

PEOPLE OF GOD

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My ward reacted to the world's pain as Saints always had: teach the gospel as best we can, take care of our own, and trust in the Lord.

When I was a teenager the soulful, hungry faces, bloated stomachs, and skeletal bodies beckoning me from the pages of *Life* magazine belonged to the starving peoples of Biafra, not Ethiopia. It was a distant African nation whose name I learned to pronounce only by its repeated mention on the nightly news. Before the crisis, it might as well have been Narnia to me.

At that time I was part of (in the truest sense) a ward in an affluent area of northern New Jersey, mostly recognized as a commuter suburb of New York City. For me it was an ideal congregation, the people some of the finest I have ever known. Educated, hard working, and responsible, they seemed to embrace each task with genuine pleasure rather than as a religious obligation. I never knew anyone who refused a calling nor would consider doing so. Holidays we celebrated together gladly: marching around the parking lot on July 24 dressed as pioneers and Indians to commemorate entering the Salt Lake Valley (even converts who had never been there), sweltering in the New Jersey humidity, or doing the polka and being kissed by old men in silly hats on New Year's Eve. Road shows were modest extravaganzas in which even the least talented among us participated. There were sports teams and speech contests and bazaars and dance festivals and girls camp and ward choir and early morning seminary and gold-and-green balls.

Because our boundaries included many small cities (my own, Summit, had only a half dozen or so LDS families) and because as Mormons we were in a small minority, the ward members drew abnormally close to one another, deriving unexpected strengths from the bond. Differences among us seemed less important than our commonality; the fellow feeling was intensified. To be Mormon in

a place where most of our neighbors knew nothing about our faith ("Is that like the Amish?" or "How many wives does your father have?") was to have a shared secret, a life, a language, and code known only to ourselves.

The ward was my world.

And, from my vantage as a child, we *always* willingly, lovingly helped each other. No child was ever born, no young girl married, no person ever fell ill or was struck by accident or death without the omnipresent calming hand of the Relief Society. It seemed to me meals instantaneously appeared with so little effort, nearly in advance of the tragedy itself, that I came to wonder if there weren't a stash of frozen chicken and broccoli casseroles and strawberry Jell-O complete with bananas secreted at the ward-house somewhere. If there were any hungry souls in our midst, I didn't know them; if there were any needs unmet, anyone not visited monthly by two kindly gentlemen (later a man and boy), anyone not cared for thoroughly, I couldn't imagine it.

Into this idyllic setting burst the civil rights movement, the Viet Nam War, the 1967 race riots, literally tearing apart areas of New Jersey (notably Newark) very close to our homes. Concerned citizens all, the ward members spoke much about events swirling around us in the larger society. And, although I heard some mention of possible solutions and expressions of sorrow and compassion, I mostly sensed grave fears, outrage, and baffled disbelief as developments of the 1960s unfolded. Conversations turned easily to speculations of the Second Coming, the nearness of end-times, especially as the Church policy of priesthood denial to blacks unleashed hostility towards us we had never known.

The good Saints of my ward reacted to the world's collective pain as good Saints had from the

earliest times: teach the gospel as best we can, take care of our own, and trust in the Lord.

And so it continued through the years. Three incidents in my recent past stand out. Several Christmases ago a well-intentioned, wealthy ward on the east side of Salt Lake City decided to host a gala party for the children in a fairly depressed neighborhood of the city. They labored long and unselfishly to gather gifts, fill stockings with all variety of treats and trinkets, and prepared food to satiate any child's fantasy. They decorated a hall in the most festive manner and outfitted a Santa to the last detail. All was ready. Then they asked the Primary president to compile a list of all the "active" children in the ward for the invitations—they wished their rewards only on those children who could earn them with attendance.

Perhaps thou shalt say: The man has brought upon himself his misery; therefore I will stay my hand, and will not give unto him of my food, nor impart unto him of my substance that he may not suffer, for his punishments are just—But I say unto you, O Man, whosoever doeth this the same hath great cause to repent; and except he repenteth of that which he hath done, he perisheth forever, and hath no interest in the kingdom of God. For behold, are we not all beggars? Do we not all depend upon the same Being, even God, for all the substance which we have, for both food and raiment, and for gold, and for silver, and for all the riches which we have of every kind? (Mosiah 4:18-20.)

Second, in 1983 I had the opportunity to attend the World Council of Churches meetings in Vancouver, British Columbia, as a member of the press. They meet for three weeks every seven years in such geographically diverse places as Nairobi and Uppsala, Sweden. Vancouver seemed my only chance to observe firsthand the assembled representatives of most Christian churches the world over, to hear their concerns, to sense their faith. I confess much of it was very foreign to my peculiarly Mormon sensibilities, but most of it was exhilarating, and some of it even profoundly moving.

