

## Episode 14

# Stories from General Conference CALLINGS

**NARRATOR:** This is “Stories From General Conference.” The topic for this episode of “Stories from General Conference” is “callings.” In this context a “calling” may be defined as a Church-related assignment a person is asked to perform by the leaders of a church unit. These leaders would normally also be functioning in a “calling”. “Callings” are made under inspiration and provide opportunities for service. In a well-known Book of Mormon account, King Benjamin told his people, “And behold, I tell you these things that ye may learn wisdom; that ye may learn that when ye are in the service of your fellow beings ye are only in the service of your God.” Callings are one way we can serve God and our fellowman.

**Callings come from God, and when this is understood, commitment rises to a higher level. In the October 1997 General Conference, President Boyd K. Packer shared a experience that illustrates this point.**

(President Boyd K. Packer, Saturday Morning Session, October 1997)

“Leaders must learn how to issue calls. When I was a young man, I heard Elder Spencer W. Kimball speak in a stake conference. He said that as a new stake president in Arizona, he left his office in the bank to call a man to be stake leader of the young men.

He said, "Jack, how would you like to be leader of the young men in the stake?"

Jack responded, "Aw, Spencer, you don't mean me. I couldn't do anything like that."

He tried to persuade him, but Jack refused the call.

Brother Kimball went back to his office to brood over his failure. He knew the stake presidency had been inspired to make the call. Finally it came to him: he had made a terrible mistake! Of course, *Jack* would not respond.

Perhaps he recalled what the prophet Jacob had said when he "taught them in the temple, *having first obtained mine errand from the Lord.*"

President Kimball now did as Jacob had done in ancient times. He "obtained [his] errand from the Lord."

He returned to ask Jack to forgive him for not doing it right and started over: "Last Sunday the stake presidency prayerfully considered who should lead the young men in

the stake. There were several names; yours was among them. We all felt that you were the man. We knelt in prayer. The Lord confirmed to the three of us, by revelation, that you were to be called to that position."

Then he said, "As a servant of the Lord, I am here to deliver that call."

Then Jack said, "Well, Spencer, if you are going to put it that way . . ."

President Kimball replied, "I *am* putting it that way!"

Of course, *Jack* would not respond to a casual invitation from *Spencer*, but he could not refuse a call from the Lord through Stake President Kimball. He served faithfully and with inspiration."

**NARRATOR:**

**President Packer told a remarkable experience of how one person learned that inspiration for callings comes from our Father in Heaven. This experience was recounted in the Priesthood Session of the October 2002 General Conference.**

(President Boyd K. Packer, Priesthood Session, October 2002)

President Harold B. Lee told of calling a patriarch. He and the stake president had gone to the man's home. He had been out with his sons on the welfare farm all day and was tired and weary and covered with grime.

President Lee said, "I made him more weary when I told him what it was I had come for—that he was to be called as the patriarch to that stake."

After the morning session of conference, where the man had borne a remarkable testimony, they went to a basement office.

The stake president's wife was present and wrote to President Lee: "As you walked over to put your hands on [his] head, I thought to myself, He is a man with whom we socialize. We have gone on trips with him, to dances. . . . Now part of his responsibility is to declare the lineage from which each one has come in these blessings. He hasn't been a student of ancient languages—how is he going to know?"

". . . You walked over and put your hands on his head, and a light came from behind you and went right through you and into him. And I thought to myself, Isn't that a strange coincidence that the sunlight has come in just at that moment. And then I realized that there was [no window,] no sunlight. I was witnessing the answer to my question. . . . That light came from somewhere beyond Brother Lee and went through Brother Lee into this patriarch. Then I knew where he was going to get that information—by the revelations of Almighty God."

And so it must be. Whenever a patriarch is ordained or pronounces a blessing, that same light, though it may be unseen, is present. It empowers a patriarch to declare lineage and

to give a prophetic blessing, notwithstanding that he himself may be a man of very ordinary capacity.

**NARRATOR: Callings are made through revelation from God. President Gordon B. Hinckley had a powerful witness as a young general authority of the Church which left him with a testimony of how revelation operates in the calling of a stake president. He shared his personal experience in the April 2000 Priesthood Session of General Conference.**

(President Gordon B. Hinckley, Priesthood Session, April 2000)

I recall being assigned to reorganize a stake about 40 years ago. The president had suddenly died. The Brethren asked me to go down and speak at the funeral and reorganize the stake. I had never done this before. I was new as a General Authority. I was to be all alone.

