

Emissaries to the Church

By Elder Jeffrey R. Holland
Of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles

We are asking you as home teachers to be God's emissaries to His children, to love and care and pray for the people you are assigned.

Not long ago a single sister, whom I will call Molly, came home from work only to find two inches (5 cm) of water covering her entire basement floor. Immediately she realized that her neighbors, with whom she shared drainage lines, must have done an inordinate amount of laundry and bathing because she got the backed-up water.

After Molly called a friend to come and help, the two began bailing and mopping. Just then the doorbell rang. Her friend cried out, "It's your home teachers!"

Molly laughed. "It *is* the last day of the month," she replied, "but I can assure you it is *not* my home teachers."

With bare feet, wet trousers, hair up in a bandana, and a very fashionable pair of latex gloves, Molly made her way to the door. But her stark appearance did not compare with the stark sight standing before her eyes. It *was* her home teachers!

"You could have knocked me over with a plumber's friend!" she later told me. "This was a home teaching miracle—the kind the Brethren share in general conference talks!" She went on: "But just as I was trying to decide whether to give them a kiss or hand them a mop, they said, 'Oh, Molly, we are sorry. We can see you are busy. We don't want to intrude; we'll come another time.' And they were gone."

"Who was it?" her friend called out from the basement.

"I wanted to say, 'It certainly wasn't the Three Nephites,'" Molly admitted, "but I restrained myself and said very calmly, 'It was my home teachers, but they felt this was not an opportune time to leave their message.'"¹

Brethren, may we briefly examine the priesthood duty that has been described as "the Church's first source of help" to its individuals and families.² Entire forests have been sacrificed providing the paper to organize it and then reorganize it. A thousand pep talks have been given trying to encourage it. Certainly no Freudian travel agency anywhere could possibly arrange the number of guilt trips this subject has provoked. Yet still we struggle to achieve anywhere near an acceptable standard of performance regarding the Lord's commandment "to watch over the church always"³ through priesthood home teaching.

Part of the challenge we face is the changing demographics of the Church. We know that with our membership now spread across more than 30,000 wards and branches, located in some 188 nations and territories, it is much more challenging to visit the homes of our brothers and sisters than it was in the early days of the Church when neighbor taught neighbor in something called “block teaching.”

Furthermore, in many units of the Church, there is a limited number of available priesthood bearers to do home teaching, leaving those who can serve with as many as 18 or 20 families—or more—to care for. There can also be issues of long distances to travel, the high cost and low availability of transportation, and the extended length of the local workday and workweek. Add to these some cultural taboos against uninvited home visits and the safety issues that exist in many of the world’s neighborhoods—well, we begin to see the complexity of the problem.

Brethren, in the best of all worlds and in those circumstances where it can be done, a monthly visit in each home is still the ideal the Church would strive for. But realizing that in many locations around the world achieving such an ideal is not possible and that we cause those brethren to feel like failures when we ask them to do what cannot realistically be done, the First Presidency wrote to the priesthood leaders of the Church in December 2001, giving this inspired, very helpful counsel: “There are some locations in the Church,” they wrote, “where ... home teaching to every home each month may not be possible because of insufficient numbers of active priesthood brethren and various other local challenges.” We’ve mentioned some of them. “When such circumstances prevail,” they go on, “leaders should do their best to use the resources they have available to watch over and strengthen each member.”⁴

Brethren, if in my ward or branch I faced these kinds of difficult circumstances, my Aaronic Priesthood companion and I would apply the First Presidency’s counsel (which is now handbook policy) in this way: First, however many months it took to achieve it, we would pursue the scriptural mandate to “visit the house of each member,”⁵ establishing a schedule that would get us to those homes on a calendar that was both possible and practical. Built into that schedule would be the prioritization of our available time and frequency of contacts to those who need us the most—investigators the missionaries are teaching, newly baptized converts, those who are ill, the lonely, the less active, single-parent families with children still at home, and so forth.

