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Dell Van-Orden

J. Melan Heslop

Lance E. Larsen

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# A Prophet for All the World: Glimpses into the Life of President Spencer W. Kimball

Dell Van Orden and J Melan Heslop, with Lance E. Larsen

As editors of the *Church News*, we had the opportunity of traveling widely with President Spencer W. Kimball. From 30 December 1973, when he became the prophet, we followed him through forty countries on six continents. During his twelve years as President of the Church, he traveled well over half-a-million miles. From what we saw of him both in public and private, we testify that he was truly a prophet for all the world.

The most notable thing about President Kimball was his love for others. No matter where he traveled, he reached out. At the end of conferences, he would often look at the congregation and say, "I want to shake hands with everyone." This was his way of saying, "I love you; you are important to me." He did this in La Paz, Bolivia, with a congregation of over fourteen hundred members. Mothers carried their babies in their arms and on their backs as they passed by him. Old people, young people, the lame, the crippled, and the blind, as well as the healthy—they all came to shake hands with the prophet. It was a touching sight. For forty minutes they filed past President Kimball and other brethren. Some left crying; others left with exuberant smiles.

After a conference in Samoa, President Kimball announced that he wanted to meet the members. He stood at the pulpit shaking hands with the men and kissing the sisters. The people approached from one side, greeted the prophet, then walked down the other. At least that was the arrangement. But soon we began noticing the same people back again, to greet him over and over. If someone hadn't caught on, that could have gone on all day.

In Tokyo, when President Kimball announced that he wanted to meet the members, a number of people stood waiting by the roped-off area. Off to the side a blind man was ushered up to the rope. He couldn't see President Kimball, but it was clear by the look on his

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Dell Van Orden and J Melan Heslop are editors for the *Church News* in Salt Lake City. Lance E. Larsen is a graduate student in English at Brigham Young University.



face that he could sense the prophet approaching. He waited very, very patiently. When President Kimball drew near, the blind man extended his hand and President Kimball took it. They embraced without saying a word, and tears came to the blind man's eyes.

In Mexico City twenty-five thousand members gathered. President Kimball told of a dream he had had some thirty years before in which he saw the destiny of the Mexican people. He saw wards and stakes organized by the hundreds, a temple filled with men and women, and thousands of young men and women on missions. He saw the people of Lehi as engineers and builders, as administrators of the land, as heads of cities and nations. He saw their children becoming attorneys, doctors, owners of shops and factories. In his dream he saw them no longer as servants but as employers.

The people were greatly moved. After the meeting, the twenty-five thousand stood and burst into "God Be with You Till We Meet Again." While they sang, President Kimball reached into his pocket, pulled out a white handkerchief, and started waving it to the Mexican Saints, many of whom were crying openly. Suddenly that vast audience became a sea of white, waving handkerchiefs. After finishing "God Be with You Till We Meet Again," they were still not satisfied and went on to sing the traditional farewell song of Mexico.

The tradition of waving white handkerchiefs got started in São Paulo, Brazil, when President Kimball announced that the Church would build a temple there. The announcement brought immediate tears of gratitude from the members. At the end of the meeting the choir, seated high in a balcony, sang "We Thank Thee, O God, for a Prophet." Somebody pulled out a handkerchief and started to wave it, and next to him a second person, and across the way a third. Soon the whole audience was waving handkerchiefs at the prophet. When the meeting ended, no one left. The emotional high continued for a long time.

President Kimball never took this love for granted. Frequently when people visited him in his office, he would put his arm around them and give them a kiss. He said, "When people tell me that they love me, it is music to my ears. That's what I live on."

He was always reaching out to others, touching lives. He understood the gospel's central theme—that love changes people. Members who met President Kimball could easily see his love in his unself-conscious acts of charity. Once, while he and Sister Kimball were flying from Asunción, Paraguay, to Montevideo, Uruguay, their plane had to turn back when one of the engines stopped. When President and Sister Kimball landed in Asunción, "J" took the opportunity to interview President Kimball in connection with his upcoming eightieth birthday. The room had no air conditioning and was rather warm.



The local mission president, who had been notified of the Kimballs' return, drove out to the airport to look after them. He entered the room carrying two cold bottles of a fruit drink. He looked a bit perplexed when he saw three people sitting there; he knew he was short a drink. He gave the first bottle to Sister Kimball, who received it gratefully, and the second to President Kimball, who expressed his thanks. The President tipped the bottle up, took a long, cold drink, then handed it to "J," who smiled, took a swig, and handed it back. It was natural for President Kimball to share.

