
BY COMMON CONSENT

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Attuned to Young Women

Although the Church magazines have, for several years now, done follow-up "what did you learn at general conference?" features in the *Friend* and *New Era*, this year they joined the *Ensign* in devoting substantial chunks of pages to "getting ready for conference." Dressing in Sunday best and assembling at the TV or computer for downstreaming have long been recommended, but now prep includes, especially for the teens and adults, a combination of academic class and spiritual retreat.

Suggestions include making a list of doctrinal and/or personal questions on which to be especially attentive for answers, having note-taking materials at hand, and even getting a good night's sleep for top alertness.

The often-overlooked Young Women will kick things off on March 24 with their 6:00 p.m. MST broadcast (rebroadcast to follow at 8:00 p.m.). This session has the distinction of being directed to the teenage girls of the Church. Since boys over twelve are incorporated into the general priesthood session, they usually get at least a couple of talks (and enough sports stories in other talks to keep them interested); but the Young Women's general presidency and one member of the First Presidency are actually tasked with devoting an hour and a half to adolescent women. It is, or should be, a significant focus.

After general conference sessions on Saturday, March 31, and Sunday, April 1, the

Mormon Alliance's semi-annual Conference Critique will follow Monday, April 2, in Conference Room C, at Salt Lake City's main library downtown (210 E. 400 South), from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m..

Discussion leader for this free-wheeling event will be Jennifer M. Bowen, a librarian in Salt Lake City, a graduate of Westminster College and a long-time participant in the Conference Critique. Out-of-towners should send comments to her at jmarenbowen@gmail.com.

Conference room C is the third one the right going west from the elevator on the lower level. Take the elevator just inside the east plaza-level entry and go down one floor. The best parking (though not free) is in the lot under the building. Enter from Fourth South going east and turning right at the mid-block entrance between 200 East and 300 East.

Prophet, Seer, and Revelator AWOL

Perhaps the most exciting moment of October general conference turned out to be a non-moment--namely, that conference began on schedule with the usual carefully performed hymn, the earnestly offered prayer, President Eyring's welcome to the opening session--and no President Monson in his designated red chair.

Even though the TV cameras were assiduous about spending all of the air time between Richard G. Scott's "amen" and Barbara Thompson and L. Whitney Clayton's taking their

first breath at the pulpit, those physically present in the Conference Center were aware of that vacant chair. Since such an episode has never happened before in the memory of those gathered for the Monday evening conference Critique, it seemed like a serious matter: Was he ill? Dead? Had he been attacked? Had Sister Monson, who has not been well for some time, taken a turn for the worse? The first "official" explanation--that he had been "delayed en route"--seemed improbable since the distance between his home in Eagle Gate Apartments and the Conference Center is a bare block.

After the intermediate hymn, President Monson came to the stand with an attendant, presumably a Church security man standing behind his chair. He went to the pulpit and brightly announced, "Hello!" then, after the laughter died down, "I was wondering who I could get to substitute for me." (This spontaneous introduction was omitted from the official website version.) He then went on to announce the construction of four new temples, including, rather surprisingly, the make-over of the Provo Tabernacle, which burned in December 2010, into another temple, making Provo the first city to have two temples.

President Monson once again did not conduct any session, leaving that responsibility to his two counselors. One participant commented that a friend had reported that President Monson had fallen a day or two earlier and that make-up covered a facial bruise. Usually the camera lingers for a moment or two at the close of a session, showing the Brethren standing, greeting each other, and moving off-stage. This year, the only views were from the very back of the huge hall, making it impossible to see such movements.

KBYU, in broadcasting the Relief Society session the week before, had evidently not received this memo, since it followed the First Presidency as all three men shook hand with the three members of the general Relief Society presidency, but while Presidents Eyring and

Uchtdorft lingered to chat, President Monson moved quickly but with short, stiff strides, off-stage where his daughter Ann Dibb, met him and took his arm. The camera, at that point, shifted to another perspective.

However, at the end of the Saturday and Sunday sessions, a young, stocky man with close-cropped black hair accompanied President Monson off-stage, not touching him in the way that a colleague would have taken his elbow, or put a hand on his back or shoulder, but moving close enough to do so. This episode naturally raised questions about President Monson's health. He had seemed invigorated and coherent in speaking at the priesthood session, although his opening and closing addresses in the main sessions were very brief.

