



On March 17, 1842, the Prophet Joseph Smith organized the Female Relief Society of Nauvoo. "The Church was never perfectly organized until the women were thus organized," the Prophet declared.



Relief Society: Divine Organization of Women

“If you live up to your privileges, the angels cannot be restrained from being your associates.”

From the Life of Joseph Smith

In the spring of 1842, members of the Church in Nauvoo were busily occupied with the work of building the Nauvoo Temple. Two such members were Sarah Granger Kimball and her seamstress, Margaret A. Cook, who, while talking together one day, decided to combine their efforts in order to help the temple workmen. Sister Kimball said that she would provide fabric so that Sister Cook could make shirts for the men. The two women decided to invite other sisters to join them in forming a ladies’ society to further their benevolent efforts. Sarah Granger Kimball recalled: “The neighboring sisters met in my parlor and decided to organize. I was delegated to call on Sister Eliza R. Snow and ask her to write for us a Constitution and By-laws, and submit them to President Joseph Smith prior to our next Thursday’s meeting.”

After looking over the proposed constitution and bylaws, the Prophet pronounced them the best he had ever seen but then said: “‘This is not what you want. Tell the sisters their offering is accepted of the Lord, and he has something better for them than a written Constitution. I invite them all to meet with me and a few of the brethren . . . next Thursday afternoon.’”¹

Accordingly, on March 17, the Prophet, accompanied by Elders John Taylor and Willard Richards, met with 20 women of all ages in the upstairs room of the Red Brick Store. The Prophet officially organized the Female Relief Society of Nauvoo and taught those present about the purposes of the new organization. The

sisters elected Emma Smith as president of the Relief Society, and Emma selected her two counselors. The Prophet then read a revelation received 12 years earlier in which the Lord assigned Emma to collect hymns for publication and designated her as an “elect lady” (D&C 25:3). Emma Smith rose to speak, emphasizing the society’s vast potential: “We are going to do something extraordinary. . . . We expect extraordinary occasions and pressing calls.”²

Emma Smith, the first Relief Society general president, had always had a strong desire to serve others and build God’s kingdom, once declaring that she wanted to be “a blessing to all who may in any wise need aught at my hands.”³ In New York, she sewed clothing for the four missionaries called to preach the gospel to the Lamanites. In Kirtland, she worked with other women to collect blankets, food, and clothing for the Zion’s Camp marchers to take to distressed Saints in Missouri. She helped prepare meals and make stockings, pantaloons, and jackets for the workmen building the Kirtland Temple. She took in so many temple workmen as boarders that she and Joseph had to sleep on the floor. In the early days of Nauvoo, she devoted much of her time and attention to nursing the many malaria victims camped outside her home on the banks of the Mississippi River. In these and other ways, she exemplified the service given by many sisters in her day. Polly Angell recalled that when the Prophet saw a group of women busily sewing the veils used to partition areas in the Kirtland Temple, he said, “Well, sisters, . . . you are always on hand. The sisters are always first and foremost in all good works.”⁴

Since those early days of the Relief Society, the women of the Church have remained a tremendous force for good. At a meeting held a week after the Relief Society was organized, Lucy Mack Smith, the Prophet’s mother, gave the sisters counsel that extends to millions of women in the Church today: “We must cherish one another, watch over one another, comfort one another and gain instruction, that we may all sit down in heaven together.”⁵

Teachings of Joseph Smith

The Relief Society, organized under the priesthood and after its pattern, is an essential part of the Church.

*Sarah Granger Kimball recalled that shortly before the Prophet Joseph Smith organized the Relief Society, he said: “I will organize the women under the priesthood after the pattern of the priesthood. . . . The Church was never perfectly organized until the women were thus organized.”*⁶

*The Prophet’s history for March 24, 1842, records: “[The] organization [of the Female Relief Society] was completed this day. Mrs. Emma Smith takes the presidential chair; Mrs. Elizabeth Ann Whitney and Sarah M. Cleveland are her counselors; Miss Elvira [Cowles] is treasurer, and our well-known and talented poetess, Miss Eliza R. Snow, secretary.”*⁷