Each day at noon there was a press conference with various key

figures from the council; given my relative ignorance of ecumenical personalities, each day was an adventure. It was a game to see if I could determine what was going on by the time the press conference ended. (Many of these people spoke in foreign languages which significantly complicated things for me. It wasn't until my final day there that I discovered the availability of simultaneous translations.)

One afternoon a small, wiry black man wearing the lavender clerical collar of an Anglican entered the room to address us. He was greeted first by hushed silence and then spontaneous applause—all from an otherwise cynical press corps. As he spoke he exuded a pure Christian manner, unlike any I had known. His easy good-humor and straightforward wisdom combined to create an effect I can only describe as prophetic. This man was Bishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa, recent winner of the Nobel Peace Prize.

When I returned to Salt Lake I was filled to brimming with the experience. Desiring to share, I hurriedly met with a Church leader to discuss it. As my descriptions toppled over each other, I said, "I could sense Bishop Tutu was a man of God."

With a meaningful pause the man leaned forward in his chair as if to underscore his query and asked, "Oh yeah? What about President Kimball?"

In stunned response I heard myself mutter some standard affirmation of support for President Kimball, wondering all the while why he required one.

He leaned back, shook his head soberly, saying, "Oh, Sister Fletcher. Where is this odyssey leading you?"

To this man the light of inspiration and vision only rests upon those leading the LDS church. There can be no other "men of God."

My third memory is of one quarterly lecture of the B. H. Roberts Society. The topic concerned our individual responsibility as Christians to a troubled world. One of the participants, Rita Edmunds, was asked during the question-and-answer period

whether the LDS church might ever produce a Mother Teresa, the Catholic saint of Calcutta. Edmunds herself had served tirelessly with Elder Marion Hanks in the refugee camps of Hong Kong, teaching English and healing wounds; her answer, thus, the more surprising: "That will never happen," said she, "because, of course, all LDS women are expected to marry in order to achieve exaltation and could not devote a total life to service as Mother Teresa has."

I hope that she is wrong. I want to believe that God accepts all genuine gifts of self: the selfless lifelong nurturing of husband and children *and* the selfless care of the homeless, sick, or lost. Exaltation belongs to those who are poor in spirit, the meek, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers. Certainly some among us embody these qualities. Why not a Mormon Mother Teresa?

The week before Christmas 1984 Lowell Bennion (the man of God interviewed elsewhere in this issue) organized a food drive for the hungry of Utah. The staff of SUNSTONE along with many others throughout the city had the privilege of helping him with this effort. We were assigned in three-hour segments to stand at the door of a grocery store passing out handbills to incoming customers, suggesting they purchase an extra can or two for those in need and deposit the cans in our box on the way out. The store in which we served was located in a poorer area, quite close to downtown; the patrons themselves didn't seem too well off. (I failed to see a single yuppie the whole afternoon.)

A woman approached the box. The skin of her face was pulled downward as if by magnets, falling in piles off her chin (though her body was gaunt). The mouth small and tight, a scarf wrapped closely around her neck as if to hold her head in place. When she spoke it was nearly inaudible, raspy and choking.

"I have cancer of the tongue," she apologized. "I have had many operations on my tongue and face. I won't be around much longer."

"I am Mormon," she continued with pride. A twisted smile was all

her remaining muscles would allow. I watched as she relinquished more cans to our box than she carried out with her.

"We have to help each other," she clucked philosophically.

There may have been many individual Mormon Christians who helped to relieve the suffering Biafrans of my youth—I trust that there were. Mostly we mourned their plight in flashes of common humanity, but we spent our tears and energies on our own.

What has changed? On January 27, 1985, though I was not there, I am certain the members of my childhood ward joined the entire Church in a fast for the Ethiopians. A day of fasting for starving people we don't know, who have probably never heard the word *Mormon* and may never be "golden contacts" (although one never knows . . .).

Perhaps we are feeling a little more secure as a church. Perhaps we are beginning to recognize the goodness of other people and groups and are willing to join them in acts of global charity. Perhaps our own international growth has made us aware of the enormous differences in living standards between American Saints and all others. Perhaps we have come to sense our responsibilities to other peoples as well as other Mormons. Perhaps we are realizing what other Christians have known much longer: gospel truths cannot take hold in dying bodies.

Or perhaps our ward boundaries are expanding to include the world—the world is our ward.

One last speculation. In response to all the recent media attention given the Ethiopian situation, the Church Office Building was flooded with letters from anxious members encouraging the Church to action. Possibly, then, it is the combined voices of the Saints themselves that could be the difference. When we compel actions in the aggregate by uniting in a fast, we express our fullest potential for "suffering with" the rest of humankind. In so doing, we become a prophetic people not just people with a prophet.

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