When I arrived, I was taken to another town, where I participated in the funeral service. I asked all of the stake officers and the bishops to remain after the service and announced that a reorganization of the stake would take place the next evening.

I asked the mission president to sit with me as I interviewed the brethren, none of whom I knew. We interviewed late into the evening. I soon discovered there were problems in the stake. There were divisive feelings. When we were all through, I said to the mission president, "I am not satisfied. Are there not others?" He said, "I know of only one man whom we have not interviewed. He moved here rather recently on a transfer in his company. He is the second counselor in a bishopric. I do not know him well. He resides in another city."

I said, "Let's go see him." We drove and went to the hotel where I would be staying for the night. Here I was, having interviewed all of these brethren and having not found one that I considered worthy to preside and having scheduled the reorganization for the next evening.

We arrived late at the hotel. I called the man; a sleepy voice answered the phone. I said that I wished to see him that evening. I apologized for calling him so late. He said, "I've just gone to bed, but I'll put on my clothes and come."

He came to the hotel. The conversation that followed was most interesting. He was a graduate of BYU in petroleum geology. He worked for a big oil company. He had served elsewhere in positions of responsibility in the Church. He knew the program of the Church. He had served a mission. He knew the gospel. He was mature in the Church. And the territory for which he was responsible as an employee of the oil company was exactly the same as the territory of the stake. I told him we would telephone him in the morning and excused him.

The mission president went on his way, and I went to bed.

At about three o'clock the next morning I awoke. Doubts began to flood my mind. This man was almost a total stranger to the people of the stake. I got out of bed and got on my knees and pleaded with the Lord for direction. I did not hear a voice, but I had a very distinct impression that said, "I told you who should be stake president. Why do you continue to ask?"

Ashamed of myself for troubling the Lord again, I went to bed and fell asleep. I phoned the man early the next morning and issued to him a call to serve as president of the stake. I asked him to select counselors.

That evening when people gathered for the meeting, there was much speculation as to who would be the stake president, but no one even thought of this man. When I announced his name, people looked at one another for a clue to discovering who he was. I had him come to the stand. I announced his counselors and had them come to the stand.

Even though they did not know him, the people sustained him. Things began to happen in that stake. The people had known for a long time that they needed a stake center, but they had been uncertain and argumentative as to where it should go. He went to work and within 18 months had a beautiful new stake center ready for dedication. He unified the stake. He traveled up and down, meeting the people and extending his love to them. That stake, which had grown tired, came to life and literally bubbled with new enthusiasm. It stands as a shining star in the large constellation of stakes in this Church.

Brethren, I can testify to you that revelation from the Lord is made manifest in the naming of a stake president.

**NARRATOR: Revelation received to make callings can come in many ways. In the October 2002 Priesthood session of General Conference, President Boyd K. Packer told a personal experience about how a new stake patriarch was identified.**

(President Boyd K. Packer, Priesthood Session, October 2002)

I recall a conference where the patriarch was very old. While his ordination would remain in force, it was time that he be excused from giving blessings.

The stake president recommended a man with much leadership experience. However, I did not get the feeling that he should be the patriarch.

I knew that the First Presidency had said to stake presidents: "Because a man has filled with credit a presiding office and has attained a good age is no reason why he should or should not make a good patriarch; . . . [He should be one who has] developed within [him] the spirit of the patriarchs; in fact, this should be [his] leading characteristic, . . . [a man] of wisdom, possessed of the gift and spirit of blessing as well."<sup>5</sup>

As the evening meeting was about to begin, an older man came partway down the aisle and, unable to find a seat, went to the back of the chapel. He was not quite as well dressed as most of the others and obviously had spent much time out-of-doors.

I whispered to the stake president, "Who is that man?"

Sensing what was on my mind, he said, "Oh, I don't think he could be our patriarch. He lives at the far edge of an outlying ward and has never held any leadership in a bishopric or high council."

He was invited to give the opening prayer, and he had said but a few words when that confirmation came, as it does by revelation, "This is the patriarch."

As I recall, he had six sons and one daughter. The youngest was then serving a mission, as had his older brothers, who were married and scattered about the country, all serving faithfully in the Church.

"What about your daughter?" I asked.

"Oh," he said, "you have met her. She is the wife of a counselor in the stake presidency."

I thought, "A patriarch, this man is a patriarch indeed!"

Before the general session, I met the aging patriarch in the foyer and said, "We are going to give you some help today."

He said, "Oh, thank you! I would appreciate that very, very much."

I said, "Let me give you the name of the new patriarch; then you and I and the stake president will be the only ones who know."

