

Emma Hale Smith
1842–1844



Emma Hale Smith, first general president of the Relief Society, envisioned the great work of the Female Relief Society of Nauvoo when it was formed on March 17, 1842. The Prophet Joseph Smith had promised to organize the women “after the pattern of the priesthood.”¹ In that first meeting, Emma told the women: “We are going to do something *extraordinary*—when a boat is stuck on the rapids, with a multitude of Mormons on board we shall consider *that* a loud call for *relief*—we expect extraordinary occasions and pressing calls.”² Pressing calls and extraordinary occasions the sisters of that time did meet and still do today.

Almost 12 years before the Relief Society was organized, the Prophet Joseph Smith had received a revelation in which the Lord referred to Emma as “an elect lady, whom I have called.” She was then told that she would be “ordained . . . to expound scriptures, and to exhort the church, according as it shall be given thee by my Spirit” (Doctrine and Covenants 25:3, 7). Joseph said her calling as president of the newly formed Relief Society organization was a fulfillment of that prophecy.

Early Life and Marriage

Emma was born July 10, 1804, in Harmony Township, Pennsylvania, the seventh child of Elizabeth Lewis and Isaac Hale. Emma first met Joseph Smith Jr. in 1825, while he boarded with her family. Against the wishes of Emma’s father, Emma and Joseph married on January 18, 1827. In December 1827 Joseph began work on the Book of Mormon. Emma and Joseph had 11 children, only five of whom lived to adulthood. Emma died April 30, 1879, in Nauvoo, Illinois.

Perhaps the greatest example and legacy Emma left was the way she filled the calling she was given in Doctrine and Covenants 25:5, when the Lord instructed her to be a comfort to her husband “in his afflictions, with consoling words, in the spirit of meekness.” Joseph’s own words probably best describe the comfort she provided him: “With what unspeakable delight, and what transports of joy swelled my bosom, when I took by the hand, on that night, my beloved Emma—she that was my wife, even the wife of my youth, and the choice of my heart. . . . Again she is here, even in the seventh trouble—undaunted, firm, and unwavering—unchangeable, affectionate Emma!”³

Highlights of Service

Emma proposed the name Female Relief Society of Nauvoo. Although for a time she acted as scribe for Joseph while he translated the Book of Mormon, Emma never saw the golden plates. She was instrumental in the coming forth of the Word of Wisdom, as she was the one who expressed concern to the Prophet about the tobacco habits of many of the men. In 1843 she organized a visiting committee, the beginnings of visiting teaching, and she compiled the first Church hymnal.

Her Heart

Emma made her greatest desires known in a letter to Joseph: “I desire the Spirit of God to know and understand myself, that I might be able to overcome whatever of tradition or nature that would not tend to my exaltation in the eternal worlds. I desire a fruitful, active mind, that I may be able to comprehend the designs of God, when revealed through His servants without doubting.”⁴

Eliza R. Snow 1866–1887



Eliza Roxcy Snow, second General President of the Relief Society, dedicated her life to serving the Lord. “To be able to do Father’s will is what I wish to live for,”¹ she once said. But she didn’t wish such a life only for herself. She wanted every woman to recognize her significance in the Lord’s eyes and act upon it. “No sister [is] so isolated,” she declared, “but what she can do a great deal towards establishing the Kingdom of God upon the earth.”²

Eliza knew this not only because of the testimony that burned inside of her but because she had spent her entire life serving the women of the Church, from Kirtland to Missouri to Nauvoo to Salt Lake City. She knew their hearts, their trials, their triumphs, and the way they quietly lifted their families and one another in good times and bad. “There are many of the sisters whose labors are not known beyond their own dwellings and perhaps not appreciated there,” she said, “but what difference does that make? If your labors are acceptable to God, however simple the duties, if faithfully performed, you should never be discouraged.”³

Strengthening families and making wise use of time were priorities for her. “Let your first business be to perform your duties at home,” she said. “But, inasmuch as you are wise stewards, you will find time for social duties. . . . By seeking to perform every duty you will find that your capacity will increase, and you will be astonished at what you can accomplish.”⁴ Eliza used some of her time to write poetry. A profoundly wise and revelatory woman, she left behind some 500 poems—many of which provide tremendous comfort as well as doctrinal insight. Consider the third verse of her poem “O My Father,” which is in today’s Church hymnal:

*I had learned to call thee Father,
Thru thy Spirit from on high,
But, until the key of knowledge
Was restored, I knew not why.
In the heav’ns are parents single?
No, the thought makes reason stare!
Truth is reason; truth eternal
Tells me I’ve a mother there.⁵*

Early Life

Eliza was born January 21, 1804, in Becket, Massachusetts, to Oliver and Rosetta Snow. She was the second of seven children. Her younger brother Lorenzo Snow later became the fifth President of the Church. The Snow family valued learning, and Eliza was a brilliant student. By the time she joined the Church in 1835, she was famous for her poems. Her autograph book includes signatures from the likes of Queen Victoria of England, Victor Hugo, Susan B. Anthony, and President Abraham Lincoln.⁶

Conversion and Marriage

It was in Mantua, Ohio, where Eliza grew up, that the Snow family heard the restored gospel and were baptized. Shortly after her baptism in the spring of 1835, Eliza moved to Kirtland, Ohio, to teach the daughters and nieces of the Prophet Joseph Smith. During this time she developed a deep love for the Prophet and a fervent testimony of his divine calling.⁷ She was sealed to the Prophet on June 29, 1842. After his martyrdom, which grieved her deeply, Eliza became a plural wife of President Brigham Young, who held her in the highest esteem. She never had children. Eliza died in Salt Lake City on December 5, 1887.

Highlights of Service

During Eliza’s presidency, the Primary and the Young Women’s Mutual Improvement Association were organized, the *Woman’s Exponent* was created, and principles of welfare were introduced. The women grew and stored grain, opened cooperative stores, and manufactured silk. The Relief Society sent women to medical school to become doctors, nurses, and midwives. In return, these women came back and taught others. Eliza served as Deseret Hospital’s first president.