One observer commented sadly, "He reminded me of a big kid trying to be funny and popular. His cadence and tone were strained and exaggerated." Another attendee had been puzzled by what seemed to be "mugging for the camera" with exaggerated facial gestures at the priesthood session. Is he uncomfortable with the fact that he is always under close observation in public and doesn't handle it well? In contrast, President Hinckley, though undeniably trying consciously to charm the media with whom he held surprisingly frequent interviews (in comparison with other Church presidents), was "slick." One knowledgeable observer noted that President Hinckley's inaugural press conference was "the first in seventeen years" and that when President Monson succeeded him, the two announcements from Public Affairs were, except for the names, word for word the same, suggesting a deep level of discomfort in meeting the press from President Monson.

Other mysteries: Elder Robert D. Hales, after several years of gauntness to the point of looking skeletal, looked puffy in the face, as though from a reaction to steroids. Grooves visible in his cheeks betrayed the long-term use of an oxygen mask or cannula. He spoke while seated with clear plastic tubing running over his ears and at

least to his cheeks, although it was not clear whether it was delivering oxygen or an auxiliary microphone. Two colleagues among the apostles made a point of greeting him at the beginning of their talks and expressing pleasure that he was there.

The sustaining of the General Authorities, while scanning the seated officials, named Dallin H. Oaks, but he was not present in his place, an anomaly that was not explained

The analysis of the talks themselves spawned a vigorous discussion among attendees under the guidance of moderator Beverly Hoppe. A fairly typical response was an insightful analysis of what a particular statement or even whole talk seemed to be trying to do, followed by not infrequent confessions of bafflement about how it fit into a larger picture. "If he [some particular elder] was giving this talk to solve a problem, what's the problem that he sees?" was a question that came up at several points. Another attempt to find a larger relevance to the particular talk devolved into seeing it as a manifestation of an attempt to exercise control over Church members' attitudes and behavior, certainly not a new development.

Control attempts seemed to be the best explanation for "Truth and Tolerance," an address Elder Oaks had delivered at a CES fireside about mid-September. It was, of course, an attempt to draw a line between the evils of the world and the righteousness of gospel-living Saints (a very popular theme in the conference) but it also had overtones of announcing the Church's next jihad against gay rights. The statistics are well known that twentysomething Americans see no problem with tolerating gays as neighbors, colleagues, and friends and, worse, think that family formation on the part of gays is actually a socially responsible direction for a family-oriented Church to support. Was Elder Oaks's unsubtle encouragement for Mormons to engage in legislative lobbying as a "freedom of religion" campaign actually an expression of deep alarm at this "tolerance"? "It's like he's trying to

give us the moral values he grew up with," concluded one observer.

Actual denunciations of pornography were down and so were explicit sermons about paying tithing. Was this latter drop a response to the suffering caused by the current economic situation? No, argued one observer, since both issues have been subsumed into the larger pro-family agenda which means that support for the family comes with complex insider codes that communicate a tight relationship between family values, temple attendance, and, hence, tithing.

The Relief Society general meeting received an unusual amount of attention, thanks to some diligent sisters who attended the meeting in their stake centers and some equally diligent brethren who streamed it from LDS.org. Most of the women present had received their free copies of *Daughters in My Kingdom* and agreed that it was attractively presented, lavishly illustrated, and carved into easy-to-understand concepts. The first half of the book is roughly chronological, while the last half focuses on programs like visiting teaching. One woman cited as an example of how it (mis)used history the statement, paraphrased by Julie Beck, that "little is known about a formal women's organization during New Testament times." This observer suggested that the more accurate statement would be "Nothing is known . . ." The cumbersome six-part Relief Society motto has quietly been reduced to three emphases, repeated by every speaker: building faith, strengthening families, and providing service.

Listeners appreciated Barbara Thompson's remarks, focused on the diligent and devoted life of her grandmother in a small Utah town, with the clear message that appreciation and visibility were unknown (and even undesirable?) in the life of a good Mormon woman. This message contradicted, however, what seemed to be the assumption that LDS women should also acquire and exercise leadership skills viable in the community.

