

## CHALLENGES, OPPORTUNITIES, AND THE INTERNATIONAL CHURCH

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I must say, whenever I hear the phrase “going through the front door” or some variation of it in connection with the expansion of the Church, I ask myself why the Lord or His Church would ever go through any other than the front door. Be that as it may, I hope that my remarks and observations will complement the overall discussion of the conference relating to the ethical, legal, and political challenges that confront you who are working so diligently to establish the Church in the international arena.

There is no expert quite so qualified to speak on a topic as the one who no longer has any responsibility for it. As I no longer have any responsibility for Church matters in Europe—or anywhere else for that matter—I qualify as such an expert. I hope you will forgive me if I forbear speaking of the current challenges in Europe; there are many here much more qualified and current than I to address them. However, I would like to direct some remarks to the first part of my assignment and speak of some fundamental

principles that define what “going through the front door” means to me. I base my comments on the assignments I enjoyed for over a quarter of a century working with a front-door policy in helping to establish the Church in Eastern Europe. These principles guided me to the very end of my active service as a General Authority. As you consider them in light of your current responsibilities, and in the context of the conditions in which you must currently work, I hope you can benefit from them. I would like to speak about each of these principles, illustrating them with personal stories and examples.

I begin by identifying five fundamental principles I have found central to the process of expanding and establishing the Church: (1) represent the Church with integrity, (2) respect and keep the laws of the land, (3) work with government officials who have responsibility for religious matters, (4) work to the limit that conditions and situations permit, and (5) use local leaders and members of the Church as fully as possible.

## REPRESENT THE CHURCH WITH INTEGRITY

The reputation of the Church is created and shaped by the behavior of those who belong to it or represent it in some official capacity. The gospel itself is synonymous with integrity—so must be its representatives. We are morally bound to act in accordance with the principles we espouse. Each of us must certainly know that a dishonest act can never lead to an honorable end, no matter how important or inevitable that end might be.

There are no shortcuts leading to the front door of establishing the Church. The road we must follow is the one Jacob describes: “Remember that his paths are righteous. Behold, the way for man is narrow, but it lieth in a straight course before him.”<sup>1</sup>

President Kimball dedicated Poland in August 1977. Part of the agreement that allowed limited Church activity required a local presidency that would be responsible for the actions of the Church. The only three holders of the Melchizedek Priesthood in Poland at the time formed this presidency. One of them, a Brother Borschow, lived in Poznan, Poland, where the Genealogical Department had a microfilming project. I met with Brother Borschow each time I was in the city, and in one of our meetings he presented me with a question. He was righteously anxious to establish the Church, even though there were just a small handful of members in

the entire country. “Do you know,” he asked, “what we need in order to establish the Church?” I answered in the negative and asked his opinion. “We must understand the system,” was his reply.

This was a logical approach at that time. In the late seventies, the Communist Party was still very much in power. One made his way in such a society on the basis of connection, barter, manipulation, and “understanding the system.” I felt discomfort with his comment but didn’t know exactly how to respond to it. After a moment, I was given an idea that helped me beyond measure in years to come. “Brother Borshchow,” I said, “what the Church needs in Poland are not men who understand the system but men who understand the priesthood.” As it turned out, this was a very wise answer that came as a stroke of inspiration, and I certainly take no credit for it. Within a few short years, the system collapsed. There was nothing left to “understand.” Where would the Church then have been in Poland if it had been established on such an unstable foundation, even if at the time that foundation appeared indestructible? If individuals must build their own foundation on the rock of Christ to avoid misery, as Helaman taught,<sup>2</sup> then it only follows that the Church must be established on the same foundation.

A corollary to following the path that places the Church on a sure foundation is the knowledge that we cannot establish that path by diverging from it. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, negotiations began for Church recognition in Latvia. Our attorneys conducted time-consuming and frustrating negotiations in what seemed an endless search for registration. As it turned out, the director of religious affairs was on the verge of retirement and promised recognition if we were to give him five hundred dollars under the table. For the Church, this was not a tremendous amount of money; however, for him it was a fortune—certainly sufficient for a nice little retirement nest egg at the time. As much as we desired the recognition, we declined the offer. It was a long time before the Church finally gained official recognition in Latvia. Of course, it is well established there now, but I have often wondered how much that five hundred dollars would have cost the Church in its integrity and reputation had we accepted it. Fortunately, we never had to find out.

I know very well the desire to see that important things are done “on my watch.” This can easily lead to impatience. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky gives a fictional account of the Grand Inquisitor’s confrontation

with Christ. At least twice, the inquisitor tells Christ, “We have corrected Thy work.”<sup>33</sup> We can never put ourselves in the position of the inquisitor. We can neither correct nor improve upon Christ’s work. On the other hand, when our timetable coincides with the Lord’s timetable, patience becomes our ally. Time really is on our side. After the first missionaries were introduced into Kyiv, we ran into all kinds of difficulties with their visas and their presence in Ukraine. The relationship with the government was strained, at best. From day to day, sometimes from hour to hour, I did not know whether or not the missionaries would be permitted to stay in Ukraine. The pressure was immense, and, quite frankly, I worried about myself. I was concerned that I would “lose” our opportunity in Ukraine before it ever got started and that “my watch” would be remembered as such.

