



Religious Educator: Perspectives on the Restored Gospel

Volume 19 | Number 1

Article 2

4-2018

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BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Bingham, Jean B. "Focus on Faith." *Religious Educator: Perspectives on the Restored Gospel* 19, no. 1 (2018): 1-7. <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/re/vol19/iss1/2>

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Jean B. Bingham, Relief Society General President.

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Focus on Faith

SISTER JEAN B. BINGHAM

Sister Jean B. Bingham is the Relief Society General President.

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The following is the transcript of an address given at a faith-based panel discussion at the United Nations on 13 April 2017.

Assembled dignitaries, honored guests, ladies and gentlemen:
I am honored to be here today to discuss the role of faith-based organizations in relieving suffering and building self-reliance among the peoples of the world—particularly those who are most vulnerable. I am grateful to be in the midst of so many friends who recognize the tremendous good that is achieved when people of faith come together.

Relief Society

I am here today in my role as the Relief Society General President for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Since its origins 175 years ago, the purpose of the Relief Society has been to minister to “the relief of the poor, the destitute, the widow and the orphan, and . . . the exercise of all benevolent purposes.”¹ Today, the Relief Society is the oldest and one of the largest

women's organization in the world, with more than seven million members across the globe. Its purposes, however, remain the same: to increase faith, strengthen the family, and relieve suffering.

In the very first meeting of the Relief Society, Emma Smith, the first Relief Society President, said, "We are going to do something extraordinary."² And indeed, when you can mobilize seven million women, each doing what she can according to her own time and resources, there is no limit to what they can achieve.

I believe that every faith-based organization echoes that same sentiment. We all desire to "accomplish something extraordinary"—and working together, we will. But let's not forget that large, extraordinary achievements are generally made up of many small, seemingly insignificant contributions. Indeed, a notable passage in the Book of Mormon states that it is "by small and simple things are great things brought to pass."³

Today I will look at how people of all faiths can unite together to relieve suffering through small and simple means.

LDS Church History

Both doctrinally and historically, the plight of those in need is one that resonates with most communities of faith, including The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Those familiar with the Church today recognize the state of Utah as its worldwide headquarters, but most do not realize that it was not always so.

The Church was actually organized here, in the state of New York, but severe religious persecution drove its early members from one location to another. During one particularly harsh period, after Church members had congregated in Missouri, the state's governor issued an executive order indicating that they must be driven from the state. As frightened families fled with what few possessions they could carry, they found refuge in neighboring Illinois, where kind strangers ministered to their needs, providing food, clothing, and shelter.

But peace was only temporary, and continuing hostility eventually forced the exodus of the Mormon pioneers—including every one of my great-great-grandparents—to the Salt Lake Valley. Is it any wonder, then, that our community of faith feels so strongly about our responsibility to help those who are outcast or otherwise in need?

In 1842, following a period of intense persecution, Church founder Joseph Smith made this remarkable declaration: "[A member of the Church] is to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to provide for the widow, to dry up the tear of the orphan, to comfort the afflicted, whether in this church, or in any other, or in no church at all, wherever he finds them."⁴ Can you imagine the boldness of such a statement to a group of exiles who must have been consumed with thoughts of how they would provide for themselves and their children, and their leader asks them to assist those who may be in even greater need? And yet this has always been our rallying call.

Beginnings of Church Humanitarian Efforts

The members of the Church have always been involved in humanitarian work, such as assisting the needy in Europe after World War II or providing relief to victims of natural disasters in many parts of the world. Those efforts became more formalized in 1985 with the establishment of LDS Charities. At that time, Church leaders became increasingly concerned with the news of the prolonged and devastating famine in Eastern Africa. After deliberating about how the Church could best help, they decided to turn to the individual members. A special fast was designated, in which members throughout the world were asked to forego two meals and to contribute the money saved to a special relief fund for those impacted by the famine. The response to such a simple request was overwhelming, and the small and simple donations—in the aggregate—allowed the Church to make a *great* contribution.

From those beginnings, donations have increased over time and have led to the formation of LDS Charities, the humanitarian arm of the Church. The work of LDS Charities spans the globe and consists of emergency response, refugee relief, clean water and sanitation, and support for various health care initiatives. Like so many other charitable organizations, our efforts are propelled by our faith that it is our God-given responsibility to relieve suffering, lighten the burdens of the afflicted, and bring hope to the hopeless.

United in Faith

Having said this, I must emphasize that were LDS Charities left to do this work on our own, our impact would be limited. While beliefs may vary, we are united with other faiths in our commitment to a higher cause that transcends our personal interests and motivates us to give of our substance, our time, and our energies on behalf of our fellow men and women. I speak not

only of financial resources but also of human resources—those remarkable individuals within our organizations whose compassion, skill, and devotion combine to reach others on a deeply personal level.

Our small and simple efforts are enhanced and multiplied by our collaboration with hundreds of partners, both global and local, including all of my fellow panelists. I have been humbled by their presentations today. Islamic Relief’s “Day of Dignity” program has helped so many people raise their chins and look forward with determination to begin their new lives. Episcopal Migration Ministries’ emphasis on helping immigrants adjust to their new job markets has provided stability for individuals, families, and future generations.

When we reach out to other faith-based organizations, there is a certain affinity—a shared language, a common motivation—that allows our resources to complement each other. Our common purpose lends power to our work. Governments and UN agencies recognize it, and they rely heavily on faith-based organizations to extend the reach of their services.

