

Elder Russell M. Nelson

Gratitude for senior missionaries

Gratefully we welcome Elder Dieter F. Uchtdorf and Elder David A. Bednar to the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. Prayerfully and unitedly we will serve the Lord Jesus Christ.

Assignments this year have taken me to many nations of the earth. In some of those countries the Church is relatively new. No matter where I go, I meet our missionaries. They are remarkably resilient and ever effective. They give visible and tangible evidence that the Church of Jesus Christ has been restored in its fulness. It was He who said, "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature."¹ This commandment throbs in the heart of every missionary who testifies of Jesus Christ and teaches His message.

When we think of missionaries, we generally picture in our minds young men with shirts and ties and young women dressed modestly. But along with them are marvelous senior missionaries who have answered the pleadings of prophets and apostles for more missionary couples.²

I express gratitude for our senior missionaries. They are young in spirit, wise, and willing to work. They even tolerate remarks from their fun-filled children who might change President Spencer W. Kimball's plea "Lengthen your stride" to "Hasten your shuffle."³ These dear members are willing to serve and strengthen the lives of others.⁴ Even if these seniors don't know the local language, their accomplishments are great and their spirit of sacrifice is precious.⁵

Examples of senior missionary service

Lloyd and Catherine Poelman

For example, I think of Elder Lloyd Poelman and his wife, Sister Catherine Poelman. Parents of 9 grown children and

grandparents of 20 grandchildren, they now serve in a remote part of Chile, working in a small branch. They make frequent visits among less-active members and with families recently converted to the Church. These visits provide opportunity for the Poelmans to read with those families and bear testimony of temple blessings. In their mission branches they have also taught people how to conduct music and play simplified versions of the hymns on small electronic keyboards. Elder and Sister Poelman recently wrote:

"Baptism is only the first step in conversion. When the initial excitement subsides and the new converts continue facing the need to work long hours just to put bread on the table, they need others to help them who share the joy of the gospel. That is our specialty. Part of our work is preventive—staying close to new converts. Yet others who rarely attend meetings have not lost conviction and receive our messages gratefully. As we watch the changes brought about in the lives of those we visit, we feel blessed to be receiving constant tutoring and help from the Lord in this work and, at the same time, to know that our family members back home are vicariously sharing our calling and those special blessings."⁶

Such marvelous couples are engaged in the work of reclaiming souls who have previously made covenants to take upon themselves the name of Jesus Christ.

Kenneth and Barbara Willits

Other missionary couples render service in sacred temples of the Church. Elder Kenneth and Sister Barbara Willits, for instance, serve in the Accra Ghana Temple. They developed a special love for the people of Ghana while serving there as missionaries more than two decades earlier. They are energetic and enthusias-

tic converts of 50 years, with 3 children, 16 grandchildren, and 12 great-grandchildren. They perform the exalting ordinances of the temple. Brother Willits serves as a sealer.

On several occasions they have been pleasantly surprised to meet members whom they had previously encountered during their first mission. Recently Elder Willits performed the sealing of a husband and wife whom they had taught in 1982, and to that couple Elder Willits sealed four of their deceased children. Elder and Sister Willits write:

"Our willingness to leave our family and home is motivated by the temple covenants we have made, and our deepest desire is to become an eternal family. Our family is fully supportive as we serve, and they share in many blessings we have received. We are humbly grateful for the privilege of assisting others to receive their temple blessings."⁷

Courageous and caring couples like Elder and Sister Willits enable and enrich the work done in many of our temples across the earth. Some, such as the Accra Ghana Temple, are located where most local members had not had previous opportunities to attend a temple. Ordinances for those members are now enhanced by experienced couples who serve as temple missionaries. To them we also express our heartfelt gratitude.

Rudi and Eva Hegewald

Earlier this year Elder Douglas L. Calister and I were in Kiev, capital city of Ukraine. We were there to create the first stake in the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. We were pleased to note that the Kiev Ukraine District was well prepared to become a stake—fully organized and ready to take its place among the stakes of Zion. There we also met with the missionaries, among whom were several stalwart senior couples. We listened attentively to their expressions.

