

The Beacons of His Light

Mary Ellen Smoot

Mary Ellen Smoot is general president of the Relief Society of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. She and her husband, Stanley M. Smoot, former directors of Church hosting, are the parents of seven children and the grandparents of forty-four.

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As we come to the close of this women's conference with its theme "search diligently in the light of Christ" (Moroni 7:19), our minds and hearts have been filled with the joy the gospel brings. Our prayers are for your safe return to your loved ones. May the light of truth gleaned this week assist you to lift, love, and influence for good all those with whom you come in contact. I extend my gratitude to all those who have done so much to make this conference possible and finally, to you, the faithful, who have taken your time both to be taught and to share of your strength. How many of you are going home to share your strength? I want to hear it. Thank you. Imagine how much better our world is going to be!

In the 1994 April conference, Bishop H. David Burton shared a story that may be familiar to many of you. The story is about a proud ship captain who had spent his life at sea and was an experienced mariner [in conversation one stormy night with the keeper of a lighthouse] (see *Ensign*, May 1994, 68).

Lighthouses have stood for centuries, signaling a true and consistent message to travelers. The Egyptians completed one of the largest lighthouses in the world in Alexandria. It was more than four hundred feet high. It guided ships for more than fifteen hundred years until it was destroyed by an earthquake.

Atop each lighthouse is a beacon from which emanates a powerful and distinctive light. The beacon has special lenses which increase the intensity of the light from the inner lamp and allow the light to travel farther and communicate the position of the shore to ships. These beacon lights are a navigational aid for ships to guide them to safety, away from danger and into the shore.

Beacons are used not only in lighthouses but anywhere there is a need to guide and warn. From a spiritual perspective, we have been given beacons to help us safely travel through our sojourn here on earth. Each of these beacons relies on the same source of light—that light being the eternal truths of the gospel of Jesus Christ. He himself acted as the beacon of light during his life here upon the earth. He was the perfect beacon. In fact,

through his mission he became synonymous with light and truth, as we read in the Doctrine and Covenants:

"He that ascended up on high, as also he descended below all things, in that he comprehended all things, that he might be in all and through all things, the light of truth; which truth shineth" (D&C 88:6–7).

Like that of the beacon, Christ's message is true and consistent. He does not change it, nor is it compromised. President David O. McKay wrote: "The first and most important step is to choose as leader one whose leadership is infallible, whose teachings when practised have never failed. In the present tempestuous sea of uncertainty, the pilot must be one who through the storm can see the beacon in the harbor of peace" (*Gospel Ideals: Selections from the Discourses of David O. McKay* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976], 322).

Jesus Christ, our Elder Brother and Savior, is the one whose leadership is infallible and whose teachings, when practiced, never fail. Through the centuries, the Lord has raised up prophets, who are guardians of that light and beacons to all the world. Our modern-day prophet, President Gordon B. Hinckley, acts as mouthpiece for our Lord and Savior.

Elder Neal A. Maxwell wrote: "The Church is a beacon to all mankind, promising a special liberty and deliverance from the environmental bondage of evil, from ignorance concerning the purposes of life, from passing fads, and from the poison of petty selfishness" (*Wherefore, Ye Must Press Forward* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1977], 85).

"The Church is becoming, as foretold, a light that can no longer be hid, a beacon to guide men out of the desert of disbelief. This will be a function not only of the increasing global outreach of the Church, but also because it is an ecclesiastical Everest. It will be seen by thoughtful men and women everywhere as the only real alternative to anarchy or to the gathering forces of anti-freedom" (Neal A. Maxwell, *Deposition of a Disciple* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976], 49).

I can bear fervent testimony that our prophet and the Church are a beacon to the world. During the past eleven years my husband and I have been serving in Church Hosting, most recently as directors of Church Hosting. In this capacity, we have hosted people of influence from all over the world as they come to take counsel from our prophet and leaders and to understand what enables the Church to do all that it does.

President David O. McKay wrote: "Statesmen, men of science, thinking men in all nations, laymen everywhere sense the need of something definite to which to look forward, some clear beacon that will guide the stranded nations to a safe harbor or permanent peace" (*Gospel Ideals*, 290).