*Eliza R. Snow reported: “President Joseph Smith arose. Spoke of the organization of the Female Relief Society; said he was deeply interested, that it might be built up to the Most High in an acceptable manner.”*⁸

*Eliza R. Snow also reported: “[Joseph Smith] exhorted the sisters always to concentrate their faith and prayers for, and place confidence in . . . those faithful men whom God has placed at the head of the Church to lead His people; that we should arm and sustain them with our prayers. . . . If this Society listen to the counsel of the Almighty, through the heads of the Church, they shall have power to command queens in their midst.”*⁹

“This Society is to get instruction through the order which God has established—through the medium of those appointed to lead—and I now turn the key to you in the name of God, and this Society shall rejoice, and knowledge and intelligence shall flow down from this time—this is the beginning of better days to this Society.”¹⁰

The Relief Society enables women to act according to their benevolent natures, giving care to those in need.

“This is a charitable Society, and according to your natures; it is natural for females to have feelings of charity and benevolence.

You are now placed in a situation in which you can act according to those sympathies which God has planted in your bosoms.”¹¹

“Said Jesus, ‘Ye shall do the work, which ye see me do.’ [See 2 Nephi 31:12.] These are the grand key-words for the society to act upon.”¹²

Willard Richards reported: “The [Female Relief Society] meeting was addressed by President Joseph Smith, to illustrate the object of the Society—that the Society of Sisters might provoke the brethren to good works in looking to the wants of the poor—searching after objects of charity, and in administering to their wants—to assist by correcting the morals and strengthening the virtues of the community.”¹³

“I attended by request, the Female Relief Society, whose object is the relief of the poor, the destitute, the widow and the orphan, and for the exercise of all benevolent purposes. . . . There was a very numerous attendance at the organization of the society, and also at the subsequent meetings, of some of our most intelligent, humane, philanthropic and respectable ladies; and we are well assured from a knowledge of those pure principles of benevolence that flow spontaneously from their humane and philanthropic bosoms, that with the resources they will have at command, they will fly to the relief of the stranger; they will pour in oil and wine to the wounded heart of the distressed; they will dry up the tears of the orphan and make the widow’s heart to rejoice.

“Our women have always been signalized for their acts of benevolence and kindness; . . . in the midst of their persecution, when the bread has been torn from their helpless offspring by their cruel oppressors, they have always been ready to open their doors to the weary traveler, to divide their scant pittance with the hungry, and from their robbed and impoverished wardrobes, to divide with the more needy and destitute; and now that they are living upon a more genial soil, and among a less barbarous people, and possess facilities that they have not heretofore enjoyed, we feel convinced that with their concentrated efforts, the condition of the suffering poor, of the stranger and the fatherless will be ameliorated.”¹⁴



“This is a charitable Society. . . . You are now placed in a situation in which you can act according to those sympathies which God has planted in your bosoms.”

The Relief Society encourages women to practice holiness and to instruct one another.

“The Ladies’ Relief Society is not only to relieve the poor, but to save souls.”¹⁵

“Now beloved sisters, . . . we desire you to do your part, and we will do ours, for we wish to keep the commandments of God in all things, as given directly from heaven to us, living by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of the Lord. May God add his blessing upon your heads and lead you in all the paths of virtue, purity and grace.”¹⁶

“The [Relief] Society have done well: their principles are to practice holiness. God loves you, and your prayers in my behalf shall avail much: let them not cease to ascend to God continually in my behalf.”¹⁷

“You must put down iniquity, and by your good examples, stimulate the Elders to good works.”¹⁸

Willard Richards reported: “President Joseph Smith read the revelation to Emma Smith, from the book of Doctrine and Covenants

[D&C 25]; and stated that she was . . . to expound the scriptures to all; and to teach the female part of the community; and that not she alone, but others, may attain to the same blessings.”¹⁹

Eliza R. Snow reported: “As [the Prophet Joseph Smith] had this opportunity, he was going to instruct the ladies of this Society, and point out the way for them to conduct themselves, that they might act according to the will of God. . . .

