

Of Cups and Councils

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Talk given at the Saturday evening session of the Bloomington, Indiana Stake Conference, 28 February 2015.

My mother died recently from complications of Alzheimer's. Because four of my siblings live near my parents and were helping my dad with arrangements, my sister Carol and I decided to fly on Sunday for the Tuesday morning service and then stay longer after the funeral. We arrived at my dad's apartment Sunday afternoon, anticipating some quiet hours of reminiscing or just relaxing.

Instead, as Dad reviewed the funeral service with us, it quickly became apparent that many loose ends remained. No one had been asked to play the piano at the funeral, lead the music, give prayers, or sing "Lara's Theme" from the movie *Dr. Zhivago* that my dad fervently wanted sung to my mother from him (and that is not quite as simple as asking someone to sing a familiar hymn). Numerous texts and phone calls later, we had several necessary commitments and we met the Monday morning deadline to provide final funeral details to the mortuary.

As Carol and I talked late that night in our hotel room, we concluded that the situation resulted largely from the lack of involvement of a church ward in the funeral. Because of my mother's deteriorating health, my parents had moved to a nursing facility two months earlier, where their ward had a bishopric called from outside the facility. The members all required nursing care (except my dad). Due to such a recent move and the location of the funeral, there was no Church assistance. My dad and my siblings were on their own for all the planning, assignments, flowers,

programs, and other decisions and had simply been overwhelmed by the many details, as well as by illness.

Between us, Carol and I have served as ward Relief Society president three times. We have attended funeral planning meetings with families, dressed the deceased, arranged for flowers, ensured timely church cleaning, organized family meals, and found house sitters available during services. Carol and I noted to each other all of the unfinished details that an observant bishop or Relief Society president would have noticed earlier in the planning and all of the aspects of the service that loving ward members might have lifted from us, allowing us to mourn our mother's passing with fewer organizational intrusions.

In every way, my mother's funeral was beautiful and comforting. I do not share this experience to complain but rather because it was a powerful reminder to me of the blessings of the structure of a ward. The organization of the Church can facilitate personal growth and blessings and ease burdens when it functions properly. A quiet but powerful feature of Church governance is the ward council.

In April 1994, Elder M. Russell Ballard stated that we have an urgent need in the Church for leaders to harness and channel spiritual power through ward councils.¹ Harnessing and channeling spiritual power might seem like a stretch for a meeting that occasionally feels like it's more about comparing calendars or assigning whoever is absent to be in charge of the ward Christmas party. While these tasks must be accomplished, they should not be the heart of a ward council. The Church handbook states that the purpose of ward council is to help individuals build testimonies, receive saving ordinances, keep covenants, and become consecrated followers of Jesus Christ.² In other words, everything that happens at ward council should have the goal of helping individuals become better disciples.

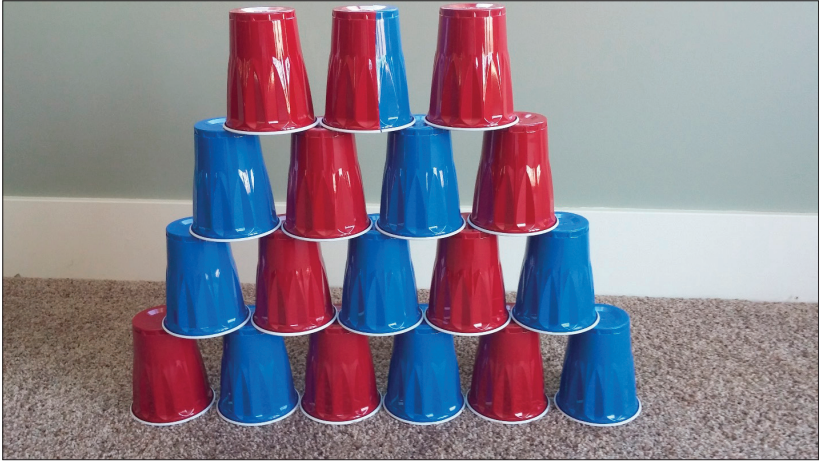
Ward council is unique in the Church because of its membership. Bishopric meeting and PEC, or priesthood executive committee, meeting are ward-level Church councils to which all invited members are male. At the bishop's discretion, the Relief Society president *may* be invited to *some* PEC meetings,

according to the handbook (emphasis added).³ Those invited to ward council, however, include the bishopric, ward clerk, ward executive secretary, high priests group leader, elders quorum president, ward mission leader, and presidents of the Relief Society, Young Men, Young Women, Primary, and Sunday School organizations.⁴ Currently, our ward also includes our full-time elders and often a high councilor is in attendance, so our ward council looks like this: 15 men and 3 women.



The Church handbook explains more fully the role of women in ward council: “The bishop seeks input from Relief Society, Young Women, and Primary leaders in all matters considered by the ward council. The viewpoint of women is sometimes different from that of men, and it adds essential perspective to understanding and responding to members’ needs.”⁵ Women are not included in ward councils to make them feel valuable, they are included because they are necessary for the functioning of a successful ward council. Why have we heard so many admonitions during the past few years that women’s voices in particular be heard in councils?

The population of my ward, if shrunk to eighteen people, would look like this: 8½ men and 9½ women.



These two representations clearly illustrate a disparity. In my ward, women comprise over 50% of the members but only 17% of the ward council. I believe this disparity is one main reason that the voices of women in ward councils should be expressed clearly and frequently and heard with sincere, intent listening. This implies responsibility on all sides—the leaders of Primary, Young Women, and Relief Society must be willing to formulate and express their viewpoints, and all other leaders should consider those ideas carefully. Under current Church structure, we have few ways to overcome this disparity, but fully involving female leaders in ward council is one of them.