While working through our schedule to visit all homes, which may take some months to accomplish, we would make other kinds of contact with the individuals and families on our list via any of the means the Lord has provided. Certainly we would watch for our families at church and, as the scripture says, would “speak one with another concerning the welfare of their souls.”⁶ In addition, we would make phone calls, send emails and text messages, even tap out a greeting through one of the many forms of social media available to us. To help address special needs, we might send a scriptural quote or a line from a general conference talk or a Mormon Message drawn from the

wealth of material on LDS.org. In the language of the First Presidency, we would do the best we could in the circumstances we faced with the resources available to us.

Brethren, the appeal I am making tonight is for you to lift your vision of home teaching. Please, in newer, better ways see yourselves as emissaries of the Lord to His children. That means leaving behind the tradition of a frantic, law of Moses–like, end-of-the-month calendar in which you rush to give a scripted message from the Church magazines that the family has already read. We would hope, rather, that you will establish an era of genuine, gospel-oriented concern for the members, watching over and caring for each other, addressing spiritual and temporal needs in any way that helps.

Now, as for what “counts” as home teaching, every good thing you do “counts,” so report it all! Indeed, the report that matters most is how you have blessed and cared for those within your stewardship, which has virtually nothing to do with a specific calendar or a particular location. What matters is that you love your people and are fulfilling the commandment “to watch over the church always.”⁷

On May 30 of last year, my friend Troy Russell pulled his pickup truck slowly out of his garage on his way to donate goods to the local Deseret Industries. He felt his back tire roll over a bump. Thinking some item had fallen off the truck, he got out only to find his precious nine-year-old son, Austen, lying face down on the pavement. The screams, the priesthood blessing, the paramedic crew, the hospital staff—they were, in this case, to no avail. Austen was gone.

Unable to sleep, unable to find peace, Troy was inconsolable. He said it was more than he could bear and that he simply could not go on. But into that agonizing breach came three redeeming forces.

First was the love and reassuring spirit of our Father in Heaven, a presence communicated through the Holy Ghost that comforted Troy, taught him, loved him, and whispered that God knows everything about losing a beautiful and perfect Son. Second was his wife, Deedra, who held Troy in her arms and loved him and reminded him that she too had lost that son and was determined not to lose a husband also. Third in this story is John Manning, home teacher *extraordinaire*.

I frankly don't know on what schedule John and his junior companion made visits to the Russell home, or what message was given when they got there, or how they reported the experience. What I do know is that last spring Brother Manning reached down and picked Troy Russell up off the tragedy of that driveway just as if he were picking up little Austen himself. Like the home teacher or watchman or brother in the gospel he was supposed to be, John simply took over the priesthood care and keeping of Troy Russell. He started by saying, “Troy, Austen wants you back on your feet—including on the basketball court—so I will be here every morning at 5:15 a.m. Be ready because I don't want to have to come in to get you up—and I *know* Deedra doesn't want me to do that either.”

"I didn't want to go," Troy told me later, "because I had always taken Austen with me on those mornings and I knew the memories would be too painful. But John insisted, so I went. From that first day back, we talked—or rather I talked and John listened. I talked the entire drive to the church and then the entire drive home. Sometimes I talked while we parked in the driveway and watched the sun rising over Las Vegas. At first it was difficult, but over time I realized I had found my strength in the form of a very slow 6-foot-2-inch (1.88 m) Church ball player, with an absolutely pathetic jump shot, who loved me and listened to me until the sun finally rose again on my life."⁸

My brethren of the holy priesthood, when we speak of home teaching or watchcare or personal priesthood ministry—call it what you will—this is what we are talking about. We are asking you as home teachers to be God's emissaries to His children, to love and care and pray for the people you are assigned, as we love and care and pray for you. May you be vigilant in tending the flock of God in ways consistent with your circumstances, I pray, in the name of the Good Shepherd of us all, whose witness I am, even the Lord Jesus Christ, amen.

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