

Counseling with Our Councils

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As recently as the November 2012 Worldwide Leadership Training, I stressed the critical significance for stake presidents and bishops to work through their inspired councils to meet the spiritual and temporal needs of those who live within their respective congregations. There has been a renewed emphasis on councils in the new Church Handbook, which was released in late 2010. It occurs that it is time to take a fresh, updated look at what it means to counsel within our councils.

One social commentator has written that "the present illegitimacy ratio is not only unprecedented in the past two centuries; it is unprecedented, so far as we know, in American history going back to colonial times, and in English history from Tudor times" (Himmelfarb, *De-Moralization of Society*, 23). And a noted family historian at Princeton University, Lawrence Stone, has said: "The scale of marital breakdowns in the West since 1960 has no historical precedent that I know of, and seems unique. ... There has been nothing like it for the last 2,000 years, and probably longer" (quoted in Popenoe, "World without Fathers," 13).

Today the family itself is under attack. Media images suggest a world in which parents are old-fashioned, uninformed, or completely inconsequential. If you believe what you see on TV or in movies, friends and lovers have replaced siblings and spouses as the most meaningful and impactful human relationships. Political attempts to redefine the family have prompted worldwide debate and discussion about the relevance of the family as a social institution. For perhaps the first time in history, there is a significant and sometimes very vocal and persuasive segment of contemporary culture that wonders if the family comprised of a traditional marriage of one man to one woman with their children is worth protecting.

President Thomas S. Monson said, "We must be vigilant in a world which has moved so far from that which is spiritual.... The winds of change swirl around us and the moral fiber of society continues to disintegrate before our very eyes" ("*Stand in Holy Places*," 83, 8G).

Because of these conditions, ever-escalating and powerfully troubling, I have continued to consider the question: How can the Church best prepare all of its members to cope with today's challenges and ever-changing circumstances?

The day is long past when any one leader, either man or woman - or, for that matter, any parent - can provide all that is so desperately needed in the lives of our families and Church members. If we are to succeed in leading our Heavenly Father's children back home to Him, we must counsel together and help each other.

As has always been the case, we each bear the primary responsibility for meeting our own spiritual and temporal needs and many of us can turn to immediate and extended family members for assistance, counsel, and encouragement. But the Lord has also established both in the Church and in our homes, a system of councils designed to strengthen and uplift every Latter-day Saint. These range from the Council of the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles to the family council, and all play an important role in blessing lives and saving souls.

Elder L. Tom Perry of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles explained that the family council meeting is an ideal setting to teach children "how to prepare for their roles as family members and prospective parents." In family councils, he said, mothers and fathers can provide training in such topics as "temple preparation, missionary preparation, home management, family finances, career development, education, community involvement, cultural improvement, acquisition and care of real and personal property, family planning calendars, use of leisure time, and work assignments." He also suggested that before family members come together to discuss matters as a council, parents could profit by holding "a family executive committee meeting to plan family strategy. The executive committee, composed of a husband and wife, would meet together to fully communicate, discuss, plan, and prepare for their leadership role in the family organization" ("For Whatsoever a Man Soweth, That Shall He Also Reap," *Ensign*, November 1980, 7-9).

Like other councils, the family council can be a positive, causative force in the lives of Church members. It can help bring order to the home, provide a forum for soothing hurt feelings, give parents an important tool with which to combat outside influences, and create an opportunity to teach profound gospel truths. But like other councils, the family council will be effective only to the extent that it is properly formed and implemented. Indeed, the principles that govern family councils are basically the same as the principles that govern other Church councils. Their overall objective is identical. We want for our families the same thing Heavenly Father desires for His family: "immortality and eternal life" (Moses 1:39). We want to develop loving relationships that will extend beyond this life.

We read in the revelations, "Behold, mine house is a house of order, saith the Lord God, and not a house of confusion" (D&C 132:8). Further, the Lord instructed His nineteenth-century followers to "organize yourselves; prepare every needful thing; and establish a house, even a house of prayer, a house of fasting, a house of faith, a house of learning, a house of glory, a house of order, a house of God" (D&C 88:119). Although these scriptural verses refer specifically to God's holy temples, the same principles can and should be applied within the walls of our own homes. Family councils, led by righteous, loving parents who are striving to teach their children to love and respect each other, can make a difference in creating a sense of discipline, order, and loving cooperation in the home.

Family Councils

A mother of seven children wrote, "As you might expect, with seven children I often used to find myself frustrated by problems that are common to day-to-day living". "Occasionally I felt overwhelmed, and then discouragement would set in. Those feelings always passed, but I did wonder if we would ever make any real progress toward becoming the kind of family that we felt we should be."

Then the parents heard one of the Brethren indicate that "the basic council of the Church is the family council."

"This hit me with great force," the mother said. "After I discussed it with my husband, we decided to try using family councils in our home. We explained it to the children and began holding family councils every Sunday night.

"I have been amazed and delighted by the results," she continued. "One by one, we have begun to tackle problems we see in our family. We aren't a perfect family by any means, but for the first time I can see that we are starting to make real progress. And when problems do crop up, I just make a note, as other family members do, and we take these notes to the next family council. We discuss them and deal with them there."

Too often family councils are held only when the parents feel there are problems - and when parents think they have all the answers. Just as presidents and bishops in other Church councils err if they believe that it is their responsibility to come up with all of the answers to the problems and concerns facing their respective organizations, parents are missing valuable insight and inspiration if they choose not to give due consideration to the ideas their children bring to the family council. Remember, although children never have the right to be disrespectful to their parents, they are entitled to be heard. They need a calm setting where discussion can take place on rules or principles they do not understand-a place where they know they are loved and at which their voice will at least be heard. Family councils are ideal forums for effective communication to take place. Family rules and procedures are more likely to be accepted and followed if all family members have been given the opportunity to participate in the discussions and agree to the rules.

There are as many different kinds of family councils as there are different kinds of families. Family councils can consist of one parent and one child, one parent and several children, two parents and one child, two parents and several children, or just two parents. Regardless of the size or makeup of the family council, the things that really matter are loving motivations, an atmosphere that encourages free and open discussion, and a willingness to listen to the honest input of all council members - as well as to the whisperings of the Holy Spirit as it comes to confirm truth and direction.