Zina Diantha Huntington Young
1888–1901



Zina Diantha Huntington Young, third General President of the Relief Society, was fondly known by the sisters of the Church as the “heart” of Relief Society. “Sister Zina was all love and sympathy, and drew people after her by reason of that tenderness,” wrote Susa Young Gates, one of the most prolific Latter-day Saint writers of that time.¹

With gentleness, kindness, and the power of God, “Aunt Zina” inspired the women to be better. “Sisters, it is for us to be wide awake to our duties,” she said. “The kingdom will roll on, and we have nothing to fear but our own imperfections.”²

With the tenderness she was known for, Zina taught the importance of a personal testimony of the restored gospel. “Seek for a testimony, as you would, my dear sisters, for a diamond concealed. If someone told you by digging long enough in a certain spot you would find a diamond of unmeasured wealth, do you think you would begrudge time or strength, or means spent to obtain that treasure? . . . If you will dig in the depths of your own hearts you will find, with the aid of the Spirit of the Lord, the pearl of great price, the testimony of the truth of this work.”³

By all accounts, Zina graciously embraced the Lord’s will in her life despite many hardships. Her beloved mother died in the expulsion from Missouri. Her father died in the expulsion from Nauvoo.⁴ And she gave birth to a baby in a wagon while headed west.

But since the day she picked up the Book of Mormon as a 14-year-old girl and felt the burning in her heart that it was true, nothing could harden her heart or make her testimony waver. In her autobiography, she wrote, “Before my maker I wish to bear a faithful Testimony that this is the work of God & each year it is more precious.”⁵

Early Life

Zina Diantha Huntington was born January 31, 1821, in Watertown, New York, to William and Zina Baker Huntington. She was the seventh of nine children. Zina’s parents were strict Presbyterians and set good patterns for their children. As a family, they read the Bible daily, sang hymns as Zina played on the cello, and prayed together morning and night. Zina’s mother was known for taking care of those in need, while her father had studied the Bible enough to

conclude that none of the churches at that time “had the organization peculiar to the primitive church.”⁶ So when the family heard the restored gospel, all but her oldest brother, Chauncy, embraced it. Hyrum Smith baptized Zina on August 1, 1835.

Marriage and Family

Zina married Henry Bailey Jacobs on March 7, 1841. They had two sons but did not remain together. As a plural wife of Brigham Young, Zina had one daughter, and she raised four other children as her own after their mother died. Blessed with the gift of healing and limited medical training, Zina helped the sick and delivered countless babies. She died August 28, 1901, in Salt Lake City.

Highlights of Service

Before serving as general Relief Society president, Zina spent 21 years traveling the Utah Territory organizing Relief Societies with her dear friend Eliza R. Snow, who was then the Relief Society General President. After Zina became General President, she continued and expanded those visits beyond Utah, adding an emphasis on local Relief Societies creating their own nursing classes and improving medical care. She opened a nursing school and headed the school of obstetrics. She advocated women’s suffrage, served as president of the Deseret Silk Association, and was matron of the Salt Lake Temple from its dedication in 1893 until her death.

Bathsheba W. Smith

1901–1910



Bathsheba W. Smith, fourth General President of the Relief Society, had three great loves in life—her family, homemaking, and the Lord. Together, these loves carried her throughout her life.

Devoted to her husband and children and knowing she was doing the work of the Lord, Bathsheba dedicated herself to strengthening her family. Her husband, George A. Smith, was a cousin to the Prophet Joseph Smith and the youngest member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles when they married. He was frequently away serving missions, and Bathsheba often wrote to him of her love. “It seems to me I could not wish to enjoy myself better than to sit

under the sound of your rich and lovely voice and hear you unfold the rich treasure of your mind,"¹ she once wrote to him. Her children were just as dear to her. "They made our home joyous with song and just their pleasure was mine," she recalled. "I was proud of them and so happy with them."²

And so Bathsheba found great satisfaction in providing for them. Her letters and autobiography are filled with descriptions of the shirts, carpets, curtains, cushions, soaps, rugs, caps, pillowcases, sheets, comforters, bonnets, stockings, diapers, candles, dresses, aprons, and so forth that she made to make her family comfortable, not to mention the animals she tended, the gardens she kept, and the sick she visited.³ She once wrote that she had "done all we could to encourage home manufactory."⁴

Naturally, this love of home and self-sufficiency carried over into her time as General President of the Relief Society. As a result, the Relief Society published the first of what would later become known as Mother Education lessons, focusing on topics such as child rearing, industry, and marriage.⁵ Additionally, Relief Society wheat was shared with American Indians in Utah; earthquake survivors in San Francisco, California; and famine victims in China.⁶

Most important, "President Smith felt strongly that women needed to be spiritually self-sufficient and that Relief Society was the place for that to occur: 'It is plainly necessary that women as well as men, cease not while life lasts to study diligently for the knowledge which is of greatest worth.'"⁷

Early Life

The eighth of nine children, Bathsheba Bigler Smith was born May 3, 1822, near Shinnston, West Virginia, to Mark and Susannah Ogden Bigler. She lived a life of relative ease learning handicrafts and horseback riding on the family's 300-acre plantation. But when the missionaries came to her door in 1837, that all changed. "I heard them preach and believed what they taught," she wrote. "I believed the Book of Mormon to be a divine record, and that Joseph Smith was a Prophet of God. I knew by the spirit of the Lord which I received in answer to prayer, that these things were true."⁸ The entire family was converted. The persecutions that followed drove the family to eventually join the Saints in Nauvoo, Illinois.

Marriage and Family

On July 25, 1841, Bathsheba married George A. Smith, one of the missionaries who had taught her family. They had two children. In time, her husband took on five more "good, virtuous, honorable young"⁹ wives with her blessing. Of this she wrote, "Being thoroughly convinced . . . that the doctrine of plurality of wives was from God; and having a fixed determination to attain to Celestial glory, I felt to embrace the whole gospel."¹⁰ She died September 20, 1910.

Highlights of Service

At age 19, Bathsheba Smith was the youngest woman at the organization of the Relief Society in Nauvoo, Illinois, in 1842. She served as matron of the Salt Lake Temple at the same time she

was General President. She felt that serving in the temple was one of the most important things she could do.

