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Being released from a calling can bring with it mixed emotions. If we go into the calling knowing that it will be temporary, the release will be easier to accept. We must keep in mind that the Lord has need for us to serve in new ways and learn new things throughout our membership in his church.

Called to Serve for a Season: Church Callings and Releases

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A former bishop reflected upon his release, “I hope I have made a difference in the lives of the members of my ward. I hope I have helped bring them to Christ. I have tried my best and learned a lot; I have loved serving. But this is not my ward—it is the Lord’s. I am now happy to take my place in the congregation and follow the counsel of our new bishop.”¹ A former stake president said, “[Being released] was difficult for a few weeks. I went from the phone ringing off the hook at all hours of the day and night, to nothing—almost instantly. No phone calls, no crises or emergencies that I needed to take care of. It was easy to feel forgotten, even unappreciated for the work I had done. . . . I know that is the way it works in the Church, but it was hard for a while to feel that I was ‘put out to pasture’ and was not needed anymore.”²

Many of us, upon being released from a Church calling, have felt similar emotions. Sometimes we feel like the former bishop, thankful for the chance to serve and eager to accept whatever calling the Lord may have in store for our future. Other times we feel like the former stake president, suddenly unneeded and perhaps a bit unappreciated. This range of emotions highlights a unique characteristic of God’s kingdom on earth, one that distinguishes the

Lord's church from the rest of the world and even from other churches. The Lord calls us to serve with all our heart, might, mind, and strength—and then, after a time, he calls someone else.

Elder Neal A. Maxwell put it this way:

It should be clear to us with regard to various callings and assignments that just as soon as we are sustained and set apart the clock begins running toward the moment of our release. How vital it is to manage our time and talents wisely from the moment a task begins! Later, when we have devotedly invested much of ourselves in a particular calling or assignment (and especially when it has been satisfying and we have made a real difference), we may feel the release when it comes, but that, too, is part of our schooling as disciples. Being released gives us experience in patience and humility, as well as a fresh reminder of our non-essentiality.”³

Rather than feeling ennui about a call we know is temporary, we can feel inspired to give our best efforts and serve diligently for as long as the opportunity to serve lasts. Just as surely as the Lord will magnify our righteous efforts to serve in a calling, he will also strengthen us as we transition through the release and into a future calling.

Those transitions can be difficult, but perspective is important. If we go into the calling knowing that it will be temporary, the release will be easier to accept. As members of the household of faith, we have countless opportunities to serve and to sustain, to lead and to follow, to teach and to be taught. We thereby reap the spiritual growth and joy that come from consecrated and reciprocal service. Our various callings can bring us closer to the Savior, individually and as a Church.

Granted, sometimes we may feel relieved and happy to be released from a calling. Perhaps the call was demanding, consumed lots of time and energy, or required late hours and significant sacrifice from the whole family. When such a calling ends, we may experience feelings of relief and contentment along with a sweet sense of satisfaction that we did our best and fulfilled our duty. We may look forward to future opportunities to serve in new capacities.

But what if the release comes when we are not quite ready to give it up? What if we have so enjoyed the opportunity to serve and be involved that we feel empty, even lost, when we are released? What if others who take our place seem to do a better job than we did? And what if the next calling feels less fulfilling or rewarding?

No one is indispensable in the work of the Lord. This marvelous work will roll forth with or without us, unhindered and unstoppable, until it has “penetrated every continent, visited every clime, swept every country, and

sounded in every ear, till the purposes of God shall be accomplished, and the Great Jehovah shall say the work is done.”⁴ In no way should that make us feel unneeded, unwanted, or nonessential in the service of God. The Lord and his Church require our willing, consecrated efforts. We develop the attributes of godliness as we put our shoulders to the wheel, rub those shoulders with fellow citizens in the household of faith, and consequently magnify our discipleship. What we are called to do matters not if we serve with devotion and sincerity, for the Lord will bless our efforts. As President J. Reuben Clark Jr. so memorably taught, “In the service of the Lord, it is not where you serve but how. In the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, one takes the place to which one is duly called, which place one neither seeks nor declines.”⁵

That is different from the world’s way, and maybe that is one reason accepting a release can be so difficult at times. In most organizations, a person is usually relieved of responsibilities because he or she is not doing a good job. Someone who performs well, on the other hand, often expects to advance to a position of even more responsibility or prestige.

By contrast, in the Lord’s kingdom, all callings are important—even those that seem to involve less responsibility or less visibility. This is true for at least two reasons: (1) each calling comes with a sacred responsibility and opportunity to serve others, and (2) each calling provides opportunities to grow spiritually and develop Christlike qualities. One may be a chorister one week and a bishop the next. One may be a Gospel Doctrine teacher instructing adults one week and a few weeks later be teaching a class of seven-year-old Primary children. This does not mean that the chorister is being rewarded for a job well done or that the Gospel Doctrine teacher is being punished for underperformance. It simply means that the Lord has need for them to serve in new ways and learn new things.

