

Family History Consultants Fireside Address

Bountiful, Jordan River and Salt Lake Temple Districts

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Brothers and sisters, whether you are seasoned or new in your calling as a family history consultant, I want to thank you for your willing service. Thank you for coming this evening. Your presence here says much about you, about your faith in Jesus Christ, about your devotion to Him, and about your desire to please Him. I'm confident that the Lord is pleased with your desires and with your sincere efforts to add your strength to this work. Thank you so much for what you are doing in family history work and for what you will do as the exciting developments you are learning about go forward.

At the outset, I wish to recall the words of Moroni to Joseph Smith given the night of September 21–22, 1823, and the following morning. The Prophet recorded:

While I was thus in the act of calling upon God, I discovered a light appearing in my room, which continued to increase until the room was lighter than at noonday, when immediately a personage appeared at my bedside, standing in the air, for his feet did not touch the floor. . .

He called me by name, and said unto me that he was a messenger sent from the presence of God to me, and that his name was Moroni; that God had a work for me to do; and that my name should be had for good and evil among all nations, kindreds, and tongues, or that it should be both good and evil spoken of among all people (Joseph Smith—History 1:30, 33).

You recall Moroni's magnificent messages. He told Joseph first about the Book of Mormon, which would become tangible evidence of Joseph's prophetic calling, about judgments coming upon the earth, and about promised power and blessings that would protect mankind in the coming day. Quoting Malachi, Moroni said:

For behold, the day cometh that shall burn as an oven, and all the proud, yea, and all that do wickedly shall burn as stubble; for they that come shall burn them, saith the Lord of Hosts, that it shall leave them neither root nor branch.

. . . Behold, I will reveal unto you the Priesthood, by the hand of Elijah the prophet, before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord.

. . . And he shall plant in the hearts of the children the promises made to the fathers, and the hearts of the children

shall turn to their fathers. If it were not so, the whole earth would be utterly wasted at his coming (Joseph Smith—History, 1:37–39).

Those verses about the then-imminent restoration of the priesthood keys of sealing and the turning of hearts are the only ones recited in all four books of our canon: the Bible, Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and Pearl of Great Price. The message and import of those sacred repeated verses draw all of us here tonight.

You remember the Prophet’s description of events in the Kirtland Temple when the Savior appeared April 3, 1836, saying:

Let the hearts of your brethren rejoice, and let the hearts of all my people rejoice, who have, with their might, built this house to my name.

For behold, I have accepted this house, and my name shall be here; and I will manifest myself to my people in mercy in this house.

Yea, I will appear unto my servants, and speak unto them with mine own voice, if my people will keep my commandments, and do not pollute this holy house.

Yea the hearts of thousands and tens of thousands shall greatly rejoice in consequence of the blessings which shall be

poured out, and the endowment with which my servants have been endowed in this house.

And the fame of this house shall spread to foreign lands; and this is the beginning of the blessing which shall be poured out upon the heads of my people (D&C 110:6–10).

Immediately following the Savior’s appearance, Moses, Elias, and then Elijah the prophet appeared. Joseph recorded that Elijah said:

Behold, the time has fully come, which was spoken of by the mouth of Malachi—testifying that he [Elijah] should be sent, before the great and dreadful day of the Lord come—

To turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the children to the fathers, lest the whole earth be smitten with a curse—

Therefore, the keys of this dispensation are committed into your hands; and by this ye may know that the great and dreadful day of the Lord is near, even at the doors (D&C 110:14–16).

With those reminders as preface and foundation, we move to the reason for this meeting: your callings as family history consultants. We hope to say things tonight, tomorrow, and Saturday that will both inspire

and instruct you. There is a *reason* for all of this focus on *you*. We garden variety members need your attention, help, and patient encouragement with our sacred responsibilities.

