

*Visiting Teaching: Making a Difference by Small and Simple Means
Beyond Statistics*
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When I received my assignment to talk about visiting teaching, I made special arrangements that no one who has ever had me as a visiting teacher would be allowed to attend.

I have prayed a lot about what the Lord wanted me to share, and I pray that His spirit will be with us, that each of us can learn and feel things that we need.

I love the quote from President Julie B. Beck in the description of this particular topic: "A sister in this Church has no other responsibility, outside of her family, that has the potential to do as much good as visiting teaching" (Julie B. Beck, "Relief Society: A Sacred Work," *Ensign*, November 2009, 110–14).

She has taught us that this is a work of salvation, of service, of learning to be holy people, and that "much of the essential work of Relief Society does not happen in meetings" (Julie B. Beck, "Relief Society: A Sacred Work," *Ensign*, November 2009, 110–14).

These are profound statements. Many of the best, most spiritual, happyfying, and tender experiences that we have happen when we visit someone in their home, when we are listening, and feeling, and caring—and praying like the dickens for spiritual guidance as we minister to a child of God.

Now, since tomorrow is the last day of April, we have all done our visiting for this month . . . of course we have. And there are some things that we have probably shared, some of which I'd like to share again. One from Sister Beck: "The Lord expects us to *increase our offering*. He expects us to fulfill the purpose of Relief Society as never before" (*Ensign*, April 2011, p.7).

How shall we do that? How shall we *increase our offering*? I think each of us must search our soul and make a personal commitment as to what we wish to do.

I love the invitation as recorded in the Book of Mormon: "Come unto Christ . . . and offer your whole souls as an offering unto him" (Omni 1:26). How different our lives can be when there

are others watching out for us, caring for us, wanting to know and understand us. This feels like an offering that is *beyond statistics*.

Do those we visit *know* that we love them? That we *care*? What do they sense from our interaction with them?

[On the phone]

“Umm, hi, Jo, can we come over and visit in half an hour?”

Yeah, yeah, we do need to come today. I know, it’s the 31st...

Oh, 30 days hath September—we missed it?

Well, how about if we come over and spend about 20 minutes and we’ll make it good for October too? How’s that grab you?”

I’ll tell you something that grabbed me. In 1976 I was called as a missionary in Indonesia. They had not yet had lady missionaries, and our mission president wanted us to see how Relief Society was doing. We were assigned to the little branch in Solo, in Central Java.

Our president, Ibu Subowo, was a tiny package of thorough conversion. We didn’t yet have the Book of Mormon, let alone the Relief Society handbook. But someone had come up with two words: Lembaga Pertolongan—the society of helpfulness. And with those two words, Ibu Subowo helped miracles to happen.

She asked the sisters in the branch to save a spoonful of rice before they started cooking each morning. And then every week, all the sisters would bring their little bag of rice to Relief Society, and they were put on a shelf in the home that we used as a chapel. I can still feel the emotion as I would see those little bags of rice sitting on the shelf. It was a storehouse, and there was a lot of love on those shelves along with bags of rice.

After Relief Society, Ibu Subowo would call us all together and ask someone to pray and ask Heavenly Father who needed us—who needed a visit. An impression would come, and everyone would walk together to go and visit this sister who hadn’t been able to be there. And they would take bags of rice, according to what they felt was needed.

I received a strong impression not to mess with this that was happening. It was a distinct and strong message for me: “Edmunds, do not disturb what is happening. This is a higher, purer form of visiting teaching than you have yet experienced. Just watch, and listen, and feel, and remember.”

Ibu Subowo knew a little bit of English, and so she borrowed our Relief Society handbook and some other materials and she began to study. She used her English-to-Indonesian dictionary. One day she came to me with a problem. (Speaks Indonesian) She said that in something she read there was the recommendation that you call the sister to make an appointment to go and visit. Well, I knew what the problem was, but I wanted her to tell me. She said (speaks Indonesian) “We don’t have any phones.” Well, guess you won’t be going to the celestial kingdom, eh? You know that’s not what I thought—well, I thought it but I didn’t say it. I was just being stupid.

So I asked her, “Well, what do you do?” “I pray.” Well, what a great idea! She said, “I ask Heavenly Father who needs me to come. And then I ask Him if they need rice. And then I get on my bicycle and go and visit them.” And she told me that many times they would be waiting for her, knowing that she would come.

This sweet soul, this Relief Society president, mother of 12 children, in a little branch in Central Java, Indonesia, is one of my heroes, an incredible example to me.

Years ago I imagined I was in an interview with the Savior. He was asking me about how I did with visiting teaching when I was an earthling.

