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BASIC UNIT PROGRAM



Thank you, Elder Maxwell, for reminding us how important revelation is to our spiritual growth and the growth of the Church. It is a great privilege to receive counsel from the Lord Himself that will help us answer our questions and solve our problems.

I would like to talk to you about the opportunities many of you are facing in establishing the Church and building the Church in areas where there are few members.

Different Needs and Challenges

I know firsthand the challenges you face in building a branch. I grew up in a very small Latter-day Saint community in northern Utah. Our whole community activity centered around the Church. The community was nearly 100 percent Latter-day

Saint. I had deep involvement in what was going on, for my father served as my bishop of our ward for the first 18 years of my life. During that period, I watched the way he administered the Church. I watched how he involved us to be certain we understood how the gospel affects our lives and those who embrace its divine teachings.

It was a fully developed ward organization. There was little conflict with the Sunday meeting schedule. We spent Sunday morning in priesthood meeting, followed by Sunday School. Then we came back in the evening and enjoyed sacrament meeting. There was very little in the community to distract us from attending. Tuesday evening was always Mutual. Even our schoolteachers recognized that and lightened up on the homework load, allowing us to participate in our Mutual activities. There was abundant leadership to give direction to the Primary, Young Men, Young Women, Relief Society, Sunday School, priesthood, and all the other organizations. I felt very comfortable and secure in this community.

When I reached the age of 19, it was time for me to leave the comforts of home and journey into the mission field. I had received a call to serve in the Northern States Mission. I was assigned to go to Columbus, Ohio. I had served in Columbus for only a month when my companion and I

were moved to Marion, a little town some distance away.

One Church family had moved to Marion for employment. The husband was an engineer by profession. He and his wife had been lifetime members of the Church. They had two small children. He was determined that his family would be reared in the gospel and have opportunities to participate in Church activities. He had encouraged our mission president to send two missionaries into the community so his family could have a Church experience.

My companion and I started with just one family as members of the Church. We held our sacrament meeting in the living room of their home. What a contrast this was to the full program of the Church I had experienced in my hometown in northern Utah! For teaching materials, all we had were the scriptures. There was no program for Primary, Mutual, Sunday School, or Relief Society. The only priesthood brethren were my companion and I and one high priest.

With that beginning, we started to organize a branch of the Church. We proselyted long hours during the day to find people we could invite to come and join us. Fortunately, in tracting, we found three other families living in Marion who were members of the Church. They knew nothing of our efforts until we knocked on their doors. These four families formed the nucleus of the branch. Almost every Sunday my companion and I did most of the preaching, teaching, praying, and administering the sacrament.

Gradually the living room became too small to accommodate the numbers attending the little branch. We moved to a rented hall to hold our services. The Church started to supply us with teaching materials. With more priesthood bearers available, now we could add priesthood meeting to our Sunday School and sacrament meeting schedules. At that

point, our biggest challenge was trying to keep from moving too fast and loading down the members with too many Church callings.

A few years ago I had the opportunity of returning to Marion. They now have a small chapel in which to meet. Because of their small numbers, they are still a branch. They still are not ready for the fully developed program of the Church.

Guidebooks for Basic Units

As General Authorities travel throughout the world, we see many stages of the Church organization. Some units are fully organized, like the one in my hometown. Others are small branches, similar to the one in Marion. Despite the differences in organization, the Spirit is still the same.

The Brethren recognize that units of the Church are at different stages of development and have different needs. For the fully matured wards and stakes of the Church, we have provided a handbook of instructions. The handbook contains the doctrine, policies, and procedures for the mature Church organization. It is a library and a reference guide. However, it contains instructions that are sometimes beyond the ability of smaller units to follow fully.

Therefore, we have developed a *Basic Unit Program Guidebook* for the beginning units, such as the one we had in Marion. It is small and quick to read. It has four companions: a *Family Guidebook*, a *Branch Guidebook*, a *Teaching Guidebook*, and a *Priesthood and Auxiliary Leaders' Guidebook*. These guidebooks are all that members of the Church need to function fully as a basic Church unit.

There is nothing second-class about being a basic unit. The Savior's Church in all dispensations, where it has been established, began simply with a basic organization and basic

materials. The Spirit does not limit itself just to a big Church organization. In fact, I found a wonderful closeness in the branch we established in the mission field. The people knew each other; they loved each other; they strengthened each other; they built one another's testimonies. Any Church unit, large or small, would be blessed to have that kind of spirit.

Somewhere between this basic Church program and the handbook of instructions for the mature Church exist all of the branches, districts, wards, and stakes throughout the world.

We have seen some difficulty when unit leaders request the division of their unit before they are ready. Premature dividing can sap the strength of a branch or ward before it becomes a center of strength.

Some leaders religiously search the handbook of instructions trying to organize the full program, without consideration of the available leadership or the number of members whom they could serve. At times, in our eagerness to develop the full program of the Church, we overburden our members. Too many responsibilities can cause them to withdraw from Church activities.

