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Each member might contribute to temple and family history work in different ways at different stages of life.

What We Should Teach the Latter-day Saints about Family History and Genealogy

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One of the hallmarks of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has long been its doctrine regarding the status of deceased individuals who never had an opportunity to hear the restored gospel during their mortal existence. This doctrine states that living persons are to stand as proxies for the deceased when the deceased can be identified properly.[1] Thus, members of the Church are often intensely interested in the spiritual welfare of family members who died without priesthood ordinances—and these ordinances can be performed only in modern temples by embodied persons.

Modern Latter-day Saints and their leaders have proved themselves to be well aware of this sacred stewardship, constructing more than 140 temples around the world and filling them with patrons and workers. Hundreds of thousands of saving ordinances are performed for the living and the dead every week. Because Church leaders have urged us to hasten the work, instructors should be more aware of proper research methodologies and procedures.

Duplication of Effort

The Church's databases include the names of nearly one billion deceased persons for whom temple ordinances have been performed by proxy. Anyone who has spent significant time studying those databases has noticed the substantial duplication of effort reflected therein. For example, George Washington's endowments have been performed several times; Abraham Lincoln has been sealed to his wife Mary Todd several times.[2] Such duplication occurred in literally millions of cases before the introduction of computerized records in 1970 as the *International Genealogical Index*. Unfortunately duplication of ordinances continues to this day—despite the best efforts of teams of excellent computer programmers.

President Gordon B. Hinckley reminded us of the importance of avoiding such duplication of temple ordinances:

> One of the most troublesome aspects of our temple activity is that as we get more and more temples scattered across the earth there is duplication of effort in proxy work. People in various nations simultaneously work on the same family lines and come up with the same names. They do not know that those in other areas are doing the same thing. . . . To avoid such duplication, the solution lies in complex computer technology.[3]

One way to reduce duplication of temple ordinances is to educate the members of the church more extensively in the process of determining whether temple work has already been done for an individual of interest. In addition, researchers may need more instruction in research sources and methodologies in the effort to more precisely identify deceased ancestors. Religious educators have an excellent opportunity to contribute to the improvement of the process and thus the product, as discussed below.

Perhaps the principal cause of duplication of temple ordinances is the submission of names of an ancestor to the temple when only partial data have been collected, i.e., the person is not sufficiently identified. For example, the standards for temple names submission allow work to be done for a person who has an incomplete name, whose birth date can only be estimated, or for whom only a nation or state can be identified as a birthplace. Veteran temple patrons can attest to seeing temple cards with names such as "boy Wilson" or "child Jorgensen" or the often meaningless "Mrs. Hansen" or "Mr. Long" (who is the son of "Mr. Long" and the grandson of "Mr. Long"). When Latter-day Saints learn how to convert the estimated date (for example) "about 1820" to a precise and verifiable date such as "8 May 1818" (which in many cases is possible), then the detail submitted to the temple will be more "worthy of all acceptation" (D&C 128:24). Providing precise detail reduces the chance that members of the Church will hurry to the temple when more exact details might be located through additional research.

Another close look at the computer databases will show that many hundreds of thousands of deceased persons were first represented at the altar or the veil of the temple when only incomplete genealogical data were available, then again one or more times after a researcher succeeded in converting an ancestral birth from an estimate of "about 1820 in Indiana" to "8 May 1818 in Lawrenceburg, Dearborn County, Indiana." Thus, doing precise research the first time around would potentially eliminate such duplications.

Genealogy Versus Family History

As a first step, members of the Church would profit by learning the difference between *family history* and *genealogy*. After all, it is the latter and not the former that provides the data needed before temple ordinances can be performed properly and finally for deceased individuals.

Genealogy: *the science of identifying ancestors and descendants*. Genealogists collect names of relatives and dates and places for vital events (birth, marriage, and death) in their lives.

Family history: *the field of study of all aspects of living and deceased persons*. Family historians collect every kind of information about relatives, such as height/weight, property ownership, education, occupations, hobbies, military service, travel, photographs, etc.

By definition, all genealogists are family historians, but many family historians are not genealogists. The submission of ancestral names for proxy temple ordinances is a function of genealogy. In regard to proxy temple work, family history should be the means to the end—not the end itself. Although we enjoy learning family history details, such as the fact that great-grandmother Constance Faith Geurts was five feet two inches with blonde hair or that her brother Dale Geurts served in World War I, these facts do not allow us to represent those persons in temple ordinances.