President Uchtdorft's address to the Relief

Society was a conference favorite, perhaps the best talk of the conference, although most of the competition consisted of his other two talks. It was well received by an obviously enthusiastic congregation who greeted with laughter many statements that had no overtly comic component (but who failed to chuckle at one inadvertently humorous statement, delivered in his slight German accent, that we weave our lives "from threat to threat").

President Uchtdorft identified five messages keyed to the five leaves of a modest, blue forget-me-not. One commentator particularly found meaningful his counsel not to wait for a "golden ticket." His clever use of hyperbolic examples of inappropriate sacrifice (i.e., staying up all night to sew the theme of the Relief Society lesson in individual potholders) was amusing and effective, but the use of the stereotype itself prompted one participant to ask thoughtfully: "The use of these stereotypical examples, as prelude to sincere statements of we love and appreciate you sends the clear message that there is a 'you' and an 'us' and they're not the same. How do we get past the stereotypes and get past these internal divisions?" This question dissolved in gales of laughter when another participant announced that she had seen, on a blog, the announcement by a woman who was so inspired by President Uchtdorf's statement that she was going to embroider a sampler of forget-me-nots.

Another question was whether, by authorizing women to choose between "good" sacrifices and "less good" sacrifices, was he opening the door to situational ethics? However, all of the participants commented positively on the talk's "beautiful construction, effective delivery," and strong point about priorities.

The music in each session received plaudits: well-prepared (most sang without music), attractive arrangements, energetic and competent leaders, and an enthusiastic spirit that boosted the energy in the room.

President Packer's address, deceptively non-controversial, "wandered from topic to topic."

Alert listeners, attuned to his efforts in April 2011 to grant "revelatory" status to "The Family: A Proclamation to the World," noted that he now called it an "inspired document." A particularly painful part of his message for some observers was his gratitude for his patriarchal blessing's promise that, if he were obedient, he would return unharmed from service in World War II. "What does that say to the parents of everybody who didn't come back?" asked one participant. "That their sons weren't worthy of protection? God can find a quarter so a hungry medical student can buy a chicken leg [an allusion to Davn Cornish's address] but can't protect an innocent boy who is fulfilling his patriotic duty?"

Perhaps President Packer's most interesting statement was his assurance to fearful youth that they would have time to marry, raise children, see their grandchildren, "and even great-grandchildren." Given the steady upticks, conference by conference, for the last three years in references to the Second Coming (mentioned explicitly six times in this conference), this quashing of any millennial urgency generated an interesting discussion. One participant remembered hearing Elder Packer, as a young apostle, drawing a similar conclusion several years ago; and another cited Elder McConkie's assertion that the Second Coming was not as close as many were willing to believe.

One participant reported that a friend who was part of a team providing health care to Elder Packer some years ago jokingly asked him, "Do you have to have a middle initial to be a General Authority?" and was taken aback when Packer, highly offended by the levity, responded with a stinging lecture that included instruction on a number of General Authorities who were not blessed with such initials.

However, others praised President Packer's willingness to expose his vulnerability, citing his age (87) and making the first public mention in a conference talk of the childhood polio, whose symptoms have returned and which affect his mobility.

Some talks seemed dully repetitive and others were addressed to a seemingly mythical nonmember audience. Elder M. Russell Ballard's confusing attempt to simultaneously claim but discourage the use of "Mormon," was annoying, both in picking up another claim from President Packer's April address that the Public Affairs Department had corrected and also because it was factually and historically inaccurate, given the Church's recent attempt to patent "Mormon," which the U.S. Patent Office had turned down.

Continuing what one participant called Satan's "big comeback" in October 2010 and intensifying a long-time trend of warning against the evils of the world--twelve of the thirty-eight total addresses (32%) specifically characterized Satan, Lucifer, or "the adversary" as a personal and individual enemy to Saints and their families.

Attracting particular attention were addresses by Seventies and auxiliary presidencies whose pulpit time is rare and limited. Matthew O. Richardson, second counselor in the Sunday School presidency, who was making his first address in that position, received plaudits for his enthusiastic and energetic delivery. "It didn't have that droning, sing-song quality," commented one participant, "and I really liked what he said: that the Holy Ghost teaches people, it doesn't teach lessons." Seventy Randall K. Bennett, with his story of disregarding warnings about a dangerous current, puzzled listeners who had the initial impression that he was instructing them to disregard the messages of the world but who enjoyed the irony that he had to be rescued by the lifeguard whom he had disregarded. Elder Kazuhiko Yamashita's honesty in admitting that he was baptized without understanding LDS doctrine, gave added emphasis to his spiritual experience in knowing that the love he felt from the missionaries was coming from God.

