



## MORMONS IN THE URBAN COMMUNITY

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*Unless you consult particulars,  
you cannot see.*

—William Blake

The average L.D.S. Church member finds many societal forces buffered or muted for him by the Church. Among other factors, our focus on the eternal nature of life (with a strong orientation toward the hereafter), our social solidarity (which undercuts tendencies toward “anomie”), and our commitment to all-consuming activity in Church work all serve to blunt the impact of urban life on the typical Saint.

On the other hand, there are also many elements of Mormon doctrine and practice which can impel the urban Mormon toward an active role in the community. We are admonished to become “anxiously engaged” in good causes without having to be commanded to do so. We are imbued from early childhood with notions of free agency, eternal progression, and the *potential* godhood of man. We look upon this free land of ours as a proving ground wherein man may exercise his agency and progress toward his ultimate goal of perfection. There is no room in this vision for sitting back idly while some of God’s children are denied the opportunity to develop to their maximum potential. Nor can we overlook Christ’s injunction to love our neighbors as ourselves — “neighbor” stretching beyond our brethren in the Church to include strangers, the downtrodden, those who suffer adversity, and even our enemies.

Finally, the pragmatism which is so characteristic of urban man strikes a responsive chord in many Latter-day Saints. This article describes the response of some of the members of the Alexandria Ward — living in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area — to the compelling needs of the community in which they live. This response, reflected in two ward-related projects, represents an attempt to apply the teachings of the Church to the problems of daily living and to bring to bear the insights and strength of Mormon theology and organization upon their solution.

The idea of participating in some concrete community project had been discussed in the ward for some time. A spark of encouragement came in a ward conference in 1965, when President Miller L. Shurtleff of the Potomac Stake suggested that Church members have a responsibility to the larger community of which they are a part. He specifically recommended participation by ward members in such community activities as fund drives for charitable organizations and projects to assist the poor. But the impetus to action failed to develop, and the idea survived on the hot air of discussion and debate alone until a new Elders Quorum president, Howard T. Nelson, decided that the quorum should undertake a specific project to assist the predominantly Negro poor people living in downtown Alexandria.

Some initial assignments were made to investigate the kinds of programs which might be useful and which were suited to the needs and skills of the quorum. When some general areas had been marked out for further research, the quorum sought the approval of the new Potomac Stake Presidency before proceeding further. President Julian C. Lowe approved the general outlines of the project on the condition that other Priesthood responsibilities were not to be sacrificed to the new undertaking. The plan was then submitted to the Bishopric and Priesthood Executive Committee of the Alexandria Ward, virtually all of whom received it favorably. Bishop Ira Whitlock commended the quorum leaders and offered his support.

The next steps were particularly critical ones. The selection of specific projects and the determination of the "ground rules" for participation could mean the difference between success and failure. The following general contours were decided upon:

1. *Voluntary participation.* The Elders Quorum provides *information* on the opportunities available for community assistance. It is left up to each elder to decide whether or not to participate. No pressure is brought to bear. Unlike work at the stake farm, the project is not even termed a "Priesthood responsibility," to avoid even subtle ecclesiastical suasion. (This feature was one of the first agreed upon and was, in fact, understood at each successive stage of approval.)

2. *Minimal resource commitment.* The nature of volunteer work is such that a resource commitment of some kind is a *sine qua non* for any action. Realizing that nothing would be accomplished without the assignment of responsibility, one member of the quorum presidency accepted as his primary duty the coordination of the community service project.

3. *Use of existing agencies.* This decision was dictated by our lack of experience and by the practical necessity of conserving our own time, energy, and funds.

4. *Involvement in the local community.* We chose the city of Alexandria as the focal point of our efforts — rather than the more deprived ghetto areas in Washington, D.C. — because we felt obliged to serve our own community first and because we wanted the project to be near at hand and to involve us with our literal neighbors.

5. *Careful selection and planning of projects.* The chief frustration of volunteer work is the lack of comprehensive information. There are bits and pieces of potential service opportunities all over the city, but they have to be ferreted out, and then carefully gleaned to identify the most promising. Contacting specific agencies brought enthusiastic response to the offer of volunteers, but an appalling lack of concrete ideas on how they would be used. In fact, some agencies never bothered to call us back after the initial contact. But our persistence was eventually rewarded, and the time spent in project selection proved to be well invested. (One long-time welfare worker even asked us for a description of our approach and findings, knowing of other organizations lost in the maze.)

After searching for months, we decided to concentrate our efforts on the Head Start Day Care Center sponsored by Hopkins House, a settlement house active in a number of welfare activities in Alexandria. The Center — which receives about three-fifths of its financial support from the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) — is well organized and administered, and it met our offer of volunteer help with considerable enthusiasm.

Members of the quorum and their supporters (wives, assorted High Priests, Seventies, Senior Aaronic members, and friends) have been involved in four different kinds of activities. Approximately thirty-five Mormon families have participated in one or more phases of the project:

1. *Physical services at the Center.* Since most of the employees at the Center are women, they often require the services of able-bodied men. One Saturday, four elders joined the fathers of three children and painted part of the building. A few Saturdays later, five more quorum members helped repair tricycles, wagons, and a climbing tower — the only outside play equipment available to the children.