Elder Dallin H. Oaks noted how this pattern conflicts with the traditions of the world:

In the world, we refer to the up or down of promotions or reductions. But there is no up or down in Church positions. We just move around. A bishop released by proper authority and called to teach in Primary does not move down. He moves forward as he accepts his release with gratitude and fulfills the duties of a new calling—even one far less visible.

I saw a memorable example of this a few months ago in the Philippines. I visited a ward in the Pasig stake, near Manila. There I met Augusto Lim, whom I had known in earlier years as a stake president, a mission president, a General Authority, and president of the Manila temple. Now I saw him serving humbly and gratefully in his ward bishopric, second counselor to a man much younger and much less

experienced. From temple president to second counselor in a ward bishopric is a beautiful example of the gospel culture in action.⁶

The Lord honors and will magnify our sincere efforts all along life's changing course. Even so, sometimes a release from a calling can leave a void, a feeling of emptiness, especially when we have given our heart and soul to the calling that has now come to an end. But, to coin a phrase, better to have loved and served with wholehearted devotion and then be released than to have never served at all. The degree of our feeling of loss, in some ways, may be commensurate with our dedication to the call and our love of the people we have served.

Three vital principles may help ease the transition from a release to a new calling in the Church:

1. *Beware of pride and all of its subsidiaries.* Always providing fertile soil for resentment and bitterness, pride may be manifest as self-pity if we feel that our service was not appreciated or acknowledged enough. Pride may rear its ugly head as we compare ourselves to others who we may think have not served as well as we did, who seemed to have served better, or who have "higher" or "lower" callings in the Church. Pride whispers in our ears when we hold too tenaciously to a calling, feeling that somehow it is ours, that we own it and cannot give it up to let others serve. The pride manifested by coveting or rejecting a calling drowns out the sweet promptings of the Spirit.

The Lord said that we are called to the work "if we have desires to serve God" (D&C 4:3), not desires to gain status or recognition or supposed emblems of our worth. When we serve the Lord, we are on his errand, doing his will, and serving at his pleasure. We must resist the urge to take credit for the Lord's work or to relish the title, position, or information a calling may bring.

Speaking to the priesthood brethren, Elder M. Russell Ballard taught:

A priesthood office is bestowed not for status but for service. You and I are *fellow servants* in the Church of Jesus Christ.

In addition to holding an ordained office in the priesthood, most priesthood bearers also are called to a specific position in their ward or stake. For example, you priesthood brethren may be called to serve in a quorum presidency, as a teacher in a Sunday School or Primary class, as a member of a ward or quorum committee, or as a stake officer. In each of these callings, you will serve for a time and then be released to give another an opportunity to serve where you have labored. You then will receive other opportunities for further service. Your callings may change, but the need for your constant and committed service in some Church capacity

will continue. Remember, brethren, your responsibility to honor and magnify your priesthood is an eternal obligation.

As we serve together, we must serve in humility, always being kind and considerate of one another. . . . We do not covet positions. . . . Perhaps this is part of what Alma perceived when he declared, “Why should I desire more than to perform the work to which I have been called?” (Alma 29:6.) Remember the admonition given by the Savior: “And whosoever of you will be the chiefest, shall be servant of all” (Mark 10:44).⁷

2. *Be thankful that you were able to serve.* Service in the Church is filled with opportunities for spiritual and emotional growth, for strengthened relationships and deeper gospel understanding, for development of leadership skills and the virtues of patience, compassion, long-suffering, and gentleness. And because service enlarges and educates our soul, it is an important part of our journey toward exaltation.

One woman who had served as a Primary president shared these thoughts: “I knew a few months before my release that my time as a Primary president was coming to an end. I had learned the things I was supposed to learn and felt other women needed this opportunity for their spiritual growth. My first feeling was one of complete loss. . . . I thought of how rejuvenating Primary was for me. I was really sad to know I would be missing sharing with the children that special witness of Jesus Christ and God’s divine plan on a weekly basis. But I knew the Lord would bless another to teach the children well.”⁸

Blessings attend those who serve the Lord. Some of our sweetest memories can come as we reflect on serving in a calling, especially if we did our best and served with diligence. Most of us probably feel that we could have done more or been more diligent or handled a situation better, but peace can come from the feeling that the Lord has accepted our offering. Many home teachers and visiting teachers can attest to the truth that serving and getting to know someone as part of their calling blesses both the giver and receiver. Home teachers who really care about assigned individuals and families know that lasting friendships can be built. Visiting teachers who are diligent in their service know the joy that comes of close relationships. As we consider our work in the Church, we notice the great reciprocal blessings that always accompany sincere service. We truly can count ourselves blessed that we are able to serve.

Ardeth Kapp, former Young Women general president, reflected on the feelings of gratitude that can accompany a release:

At the time a call is made, there is inherent in the call the pending date for release. We usually are not given the exact day. It may not happen when expected, and it may

not be easy when it does happen. It will usually come after we have formed close relationships, shared wonderful experiences, prayed together with associates in the work, and learned to serve and love. And we may think, Why couldn't it have been just a little longer?

