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Keeping Memory

Elder James J. Hamula and J. Spencer Fluhman

Elder James J. Hamula was sustained a General Authority Seventy of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints on April 5, 2008, at age fifty. From 2009 to 2014, he served in the Pacific Area Presidency, serving as Area President from 2011 to 2014. At the time of this interview, Elder Hamula was serving as Assistant Executive Director of the Church History Department. Since then, Elder Hamula has been called to serve in the Church Correlation Department effective August 1, 2016. Elder Hamula graduated magna cum laude from Brigham Young University in 1981 with a BA in political science and philosophy. In 1985, he received both an MA in political philosophy and a JD degree from Brigham Young University. From 1985 until his call to be a General Authority, Elder Hamula practiced law. He has served in a number of Church callings, including full-time missionary in the Germany Munich Mission, bishop, elders quorum president, high councilor, stake Young Men president, stake president, president of the Washington DC South Mission, and Area Seventy. Elder Hamula was born in Long Beach, California, on November 20, 1957. He married Joyce Anderson in April 1984. They are the parents of six children.

J. Spencer Fluhman is an associate professor of history at Brigham Young University and editor of Mormon Studies Review, and executive director of the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship at BYU. Professor Fluhman served as a missionary under then-President Hamula in the Washington DC South Mission in 1994.

Fluhman: *Elder Hamula, let's start with you giving us a sense of your Church service to this point. You served most recently, before your assignment with the Church History Department, as President of the Church's Pacific Area. Tell us about your background in Church leadership.*

Hamula: I can't begin to talk about my Church service without starting with my mission as a young man to Germany because it was so foundational to everything that I am and have done since. My mission president was Elder F. Enzio Busche. He taught me to pray, to be consecrated, and to love the Lord with all my soul. I stayed true to the Lord and His gospel following my mission.

A year after I graduated from law school and two years after my marriage to Joyce, I was called to serve as a bishop. Our first child was only four months old, and I was working for a law firm that demanded a great deal of me. I was not sure how I could be a bishop, but I trusted that the call came from the Lord and therefore accepted it. At the time of my call, our stake had seven wards but only one building. Shortly after my call, the stake president informed me that the Church had approved the construction of three new meetinghouses for our fast-growing stake and that the president had subcontracted the stake members to perform a variety of projects for the general contractor for these meetinghouses. The job of the bishops was to marshal ward resources—principally workers—to execute the projects in a timely way. When I asked when those of us with jobs would be expected to perform these projects, the stake president asked rhetorically, “What are you doing at 3:00 a.m.?” Over the next two years, many of my early-morning hours were spent at construction sites with other faithful men and women from our ward and stake. Through this period, I also had to minister to a congregation that grew from 430 to over 1,000 people, with 70 percent of them attending meetings. This was a very challenging

time but also a time of great growth for me. I learned how to give myself to the Lord—not just as a missionary in the mission field, but as a member of the Church at home.

After two years of service as a bishop, I was called to be the president of our stake. After four years, our stake divided with a neighboring stake, and I was called to serve as president of the new stake. Within eighteen months of my service as president of the new stake, Joyce and I, now with four children under the age of eight, were called to preside together over the Washington DC South Mission. Many were surprised by our call because of our relative youth and because of the potential impact it would have on my legal career. But, again, we went with faith and had an absolutely glorious experience for many reasons. Not only did we come to love the over six hundred young men and women who were in our care, but the Lord blessed Joyce and me with twin boys midway through our service. In receiving these twin boys, we learned that everything in the mission field comes in sets, even your babies! Today, these twin boys are serving missions, one in Mexico and the other in Taiwan.