“I heard you were a visiting teacher.”

“Oh yes. Wasn’t everyone??”

“Well, maybe not the men.”

“Oh. Yeah. That’s right.”

“Did you enjoy the calling?”

(Oh my word, He knows what I’m thinking. I can’t lie!)

“Well . . . I had some times that I pretty much did come close to almost nearly enjoying it . . .”

“But not all the time?”

“Not all the time. Sorry.”

“Why not?”

“Well, sometimes I wasn’t in the mood.”

“Oh, but you had to go?”

“Well, yeah . . . they keep records . . . they’re trying to get 100%.”

“And how did you reach 100%?”

“Well, everyone got visited or contacted or something like that.”

Well, you can see the whole imagined interview kind of went downhill, down into the visiting teaching black hole. “What if it had happened?” I kept thinking. “What if it will happen someday?” I hope it goes better than it did in my imagination.

My friends, I am convinced that we will *never* be asked to do anything *stupid*—anything that doesn’t *really matter*. And visiting teaching *really matters*—we just maybe don’t understand how much it does. We are not called to serve each other in the Church to annoy us, to keep us overly busy or stressed or something—“This is really going to bug Edmunds! Let’s get her called as a visiting teacher!” There must be a reason. There must be a good reason, and there is!

We are asked to care for each other and watch over each other, as true undershepherds to Heavenly Father’s children. I guess Jesus could visit everybody Himself. He could just gather up a whole bunch of angels and have some beautiful stuff happen. Why does He let us help?

Because

“*The errand of angels is given to women,*

And this is a *gift* that as *sisters* we claim:

To do whatsoever is *gentle* and *human*,
To *cheer* and to *bless* in *humanity's name*.”
(“As Sisters in Zion,” *Hymns*, no.309, emphasis added)

We are called to the work of lifting and comforting, of teaching and encouraging, of loving and serving in Christ’s name (D&C 59:5–6). You’ll remember what the Savior taught in the book of Matthew about visiting:

“I was an hungered, and you fed me.”
I was hungry for love and attention, for kindness and compassion, and you came.

“I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink.”
I was thirsty for companionship, for someone to listen to me, to lift my spirits, and to be nice, and you came.

“I was naked, and you clothed me.”
I was without protection or defense; I was vulnerable, and you clothed me with your friendship and with your genuine charity.

What was Jesus teaching us? Well certainly it’s a reminder that we serve others the best we can in His name. We try to do what He wants us to do. But then He used the word “*inasmuch*.” He helped us to know that we are doing things for Him, we’re true disciples, but in some holy and sacred way, it’s as if it’s to Him!

Inasmuch as ye visit the least of these, of your ward members or neighbors, and have responded to their hunger, to their thirst, to their nakedness, it’s as if you have done it unto *me*! “You have clothed *me*! You have comforted *me*! You have visited *me*!” teaches the Savior, “and I will bless you forever.”

Can this make a difference in how we accept and carry out our assignment as visiting teachers? And can it make a difference in the way we welcome our visiting teachers into our homes and our lives?

Brigham Young taught that: “It is no trifling thing . . . to be a Saint. What does it require of us? It requires . . . our whole heart, our whole purpose of mind, and correspondent actions We are to manifest our religion by our works. We are not simply to say how lovely it is to feed the poor, to clothe the naked, to visit the sick and the afflicted, to cheer and console them. It may be all very well to talk about this; but the thing is to practice it in our lives, and by that practice create our own characters” (Brian H. Stuy, ed., *Collected Discourses*, 5 vols., 4).

What are some things that would make a difference for you as a visiting teacher? Would it make a difference if we would pray for those whom we are assigned to visit, by name, and ask Heavenly Father what they need and ways in which we could serve them better?

Would it make a difference if we remembered a birthday, followed someone to see how they did

after a crisis, sent a card at Christmastime or any other time, sent an e-mail, dropped by with something somebody might enjoy—soap, flowers, a book, a hug, zucchini. . . .

What our Heavenly Father and the Savior are asking is that we love one another as they have loved us!

Of course, in our service there are some things that don't change. Principles don't change. Ordinances and doctrines don't change. But with programs, there is a need for flexibility. President Kimball reminded us that people are more important than programs. So with visiting teaching, we adapt to a huge variety of circumstances in which women live, in which they serve as visiting teachers.

As I've pondered all of this, I've asked myself some questions: "What am I willing to do to be a more effective representative of the Savior as I visit?" "What might Heavenly Father have in store for me that I'm resisting by not responding more completely to His promptings as I go to visit?" "In what ways might I be blessed if I make a commitment to step up to a higher level, with heavenly help, as I serve others?"

