

As long as families don't fit the ideal two-parent, multi cooperative-child families, we're going to need extensive activities within the community

THE IMPORTANCE OF PROGRAMS IN OUR RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY

By J. Lynn England

WHEN I WAS YOUNGER, I THOUGHT THAT I could successfully separate my roles as sociologist, Church member, father, and husband. The more I experience the more certain I become that all of those things have a way of blending and affecting what I see and say when I act in any one of the roles. So, although my original intention was to speak as a sociologist, I find that I'm speaking as a ten-year-old boy whose parents were relatively inactive in the Church; as a father who has children in his own family who are not perfect; as a bishop of an active middle class ward; and as a sociologist who doesn't have much data on this topic beyond his own personal experience. I'm going to take a conservative stance, where I'm used to taking relatively liberal stances. This doesn't bother me a great deal because these sorts of labels have come to mean less and less. For example, in the Soviet Union the liberals support a free market, and the conservatives push the socialist "Revolution."

The recent "Course Corrections" are part of a long sequence of corrections and refinements to programs and practices in the Church. The changes announced this past year are major and their importance is reflected by the ways in which they were introduced: through letters to local leaders; a satellite fireside in which members of the First Presidency demonstrated unanimous support for the changes as well as elaborating the details; and in a talk by Elder Boyd K. Packer to regional representatives in March 1990. In his talk, Elder Packer said that we are at a unique point in history because the Church is experiencing rapid growth, acceptance by the world, increased popularity, and greater and greater prosperity. Elder Packer points out that based on Book of Mormon history those

four conditions have always been accompanied by a fifth condition: apostasy. The challenge then is to maintain the four conditions and at the same time avoid the fifth.

The intention of the course correction is to assure that apostasy does not become a condition of the Church. It consists of returning to basic principles and eliminating traditions and programs that "over-medicate." The changes include funding of ward and stake activities through tithing rather than local fundraising and returning time to families instead of spending so much time in church activities. A great deal of Elder Packer's emphasis is focused on the idea that to avoid apostasy we must return responsibility to families, and we do that by returning to them their two primary resources—time and money. The basic idea is that, especially with time, when you reduce Church programming you create a vacuum. The local units are not to attempt to fill the vacuum so that the family will step in and fill it with its own activities and support.

BUDGET CHANGES

WHEN we talk about what is happening in the current course correction, speaking now not as a sociologist but as a bishop, one of the things I appreciate greatly is that I no longer have to do fundraising. The change allows me to do what I'm really supposed to: work on a personal basis with members of our ward. I no longer have to allow my favorite sweatshirt to be sold at an auction. A major part of our ward activities no longer consist of a fundraising component. We don't have to devote most of our bishopric meetings to figuring out how we are going to pay our obligations to the stake. Many of our ward members don't have to choose between family activities and paying into the ward budget.

In looking at the larger picture, beyond my own preferences and efforts in my church calling, this part of the course correction has two related consequences. Before the budget change, some ward and stake activities occurring in neighborhoods near my own were simply examples of conspicuous

J. LYNN ENGLAND is a professor of sociology at Brigham Young University. A version of this paper was originally given on 22 August 1990 as part of the Sunstone Symposium XII opening panel, "Tightening our Belts and Streamlining our Programs: Implications of the Church's Recent 'Course Corrections'."

consumption. While the change has resulted in the reduction of some such programs, it has also had a very positive consequence for wards with severely limited economic resources. Some wards are now able to have worthwhile activities they did not have funds for under the former budgeting system.

FAMILY CENTERED ACTIVITIES

MY assessment of the expectation that families fill the time vacuum left by a reduction in Church programs is very different from that concerning the ward budget. Many of the course corrections that the Church has been involved in have been successful. Nevertheless, not all announced corrections have even been implemented by the membership. I was reminded of this not too long ago as I sat in my ward during a sacrament meeting, “that wasn’t a missionary farewell,” to say godspeed to a missionary: one of his parents, supposedly giving a “gospel message,” shared all kinds of embarrassing information about their son. The meeting, “under the control of the bishop,” lasted for two hours instead of an hour and ten minutes. At the end the young man stood up and announced that the family was having a “non-open-house” at their home. Some traditions die hard. There are several reasons why the reduction of ward activities and an increase in family activities will probably not work very well.

First, there’s a questionable assumption that lies behind this particular course correction model—an image of a particular kind of family. It requires a model family which has two parents and several children: one that is a well-functioning household with parents who have the energy and the resources to do the many things that are necessary; one where the children are cooperative and responsive to parental direction, and where the parents themselves have testimonies of the gospel and are actively involved in the Church.

In one of his comments, Elder Packer said, “I used to worry as we designed programs to fit weak, unstable families, scheduling for men, women, children, youth, young adults, singles, everything with too little attention paid to the effect it was having on stable families.”¹ As a result, the new course correction is based on this particular image of stable families with their abundant resources and abilities to accomplish particular kinds of Church missions.

Unfortunately, the model family doesn’t exist very often. Where it does occur, it is often a temporary condition. Further, if you look at the pattern of Church growth outside of Utah’s Wasatch Front, typically individuals join the Church; intact families converting is relatively rare. So if you have a model based on intact, ideal families, and you have very few such

families, you’re basically doomed to serious difficulties. In addition to these conversion patterns, we live in a world where many of the members of our individual wards are either single persons, single parents, children with inactive parents, parents with inactive children, parents with unruly children, and on and on. Today, many two-parent families are also two-career families where resources such as time and energy are reduced.