Emmeline B. Woodward Wells
1910–1921



Emmeline B. Wells, fifth General President of the Relief Society, had a testimony that the Relief Society had been organized by revelation. “We do declare,” she said, “it our purpose to keep intact the original name and initial spirit and purpose of this great organization, holding fast to the inspired teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith when he revealed that plan by which women were to be empowered through the calling of the priesthood to be grouped into suitable organizations for the purpose of ministering to the sick, assisting the needy, comforting the aged, warning the unwary and succoring the orphans.”¹

In 1876 President Brigham Young put Emmeline in charge of a grain-saving program in which Relief Society sisters worked together to procure and store grain. Over the years, Relief Society sisters were able to share their wheat with those in need. Recipients included drought victims in southern Utah, earthquake survivors in California, and people of China who were suffering from a famine.² The Relief Society also sold over 200,000 bushels of wheat to the U.S. government during World War I.³

Emmeline knew that there was much to be learned from the Relief Society’s early members. “It is [my] strongest desire that our young women of today be made to comprehend the work of the early members who,” she said, “without the facilities of the present time, comforted the sad and distressed, visited the widow and fatherless, and were like ministering angels.”⁴ To capture the inspired origins and founding principles of the society, Sister Wells and her counselors chose the scriptural declaration “Charity never faileth”⁵ for the Relief Society motto. The motto became especially meaningful as, within years of its announcement, World War I began. During this time, sisters responded to Emmeline’s urgings for charity by being kind to friends and enemies alike, volunteering in community efforts, and seeking the pure love of Christ.

Early Life

Born February 29, 1828, Emmeline Blanche Woodward was born to David and Diadama Hare Woodward of Petersham, Massachusetts. She was the seventh of nine children. Clearly an intelligent young woman with aspirations of becoming a writer, Emmeline was the only sibling afforded a private education. She earned her teaching certificate. At the age of 14, she joined the Church. Her mother and three youngest sisters had also accepted the gospel.

Marriage and Family

Emmeline married James Harvey Harris on July 29, 1843. The couple moved to Nauvoo, where their first child died. James left to look for work and did not return, and she had to earn an income by teaching school. On February 17, 1845, she became a plural wife of Newel K. Whitney and later crossed the plains with his family. When Bishop Whitney died in 1850, Emmeline was once again left to take care of herself. She turned again to teaching. On October 10, 1852, she became the seventh wife of Daniel H. Wells. She had five daughters, two of whom she outlived. Emmeline died on April 29, 1921.

Highlights of Service

Emmeline was one of Utah's greatest leaders of women's suffrage, which encompassed religious freedom. "I desire to do all in my power to help elevate the condition of my own people, especially women," she wrote.⁶ "I have desired with all my heart to do those things that would advance women in moral and spiritual as well as educational work and tend to the rolling on of the work of God upon the earth."⁷ In 1877 Emmeline became the editor of the *Woman's Exponent*, a newspaper written for the benefit of Latter-day Saint women. For 37 years she made her voice and that of Latter-day Saint women heard across the country. Emmeline was 82 years old when she was called to be General President of the Relief Society. She served for 11 years, until shortly before her death.

Clarissa Smith Williams
1921–1928



When Clarissa Smith Williams became the sixth General President of the Relief Society, women in the United States were excited about the possibilities that lay before them. They had just won the right to vote, and they were eager to make a difference in their communities. “We have been given such blessings as have never been given to women in any other age,” Clarissa said, “and we should in every way endeavor to live up to them.”¹

It was through Relief Society that the women of the Church would most effectively strengthen their families, their communities, and the world. Equipped with exceptional executive ability, Clarissa devoted herself to helping women be instruments in the Lord’s hands.

Through the newly created Relief Society Social Service Department, the Relief Society worked with wards and stakes to help needy women and girls find employment, place children for adoption, operate a storehouse for used clothing and items to be distributed to the needy, hold health clinics, send aid to war-torn Europe, and offer training courses on charities and relief work, child rearing, hygiene, disease, care for the sick, crime prevention, economic conditions, and so forth.²

Clarissa was especially concerned about the high mortality rate of mothers and infants. In 1922 Church vitals showed 58 deaths of mothers and 751 infant deaths.³ In response, Clarissa proposed that the interest from the Relief Society’s wheat fund be used “in the interest of maternity and motherhood throughout the Church.”⁴ The proposal was accepted, and the wards and stakes around the world used the funds to do everything from assembling maternity loan chests for home deliveries to opening maternity hospitals. By 1924 the Presiding Bishopric reported the lives of 500 children had been saved by the Relief Society’s efforts.⁵

“This great trust which the Prophet Joseph Smith gave to women eighty years ago,” Clarissa said, “has been a great blessing, not only to the Relief Society women but to the communities in which they have lived. Through our organization the gospel has been preached, the needy have been looked after, the sick have been comforted, the downhearted have been cheered, a message of love and of blessing has ever emanated from Relief Society workers. . . . The greatest thing in the world is love. And if we keep that always in our hearts, and give it as a message to those about us, we will be blessed and will be instruments in blessing those with whom we associate.”⁶

Early Life

Clarissa West Smith was born April 21, 1859, in Salt Lake City, Utah, to Susan Elizabeth West and George A. Smith. She was the first of five daughters. Clarissa's best friends were daughters of President Brigham Young.⁷ She graduated from the University of Deseret (later the University of Utah) with a teaching certificate and afterward opened her own private school in Parowan, Utah.

Marriage and Family

On July 17, 1877, Clarissa married her sweetheart of two years, William Newjent Williams, the day before he left on a two-year mission to his native land of Wales. She taught school until his return. They had 11 children. Three died before reaching adulthood. Clarissa died March 8, 1930.

Relief Society Highlights

Much of Clarissa's efforts regarding social, humanitarian, and welfare work helped pave the way for today's Church welfare system. The Relief Society established a training program for nurses' aides. Five loan funds in honor of the past General Presidents of the Relief Society were created at Clarissa's request. The funds were awarded to female upper-division students, nursing students, and poets and were also used to assist in temple work. The first uniform monthly visiting teaching messages were published in the *Relief Society Magazine*.

Louise Yates Robison

1928–1939



Louise Yates Robison, seventh General President of the Relief Society, thought a mistake had been made when she was called to the General Presidency of the Relief Society. She had never known material wealth or a formal education, and she was shy and avoided attention.