Inquiry before Research

The next step toward gathering vital data is to understand the difference between inquiry and research.

Inquiry: *the process of determining what is known about our ancestors.*

Research: *the process of identifying and compiling new data about our ancestors.*

All efficient genealogical research begins with inquiry, because it is only if the researcher studies what is already known about an ancestor that duplication of effort can be avoided. Sometimes the inquiry can be accomplished quickly, especially if the researcher can determine that no one has ever made this effort on behalf of the ancestor in question (such is often the case with recent converts to the Church). On the other hand, most researchers who descend from persons who joined the Church before 1900 learn that a great deal of temple work has been done. Indeed, there are people who can claim reliably that "it's all been done" (meaning that all ancestral lines have been extended back in time to the beginning of original records in the location in question).[4]

The following simplified methodology will help members of the Church conduct efficient inquiry into the status of their ancestry:

1. Study all possible records in your possession and in the possession of your relatives.
2. Interview all older relatives using questions designed to elicit genealogical data.
3. Consult *FamilySearch/Family Tree*.
4. Study family history publications (principally books on individuals and families).
5. Search websites (using caution in determining the veracity of the data).

The Role of the Internet

One of the great innovations in genealogy is the Internet, with its countless websites dedicated to ancestral research. Consultation with reliable websites is essential during the inquiry process. Unfortunately, a most misleading axiom is heard among novices with increasing frequency: "It's all on the Internet; all you have to do is find it!" Those who espouse this theory will tell you, "If you can't find it on the Internet, you just haven't looked in the right places!" Such statements can be both misleading and incorrect.

The Church has invested great efforts and substantial funding for many years to improve our access to genealogical data. Several major databases compiled over the decades have given rise to *FamilySearch/Family Tree*. This resource is extremely helpful to Church members who endeavor to determine what genealogical data have already been compiled for their ancestors and what temple ordinances have been performed. Unfortunately, some Latter-day Saints now seem to come to the conclusion: "It's all in Family Tree. All you have to do is find it!"

Just what is so wrong about the notion that "it's all on the Internet" and that you simply have to "keep looking until you find it"? One example will make this point sufficiently clear: only about 10 percent of European church records (the best source of genealogical data for most United States residents before 1800) can be viewed as digital images in the Internet. Thus, the Internet can't be the only resource researchers use. Researchers desiring to locate vital data in records not digitized will need to gain access to them by some other means (principally the Family History Library Catalog).

Inquiry may be conducted in the home and from the home to an extent, but it might be necessary to visit the local LDS family history center or public library. It is a necessary step in genealogy research, and researchers should be prepared to be flexible. Access to the Internet is indispensable; telephone calls or letters and emails to relatives may be of great value. One of the first lessons many Church members learn is that the process cannot be completed in a day. The inquiry process may take an extended period of time, but it must be done and it must be done with diligence. Most of our ancestors have waited for centuries for their temple ordinances and will likely be patient for a few more earthly months or years. Once the inquiry process is truly complete (at least for one or more specific branches of the family tree), the research process can begin.

Primary and Secondary Sources

Initial instruction for a genealogical researcher should incorporate such terms as *primary* and *secondary records*.

Primary records: records kept at the time and the place of the event (especially birth, marriage, or death) by a person or an agency charged with that responsibility (principally government and church entities)

Secondary records: all other sources that might feature vital data (newspapers, journals and diaries, school records, occupational records, military records, census enumerations, tax and resident lists, real estate and probate records, county histories, personal and family histories, local and regional histories, indexes of all varieties, etc.)

Because secondary records can and do feature incorrect data (sometimes called "transfer errors") it is an excellent idea for researchers to consult secondary records principally in an effort to locate primary records. This tactic is illustrated in the following abbreviated case study.

A case study. Our search for information about a specific relative began with a copy of his obituary (a secondary source) in a Pemberville, Ohio, newspaper in 1904.[5] Victor H. Meinert had been born in Hannover, Germany, had lived in the United States for seventy years, and had died in his ninety-first year. The obituary indicated that he had "resided continuously" on the same farm.

At this point we could have submitted Victor H. Meinert's name for temple ordinances as such: "Victor H. Meinert, male, born 1814, Hannover, Germany." However, we considered the data to be not yet "worthy of all acceptation." We wanted to identify him with a complete name, an exact birth date, and an exact birth place.

