

A Celebration of Sisterhood

Claudia L. Bushman

I RECENTLY COMPLETED A SHORT SEASON of speaking at Mormon women's conferences, largely related to Relief Society. I do not do this as a professional speaker. I don't sell books, and (at the moment) I have no causes to further. I don't take any money for speaking to church groups, although, if going any distance, I expect to have my transportation paid. I'm usually enthused when asked but gradually cool down and wish there were some way to get out of it when the time actually comes. But I see travelling around as a great opportunity; and when I am invited, I go if I can. Besides I am very flattered to be asked.

And I have to admit there are other advantages. I like to see how things are done in other stakes. I see good friends and reemet women I have not seen for thirty years. I meet people I have heard about.

I nearly always pick up ideas for activities — new themes, graphics, ideas for class sessions, procedures. I like to trace the travels of ideas from place to place; and playing the part of the bee which fertilizes the flowers she steals from, I pass on other people's ideas and suggestions for future years. I like to "feel the pulse" of various groups, asking provocative questions in innocent ways to see what people say. I hear gossip and news of people I know.

Women's conferences focus a stake's activities for months. They involve hundreds of people in the preparation and planning, provide a climax for the year, and are times of emotional stress and release. They are now the single spectaculars in calendars which included many stake-wide events in the past. While in format most like the conferences Relief Society General Board members used to come and put on, they seem to fill the ecological niche left by the extinction of the Relief Society bazaar.

CLAUDIA L. BUSHMAN is executive director of the Delaware Heritage Commission. Her most recent book is Proceedings of the Assembly of the Lower Counties on Delaware, 1770–1776 She leads the choir, teaches Relief Society, and coaches the brass group in the Elkton Maryland Ward.

The women's conferences sprang up spontaneously, as far as I can tell, about a dozen years ago, a genuine grass-roots movement which exists without specific direction from Salt Lake City and without an instruction manual. The first I ever heard of was organized by Charlotte Johnston, then stake Relief Society president in Chicago, in the early seventies. My sister Georgia Gates, a stake Relief Society president in Wisconsin, began a similar event about the same time. Other stakes have been holding annual events for eight years. Some do something new each year; others have frozen the format, just changing chairs annually.

For a movement without direction, the results are remarkably similar. Classes always include scripture and Church history, maybe world affairs, some crafts, household efficiency, fitness (a pseudonym for losing weight), family life, and, ubiquitously, self-esteem and depression. Occasionally a sexuality session makes a courageous move toward acknowledging real problems. For a while, I collected programs and memorabilia wherever I went; but as the repetition increased, I lost interest and threw out my collection. What I have to say, then, is more impressionistic than documented.

In 1977, I was asked to chair the first women's conference in the Wilmington Delaware Stake, to which I had recently moved. I was pleased to have this chance to build something of my own with considerable freedom and also anticipated the opportunity to find out about the stake and the people in the process. I assembled a wonderful committee and had considerable support from people in charge. In this friendly crucible, I was able to work out my ideas of what such an event should be.

My opinions were, I confess, firm. I felt — and feel — that a women's conference should be a full day of special activities away from regular life. A woman should be able to forget diapers and dishes, devoting herself to exploring new ideas in the company of her sisters. The plenary session should have uplifting talks and music, the lunch should be tasty, and the choice of workshops and classes should be tantalizing. The conference should be a pleasant day out.

Many people think these conferences should be primarily for instruction. I don't. I think they should be for friendship, sisterhood, sharing, and visiting. When I hear admonitions to "get right to class! Don't linger in the halls. And keep the talking down!" I am amused and saddened. The women are there to make human connections; learning is icing on the cake.

I dislike classes that run for fifty minutes or an hour. Of course, great labor has gone into the preparation and many good things have been discovered which must be included in the session, but a lack of ruthless selectivity often results in a machine-gun delivery and the repeated refrain that the time is going too fast. The women have no chance to comment. Discussion is not allowed. I think the presentation should be no more than half the class period and that discussion should fill the other half. People remember what they say more than what they hear.