There are several reasons members fall away from the Church. Some do not have a friend. Others do not find spiritual nourishment. Still others are not given a calling that helps them strengthen their testimony. On the other hand, we can give members too much to do, overwhelming them. For this reason we should attempt to give each individual in our unit just one calling plus home or visiting teaching.

Organizational Inventory

Now, as leaders, how do you decide where your organization fits? If you have even a few leaders, I suggest you take an inventory. Determine the number of members you serve, their ages, and their needs.

First, look at the total membership of your branch or ward. From this list, identify those adults who are active and can serve. This group will be your leadership base. They will serve in positions necessary to build your organization.

Now decide what kind of organization your leaders will need to fulfill their callings. If you have a few priesthood holders, your first objective will be to build a Melchizedek Priesthood base. Do the same for the sisters. If you have sufficient numbers, form a Relief Society. With small numbers, maybe all you will need will be a president to lead the organization, but that will be a good start.

Next, identify the youth in your unit. Determine the type of program, activities, and instruction they need to have a Young Men and a Young Women program. If they are not ready, wait before you create a youth organization. The Spirit will tell you when the time is right.

Finally, identify the number and names of the children. Create a Primary organization that is just large enough to meet their needs.

For example, in taking an inventory in a very small unit, you may find that there are not many youth. If so, do not create separate classes; instead, combine the youth into one class. Or, if you find that you have very few children, you do not need to call a Primary presidency. Maybe all you will need is an instructor to teach the children.

Strengths and Needs

The secret in building a branch or a district, a ward or a stake is to know your members, their abilities, and their needs, and build your program based on the leadership available and the needs of your members.

Once you know the members well enough to match them with the right calling, you can focus on the instructional materials they will need. Keep

in mind that for basic units, we have provided a basic curriculum. For mature units, we have provided a general Church curriculum.

In all you do, be aware that bigger is not necessarily better. Grow only as fast as the size and maturity of your unit permit. Preserve the strength of your members. Enjoy each stage of your unit's growth. Remember the fundamentals.

President Hinckley has continued to remind us to do the best we can. He did not say, "Do whatever you can," but emphasized, "Do your best."

Obedience to the Spirit

What is your objective? What is your goal? It is to build a strong testimony in the life of each member we have and encourage members to serve. Encourage them to keep the commandments of the Lord and receive all the sacred ordinances that will qualify them for eternal life. It is important to share our testimonies with others and give them the opportunity of embracing the gospel of Jesus Christ. We need to live worthy of having the Holy Ghost as our constant companion, to inspire us in our responsibilities.

We need to remember that the Lord will bless us with wisdom, with revelation, with strength beyond our own. He will even provide miracles for us when we have done all we can. With His help, we will move forward. He has the power to help. He will inspire and direct us as we serve Him faithfully in guiding His children.

A number of years ago I had some responsibility for the country of Peru. Inflation and internal strife had made life difficult for the people there. For their safety, it was necessary to remove those leaders and full-time missionaries from the country who were not Peruvian.

The Area Presidency recognized the need to fortify the members. After much prayer and fasting, the Area Presidency decided to emphasize two

basic gospel teachings: family prayer and family scripture study. Instructions were passed down through the priesthood line. Fathers were specifically asked to lead their families in daily prayer and scripture study.

The results were astounding. The Peruvian Saints faithfully adopted family prayer and scripture study as part of their daily routines. As they did so, testimonies increased. We saw a significant increase in sacrament meeting attendance. The Saints began to love and care for each other. They would undergo difficult and dangerous travel to attend the temple, and temple attendance increased.

The number of local and full-time missionaries from the wards and branches of Peru also increased. And the Peruvian missionaries arrived in the field much better prepared to serve, which resulted in a greater number of convert baptisms.

Because the leaders simply taught the practice of family prayer and family scripture study in their sacrament meetings, a remarkable maturing in gospel understanding and practice developed among the Saints. It does not take a complicated Church organization or a full library of materials to help Church members mature in the gospel. What they need, more than anything else, is the influence of the Spirit to give divine direction and faithful obedience.

Blessings of the Temple

If our members build on such a foundation, they will grow spiritually and eventually be ready for the ordinances of the temple. In fact, our primary goal should be to prepare every individual to enter the house of the Lord. We must "do the best we can" to see that every husband and wife are sealed together for time and eternity. Brethren, make it a personal goal to help each adult member of your unit become worthy of holding a current temple recommend.

We live in exciting times but also dangerous times. As the Lord has increased His pace, so has Satan. We need the Lord's help every step of the way. That is why He offers to make covenants with us—first in the waters of baptism, then renewed at the sacrament table, and finally in the temple. Spiritual strength flows from the Lord's endless supply when we keep our covenants. If, as priesthood leaders, you only help your members keep their covenants with the Lord, you have done measurably what you are expected to do.

In closing, I invoke the blessings of the Lord upon you. May the Lord bless and prosper you in your families and in your Church callings. May He bless you abundantly with His Spirit. May He give you a clear mind and an understanding heart. In return, may you be wise in moving the kingdom forward.

I encourage you to move at a pace slow enough that the weak will not be left behind and fast enough to keep the journey interesting. This is the Lord's work. I bear my witness of that fact. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.