

United Heart and Hand

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Sisters, I appreciate this opportunity to be with you. I am particularly honored to be speaking with a very good friend and effective colleague, Sister Kathleen H. Hughes of the General Relief Society Presidency. She is an expert on the topic assigned to us and has taught me much of significance about these matters.

For almost two years, I have had the opportunity of working rather closely with all of the general auxiliary presidencies. I don't know when I have enjoyed an assignment or association as much as I have enjoyed working with these exceptional women. Consistently, these sisters are wonderfully competent, faithful, strong, and effective, all the while being very pleasant, always cooperative, and fully supportive of their priesthood leaders. If I could bottle what it is they do and what they are, I would do so and distribute it throughout the Church and the world. I have only admiration and gratitude to accompany my growing feelings of withdrawal, knowing that our association will change, given my exciting new assignment as president of Brigham Young University.

Having said these things about Sister Hughes and her sister-associates, I must also remark that in my years of traveling about the Church, I have consistently met sister leaders of capacity and devotion who contribute significantly to the work and success of

the Church while being positive and important influences on the families of the kingdom, particularly their own. I am thus very tranquil about the stellar qualities of the faithful sisters of this church. I think that this has been so from the beginning, and I am comforted by much of what I see in our young women as well, even considering the challenges they face and the pressures today's world creates for them.

In spite of my optimism about the present and future, I also candidly believe that we were assigned to address this topic of being united heart and hand because of our agreement—and I think the concurrence of many of you—that things can and must be even better. I speak specifically of the communication, work, and cooperation that is conducted and performed by sister and priesthood leaders in our families, in the Church, in our communities, and in all other endeavors. We might ask, Why is it that even though we can all seemingly agree on and be faithfully committed to the notion that we want to be united in serving the Lord and building His kingdom, we continue to have occasional glitches or misunderstandings as we go about our duties and our work?

I believe there are as many answers to that question as there are people trying to work together. Given our rather short time together today, I have chosen to focus on things we might consider in a positive framework as we strive to improve our communication and thus our cooperation to fulfill the goals on which we already agree.

First, we must always remember that we live in a world of individual differences. Most of us notice fairly early in life that men and women are different in very important ways! We must also recognize that women are different from women and men are different from men and that virtually no stereotype is completely accurate for a particular person. We are products of our genetic makeup as well as our life experiences, and each one of us brings to every social encounter, be it marriage or a ward council or a profession or a PTA committee, perceptual sets and expectations that color what we see and hear and how we attempt to communicate—or to avoid sharing—our feelings, attitudes, concerns and suggestions. Because our individual differences are in large part God-given, then it must also be part of Heavenly Father's plan for us to learn to deal with and accommodate for our own quirks or traits as we try to constructively respond to the personalities of others we encounter.

The scriptures describe Heavenly Father's great plan of happiness for His children and teach ways that we can fulfill our own potential and responsibilities in every way,

including our communication and cooperation with others, even those who differ from us—and that includes everyone at least part of the time. Let me review with you a few examples and then offer some suggestions that might be useful as you do your own thinking about the circumstances, challenges, and opportunities that you face in all of the associations you have in your family, the Church, and your community.

What has the Lord said that will help us in this quest to find and improve our relationships and communication? Think of Jesus and His dealing with His wonderful and especially chosen Apostles. Although these special disciples had much in common, they also had distinct personalities and characteristics. Consider, for example, impetuous Peter or doubting Thomas. We don't know all about them, of course, but we know that they were different in easily recognizable ways. Nevertheless, Jesus wanted them to be one in some very vital ways, as He clearly stated in His great intercessory prayer for them to Heavenly Father (John 17). I don't believe that Jesus was praying that they would lose their individual identities, their charming personalities, or their other uniquely good characteristics. But I do believe that He was unmistakably concerned that they be united together firmly and permanently in the great cause of advancing the Church and kingdom as well as progressing themselves toward eternal life. Jesus had His priorities straight, and He expected the Apostles to have theirs properly positioned as well (John 21:15–17). Think of Mary and Martha. The Savior didn't demand uniformity in the service or offerings, but He did teach both of them important principles of priority (see Luke 10:40–42). You will readily think of other examples.

