

Relief Society Open House Workshop Fall 2005
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Bathsheba Smith: I will never forget November 10, 1901. The members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints met in solemn assembly in the Tabernacle. Lorenzo Snow, fifth President of the Church, had died just weeks before. All in attendance stood with right hands raised to sustain President Joseph F. Smith as prophet, seer, and revelator.

The Prophet Joseph organized the Female Relief Society of Nauvoo on March 17, 1842, in the Lodge Room of the Red Brick Store. My husband, George A. Smith, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve and cousin of the Prophet, often met there in council with the Brethren.

Elizabeth Ann Whitney: I nominated Emma Smith as president. She and Joseph lived with us—Newell and I and our seven children—when they first came to Kirtland in 1830. I will always remember Emma getting out of that carriage; middle of winter it was. And cold. She was so beautiful and dignified. We became lifelong friends. Did I tell you? I am Elizabeth Ann Whitney. Emma chose me as her counselor in Relief Society. Often, when she couldn't attend the meetings, I carried on for her.

Elvira: I am Elvira Cowles; I was single when I lived in Emma and Joseph's home. I helped Emma about the house and was honored to serve in the presidency as one of the secretaries. Relief Society was a reservoir of spiritual strength for me. I remember the Prophet Joseph saying he was "deeply interested that [the Relief Society] might be built up to the Most High in an acceptable manner." He taught that "when instructed we must obey that voice. that the blessings of heaven may rest down upon us."³

Bathsheba: The Prophet Joseph gave us something better than our proposed constitution. He gave us a living constitution. When a decision needed to be made we turned not to a set of rules, like most organizations of the day, but instead to the guidance of the Holy Ghost.

Elizabeth: Our first charge was spiritual: the women of the Church were to be taught the gospel. Joseph Smith met with us often, and we learned from him. We also taught one another, taking to heart the doctrines of the kingdom of God.

Elvira: “Nearly all present arose and spoke, and the spirit of the Lord like a purifying stream, refreshed every heart.”⁴

Bathsheba: As I visited the homes of our sisters, as we so often did, I left with them the words that Joseph Smith always left in my home, “Peace be unto this house.”

Philinda: The prophet counseled us in “strengthening the virtues of the female community.”⁵ He said, “Act honestly and uprightly. asmuch as [we] would be call’d to give an account to Jehovah.”⁶

Elizabeth: Relief Society was to be self-governing—but not independent. It was an integral part of the Church, not a separate church for women. I will never forget how I felt when the Prophet Joseph said, “I now turn the key to you in the name of God, and this Society shall rejoice, and knowledge and intelligence shall flow down from this time—this is the beginning of better days to this Society.”⁷

Bathsheba: Organized under the authority and power of the priesthood, we turned away from worldly influences and sought the inspiration that flows down from heaven for those who are using their time and talents in the Lord's way.

Philinda: I remember the Prophet grieved when we did not exhibit greater unity. He said that only by a union of feeling and effort can we obtain power from God.

Elvira: Unity and charity went hand in hand. We learned the doctrine of charity, and then we applied it.

Elizabeth: The Prophet Joseph Smith gave us the responsibility as sisters of Relief Society “not only to relieve the poor but to save souls.”⁸

Bathsheba: I think about the significance of choosing the title Relief Society. Relief from poverty, relief from illness, relief from doubt, relief from ignorance—relief from all that hinders the joy and progress of women.

Elizabeth: Emma set our course with the words, “We are going to do something extraordinary. we expect extraordinary occasions and pressing calls.”⁹

Philinda: My husband died at the hands of the mob at Haun's Mill in Missouri. My children and I escaped and made our way to Nauvoo with the rest of the Saints. We struggled financially. At that first meeting, Emma spoke of my need for relief. She said, "[Philinda] is industrious—performs her work well, therefore recommend her to the patronage of such as wish to hire needlework."¹⁰ I saw an increase because of her words.

Elvira: Our records quickly showed donations to the Society in the form of articles of clothing, wool, yarn, shingles, soap, candles, baskets, quilts, onions, apples, and crackers.

Elizabeth: Members of our Society watched over one another. “We did not say ‘be ye warmed and clothed’ without trying to do it.”¹¹

Bathsheba: Much of our effort was focused on contributing to the building of the Lord's temple. I received my endowment in the upper room over Joseph Smith's store—the same room where the Relief Society was organized—as did Elizabeth. The endowment was given under the direction of the Prophet Joseph Smith who taught us about our covenants, explaining and enlarging our understanding of the blessings of the temple.

Elizabeth: He prophesied things great and glorious about Relief Society. “I rejoice in the contemplation of these things daily. I trust the sisters who are now laboring in the interest of Relief Societies in Zion realize the importance attached to the work.”¹²

Bathsheba: You, sisters, now labor in the interest of Relief Societies in Zion. Remember the promise of the Prophet Joseph: "If you live up to your privileges, the angels cannot be restrained from being your associates."¹³

[She turns to the audience.]

May you in the years to come, hold fast to the legacy of the Lord's organization for women. May you, the sisters of Relief Society, fulfill the noble purposes for which this divine organization was established.

Notes

1. See Women's Exponent 30 (Christmas 1901), 62.
2. Minutes of the Female Relief Society of Nauvoo, March 17 1842, Historical Department Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 8.
3. Minutes, March 30, 1842, 22.
4. Minutes, April 19, 1842, 33.
5. Minutes, March 17, 1842, 7.
6. Minutes, April 28, 1842, 34.
7. Minutes, April 28, 1842, 40.
8. Minutes, June 9, 1842, 63.
9. Minutes, March 17, 1842, 12.
10. Minutes, March 1842, 14.
11. Minutes, October 14, 1843, 123.
12. Elizabeth Ann Whitney, "A Leaf from an Autobiography," Women's Exponent 7 (15 November 1878), 91.
13. Minutes, April 28, 1842, 38.