Those whom we have hosted include royalty, leaders of nations, ambassadors, journalists, and business and religious leaders throughout the world; thousands come every year. May I share with you direct quotes which are representative of many sentiments

expressed by some of the most powerful individuals throughout the world.

One religious leader said after attending the Bountiful Temple open house: "Your people seem to be happy people. Your temples are light and warm; our cathedrals are dark. And our people are not happy—they mourn too long over their dead."

Another religious leader inquired: "How do you get your missionaries to voluntarily go out, at their own expense, for two years or eighteen months and set aside all their goals and desires? We can't even get our youth to attend church services." A member of the Quorum of the Twelve responded: "It's a miracle, isn't it."

The wife of a very powerful and wealthy businessman said: "You seem to have such good relationships with one another. I feel peace and serenity here."

Another visitor said: "Where do you find so many volunteers? Everywhere we go there are people volunteering. And where do you find all of these commodities to send around the world to people in need?"

At the first dinner we had with an ambassador from Chile, he observed: "Your church has a decided presence in Chile. In fact, I believe you have half a million people who are members of your church there. We appreciate their values. One of the main problems in our country is alcoholism, and when a member of your church applies for a job, the leaders realize that this applicant will be more reliable and will not require time off work because of the illnesses caused by drinking. Our second most serious problem is theft. Your people believe in being honest, so they will most likely receive the job."

The ambassador continued: "A few years ago there was a religious poll taken in our country, and 98 percent of the people indicated they were of the major denomination. Another poll was taken just recently, and now only 60 percent say they are members of that denomination."

One journalist said: "I bring the international writers to Salt Lake City because if they just visit New York and Washington, D. C., they leave the United States saying we are antireligious and antifamily. I bring them to Utah to witness families. I see parents who are still having and enjoying their children. My mother country has youth, including my own, that have stopped having children; there will soon be no one to take care of the aging parents and grandparents."

People from the world do not need to visit Church headquarters to see the light of the beacon of the gospel. President Hinckley said in the October 1996 general conference: "I wish to say that none of us ever need hesitate to speak up for this Church, for its doctrine, for its people, for its divine organization and divinely given responsibility. It is true. It is the work of God. The only things that can ever embarrass this work are acts of disobedience to its doctrine and standards by those of its membership. That places upon each of us a tremendous responsibility. This work will be judged by what the world sees of our behavior. God give us the will to walk with faith, the discipline to do what is right at all times and in

all circumstances, the resolution to make of our lives a declaration of this cause before all who see us" (*Ensign*, Nov. 1996, 51).

We, as sisters in the gospel, must come to realize that we, too, can be powerful beacons of our Savior's light, regardless of our position in life. During this sesquicentennial year, we have been blessed to learn more about many of our pioneer predecessors, who emanated this light to the world in the face of ruthless persecution and seemingly endless trials. One such beacon was Mary Stretten Blood.

In Yoxall, Staffordshire, England, Mary Stretton was born on the 25th of July 1811. She was the sixth of nine children—five brothers and three sisters.

Mary's parents were the sturdy, frugal, hardworking type, the strength of the British race, according to a descendant, Mary Linford, who researched and wrote Mary Stretton's history.

Mary was five feet, six inches tall with light hair and blue eyes and had a pink and white complexion. She was quick in her movements and very methodical.

Little or nothing is known of Mary's early life, beyond the facts that became evident in her later years. From these it is known that she was carefully reared and well trained to take up life as a homemaker and a provider of household needs. She was a baker and also was adept with the knitting needles. Throughout her life, her evenings were employed in knitting.

The earliest recorded incident in Mary Stretton's life took place when she was employed as a dairymaid at Hare Hill Farm, a gentleman's estate near Sudbury in Derbyshire. At the same place, William Blood was employed as farm foreman. They fell in love and were married in the parish church in the neighboring town of Church Broughton on February 16, 1836.

Shortly after their marriage, William and Mary opened a bakery and small store. William took a position with the railroad as "plate-layer," and Mary ran the shop. While they resided in Barton-under-Needwood, four children were born: Ann, the eldest; William; Thomas, who died in infancy; and Mary.