On another occasion, a group attending an area conference in La Paz, Bolivia, flew from sea level to 13,600 feet in two hours, which is not enough time to become acclimated to that high altitude. As the plane approached the La Paz airport, the highest in the world, an announcement over the public address system warned that because of the thin air, passengers could expect to get headaches and possibly chest and stomach pains. As soon as the door opened, Dell got a headache. Then when he stood up, his chest and stomach hurt. We rode down a winding road in a bus and checked into a hotel. Dell felt very, very sick. While he was lying on his bed feeling sorry for himself, the doctor came in and asked how he felt. Dell said he was dying, so the doctor sent up an oxygen tank. As long as Dell was breathing oxygen, he felt better, but when he wasn't, he felt terrible. Half-seriously he felt as if the end were near and his family would never see him again. When he heard a knock at the door, he was impatient—somebody was disturbing his dying. He flung the door open, and there stood President Kimball. "How do you feel?" the prophet asked. Dell did some fast repenting. "President, I feel fine." The President left and went to the next door, then the next. Everybody was ill, but President Kimball, who must have felt quite ill himself, was out checking on the welfare of others.

Missionaries were special recipients of his love and attention. On his way from Johannesburg, South Africa, to South America, President Kimball had a layover of several hours in Capetown, a city rich with history. This is where the Indian and Atlantic oceans meet and where early British ships stopped on their way to the Far East. President Kimball could have done interesting sight-seeing there, but instead he chose to meet with the missionaries. Word quickly went out to the twelve missionaries in Capetown to meet in one of the church houses. Nearly as many General Authorities attended that meeting as missionaries, but President Kimball treated those twelve missionaries the same way he would have treated three hundred.

At other times we have seen him walk down a corridor in a chapel with his arm around a missionary so that they could be alone to talk. He had equal concern for twelve hundred, or twelve, or one.



His loving concern for others caused him to be direct in sharing the gospel. Instead of merely making friends among nonmembers, he taught. While staying at a hotel in Germany, President Kimball learned that the desk clerk wanted to meet him, so he put on his coat and went down to the lobby. He could have merely said, "You have a lovely hotel here; the accommodations are very nice." But he didn't. After introducing himself, President Kimball asked, "What do you know about the Mormons?" When the man answered that he didn't know very much, the President said, "Would you like to know more?" The man said that he would. President Kimball wrote down his name and address, then said, "I'll see to it personally that missionaries contact you."

In Denmark, President Kimball expressed a desire to visit the Cathedral of Copenhagen to see the original of Thorvaldsen's famous statue of Christ, a copy of which stands in the visitors' center in Salt Lake City. The cathedral was closed for repairs, but a knock on the front door brought the caretaker. After the visitors explained who they were, he graciously let them in. Along the sides of the dimly-lit cathedral were statues of the original Twelve Apostles—Peter, James, John, Andrew, and the others. At one end was the Christ statue and, above that, the words, "Behold, this is my beloved Son; hear ye Him." The sculptor, who had finished the sculpture in 1821, had no idea that these were almost the words the Father had said to Joseph Smith the year before, when Joseph knelt to pray in the Sacred Grove. President Kimball was very moved by this.

As the group prepared to depart, President Kimball could have merely thanked the gracious caretaker and said good-bye, but he didn't. Instead he said, "I've certainly enjoyed this tour. But you know these statues are of dead Apostles." The caretaker, who had spent much of his life involved with the statues, was taken aback and a little offended. But President Kimball went on to say, "Do you know that in the world today there are living Apostles, and four of them are in this room right now?" First he introduced himself, then President N. Eldon Tanner and Elder Thomas S. Monson and Elder Boyd K. Packer. "We are Apostles of the Lord Jesus Christ. Would you like to know more about a church that has living Apostles?"

Even when the prophet met with national leaders he taught the gospel. When the Church President visits with heads of state, press people usually get about two minutes for pictures before being politely escorted out. But when President Kimball visited the president of Guatemala, Dell was allowed to stay. During those thirty-five minutes, President Kimball taught the president of Guatemala the gospel from A to Z. He talked about family home evening, temple work, genealogy, and eternal families.



President Kimball used the same directness in teaching members their responsibilities. Although many of those attending area conferences had been in the Church only a few weeks or a few months, President Kimball left no room for misunderstanding. He would say, “When your children are eight years old, they will be baptized.” He didn’t say it would be nice; he didn’t say the scriptures say age eight; he didn’t soften it. He merely affirmed: “When they’re eight, they will be baptized.” He also said, “When your sons are nineteen years old, they will go on missions.” The members left knowing exactly what was expected of them.