Elder Dallin H. Oaks came to our area for a mission presidents’ seminar and consented to visit with me early one morning about the situation in Ukraine. I began a description of the challenges and problems. It was immediately clear that he was not nearly as concerned as I was. After a few moments, I slowed down. Elder Oaks looked at me and gave me perhaps the best advice I ever received about establishing the Church: “This is the Lord’s work; why don’t you let Him do a little of it?” I did, and matters have worked out pretty well over the last twenty years in Ukraine.

Here are three ideas concerning establishing the Church with integrity: (1) there are no shortcuts; (2) don’t diverge from the path in an effort to establish it; and (3) work with patience, try to stay in harmony with the Lord’s timetable, and permit Him to do a little of His own work.

## RESPECT AND KEEP THE LAWS OF THE LAND

The Lord set the pattern of respecting and keeping the laws of the land when He revealed, “Let no man break the laws of the land, for he that keepeth the laws of God hath no need to break the laws of the land.”<sup>34</sup> Even though the Church is to “stand independent above all other creatures,”<sup>35</sup> it still must work within the context of law, respect for the society in which it operates, and fidelity to the principles that distinguish it as a religious society. Neither representatives of the Church nor its members can flout the law and hope to be known as peacemakers or be considered as a valuable, influential, and respected member of society.

I speak of respect in the sense of “obey” or “comply,” but I also suggest that respect for law and the rule of law calls for contributing to its development and improvement. Many countries, including the US, are currently considering legislative enactments or interpretations relating to the relationship between church and state. Countries that are now emerging from long years wherein law, educational curricula, economic policy, and social tradition existed to support a single party, dogma, or system, must now deal with diversity, religious freedom, and matters of individual conscience.

In addition, the weakening or outright disappearance of political borders, resulting in a significant migration of people who bring their religious and cultural heritage with them; the expanding global economy, with all of its tangential requirements; and increasing access to online information create a rich opportunity for us to be an influence for good in a cauldron of development and change. It is essential for the establishment of the Church across the world that its representatives participate in defining the issues and framing the laws that affect them. When the definitive history of Eastern Europe is written, some of its most critical chapters will be devoted to the work of the BYU Law and Religion Center. Cole Durham and his colleagues have made a contribution that very few recognize and, in my view, have framed the debate on critical issues that have direct bearing on the establishment of our Church and others, especially in the so-called emerging or developing areas. Their work has touched on the well-being and security of people who look to faith as the basis of their lives. The contribution made by their worldwide symposia and its annual conference each fall can hardly be measured. The creation of a forum in which people of goodwill may discuss and learn of such important issues is its greatest achievement. The center has, in a very real way, created the context in which ecclesiastical leaders may do their work.

What I have said thus far works well over time, but what of an opportunity that requires immediate or quick action? Speaking of Eastern Europe, the political and social changes of the eighties and nineties occurred so rapidly that laws defining or permitting Church activity lagged far behind the reality of the situation. In order to take advantage of such immediate situations, we must rely wholly on principle. Those who work to establish the Church have good access to the Holy Ghost. His guidance is like an

inner gyroscope of good judgment. It has always been my advice to our attorneys and to others that in the absence of clearly defined law, we must follow the moral and ethical standards given to us in the gospel itself. I felt that if we would do so, with respect and with the knowledge of the right people, we would be all right when the laws finally do catch up to us. To my knowledge, this has always been the case.

Here are three ideas concerning respect for the law: (1) obey it, (2) participate as fully as possible in the drafting of laws relative to the establishment of religion and individual conscience, and (3) use good judgment and rely on the inner gyroscope provided by the Holy Ghost and gospel principles themselves.

### WORK WITH GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS WHO HAVE RESPONSIBILITY FOR RELIGIOUS MATTERS

The Church cannot be established in a religious, social, or political vacuum. Many countries, not unlike those in Central and Eastern Europe, have offices and governmental appointments that look after matters relating to religious activity. Countries that do not have a tradition of religious freedom or laws that are conducive to religious activity are naturally suspicious and wary of religions, particularly foreign ones. I cannot emphasize enough the importance of building bridges and relationships with these officials and departments.

I am grateful I learned very early in my assignments in Eastern Europe to build relations with those who had political and legal influence on the course of Church development in any given country. Building such relationships was not always easy, pleasant, or fast, but it always paid great dividends. These relationships provide opportunities for the gatekeepers and opinion makers to know us, to learn not to fear us, and at times to (begudgingly) respect us. During the initial years of the Church in Bulgaria, I tried to meet regularly with the director of religious affairs. He was a well-educated and fair man, but he was also suspicious and cautious. I often felt he met with me only because it was his job. Nonetheless, I persisted, and, through time, we built a cordial relationship. In one of our meetings, he candidly said that he liked meeting with “the Mormons.” He

remarked that we never brought him problems and spoke only of solutions. He compared us favorably to other groups who were always badgering him for favors and intervention. He also told me he appreciated that we never spoke evil of other religions. His comment opened a wonderfully receptive opportunity to discuss the Church and the principles it espouses. It allayed his fears that the Church would somehow be a disruptive problem for his office and brought us latitude in our activities.

