

Hazardous Duty, Combat Pay: Working in the Primary

*Versions of the following essays were delivered at the August 1991
Sunstone Symposium, Salt Lake City, Utah.*

Of Primary Concern

Susette Fletcher Green

THE FIRST CHURCH I REMEMBER ATTENDING as a child wasn't a church at all—it was the Odd Fellows Building in the heart of rundown, downtown Wilmington, Delaware. It was a spooky (at least to me) old three-story brick structure. Every Sunday morning, three or four members of our small branch would arrive early to sweep the floor, dump the overflowing ashtrays, and set up slat-backed wooden chairs.

This was twenty-five to thirty years before the consolidated church schedule; but because a number of our few members came to church from considerable distances—some even from neighboring states—we held our meetings back to back, much as we do now. I'm fairly certain the meetings lasted closer to two hours than three—I remember no agony of endless sitting. After our Sunday School opening exercises, we children, along with our leaders, threaded our way through a dark hallway and down an elevator to another floor of the building to have our meeting—I can't remember whether we called it Primary or Junior Sunday School.

Though probably no more than fifteen children hurried through that hallway, we looked forward to our time together and knew that we were very loved. I lived in terror that I would somehow become lost and wouldn't have dreamed of negotiating those halls without holding tightly to my teacher's hand. I was very young and remember little of those meetings, yet what I do remember seems significant to me now.

SUSETTE FLETCHER GREEN is associate editor of DIALOGUE, works for a local editing company, continues her work as Primary president, and is part of a very busy family.

One Christmas, Helen Candland Stark, a woman of legendary gifts and energy, wrote a wonderful Christmas play for the children to perform on the Sunday before Christmas. The story told of a little girl going to feed the animals in her father's stable on Christmas morning and finding the Christ child and Mary and Joseph. Somehow I had the good fortune to be chosen to act the part of the little girl. The details of the performance blur in my memory now, but I do remember that we practiced and practiced. I felt honored and loved to take part in it. We offered our performance with great awe and reverence. It may have been my first experience in feeling touched by holiness.

Another thing I remember is my younger sister, attiring herself in one of my mother's house dresses and high heels. She would strut and shuffle through the house with a worn purse slung over her arm, pretending she was "Sister Thompson," her Primary teacher. She adored that woman and fought to sit in her lap whenever she was near.

Our branch parties were held at the Stark's home—a Revolutionary War-era rock and frame house on five wooded acres. The time spent with other Mormon children was precious. My sisters and I had no LDS classmates in our grade school, but our little branch offered unfailing support and stability. My grandparents lived in far-off Utah, but one older couple, Leo and Bea Stirland, invited my sister and me to spend summer weekends on their Pennsylvania farm. As surrogate-grandparents, they willingly loved us and welcomed us into their home.

I have taken you on this rather long, nostalgic sidestep into my past because these very warm memories form the foundation of my vision of a church community. These memories and feelings have been with me for a lifetime. They enriched my childhood and gave me a love for the Church that is powerful and enduring, more powerful than any doctrinal concept or theological system I learned in a classroom. This love is something that I would like to pass on to my children and to other children in my ward.

In the middle of December 1988, I was asked to be the Primary president in my Salt Lake County ward. I was just cranking out the spring issue of *DIALOGUE*, my eight-year-old son had an undiagnosed lump on his left temple that would require surgery, Christmas was looming in front of me, and I was overwhelmed by anxiety. My husband, Fred, who had been asked to attend this "calling" meeting, carefully explained to the bishop, when asked his opinion, all the reasons why I was in no shape to take on the heavy responsibilities of a Primary president. He exaggerated nothing. The bishop, without responding directly to Fred, looked me in the eye and said, "My counselors and I have prayed about this, and we feel very strongly about this calling." I had never refused a call to serve, and I heard myself saying, "I'll do

my best,” much to my husband’s dismay. I’m sure he envisioned me with a nervous breakdown and our family in chaos.

But overwhelmed as I was at that moment, during the next few days I had a chance to think about what I had to offer to this calling, to the children of my ward. It was obvious that I didn’t have much time, with a family of seven to care for, a job with unrelenting, stress-producing publishing deadlines, and volunteer service commitments in local schools. I’ve always marveled at Primary presidents who create beautiful visual aids, dazzling bulletin boards, or cute little handmade items for children to take home. I have neither the time, patience, nor aptitude for those kinds of things—and now, with the Church budget changes, I don’t have the funds either. Neither did I seem particularly suited for a leadership position where I needed to delegate authority—I have a very hard time asking people to do things. I also become easily overwhelmed and discouraged. But what I did have were my memories of warm acceptance in my own childhood and a sure love of my my Heavenly Father and of his children. I believe that we have much to give children in our Church, and Primary is a good place for them to be.