“If you live up to these principles, how great and glorious will be your reward in the celestial kingdom! If you live up to your privileges, the angels cannot be restrained from being your associates. Females, if they are pure and innocent, can come in the presence of God; for what is more pleasing to God than innocence; you must be innocent, or you cannot come up before God: if we would come before God, we must keep ourselves pure, as He is pure.”²⁰

The Relief Society encourages women to follow the example of the Savior in showing mercy and avoiding strife.

“If you would have God have mercy on you, have mercy on one another. . . . We are full of selfishness; the devil flatters us that we are very righteous, when we are feeding on the faults of others. We can only live by worshiping our God; all must do it for themselves; none can do it for another. How mild the Savior dealt with Peter, saying, ‘When thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren.’ [Luke 22:32.] At another time, He said to him, ‘Lovest thou me?’ and having received Peter’s reply, He said, ‘Feed my sheep.’ [John 21:15–17.] If the sisters [love] the Lord, let them feed the sheep, and not destroy them. . . .

“Sisters of the society, shall there be strife among you? I will not have it. You must repent, and get the love of God. Away with self-righteousness. The best measure or principle to bring the poor to repentance is to administer to their wants.”²¹

Eliza R. Snow reported the following words of the Prophet: “Notwithstanding the unworthy are among us, the virtuous should not, from self importance, grieve and oppress needlessly, those unfortunate ones—even these should be encouraged to hereafter live to be honored by this society, who are the best

portions of the community. Said he had two things to recommend to the members of this society, to put a double watch over the tongue: no organized body can exist without this at all. . . . The object is to make those not so good reform and return to the path of virtue that they may be numbered with the good. . . .

“. . . Search yourselves—the tongue is an unruly member—hold your tongues about things of no moment—a little tale will set the world on fire.”²²

“The little foxes spoil the vines—little evils do the most injury to the Church. If you have evil feelings, and speak of them to one another, it has a tendency to do mischief.”²³

“Do not injure the character of anyone. If members of the Society shall conduct themselves improperly, deal with them, and keep all your doings within your own bosoms, and hold all characters sacred.”²⁴

Suggestions for Study and Teaching

Consider these ideas as you study the chapter or as you prepare to teach. For additional help, see pages vii–xii.

- Read the statement by Emma Smith at the top of page 450. Why do you think Relief Society sisters are able to accomplish extraordinary things? In what ways have you and your family been blessed through the efforts of Relief Society sisters? Read the counsel from Lucy Mack Smith at the bottom of page 450. In what ways do Relief Society sisters follow this counsel today?
- The Prophet Joseph Smith organized the Relief Society “under the priesthood after the pattern of the priesthood” (page 451). How does this set them apart from other service organizations in the world? (For some examples, see page 451.) Why do you think the Church was “never perfectly organized” until Joseph Smith organized the Relief Society?
- How do the responsibilities of Relief Society sisters today compare to the assignments the sisters received from Joseph Smith? (For some examples, see pages 451–54.) Read the first

full paragraph on page 452. In what ways do opportunities to give service help us become more like the Savior?

- Read the first paragraph on page 453. What do you think it means to save a soul? In what ways do members of the Relief Society fulfill this responsibility, both temporally and spiritually?
- Review the second full paragraph on page 452 and the fourth paragraph on page 453. What can Relief Society sisters do to stimulate good works among priesthood holders? What can priesthood holders do to support Relief Society sisters in their work?
- Read the paragraph that begins at the bottom of page 453. What can we learn from this statement about each sister's responsibilities and opportunities?
- The Prophet warned against "feeding on the faults of others" (page 454). What do you think this means? How might this attitude hinder the efforts of the Relief Society—or any quorum or group in the Church? What can we do to feed the Lord's sheep rather than feed ourselves on their faults?

