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# Reaching Out

By *Derin Head Rodriguez*

*How some busy Latter-day Saints find time for community service by making it a regular part of their lives.*

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The scriptures are filled with entreaties to love and serve one another. Two of the Savior's admonitions are prime examples:

"Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me." (**Matt. 25:40.**)

"Men should be anxiously engaged in a good cause, and do many things of their own free will." (**D&C 58:27.**)

Church leaders have consistently reminded Latter-day Saints of the need to serve. In a recent conference address, Bishop Glenn L. Pace, Second Counselor in the Presiding Bishopric, commented on the need for Latter-day Saints to contribute:

"We must reach out beyond the walls of our own church. In humanitarian work, as in other areas of the gospel, we cannot become the salt of the earth if we stay in one lump in the cultural halls of our beautiful meetinghouses. We need not wait for a call or assignment from a Church leader before we become involved in activities that are best carried out on a community or individual basis." (*Ensign*, Nov. 1990, p. 10.)

Yet when our commitments so often find us "anxiously engaged" in service to family and Church, how can we also devote time to community service?

Here's how some members are doing it.

## **"I Have a Lot to Give"**

"I used to believe that I didn't have much to contribute to my community," said Celia McNay, of the Tuckahoe Ward, Richmond Virginia Stake. "I didn't have a college education, and as a stay-at-home mom, I didn't feel I had any job skills." But when she started working in the community, she found that skills developed in Church callings and missionary work—skills like organization, planning, and the ability to work with people—were invaluable.

Celia, her husband, Glen, and their five children (ages six to sixteen) received the Exemplary Family Community Service Award from the Richmond chapter of the National Conference of Christians and Jews. The family's efforts in two separate activities led to their receiving the commendation.

The family first became involved with programs for the deaf when Celia and Glen were called to head the Church's regional deaf program in 1986. The McNays and their children have been involved with the deaf in both Church and community activities.

In addition, Celia, a mother of two children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), cofounded a parents' support group because there was no help available locally for parents of children with ADHD. Partly as a result of her work, there are now two active support groups in Richmond.

After a recent children's workshop, someone asked Celia, "How do you know how to do all of this?"

"I planned it just like a Primary activity," she answered.

## **"Tell Granny I Love Her"**

When 61-year-old Beth McCarty first met her, Lisa (not her real name) was a drug-addicted thirteen-year-old with a hardened, streetwise look and a black, mascara-painted snake slithering down one side of her face.

"I'm not going to stay here, Granny. My boyfriend is coming to get me," Lisa bragged.

"Here" was the adolescent unit of Odyssey House, a treatment center for abusers of drugs and alcohol. Beth had been a volunteer at the Salt Lake Center since shortly after her mother's death on Christmas Eve 1986.

A widow for many years, Beth was struggling with loss and loneliness when her doctor recommended that she consider volunteer work and suggested Odyssey House. Beth, who has a degree in social work, began working as much as twenty hours a week at the facility. She sat in on group counseling sessions and took residents on errands—to the doctor, dentist, bus station, or airport. Occasionally, she would take them to church—to whatever denomination they wished or to her own meetings in the Twenty-sixth Ward, Salt Lake Pioneer Stake.

But mostly, Beth spent long hours listening to the troubled teens as they spilled out their problems, dreams, and desires. “I don’t judge them, I just listen to them and love them,” she says.

The last time Beth saw Lisa, the teenager had turned her life around and was becoming active in her own ward; her family was also being reactivated.

Beth knows that many people, including Lisa herself, contributed to the young woman’s success. But because of experiences like these, Beth feels a warm sense of joy and satisfaction from her volunteer work.

Now, whenever Lisa’s friends see Beth, they bring her a message from Lisa: “Tell Granny I love her.”

## **Our Children Need to See Us Serve**

As a member of the Relief Society presidency in the Lake Oswego Ward, Lake Oswego Oregon Stake, Carolyn Madson had been praying for direction in choosing a volunteer project for the sisters. As she discussed possibilities with ward priesthood leaders, she and the other leaders reached the conclusion that the women of the ward should focus their activities on helping other women in their own area.

Then, one sunny summer morning as she was contemplating her own blessings, she was filled with a personal desire to give something back to the Lord and his children, and her thoughts focused on the county’s shelter for battered women.