My mind goes back to the time when President Gordon B. Hinckley informed Sister Patricia Holland that, after serving only two years in the Young Women general presidency, she was to be released. The prophet, of course, was aware of many other important things she was to do, but it seemed untimely to me. In response to our feelings, he counseled, "Don't be sad that it hasn't been longer. Be grateful that it happened at all." We must not look back, but always forward. We must not live in the past, for there is work to be done.⁹

3. *Fill your heart with the spirit of service.* "Our baptism is a call to lifelong service to Christ," said President Boyd K. Packer.¹⁰ When we are baptized, we agree to stand as a witness that we have entered into a covenant with the Lord and that we will serve him and our fellowman and thereby enjoy an outpouring of the Lord's Spirit upon us (see Mosiah 18:8–10). Certainly we can and should serve others always, informally and without any specific calling, but with a desire to help and because we care. The calling to bless others is a lifelong calling that we can render all our days. We keep our covenants as we reach out in love and kindness to all people, regardless of our Church calling. Formal Church callings that come to us are part of the same covenant we make with Christ. As a stake president said upon his release, "I was happy to accept the call to serve as stake president, and I am equally happy to accept my release. I did not serve just because I was under *call*. I served because I am under *covenant*. And I can keep my covenants quite as well as a home teacher as I can serving as stake president."¹¹

Those who have entered a covenant with Christ and seek to emulate his example know the opportunities for service are endless. Of course, our most important callings are in our home, as husbands and wives, as fathers and mothers—callings from which we can never be released. As President Harold B. Lee taught, "The most important of the Lord's work that you will ever do will be the work you do within the walls of your own home."¹² But we are also called to be good neighbors at all times and in all places, to be examples of the believers (see 1 Timothy 4:12) and to strive to follow the Savior in daily Christlike living. Informal opportunities to serve are all around us: visiting the sick and the lonely, extending the hand of friendship, attending the temple, and reaching out to others in charity and compassion. No one needs an official Church calling from the bishop to be a good neighbor and friend when he or she is filled with the spirit of service. President Marion G.

Romney said, “Service is not something we endure on this earth so we can earn the right to live in the celestial kingdom. Service is the very fiber of which an exalted life in the celestial kingdom is made. . . . Oh, for the glorious day when these things all come naturally because of the purity of our hearts. In that day there will be no need for a commandment because we will have experienced for ourselves that we are truly happy only when we are engaged in unselfish service.”¹³

Some years ago, I was asked to speak to retiring Church Educational System faculty across the Church. The person who asked me to speak gave me some background information that I found both useful in my speech and poignant in its tone. It has also given me a new perspective on releases from Church callings. He said that a few of these retiring teachers were struggling with the transition to retirement—just as some struggle with being released—because they felt that in some way they had not measured up to their potential. These were people who loved the gospel and the Church with all their hearts, people who had a pure and fervent love for the Lord. But now that their time in CES was at a close, they wondered if they had truly made a difference. The hearts of these good CES employees were most likely already filled with the spirit of service, but perhaps their desires to serve the Lord had been somewhat clouded by the very mortal aspiration to do “some great thing” (2 Kings 5:13) when in fact their lifelong errand of teaching and serving really was “some great thing,” and it would not end with retirement.

Perhaps something similar happens to us when we are released from our Church callings. We worry that we have not done enough, that our offering was too small to be acceptable to the Lord. We look back on our service and, with our limited perspective and perception, fail to see how our service could have possibly contributed to the Lord’s great work.

But the Lord sees what we do not. Who could ever measure the impact of a devoted seminary or institute teacher who reaches deep into the hearts of the people he or she teaches? Who could ever forget a Relief Society or youth leader, a bishop or Sunday School teacher, a home teacher or visiting teacher who truly loves and serves people? All—both the giver and receiver—will forever carry in their heart feelings of affection and gratitude that they were brought together for a moment in time.

The seasons of our callings change over the years, but our sincere service and our earnest desires remain ever unchanging, ever needed, to the end of our days—and throughout eternity. **RE**

Notes

1. Conversation with author.
2. Conversation with author.
3. Neal A. Maxwell, "It's Service, Not Status, That Counts," *Ensign*, July 1975, 7.
4. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1957), 4:540.
5. In Conference Report, April 1951, 154.
6. Dallin H. Oaks, "Repentance and Change," *Ensign*, November 2003, 38–39.
7. "The Greater Priesthood: Giving a Lifetime of Service in the Kingdom," *Ensign*, September 1992, 71–72.
8. Coleen K. Menlove, "Called to Serve," *Ensign*, September 2004, 26–27.
9. Ardeeth Greene Kapp, *Lead, Guide, and Walk Beside* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1998), 170.
10. Boyd K. Packer, "Called to Serve," *Ensign*, November 1997, 6.
11. Boyd K. Packer, "Covenants," *Ensign*, May 1987, 22.
12. *Strengthening the Home* [pamphlet, 1973], 7.
13. Marion G. Romney, "The Celestial Nature of Self-Reliance," *Ensign*, November 1982, 93.