We remember the account of Elder Rudi and Sister Eva Hegewald, who grew up in what was then known as East Germany. Speaking with a slight and sweet German accent, they recounted the difficult days of World War II and the subsequent Soviet occupation. They spoke of their many deprivations. Finding the Lord's true Church and later immigrating to America were counted as treasured blessings. The ensuing years brought them five healthy children, along with spiritual and financial increase. They felt that serving a mission would be a good way for them to show gratitude to the Lord. They expressed a deep desire to serve in Eastern Europe. Their call came to serve in the Ukraine Kiev Mission. Elder and Sister Hegewald write:

"Now, close to the end of our mission in the land of our former enemy, we are thankful for the opportunity to teach and love the Ukrainian people. As we have served the Lord, our souls have been healed and our family has become more united. We have had a truly remarkable and satisfying experience and have seen many small miracles."⁸

A call for more senior missionary couples

Notice that all three couples wrote of their blessings. Another couple tells of blessings that come from missionary service. They wrote: "Good people replaced our parenting functions better than we. . . . If a family problem has not yielded to prayer and fasting, a mission might be considered."⁹

No senior missionary finds it convenient to leave. Neither did Joseph or Brigham or John or Wilford. They had children and grandchildren too. They loved their families not one whit less, but they also loved the Lord and wanted to serve Him. Someday we may meet these stalwarts who helped to establish this dispensation. Then will we rejoice that we did not seek the shadows when a call to missionary service

came from the prophet, even in the autumn years of our lives.

At general conference in October 1925, President Heber J. Grant issued a clarion call for “men of mature years and sound judgment, who have had experience in the preaching of the gospel, . . . to go forth and labor in the mission fields.”¹⁰

That need persists. At the most recent training broadcast to priesthood leaders throughout the world, President Gordon B. Hinckley issued a similar call:

“There is a constant need for more couple missionaries,” he said. “They perform wonderful service throughout the world. You [leaders] need not wait for the couples to volunteer. The sacrifices associated with serving the Lord full-time will abundantly bless the couples, their families, and the people they serve.”¹¹

Qualifications for the work

Bishops also need to heed that prophetic call and ask such members if they could serve. Opportunities for senior missionaries are varied and vast.¹² Their calls to serve are officially made after prayerful consideration has been given to their occupational background, language experience, and personal capabilities.¹³ Of all qualifications to serve, a *desire* to serve may be the most important. The Lord has declared:

“O ye that embark in the service of God, see that ye serve him with all your heart, might, mind and strength, that ye may stand blameless before God at the last day.

“Therefore, if ye have *desires* to serve God ye are called to the work.”¹⁴

Many humble Latter-day Saints fear that they are not qualified for missionary labors. But to such a prospective missionary, the Lord has given this assurance: “Faith, hope, charity and love, with an eye single to the glory of God, qualify him for the work.”¹⁵

Limitations imposed by age and health

As I extol the work of senior missionaries, I realize that there are many more who would like to serve but are not able to do so. Limitations imposed by age or by poor health deserve realistic appraisal, as do the important needs of family members. When desire burns within yet such limitations exist, you can extend your service through others. They can be your arms and legs, and you can provide needed funds. Still others can contribute time and talents as live-at-home missionaries.¹⁶ Each will be pleasing to the Lord, and each will receive His praise.

The gospel

All of us may preach the gospel by precept and example. The word *gospel* means “good news.” The good news is the Lord Jesus Christ and His message of salvation.¹⁷ Jesus equated the gospel with both His mission and with His ministry in mortality. In His *mission statement*, Jesus said:

“This is the gospel which I have given unto you—that I came into the world to do the will of my Father, because my Father sent me.

“And my Father sent me that I might be lifted up upon the cross.”¹⁸

The Savior’s mortal mission we know as the *Atonement*.

The Savior’s mortal *ministry* includes everything else that He did—His teachings, expressions of love, attention to ordinances, patterns of prayer, perseverance, and more. He lived to be our Exemplar, which He also equated to the gospel in His ministerial statement. “This is my gospel,” He said, “for the works which ye have seen me do that shall ye also do.”¹⁹ Thus, faith; repentance; baptism by water, fire, and of the Holy Ghost; the gathering of the elect; and enduring to the end are all part of the gospel.²⁰ All of us can emulate the Lord’s

example, regardless of age, status, or location.

As one among the “special witnesses of the name of Christ in all the world,”²¹ I declare that He is the Son of the living God, our atoning Savior and Redeemer. This is His Church, restored in these latter days to fulfill its divine destiny. His prophet today is President Gordon B. Hinckley. I so testify in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