When I named the man, he was startled and said, "Isn't *that* interesting! I saw him among the people, coming into the building, and said to myself, 'Wouldn't he make a wonderful patriarch?'" It was an inspiring confirmation from the old patriarch.

**NARRATOR:**

**There are many and various callings in the church. But no matter the calling, the purpose is the same; to serve one another. Many times, people feel unprepared and unqualified for a calling. In the April 2000 General Conference, Elder Henry B. Eyring shared a story to illustrate this point.**

(Elder Henry B. Eyring, Sunday Morning Session, April 2000)

I saw a young man nearly overwhelmed by a new call not long ago. The Lord had inspired His servant to call him to be the president of a stake. The young man had never been a bishop. He had never served in a stake presidency. The stake had in it many men of greater maturity and experience.

He was humbled when he heard the call. His wife through tears said to the servant of the Lord who called him, "Are you sure?" Her husband said quietly that he would serve. His wife nodded her support, tears streaming down her face. As you might have done at such a time, he wanted to talk with his father, who was far away. He called him that afternoon on the telephone. His father has been a dairy farmer all his life. He raised the boy into a man through milking cows and letting his son observe him stop to talk with neighbors to see how they were doing. The next morning, in his first talk as a stake president, this is how he recounted the conversation with his father:

"Many of you that know me know I am a man of few words. I must have gotten that from my father. As I called him yesterday to let him know that I was being called as a stake president, his one response to me was, 'Well, you better do a lot of praying.' That was his counsel to me. What better counsel could he give?"

His father couldn't have done much better. And you can see why. The Lord is his only hope for success. Most of the help will come through the ministrations of the Holy Ghost. The Lord's servants cannot succeed without it. We can only have the Holy Ghost as a companion if we plead for it and if we qualify for it. And both require a lot of praying, praying with real faith in our Heavenly Father and in His Beloved Son and in the Holy Ghost (see D&C 90:24; A of F 1:1).

**NARRATOR: President Thomas S. Monson shared a personal experience in the April 2007 Priesthood Session of General Conference illustrating how his own faith and courage were exercised in accepting a calling.**

(President Thomas S. Monson, Priesthood Session, April 2007)

My brethren, the priesthood is a gift which brings with it not only special blessings but also solemn responsibilities. It is our responsibility to conduct our lives so that we are ever worthy of the priesthood we bear. We live in a time when we are surrounded by much that is intended to entice us into paths which may lead to our destruction. To avoid such paths requires determination and courage.

Courage counts. This truth came to me in a most vivid and dramatic manner many years ago. I was serving as a bishop at the time. The general session of our stake conference was being held in the Assembly Hall on Temple Square in Salt Lake City. Our stake presidency was to be reorganized. The Aaronic Priesthood, including members of bishoprics, were providing the music for the conference. As we concluded singing our first selection, President Joseph Fielding Smith, our conference visitor, stepped to the pulpit and read for sustaining approval the names of the new stake presidency. He then mentioned that Percy Fetzer, who became our new stake president, and John Burt, who became the first counselor—each of whom had been counselors in the previous presidency—had been made aware of their new callings before the conference began. However, he indicated that I, who had been called to be second counselor in the new presidency, had no previous knowledge of the calling and was hearing of it for the first

time as my name was read for sustaining vote. He then announced, "If Brother Monson is willing to respond to this call, we will be pleased to hear from him now."

As I stood at the pulpit and gazed out on that sea of faces, I remembered the song we had just sung. It pertained to the Word of Wisdom and was titled "Have Courage, My Boy, to Say No." That day I selected as my acceptance theme "Have Courage, My Boy, to Say Yes." The call for courage comes constantly to each of us—the courage to stand firm for our convictions, the courage to fulfill our responsibilities, the courage to honor our priesthood.

**NARRATOR: Just as President Monson, we too should decide to “say yes”. Callings allow us to serve others, and in return, our own lives are blessed. In the Priesthood Session of the October 2000 General Conference, President Thomas S. Monson shared a poignant example of this principle.**

(President Thomas S. Monson, Priesthood Session, October 2000)

Those who bear the Aaronic Priesthood should be given opportunities to magnify their callings in that priesthood.

For example, when I was ordained a deacon, our bishopric stressed the sacred responsibility which was ours to pass the sacrament. Emphasized was proper dress, a dignified bearing, and the importance of being clean inside and out.