“When Mother went to President [Heber J.] Grant’s office to be set apart, she felt sure he had been misinformed about her abilities,” said her daughter, “so she told him she’d be happy to do her best in whatever he asked her to do, but she wanted him to know that she had limited

education, and very little money and social position, and she was afraid she wouldn't be the example that the women of the Relief Society would expect in a leader. She finished by saying, 'I'm just a humble woman!' President Grant answered 'Sister Louiza, 85% of the women of our Church are humble women. We are calling you to be the leader of them.'"¹

As it turned out, Louise was exactly what the women of the Church needed. With the onset of the Great Depression, she understood the needs of the struggling sisters and had great empathy for them and wisdom to share with them. "She spent much of her time focusing on sisters who lacked formal education and material wealth, feeling she was in similar circumstances."² "Sister Robison stressed the volunteer compassionate services," according to Belle Spafford, ninth General President of the Relief Society. "'Go where you're needed; do what you can.' That was her theme."³

"If we only half do our work," said Louise, "we will have no pleasure, if we do it from a sense of duty we will have no joy, but if we feel we are a branch of this vine, and that our Father in Heaven has felt us to be worthy to be a member of that branch, and that we can carry this work when it is here to do, then we will have joy."⁴

Early Life

Sarah Louisa Yates, later known as Louise, was born May 27, 1866, in Scipio, Utah, where her parents, Thomas and Elizabeth Francis Yates, had been called to colonize Round Valley in Millard County. She was the second of five children. Living in pioneer conditions, Louise learned how to work with wool, knit, and braid straw hats.⁵

Education and Marriage

Fourteen-year-old Louise and her sister attended Brigham Young Academy in Provo, Utah, for a year. Afterward Louise took a six-month dressmaking course, which served her well as she directed the Temple and Burial Clothing Department later in life. Her schooling was cut short when she met newly returned missionary Joseph Lyman Robison. They were married October 11, 1883, and had six children. After her children were grown, Louise enrolled in university extension classes to make up for her lack of education. For years she got up at 4:00 a.m. so that she could study for two hours before her day began.⁶ She died on March 30, 1946.

Relief Society Highlights

Understanding the importance of helping mothers stay at home, Sister Robison opened the Mormon Handicraft Shop in Salt Lake City, Utah, in 1937. It gave sisters a place to sell their wares. She was the first General President to visit Relief Societies in Europe. Relief Society choirs became known as the "Singing Mothers" after Louise's favorite quote, "A singing mother makes a happy home."⁷ She instigated the first monument to the Relief Society in Nauvoo, Illinois. The Relief Society adopted gold and blue as its official colors. But reflecting her sense of what was most important, Louise said, "Although our records are well kept, there is no human power which can give an account of the deeds of loving kindness performed by our Relief Society members."

Amy Brown Lyman
1940–1945



“No work could be more important and satisfying than that of helping to raise human life to its highest level,”¹ wrote Amy Brown Lyman in her autobiography. She believed this was done best by providing “relief of existing distress [and] prevention of new distress.”² Called as the eighth General President of the Relief Society three months after the outbreak of World War II in Europe, she experienced many opportunities to put that philosophy into practice.

During her administration, the Relief Society worked tirelessly to achieve this goal. Functioning in coordination with and under the direction of the priesthood, sisters from the United States to Holland and from New Zealand to Canada united in such activities as sending care packages to members and soldiers in war-torn countries, folding bandages for the Red Cross, and sewing items like undergarments, clothing, and bedding for those in need.

The effect of the war on families was particularly troubling. Fathers and sons around the world were being taken out of the home to fight, while mothers and young women were being encouraged to leave the home to take jobs to support the war effort. Immorality was on the rise.³

Sister Lyman encouraged mothers to do all they could to fortify their families. A *Relief Society Magazine* article in 1943 stated: “The General Board urges mothers throughout the Church to place every possible safeguard about their children. An evil influence is abroad which threatens even the best homes. Social problems, greatly aggravated by the war, demand vigilance on the part of mothers.”⁴ To make it possible for mothers to spend more time at home, Amy urged the women to develop skills of self-reliance, like sewing, gardening, and preserving and storing food.

Early Life

Amy Cassandra Brown was born February 7, 1872, in Pleasant Grove, Utah, to John and Margaret Zimmerman Brown. Margaret was John’s third wife. Amy was the eighth of 10 children. Although they had little material wealth, education was important to her parents. Amy once said, “We had plain living, but high thinking.”⁵

Education and Marriage

While attending Brigham Young Academy, Amy met Richard R. Lyman. Intellectual and spiritual equals, the two fell in love and married on September 9, 1896, in the Salt Lake Temple. They

had two children. Amy led the Relief Society's Social Welfare Department for 15 years and functioned as an officer in the Relief Society for 32 years. She served a term as a member of the Utah House of Representatives as well. Amy died December 5, 1959.

Her Testimony

Amy's firm testimony of the gospel motivated and enriched her Church service. She said: "[My] testimony has been my anchor and my stay, my satisfaction in times of joy and gladness, my comfort in times of sorrow and discouragement. I am grateful for the opportunity I have had of serving . . . in the Relief Society where during most of my mature life I have worked so happily and contentedly with its thousands of members. I have visited in their homes, slept in their beds, and eaten at their tables, and have thus learned of the beauty of their character, their unselfishness, their understanding hearts, their faithfulness, and their sacrifices. I honor beyond my power of expression this great sisterhood of service."

Belle Smith Spafford

1945–1974



Shortly after Belle S. Spafford was called to be the ninth General President of the Relief Society, she received an invitation to a National Council of Women (NCW) meeting in New York City. Relief Society leaders had been members of this council for more than 50 years even though at times they had faced opposition, the travel was expensive, and the meetings took up valuable time.

After much consideration, Belle and her counselors decided to propose to the prophet that the Relief Society terminate its membership.

Belle presented her recommendation and reasons in writing to President George Albert Smith and then added, "'We don't get a thing from these councils.'

"[The] wise, old prophet tipped back in his chair and looked at her with a disturbed expression. 'You want to withdraw because you don't get anything out of it?' he questioned.

"'That is our feeling,' she replied.

“‘Tell me,’ he said, ‘what is it that you are putting into it?’

“‘Sister Spafford,’ he continued, ‘you surprise me. Do you always think in terms of what you get? Don’t you think also in terms of what you have to give?’