In 1842 William returned home from work one day and said, "Mary, I think I have found the truth tonight, and I want you to go with me tomorrow night." He had heard Mormon elders speaking on the street. They listened to the message of the restored gospel and were converted. On March 1, 1843, William and Mary were baptized into the Church.

William came from a large family, but the whole family turned against William and Mary because of their new religion. Mary said, "We shall not bother any of them." Very soon they sold their business and most of their belongings and left for America. They sailed January 23, 1844, on the ship *Fanny*. The Prophet Joseph Smith himself met them at the

boat and greeted the new Saints in Nauvoo.

Almost immediately after their arrival, William became ill with a fever that was afflicting so many. He passed away on May 4, 1844, only three weeks after he landed in Nauvoo, leaving Mary with three children and another little girl who was born just four days after her father died. Mary named her Emma, but little Emma lived only a few weeks and was buried by the side of her father.

If this were not enough tragedy in this young woman's life, there was still more shocking news to come. Just eight days after the death of her baby, Mary was stunned again by the news that the Prophet Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum were martyred. Throughout her life Mary remembered clearly the horrors of that period. So many tragedies had come upon her, one after another, that it would have unnerved and crushed a less resolute and self-reliant woman but she remained undaunted.

With her husband and child gone and the leader of her chosen people murdered, Mary could have turned on her heels and gone back to her family in England, where she would have had security and help in raising her three living children.

At this point in her life, Mary became a beacon of light to her posterity. Instead of shrinking, she looked forward to a better day. She was present when Brigham Young stood up to address the people, and she always declared that he spoke in the voice of Joseph Smith and that Brigham appeared as if he were Joseph as he spoke. Mary pressed on, sustained by her testimony of the gospel of Jesus Christ and her commitment to do his will without compromise or apology.

I am grateful for this stalwart woman. Her radiance beams light into my life, although she was unable to look into the future and see that the decision she made would bring glory on her head and on the heads of her posterity forever. She simply did her part, as we must do, in standing firm in the gospel of Jesus Christ and being strictly obedient to the promptings of the Spirit.

Mary was later married to Henry Woolley, who was a good father to her children, and they followed William Kay to settle Kaysville, Utah. Mary would probably never have envisioned that her acts of valor would bring blessings to her family forever. Mary's son William had a son, Henry Blood, who became governor of the state of Utah. And this year a great-grandson, Gordon Smith, became a United States senator from the state of Oregon. So, we never know the influence we can have on our posterity. Descendants from her three living children now number more than one thousand. It would be impossible to measure the magnitude of goodness which has emanated from the life of this faithful beacon. I honor the heritage and guiding light left by this devout woman and look forward to meeting her beyond the veil because Mary Stretton Blood was my great-great-grandmother.

Mary Stretten Blood's life illustrates the sentiments of author Frederic W. Farrar, who wrote *The Life of Christ*:

"Christ came to convince us that a *relative* insignificance may be an *absolute* importance. He came to teach that continual excitement, prominent action, distinguished services, brilliant success, are no essential elements of true and noble life, and that myriads of the beloved of God are to be found among the insignificant and the obscure" ([1874; reprint, Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1994], 89).

There are external factors which can severely diminish the visibility of a beacon light. Haze, smoke, or bad weather, such as fog, rain, or snow, can obscure and dim the signal. Our spiritual beacons sometimes fall prey to similar obstructions. The trends of the world detract from the light of Christ and lead us into dangerous waters.

In the past several decades, the ills that result from the deterioration of families have become far too prevalent. Those evils are mounting with alarming momentum and without adherence to the counsel of our prophet will spell the failure of society as we know it today.

President Spencer W. Kimball stated: "Society without basic family life is without foundation and will disintegrate into nothingness" (*The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*, ed. Edward L. Kimball [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1982], 324).

There is no activity that has a more profound impact for good on society than a mother spending loving time nurturing and training a child in the true principles of the gospel of Jesus Christ. And there is no greater void than the absence of a mother from her child during the formative years of that child's life. Please guard against any influence or circumstance which would take a mother from the side of her child more than is absolutely necessary.