When my wife, Kathy, and I were dating, she joined our family after Christmas for a brief vacation. One night the two of us, along with my father, were busy assembling a mammoth puzzle. We began to give order to what seemed to me like 5,000 bits of disconnected cardboard. My father and Kathy made quick progress as they easily found and placed pieces on the table in just the right places. Kathy noticed that I wasn't doing very well. She studied for a few moments, then took several pieces from here and there on the table and put them in front of me. She showed me where they went and said to my father as I put them in place, "I wanted him to have a success experience." I thought my father would never stop laughing.

I've thought of that story in connection with my own assignment in family history, the remarkable present and future capacities of the new FamilySearch, and you family history consultants. Like many Church members with whom you work, I am just beginning to learn how to do my family history. Because family history has been something I postponed and approached without much confidence, something I just never quite found time to get around to, I needed someone to help me have a success experience.

Knowing that I was going to speak to you tonight helped me realize that I needed to know something personally about the new FamilySearch and something about what you will do as family history consultants. My days of postponing family history until I was old had passed; it was too late anyway regarding the getting old part – I’m already there. I asked for help from the Family and Church History Department, and help was sent to me in the person of Merrill White, who works in the department.

Merrill came to my office here at headquarters about six times. I am comfortable using a computer, and so Merrill didn’t have that hurdle to confront. He just sat down next to me at my computer, and we opened the new FamilySearch program. He asked me what I wanted to do. I responded that we might start by finding my own family—Kathy, me, and our kids—and so he showed me how to do that. It was easy.

We then looked at the families of my parents and Kathy’s family and parents. Within an hour we had gone back several generations and even identified several names Kathy and I could take to the temple. He showed a few basic features and we tried them out. Whenever I asked him about how something worked, he invariably replied, “Let’s try it and find out.” I would then click on that feature’s icon on the computer screen, and off we went, experimenting with that function until I asked some other question. Whenever I needed help, Merrill was right at my

elbow. Occasionally he would introduce something we hadn't yet tried but that he felt I would be interested in seeing and experimenting with.

Merrill returned to my office once or twice a week, each time for about an hour. Because I didn't always remember everything we had done the last time, he often had to gently remind me about what we learned in our last meeting. He always remembered what names we had worked with the last time and where I had become "stuck." He patiently helped me remember the earlier lessons, and then, using a style that I came to admire greatly, he let my questions and needs steer our meetings. Every time I asked about something I didn't understand, he would say, "Well, let's try it and see what happens."

Merrill never once said that we should look at his family's records. He didn't have any apparent need to tell me about all the work that he had done or to demonstrate his formidable knowledge. He never drew any attention to the fact that I was an absolute novice and he was an expert. Instead, he focused on me and on my needs. He took me from exactly where I was as a beginner and helped me learn, consistent with my abilities, interests, and needs. He neither said nor did anything that made me feel embarrassed or inadequate. I already felt that way. His non-threatening and approachable manner promoted my confidence and my desire to continue.

I have thought that what Merrill did with me was just what missionaries are taught to do in *Preach My Gospel*. He understood that

he wasn't teaching *lessons*, he was teaching *me*. It would probably have been easier for him to simply start at page one of the lessons and take me through the material without thinking much about what I knew or didn't know, and without worrying much about what I had understood or was remembering. But Merrill was teaching *me*, not the lessons, so he focused on me and on my needs and interests.

After a couple of his visits, I was so excited that Kathy and I sat down on the couch one night and I showed her what I had learned; together we found additional names we can take to the temple. Merrill spent enough time with me to help me overcome my lack of confidence and to leave me feeling that, with a little work, *even I* could do family history work.

I'm sure that *you* already sense where this is heading. I hope and even pray that *you* will do for members of *your* wards and branches just what Merrill did for me. *You* can make a tremendous difference. And that difference will help "turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers" (Malachi 4:6). Your efforts will help members open doors for their ancestors and relatives on the other side of the veil, people who are as real as *we* are, people who are waiting and yearning for blessings which only *we* can help them to receive.

