

“Who Is She”

ANNE C. PINGREE
Second Counselor in the Relief Society General Presidency

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For further information write:

BYU Women’s Conference,
352 Harman Continuing Education Building,
Provo, Utah 84602.
(801) 422-7692

E-mail: womens_conference@byu.edu
Home page: <http://womensconference.byu.edu>

A few days after I was called to serve in the Relief Society General Presidency, a friend tried to reach me at the Relief Society Building. She called the Relief Society office and asked to speak to Anne Pingree. The Church service missionary who answered the phone said, “Who is she?”

“Who is she?” That may be a question some of you are asking as well. Today I want to share with you something of who I am. I am a wife, mother, grandmother, daughter, sister, aunt, friend, and neighbor. Like you, I find this journey of mortality exciting and challenging—with moments of terror and hilarity all along the way. And like you, I am grateful to have a testimony of the Savior and the restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Of all that has shaped who I am, nothing has more defined my heart than these twin facts: I am a woman of covenant and a sister of Relief Society. I cleave unto the covenants I have made in the waters of baptism and in the holy temple. These covenants bind me to the Lord and give me strength and courage to go and do and be all the Lord requires of me.

When I was a young mother, I received my patriarchal blessing. I was reminded of my legacy of faithful ancestors as I was given the blessing that I would have “a desire to carry forward the good work performed by them in both ancient and modern times.” In my youth and early adulthood, I never thought much about my heritage except when we gathered as an extended family at occasional family reunions to remember and pay tribute to our valiant forebears.

After I received my patriarchal blessing, I wondered from time to time about my responsibility in carrying forward the good work of my ancestors. I didn't really understand how my life had much to do with theirs or how theirs had much to do with mine. I didn't think what they had lived through in decades past had any real bearing on me.

How mistaken I was. At a time when I didn't think I could do what the Lord required of me, my own great-great-grandmother's life of faith gave me strength and courage. I was called to serve for three years with my husband as he presided over a very challenging mission ten thousand miles from home in a troubled African nation. And I was afraid.

My apprehensions increased as well-meaning friends shared accounts they had heard about the chaotic, unsettled conditions in this third-world nation in which I would live. Soon I had difficulty sleeping. I broke out in a rash that covered my body. Fear gnawed at me as I imagined what the future would hold.

Then there was the difficulty in leaving my children—two married, two unmarried, and our youngest son entering the Missionary Training Center the day before my husband and I were to leave for our missionary service in West Africa.

In the midst of my inner struggles, I remembered my Norwegian great-great-grandmother. I recalled how her covenants with the Lord sustained her, giving her the courage to consecrate her life to the Lord and to her new religion. In a very real sense, her example of commitment to her covenants steadied my heart and urged me forward.

As a young widow with six children and being a new convert to the Church, my great-great-grandmother longed to join a group of emigrants going to Utah. She wished to bring up her children in Zion, where they could mingle with the members of the Church she had recently embraced. She sold her home in Christiania (Oslo) along with the silver and jewelry she had. But she still did not have sufficient funds to pay for the passage of all her children. She made the wrenching decision to leave her two eldest daughters—ages twelve and fourteen—behind, promising them that she would save money and send for them later. While they remained in Norway with friends and neighbors, working to support themselves, my great-great-grandmother and her four youngest children traveled by ship to America and then by rail to Council Bluffs, Iowa, where they joined a wagon train heading west.

Then conditions took a bad turn for her young family.

After the long sea and rail journey, her two-year-old, my great-grandfather, became desperately ill. She had to carry him in her arms because he couldn't stand the jolt of the wagons over the rough plains. Undaunted by the difficult journey, she walked, carrying her child, every step of the way from Council Bluffs to Utah, a distance of more than one thousand miles. Sometimes she held an umbrella over him to keep off the blazing sun. When her arms ached, she suspended him from her back in an old shawl.

She trudged along day after day and became so tired at times that she lagged far behind the company. Being such a distance away from the others put her in danger of Indian attacks

and, even worse, angered the wagon master. He reproved her and even told her to give up and let her little son die because no one felt the child could possibly live anyway. He made it clear that my great-great-grandmother was holding up the wagon train by hanging onto her son. With great courage and a mother's determination, she refused to abandon her child. She assured the wagon master she would make it—even if they decided to hurry on ahead without her.

The little family did make it to Utah. She and her children moved into an abandoned building, covering the broken windowpanes with fragments of old carpet and rugs to keep out the cold. Working from early morning to late night, she took in washing and sewing. Through conditions of extreme poverty, she wove rugs and carpets on the loom she had brought with her from Norway. It was many years later that she was finally able to keep her promise to her oldest daughters, now adults, to bring them to Utah.

As I stood at what seemed like a precipice overlooking the frightening, unknown world of West Africa, I thought about the example of my own great-great-grandmother. Who is she? Though I have never seen a photograph of her, I answer without hesitation—she is a faithful woman of covenant and a sister of Relief Society. I have taken heart from her.

During the time I spent in Nigeria, where my husband and I served, I took heart from brand-new converts to the Church who composed the majority of the women I met with so often in Relief Society. Again and again, whether it was in the teeming cities of our mission or the most remote jungle villages, I witnessed how these new members of the Church grew as they began to understand the baptismal covenants they had recently made. These beautiful, noble, ebony-skinned pioneer Relief Society members, who are so dear to me, taught me through their examples. I watched their faith and courage in the face of unbelievable hardships and terrible trials, as they struggled just to obtain enough food each day to feed their families.

To our faithful sisters in Nigeria, the journey of life brings heavy physical burdens and denies basic comforts. Yet they carry their burdens—literally and figuratively—with patience and unflinching trust in the Lord. I recalled how my great-great-grandmother carried her child in a shawl strapped to her back as I watched my African Relief Society sisters farm small plots by hand, bent over using short-handled hoes with their babies firmly secured to their backs with long lengths of brightly colored fabric.

In the circumstances of my mission and the challenges of my daily life, I came to understand who I am and whose I am in the most profound sense. And who I am is all centered in my covenants. Knowing that has given me the confidence that, in whatever circumstances I may find myself, “I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me” (Philippians 4:13). I believe in the power of covenants. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland said, “I promise you that your covenants will be a source of strength and satisfaction and safety to you.” [1](#) And I testify that they have been.

Covenant women, as my own great-great-grandmother learned on the Great Plains of North America and as new members of Relief Society discovered in the steamy rainforests of

Nigeria, can and do rely on the Lord. In our beloved Relief Society sisterhood, we also learn that we are often the instruments the Lord uses to bless others. As women of covenant and sisters of Relief Society, we help one another and strengthen one another through the hard things we face. The journey of life remains the journey, but we are surrounded by loving, charitable women who make it richer.

And this I know: The Lord is always beside us in our journey. His promise to us is sure and clear. “I will go before your face. I will be on your right hand and on your left, and my Spirit shall be in your hearts, and mine angels round about you, to bear you up” (D&C 84:88).

Who am I? I am a woman of covenant and a sister of Relief Society. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

¹ Jeffrey R. Holland and Patricia T. Holland, “Considering Covenants: Women, Men, Perspective, Promises,” in *To Rejoice as Women: Talks from the 1994 Women’s Conference*, ed. Susette Fletcher Green and Dawn Hall Anderson (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1995), 113.