These teachers ought to teach a few college classes where the students begin crouching for their getaway with two minutes to go. Then they would learn

that nothing, *nothing* is fascinating enough to keep a class overtime and they would not run five minutes past the bell.

Committees often select class topics by brainstorming. They they “find someone” to teach them. I am not sure that this is the best way to proceed, if the brainstorming also includes a list of “essential” concepts. I know I am somewhat chagrined when presented with the detailed outline of the talk they want me to give. Usually a speaker can take the topic and develop it with personal material, but she should have the option of choosing. I was recently asked to speak on raising my teenage daughter. Though I have two remarkable and marvelous daughters, I do not feel like discussing either of them in public. Another topic I turned down was a discourse on “thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee.” (Let them find someone else to do their dirty work.)

In addition to having firm opinions on teachers, I also have firm opinions on guest speakers. I am often invited to speak, not because I am either a good Christian or an excellent wife or mother, and certainly not because I improve in those roles, but mostly because I stuck it out through school and have done a little writing over the years. While I would encourage education for any woman, I feel guilty when it is used as a speaker criterion. I think we need to ask ourselves if we are rewarding things that we really want to encourage. If a life of true service and devotion is what we want to sell, there are plenty of exemplars. We should feature speakers who personify the virtues we really want our people to achieve.

From this perspective, I resent and disapprove of inviting celebrities and other out-of-town guests, like me. People come in as stars. Much is made of them when they really do not deserve it. Local people are made to feel inadequate. Besides, such adulation does something terrible to the speaker. I think it is more cultural than personal — the Church is big on hero worship — but I soon begin to feel like a fraud, and, of course, it completely ruins me for going back to my family who knows the real truth.

Such experiences give some insight into what it must be like to be a General Authority, always on the road where the less attractive facets of personal life are unknown, always speaking in general terms about big ideas to people you do not know. Always talking instead of listening, always receiving the homage of others. This treatment allows you to be gracious, kindly, charming — just about the fake way that I manage to behave at such times.

Most keynote speeches I give are from complete ignorance of local conditions. Sometimes those talks are given in the middle, or even at the end of the day, but I am not in very good condition to sum up anything as I have been giving workshops myself. I value glimpses of local reality and wish I could get more.

So I am in favor of inviting local people to give important lectures, perhaps a new person who is not yet well known. I am also in favor of using local women to make up the general faculty. If women cannot be found to speak on certain topics, let them choose their own topics. The result will be just as good.

The time between classes should be fifteen minutes rather than five. The lunch hour should be long. Displays, which encourage walking and talking, are better than a few more classes. Our first conference ended with a punch-and-cookie reception and the encouragement to linger and chat.

That first year, we had only women teach our classes. In fact, the only man present was the stake president. I am not against male teachers in principle, but the sisters have many opportunities to hear from them. Having our own women teach the classes helps to develop both self-esteem and their knowledge, planting valuable seedlings of confidence and reputation. Most conferences I go to have at least half men among the teachers now. To my mind, this is a great opportunity lost.

Nor do I like to see men serving, and sometimes creating, the lunch. For one thing, male-planned lunches tend toward the over-hearty; and for another, I think the men should be home tending the children. Besides, the tone of condescension and mock-chivalry about all those men in aprons cheerfully slinging the hash is irritating. I'm in favor of simple fix-aheads, bag lunches, taco salads, catered by Wendy's — something else.

Another lunch-time activity I can do without is the program. Inexorably rolling over any chance to talk to the women at the table comes a drama, a fashion show, a slide show with loud music, a craft demonstration, or a travelogue. I'll admit that one of my favorite luncheon entertainments was a performance by the local aerobics class. As the ladies on the stage stretched and twisted to the pulsating mod beat we sat sodden and silent, feeding our faces. I thought it was the perfect example of the subliminal message to women in our day: cook! eat! but don't enjoy it.