2. *Teaching assistance.* The first continuing activity was undertaken by about a half-dozen of the wives. Two or three times each week at least one of the women goes to the Center to help care for the children. Most of those who do so have teaching certificates and are able to provide valuable service. (The favorable comments of the non-Mormon staff at the Center have made their way back to us indirectly.)

3. *Broadened horizons.* One of the most successful elements of the program — for all concerned — has been a weekly series of Saturday outings.

Every Saturday for the past few months, twelve to seventeen children from the Center have gone on outings with ward members and their families — each family taking two or three children from the Center along with their own children to the zoo, on a picnic, home to bake cookies or play, or on similar excursions. The outings can broaden the horizons of all those involved. One little girl enjoyed her first ride on a merry-go-round. At the same time, our own children gain an opportunity to understand the diversity (and underlying similarities) in the world around them. It would be presumptuous and premature to contend that this kind of social interaction will overcome the problems of either black or white racism, but the potential is there for ameliorating racial strife.

4. *Limited financial aid.* Since provision for playground equipment was not made in the Center's budget, the Elders Quorum presidency directed a fund-raising drive which brought in \$350 (mostly from non-members of the quorum) to purchase equipment.

In over a year's involvement we have learned much. We hope to extend the number and quality of our associations with the children's parents in the months ahead — perhaps by holding joint family picnics or merely chatting briefly when returning children to their homes after an outing. We are not so naive that we conceive this as an easy goal, nor are we even certain that greater involvement with the parents should be one of our objectives. We are rank amateurs, optimistically groping our way along a path that we hope will lead to greater tolerance, love and understanding. We have no idea what benefits, direct or indirect, our project might bring to the Church. For some quorum members, this is virtually the only connection with Church activity. Judging from the interest — and surprise — of some of our colleagues when they see Mormons so engaged, I suspect that it might aid our missionary efforts in the Washington metropolitan area (although obviously not with the Hopkins House people). In any event, we are anxiously engaged in what we believe to be a good cause.

Less controversial but equally satisfying is a project begun by two members of our Seventies group. The men, both stake missionaries, began holding Sunday services for the elderly residents of the Woodbine Nursing and Convalescent Home several months ago. This undertaking has received broader acceptance than the Head Start program. The most interesting feature of the project at the Home is that the arrangements were made quite independently of those for the Elders Quorum project. Insofar as I can determine, neither organization was aware of what the other was doing; yet they were both responding to a similar need — that of community service. The people at Woodbine had tried in vain for years to obtain the services of a clergyman so that they could hold Sunday services for their patients, most of whom are in wheel chairs. Since our chapel is directly across the street from the Home, we can conduct services there without disrupting our own services.

Support for this project has expanded to include the Mt. Vernon Ward (which shares our chapel) and much of the Stake High Council. Talks are

given by various Church leaders (including Elder Hartman Rector, recently called from this area to the First Council of Seventy), music is offered, and the MIA girls participate by bringing the elderly patients downstairs in their wheel chairs. The sermons are based strictly on the Bible, and active missionary work per se is not pushed. Nevertheless, according to William J. Holliman, "The influence of these services in the community, particularly among the families of the patients, is resulting in the opening of doors to our missionaries." Some employees at the Home have joined the Church, and others are receiving instructions from the missionaries. Two of the patients who have returned to their homes are being taught, as well as the son of one of the patients. Recently we were asked to conduct funeral services for one of the patients who had passed away. Finally, we are coming into contact with other ministers in the area whom we are inviting to speak at the services. (We are even presenting the lessons to one of the ministers.)

But even if no additional baptisms result from our activities at the Home, the project is highly rewarding. Anyone who has attended these meetings and has seen the eyes of lonely people brighten when the Saints come to bring them a spiritual message has known the joy that comes of service, and of having brought just a little love and happiness into the life of another human being.

Of interest here is a stake project initiated by Potomac Stake President Julian Lowe. After the April riots in Washington, D.C., President Lowe mobilized, through the Home Teaching Program, all of the wards in the stake, who gathered overnight seven truckloads of food for the riot-torn areas. Mayor Washington later complimented President Lowe upon the effort, remarking that it was the best-organized of all food programs undertaken by churches in the area.

The future of such community service projects as these is uncertain. For these programs to be initiated and carried out successfully requires the support of a sizable number of people, from the stake president down to the ward members who must actually give their time and efforts. With such transient people as we Mormons tend to be in urban areas, it is questionable whether this elusive combination can be maintained for long. I suspect that only if the Church will institutionalize them can such programs thrive. To claim that this would dissipate resources which should be focused only on teaching the Gospel is to overlook the fact that this is another approach to the same objective — an approach which is especially suited to the needs of urban life.

## REFLECTIONS AT HOPKINS HOUSE

Belle Cluff

"What's your name?"

"Are you coming back?"

"I love you."

These are the words of a Hopkins House child. Being young, very young,