Possibly the easiest source to consult for additional information about this man was the US Federal Census for Wood County, Ohio. We found a John V. Meinert in 1900 as an eighty-four-year-old who was born in Germany. Hoping the V. stood for Victor, we next looked for an official death record compiled by the state of Ohio and learned in the *FamilySearch Wiki* that state death records were required beginning in 1867. The Family History Library Catalog showed that microfilm number 955453 contains death records for Wood County. We located the official death record on the microfilm, but did not find additional vital data.[6]

At this point we decided to study the obituary again and found that Mr. Meinert's funeral service was conducted in the Sweitz Lutheran Church in Pemberville. Back in the Family History Library Catalog, we were pleased to see that the records of that church for the time period in question are also on microfilm.[7] It was there that we hit the jackpot: a family page lists this man with three given names, one wife, and fourteen children. His hometown is identified as Jeggen, Osnabrück County, Hannover, Prussia (a former kingdom of Germany).[8]

Our search was finally completed. The records of the Salem Lutheran Church qualify as primary source documents. We could now submit the name of this relative for temple ordinances as such: Johann Daniel Viktor Meinert, born 2 March 1814 in Jeggen, Osnabrück, Hannover, Germany. The next step was to check *FamilySearch/Family Tree* to see if temple ordinances were already completed, and we did indeed find a very good candidate: "Johann Viktor Daniel Meinert, who was born on 2 March 1814 in Jeggen, Hannover [Germany], and died in Wood County, Ohio, on 26 May 1904." This had to be my relative, but we still had no primary record for his birth date and place.

A German gazetteer shows that the town of Jeggen was included in the Lutheran parish in nearby Schledehausen. A letter to the office of that parish resulted in the confirmation of the birth date and the identification of his parents—thus creating the beginnings of additional research into the Meinert ancestry in Germany.[9] Now the temple work could be done with *precise* genealogical assurance: "Johann Daniel Victor Meinert, male, born 2 March 1814 in Jeggen, Osnabrück, Hannover, Germany." Now there is only a small chance that another descendant will duplicate temple ordinances for this man in the future.[10]

Our Responsibility in Genealogy

Recently, Richard G. Scott encouraged members of the Church to be involved in both the compilation of the required genealogical data and the performance of the proxy temple ordinances:

> I have learned that those who engage in family history research and then perform the temple ordinance work for those whose names they have found will know the additional joy of receiving both halves of the blessing. Father in Heaven wants each of us to receive both parts of the blessing of this vital vicarious work. He has led others to show us how to qualify.[11]

This modern mandate given in the Church's general conference in October 2012 discussed numerous ways to serve in the realm of family history, temple work, and genealogy. He suggested that not every Latter-day Saint must do genealogical research. He would likely agree with Dallin H. Oaks, who indicated in his remarks in general conference years ago that each member might be able to contribute to this great work in different ways at different stages of life.[12] Even for those who wish to conduct research, there may be significant limitations in available time, effort, and money.

Other significant obstacles can hinder researchers. For example, what does the layman do when confronted with the complexities of old New England families, Scottish clans, or Scandinavian patronymics? How can researchers confront the archaic handwriting and spelling of sixteenth-century German church records, the lack of records among Swiss nonconformists, or the oral family history traditions of Native Americans? To combat many of these challenges, specific training is available.

Family Organizations

What can we do now to participate in genealogical research? As early as 1978, LDS families were encouraged to form committees for genealogical research and temple work. As the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* explains, "The purpose of the ancestral organization is to coordinate genealogical activity on common lines. Such organizations frequently raise money for family history research, publish family histories, and generally direct the activities of the larger."[13] The existence of such committees could be an excellent step towards the reduction of duplication of research and ordinance work.

The following recommendations are designed to guide the members of the Church toward effective use of their time, talents, and resources in their efforts to serve their kindred dead and others. These steps need not be taken in strict order.