The displays are always impressive, but since I want them to be mostly backdrops for conversation, I am sometimes appalled by the fifty tables of handwork, the recreation of pioneer Salt Lake, the dramatic dioramas, and artificial flowers. I find myself muttering that I wish I had a nickel for every woman-hour that has gone into that decoration-for-one-day. I recall visiting the Relief Society Building in Salt Lake City one March 17 and seeing a dozen immense, intricately decorated cakes sent from wards and branches all over the Church. I found myself wishing we could put our labor into lasting things — building in wood and stone instead of icing and play-dough. Nor is this just a reflection of my personal dislike for such projects. I've know women so worn out from preparing conferences that they were too weary to enjoy them — or even sometimes to attend.

I also wish music received more attention at these affairs. I thoroughly enjoy occasions when it is. The best soloists get a chance to perform, and even better, to my mind, dramatic ensemble work is encouraged. At our first conference, all ward groups practiced Merrill Bradshaw's arrangements of the same three hymns from the "orange" book. The music director went from ward to ward to rehearse the groups and the final practice was held on the morning of the conference itself. In the general sessions, music was by the whole congregation singing in parts for the benefit of the few on the stand. The many

performing for the few is the model I like. The big choir has given way to smaller groups as years go by, but that is still my ideal of what these conferences should provide — the opportunity to work in concert for a big effect. More people should participate and fewer should listen.

I am in favor of all participatory activity. There is too much talking at people, too much group listening. I'm in favor of working with clay, craft work, and sports. I suggested a marathon, though I would never in the world run in it, for one of our celebrations. Other appealing activities are planting a tree, a group-made quilt to go to the holder of a lucky ticket, a barter booth to exchange plants and books, and making a movie. I think more effort should be made to mix women and get them acquainted. How about an oral history session where instant intimacy is formed? I would like to see some of these conferences held overnight, complete with star-gazing, ghost stories, and a bird walk at dawn. How about more field trips and women's conferences outside the stake center?

The Wilmington Delaware conference has been called "Celebration of Sisterhood" since its inception. Before moving to Delaware, I had lived in Boston where our wonderful group of women would go off from time to time for overnights which we called "retreats," now "reunions." I argued that a word more in keeping with our heritage and what actually went on would be "revival," but I did not persuade my sister Bostonians. I tried titling our first Wilmington conference "The Revival of Sisterhood," but our stake Relief Society president was a convert from an evangelical tradition and *revival* struck her as wrong. After considerable research and reflection, she suggested "Celebration," and so it has continued. At least one other stake has picked up this theme.

Our first publicity chairman commissioned a logo from an artist friend. We paid \$35 for a terrific drawing of three women's juxtaposed profiles, one young, another mature, the third old. This image has remained Wilmington's design theme, but every year it changes. A flowered border replaces the severe circular bands, the hair styles are updated, sometimes the faces are cuter, and this year the women have become oriental, black, and Caucasian. Besides local transmutations, groups in other stakes have picked up the idea and redrawn it to their specifications. In these modest revisions, the cultural history of the Church is written.

Some of these conferences are free to all comers. For others, a very moderate fee is charged. Two or three dollars allows for a nice lunch and some working capital for women as efficient as our Relief Society sisters. Even with this modest amount, some manage incredible displays, handouts, and favors. T-shirts are now widely available — often at reasonable extra cost, and I have seen hats. A group in Baltimore gets the prize, I think. One year they provided tote bags silk-screened with the conference logo. Just recently they served lunch on individual wood cutting boards, again with the logo handsomely applied. These favors were included in the registration cost.

In Wilmington we have gone in for publication. Several times we have printed poetry and essay collections, also a cookbook of prized family recipes,

each with a story, and another of company dishes. This year a group of spiritual experiences was gathered up and reproduced. Every now and then, someone uses one of these anthologies for a talk or remarks on her pride at seeing her name in print, making such efforts, I think, valuable and useful.

One of my firmest opinions is about what women need to hear. Being told the many things essential for women to do is not helpful. Self-improvement still has a place, especially in the classes. Lists, the backbone of many talks and articles, are also popular; but I think what women most want these days is comfort. They need assurance that their efforts are appreciated. They need some hope that the requirements set before them have some limits. They also want real scriptural guideposts to cling to that relate to their lives.

Instead of talks about how women should lose themselves in the service of others to be happy, I think women should be told to indulge themselves. Do they feel deprived? Are they longing for a new dress, some time to themselves, a new appliance, a university class? Well then, instead of working to suppress and deny their desires, they should think how to go about getting them. Many heart-felt desires *can* be achieved.