Brothers and sisters, in a sense, because of your callings and expertise, you are the ones looking at the lid to the puzzle box. You see

what the final picture looks like while I and others like me, as novices, may only see hundreds of pieces we don't know how to put together.

Learning how to do family history work can seem daunting. For a new family history consultant, the calling can seem overwhelming. What matters for all of us is that we proceed with faith from where we are. That's what Merrill did for me—he helped me proceed with faith in a fundamental and saving gospel endeavor with which I was mostly unfamiliar.

“The key to a successful family history program is family history consultants who meet with members and families individually to help them begin and continue their temple and family history work” (*Church Handbook of Instructions: Book 2*, 264). Now, your being that “key” does not mean that *you* should do all the work *for members*. Rather, *you* help *them* begin and continue. Merrill's example of helping me begin, of getting me off the ground and on my way, seems to me to be ideal.

Helping members begin and continue may require some hand holding. Because I am one of those who very much needed having my hand held, I want to share a few additional ideas with you about your service.

First, family history is a spiritual work that requires faith. The Lord admonished, “Remember that without faith you can do nothing” (D&C 8:10). Whether a member reaches out to you for help, accepts your offer to get involved, or needs your assistance, that person is acting

by faith. You will help members find their way through the vast family history resources the Church provides: Internet sites, Internet-based training, databases, libraries, reference materials, classes, and more. Because these tools aid the work significantly and require some training, you may often find yourself in the role of an instructor who helps members learn new skills. All those skills are important; each has its place. I encourage you, however, to see yourself as someone who helps kindle the faith by which members do this work, not just as a person who teaches skills. Family history is a work of faith.

Sometimes, I fear that a family history consultant might see what a member does *not* know rather than what he or she *does* know. Especially if a member is not very skilled on a computer or knowledgeable about specific tools, it can be all too easy to focus on what's *missing* rather than on what's *in place*. Merrill could so easily have been just a little impatient with me, a little directive, and unconsciously condescending. We must guard against letting those impulses seep into our service.

One sad example may help to paint this picture for you. Some time ago in a stake conference a long way from here, we were holding a questions-and-answers session during a conference meeting. One member with an important family history responsibility asked a question about family history, only it wasn't really a question. Instead, it was a statement criticizing others who didn't do what this member apparently

did—which was a lot of family history work—and asking me if I agreed that others should do more family history work, like she did. I attempted to answer by observing that there are lots of opportunities to do things in family history, and encouraging everyone to do a little something. I wanted to take the hard edge off that non-question “question.”

Unfortunately, the member who asked the “question” wasn’t satisfied by my response and asked another non-question question, again assuming superiority because others were not doing what she was doing. A spirit of criticism from an expert will kill the enthusiasm of beginners like me. Be careful to encourage faith, to encourage a desire to begin and to continue, to encourage confidence, and to help members have success experiences. When members feel that their faith in the Lord and in themselves is growing as a consequence of what you help them to do, you will have done your job, and done it well.

The Prophet Joseph Smith, “And there are none that doeth good except those who are ready to receive the fulness of my gospel” (D&C 35:12). This concept of being “ready to receive” is an interesting one for us to consider.

You are called to help members who are in varying states of readiness to receive, or to participate in, family history. Of course, you will want to be careful not to open the fire hydrant when a member asks for a sip. But in a larger sense, you will want to ask the Lord to help you sense the readiness of each member to receive what you have to offer.

Let me share an example that was shared with me. A consultant with a rich background in family history approached a woman in her ward about family history. The woman, a lifelong Church member, accepted the offer of help, much to the consultant's delight. The consultant—laptop, handbook, and forms in hand—met the woman in her home for their first visit. The consultant reviewed the paperwork she brought, booted up her computer, and shared some of her own family history on FamilySearch.org and in PAF.