1. Study the most recent *FamilySearch/FamilyTree* to determine what is already known about the ancestor(s) in question.
2. Seek the assistance of the ward family history consultant, staff members in the local family history center, other experienced researchers, or professionals in specific areas.
3. Inquire about the existence of genealogical committees in the extended family and offer to assist (including making financial contributions).[14]
4. Diligently collect or copy available genealogical data and documents from personal collections of relatives and organize readily available copies of public records and extract genealogical data.
5. Once possible secondary sources have been exhausted, identify and study primary source documents.
6. Record all data found and the corresponding sources (whether primary or secondary) in a reputable computer database program (outside of *FamilySearch/FamilyTree)*.
7. Seek the assistance of qualified experts to confirm interpretations of primary records found, especially in the case of documents with old handwriting or in foreign languages.
8. Do not submit names for proxy temple ordinances for persons with incomplete data until it has been established that more precise details about names, dates, and places truly cannot be found (this may require additional patience and perseverance).
9. If personal involvement in the research process is currently not possible or appropriate, consider conducting research for other families or becoming involved in the indexing program (www.familysearchindexing.org).

The Role of Church Leaders and Educators

What can Church leaders and religious educators do to assist in this work? More than anything else, they can encourage the Saints to consider what time, effort, and resources they can invest in this work without interrupting or hindering other stewardships and callings. Above all, Elder Oaks suggests that while we are to promote temple and family history work, we should not "impose guilt on [Heavenly Father's] children" who may not currently be actively involved in this work of salvation.[15]

President Boyd K. Packer emphasized the importance of this work in these words: "No work is more of a protection to this Church than temple work and *the genealogical research which supports it*. . . . No work requires a higher standard of righteousness."[16]

Elder John A. Widtsoe explained in 1934 the role that each Latter-day Saint can play in the spiritual advancement of deceased ancestors who knew nothing about temples and temple ordinances during their earthly lives. He taught this:

> In our preexistent state . . . we made a certain agreement with the Almighty. . . . We agreed, right then and there, to be not only saviors for ourselves but measurably, saviors for the whole human family. . . . We promised to provide those ordinances . . . [and] committed to the great plan of offering salvation to the untold numbers of spirits.[17]

With the proper approach to this sometimes demanding and even daunting task of genealogical research, with the patient guidance of the Holy Spirit, and with the efficient use of all appropriate resources, Latter-day Saints can fulfill the mandate given to Joseph Smith and eventually "present in his holy temple . . . a book containing the records of our dead, which shall be worthy of all acceptation" (D&C 128:24). When this is done, the redemptive work of Jesus Christ becomes complete.

Notes

1. See especially section 128 of the Doctrine and Covenants.

2. Years ago, it was still possible to see the dates of all temple ordinances performed for a given individual, but now the Church's database simply indicates that the ordinances are completed.

3. Gordon B. Hinckley, "Opening Remarks," *Ensign*, November 2005, 6–7.

4. For example, the recording of consistent church records (baptism, marriage, burial) in Germany began in the city of Nuremberg in 1524. Before that time, there are essentially no records that include vital data on the common German—only on nobility and royalty.

5. "Death of a Pioneer," *Pemberville Leader*, May 28, 1904, 2.

6. Wood County Ohio Death Records, 1894–1908, microfilm no. 955453, Family History Library, Salt Lake City.

7. Salem [formerly Sweitz] Evangelical Lutheran Church of Pemberville, Ohio, 1848–1983, microfilm no. 940116, Family History Library, Salt Lake City.

8. Because vital records did not begin in Prussia until 1874, the church record used here is the only one existing for documentation purposes.

9. Schledehausen Lutheran Parish, e-mail to author, March 7, 2013.

10. Throughout the process, we were careful to enter complete source citations for and to make copies of all records found.

11. Richard G. Scott, "The Joy of Redeeming the Dead," *Ensign*, November 2012, 93.

12. Dallin H. Oaks, "Family History: In Wisdom and Order," *Ensign*, June 1989, 6.

13. Daniel H. Ludlow, "Family Organizations," *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 1992, 498.

14. In the 1990s my wife asked the chair of her family genealogical committee what she could do to help. Her extended family was first associated with the Church in Nauvoo, Illinois, and thousands of proxy temple ordinances had been done over decades. She was given this instruction: "Don't do anything! We have it all under control and you'd probably just get in our way." That response may sound impolite, but it was likely based on negative experiences of committee members and thus was the correct advice. My wife was encouraged to help someone else such as a ward member or a recent convert; anyone who wishes to do family history research can find someone to help.

15. Oaks, "Family History," 6.

16. Boyd K. Packer, *Preparing to Enter the Holy Temple* (Salt Lake City: Intellectual Reserve, 2002), 37. Emphasis added.

17. John A. Widtsoe, "The Worth of Souls," *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine* 25 (1934): 189–90.