After our mission, Joyce and I returned home, and I rebuilt my legal career. Within two years of returning home, I was called to serve as an Area Seventy and served in that capacity for eight years. And at the end of that term of service, I was called to be a General Authority Seventy. This call fundamentally changed our family's life. We sold our major possessions, moved to Salt Lake City, and commenced a new life. After one year at Church headquarters, Joyce and I were asked to move to Auckland, New Zealand where I would serve in the Pacific Area Presidency. We left behind our three oldest children, all young single adults, and took with us our three youngest children, all teenagers. I served in the Pacific Area Presidency for five years, the last three as Area President. It was a tremendous experience for Joyce and me and our entire family.

Fluhman: *And that experience provides a bridge to a discussion of your assignment as Assistant Executive Director of the Church History Department. What did your service as president of an area far removed from Church headquarters teach you about the Church's relationship to its own past, about the reading and writing of Church history?*

Hamula: The Pacific Area is an area of enormous geographical extent and cultural diversity. Culturally, it includes Polynesia (island nations such as New Zealand, Tonga, Samoa, and French Polynesia), Melanesia (island nations such as Fiji, Vanuatu, the Solomon Islands, and Papua New Guinea), and Micronesia (island nations such as Kiribati and the Marshall Islands). The area also included Australia, with its dominant European culture but including its ancient aboriginal culture.

After arriving in the Pacific Area, I soon learned that I had to approach my teaching differently. I learned that the people of the Pacific were largely a people who did not anciently have a tradition of writing or reading. Their tradition of communicating and preserving their past was largely oral. Some of their history would be kept—depending on location, island, and culture—in a carving of stone or wood, but it's not in the way that you or I in the West would preserve our history. I soon learned that they valued stories. Stories communicated a lot more than a bare precept or bare principle. And so I needed to adjust my way of teaching. My career was as a lawyer. My education was in political science and philosophy. I tended to be one who would speak and teach using abstract, esoteric principles and precepts, and I expected people to understand me. The people of the Pacific are very bright and intelligent, and they are very polite, loving, and pleasing. They will nod their heads and smile at almost whatever you say. But I soon learned that what I was saying wasn't really resonating because I saw that my teaching wasn't causing any change in them. And that's what a teacher wants. A teacher wants his or her students

to not just hear, but to change; he or she wants the teaching to take root and bring about positive change in a student's life.

I learned that I needed to adjust how I approached my ministry. I needed to speak more simply. I needed to speak more concisely. I needed to use stories that they could relate to. I thought that the stories that they would best relate to were their own stories, but I wasn't familiar with the stories of the people of the Pacific. I was familiar with the stories of my background in the Church, the stories of the Church in North America, but I wasn't familiar with their stories. So that caused me to want to learn their history and to start to share stories from their history. I found that as I understood their history and could relate to it and use it in my ministry that I became more effective with the people of the Pacific. They saw that I knew and respected their history and culture, and that caused them to listen more intently. I also found that telling them stories from their own history revealed aspects of their history they did not know, particularly among the youth, and helped them relate to, understand, and embrace more readily the principles of the gospel illustrated by the stories from their history.

Learning the history of the Church in the Pacific led me to learn the history of the Pacific, meaning the political, economic, social, and cultural history of the Pacific. In doing so, I began to understand why and how the people to whom I ministered were the way they were and why they thought the way they thought and acted the way they acted. The stories of these people are extraordinary. And their history is not only past, it is being written now—being made now as they live out their lives. These stories of faith and hope and love are powerful and need to be told to inspire the current generation of Pacific Islanders.

So one of the very important lessons I learned from my five years in the Pacific Area is that wherever you go, *you are a teacher*. That's what I was. That's what any Church leader is—a teacher. And to be effective in your teaching, you first need to listen to and learn something from and about your students. When you do this, you are far more effective because your students hear you talking to and teaching *them*, not just some artificial construction of them. And in doing this, you will adjust what you say and how you want to say it because you will have listened to your students first. I think there is a certain tendency among those of us coming out of North America to arrive at any location and presume that we have all the truth and all the insights, and that everyone needs to listen to us first and foremost . . . My experience was that you need to listen and learn before you begin to teach.