“He returned that paper to her and extended his hand. With considerable firmness he said, ‘You continue your membership in these councils and make your influence felt.’”¹

Sister Spafford humbly took the counsel and in time, through her patience and faithfulness, won over the hearts of the women she worked with. Consequently, women around the world were blessed by her faith, wisdom, and inspiration as she not only led the Relief Society for 29 years but also served on the NCW for 42 years and as its president from 1968 to 1970.

Regarding her experiences working with priesthood leaders, Belle said, “I have learned the greatness of the priesthood of God. I have learned the inspiration that guides the brethren who preside over us. I have learned that there is nothing more important for me to do as a woman than to be obedient to the counsel which they give.”²

Early Life and Education

Born October 8, 1895, in Salt Lake City, Marion Isabelle (“Belle”) Sims Smith was the last of seven children of Hester Sims and John Gibson Smith. Although her father died before she was born, her mother always made Belle and her siblings feel that their father was watching over them, along with their Heavenly Father and bishop.³ After completing her studies, she taught special education classes at Brigham Young University (BYU) in Provo, Utah.⁴

Marriage and Family

While at BYU, Belle met Willis Earl Spafford. They married March 23, 1921, in the Salt Lake Temple. Their two children were her top priority. “The most valuable contribution that a woman can make to society,” Belle said, “is to rear children who have internalized . . . values through the family teaching that would enable them to function as responsible citizens.”⁵ She died February 2, 1982.

Relief Society Highlights

Relief Society sisters united to donate more than \$500,000 to build the long-desired Relief Society Building in Salt Lake City, Utah. It was dedicated October 3, 1956. In 1970, Relief Societies stopped raising their own funds and were given a budget. This allowed sisters to focus on compassionate service and visiting teaching instead of fund-raising. In September 1971 all sisters in the Church became members of the Relief Society.⁶ During Belle’s almost three decades as General President, she served under the leadership of six prophets.

Barbara Bradshaw Smith
1974–1984



Barbara B. Smith, 10th General President of the Relief Society, led the women of the Church during a critical time in history. The proposed Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) to the U.S. Constitution was making women question their rights, roles, and value as mothers and wives. But Sister Smith defended the essential calling of womanhood and faithfully led women around the world in embracing their divine purpose as women.

“As sisters in Relief Society, women have a noble heritage, a present challenge, and a vision of greatness to be,” she once said. “With the organization of Relief Society came the Lord’s program for His daughters. The cornerstone of that work was to become deeply engaged in relieving suffering among His children. The prophet also instructed the sisters that their society is not only to relieve the poor but to save souls. That challenge is much with us today.”¹

Motherhood is essential in the Lord’s plan for saving souls, and it helps women become more like Him. “‘Good family life is never an accident; it is always an achievement,’ she said. It was so for the women of the past, and it is so for us today. Our lives require discipline, coping without compromise, conversion of precepts into living principles that will make us saintly.”²

Sister Smith felt so strongly about the importance of women’s divine roles that she invited the women of the Church to donate funds to erect the Nauvoo Monument to Women in Nauvoo, Illinois. Of the finished monument she said, “The 13 pieces of statuary in this lovely garden setting are designed to share what we know to be true about the essential role, the irreplaceable contribution of women to life and to making life worth living.”³

In 1980 Sister Smith said, “I’ve become aware of the great purpose of the Relief Society. In the beginning, I thought Relief Society was the Lord’s gift to women of the Church. Now I know it is the Lord’s gift to his daughters *everywhere*, and that as women in the Church learn and implement the principles of the gospel, they will be an influence for good in the lives of women all over the world.”⁴

Early Life

The third of six children, Barbara was born January 26, 1922, in Salt Lake City, Utah, to Dan Delos and Dorothy Mills Bradshaw. Barbara’s parents were known for encouraging their children to do their best, and Barbara was an obedient child who liked to set and achieve goals.

Marriage and Family

Barbara met her husband, Douglas Hill Smith, while she was in high school. After a two-year courtship, they married on June 16, 1941, in the Salt Lake Temple. They were the parents of seven children. Although Sister Smith and her husband were often busy with Church, business, and community responsibilities, their children did not remember their mother being away frequently. They remembered her at home, teaching them, encouraging them, and entrusting them with duties that made them feel important to her.⁵ Sister Smith died September 13, 2010.

Highlights of Service

During Sister Smith's administration, membership in the Relief Society grew from less than a million members who spoke 17 different languages to 1.6 million members speaking 80 languages.⁶ After her release, her Church service continued as her husband was called to serve as a member of the First Quorum of the Seventy and was named Area President in Asia. Barbara worked extensively on family history and authored four books.

Barbara Woodhead Winder 1984–1990



When Barbara W. Winder was called to be the 11th General President of the Relief Society, she said, "I want so, and desire so, that we be unified, one together with the priesthood, serving and building the kingdom of God here today and spreading the joy of the gospel to those who are so in need of it. This is His kingdom. We have a great responsibility to share it."¹

The controversy over the proposed Equal Rights Amendment of the 1970s had divided American women. The 1980s brought more tolerance. "It is a time to heal," said Sister Winder, "a time to bond women to women and women to men. We can have unity in diversity and diversity in unity. We don't have to be like one another to enjoy sisterhood."²

Barbara learned early through her own experience the value of Relief Society visiting teaching and how its emphasis on serving each other could bless lives. She had been married 11 months when her first baby was born. "One day, just after we had brought the baby home," she recounted, "I had a very high fever. Richard was at work. I had no car, no phone, and I was

terrified.” Thankfully, her visiting teachers stopped by and were able to get her the help she needed.³

“It is vital that each sister have visiting teachers,” Sister Winder taught, “to convey a sense that she is needed, that someone loves and thinks about her. But equally important is the way the visiting teacher is able to grow in charity. By assigning our women to do visiting teaching, we give them the opportunity to develop the pure love of Christ, which can be the greatest blessing of their lives.”⁴

Early Life

Barbara Woodhead was born May 9, 1931, in Midvale, Utah, to Marguerite Hand and Willard Verl Woodhead. She was the oldest of four children. Because her mother had to work, she often babysat her siblings. Barbara credits her parents with teaching her compassion as they took in and cared for family members as she was growing up. Although Barbara’s parents were not active in the Church until she was an adult, they encouraged her to go to church, and she wanted to go. It was a Primary teacher who took her to church and to her baptism.⁵

Marriage and Family

Barbara was majoring in home economics at the University of Utah when she met Richard William Winder. Less than three weeks later, they were engaged. They married on January 10, 1951, in the Salt Lake Temple. Nineteen cousins lived on the same road on which the Winders raised their four children. “It was a real source of strength to have each other,” she said.⁶ Their second child, Susan W. Tanner, served as the 12th General President of the Young Women.

