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The First Fifty Years of Relief Society

Karen Lynn Davidson

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Jill Mulvay Derr, Carol Cornwall Madsen, Kate Holbrook, and Matthew J. Grow, eds. *The First Fifty Years of Relief Society*. Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2016.

Reviewed by Karen Lynn Davidson

The First Fifty Years of Relief Society has the distinction of being the first published volume other than the Joseph Smith Papers to appear under the imprint of the Church Historian's Press. The stated purpose of the Church Historian's Press is to publish "accurate, transparent, and authoritative works of history about The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints," works that "meet the highest standards of scholarship."¹ Without question, *The First Fifty Years* rises to those standards in every way, with its broad research, meticulous transcriptions, inviting and thorough introductions, and accessible reference materials. Half a century unfolds in this book as we trace the Relief Society from its modest beginnings in Nauvoo to its much-expanded and influential role in the West.

The volume's editors are seasoned professionals whose names are well known in the world of LDS historical studies. Jill Mulvay Derr is a retired senior research historian for the Church History Department, and Carol Cornwall Madsen is a professor emerita of history at Brigham Young University. Kate Holbrook and Matthew J. Grow both work in the Church History Department, she as a specialist in women's history and he as director of publications. The research and editing skills of dozens of others, as listed in the front matter and the acknowledgments, add depth to the annotations and readability to the prose.

The range of the seventy-eight selected documents in this volume is impressive. As readers might expect, the book contains Joseph Smith's instructions and the sisters' minutes from the early days in Nauvoo. But the book also contains lesser-known jewels such as "Lamanite Sisters

1. Church Historian's Press, "About the Press," <https://www.churchhistorianspress.org/about>.

Testify,” an 1880 Relief Society report from Thistle Valley, Utah. The book provides everything from personal jottings to polished oratory: minutes, personal letters, journal excerpts, articles from *Woman’s Exponent* and *Deseret News*, poems, reports, petitions, and speeches. In following the growth of the Relief Society, readers learn about religious, economic, social, and political history as well. Some of these records reflect the broad history of the Society, while others reveal what the Society meant in the lives of individual women. Readers meet a whole cast of leaders and members far beyond the well-known players in Relief Society history.

Each of the book’s four chronological sections draws on the documents that best represent that period. Part 1, 1830–45, focuses mainly on the Nauvoo minutes. As Joseph Smith organized the women “according to the law of Heaven,” they welcomed his invitation to expand their spiritual natures and their sphere of service. But in 1845, Brigham Young dissolved the Society, resulting in a hiatus of almost a decade. Part 2 picks up the history from 1854 to 1866, as Brigham Young began to authorize the organization of local Relief Societies, and the women in at least twenty-five wards in the Salt Lake area came together to meet the needs of American Indians, destitute neighbors, and newly arriving immigrants. Part 3 spans the years 1867–79, when Brigham Young called upon wards churchwide to organize their own Relief Societies. Although the sisters are still without central leadership, the Relief Society movement expands in many directions as the women organize the Primary and Young Women and become active in commerce, politics, and home industry. Part 4 begins in 1880 and ends with the 1892 Jubilee celebration, when the Relief Society—now with its own general president and officers—celebrated a new hospital, their membership in the National Council of Women, and their success with the youth auxiliaries.

A scholarly publication like *The First Fifty Years of Relief Society* is of great value to historians, teachers, and anyone else interested in the history and culture of this era (and that would surely include readers of *BYU Studies Quarterly*). But what about the nonspecialist? At more than eight hundred pages, this volume might seem intimidating. But in fact, because early Relief Society documents encompass so many different events and trends, and because the editors provide such clear and to-the-point explanatory materials, any interested reader would be able to follow a favorite thread.

For example, most Latter-day Saints are familiar with the organization of the first Relief Society in Nauvoo. It has been reenacted in

pageants and films, retold in historical novels, and even painted on china plates. But what about the Relief Society after the westward trek? The trials, achievements, and dedication of these Salt Lake women deserve to be better known. Fortunately, the documents in this volume help to restore a larger view.

Another thread takes readers through the gap of almost ten years without a Relief Society. Using strong language, Brigham Young summarily dissolved the organization, but little by little, over a span of many years, he enabled and then encouraged its reorganization. Documents in this volume, along with their accompanying introductions and notes, explain the motives behind these events. Readers can easily browse the volume according to other interests as well: Speaking in tongues? Women giving healing blessings? Personal, organizational, and legal documents regarding plural marriage? The menu for a “Retrenchment Table”? Commerce, suffrage, fashion, education, raffles, silk production? It’s all there.

Even glancing through the index can be quite absorbing. The name of a relative, Keziah Burk, caught my eye. She certainly is not a major figure in the history of Relief Society, but there was her name, in the handwriting of Eliza R. Snow, among the women who were “presented to the Society and were unanimously receiv’d” into membership at the seventh meeting in Nauvoo.

And sometimes the bare-bones account in the document itself is more moving and significant than any retelling or any scripted version could be. At the meeting in Nauvoo on July 28, 1843, Elizabeth Ann Whitney “suggested the necessity of having a committee so appointed to search out the poor and suffering—to call on the rich for aid and thus as far as possible relieve the wants of all.” So what happened in the weeks to follow? Again and again, the minutes show notations like these:

Mrs. Meeccum . . . spoke of a Mrs. Nickerson Who had no home

Mrs. Webb said she would take her in

Mrs. Jones said a little girl was brought to her as an object of charity

Mrs. Hunter gave calico for a dress for her

Sister [Granger] spoke of Sister Broomley as being destitute of dresses
said she would donate one of her own

Just see what was happening here. A need was reported, and that need was met, without delay. *Someone needs shelter.* Check. *A woman needs a dress, and a child needs fabric so a dress can be made.* Check, check. These women were first responders extraordinaire.

Like their counterparts in priesthood quorums, Latter-day Saint women knew that the keeping of records was a sacred duty. They treasured their beliefs and their mission; they wanted their work to be remembered. *The First Fifty Years of Relief Society* is a way to remember, touching our hearts and resonating with our own aspirations while at the same time assuming a proud place among the finest volumes of LDS scholarship.

Karen Lynn Davidson received BA and MA degrees from BYU and a PhD from the University of Southern California. She served as an editor for two volumes of the Joseph Smith Papers, *Histories, Volume 1*, and *Histories, Volume 2* (2012). With Jill Mulvay Derr, she co-edited *Eliza R. Snow: The Complete Poetry* (Provo, Utah: BYU Press; Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2009), and co-wrote *Eliza: The Faith and Works of Eliza R. Snow* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2013). She is a member of the board of directors of the Mormon Scholars Association.