

## AN OLIVE LEAF

“... plucked from the Tree of Paradise, the Lord's message of peace to us.”  
(See History of the Church 1:316 and D&C 88.)

## THE WEIGHTIER MATTERS

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NEAR THE CENTER OF THE SALT LAKE VALLEY AT THE end of a picturesque lane lives a little lady of seventy-five in a two-room shack. Her house is heated by a coal range which has a broken grate and a big hole between the fire box and the oven that prevents her from baking. The pipe from the stove to the chimney has a large crack that releases smoke and soot into her kitchen. She heats water for dishes and a sponge bath on top of the stove. Since the drainage system doesn't work, she throws her waste water out the front door. Years ago, a leaky roof rotted away the bedroom ceiling and caved it in; so she now sleeps on the living room couch and looks up at another ceiling that is bowed towards her. The kitchen floor is covered with pieces of linoleum to cover up the cracks.

Her Social Security income is about \$173 per month, so she can't fix up the house herself. Her husband died 19 years ago, her only son eight years later. She has two daughters—one divorced with four children, the other chronically ill with six children and a husband of modest means.

Less than a block away stands an LDS chapel where the faithful meet regularly to praise God, to take upon them the name of Jesus Christ, and to discuss the Lord's poor in priesthood quorums. A few miles to the east, other Saints live in luxurious homes with many bedrooms and multiple bathrooms.

While this woman's condition is extreme, it is not wholly unique. In the Salt Lake Valley, there are 58,000 persons over 65, 22 percent (about 12,000) of whom live below the Federal poverty level. They must go without food or heat or medical care to survive. How can these conditions exist in Zion?

Similar conditions were found in ancient Israel in the days of Amos (760 B.C.). Large class distinctions had developed, a few people becoming rich while many suffered in poverty. The wealthy had no regard for the plight of the poor but denied the poor their legal rights and sold debtors into servitude. Amos, in the fury of the Lord, lashed out against those who lived in luxury, indifferent to the suffering of their fellow Israelites.

“Woe unto them that are at ease in Zion, . . . That lie on beds of ivory, and stretch themselves upon their couches, and eat the lambs of the flock, and the calves out of the midst of the stall; That chant to the sound of the viol, and invent to themselves instruments of musick, like David; That drink wine in bowls, and anoint themselves with the chief ointments: *but they are not grieved for the affliction of Joseph.* (Amos 6:1, 4–6; emphasis added.)

The scene Amos describes might be compared to a ward dinner or social. The Saints are busy enjoying the food and entertainment, and they do not sorrow for the suffering of their brothers. Somehow these affluent Saints lack any concern for those beyond their eyesight who are in need. Perhaps the greatest modern convenience is the ability to

insulate against the poor—to assume either that there are no poor nearby or that some church or government program will take care of them.

There is a couple in their sixties in the south end of the Salt Lake Valley who have had neither teeth nor dentures for four years. They each have a pair of old misfit uppers they put in their mouths to go to funerals. The rest of the time they stay home, social isolates, surviving on soft and liquid foods. One set of dentures costs \$350, but the cost is not covered by Medicare. Most of the health needs of the elderly—tooth, eye, and ear care—are not covered by Medicare. Government programs are not the answer. The generosity of some physicians is not enough. Occasional fits of charity are not sufficient.

Another woman, an intelligent, cultured lady of eighty-three, lives alone in her comfortable Salt Lake home. She is not in need financially, but she is nearly blind. Just cooking a meal is difficult, even dangerous for her. After she has eaten, she worries that she has forgotten to turn off the stove. When she answers the door, she wonders if it could be an intruder. Once a voracious reader, now she is unable to read her mail, write a letter, or look up a number in the phone book. She sits alone hour after hour in a dark room reviewing her life again and again, trying to keep her keen mind from slipping into forgetfulness and aimless wandering. She longs for conversation. She would like to have someone read to her. Friends and neighbors are good to her, but their occasional visits make up only a small fraction of her waking moments.

Yet Latter-day Saint youth in the surrounding area have time for skiing, shows, popular concerts, television and sports events. In church the list of announcements often includes fathers and sons' outings, Halloween and Christmas parties, even money-raising projects to finance a trip from Salt Lake to Disneyland. Seldom is a planned service project announced. It seems we are more often motivated by personal excitement and entertainment than by a sense of brotherhood or community.

In a village in Idaho a few years ago, my neighbor's haystack caught fire and burned to the ground. It was his winter's supply of hay to feed ten cows—his whole livelihood. Neighbors rushed to the scene, contained the fire with a bucket brigade, and saved his barn. Then they went home and each returned with a load of hay to rebuild their brother's stack.

Perhaps it is difficult in an urban society to reach out to the stranger, to the non-member as well as to the co-believer. But we must become personally involved. Our time and means are desperately needed, not only to build human relationships but to save the health and lives of the poor in our midst. Otherwise how can we escape the wrath of Amos or the condemnation of Jesus, who said in his day: “Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithes of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone.” (Matt. 23:23.) ☒