How did Jesus teach and how did He communicate? The resurrected Christ was absolutely faithful in delivering the message His Father commanded that He give, but He also was sensitive to the circumstances of His audience. Let me share just a few verses from 3 Nephi 17:

“Behold, now it came to pass that when Jesus had spoken these words he looked round about again on the multitude, and he said unto them: Behold, my time is at hand.

“I perceive that ye are weak, that ye cannot understand all my words which I am commanded of the Father to speak unto you at this time.

“Therefore, go ye unto your homes, and ponder upon the things which I have said, and ask of the Father, in my name, that ye may understand, and prepare your minds for the morrow, and I come unto you again” (3 Nephi 17:1–3).

Though the Redeemer loved these people more than we can imagine, He also measured their capacity to understand what He was teaching and was patient enough to realize that real learning often takes significant time and effort.

We know that Jesus was a master of expression. What do we know about His capacities to listen? Think, for example, of His conversations with Nicodemus, who came to Him by night to ask vital questions (John 3:1–5) or the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well who initially did not understand what “living water” really means (John 4:6–26). He answered not only the questions they asked but also the ones they should have asked. He not only listened carefully to them but waited until they were ready to really hear what He had to say to them that was so very important.

Other questions might occur to us as we use Jesus as a model in communication. How did Jesus target His teachings to His audience? Did He teach His apostles and disciples in ways different from those He used to teach the multitudes? Given His stature, did He save all His best lessons for the masses, or did He also deliver carefully crafted messages to individuals? Did He have the need to respond to every criticism or unfair comment directed to Him? What was His capacity to forgive those who had wronged Him? I believe we can summarize the answers to all those questions, and others, by saying that as we search the scriptures, we find that the living Christ is the perfect example of virtually every form of effective and proper communication.

I am impressed, too, with the special communication skills of women, both in the scriptures and also by personal observation. Think, for example, of Abish, the wonderful Lamanite woman who had not only a firm testimony of the gospel but also a testimony that she could make a difference. Like so many faithful women, she not only said what she knew but had the courage and the wisdom to reach out her hand to her queen, lifting her from the ground and helping change the history of her people for the good (Alma 19:16–31).

Or consider the faithful slave girl from Israel who served the Syrian wife of Captain Naaman, who suffered from leprosy (2 Kings 5:1–4). In a sweet, submissive, but properly assertive way, she shared with her mistress important information, combined with unmistakable testimony, that eventually led to Naaman’s cure.

Like many of you, I think of correction and counsel from my own mother that made a difference in my life and continues to make a difference even today. Likewise,

both of my grandmothers, different in a number of unimportant ways, also were master communicators. I don't recall either of them formally bearing their testimony in my presence, but I was never in doubt about their devotion to the principles of the Restoration and always knew of their clear and absolute loyalty to the Lord's servants and to basic gospel principles. I have no remembrance of any qualification or reservation about gospel fundamentals, but I do remember vividly some fifty years later the lessons of faith and commitment their lives reflected. Interestingly, the power of their examples and lessons has been amplified, rather than diminished, by the passage of time because the context of their sacrifices and modeling is strengthened by contrast with with other, perhaps less sterling examples that were not then evident to me.

Clearly, my most important teacher, counselor, and confidante for more than thirty-eight years has been my wife, Sharon. She is a master of nonverbal communication and yet is also never shy about explaining to me exactly how things really are! She has her own customized techniques that work most of the time with her husband, and she also has the special capacity to completely connect with each of our children, who are in no way "clones"—and this includes even the twins—in ways especially and uniquely responsive to their individual needs and circumstances.