During my early childhood years, my world fit neatly within a several-block radius of my home in the small community of Clearfield, Utah.

On one side of my home was the church, which was built by my grandfather James G. Wood, who was the first bishop of the Clearfield Ward. On the other side of my home was the Smith Canning Factory, built by my maternal grandfather, and across the street was the school.

Life was peaceful and happy for my five sisters and me, daughters of Melvin and LaVora Wood. My parents both served full-time missions before they married in 1924. The gospel of Jesus Christ was an integral part of our lives. Family prayer was a ritual insisted on by my father—he would tease us until we arrived at the table for prayer. Provident living and self-reliance were virtues instilled in us from an early age as we all took part in placing seeds in the ground, watering, weeding, harvesting, and canning or bottling in preparation for the winter months. We learned to fast every month and on special occasions to draw on the powers of heaven. We were taught love and respect for our grandparents and all of our relatives. They loved one another and shared the positive things about one another.

My sisters and I learned unconditional love for one another through our parents'

example. We watched them love and serve others. Father was the bishop for nine of my growing years. My mother taught Sunday School and Relief Society and later was both ward and stake Relief Society president.

My parents taught us the fundamental principles of the gospel and bore testimony to us of their teachings by the way they lived. As I grew and the boundaries of my world expanded, I had many opportunities to put to the test those lessons taught me by my parents. I learned for myself the truthfulness of the gospel precepts. Later as I married my eternal companion and experienced the sacrifice, trials, and supreme joy of raising seven children, I came to understand the divinity of the grand and glorious plan of salvation, which our kind and loving Heavenly Father has provided us.

The beacon of the world would train us in the art of selfishness, while the light of the gospel gently schools us in the discipline of selflessness. The irony of these two paths is best described in Christ's own words taken from Matthew 16:25–26: "For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it. For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?"

Sisters, I humbly stand before you in my present capacity, having few credentials by the world's standards. But I am not on the world's errand. I am on the Lord's errand. I bring to this calling a lifetime of experiences as a daughter, wife, mother, and servant within the kingdom. Never once has the Lord let me down, nor have I ever regretted my obedience to the eternal truths of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Quite to the contrary, the blessings for obedience have been overwhelming. Although the task that lies before me is daunting, I have peace in my heart because this is the Lord's work and his answers to life's challenges are profoundly simple and complete. As our Savior, he understands what each of us is going through, for he "comprehendeth all" (Alma 26:35).

President Hinckley stated: "This is a season to be strong. It is a time to move forward without hesitation, knowing well the meaning, the breadth, and the importance of our mission. It is a time to do what is right regardless of the consequences that might follow. . . . We have nothing to fear. God is at the helm. He will overrule for the good of this work" (*Ensign*, May 1995, 71).

I can envision four million women, and more, who are members of Relief Society throughout the world unitedly standing firm in the principles of the gospel as a beacon for all the world to see.

Can you comprehend the influence we, collectively, could have upon this world, if together we would follow the admonition of Elder Thomas S. Monson to fill our minds with truth, fill our hearts with love, and fill our lives with service? (*Brigham Young University Twelve Stake Fireside* [Provo, 2 Nov. 1975], 21).

There is nothing more beautiful in this world than a woman aglow with faith and testimony, who has looked within herself and to the Lord for strength—a woman filled with compassion and love, willing to serve and lift others everywhere she goes. We all have the

ability to become that kind of woman.

I challenge you to rejoice in who you are and the work that we are all a part of, to be a beacon and radiate the Savior's light to all within your sphere of influence. We have within our power the ability to rise up and influence the world for good and save the family, which is the foundation of society. If we do, the richest of our Father in Heaven's blessings will be ours, as evidenced by the Lord's words in Doctrine and Covenants 41:1: "Hearken and hear, O ye my people, saith the Lord and your God, ye whom I delight to bless with the greatest of all blessings."

He's waiting to bless us. He desires to bless us.

Sisters, may we rise up and be powerful beacons unto the world, pointing the way to that eternal harbor of peace and safety. This is my humble prayer, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.