Ties to the Sustainable Development Goals

The contributions of faith-based organizations were particularly highlighted during the development of the Sustainable Development Goals, or SDGs. Speaking on the role of faith-based organizations and the SDGs, Rev. Dr. Olav Fykse Tveit, the general secretary for the World Council of Churches, stated:

Churches and other religious communities are not engaged in humanitarian response and development because of the SDGs, but *because of their fundamental faith commitments* to respecting human dignity, to serving the community, to protecting creation, and to witnessing to the divine. The faith that is our fundamental point of reference is expressed and brought into action in many ways: in confidence and trust in God, in the content of doctrine, in the teaching of the tradition, in a commitment to serve and share.⁵

I echo Reverend Tveit’s statement. Faith motivates those who serve in our organizations to give not only of their substance, but to give of *themselves*—they bring a human factor to the work which governmental programs alone cannot provide. We see a divine potential in those whom we serve; therefore, our efforts are not limited to just providing relief—we strive to build their capacity and their self-worth to increase their ability to meet the next

challenge that occurs so that they can also, in their turn, experience the joys of service and life.

Family

Allow me to now focus my comments briefly on the subject of the family.

Just a few steps away from us is the Security Council Chamber of the United Nations, a room where nations of the world can come together to work towards common goals of peace and security for all people. A large mural symbolizing the promise of future peace and individual freedom covers most of the east wall. It is noteworthy to me, however, that at the very center of this mural there is a family.

As defined by my faith, and by the United Nations, the family is the fundamental unit of society. Thus, care should be taken to protect the family, especially those in dire circumstances. As noted by the High Commission on Refugees, “When other institutions of society break down or are unavailable, as is so often the case in refugee situations, the family assumes a greater than usual importance. Refugees who are alone are more vulnerable to exploitation, attack, and trafficking.”⁶

It is also in the home that children are taught their first lessons of love, respect, forgiveness, compassion, care, and service. If we strengthen our homes now, we will be able to teach our children to reach out to those in need in the future. Is it any wonder, then, that the family is featured in the logo for LDS Charities?

Support to Refugees

I wish to touch briefly on how we have collaborated with other organizations to the relief of others.

In the United States, LDS Charities has assisted the nine federally authorized refugee-resettlement agencies, six of which are faith-based organizations. While we have provided furnishings, supplies, and funding to assist with housing and other needs, they have had the personnel, the expertise, and the organization to help refugees transition into their new homes and communities.

But perhaps what is as noteworthy as the material support is the personal outreach of the volunteers in helping refugees feel integrated and welcome. Locally, just across the Hudson River, a Latter-day Saint congregation in

Jersey City decided to collaborate with UNICEF and Church World Service to open their homes and hearts to refugees in their community.

Last night, I was invited to eat dinner with many of the members and the immigrants they are helping. One member of that congregation described her experiences. She said, “For now, we see our LDS chapel as a kind of community service space. For instance, we have a resettled women’s sewing group who meet weekly at our building. We provide volunteer education for those who wish to help newly settled families with needed cultural training. We have loved seeing our building become a safe haven for so many in our community. We’re thrilled to begin combining efforts with other churches and local groups working toward the same goal.”⁷

Visit to Uganda

Internationally, LDS Charities has partnered with a host of outstanding organizations to help provide food, shelter, clothing, and medical supplies to refugees in camps as well as those in transit. Longer-term needs in refugee camps and communities are also addressed through support for educational facilities and programs, water and sanitation systems, and health care.

Six weeks ago, I traveled to Uganda with UNICEF representatives to observe a multipartner effort to address the needs of refugees arriving from South Sudan and other neighboring countries. In addition to meeting immediate needs such as nutrition and medical care, LDS Charities and UNICEF are partnering to help provide immunizations and educational services for the many children in the settlement centers. As we visited the Bidi Bidi center and host communities, the array of skills and resources needed to address such needs were evident and, fortunately, so was the level of coordination among agencies.

In meeting the newly arriving refugees, I could see the relief wash over them as they exited the crowded buses to find a friendly welcome and a hot meal. As I observed teachers and children in classrooms and on playgrounds, I felt the sense of order and security that a safe learning space and caring teachers can bring to the lives of displaced children.

Wherever I looked, I saw people reaching out to teach and comfort. These are people who believe they can and must make a difference in the world around them; they are people who work together in order to magnify their individual efforts to bless the lives of others; in short, they are people of faith.

In summary, I express my sincere appreciation to all who are engaged in the challenging, but deeply rewarding, work of relieving suffering throughout the world. Our role in this effort is critical. We need to build bridges among faith-based organizations, understand each other’s work, and cooperate more. We need to organize the time, talents, and resources of faithful people who desire to help. We are united in a common commitment to care for those in need. While individually we can do great good, collectively we can accomplish so much more. It is my hope that we will all work together through small and simple means to accomplish extraordinary things.

Thank you. **RE**

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Notes

1. “Ladies’ Relief Society,” *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 11 (1 April 1842): 743; Joseph Smith was the editor of the periodical.
2. Polly Angell, quoted in Edward W. Tullidge, *The Women of Mormondom* (New York: Tullidge and Crandall, 1877), 76.
3. *Alma* 37:6.
4. Editor’s reply to a letter from Richard Savary, *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 10 (15 March 1842): 732; Joseph Smith was the editor of the periodical.
5. Rev. Dr. Olav Fykse Tveit, “The Role of Religion in Sustainable Development and Peace” (address, Partners for Change: Religions and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, Berlin, 17–18 February 2016), http://uri.org/files/resource_files/TheRoleofReligioninSustainableDevelopmentandPeace.pdf.
6. Kate Jastram and Kathleen Newland, “Family Unity and Refugee Protection,” UNHCR, <http://www.unhcr.org/3bd3d4a14.pdf>.
7. Personal correspondence to Ty Johnson.