As important as all of these examples may be, those who have been properly baptized and have received the gift of the Holy Ghost at confirmation have access to the most magnificent resource of communication of all, the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, which is provided and promised by the Lord (D&C 90:14). This resource is invaluable because it is the vehicle through which pure communication of all kinds is received (Moroni 10:5) and also because the Holy Ghost can be a monitor or modifier of the proper communication we have with others (D&C 84:85; 121:43–46).

Let me now make some suggestions for your consideration and perhaps even your implementation should you find them useful and applicable to your circumstances. You remember that President Gordon B. Hinckley shared his famous "Six B's" with the youth of the Church.¹ Though my effort and contribution will be much more modest, I would like to propose Ten C's—or at least words that begin with C—that may assist all of us in becoming more united in improving our communication in all venues of our lives. These are words that might be used to measure both the quality of the delivery of the things that we share or communicate with others and our preparation for communicating them.

These ten C's are not given in a particular order or hierarchy, and you might want to add or substitute similar words of your own.

The first word is *careful*. We are all aware of disappointments and even tragedies that occur when there is miscommunication. We need to be very careful to say what we mean and to mean what we say. Those skilled in the translation of foreign languages recognize that it is essential to listen carefully to both specific words and also to what is meant so that the actual communication can really reflect what is intended to be communicated.

The second word is *considerate*. There is a tremendous temptation to be so focused on the things that we are feeling and wishing or needing to share that we might not recognize how our message could be received by others. Even when the content of what we are trying to communicate is absolutely accurate, real communication is also influenced by the context of how and where it is shared. The advice given by a wise leader long ago that we should commend people publicly but correct them privately is just one example of the importance of consideration in our communication.

The third word is *confidential*. While not everything we would share with others is secret, much, particularly when we are entrusted with leadership responsibilities in the Church or when we are dealing with important matters of family sensitivity, is confidential and must remain so. One of the easiest ways to spoil a special relationship is to betray a confidence. When the trust of maintaining appropriate confidentiality is lost, it is not easily recovered. Likewise, when we hear things that might be hurtful, embarrassing, or sensitive in any way to another, we should consider it both a responsibility and a privilege to hold what we have heard in confidence, even when the facts are true and might be reported by other people anyway.

The fourth word is *courageous*. We all know of times when it has taken significant courage to properly communicate things that needed to be shared. We live in a world of changing values and, increasingly, no values at all! We must always be careful and considerate, but we also have opportunities when we need to be courageous in taking a stand on things that we know to be right or against things that we know to be wrong. Think of the young Prophet Joseph Smith, who was surprised and saddened by the responses of those whom he thought would welcome his account of his interview with the Father and the Son. Yet despite the criticism, hostility, and physical peril that he faced, he

was always consistently courageous in stating his testimony of what he knew was right and what he knew God expected of him.

The fifth word is *clear*. For most of us, some effort is required to be absolutely clear about our feelings, concerns, observations, and suggestions. Some have made a living by being obscure, and some perhaps consider this characteristic to be a key to survival in politics and other endeavors. Nevertheless, if we expect to be understood, appreciated, and effective in our relationships, we must always do our very best to speak with clarity.

The sixth word is *complete*. In the Sermon on the Mount, the Savior taught, “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). I have been grateful for the footnote found in the LDS edition of the scriptures that equates the perfection the Savior is describing with being “complete, finished, fully developed.” Though we rarely have either the time or the talent to carefully craft every communication, it is important that we do all that we can so that the messages we share are complete and reflect not only appropriate levels of detail but also necessary consideration, planning, and development. Usually, people who make the greatest contribution or have the greatest influence are often those who say little but who, when they do speak, really do have something to say and their ideas and suggestions are complete.

The next word is *concise*. You might believe that after all I have said about such things as clarity, completeness, and so forth that being concise is probably not desirable or even possible. I again refer to the examples of the Savior. Think of those first verses of the Sermon on the Mount that we refer to as the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3–12; 3 Nephi 12:1–11).

“Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted.

“Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.

“Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.

“Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.

“Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God.

“Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.

“Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness’ sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake” (Matthew 5:3–11).