Related Scriptures: Proverbs 31:10–31; 1 Corinthians 13:8; D&C 25:1–16; 88:125

Notes

1. Sarah Granger Kimball, "Auto-biography," *Woman's Exponent*, Sept. 1, 1883, p. 51.
2. Emma Smith, quoted in Relief Society, Minute Book Mar. 1842–Mar. 1844, entry for Mar. 17, 1842, p. 12, reported by Willard Richards, Church Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.
3. Emma Hale Smith, Blessing, 1844, typescript, Church Archives.
4. Quoted by Polly Angell, in Edward W. Tullidge, *The Women of Mormondom* (1877), p. 76.
5. Lucy Mack Smith, quoted in Relief Society, Minute Book Mar. 1842–Mar. 1844, entry for Mar. 24, 1842, pp. 18–19, reported by Eliza R. Snow, Church Archives.
6. Quoted in Sarah Granger Kimball, "Auto-biography," *Woman's Exponent*, Sept. 1, 1883, p. 51.
7. *History of the Church*, 4:567; from "Ladies' Relief Society," an editorial published in *Times and Seasons*, Apr. 1, 1842, p. 743; Joseph Smith was the editor of the periodical.
8. *History of the Church*, 4:570; from a discourse given by Joseph Smith on Mar. 30, 1842, in Nauvoo, Illinois; reported by Eliza R. Snow.
9. *History of the Church*, 4:604–5; paragraph divisions altered; from a discourse given by Joseph Smith on Apr. 28, 1842, in Nauvoo, Illinois; reported by Eliza R. Snow; see also appendix, page 562, item 3.

10. Discourse given by Joseph Smith on Apr. 28, 1842, in Nauvoo, Illinois; reported by Eliza R. Snow, in Relief Society, Minute Book Mar. 1842–Mar. 1844, p. 40, Church Archives.
11. *History of the Church*, 4:605; from a discourse given by Joseph Smith on Apr. 28, 1842, in Nauvoo, Illinois; reported by Eliza R. Snow.
12. *History of the Church*, 5:20; from a discourse given by Joseph Smith on May 26, 1842, in Nauvoo, Illinois; reported by Eliza R. Snow.
13. Discourse given by Joseph Smith on Mar. 17, 1842, in Nauvoo, Illinois; reported by Willard Richards, in Relief Society, Minute Book Mar. 1842–Mar. 1844, p. 7, Church Archives.
14. *History of the Church*, 4:567–68; from “Ladies’ Relief Society,” an editorial published in *Times and Seasons*, Apr. 1, 1842, p. 743; Joseph Smith was the editor of the periodical.
15. *History of the Church*, 5:25; from a discourse given by Joseph Smith on June 9, 1842, in Nauvoo, Illinois; reported by Eliza R. Snow.
16. Letter from Joseph Smith and other Church leaders to the Nauvoo Relief Society, 1842, Nauvoo, Illinois; in Relief Society, Minute Book Mar. 1842–Mar. 1844, p. 88, Church Archives.
17. *History of the Church*, 5:141; from a discourse given by Joseph Smith on Aug. 31, 1842, in Nauvoo, Illinois; reported by Eliza R. Snow.
18. *History of the Church*, 4:605; from a discourse given by Joseph Smith on Apr. 28, 1842, in Nauvoo, Illinois; reported by Eliza R. Snow.
19. Discourse given by Joseph Smith on Mar. 17, 1842, in Nauvoo, Illinois; reported by Willard Richards, in Relief Society, Minute Book Mar. 1842–Mar. 1844, p. 8, Church Archives.
20. *History of the Church*, 4:604–5; from a discourse given by Joseph Smith on Apr. 28, 1842, in Nauvoo, Illinois; reported by Eliza R. Snow; see also appendix, page 562, item 3.
21. *History of the Church*, 5:24–25; paragraph divisions altered; from a discourse given by Joseph Smith on June 9, 1842, in Nauvoo, Illinois; reported by Eliza R. Snow.
22. *History of the Church*, 5:20; from a discourse given by Joseph Smith on May 26, 1842, in Nauvoo, Illinois; reported by Eliza R. Snow; see also appendix, page 562, item 3.
23. *History of the Church*, 5:140; from a discourse given by Joseph Smith on Aug. 31, 1842, in Nauvoo, Illinois; reported by Eliza R. Snow.
24. Discourse given by Joseph Smith on Mar. 17, 1842, in Nauvoo, Illinois; reported by Willard Richards, in Relief Society, Minute Book Mar. 1842–Mar. 1844, p. 10, Church Archives.