Fluhman: *Elder Hamula, tell us then about your experience coming to work with the Church History Department. In your time here, what have you learned about this aspect of the Church's mission?*

Hamula: Again, let me refer to my Pacific experience in answering that question. As I have said, there is not a tradition of writing in the Pacific. Traditionally, history was passed on verbally or through carvings in wood or stone. Sadly, as the cultures of the Pacific become more Westernized, people today do not know their own histories, and the inspiring stories of their past are becoming forgotten. Again, as I said earlier, I saw that when you bring forward their past, bring forward their history, and share it with them, it inspires them, it builds faith in them. Young people, when they heard the stories of their faithful forebears, would square their shoulders a little bit and want to emulate them. It inspired them. So I learned there's great value in knowing your history, preserving it, and sharing it because it builds faith or has the potential to build or inspire faith.

So against that backdrop, I think that one of the key purposes of Church history—and why there is a Church History Department, and why we work so hard in the Church to collect it,

preserve it, and ultimately share it—is for the purpose of building faith in people. That’s the overriding purpose. We want people to know our history because it teaches the doctrine and principles of the gospel, and because it inspires us who are the recipients of that history to live consistent with that history. In short, our history inspires faith. Not just faith generally, but faith in our Father and faith in his Son, as well as appreciation and gratitude for earlier men and women who had such faith in the Father and in the Son, so that when there are efforts to rewrite our history or to reinterpret it to the end of eroding faith, we can stand forward and say, “No. This is the history, and when you know it well, you’ll be inspired by it.”

Fluhman: *This may overlap a little bit, but I’m wondering, given your perspective in the department, what you would consider the Church’s most pressing needs in terms of preserving, telling, writing, and sharing its history.*

Hamula: I think the most pressing need is for Latter-day Saints everywhere to know our history. Generally speaking, Church members do not know their history as they should and could. That’s true whether you’re in Utah or you’re in Samoa. Now, to the Latter-day Saint in Utah there may be a sense, “Well I know my history.” And yet the reality is many do not. They know some version of the history, but they don’t know it as well as they should. If they did, they wouldn’t be shaken by some of the things that are being said today about our history. They would be able to put the critics’ myopic focus on some aspect of our history and be able to properly contextualize it. People can be shaken when they don’t know the whole picture.

Our people need to know our history better than they do currently, and I think we need to tell our history better. Some of the things that our people get shaken about today are based on an inaccurate teaching or portrayal of our history. Thus, when the facts are presented to them, some say, “Whoa, that’s not what I understood. Why didn’t anyone tell me the way it really was?” That’s an appropriate question. However, an equally appropriate question would be, “Why didn’t I dig deeper?” In any case, one of the things we’re trying to do in the Church History Department, with the full support of the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve, is to get our history out there into the hands of our people, and when we learn something more about our history, then we share that too. We want our people now and in the future to know and understand our history. If they understand the whole story, not just parts of it, or distorted versions of it, their faith will be deepened and strengthened.

Fluhman: *I want to pause more on this topic that you’ve started into. Could you reflect for a minute on advice for teachers of Church history, be it in a Church unit or be it in Church education?*

Hamula: Some of the teachers we’re talking about are trained scholars in Church history, but many of the teachers we’re talking about are not. Nevertheless, every teacher is responsible to teach our history truthfully and faithfully. Therefore, it’s vitally important for every teacher of Church history to become more familiar with our history. Ideally, teachers should go to primary sources. But that might be more possible for the trained scholar than it would be for the teacher of seminary or institute. . . . But where primary sources are not accessible or digestible, teachers should go to the secondary sources that are truthful and faithful, of which there are many. These would include the Gospel Topic essays available on lds.org.

Fluhman: *The Joseph Smith Papers project has made it more possible to go to primary sources.*

Hamula: Absolutely. Those are expensive books, but, on the other hand, we’re making the content of those books available online so that every Latter-day Saint, everywhere in the world, can go to the primary sources.

