

Relief Society Birthday Celebration Program - A Tribute to General Relief Society Presidents

Narrator: In the early days of the Church, work and sacrifice were the daily fare of Mormon women. Much was asked of them and of one in particular - Emma Smith, the wife of the Prophet Joseph Smith. Emma was charged by her husband with the creation of an organization, the Female Relief Society of Nauvoo, later to be known as the Relief Society, that would become a worldwide legacy to all women. The first Relief Society was organized on March 17, 1842, 163 years ago. Emma Smith had a very brief period of prosperity in her life. It only lasted two or three years in Nauvoo. She had a lovely home and her husband was mayor.

After Emma's husband, the prophet, was slain in Carthage, Emma felt she could no longer continue as head of the women of the church. She and her family stayed in Nauvoo rather than travel west with the Saints. The sisters who had come to love her as an elect lady took with them memories of a woman eager to be a blessing to those whom she served.

Let's briefly look at the faithful women who served the Lord diligently through the years in the capacity of General Relief Society President.

Eliza Roxey Snow was called to be the 2nd General Relief Society President in 1866.

Eliza: Brigham Young knew of the good the Relief Society had accomplished in Nauvoo and how it blessed the lives of all the women who were members. He called me to be the General President and asked me to assist the bishops in our new Utah territory in organizing a Relief Society in every ward.

Narrator: Sister Snow was a talented poetess and she used her poetry to strengthen the Saints. She wrote "Though Deepening Trials" for those who needed to press on with hope after they had been driven from their homes in Missouri. She wrote "O my Father" for a close friend who was mourning the loss of a parent. In all, she left a legacy of some 500 poems. She served as President for 21 years.

Zina Diantha Huntington Young, the 3rd General President of the Relief Society was very lovely and dearly loved by all. She gained her testimony at age 13.

Zina: One day on my return from school, I saw the Book of Mormon, that strange, new book lying on the window sill of our sitting room. I went up to the window, picked it up and the sweet influence of the Holy Spirit accompanied it to such an extent that I pressed it to my bosom in a rapture of delight, murmuring as I did so, "This is the truth, truth, truth." I was baptized with my family about a year later. My parents both died later as a result of the persecutions against the Mormons. I was a plural wife of Brigham Young and 10 years after his death was called to be General President of the Relief Society, serving there for 13 years.

Narrator: Bathseba Smith. She was the 4th General Relief Society President. She saw

tremendous growth in the Relief Society during her life time.

Bathsheba: As a 19-year old I was the youngest of the 20 women present at the first meeting of the Relief Society. That same year I gave birth to my first child. A few months later, my husband George Albert Smith left on his 5th mission for the Church. I lost both my sons. One died at Winter Quarters and one was killed by Indians. I was blessed to serve as General president for nine years and saw the Relief Society grow from those original 20 to over 40,000 women.

Narrator: In 1912 the unsinkable triumph of maritime engineering, the titanic, sank after hitting an ice berg. In 1917 America entered World War I. Prohibition came, along with votes for women. Voting was nothing for Utah women - they had been doing it as early as 1870. During this time Emmeline Woodward Wells, served as the 5th General Relief Society President. Emmeline was a tiny woman with striking white hair.

Emmeline: I spent a happy childhood in a God-fearing England community. Though my father died when I was young, my mother saw that I received a good education at an early age. At 14, I was baptized into the Mormon Church. When I was 15, I married James Harris. The next year I lost a 3-month old baby and my sadness continued as my husband left me and the Church, giving no explanation. I became a plural wife to Bishop Newel K. Whitney and after his death, later married Daniel Wells. I was called to be General president of the Relief Society by Joseph F. Smith in 1910.

Narrator: Clarissa Smith Williams served as the 6th General Relief Society president.

Clarissa: When President Heber J. Grant called me to be the General Relief Society president, I replied, "Brother Grant, I know you are a very busy man and you might call me to have a conference with you in the late afternoon and I want you to know during school days I intend to leave my office just before 3:30 p.m. I have three children yet in school and I want to be home when they arrive." My husband William and I had 11 children. My first responsibilities were those of wife and mother.

Narrator: Clarissa had unusual business and executive abilities. Under her leadership the Welfare Department Services were expanded. Clarissa served from 1921-1928.

Louisa Yates Robison, 7th General President of the Relief Society, whose warmth, wit and practicality made her an instinctive leader. However, her feelings of inadequacy about her lack of formal education and her shyness made such positions hard. She adopted the motto, "Welcome the task that takes you beyond yourself." In order to increase her knowledge, she studied from 4-6 a.m. every morning for 2 years, arriving early for a full day at Relief Society headquarters.

Louisa: It was fashionable in the 1930's for women to wear large hats and the General Authorities had counseled the women to remove them during meetings, a counsel often disregarded. As I opened on conference, I looked over a sea of hats and said, "Sisters, we are

going to remain seated while we sing our first song. I'm sure you have books and papers and your hats on your laps and I'm afraid it would be hard for you to hold all of them if you stand." You should have heard the gasps and scattered laughter ripple through the congregation as heads were ducked and hats whisked off!

Narrator: In 1940, President Heber J. Grant called Amy Brown Lyman to be the 8th General President of the Relief Society. Her first task was to thoroughly modernize the equipment and business affairs of the organization.