The member sat silently through all this. The consultant, who had fully expected this sister to relish seeing all the resources available to her, finally stopped when she noticed the sister was studying a blank pedigree chart with a look of puzzlement. At this pause in the presentation, the member waved the sheet and asked, “What is this and what does it have to do with my family history?”

I was only a few steps ahead of that sister, and Merrill was wise enough to deal with me at my own level. I am grateful that he didn't begin by showing me all that he had done on his own lines, thereby emphasizing my comparative inadequacy.

Again, remember that you will be the person holding the puzzle box lid. You may need to remind the member what the *big picture* is: when the requisite puzzle pieces are in place, the member will take a family name to the temple and perform ordinance work for that family

member. The sealing of families is what we wish all members to experience.

I hope you won't become discouraged or frustrated when members move slowly. Sometimes it requires patience when you're ready to *give* and they aren't ready to *get*. The Lord will be equally grateful for the love and encouragement you give to those who *aren't quite ready* as He is for your help to those who *are*.

Remember that success begets success. Just as Kathy made sure I had a success experience with that Christmas puzzle, so you are the key to ensuring members' success with family history. When a member begins family history work, he or she hopes to find ancestors' names and perform ordinances in their behalf in the House of the Lord. On the way to that spiritual success, members can be motivated by many small points of progress but they may not immediately recognize those points. Help members who are unfamiliar with family history see how their new skills and steady efforts lead directly to preparing names for temple ordinances. The principle that "out of small things proceedeth that which is great" (D&C 64:33) is proven repeatedly in family history work. Help their small success experiences become great victories, victories that culminate in the temple.

Please focus on the member's family rather than your own. This is an important aspect of Merrill White's example in helping me learn about new FamilySearch. He focused on my family and Kathy's family

exclusively. Stories of your search for family names, particularly when you worked for years without results on a particular line or a specific individual, may not motivate someone else. The members with whom you work will be motivated by your encouraging help as they use FamilySearch for the first time to learn about *their own* families.

Remember also that a member can come to an abrupt halt in family history work. Anyone using a computer is one click away from an error message or a confusing screen. A member can be stopped by a box on a form that doesn't make sense or by an unreadable name on a microfilm. These dilemmas may be easy for *you* to resolve, but for a *novice* they might seem insurmountable. Please be vigilant in helping members *continue* with the family history they've begun. Help them have success experiences.

Your welcoming attention to new members blesses them immensely. New members who are baptized for their kindred dead are reminded of their own recent baptisms and the blessings of eternal families. Those baptisms are a key to helping new members' testimonies sink deeply into their hearts and to retaining these new members through the years.

As in countless other matters, the scriptures of the Restoration teach us why we are so serious about family history. In recording his remarkable vision regarding the spirit world and the redemption of the dead, President Joseph F. Smith wrote:

And the chosen messengers went forth to declare the acceptable day of the Lord and proclaim liberty to the captives who were bound, even unto all who would repent of their sins and receive the gospel.

Thus was the gospel preached to those who had died in their sins, without a knowledge of the truth, or in transgression, having rejected the prophets.

These were taught faith in God, repentance from sin, vicarious baptism for the remission of sins, the gift of the Holy Ghost by the laying on of hands,

And all other principles of the gospel that were necessary for them to know in order to qualify themselves that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit.

And so it was made known among the dead, both small and great, the unrighteous as well as the faithful, that redemption had been wrought through the sacrifice of the Son of God upon the cross . . .

The dead who repent will be redeemed, through obedience to the ordinances of the house of God (D&C 138:31–35, 58).

I am grateful to participate with you in the tremendous latter-day effort to redeem the dead. I testify of the redemptive power of these efforts in our own lives. I am the personal beneficiary of the very services you are called to offer in your wards and branches.

I testify of the living reality of the Lord Jesus Christ, whose work this is and whose servants we all are. He lives, and because He does, we will as well, and so will everyone else who has ever lived or will ever live. May the Lord bless us all as we help members to extend the blessings available in the holy temples to the ranks of the dead, I pray, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.