I think it would be important for teachers to go, then, to what I'll call "faithful" sources of Church history. And when I say that, some will say, "Why?" I'd like to explain why; I think that's vitally important. Every history is a story. Every history is a narrative. It has a theme. It has a purpose. It, by necessity, includes things that support the theme. It also, of necessity, excludes things. You include what you deem important; you exclude what you deem unimportant. The question, then, is, "What's important to you? What's the purpose of the story? What's the purpose of the theme that you're trying to narrate here?"

The other part of history that has to be understood is that no telling of history, no telling of the story, is ever based on a full record. The record is always fragmentary, so there's always going to be gaps in the story you're trying to tell. So how do you fill in the gaps in order to arrive at something that is "the way things were," to begin to paraphrase a scriptural definition of truth? The only way to fill in the gaps is through revelation. In other words, you can't narrate things as they really were, or piece the fragments of history together in a manner that approximates the truth, unless you are aided by the Spirit. The Spirit can help us take events from the historical record and put them into their proper context. To teach or share a history, to tell the story of this work, if it's going to be done properly, if it's going to be done accurately—and I use that term cautiously—it needs to be done with the Spirit. You cannot tell the story of the Restoration without the Spirit of the Lord if you want it right.

Now I'm not saying that means that we, in our faithful telling, should avoid the difficulties, that we avoid the errors, that we avoid the deficiencies or the weaknesses of men or women. I'm not afraid of that, and I don't think that Latter-day Saints should be afraid of the weaknesses of men and women in our storytelling. I love this statement that the Lord made to Joseph Smith in Doctrine and Covenants 124:1: "Unto this end have I raised you up, that I might show forth my wisdom through the weak things of the earth." Weakness in our people, weakness in our leaders, is not evidence of the ungodliness of the Church, or the absence of the Divine in our labors or the labors of our leaders. On the contrary, our weakness, our errors, our deficiencies, when put into proper context, are evidence of the majesty and the truthfulness of this work. Because God our Father is going to show forth his wisdom through the weak things, the weak men—whether they be prophets or not—of the earth. But you can't tell that story, with all the strengths and the weaknesses, without being attuned to the Spirit of the Lord.

Fluhman: *I heard you calling for two things, simultaneously, that are often seen as oppositional: that Latter-day Saints approach their past both more faithfully and more rigorously. That prompts me to ask of you what advice you might have—not for teachers of Church history—but for students of Church history, be they students who are taking university courses in related topics or Latter-day Saints just wanting to learn about their past? They might come across unfamiliar or new information that might be troubling, as with the recent release by the Church History Department related to the translation process for the Book of Mormon.*

Hamula: If you come across something you don't understand, then shelve it for a time until you do.

Now, why do I give that counsel? Reflect on what the Lord said, as we have it recorded in John 6. He comes to His disciples and He announces a principle that is very hard for His disciples to understand. He says, in essence, "If you want to enter into eternal life you've got to eat of my flesh and drink of my blood."

Now, you can take that literally and be offended—"That's gruesome." And apparently some took it that way and turned away. You can also take that figuratively and similarly be offended, because what he's saying is, "You've got to become me, not just part of me. If you

want to be where I am you've got to accept the whole thing: everything that I am, everything that I'm teaching. It requires everything that you are. You've got to lay it all down and become me." And, as John 6 indicates, some couldn't accept that and began to turn away.

Jesus saw that, turned to His closest disciples, and asked them, "Will ye also turn away?" Now, note that He doesn't modify the teaching. When He sees the people peeling off, He doesn't say, "Well I'm sorry you were offended by that. Let me rephrase. Let me withdraw it." He turns to his closest disciples and basically says, "Does this also offend you? Will ye also turn away?" It's Peter who gives the beautiful answer, "Where else shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life, and we are sure that thou art He. Thou art the Christ." As I reflect on that, I see Peter saying, in essence, "I don't quite get what you taught me. I'm not quite sure what you're saying here. I'm not quite sure what this is that you've just said to the people, but I absolutely know who you are, and where else am I going to go?"