More than anything, in those pre-Christmas musings, I wanted—and still want—the children to enjoy being in Primary, to feel good about themselves, to have fun. I want them to learn more than to just sit quietly in seemingly endless meetings. I want them to be involved. When they answer questions, I don’t want pat recitations: “Jesus,” “Heavenly Father,” “Be reverent.” I want the children to think and to know what they think. I want them to feel free to ask questions. They are our future as a church; we need to take good care of them. I want them to stay with this cause, to understand what they believe. I want them to laugh, to be naughty sometimes as children need to be, to listen when it’s time to listen, to be kind to each other, to want to serve. I want them to look back on their Primary years in my ward and know that they were loved.

This is not easy to accomplish. Children get restless. Children get bored. Some children are afraid to say anything, and others want to say too much. Some of them intimidate others. And, as much as I want to focus on the children, I am often so inundated in administrative details that I find little time to relate directly to the children. Counselors help, especially filling in where I am weak, but choosing counselors has not come easily for me, and I have worn out six in my two and a half years. I remember hearing Sharon Swenson speak about choosing counselors as a Relief Society president several years ago—writing names on a piece of paper, then driving up to Park City and knowing by the time she got there just who her counselors should be. I tried for similar inspiration but drew a blank. Finally, I made the

best choice I could — under the stress of having to staff almost an entire Primary right at Christmastime. Both women I requested accepted. The day after we were sustained, my second counselor had an emotional collapse and had to be hospitalized for several weeks. The bishop released her immediately. So much for my inspiration.

During the years I have served, some of the callings I felt most inspired about did not work out well, and some I had doubts about have been wonderful. I have learned that calling someone is usually not a good way to strengthen their activity. Often their commitment is less than it should be, and the children suffer. Over the years I have had support and love from counselors, and I have experienced stress and strain. I have come to appreciate steadfast workers who offer unwavering support and understanding. The two counselors I work with now are much younger than I am, with more time and energy, and we have bonded very well.

I wondered when I was called just how well I would work with the authority figures in my ward. I tend to be a little more outspoken than most of the women in my ward, and I bristle at even the suggestion of unrighteous dominion. I need not have been concerned. The bishopric counselor whose jurisdiction was the Primary let me know right from the start that he defined his job as serving us. He was a man of his word. Each Sunday he came into the Primary, often with a hug, and asked what we needed him to do. And he really meant it. He led songs, helped with Sharing Times, flipped pancakes and played with the children at activity days, and taught classes when we were short-handed. He was open-minded and easy to talk to, an incredible support and blessing. I always had the feeling that he would rather be in Primary than any other place in the building. In fact, he now works with the Young Men and Women's program, but I still find him sitting in the back in Primary from time to time.

About a year after I was sustained, our Primary was asked to oversee classes for the children at stake conference. I was totally unnerved at the prospect of keeping 100 to 150 children, many of whom I did not know, entertained for two hours. The logistics and organization required overwhelmed me. However, I dutifully prepared for the ordeal. The evening before the meeting, while I was out for the evening, someone from the stake phoned one of my counselors to inform her that the visiting Regional Representative would like to come speak to the children — five minutes before the meeting was to begin. Could we start our meeting a little early? he wondered. My counselor was irate. Five minutes before meeting time would be total bedlam. People arrive at stake conference anywhere from a half hour before the meeting to fifteen minutes after. Children would be flooding into the room. Keep-

ing them focused would be nearly impossible. She and her husband complained to the stake leaders but found no sympathy. She reached me with this bad news at 10:00 o'clock Saturday night.

The next morning, with the help of three teachers (my two counselors, the music people, and everyone else I had asked to help were late) I was frantically pinning name tags on what seemed like hundreds of small children when a member of the stake presidency brought in our Regional Representative. I'm not one to hide hysteria well, and I didn't even try. I was frustrated and out of patience with this man for imposing on us in this way, but there was no way that I could keep those feelings when he held my hand in his, looked lovingly into my eyes, and thanked me for helping to care for the Lord's children. His message to them, spoken gently through the chaos, was a message of love. He had not come to exert his authority; he had come to let the children know that they were important to him and to their Heavenly Father.

Let me relate one more surprising experience I have had dealing with priesthood members. My former bishop, a man I was personally very fond of, was quite authoritarian. Though he liked me, he often did not know what to make of me and my ideas. He believed in hierarchy, order, and going by the book. We had had a couple of uncomfortable confrontations. When I was sustained as Primary president, he accepted a calling to be the Blazer Scout leader. Almost immediately, as he got himself organized, he began telephoning me, asking my approval on this or that that he planned to do. Would I give my okay for an outing? Would I come with him to welcome a new Scout into the ward? Did I think such and such was appropriate? I was amazed. And I realized that I had misjudged the man. What I had seen as overbearing masculine muscle was really just a commitment to the order of a hierarchical system. It mattered not one whit to him that a woman was his "superior." He still wanted to go by the book, and in that book, my sanction and approval were important to him.