With the approval of the bishopric, she and the other sisters began a project that grew to involve not only the ward Relief Society but also the Young Women and the Primary as they caught the spirit of service. The Relief Society sisters gathered food along with new and nearly new items for the shelter. The young women of the ward collected art supplies, craft supplies, and educational materials for the children at the shelter, and Primary children gathered toys to be donated.

Their drive culminated with an evening meeting in which the director of the women’s center spoke. Carolyn recalls that the ward group had hung at the front of the room a banner displaying the Young Women values; when the center’s director arrived, she was surprised and delighted. “This is what I have come to talk to you about,” the director said. “When a woman internalizes these concepts of self-esteem and self-worth, she is not nearly as likely to find herself a victim in an abusive situation.”

Carolyn believes that the involvement of the young women and children added an important dimension to the project. “Our children not only need opportunities to serve, but they need to see their parents and leaders giving service as well.”

She said the activity helped those who participated to learn empathy for the women in the shelter, and for women in the ward or community or for friends or relatives who have been in similar situations.

## **Night Patrol in Sydney**

When John Mallors, then Young Men president in the Penrith Ward, in the Sydney Australia Hebersham Stake, heard of the Night Patrol, he knew it was something that could benefit the young people in his ward while they helped others. Sponsored by the St. Vincent de Paul Society, the patrol is a group of volunteers who roam the streets and alleys of Sydney in a vehicle by night, supplying homeless people with hot food and beverages and meeting whatever other needs they can.

Brother Mallors discussed his ideas with local priesthood leaders, who gave their approval for LDS involvement in the project. Now, one night every week, the Night Patrol consists of youth and adults from the Hebersham stake.

On a frigid evening not long after the stake began supplying volunteers for the patrol, a young Latter-day Saint on the patrol encountered an old man lying on the sidewalk, his feet swollen and bare. Patrol members learned that the man had been beaten and robbed the night before and that his shoes and socks had been taken. The young Latter-day Saint volunteer was so touched that he immediately took off his own thick, warm socks and gave them to the man.

On another night, a bishop from one of the other wards in the stake met a homeless youth who had been sent out of his home by his parents and told not to return. Learning that the boy’s grandparents lived somewhere in Sydney, the bishop made the effort to locate them; eventually the grandparents took the young man into their home.

John Mallors now serves on the committee that manages the program. He says that participating in the program has changed the perspectives of LDS youth; they are more aware of their blessings and of the needs of people around them. “Doing something outside of your own safe, comfortable environment to help others is a good feeling,” he adds.

## **No Coincidence**

“When ye are in the service of your fellow beings ye are only in the service of your God.” (**Mosiah 2:17.**)

As Vicki Vehar was investigating the Church several years ago, this scripture from the Book of Mormon struck her with great impact. Now a member of the Naperville Second Ward, Chicago Illinois Stake, Vicki is a busy financial planner, wife, mother, and worker in the Chicago Illinois Temple. Still, Vicki makes time for volunteer service.

When she read about a program in which excess food is collected from places such as restaurants and grocery stores and distributed to food banks and shelters for the homeless, she believed it was an idea that could work in her area. She began investigating the availability of surplus food and the need for it in the Chicago area. One of the places she called to offer help in arranging for food was the Salvation Army.

The night following her call, a freak tornado struck the Plainfield-Joliet area, about thirty-five miles southwest of Chicago. The twister plowed down a three-mile swath several blocks wide, destroying everything in its path and killing twelve people. The next morning, Vicki received a call from the same Salvation Army worker she had spoken to the previous day: Could she possibly help provide some volunteers to assist the tornado victims?

Although this wasn't the kind of help she had originally offered, it was still an opportunity to serve. Vicki called the mission president, and within an hour, eight missionaries—one couple, four elders, and two sisters—were on the scene. The women distributed hamburgers and other foodstuffs, donated by a national fast-food chain, to people whose homes had been destroyed; the men began helping with the salvage process.

The next morning, Vicki got an elated phone call from the woman at the Salvation Army. “I don't know how you did it, but your church is absolutely wonderful!” the woman exclaimed. Then she added: “Do you think you could get us some bread?”

Though her service to the community was not exactly what she had planned, Vicki is not willing to chalk up her timely contact with the Salvation Army to mere coincidence.