He used a similar tactic to encourage children—especially twelve-year-olds—to go on missions. Instead of merely suggesting they start missionary funds, he gave them their first dollar. “This is to start your missionary fund,” he would say. His secretary, D. Arthur Haycock, kept money in his pocket to lend him because sometimes, if there was a crowd, President Kimball ran out.

He even kept the same straightforward manner with the press. The day he became President, a big press conference convened. There must have been dozens of reporters, with their cameras and lights, encircling him, some of them sitting on the floor. He answered some of their inquiries by saying, “We have the answers. We have all the answers to all the problems in this world because the Lord is head of our Church.” When they asked what advice he had, it was simple: “Keep the commandments.” There was no arrogance about him—he was just direct.

In the press conference at the laying of the cornerstone of the Washington Temple, there were representatives from all the big newspapers and television stations in the country, as well as several foreign correspondents. Someone asked the question, “Why is the Mormon church growing so rapidly?” President Kimball could have answered many ways. He could have said we have a great youth program, we take care of our own, or we emphasize the family, but he answered humbly and directly: “Because the Church is true.”

The President always used his time effectively. On a jet plane, when he was tired, he rested. He folded his arms, closed his eyes, and went to sleep; after a while he was refreshed and wide awake. He also used the flying time to read and study and prepare. And he always had a lot of preparing to do. One day Brother Haycock commented, “The President is working on twenty-three speeches right now.” He traveled with two briefcases, one that he carried himself and another that Brother Haycock carried. Worried about losing his notes for the next talk he was supposed to give, he was constantly saying, “Arthur, have you got the briefcase?” Travel is wearing, but President Kimball’s reaction was the opposite of most; he got stronger as he went on. After



being gone for two or three weeks, he often returned home stronger than when he left.

When asked once why he felt such an urgency about his calling, he answered, "I've been to the Mount of Olives where Christ said to the eleven who were with him, 'Go ye into all the world.' And I remember that there are nine hundred million people in one country who haven't heard the gospel. Until we've touched them all, I will feel an urgency."

Everything he did carried with it that sense of urgency. Although President Kimball traveled a lot, he hardly ever took any time for sight-seeing. He wasn't on tour; he was on a work mission. He kept up an incredible pace—flying from country to country, attending conferences, dedicating buildings and temples—but he never lost sight of why he was doing it: to help people, to show them love.

On a plane he would visit others. He would walk down the aisle, lean on a seat, and talk to anyone he knew or anyone he thought he would like to know. Once on a plane from San Francisco to Salt Lake, a clean-cut young man, who looked like a returned missionary, came down the aisle. When he noticed President Kimball, he stopped. President Kimball reached up with his arm and put it around the young man's neck and brought him very close, six or seven inches away. As they conversed, he kissed the young man on the cheek. The young man's eyes glistened with tears.

After the plane landed, Dell's wife, who had observed the incident, saw the young man across the baggage carousel. She approached him and said, "Hi, I saw you talking with the President of the Church. I suppose you're LDS."

"No," he said, "I'm RC—Roman Catholic."

Surprised, she asked, "What did you talk about?"

"He asked me to join the Church."

"Are you going to do it?"

"Well, it's kind of hard to refuse what a prophet of God asks you to do."

President Kimball reached out in a similar way to a young man he met at the Chicago airport. The young man had long hair and a beard and was wearing ragged clothes. He kept looking at President Kimball, gradually moving closer to him. One of the President's aides said to the young man, "If you want to go say *hello* to him, go ahead." That was all the invitation he needed. The young man and President Kimball talked for a few minutes; then President Kimball reached out, brought this young man close to him in a big hug, and kissed him on the cheek. The young man broke down and cried.

On one occasion, after addressing the missionaries at the Missionary Training Center in Provo, President Kimball said, "As long as we're



here, we'd better do some visiting.' First, he stopped by to visit a married relative of his, but no one was home. Next, he called on one of his grandchildren in a basement apartment. Then, on the way back to Salt Lake, he drove out to a small community and knocked on the door of a home. The people inside were absolutely startled. "I heard there was illness here," President Kimball said, as he walked in to visit a man he knew from Arizona.

President Kimball was open to all kinds of people and situations. Having time between conferences, he chose to go by ferry from Sweden to Finland rather than fly. There were many Church members from Finland on the ferry, too. Recognizing President Kimball, they slowly approached him. At first there was a problem in communication, but a young sister who had been an exchange student in America came forward and translated. Before long, the President had invited the members to a fireside meeting later that evening. After dinner, the group met on deck. It was a lovely setting. They gathered deck chairs in a semicircle, and someone brought a ship's lantern and hung it on the wall so there would be light.