Relief Society Highlights

During Barbara’s administration, the general offices of the Young Women and Primary were moved into the Relief Society Building. The organizations would no longer work separately but together through the priesthood to address the needs of the children, young women, and adult women of the Church. The presidents of the organizations traveled together to other countries for the first time. In difficult circumstances, letters and telephone calls became acceptable methods of visiting teaching.

Barbara was released as General President when her husband was called to be the president of the new Czechoslovakia Prague Mission from 1990 to 1993. The Winders served as the leaders of the Family History Center missionaries and later as the first president and matron of the Nauvoo Illinois Temple from 2002 to 2004.

Elaine Low Jack
1990–1997



Elaine L. Jack, 12th General President of the Relief Society, recognized that she couldn't solve every woman's problems but that she could remind them of their greatest source for strength and power—the gospel of Jesus Christ.

“Despite trials, worldly confusion, and caustic voices, we can trust in the Lord and go forward with happy hearts, knowing that with every challenge or problem, there's the strength to go on. Why?” she asked. “Because we know His promises are real, that He does know us by name and has a plan for each of us. He will help us learn what it is and give us joy in doing it.”¹

A personal testimony of Jesus Christ is the key to happiness, and Elaine wanted every sister to have one. “The first point [of Relief Society] . . . is to build personal testimony,” she said. “That is the foundation for everything else we do.”²

Sister Jack's desire was magnified in 1992 when the Relief Society launched the gospel literacy effort, a worldwide service effort to help sisters learn to read. “The ability to read is more than just an earthly skill. It's important to our eternal progression as well,” said Elaine. “If we're going to bring souls to Christ, they must be able to understand the basic commandments and gospel principles that are in God's word—the scriptures.”³

Subsequently, women and their families were blessed as Relief Society sisters volunteered in schools, set up literacy programs, and taught their visiting teaching sisters how to read.

“We are part of a grand whole,” Sister Jack said. “We need each other to make our sisterhood complete. When we reach out to clasp the hands of our sisters, we reach to every continent, for we are of every nation. We are bonded as we try to understand what the Lord has to say to us, what He will make of us. We speak in different tongues, yet we are a family who can still be of one heart.”⁴

Early Life

One of four children, Elaine Low was born March 22, 1928, in Cardston, Alberta, Canada, to Church stalwarts Sterling Oliver and Lovina Anderson Low. Her childhood home was less than a block from the Cardston Alberta Temple.⁵ Her parents were among the first couples sealed in it, and her patriarch grandfather worked on it from start to finish. She played the organ in Sunday School⁶ and transcribed patriarchal blessings for her grandfather.⁷

Education and Marriage

After becoming her high school valedictorian, Elaine majored in English at the University of Utah in Salt Lake City. There she met her husband, Joseph E. Jack, a senior medical student. They married September 16, 1948, in the Cardston Alberta Temple. The couple lived in New York, Massachusetts, and Alaska before returning to Utah. They reared four sons.

Highlights of Church Service

Before being called into the Relief Society General Presidency, Elaine served as second counselor in the Young Women General Presidency under Ardeth G. Kapp. Relief Society marked 150 years in 1992. In celebration, Sister Jack encouraged sisters to participate in service projects in their communities. Sisters did everything from sweeping a path to the water hole to painting homeless shelters to collecting books.⁸ Additionally, the General Presidency organized the Relief Society Sesquicentennial Satellite Broadcast on March 14, 1992. Sisters felt a great spirit of unity as they participated in the Church's first live broadcast to sisters in 10 major cities around the world in addition to those in the United States, Canada, and the Caribbean.⁹ From 1997 to 2000, the Jacks served as president and matron of the Cardston Alberta Temple.

Mary Ellen Wood Smoot 1997–2002



Visiting teaching is an important way to uplift sisters and bring the gospel of Jesus Christ into their lives and the lives of their families. Mary Ellen W. Smoot, 13th general president of the Relief Society, wanted every sister to catch that vision and live up to her responsibility in it.

“We need each other,” she said. “We need visiting teachers ... who are sincerely interested in those they visit and realize the importance of their calling as they strive to reach the one.”¹ Visiting teaching is not about completing a monthly to-do list. It is about nurturing every sister and bringing the gospel into every home. “My desire is to plead with our sisters to stop

worrying about a phone call or a quarterly or monthly visit, and whether that will do, and concentrate instead on nurturing tender souls,” Sister Smoot said. “Our responsibility is to see that the gospel flame continues to burn brightly. Our charge is to find the lost sheep and help them feel our Savior’s love.”²

When sisters truly understand their identity, they make better decisions, and that includes living gospel-centered lives and visiting teaching with sincere interest. At the 1999 general women’s meeting, Sister Smoot presented the Relief Society Declaration, which expressed the “meaning, purpose, and direction”³ of the lives of Relief Society sisters. In part it reads:

“As a worldwide sisterhood, we are united in our devotion to Jesus Christ, our Savior and Exemplar. We are women of faith, virtue, vision, and charity. ... [We] seek spiritual strength by following the promptings of the Holy Ghost. [We] dedicate ourselves to strengthening marriages, families, and homes. ... [We] delight in service and good works. ... [We] rejoice in the blessings of the temple, understand our divine destiny, and strive for exaltation.”⁴

Early Life

Mary Ellen Wood was born August 19, 1933, to Melvin and LaVora Blood Smith Wood in Ogden, Utah. She was the fifth of six daughters. The Woods lived the restored gospel, served others, and taught their girls to work hard. The family gardened, grew fruit trees, and raised their own animals. Mary Ellen and her sisters worked in their grandfather’s canning factory. As a child, Mary Ellen cherished the stories of her pioneer ancestors, which led to a lifelong passion for family history work, for which she published several books.