## **Friendship Fast**

The idea of fasting, then donating to the needy the food and money thus saved, was new to many members of FOCUS—Faith Organizations in Covenant for Understanding and Service. But when Todd Christofferson, president of the Franklin Tennessee Stake and a member of the FOCUS board of directors, proposed the idea, it was readily accepted.

Members of the board of directors represent the nine major religions in the Nashville area. The idea of a fast appealed to them “because they felt it was something everyone, regardless of their circumstances, could participate in,” explains President Christofferson.

Going hungry would also help people understand and empathize with those they were trying to help.

People in the community were asked to choose one day in a particular week and fast for one or two meals. The money they donated would be apportioned among FOCUS, the Second Harvest Food Bank, and Room at the Inn, a Catholic-sponsored charity that helps homeless people find housing.

Gail Cherry and Mary Allen, both from the Nashville Third Ward, volunteered to handle the public awareness campaign, which included newspaper stories, appearances on radio and television talk shows, public service announcements on all local stations, and fliers distributed to more than two hundred thousand homes. Gail and Mary recruited commercial sponsors to provide supplies and services so that all the donated money would go directly for aid.

The willingness of people to help with the project was “incredible,” Gail says. “We were told a good public service announcement would cost us at least \$4,000 to produce, yet an employee of a television station agreed to make the announcement for us, and his station underwrote all of the production costs. It was a very effective spot that got a lot of airtime on all the stations in town.”

“The project benefited the community in many ways. Besides the money, it fostered goodwill, acceptance, and some very positive relationships,” she adds.

The fast for the benefit of the needy is being planned as an annual event in the Nashville area. “We had thought of trying to do

something like this on our own," President Christofferson explains. But Latter-day Saints could not have reached the community as FOCUS was able to do. "Working through this interfaith organization gave us the opportunity to pool the efforts, goodwill, and resources of the community," he adds.

## **Volunteers in Variety**

Even a random sampling of volunteer efforts by Church members is difficult, as so many reach out in such varied ways. Members of the Gilbert Arizona Stake devoted many hours to helping complete and then landscape a meetinghouse for their neighbors, the Trinity Presbyterian Church. David Fisher in Woodbridge, Virginia, through his service on a community board, was instrumental in developing the sex education curriculum for his local school district. Lee Pratt, stake Relief Society president in Richmond, Virginia, works side by side with homeless people in the Church cannery, which has been turned over to the homeless on several occasions so they can preserve donated foodstuffs for the community shelter. LDS youth groups in São Paulo, Brazil, give many hours of service in community projects that help the young people as much as those they serve. Louise Shaw, an Oregon mother of four, spends many hours organizing the annual state convention for American Mothers, Inc., a national organization set up to strengthen the moral and spiritual foundation of the home and family.

The people, circumstances, and situations vary, but one result is assured, as President Spencer W. Kimball said: "The more we serve our fellowmen in appropriate ways, the more substance there is to our souls. We become more significant individuals as we serve others. ...

"Wherever our Father's children magnify their opportunities for loving service, they are learning to become more like Him." (*New Era*, Mar. 1981, p. 49.)

President Ezra Taft Benson has counseled: "Forget yourself and find someone who needs your service, and you will discover the secret to the happy, fulfilled life." (*Ensign*, May 1979, p. 34.)

## **Where Shall I Begin?**

If you're thinking about how you might help as a volunteer in your community, you may want to consider the following suggestions.

1. Prayerfully and realistically review your circumstances. The time you give to volunteer work may be limited by other demands on your time and energy. If you conclude that you have some time to serve the community, even small amounts, if used efficiently, can bring rewarding results.
2. Choose worthy causes. There are many that can bring joy and happiness to you and others as you serve. But some causes, which may seem to be fashionable and to offer praise from the world, may be selfish in nature.
3. Realize that your efforts can often be more effective when you work through established programs. While these programs may be organized by other religions or civic groups, their goals are often compatible with the standards of the Church.
4. Review your job skills, education, hobbies, experience, and interests. Your areas of expertise may fill the needs of another individual or organization.
5. Volunteer work can help overcome loneliness and depression. It can sweep away selfishness, sin, and greed. Concentrating on helping others can help you readjust your own priorities and perspectives and can bring healthy feelings of self-worth and the satisfaction of meaningful labor.

*Gospel topic: service*

[illustrations] Illustrated by Scott Snow