Amy: During my 5 years in office, my board served under particularly difficult circumstances. There were the many problems of World War II. The Church called its European and Pacific missionaries home. The Relief Society Centennial scheduled for April of 1942 was postponed. So much of life was centered around the war.

Narrator: In addition, Amy bore the sorrow of her apostle husband's excommunication. Two years before her release, Belle Spafford, a friend and co-worker said this of Amy: "She met disappointments and challenges in her personal life during these years with composure. She never panicked in time of trouble. She always placed her faith and trust in the Lord and was poised always in time of trouble. I don't know anyone who better taught me how to meet adversity than Amy Lyman."

Belle Spafford followed Amy's tenure as General Relief Society President. Her period in office as the 9th General President of the Relief Society covered nearly 30 years. She was a woman richly endowed with driving executive leadership abilities, a charming forthright personality, and a deep abiding faith.

Belle: I would like to relate a personal experience which taught me a great lesson. I recall at one time when I first served in a Relief Society presidency the ward had built a new meeting house. They had to raise a few thousand dollars in order to have it done and dedicated on time. The Relief Society was called upon to prepare a turkey dinner for a large group. It was the first dinner in the new building. We found the kitchen to be insufferably small, the women were in each other's way, slowing up the service. One woman fainted from the heat. The next day, distressed about this circumstance, I went to see the bishop. I explained the situation and requested we knock out one wall and extend the kitchen to include the adjoining space which had been allocated for a classroom. He responded with sharpness, "Certainly not," he said. "We aren't going to start remodeling this building before it is dedicated." On my way home, discouraged and feeling somewhat reprimanded, I called at the home of one of the older sisters and I poured forth my troubles. I concluded by saying, "In this church men have all the power, the women are helpless." To this she replied, "Oh no, my dear, the women are not helpless. If someone came to you, Sister Spafford, and had a great but different gift in each hand and one was power and the other was influence, which gift would you choose?" I thought seriously for a moment and then I said, "I think I would choose influence." "You probably did, my dear," she said. "Influence is a great gift of God to women." Then she said, "Appreciate it and use it right. Do not envy that which has been given to the brethren."

Narrator: Belle Spafford was replaced by Barbara Bradshaw Smith, the 10th General Relief Society President. Those who had worked with Sister Smith knew of her humility, intelligence, energy and devotion to the Gospel.

Barbara Smith: You can't pray for sisters every single day and then not feel a great love for them. I do pray the Lord will bless the sisters. I pray they will be unified. I pray that they will understand that the Relief Society is there to help them and that they will avail themselves of the opportunities it affords them. Above all, I pray that they will have great love for one another.

Narrator: Barbara Winder served as the 11th General President of the R.S.

Barbara Winder: I am Barbara Winder. I was called while my husband was serving as president of the San Diego, CA. mission. I truly had mixed emotions as we left our field of labor. Bless my dear husband! He sacrificed that I might serve my Heavenly Father in this capacity. We have come a long way, sisters, since the prophet first organized Relief Society. Joseph was far ahead of his time when he said the church would never be fully organized until the sisters were organized.

Narrator: Elaine Jack was called to be our 12th General Relief Society President in 1990. There were over 3 million Relief society sisters in 135 countries and territories worldwide. As we listen to her counsel, we feel she is speaking friend to friend, sister to sister, about women's concerns, always with a vision of the reality of being daughters of God.

Elaine Jack: Our goal is that each of you enjoy the process of life; that you have hope and joy in daily living, that you know the joy and necessity of making Jesus Christ the center of your life, that you realize your importance and goodness, and that you see the great scope of Relief Society. Relief Society is the sum of righteousness of each sister. Your life is a testament to your testimonies of your Savior. You are something extraordinary.

Narrator: Sister Mary Ellen Smoot, with her special spirit, led and inspired the sisters of Relief society as the 13th General Relief Society President.

Mary Ellen Smoot: Everywhere I have traveled, whether it was Finland, Idaho, Brazil, Washington D.C., or Russia, I have witnessed the Gospel of Jesus Christ in action and the radiant light of the Gospel in the countenances of courageous and faithful sisters. The spirit has born "for such a time as this" (Ester 4:14). To each of you, no matter your nationality, race, social status, or individual talents, whether you are married, single or widowed, whether you were born into the Church or are a new convert and the only member of your family, I say, "Welcome home!" The Relief Society is your home, and you are an integral part of a worldwide sisterhood with a divine mission."

Narrator: Sister Bonnie Parkin, the 14th and current General Relief Society President has said:

Bonnie Parkin: My desire as General Relief Society president is that sisters will feel the love of the Lord in their lives daily as they keep their covenants, exercise charity, and strengthen

families. I am more and more convinced that feeling the love of the Lord in our lives daily is an essential thing for our joy and happiness. Knowing that God loves us in a personal way changes our concept of self and fortifies us to meet life's daily challenges. Feeling the love of God helps us to live our lives more meaningfully and successfully. It literally changes us.

Narrator: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has experienced much growth in recent years. The Lord's church has a worldwide influence. We're members of this church and sisters in Zion. Each one of you will add to the legacy which is to be left for those to come. Please join us in Singing "As Sisters in Zion."

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