The meeting began with a hymn. Although a blaring band downstairs ran competition, the singing of the Saints overshadowed it. Then President Kimball spoke. He talked about the Navajo Indians, a people he greatly loved and respected. Then he talked about growing up in Arizona. "Back then I used to sing. In fact, there was hardly a funeral I didn't sing at, either as a soloist or with a quartet. I sang and sang until they cut my throat." He went "Kuuuuuuughh" and drew his finger across his neck. Mouths dropped open. Then he recounted the circumstances of his cancer operation and explained that the doctors had told him he might not have a voice. He had responded by saying, "I must have a voice. The reason I'm here is to speak. I have a message. I must have a voice." When the operation was over, he had just a little bit of one vocal cord left, and with difficulty he learned to speak again. His voice was never the same, but it was a voice the Saints learned to love.

"Tonight," he said, "I'm going to sing for you." And he called Sister Kimball to come up. He lifted her handbag from her shoulder and began to beat out a little Indian rhythm on that bag, and all of a sudden he began chanting a Navajo song. The people were startled, spellbound. They saw that a prophet of God need not always be solemn and straight-faced.

A notable characteristic about President Kimball was his simplicity. In South America, where most travelers order steak at restaurants, President Kimball would typically eat a bowl of soup, or bread and milk. His home was simple, too. When he went home at night, he always took work with him, and he would stay up working in his study.



It was a small room lined with books and file cabinets and his personal journals in binders. His desk was too small to hold the things he was working on, so papers and books spilled over onto a card table. A card table was good enough for him.

This simplicity was a part of his humility. One morning his party was up early to catch a 2:00 A.M. flight out of Panama. President Kimball asked them to come to his room for prayer. When they had gathered, he explained that he had received word from Salt Lake City of an accident. Some young people driving on a snowy road had collided with a snowplow. Two of them had been killed, three or four injured. President Kimball had been requested to offer a prayer for the afflicted families. He looked over at his counselor and said, "I would rather have President Marion G. Romney pray because he prays so much better than I do, but since the family has requested that I offer the prayer, we'll honor that request." As they all knelt down, President Kimball poured out his heart, seeking comfort for those people who had met tragedy. And yet he had wanted President Romney to pray because he prayed better.

On another occasion, President Kimball invited members of the traveling party into his stateroom for prayer. Everyone knelt and President Kimball said, "'J,' would you give the prayer?" "J" swallowed hard. He had come to hear the prophet pray, but he ended up offering prayer for the prophet.

When President Kimball went to Israel in 1979 to dedicate the Orson Hyde Memorial Garden, he drove around the country before the dedication, looking at various biblical sites. He seemed to be anticipating something. He wanted to visit a particular area, Mount Tabor, one of two likely sites of the Transfiguration. Those who were escorting him assumed they could just point off into the distance and say, "There's Mount Tabor," but that did not satisfy him. He wanted to go to the mountain. Early the next morning they drove up Mount Tabor. At the top was a church. They climbed the exterior stairs and stood on the roof, looking out. President Kimball seemed to be sensing something. "This is why we came to Israel," he said. "This is the highest point in all the world." It was as if he were observing it all over again—how Christ's celestial glory was uncovered before his Apostles. Only after he had visited Mount Tabor did President Kimball's visit to the Holy Land seem complete.

He and Sister Kimball also visited the Garden Tomb outside the walls of the old city, where a small cave carved out of rock is partitioned into two chambers. On one side there is a ledge where a body could have lain. The other side contains a bench where President and Sister Kimball sat down to talk about their feelings. He said, "I feel very sure that this is the right site, that this is where Jesus lay during those

three days.” Later, when he was walking alone so that the photographers could take pictures of him near the tomb, Brother Haycock told him to be careful because the ground was uneven. “Don’t worry,” he said. “I’m used to walking in holy places.”

Just being near President Kimball, one could sense his power as the Lord’s chosen and anointed. In New Zealand, after the President spoke at a multistake fireside on the importance of the temple, Dell decided to walk around the New Zealand Temple grounds. It was a beautiful, warm night. He struck up a conversation with a Maori woman sitting in front of the temple. She said she had attended the fireside: “I got there early and got a seat on the aisle, hoping I could shake President Kimball’s hand or reach out and touch him. As the meeting closed, he walked past and I touched him. I couldn’t go right home after that. I had to come here to keep that spirit for a while longer.”

No man has been more loving and loved, more teachable and capable of teaching, more diligent, more committed, more spiritual, more powerful in his own way. No one has been more able to encompass in his concern the people of all the world.