So that's why we've got to have people who will approach our history with patience—it can't be learned in a day. I don't know it all. I'm still learning it. Everyone is learning it, and every generation is going to have to learn it anew. Aspects of our history are going to be new and pieces of it are not going to be properly contextualized.

So what keeps you grounded? You've got to have the spiritual witness that this is what we claim it to be. And when you do, then you can hear something that you don't understand and you can shelve it until you do understand. Does that require faith? Yes, it does. But that's the whole point. You've got to have faith until you can put it all together.

Now, some people will say, "You're presuming the outcome you want. You're demanding faith when you're trying to inspire faith." And my answer to that is, "That's right, yes. We are." Everyone has faith of some kind or another. At its core, faith is accepting knowledge, or testimony, of one kind or another. The believer accepts the testimony of the Spirit to mind and heart, and the knowledge that comes with it. The atheist accepts the testimony only of what is presented to his physical senses—what he or she can see and touch. Both choose to accept one testimony or another and thus to exercise faith in that testimony. What I am saying is that as our people study and learn our history and in doing so encounter things they do not understand, they should continue to choose to believe the Lord's witness they have received in times past that the Church is true. Trust the Lord's witness, and continue to study and learn. In time, the history will confirm and strengthen the Lord's witness. Don't give up on the Church because you encounter something you don't understand at present. That is folly of the highest order. If you don't understand and you can't put it in proper context, continue to push on until you do. Your study will confirm—and thus strengthen—the Lord's original witness to you, in time.

Fluhman: *In the context of what you just related about studying Church history, could comment on the Gospel Topics essays available on lds.org? What were they intended to do for Church members? How might teachers make best use of them? How might they shape the way we as a Church approach our past?*

Hamula: We want Church educators and students to know these essays, and we want them to use these essays. With future curricula, we are striving to ensure that those essays are woven into the teaching materials available to religious educators. These essays are designed to address issues that have given some of our people concern about our history or about our doctrine. And the essays are intended to address these issues in a faithful way, as I described earlier. So when our teachers know the content of those essays and when our students understand the content of the essays, we're confident that they'll be inspired and that they'll have greater faith.

Fluhman: *Are there any initiatives in the Church History Department that you're particularly excited about? Are there additional directions that you could point us to?*

Hamula: Well, the Church History Department has a lot of exciting projects right now. Of course, we have the Joseph Smith Papers project, which is a project that has been going on for a number of years and will continue for a number of years yet to come. One future volume will cover the Council of Fifty and its role in the administration of the Church and the westward migration. The most recent volume that was released this past summer—the Book of Mormon “printer’s manuscript”—is thrilling for all of us who are students and lovers of the Book of Mormon.

We have the Church History Museum that has been renovated just off Temple Square. The entire space has been redesigned, and the theme is “The Heavens Are Opened.” At the center of it is a theater with a 220-degree screen and a capacity of just forty people. It’s designed to give an immersive experience to the visitor on the First Vision. The reopened Church History Museum is an exciting thing.

We saw President Russell M. Nelson dedicate the Priesthood Restoration Site in Harmony, Pennsylvania, in September. We are telling there not only the story of the restoration of the priesthood but also the story of the translation of the Book of Mormon and the story of how revelation is received. And because of how that story is being told there, as it will be told in the Church History Museum, we felt the need to have an article issued in the *Ensign*, available online and in the October 2015 print edition, on the translation of the Book of Mormon. Assistant Church Historian and Recorder Richard E. Turley¹ is the coauthor of that article, and it was vetted by General Authorities. It is a wonderful way of putting into context how all the elements of the translation process (so far as we understand it) came together to produce this miraculous work of the Book of Mormon.

I should also say that the Granite Mountain Records Vault, which is part of our portfolio of responsibility, has been going through major renovations. We’re very excited about that. We have the responsibility of preserving Church history but also being a recorder for the Church. So records that are kept, all Church records, are ultimately to be held by the Church Historian and Recorder, here at the Church History Library and the Granite Mountain Record Vault.