NOTES

1. Mark 16:15; see also Matthew 28:19; Mormon 9:22; Doctrine and Covenants 42:58; 68:8; 80:1; 84:62; 112:28.
2. For example, see Gordon B. Hinckley, “There Must Be Messengers,” *Ensign*, Oct. 1987, 2–5; see also L. Tom Perry, in Conference Report, Apr. 1984, 104–8; or *Ensign*, May 1984, 78–80; M. Russell Ballard, “Missionary Couples,” *Ensign*, June 1988, 8–12; Robert D. Hales, in Conference Report, Apr. 2001, 31–34; or *Ensign*, May 2001, 25–27.
3. See “Serving as Couple Missionaries,” *Ensign*, Sept. 1997, 15.
4. See Luke 22:32.
5. Concerns pertaining to a mission may be considered in four categories:
 - (1) Finances: Any expenses over and beyond what would have been needed at home may be subsidized by children, friends, quorums, or by other members of the family.
 - (2) Fear: Mature missionaries need not fear tracting or learning a new language. Much can be contributed by using talents already acquired. Missionaries can venture into another language situation knowing that they will learn what they need to know without demanding fluency of themselves. They will learn some of their mission language and find joy in using each new expression.
 - (3) Fitness: While a risk-free environment cannot be guaranteed either at home or in the mission field, appropriate provisions can be made for proper diet and exercise. Routine needs for physical care can generally be met in the mission field. In the event of an emergency, evacuation, if advisable, is possible.
6. Personal letter, dated June 29, 2004.
7. Personal letter, received June 28, 2004.
8. Personal letter, received July 1, 2004.
9. Letter addressed to Elder Dallin H. Oaks from Dr. Brent and Carol Petersen, dated June 27, 2004.
10. In Conference Report, Oct. 1925, 10.
11. “To the Bishops of the Church,” *Worldwide Leadership Training Meeting*, June 19, 2004, 27; see also “Excerpts from Recent Addresses of President Gordon B. Hinckley,” *Ensign*, Apr. 1996, 72.
12. Categories include leadership and member work; family history and temple service; medical, humanitarian, and welfare services; working at visitors’ centers, for public affairs, on an area or mission office staff, with finance and records, with physical facilities, for the Church Educational System, with the Perpetual Education Fund, or in support of other educational endeavors. Other opportunities are available to suit the unique abilities possessed by prospective missionaries. See Giles H. Florence Jr., “So Many Kinds of Missions,” *Ensign*, Feb. 1990, 6–11.
13. For details regarding qualification and preparation for senior missionaries, see

- David B. Haight, “Couple Missionaries—‘A Wonderful Resource,’” *Ensign*, Feb. 1996, 6–12; Vaughn J. Featherstone, “Couple Missionaries: ‘Too Wonderful for Me,’” *Ensign*, Sept. 1998, 14–17; “There Is Work for Us to Do,” *Ensign*, Oct. 1993, 36–41; “The Impact of Couple Missionaries,” *Ensign*, Apr. 2003, 60–63; John L. Hart, “Working Miracles in Mission Field,” *Church News*, Dec. 22, 1990, 3, 7.
14. Doctrine and Covenants 4:2–3; *italics added.*
 15. Doctrine and Covenants 4:5.
 16. Additional information can be found on the Church Web site www.lds.org under “Service Opportunities for Senior Missionaries” (click on “Other Resources” on the home page, then on “Church-Service Missionary Opportunities”).
 17. See Bible Dictionary, “Gospels,” 682–83.
 18. 3 Nephi 27:13–14.
 19. 3 Nephi 27:21.
 20. See *Doctrine and Covenants* 33:6–12; 39:6.
 21. *Doctrine and Covenants* 107:23.
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- The choir sang “Still, Still with Thee.”
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President Hinckley

The choir has just sung “Still, Still with Thee.”

It will now be my pleasure to address you. Following my remarks, the choir will sing “Come, Ye Thankful People.” Elder Spencer V. Jones of the Seventy will then offer the benediction.

The concluding session of this conference will begin at 2:00 this afternoon.

President Gordon B. Hinckley

Reflections on Sister Hinckley’s passing

My brethren and sisters, at the outset, if you will bear with me, I wish to exercise a personal privilege. Six months ago, at the close of our conference, I stated that my beloved companion of 67 years was seriously ill. She passed away two days later. It was April 6, a significant day to all of us of this Church. I wish to thank publicly the dedicated doctors and wonderful nurses who attended her during her final illness.

My children and I were at her bedside as she slipped peacefully into eternity. As I held her hand and saw mortal life drain from her fingers, I confess I was overcome. Before I married her, she had been the girl of my dreams, to use the words of a song then popular. She was my dear companion for more than two-thirds of a century, my equal before the Lord, really my superior.

And now in my old age, she has again become the girl of my dreams.

Immediately following her passing there was a tremendous outpouring of love from across the world. Great quantities of beautiful floral offerings were sent. Large contributions were made in her name to the Perpetual Education Fund and her academic chair at Brigham Young University. There were literally hundreds of letters. We have boxes filled with them from many we know and from very many we do not know. They all express admiration for her and sympathy and love for us whom she left behind.

We regret that we have been unable to respond individually to these many expressions. So I now take this occasion to thank you every one for your great kindness toward us. Thank you so very, very much, and please excuse our failure to reply. The task was beyond our capacity, but your ex-