How does a ward council help individuals become better disciples of Jesus Christ? My husband and I are parents of four daughters and one son, all adults now. For several weeks, I pondered the question of what specific inspirations, ideas, or actions of various ward councils have assisted my family members along their paths of discipleship. Here are a few examples:

Approval for a full program, with ward members invited, for girls earning their Young Womanhood Recognition award

Approval for a fair and equitable distribution of ward funds to the Cub Scouts and Activity Days programs, as well as to the Young Women and Young Men programs

Institution and support of an annual high adventure activity for Laurel-aged young women

Recognition of the importance of diversity in Church organizations—Primaries with male choristers, male nursery leaders, and male and female teachers of all ages; Young Women leaders of all ages and life experiences; Relief Society teachers from different stages of life

Support and sponsorship of local interfaith evenings of conversation

Official encouragement for ward members to participate in everything from a 5K fundraising run/walk for a local cancer center to the local interfaith winter shelter to the Habitat for Humanity's Women Build program

Approval to schedule Young Women programs such as New Beginnings and Young Women in Excellence on Sunday evenings, even though such scheduling was discouraged in the handbook, in a ward in which most of the girls had a parent who traveled all week for work

Recognition of the value in utilizing members who could easily lead a ward or lead a stake to guide young men through Scouting and the Young Men program

Plans for ward activities ranging from lakeside barbecues to park picnics to Santa visits to *Messiah* sing-alongs to talent nights to cultural evenings

Support of sports opportunities for young men, young women, and adult men and women—basketball, volleyball, ultimate Frisbee, and others (one of the longest running Relief Society midweek activities of our ward, close to twelve years, is women's basketball)

Food drives

Genealogy fairs or preparedness fairs

Community nativity displays

I hope you are not yet exhausted by the scope of building the kingdom of God. Please remember that my list does not reflect one ward at one time but several wards over many years. The most vital efforts of ward councils that I have witnessed have been in outreach and service. I could share dozens of stories, as I'm sure all of you could, of missionary efforts, new member fellowshiping, reactivation, assisting those in need of meals or groceries or childcare or rides or a friend to listen or a home repair, of mourning with those that mourn in a great variety of ways, and of sustaining individuals and families through long-term difficulties. I will share one instance from a ward where we formerly lived.

Early one year, Susan, as I will call her, was diagnosed with late-stage liver cancer. She and her family had little time to process their immense grief and fear as they suddenly faced numerous medical appointments and chemotherapy treatments and, at the same time, worked to prepare the family for life without a wife and mother. By May, Susan was too weak to work. The family had planned for their youngest child to attend a full-time summer day camp while the father was at work, and their two teenagers would stay home with Susan. Her husband called me one Saturday just as school had ended for the year and said that after much family discussion, it was clear that Susan would prefer that her teenagers enjoy their regular summer routines rather than stay home with her. This would require the Relief Society to find two women daily, Monday through Friday, to be with Susan for four-hour shifts each for eight weeks, starting in one week.

I took their request to the other Relief Society presidency members that day and spoke with the bishop as well. The next day, in ward council meeting, we prayerfully discussed this family and their overwhelming challenges. We knew it could prove difficult to support them in this way because many student families in our ward left for the summer. However, the ward council felt that it was an important service and we should move ahead with it.

After church, I discussed the service schedule with one of Susan's visiting teachers. Despite the fact that this visiting teacher and her large family were leaving early the next morning for six

weeks, she was eager to make a few phone calls and start filling the calendar. She called me back that evening to report that the entire eight-week schedule was full. I was grateful I had added my name in two time slots before she took over.

One time when I stayed with Susan, she slept and I completed a few small tasks around the home. Another time she wanted to talk and I was enriched by stories from her past as well as her reflections on life as death approached. Near the end of the eight weeks, our family left for a vacation. Several days after our return, I dropped by to visit Susan and found her preparing to leave for the hospital after a very uncomfortable night. While her husband packed a few things, I assisted Susan slowly and carefully down the stairs and out to their car. She died without ever seeing her home again. I never heard anyone who helped that summer complain about sacrificing their time, but many who helped expressed gratitude for the opportunity to talk with Susan and be of service to her and her family. Wards simply cannot fill every need, but I give thanks to a ward council that followed inspiration that day.

I am grateful for the organization of wards and ward councils. I am grateful for ward councils that consult and give careful consideration to the viewpoints of the female leaders. I am most grateful for ward councils that harness and channel spiritual power, making decisions and taking actions that assist me, my family, and all of us along our paths of discipleship.

Notes

1. M. Russell Ballard, “Counseling with Our Councils,” <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/1994/04/counseling-with-our-councils?lang=eng> (accessed February 14, 2015).

2. *Handbook 2*, section 4.4 “Ward Council,” <https://www.lds.org/handbook/handbook-2-administering-the-church/the-ward-council?lang=eng#44> (accessed February 14, 2015).

3. *Handbook 2*, section 4.3 “Priesthood Executive Committee,” last updated March 18, 2014, <https://www.lds.org/handbook/handbook-2-administering-the-church/the-ward-council?lang=eng#43> (accessed February 14, 2015).

4. *Handbook 2*, section 4.4 “Ward Council.”

5. *Handbook 2*, section 4.6 “Ward Council Meetings,” last updated March 18, 2014, <https://www.lds.org/handbook/handbook-2-administering-the-church/the-ward-council?lang=eng#4.6> (accessed February 14, 2015).