I think the results of such a strategy are far more positive than self denial. Then, ideally, we can react to each others' needs from a sense of contentment rather than suffering. It is much easier to perceive the real needs of someone else when our own have been met — if only partially.

In giving a recent talk, the hostess introduced me as someone who knew how important it was to be selfish. At the time, I rather resented it; but since then, I have been busily turning selfishness into a virtue, and I think there is much to be said for it.

I tell people to compromise, to resist the pernicious adage that "whatever is worth doing is worth doing well." Rigorous care lavished indiscriminately on small things limits the number and variety of things that can be done. I say that people should do the things they have to, then the things they want to, and last the things they should do. My favorite aphorism — it came to me by revelation — is "If you keep up, you'll never get ahead." It justifies desirable selective neglect.

Maybe I'm just not as ambitious as I used to be, but I've developed a new strategy for contentment. It's called the 10 percent solution and is based on the idea that we generally have almost enough to be happy. We could get by with just a little more than we have now — money, things, beauty, talent, housing amenities, achievement of children, and so on into the night.

To put this strategy into effect, consciously reduce any list of desires by 10 percent. Do it with the list of things you plan to do today. If money is tight this week, cross a few items off the grocery list. Is Christmas too much? Cut down planned activities 10 percent. Eliminate 10 percent of the clothes you pack to take on vacation. Think of what you require of your children and knock a few off. Great peace has come to our home since I moderated my requests of my children. At least sometimes.

This strategy allows the old gnawings of ambition, envy, and covetousness to be laid to rest. It is almost as good as having everything you want to be

satisfied with what you have. Maybe it's better. Being content with your lot is the best revenge. No one can put you down. You are unassailable. This position equals, maybe surpasses, success.

My favorite scripture is, "Surely the Lord requires nothing of his children but to do justly, love mercy and walk humbly before thy God" (Mic. 6:8). I am very partial to this scripture for the completeness of the requirements, for measuring attitude rather than action, and for talking about things that can be managed. This limitation of duties is a great comfort, tracing as it does the relationship between the individual and Deity and saying nothing about food storage, genealogy, 100 percent attendance, visiting teaching, family home evening, and other ambitious, time- and labor-intensive improvement schemes of the contemporary church.

A final opinion I have involves the larger question of conferences and the needs they meet. Conferences are once a year. Sisterhood is a daily need. Our Church provides such an image of unity and structure and a place for people to belong that many envy it. One non-Mormon friend told me how much she wanted to be part of a group — to belong. When I replied that everybody felt that way, she said that I couldn't possibly understand as I had the Mormons. Well, yes and no. It is true that we are all bound together. We have a structure with service built in and we would do anything for each other. At least someone would do it, out of duty, if not out of love. But for all that, we have plenty of tension and troubles. We are bound together by our mutual dislikes, our hurt feelings, and our insecurities just as surely as by love and service.

People constantly complain of cliques and enclaves, of judgments and inadequacies in our little groups. They feel left out. They have part-member families, they don't live the Word of Wisdom, they are too shy to speak in church, they didn't go on missions, etc., etc. They think some wonderful hidden life is going on without them. I'd estimate that the majority of faithful Church members feel out of it for not measuring up to some idea or other while, on the other hand, some of those who feel most secure have little reason to be so, when measured by the same requirements. I often feel "out of it" myself, and who is more in it than I? Are we all in need of conversion or grace?

The solution seems to be to belong to a group within the group. Such groups become the really important membership units in the Church. That is why I think women's groups are so strong and important. Our best friends are the ones we work with, not work on. Groups of officers, classes, and committees provide the best support and friendship groups. I am currently touting the choir (which I direct) as the best, most collegial, more rewarding subgroup in our ward.

So, yes to conferences, but yes in perspective. I think it is all important for women to have groups and gatherings apart from church meetings in general. These gatherings encourage and strengthen sisterly bonds within the larger organizations so that women actually care more about each other. They are bound to all those other women with whom they originally felt little or nothing in common and find themselves true sisters.