
FROM A TRUSTEE

LIFE IS TOO FULL OF SURPRISES



By Lisa Bolin Hawkins

MY FRIEND NEEDED to talk. "I got a really scary phone call this morning," she said. My mind leapt from heavy breathing to obscenities to threats. "What?" I asked.

"Elder So-and-so's office called," she said, naming a general authority neither of us had heard of, despite faithful attention to general conference and perusal of the *Ensign*. "They want us to come up tomorrow."

We spent a few minutes discussing the most likely callings for my friend or her husband, who between them could serve in any Church capacity. She did not doubt they would serve if called, but worried about the timing, the possible need to sell their home, and so on. I left in suspense. She was clinging to the ceiling.

Well, it wasn't anything important. No calling, no difficult decisions, no sacrifices. What matters is that my friend spent an anxious day and night for nothing. Perhaps the solution is to reduce the anxiety level in my circle of friends. But perhaps a better solution is to end the Church practice of summoning people to meetings without telling them why.

This time-honored tradition may have healthy roots. After all, it's wise to keep confidential the names of those considered and then rejected for a calling. The name of a member to whom a call has been extended is similarly private. Those who've been called to and accepted Church positions would be wise to limit the number of people who know about it until they are sustained. And a member who is considering a new calling should consult only a few discreet advisors.

However, the confidentiality surrounding these situations is meant to protect the pri-

vacuity of those who are considered for a calling and then rejected, or declined the call themselves. Other kinds of secrecy surrounding callings and some Church meetings seem unnecessary. For example, no child (or, far worse, spouse) should learn in sacrament meeting that a parent will be the new bishop or Relief Society president. Nor should members be subjected to the practice where, on Tuesday evening, the ward or stake executive secretary calls to set up an unexplained appointment on Sunday between a member and the bishop or stake president. The member is left to wonder for almost a week whether he or she is "in trouble" (because the current practice is rather like being called to the principal's office in school), what callings might be extended, from what callings he or she might be released, or whether some unexpected topic will be discussed.

The current "keep 'em guessing" system creates anxiety, a perceived need to respond to the subject of the meeting without time for prayer, consultation, or reflection, and a sense of anticlimax when one discovers once again, after a week of rich imagination, that Church membership usually requires small-but-steady service, not heroic quests.

Leaders undoubtedly find some benefits to the current system. If, during the preliminaries, a leader discovers some impediment to a planned call, he can simply refrain from extending the call and explain that concern for the member's welfare prompted the meeting. Unfortunately, this approach may result in a decision not to extend a call when the impediment was more perceived than real or when the member would have overcome the difficulty, given the chance. In all cases it results in a one-sided decision, rather than an adult discussion of the needs of the member, the organization, and the balance between the two.

Another possible benefit to leaders is a

desirable result. Having served in callings (e.g., the Primary presidency in a ward with sixty-six adults and more than 150 children) where keeping the organization staffed was sometimes more a matter of desperation than inspiration, I sympathize with leaders who wish to minimize the chances that a member will turn down a calling. I also sympathize with members who want time to think and pray about a possible calling, something that's hard to do when the bishop or one of his counselors calls you in for a few minutes and assumes you'll accept a calling on the spot.

A friend of mine was attending a ward where her family was likely to buy a home and was called, with her husband, to a meeting with five unfamiliar ward leaders. She thought it was a "get-acquainted" meeting, but was asked to accept a calling in the Young Women. Her family had just moved three thousand miles. She was looking for work, her husband was about to begin a demanding job, and her children would be attending new schools. Closing on the new house was a month away, everything possible was going wrong with the financing, and there was no guarantee that she would ever be a member of the ward. The calling, which would start immediately, involved a lot of scheduled meetings compared to the woman's previous calling as gospel doctrine teacher. She had never worked with the Young Women before.

After explaining all this, my friend asked that she be allowed to "defer" the calling for two weeks, when her circumstances would be more certain and she would have had time to pray and consult her husband. At that time, she said, she thought she would be in a position to accept the calling.