Listeners enjoyed Elaine S. Dalton's table-turning talk. "After years of listening to men tell women what they should do as women, it was

refreshing to hear a woman tell a man what kind of man he should do." The same participant who had expressed concern about the way stereotypes maintain gender boundaries, however, wondered if such a talk could be given in a way that did not also communicate the same tone of patronage.

Although participants understood that having a second temple in Provo was probably the only way the historic building could have been saved and also that the existing Provo Temple is "horribly crowded" ("One of my friends goes to the 5:00 a.m. session just so she can get a seat"), another reported the sorrow from a friend that it would not be restored as a performance hall. "It won't be a community meeting center anymore. The concerts and recitals that made it a center for culture in the city are gone."

Elder Bednar's encouragement that youth use their computer skills to do family history was intriguing. "It's one way to channel the kids away from pornography but still let them keep their computers," pointed out one father. Another saw the early attachment of teenagers to the temples, where they can perform baptisms from age twelve on, as being a logical extension of the past fifteen years' emphasis on the temple.

Feminists noted with interest that Seventy Davn Cornish began his talk with "My sisters and brothers..." possibly the first time in recorded conference history for this order of address. At the same time, however, the only reference to Mother in Heaven occurred as "heavenly parents" in "Oh What Songs of the Heart," a hymn sung in the priesthood session. In contrast, there were six references to "returning to Heavenly Father," as though He were a single parent.

A side discussion, generated by President Packer's talk was the "I'm a Mormon" profile campaign. One woman with considerable dismay said that her Sunday School class had been instructed to bring their laptops on a given Sunday, and the instructor walked them through how to prepare an acceptable profile. "It was

beyond pathetic," she said. But it was also part of the mixed message that seemed to be coming from the generally split Quorum of the Twelve: use the social media BUT don't spend much time with computers.

Other famously mixed (though not new) messages were:

1. Temples are easily available to the vast majority of members BUT getting to the temple is worth days of uncomfortable and expensive travel.

2. The Church's irresistible growth is a sign that it is God's true Church BUT the actual growth rate in North America and Europe is nothing but abysmal, so Elder Clayton (AKA the Church's hit man in California for Prop 8), "has to go to Peru to find stories of small branches becoming mighty stakes and formerly humble missionaries being invited into the presidential palace in Lima."

3. According to Apostle Neil L. Andersen, when to have children and how many is a private decision to be made between the husband, the wife, and the Lord, BUT the two stories he told (about physician and former Seventy James O. Mason) were about Elder Spencer W. Kimball's counsel not to delay having children with the result that the Masons had four when they left medical school and that Elder Mason, looking at his sixth baby in the hospital nursery, received the revelation that there was a son yet to come. Sister Mason's role in either case was not

mentioned. "It was an anti-birth control sandwich," as one participant put it. She also took sharp issue with the expressions of sympathy for the suffering of "noble" single women, infertile couples, and underfertilized couples. "I'm single," she said. "Maybe I'll never marry or have children. I know I'm supposed to be suffering over that, but I'm not. I'm bored."

4. Elder Ted Callister praised the Book of Mormon for clarifying doctrine, BUT the Book of Mormon fails to mention such core contemporary beliefs as eternal families, temple sealings, eternal gender, family history, polygamy (except to denounce it) homosexuality, the age of the earth, the Word of Wisdom, etc., etc. He also got boos from the geometers in the group for failing to note that lines extending only to the diameter of a circle do not limit the number of lines between the two circles to one.

A SAD DEPARTURE

One of the the most consistent and lively participants in the semi-annual conference critiques was Richard Calder--characterized by his good humor and a definite twinkle in his eye. An attorney in Salt Lake City, he died on December 11, 2011, and is survived by his wife, Jane, and their four children. Mormon history was a passion of his, and he was serving on the Awards Committee of the John Whitmer Historical Association at the time of his death. We'll miss Dick.

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