We live in neighborhoods where many families, even when the resources are there, simply don’t choose to fill the time vacuum. I fluctuate between being amazed and appalled at the discrepancy between how the extra time that’s given to be spent (taking our children to visit their grandparents, reading the scriptures, etc.) and how it is spent (parents taking a nap or watching the television while the children roam the streets).

Another problem occurs when we try to correct traditions that have genuine reasons for their existence. That is, many of the things that develop in communities and organizations emerge to address real kinds of needs and problems. Quite often the need is already present and activities are engaged to meet that need and eventually become tradition: the innovations that successfully meet the need persist. Some traditions are maintained beyond their useful lifetime, but in most cases they are maintained because they continue to serve certain purposes. Hence, as a Church leader sitting behind a mother who has just lengthened her five-minute talk to twenty, praising her young, soon-to-become-a-missionary son, and

deciding whether to push the button that launches the trap door to get her out of there, you also remember that part of what she’s talking about is nineteen years of love and struggle and hope and prayer. And that all of that is now getting bound up in her twenty-minute talk. There is a certain reason for that particular kind of thing occurring frequently within the community. Ward camp-outs, birthday parties, youth conferences, and other ward traditions are there because they successfully help the ward membership attain their spiritual and social goals.

A third problem arises because even though we talk about reducing programs, so far there has been very little program reduction in terms of time commitments. The Young Women are still expected to meet every week; the scouting program still carries the same responsibilities and requirements that were present before. The number and frequency of leadership meetings, training meetings, and interviews does not seem to have been modified. Perhaps one reason for the failure to reduce programs is that, as I have said, many of the programs and activities are still important because of needs.

WHAT all this means to me is that there are important

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needs out there that families in isolation simply can't meet. One of the reasons for this—and sociologists took some time to rediscover this—is the extreme importance of community itself. It's not an isolated family that's striving for the salvation and exaltation of the members of the family, but it's the entire community. My own feeling is deeply colored as far as the Church is concerned by an early exposure to John Widtsoe who expressed the notion that humans "must not be allowed to stand alone. Brotherhood is the prime principle on which the Church is based."² He stressed the "Supremacy of Community."

Sociologists during the 1930s and 1940s talked about the disintegration of community: that in urban centers people became isolated individuals in families without community support. A more recent reexamination of those studies suggests that that may have been true in large, middle-class, suburban areas, but in most large cities, and small towns as well, community still persists. There is still a kind of closeness that's there to provide mutual support, and it's there for important reasons.

I suspect the same is true of the Church and our own ward organizations. The reason for the existence of congregational community is because when your sixteen-year-old decides that this is his or her year to be rebellious and when mom and dad talk he or she walks away, there's an Explorer or Laurel advisor or a bishop who can step into the gap and get away from family issues that occur when you have a teenager struggling to gain space and independence. The extreme importance of the mutual support that occurs in those settings mustn't be overlooked. A significant reinforcement of parental and church values comes when an admired neighbor isn't only an admired neighbor but someone who takes a group of Young Men or Young Women into the mountains for a week-and-a-half, putting-up with all of the anti-social behavior that mom and dad can't possibly stand for any period of time.

These are the sorts of things that ultimately lead us back to local units resisting many program reductions—because the programs meet important kinds of needs that the family in isolation simply can't accomplish.

Now, some criticize programs because they *assign* people to heart-felt service. As I mentioned, there is a real problem in trying to separate our roles: when my neighbor who is also my home teacher shovels my walk, I might question if it is my neighbor shoveling my walk or my home teacher. Or when someone contracts cancer and the neighborhood rallies behind the person, the reality is that they are neighbors *and* elders quorum presidents and visiting teachers. I'm not sure that there is a way we can successfully say which service is "program" and which is based on love and spontaneity. The basic idea is that even programs themselves can be enacted in

a sensitive, flexible, and loving fashion; they don't have to be the kind of constraining endeavor that we sometimes experience. It's true that sometimes the division of labor in programs keeps us from service and involvement—"that's not my job."³ The other side of that, however, is if you have a neighborhood of fifty people and someone's in need, all the research on helping behavior argues that the fifty people generally disperse responsibility among them and no one acts.

Whereas, if you do have someone who feels a responsibility and a personal tie, then something highly productive will take place.

Of course, certain important things can't be programmed, but one of the things that often happens in programs is that individuals are placed in circumstances where relationships develop. For example, the visiting teacher who becomes involved with a family she is assigned to visit: she develops a relationship that grows out of the program process.

And so, as we talk about course corrections and think in terms of reduction of programs, it is my opinion that as long as we live with families that don't fit the ideal two-parent, multi-cooperative-child families, we're going to be in the situation of needing extensive activities within the community and the local unit regardless of official pronouncements to the contrary. ☞

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NOTES

1. Boyd K. Packer. "Let Them Govern Themselves." Address delivered at a Regional Representative Seminar, March 30, 1990. (Reprinted in this issue, see page 33).

2. John Widtsoe, *A Rational Theology* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1965.), 161.

THE WORD WAS UNPERFECTED TILL MADE FLESH

The word was unperfected till made flesh:
With clay and spittle Christ restored the blind;
He laid his hands on those whom he would bless;
His body bled as he redeemed mankind.

As "Hamlet" issued forth from words and time
Or "David" was released from faulty stone,
So soul and body can become sublime;
The Spirit follows passion's path in bone.

Desired, fathered, and resired, then born
In blood that craves both earth and sky, we'd love
With heart, might, mind and strength; yet torn,
Abuse the means by which we'd rise above,

Refuse and swill and rut: damn the divine,
As devils still desire to enter swine.

—PENNY ALLEN