We're building trusting relationships with those whom we visit. If you don't trust me, you can't share your heart with me. What a difference it makes to be able to trust someone to look on your heart, withhold judgment, and keep your confidences. As one of my friends said, open your heart and shut your mouth.

Several years ago I was teaching a group of missionaries about helping people to come back into activity in the Church. I was telling them about a talk that Elder Maxwell had given where he talked about learning to "pat a porcupine"—hereafter to be known as "porky-pine" ("According to the Desire of [Our] Hearts," *Ensign*, November 1996, 21).

A lady missionary who was probably about 30 years old raised her hand and said, "I was a porcupine!" And then she shared her story. She said she went away to college when she was about 18 years old. And all of a sudden she could make her own decisions, and she said some of her choices were not very wise. And in her own words, within a short while, she was "totally inactive" she said. Well, she went to the bishop and told him she did not want anyone to visit her from the Church. She said it embarrassed her, made her feel uncomfortable. She said, "I don't want you to visit. I don't want home or visiting teachers. I don't want anybody gathering fast offerings . . . nobody! I don't want anybody to visit."

And it worked. She didn't have any visits from anybody from the Church. Until one day there was a knock on the door, and she opened the door, and there was a lady standing on the porch who was far too cheerful: "Hello! I've been assigned as your visiting teacher!" She said she was so upset, and she just said, "I don't want you here! I don't want a visiting teacher. I told the bishop I didn't want anybody from the Church to visit! I don't want you!"

Anything could have happened at this point. She could have said, "Well, I have never in my life been treated like this! You can be assured I will never . . .!" She could have gone back home to

the Relief Society president and said, “I almost lost my life! You do not want anybody to go to visit that porky-pine ever again!”

That’s not what happened. When this dear soul heard the girl say, “I don’t want you here! I don’t want a visiting teacher!” she responded—this rescuer, this brave, courageous soul, “Oh good, then I can just be your friend,” and she walked right in. And she became her “un-visiting teacher” for about eight years. And after that time had gone by, the young woman called her one day and said, “I want to come back to the Church, but I don’t know how. I don’t know where to start. Will you help me?” “Of course.” And they grew even closer. About a year later, the young woman called her visiting teacher and said, “I’m going on a mission.”

Was it worth eight years of hanging in there as her “un-visiting teacher”? Was it worth the courage and love it took to respond the way she did on that day on the porch? You know, it’s a good thing that angels are “silent notes taking,” (“Do What is Right,” *Hymns*, no.237) because I think we don’t have any idea the good that is done when you go to visit—even sometimes when you might not be in the mood.

One important role of Relief Society is to know the needs of women and their families, working as a team with priesthood leaders. Their input is critical in the ministering that takes place in wards and branches.

President Kimball shared this: “One of the most important responsibilities Relief Society leaders have is to really know the sisters in their wards, know what their circumstances are, and thereby serve them better. We need to have a keen awareness of each sister's situation in order to make the programs of Relief Society helpful to each one. Leaders should always have a 'why' for everything they do. The 'why' is found in the needs of the sisters” (Regional Representative Seminar, 1978).

Leaders, how are you doing? Does the very mention of visiting teaching sometimes make you want to move to Timbuktu? (That’s in Africa.) Have you figured out things that help you in your calling?

How do you orient new visiting teachers or new members of Relief Society? Are they given information about their companion and the sisters whom they’ll be visiting? This would seem so much more helpful than a piece of paper with only names, addresses and phone numbers.

Do they know how much you want and need to hear how the sisters and their families are doing? Do they have a way to contact you directly if there’s some information that you need to know?

Are your visiting teachers being asked more than just “Did you get it done”? That seems a most ineffective question to ask visiting teachers. It doesn’t seem to hold much motivation for doing anything different than “getting it done.”

I’ve wondered if it would make a difference if you let your visiting teachers know some of the things you’d like them to find out. Maybe you’ll think of some questions you’d like them to ask so you can find out how the sisters in your ward or branch are doing.

What if they were to ask things like: “What is something you're looking forward to?” “Can you share a concern that you have at this time?” “What would you consider to be one of your greatest needs in this season of your life?” “How could a visiting teacher make more of a difference for you?” “How could Relief Society meetings and activities make more of a difference for you?”

You'll think of other questions which would help you and the visiting teachers to get to know the sisters better. And if I have a specific question to ask, and if I know that somebody is going to want to know the answer to that question, I think that I will be more likely to go *beyond statistics*.