While the scriptures of the Restoration add additional insights to these wonderful words, each time the Savior shared them provides a model of what is possible and what can be conveyed when our communication is concise.

The eighth word is *capacity*. Just as Jesus was always able to measure the capacity of His audience, so do we need to measure the capacity of those with whom we are communicating. The explanations or teachings we share with children are usually delivered in a different way than the explanations or teachings of the same principles shared with adults. Likewise, such things as timing, context, and competing factors all relate to the learning capacity of those we are trying to teach. Too often, perfectly appropriate communication is spoiled because the timing or environment isn’t right. We need to spend as much time on the proper setting and circumstances for our communication as we need to spend on the message itself. Likewise, if we choose to be optimally effective, we need to communicate in the same way that the Lord does, such as when He gave us the Word of Wisdom, “Given for a principle with a promise, adapted to the capacity of the weak and the weakest of all saints, who are or can be called saints” (D&C 89:3). It is important to remember that even with our own limitations, on a particular matter or issue, our capacity to expound or communicate may exceed the capacity or capability or the interest of those whom we would like to receive our message. Likewise, we need to remember that “Rome was not built in a day” and that even the Lord when dealing with the most urgent matters has counseled clearly about the issue of capacity. Recall what He said to the Prophet Joseph Smith during the translation of the Book of Mormon (D&C 10:4). The same principle was expounded by King Benjamin (Mosiah 4:27) when we are told not to run faster or labor more than our strength or means allows us to do. Although we should always strive to increase our capacity and that of others, we need to be objective about the limitations everyone faces if we are to be effective in our communication.

The ninth word is *counsel*. One of the most effective and necessary types of communication occurs in counsel. The Lord reminds us that when we give counsel, it

should be as if we were speaking in His name, meaning that we would say, under the inspiration of the Holy Ghost, what He would say rather than advancing our own agenda (D&C 1:19–20). To be truly effective communicators, we need to both give counsel and receive counsel that is consistent with the spirit and mind of the Lord. We should gather information, advice, and even counsel from every appropriate source, but we must also remember our priorities and recognize that “to be learned is good if [we] hearken unto the counsels of God” (2 Nephi 9:29).

The last C-word for your consideration today is *council*. Elder M. Russell Ballard has taught us much about counseling in councils.² Our councils are very important and a significant part of the government of the Church. I speak not only of our ward or branch and stake or district councils but also of the councils that reside in our presidencies or group leadership assignments and especially the councils that should exist in our homes. A *council* is not only a place to share *counsel* but a place for us to communicate using all of the ideas or considerations that are found in these ten C-words that I have shared with you.

You will notice there are some C-words that I didn’t mention. Words or ideas like *carping* or *criticism* or *condescension* have no place in our communication. These are words that tend to be destructive and have no role in building the kinds of relationships that are truly united in heart and hand. All that we do and all that we are should be focused on the Savior, His work, and His glory. Our communications one with another that cause us to be united heart and hand lead us to the Savior and make the promise given by the Lord’s servants operative in our lives.

Let me conclude with the words of Amaleki, which have been chosen as the theme for this year’s conference and which I endorse as if they were my own testimony: “And now, my beloved [sisters], I would that ye should come unto Christ, who is the Holy One of Israel, and partake of his salvation, and the power of his redemption. Yea, come unto him, and offer your whole souls as an offering unto him, and continue in fasting and praying, and enduring to the end; and as the Lord liveth ye will be saved” (Omni 1:26). I’m grateful for this opportunity to attempt to communicate with you; to share my witness of the importance of sharing these materials, these ideas, these ways that we might be more effective in sharing our feelings and hearts, our instruction, and other matters that need to be shared. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1 Gordon B. Hinckley, “The Six Bs,” *Friend*, February 2001, 24–25.

2 See, for example, M. Russell Ballard, “Strength in Counsel,” *Ensign*, November 1993, 76–78; “Counseling with Our Councils,” *Ensign*, May 1994, 24–26.