Of course, it is the teachers who spend the most crucial time with the children. I have been moved by the generosity of teachers who accept callings—not just because an authority figure has asked them or because the structure of the Church demands that they hold a calling but because they are committed to serving the children. Perhaps my most inspired calling was to ask my husband to teach Sunday lessons to the Blazers. He loves the boys, and they love him back. Not one of them complains now about coming to Primary. He has coaxed them to perform puppet shows, to sing (occasionally), to give serious Sharing Time and flag presentations, and to think in class. He urges them to think about what he tells them, and I often hear spirited

debate coming from their classroom. Of course, he feeds them liberally on the sly. I felt intense satisfaction when I looked back one Sunday to see one particularly introverted boy snuggling his head against Fred's shoulder.

In almost three years in my small ward, only one person has refused a Primary teaching job. That seems nothing short of miraculous to me. White-haired, newly married, single, childless, male, and female, my teachers surround both me and the children with love and support.

Something happened the other day that reminded me just how unusual this service is. I was talking to a good friend, a seventy-five-year-old woman who has been inactive since her youth. Her thirty-eight-year-old son was getting married. He and his new wife, who has teenagers from a previous marriage, have decided not to have children. He does not really regret this decision, though it means he will never father a child, because he is so used to doing things his own way—going here, going there, traveling, being responsible only for himself—that the thought of children is overwhelming.

I do not wish to pass judgment—we are all so different. But I was struck, because that kind of feeling, so prevalent in America right now, is so alien to my experience and the experience of most Church members. Serving others, serving children, is a focus for many of us. Indeed, some of us are so used to doing things for others that, when left to do something that we want to do, we are not sure what that might be. We don't really consider that we are giving up things to parent children or teach children. Our Mormon culture is solidly committed to children. It is hard to imagine life without them.

Let me give you another example. For several years, my husband's sister worked for a nanny agency in the Salt Lake valley. She spent a good deal of time talking on the phone to powerful, professional women, mostly residents of New York and the East Coast. From the stories she tells, many of these women have been incredibly successful in almost all phases of their lives—and they care about children or they wouldn't be having them. But what they want, when it comes to taking care of those children, is a Mormon nanny. That Mormonness is very important to them, my sister-in-law learned. From somewhere, they sense that we love and nurture children. They don't want our lifestyle, but they want Mormon women to care for their children. Of course, they are looking at our culture through rose-colored glasses, just as we sometimes look at theirs. We have our share of family problems. Statistics for child abuse within the Church are very close to the national average. We make lots of mistakes. And we sometimes take on more than we can handle. But within the very foundations of our faith is a strong, legitimate, enduring love for children.

Several months ago, my five-year-old daughter, Erin, and I spent some time at the North Visitors' Center on Temple Square. Ever since Erin was tiny, she has loved the Christus statue, and we had not visited it for a long time. We walked up the ramp to the statue only to find a rather large group of visitors crowded around a tour guide. Except for the guide's voice, the room was hushed, all attention focused on the statue. Erin tugged on my skirt. "Can I go up?" she asked. I hesitated. She would have to walk right through the group of listeners. She might distract the tour guide. Then I thought of the Savior: "Suffer the little children to come unto me and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God" (Mark 10:14). I nodded to Erin that she could go. She walked as close as she could to the statue and then looked up—a very long way for a small child. And then she just stood there for a very long time, minutes, looking at Jesus. She did not move. I watched her through misting eyes. I wondered if some of those visiting Temple Square for the first time did, too.

Erin knows Jesus, and she loves him. And she knows that he loves her. She does not feel alone; she feels part of his eternal family. Part of this she has learned at home, part through her prayers, and part at Primary. It is a gift to feel this way. In this troubled world, it is a tremendous gift. And I hope that if we do nothing else in our Church and in Primary, we will give each other and each other's children the sense that we are loved, that there is someone beside us as we walk over the burning coals of life. "Let us love one another:" we find in 1 John 4:7, "for love is of God; and every one that loveth . . . knoweth God" (1 John 4:7).

Busier Than Thou: The Primary

Dawn Hall Anderson

MY CALL TO SERVE AS Primary president eight years ago came at a time in my life when I was especially—maybe even uniquely—unsuited for the job. I was thirty-six, married only four years. I was the ward-

DAWN HALL ANDERSON is an editor and writer living in Salt Lake City. She received her master's degree in American and English literature from Brigham Young University and pursued doctoral studies at Pennsylvania State University. She and her husband, Richard, are the parents of four children. A former ward Primary president, she now serves as a Cub Scout den mother.