As we were taught the procedure in passing the sacrament, we were told that we were assisting every member in a renewal of the covenant of baptism, with its responsibilities and blessings. We were also told how we should assist a particular brother--Louis--who had a palsied condition, that he might have the opportunity to partake of the sacred emblems.

How I remember being assigned to pass the sacrament to the row where Louis sat. I was hesitant as I approached this wonderful brother, and then I saw his smile and the eager expression of gratitude that showed his desire to partake. Holding the tray in my left hand, I took a piece of bread and pressed it to his open lips. The water was later served in the same way. I felt I was on holy ground. And indeed I was. The privilege to pass the sacrament to Louis made better deacons of us all.

**NARRATOR: Activities relating to a calling can take unusual forms, but lives are always blessed. In the April 2001 General Conference, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland shared the following example about an unusual call and the service of some senior missionaries.**

(Elder Jeffrey R. Holland, Saturday Morning Session, April 2001)

Many more of us can prepare for senior missionary service when that time in our life comes. As the senior couples at the MTC in Provo have said on a poster, "Let's lengthen our shuffle!" I just returned from a long trip which took me to half a dozen missions. Everywhere I went during those weeks, I found senior couples giving the most remarkable and rewarding leadership imaginable, providing stability, maturity, and experience that no 19-year-old or 21-year-old could possibly be expected to provide. I found all kinds of couples, including a few former mission and temple presidents and their wives, who had come to parts of the world totally unknown to them to quietly, selflessly serve a second or a third or a fourth mission. I was deeply moved by every one of those people.

I had lunch recently with Elder and Sister John Hess of Ashton, Idaho. "We're just old potato farmers," John told me, but that is precisely what the nation of Belarus in the Russia Moscow Mission needed. For years the very best potato yields on government plots of ground there had been 50 sacks of potatoes a hectare. Considering it takes 22 sacks of seed to plant a hectare, the return was poor indeed. They needed help.

Brother Hess asked for ground just three feet away from the government plots, rolled up his sleeves, and went to work with the same seed, tools, and fertilizer available in Belarus. Come harvest time they began to dig, then called on others to dig, then called on everyone to dig. With the same rainfall and soil, but with an extra measure of Idaho industry, experience, and prayer, the plots planted by the Hesses produced a whopping 550 sacks per hectare—11 times better than any prior yield on that land. At first no one would believe the difference. They wondered if secret teams had come in the night or if some wonder drug had been used. But it was none of that. Brother Hess said, "We needed a miracle, so we asked for one." Now just little more than a year later, in that community young proselyting missionaries are finding much more success just because an "old potato farmer" from Idaho answered the call of his church.

**NARRATOR: We should not allow our own perceived deficiencies to prevent our service in a calling. In the April 2002 Priesthood Session of General Conference, President Thomas S. Monson related the following incident, which reminds us that our capabilities may be greater than we think.**

(President Thomas S. Monson, Priesthood Session, April 2002)

Should any of us feel inadequate or tend to doubt the ability to respond to a priesthood call to serve the Lord, let this divine truth be remembered: "With God all things are possible."

Not long ago I learned of the passing of James Womack, the patriarch of the Shreveport Louisiana Stake. He had served long and had blessed ever so many lives. Years before, President Spencer W. Kimball shared with President Gordon B. Hinckley, Elder Bruce R. McConkie, and me an experience he had in the appointment of a patriarch for the Shreveport Louisiana Stake of the Church. President Kimball described how he

interviewed, how he searched, and how he prayed, that he might learn the Lord's will concerning the selection. For some reason, none of the suggested candidates was the man for this assignment at this particular time.

The day wore on; the evening meetings began. Suddenly President Kimball turned to the stake president and asked him to identify a particular man seated perhaps two-thirds of the way back from the front of the chapel. The stake president replied that the individual was James Womack, whereupon President Kimball said: "He is the man the Lord has selected to be your stake patriarch. Please have him meet with me in the high council room following the meeting."

Stake president Charles Cagle was startled, for James Womack did not wear the label of a typical man. He had sustained terrible injuries while in combat during World War II. He lost both hands and part of an arm, as well as most of his eyesight and part of his hearing. Nobody had wanted to let him into law school when he returned, yet he finished third in his class at Louisiana State University.

That evening as President Kimball met with Brother Womack and informed him that the Lord had designated him to be the patriarch, there was a protracted silence in the room. Then Brother Womack said: "Brother Kimball, it is my understanding that a patriarch is to place his hands on the head of the person he blesses. As you can see, I have no hands to place on the head of anyone."