Education and Marriage

In her youth, Mary Ellen held a variety of Church callings as well as student government positions. She attended Utah State University in Logan, Utah. When she was in the ninth grade, she met Stanley Millard Smoot. After Stanley completed his LDS mission to Hawaii, the couple married on October 8, 1952, in the Salt Lake Temple. They had seven children and five foster children. Mary Ellen’s community service included holding positions as diverse as PTA president, host of a teen radio show, and president of the Centerville (Utah) Women’s Republican Club.

Highlights of Church Service

Sister Smoot served on the editorial board for the *Children’s Friend* from 1966 to 1971. She and her husband served seven years on Church public affairs committees and were directors of Church Hosting for VIPs from 1993 to 1997. In 1999 the Relief Society collected 350,000 quilts in response to a need for 30,000 quilts for Kosovo refugees. Sister Smoot was a keynote speaker at the second World Congress on Families in Rome, Italy, in 1999.⁵

Bonnie Dansie Parkin
2002–2007



When Bonnie D. Parkin was called to be 14th general president of the Relief Society, she prayed to know what the women of the Church needed. “I received a strong witness that we, His daughters, need to know that He loves us,” she said. “We need to know that He sees the good in us. Feeling His love encourages us to press forward, reassures us that we are His, and confirms to us that He cherishes us even when we stumble and experience temporary setbacks.”

In His love for His children, Heavenly Father gave the women of the Church the Relief Society, which helps sisters increase in faith, strengthen their families and homes, and seek out those in need.

“As members of the Relief Society of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, it is our blessing and our responsibility to nurture and sustain the family unit,” taught Sister Parkin. “Everyone belongs to a family, and every family needs to be strengthened and protected.

“My greatest help in becoming a homemaker came first from my own mother and grandmother and next from the Relief Society sisters in the different wards where we have lived. I learned skills; I saw modeled the joys that come from creating a home where others want to be. ... Relief Society leaders, make sure that the meetings and the activities you plan will strengthen the homes of all your sisters.”²

Relief Society helps sisters feel the love of the Lord. A sister who feels the love of the Lord strengthens her family and fills her home with His love. Sister Parkin taught that “a mother who knows her relationship with God helps her children to know Him and to be encircled by His love.”³

“If I could have one thing happen for parents and leaders of this Church,” she said, “it would be that they feel the love of the Lord in their lives each day as they care for Heavenly Father’s

children. ... I invite you, in all of your dealings, to put on the mantle of charity, to envelop your family in the pure love of Christ.”⁴

Early Life

The third of five children, Bonnie Rae Dansie was born August 4, 1940, in Murray, Utah, to Jesse Homer and Ruth Martha Butikofer Dansie. Raised in Herriman, Utah, where her family had rich pioneer heritage, Bonnie and her siblings did all the jobs required on a family farm as well as worked in Dansie’s Place, the family store. Her parents instilled in her their steadfast faith. Bonnie said, “My mother taught us, ‘Do what is right; let the consequences follow.’”⁵

Education and Marriage

In 1962 Sister Parkin graduated from Utah State University in Logan, Utah, with a bachelor’s degree in elementary education and early childhood development. Afterward, she taught third grade. In 1963 she met James L. Parkin, who was in his first year of medical school. They married July 1, 1963, in the Salt Lake Temple. They have four boys.

Highlights of Church Service

Before serving as general president of the Relief Society, Bonnie served on the Relief Society general board under Elaine L. Jack, chairing a committee dedicated to helping young women transition into Relief Society. This calling carried over into her own Relief Society administration as she worked tirelessly to help young sisters feel comfortable and of value in Relief Society. In 1994 Bonnie was called to serve as second counselor to Janette C. Hales in the Young Women general presidency. In 1997 the Parkins moved to England so that James could preside over the London South Mission. As general president of the Relief Society, Sister Parkin and the Young Women general president, Susan W. Tanner, instituted a monthly combined opening exercises for Relief Society and Young Women.

Julie Bangerter Beck

2007–2012



Julie B. Beck, 15th General President of the Relief Society, taught that revelation is the most important skill a person can obtain. “The ability to qualify for, receive, and act on personal revelation is the single most important skill that can be acquired in this life,” she said. “It

requires a conscious effort to diminish distractions, but having the Spirit of revelation makes it possible to prevail over opposition and persist in faith through difficult days and essential routine tasks. . . . We can feel certain that the Lord is pleased when we feel the Spirit working through us.”¹ She added, “With [personal revelation] we cannot fail; without it we cannot succeed.”²

Sister Beck also stressed that all Relief Society meetings and activities should be planned with the purpose of furthering the kingdom of God on earth. “The purposes of Relief Society, as determined by the Lord, are to help us increase faith and personal righteousness, strengthen families and homes, and seek out and help those who are in need,” she said. “That’s why we exist. The outcome is that we will improve women individually and as a whole and prepare for eternal life; that we will build the Lord’s kingdom and homes and wards. We’re not entertainers. This is the Lord’s business of salvation. That’s the business we’re in. So we teach like the Savior taught, and we teach, and we teach, and we build the Lord’s kingdom.”³

Sister Beck taught that visiting teaching is one of the most effective ways to bring about the Lord’s work of salvation, since it gives sisters an opportunity to personally nurture and strengthen each other as the Savior did. “Because we follow the example and teachings of Jesus Christ,” she said, “we value this sacred assignment to love, know, serve, understand, teach, and minister in His behalf. . . . A sister in this Church has no other responsibility outside of her family that has the potential to do as much good as does visiting teaching.”⁴

Revelation also plays a key role in visiting teaching as it leads and guides sisters to know how to minister to one another throughout the month. “It is our blessing,” Sister Beck emphasized, “to pray for another sister and receive inspiration as to how the Lord would have us care for one of His daughters.

“Visiting teaching becomes the Lord’s work when our focus is on people rather than percentages. In reality, visiting teaching is never finished. It is more a way of life than a task. Faithfully serving as a visiting teacher is evidence of our discipleship.”⁵

Early Life

The fifth of 11 children, Julie Bangerter was born to William Grant and Geraldine Hamblin Bangerter on September 29, 1954, in Granger, Utah. When she was four, the family moved to São Paulo, Brazil, where her father presided over the Brazilian Mission, which at the time encompassed the entire country. She learned Portuguese as a child and as a General Officer of the Church learned to speak Spanish.