That was Tuesday. The bishopric asked her to contact a counselor on Thursday. When she did, and repeated her concerns, the counselor said the bishopric wanted to staff the position as soon as possible and so they couldn't wait. Since then, she has moved into that ward and has seen many reasons why it would have been a good idea to serve in the calling extended to her, working with the Young Women. She is sorry the bishopric was unwilling to wait the two weeks she feels she and her family needed and, although she has served in other wards in every calling available to her, feels "branded" as someone less-than-valiant because she did not accept the calling immediately.

The problems of "anonymous meetings" can be seen on a group level, too. It was announced in our sacrament meeting one

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Sunday that the Young Adults aged eighteen to thirty were invited to attend a meeting that evening at the stake center. It was one of several announcements and no other information was given. The next Sunday, it was announced that a new Young Adult ward had been formed at the meeting. I wondered how many people had attended; after three hours of Church starting at 8:30 in morning, I am unlikely to go to an evening meeting unless I know why I'm going. The Young Adults who didn't attend may feel left out or less committed to their new ward. It would have done no harm to have invited the Young Adults to attend the meeting "where a new Young Adult ward will be formed for our stake."

Which leads to the first of several suggestions:

1. *Tell people why they are being asked to attend a meeting.* The person who makes the appointment need not be absolutely specific, although he could. Statements like "the bishop wants to discuss a calling in the Sunday School"; "the bishop wants to get better acquainted with you"; or "a committee is being formed for the fall social"; or even "the bishop hopes to lay some rumors to rest" are better than nothing. These more-specific statements may alleviate anxiety, or at least provide it a focus. The adage that whatever one imagines is likely to be worse than the truth often applies to meetings with Church leaders.
2. *Allow members to explain their circumstances when they are offered a calling.* Many Church leaders, as well as Church tradition, teach that it is inappropriate to turn down a calling because the leader issuing the calling has received inspiration and confirmation from the Lord.

Anyone who has been a part of the process of issuing callings knows that the Lord lets us make mistakes and the ideal, inspired scenario often is not the case. A member may not be in a position to accept a calling—perhaps for reasons he or she would rather not discuss, although they have nothing to do with worthiness. My idea of a wise bishop is one who asks members what callings they enjoy or think they would enjoy most. Although members' preferences won't always coincide with the ward's needs or with inspiration, when they do, there is no reason not to give people callings they can approach with enthusiasm. And, despite the current stigma, there should be no reason for members not to ask to be released if their circumstances change or they find a

calling is more than they can handle and remain physically, emotionally, and spiritually healthy.

3. *Assume that members will take time to consider a calling.* Once, I knew through inspiration even before meeting with the bishop that I would be called to a certain position (one I didn't want, but accepted). Other times, a calling has been obviously right and I have accepted immediately. But other times, I have accepted in the "heat of the moment" and later wished I had taken time to pray and consult my husband. Those are the callings I've struggled with and regretted.

Church leaders should make "thinking time" a part of the schedule. Members should be called to a position and then asked to pray about it, with a time set several days later for the member to return with a decision. Members should be discouraged from accepting callings at the time they are extended, especially callings that are particularly time-consuming or demanding in other ways.

Most of these suggestions can be summed up in the principle that Church leaders should treat adult members as adults: adults who know their own circumstances better than the leader does, who are dedicated to the work of the Lord, but who also have other responsibilities and needs. Consider

the analogy to a university. A professor might ask that a student come to her office at a certain time without explaining why (although most of us would consider that rude). However, almost never would a professor make an appointment with a colleague without giving him some idea of what the proposed conference is about. Similarly, in a family, children are expected to come when their parents call them without a lot of explaining or justifying. Husbands and wives, however, usually call to each other with some form of explanation, even if it's just, "Honey, can you come look at this? I'm in the basement," or "We need to talk about a vacation."

In the Church, although some of us have stewardship over others, the adults are more like colleagues, or better still, adult brothers and sisters, than we are like teachers and young students or parents and children. The practice of summoning other adults to meetings with no explanation and expecting that they will agree to whatever is proposed without consideration perpetuates a false idea of how one exercises priesthood power. Anonymous meetings and surprise callings jolt one's spirit—they are neither long-suffering, nor meek, nor kind, nor loving. This is one tradition that could, and should, go the way of other false traditions. ☒

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