Fluhman: *Elder Hamula, we’d like to have you finish on a personal note with a question about Church history—what it’s meant in your life, how it shapes your own sense of discipleship. How does Church history relate to your own work as a General Authority?*

Hamula: I came across a verse of scripture recently: Paul writing to the Corinthians. And it’s one of those scriptures that you’ve read before, but you say, “Why didn’t I see that before?” I didn’t see it because I didn’t have the experience that I’m now having in the Church History Department or, for that matter, the experience that I had in the Pacific. Paul says to the Corinthians, “ye are saved, if ye keep in memory what I preached unto you” (1 Corinthians 15:2). That verse has deeply impressed me. We all have a tendency, as the Book of Mormon says, to quickly forget and slowly remember. That’s the nature of mortality. And so, knowing that, the Lord has given us a variety of things to help us remember. He gives us the scriptures to help us remember, and one of the key themes of the Book of Mormon is that “were it not for these things, . . . even our fathers would have dwindled in unbelief, and we should have been like unto our brethren” (Mosiah 1:3), referring to the Lamanites. He’s given us ordinances, one of the most important of which is the sacrament. It is repeated weekly, and it’s intended to cause us to remember.

We have memories that erode quickly. There are a host of evidences of the importance of recording what has been given so that we don't lose our way. Again, the Book of Mormon shows how easy it is. In 3 Nephi, chapter 1, you have the signs of the birth of the Son of God, and in 3 Nephi chapter 2, they forget the signs and the wonders within a very short period of time.

I had the experience on September 11, 2001—as everyone in the world, but particularly in the United States, was being shaken by the events in New York and Washington, DC—of having neighbors who were completely unwilling to receive the missionaries come knocking at my door, shaken, and saying, “Can we have a blessing at your hand? Can you put this in context? Can you help us understand what’s going on?” I reference that because there was a moment in time when nearly everyone was looking to God and feeling a need for God and prayer and returning to church . . . and how soon do we forget that? Within weeks it was over. That was evidence to me of how quickly people can forget their desire for, their need for, and their dependence upon God unless we do certain things to keep a memory of what has been given to us.

So, to answer your question, I’ve begun to appreciate what the Lord has done to help us remember Him and to remember His work. I’ve become more committed to trying to avail myself of those tools of preserving memory, which include not just the scriptures but also Church history resources. As has been said by others, I wish to affirm that the more you know about our history, the more inspired you are. I’m confident that, as a Church, as we become more familiar with our history, as we dig into it, and as we avail ourselves of every tool that God has given to us to remember properly, we’ll end up having the faith necessary to endure the difficult days that we’re in and the even more difficult days that lie ahead.

I believe that one of the reasons the Lord is inspiring greater transparency with our Church history is so we will come to know what He’s done and with whom He’s done it, for the larger purpose of inspiring this and the following generations. I think He understands that when Church history is known and properly understood, it will fortify and strengthen faith in conditions that will be far more difficult than they are right now. I’m not a doomsayer, but I think it’s clear to any student of the scriptures that, yes, we have difficult times now, but it’s only going to get more difficult until He comes and rectifies what needs to be rectified.

He knows how best to fortify His people and ensure the ultimate victory of this work. I deeply believe that that fortification of His people and the strengthening of His Church will come, not only by reading the scriptures and availing ourselves of the ordinances but also by knowing our past. “Ye are saved if ye keep memory of what I’ve preached to you, what I’ve taught to you, what I’ve given to you.” I have great faith in that. I have great confidence in that. I think that it behooves Church leaders at all levels to know our history and to teach it. It behooves Church educators to know it and to preach it. And it behooves students to learn it, and to learn it well, so that we can stand in the places that we’ve been called to stand in and not wither in the heat of the last days.

Note

¹ On April 26, 2016, Richard E. Turley Jr. was appointed managing director of Church Public Affairs.