Education and Marriage

Despite being told by a high school counselor that she would probably not do well in college,⁶ Julie graduated from Dixie College in St. George, Utah, and then from Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah. She married Ramon Paul Beck, her stake young single adult representative, on December 28, 1973, in the Salt Lake Temple. They had three children.⁷

Highlights of Church Service

Sister Beck served on the Young Women general board and as First Counselor in the Young Women General Presidency before serving as General President of the Relief Society. During her administration there was a reemphasis of the purpose and work of Relief Society. The book *Daughters in My Kingdom: The History and Work of Relief Society* was published, and the Relief Society logo was simplified to benefit a worldwide Church. Sister Beck's ability to speak Portuguese and Spanish enabled her to teach and speak personally to a large percentage of sisters in the Church.

Linda Kjar Burton 2012–2017



Linda K. Burton, 16th General President of the Relief Society, shared, “In the dedicatory prayer of the Kirtland Temple, the Prophet Joseph Smith used a phrase I have long loved. In [Doctrine and Covenants 109:15](#) we read, ‘*And that they may grow up in thee.*’ What can we do to prepare our families to ‘grow up in the Lord’ in order that they and we might better claim the blessings associated with temple worship?

“I invite us all to put a higher priority on preparing ourselves and loved ones to worthily partake of sacred and eternal temple ordinances and blessings. May we accept the invitation written on the assembly hall of the abandoned Nauvoo Temple as the Saints headed west. It simply said, ‘*The Lord has beheld our sacrifice: come after us.*’ I testify that no sacrifice will be too great to claim the blessings of eternity that await as we worthily worship in the temple, keep our covenants, and help others to ‘*grow up in the Lord.*’”

Early Life

As a teenager, Sister Burton had a sudden realization during a missionary testimony meeting in Christchurch, New Zealand. “I knew the gospel was true,” she recalled. “I was also aware I had always known.”

It was one of several important lessons she learned after moving with her family from Salt Lake City to New Zealand, where her father presided over the New Zealand South Mission.

Born in Salt Lake City, Utah, Linda Kjar was the second of Marjorie C. and Morris A. Kjar's six children. She had a happy childhood and was raised in a home where the gospel of Jesus Christ was taught and where both parents served faithfully in the Church. But she never realized how deeply committed her parents were to keeping temple covenants until they moved their family across the globe to New Zealand. Linda was 13.

The family lived in Wellington, the southernmost tip of New Zealand's North Island, while Linda and her sisters lived and attended school at the Church College of New Zealand, located much farther north. The dorms were filled with young women from across the Pacific, whom they grew to love. The New Zealand temple was easily seen from the dorm window and served as a source of peace when occasional homesickness set in for all of them.

Education and Marriage

As a student at the University of Utah, she met her future husband at a devotional in the Assembly Hall on Temple Square. The couple married August 7, 1973, in the Salt Lake Temple. Interestingly, their fathers had served together as young missionaries in western Canada. Together they made the decision to follow the prophet's counsel and start their family right away; the first of their six children was born almost a year later.

She was grateful to be able to stay home with the children while her husband completed a business degree and made a career in real estate.

Things were not always easy. Just as the couple's fourth child was born and while Brother Burton was serving as a bishop, the U.S. economy collapsed and the real estate market fell apart. The prime rate went sky high. No one was buying. They went one year without an income.

"We lived off our food storage and got down to almost the last can of food," said Sister Burton. The Burtons turned off their furnace and used a wood-burning stove to heat their home. In the spring, an inspired but unknowing ward member asked the couple if they would be interested in taking over a garden plot. "That was a gift to our family to have fresh produce," said Sister Burton. "We grew a huge garden that year and lived off that."

One day they came home and found a box of frozen meat sitting on their counter. To this day they don't know where the meat came from or how someone got into their house, which was locked. But "it was a blessing to us," said Sister Burton. "It was an assurance to us that Heavenly Father was aware of our needs and our efforts to be self-reliant." Then, when it seemed they couldn't make it any longer, "a wonderful job came. It was an answer to prayers."

Ultimately, Sister Burton said, the experience taught them to look to the future with confidence, “because we learned that if we do all we can and put our trust in Him, the Lord makes up the difference.”

Highlights of Church Service

Sister Burton has served as a former member of the Primary and Relief Society general boards. She has also served as a seminary teacher and has had various callings in Primary, Young Women, Sunday School, and Relief Society. She accompanied her husband while he served as president of the Korea Seoul West Mission from 2007 to 2010 and, as mentioned earlier, accompanied her family when her father served as president of the New Zealand South Mission.

Relief Society General President



Sister Jean Barrus Bingham is the 17th General President of the Relief Society, one of the world’s largest women’s organizations. At the time of her call in April 2017, she was serving as First Counselor in the Primary General Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. She also served on the general board of the Primary, the Church’s organization for one million children who are 11 and younger.

The Provo, Utah, native is the third of Robert R. and Edith Joy Clark Barrus’s nine children. Her childhood and youth were spent in Texas, Minnesota, and New Jersey.

Sister Bingham met her husband, Bruce, while they were both students at Brigham Young University. They were married in the Provo Utah Temple December 22, 1972, and are the parents of two daughters and have five grandchildren. She and her husband were also foster parents to teens and children, many of whom have become part of their family. While her children were in their later school years, Sister Bingham returned to college. She received a bachelor’s degree and master’s degree in teaching from National Louis University in Illinois. She also received associate degrees from Brigham Young University and Elgin Community College.

She taught English as a second language to elementary students at a private school, in addition to immigrants and others for nonprofit organizations. She also worked as a nurse’s aide.

Sister Bingham worked as a volunteer aide in her children's schools and served in numerous teaching and leadership positions with the women, children, and youth in her local congregation, serving as president of the Primary and Young Women and as counselor in the Relief Society. She taught teenagers in early-morning [seminary](#) for six years and served as a temple ordinance worker in the Chicago Illinois Temple.

She credits the "faithful examples" of her parents for her testimony of the gospel of Jesus Christ, in addition to personal church attendance and service. Participating in family history work and attending the temple have strengthened her commitment to becoming a disciple of Jesus Christ.

She enjoys reading; outdoor recreation, such as hiking, camping, and canoeing; traveling; cooking for her appreciative family; and spending any time available with grandchildren.