Many years ago, a friend of mine whom I'll call Debbie—because that's her name—was really, really sick with the flu. She was down and out, and she'd been sick for days. Her husband was a student and was gone a lot of the time. Her mother-in-law had her four little boys temporarily, and she was just trying to get better.

There was a knock at the door, and she wasn't going to answer it. But then she remembered that it was getting close to the last of the month. Her ward had set a goal to get 100% visiting teaching. And so she thought, “Oh, maybe it's my visiting teachers, and maybe they will help me.” So she got up and answered the door.

“Oh, Debbie, you don't look so great.”

“Well, I've been really sick with the flu, and I'm over the worst part of it, but I'm just now trying to get better.”

“Well, then we'll just hurry and give you the lesson so you can get back to bed.”

And they did. And they left. And she did go back to bed, and wept. Now, part of the reason she wept was because they were so close—they could have helped. But another reason she wept, she said, was she wondered if she had ever done that to anybody, anything like that, in all her years as a visiting teacher.

She was pretty sure the ward got 100%, but what did 100% mean? What was the purpose of their “visit”? They were right there in her home where they could see the dust, and the dishes, and the laundry, and they could have felt so much, and maybe they did feel it and they just ignored it.

How could this experience have been different? What could have changed the outcome and blessed not just Debbie, but her visiting teachers as well? Could there have been some sacrifice? Maybe they missed a lunch date, or a TV program, or seeing a soccer game, or postponing something they had really wanted to get done at home. So many miracles are waiting just *beyond statistics*.

A friend of mine who was close to delivering her fifth child was in a head-on collision, and lost the baby and nearly lost her life. Her visiting and home teachers didn't wait 'til she got out of the hospital to ask, “Is there anything we can do to help?” Chances are they prayed earnestly to

know what would help her in this time of loss and sorrow. They organized a cleaning team. They got in her home and cleaned it “top to bottom.” They even organized some of the closets for her—and no, I don’t have their names and phone numbers, sorry.

When Relief Society was first organized, the Prophet Joseph Smith shared his vision of its purpose: “The charitable society—this is according to your natures—it is natural for females to have feelings of charity—you are now placed in a situation where you can act according to those sympathies which God has planted in your bosoms . . . if you live up to your privilege the angels cannot be restrain’d from being your associates—the society is not only to relieve the poor but to save souls. [You should] be armed [always] with mercy . . . If you would have God have mercy on you, have mercy on one another” (“The Prophet Joseph Smith,” *Improvement Era*, 1942). Also: (Joseph Smith, *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph*, compiled and edited by Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, 117, 120, 123, 124).

I know this is true. *I know* angels will attend us as we do our best to do this holy work. Visiting teaching *is* the errand of angels! And Relief Society *is* the Lord’s organization for women—it is no less than that!

President Joseph F. Smith shared some tender thoughts about our responsibility for ministering: “[Part of our duty] is to look after the spiritual welfare and salvation of the mothers and daughters of Zion; to see that none is neglected, but that all are guarded against misfortune, calamity, the powers of darkness, and the evils that threaten them in the world” (*Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph F. Smith* [1998], 185).

Let’s make sure that no one is neglected. Let’s do what we can to guard each other, to give watchcare and genuine love. Let’s put the “relief” back in the society.

Our motto is “Charity never faileth.” Let’s do our best to make sure that’s true—that it never fails! It may getteth tired, it may getteth weary or even discouraged at times, but let’s do all we can to make sure it never fails!

Ask yourself what you can do—and be—that that will make a difference in how you feel about being a visiting teacher and about carrying out that calling. The change will come in our hearts and in our souls.

President Boyd K. Packer gave a talk entitled “The Circle of Sisters” and shared these promises: “Service in the Relief Society magnifies and sanctifies each individual sister. You sustain the cause that will bless every woman who comes within its influence. This great circle of sisters will be a protection for each of you and for your families. The Relief Society might be likened to a refuge—the place of safety and protection—the sanctuary of ancient times. You will be safe within it. It encircles each sister like a protecting wall” (“The Circle of Sisters,” *Ensign*, November 1980, 109).

Visiting teachers help this happen. You help this happen. You help to provide safety for individual women and their families. You help to protect them by a wall—a protecting wall.

So why do we do visiting teaching? I think your answer may be similar to what Eve and Adam responded when the angel asked them why they offered sacrifices: “I know not, save the Lord commanded me” (Moses 5:6).

I admit I don't know all the reasons why we visit and why we teach, but I do know that the Lord has commanded it for some very good reasons. We've been asked to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves, and to serve them in the name of Jesus Christ. May we do this the best we can, with all our hearts, with angels attending, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.