Brother Kimball, in his kind and patient manner, invited Brother Womack to stand behind the chair on which Brother Kimball was seated. He then said, "Now, Brother Womack, lean forward and see if the stumps of your arms will reach the top of my head." To Brother Womack's joy, they touched Brother Kimball's head, and the exclamation came forth, "I can reach you! I can reach you!"

"Of course you can reach me," responded Brother Kimball. "And if you can reach me, you can reach any whom you bless. I will probably be the shortest person you will ever have seated before you."

President Kimball reported to us that when the name of James Womack was presented to the stake conference, "the hands of the members shot heavenward in an enthusiastic vote of approval."

**NARRATOR: Service in our callings is sometimes inconvenient. The larger picture may never be seen, or it may be discovered long after the perceived sacrifice. This was illustrated by Elder Jeffrey R. Holland in the October 2002 General Conference.**

(Elder Jeffrey R. Holland, Saturday Afternoon Session, October 2002)

May I share just one contemporary example of both the challenge and blessings that our "calls to serve" can bring. A wonderful sister recently said to a dear friend: "I want to tell

you about the moment I ceased resenting my husband's time and sacrifice as a bishop. It had seemed uncanny how an 'emergency' would arise with a ward member just when he and I were about to go out to do something special together.

"One day I poured out my frustration, and my husband agreed we should guarantee, in addition to Monday nights, one additional night a week just for us. Well, the first 'date night' came, and we were about to get into the car for an evening together when the telephone rang.

" 'This is a test,' I smiled at him. The telephone kept ringing. 'Remember our agreement. Remember our date. Remember me. Let the phone ring.' In the end I wasn't smiling.

"My poor husband looked trapped between me and a ringing telephone. I really did know that his highest loyalty was to me, and I knew he wanted that evening as much as I did. But he seemed paralyzed by the sound of that telephone.

" 'I'd better at least check,' he said with sad eyes. 'It is probably nothing at all.'

" 'If you do, our date is ruined,' I cried. 'I just know it.'

"He squeezed my hand and said, 'Be right back,' and he dashed in to pick up the telephone.

"Well, when my husband didn't return to the car immediately, I knew what was happening. I got out of the car, went into the house, and went to bed. The next morning he spoke a quiet apology, I spoke an even quieter acceptance, and that was the end of it.

"Or so I thought. I found the event still bothering me several weeks later. I wasn't blaming my husband, but I was disappointed nevertheless. The memory was still fresh when I came upon a woman in the ward I scarcely knew. Very hesitantly, she asked for the opportunity to talk. She then told of becoming infatuated with another man, who seemed to bring excitement into her life of drudgery, she with a husband who worked full-time and carried a full load of classes at the university. Their apartment was confining. She had small children who were often demanding, noisy, and exhausting. She said: 'I was sorely tempted to leave what I saw as my wretched state and just go with this man. My situation was such that I felt I deserved better than what I had. My rationalization persuaded me to think I could walk away from my husband, my children, my temple covenants, and my Church and find happiness with a stranger.'

"She said: 'The plan was set; the time for my escape was agreed upon. Yet, as if in a last gasp of sanity, my conscience told me to call your husband, my bishop. I say "conscience," but I know that was a spiritual prompting directly from heaven. Almost against my will, I called. The telephone rang and rang and rang. Such was the state of my mind that I actually thought, "If the bishop doesn't answer, that will be a sign I should go through with my plan." The phone kept ringing, and I was about to hang up and walk straight into destruction when suddenly I heard your husband's voice. It penetrated my soul like lightning. Suddenly I heard myself sobbing, saying, "Bishop, is that you? I am in trouble. I need help." Your husband came with help, and I am safe today because he answered that telephone.

" I look back and realize I was tired and foolish and vulnerable. I love my husband and my children with all my heart. I can't imagine the tragedy my life would be without them. These are still demanding times for our family. I know everyone has them. But we have addressed some of these issues, and things are looking brighter. They always do eventually.' Then she said: 'I don't know you well, but I wish to thank you for supporting your husband in his calling. I don't know what the cost for such service has been to you or to your children, but if on a difficult day there is a particularly personal cost, please know how eternally grateful I will be for the sacrifice people like you make to help rescue people like me.' "

**NARRATOR:**

**May we all serve God by serving our fellow men. When we fulfill our callings we are promised blessings beyond our understanding. Extending ourselves through callings is one way we can be an example of the gospel and better come to know the Savior.**

**This has been “Stories from General Conference” on the topic of “Callings.” Thank you for listening to the Mormon Channel.**