Good relations with the government offices permitted us to solve problems that otherwise would have turned detrimental and may have had disastrous consequences. In the developing missions of Russia, we tried to build our missionary force slowly. However, as sometimes happens, the missionaries arrived much too quickly for the comfort of other churches. One such example occurred in Novosibirsk. There, the other churches complained to the director of religious affairs, who called me into his office. In preparation for this meeting, the Area Presidency and mission president had determined that twenty-six missionaries in that city of somewhat over a million inhabitants were about the right number. During the meeting, the director asked that we limit the missionaries to twenty-six, saying that such a move would bring some peace to his office. The problem was easily defused as we worked out a schedule to reduce the number of missionaries to the suggested complement.

Building solid relations and bridges takes time and persistent effort. Progress may not always be immediately obvious. The director of religious affairs in Armenia asked us to be conservative in our work, thus permitting the Armenian Church time to right itself after long years of suppression. This seemed a reasonable request. We respected his direction. It built good relations, provided the Church some protection and privilege, and, in the long run, did not harm the establishment of the Church at all.

Regarding the building of bridges, I cannot speak highly enough of the significant work the public affairs staff accomplished in Eastern Europe. In this connection, President Packer has recommended each area establish a government relations council. This council may include the Area Presidency, the director for temporal affairs, legal counsel, and representatives from public affairs, Church education, and family history. These men and women work directly with the challenges of the legal establishment of the Church.

They are the decision makers and problem solvers, particularly in newly developing areas. In Eastern Europe, I found open, frank, and candid discussions in such a council may anticipate and resolve many problems before they seriously jeopardize the expansion and establishment of the Church.

Humanitarian work also fulfills a very important role in the development of Church visibility and reputation. Humanitarian projects bring the Church into close contact with governmental offices and officials and provide invaluable opportunity to establish a positive and lasting reputation for the Church.

Here are my suggestions for productive work with local and general governments: (1) identify and build relations with individuals and offices that are responsible for or influence religious activity in a given jurisdiction, (2) be willing to work with patience in a cooperative and respectful manner, and (3) use the internal resources of the Church effectively.

## WORK TO THE LIMITS THAT CONDITIONS AND SITUATIONS PERMIT

Even though the Lord has revealed that His word will extend to the ends of the earth and to each individual in it, there are still mortal challenges and limitations that must be addressed. I would like to say a word about limitations, both external and sometimes internal to the Church.

Unfavorable local conditions and situations can and do affect the process of establishing the Church. There are times when we have no other option than to understand them, do what we can to change them, and then be patient in accommodating our work to them. The Austria Vienna East Mission was charged in 1987 with taking the gospel into the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. The political openness of those years and the unbounded curiosity of the people toward spiritual values and Western ideas were a huge advantage in the initial stages of establishing a Church presence. On the other hand, the political, economic, and legal structures were simply not equipped to cope with the kind of missionary activity we have come to expect in the Church. There was also the matter of social convention that greatly limited door-to-door contacting or open conversations on the street. The mission was simply forced to recognize many kinds of external limitations in the accomplishment of its objective.



One of the fundamental rules I had set for the mission was that we would work to the full extent that the law would permit. The missionaries soon discovered that even with imposed limitations, they could do far more than they initially thought possible. Even more surprising, at least to me, was that when we reached and gently touched the limits, they quite often—though not always—expanded to meet our needs.

Limitations internal to the Church include lack of materials in local languages, lack of adequate training of missionaries to serve in areas where external limitations may be quite severe, and a sophisticated Church administrative structure. Some of the most difficult limitations are the ones we, often unwittingly, impose on ourselves through unrealistic expectations. We expect a certain and familiar pattern in the establishment of the Church. When we are restricted in establishing that pattern, we feel we are not establishing the Church. For example, we think missionaries should be allowed to do what missionaries do. If reality does not reflect our expectations, we may feel we are not making progress or the Church is not being established. However, if we focus on limitation to the exclusion of all else, we miss opportunity. In reality, establishing a Church presence is very much a matter of attitude on the part of those who are charged with this responsibility. We may lament the imposition of limitations where we are struggling to establish the Church, which may result in frustration and disappointment, or we may focus on what we are permitted to do and pursue it with full purpose and energy.

Belarus is a good example in this discussion of limitations. The Church has been present in Belarus for almost twenty years. Though the government permits the presence of missionaries, it does not permit them to proselyte openly or to initiate gospel conversations. They cannot serve in branch leadership positions or teach or speak in Church meetings. They may perform some limited humanitarian service, but the overall missionary experience in Belarus certainly differs from the traditional expectation of missionary work. But that difference does not mean their work is any less important. The Church is doing quite well in Belarus—even under very stringent limitations. Should we give up simply because we don't have the same latitude we may have elsewhere or because the pattern differs

from the expected norm? The answer is “No.” We must learn to focus on what we can do and let the limits expand as they will in the course of time.

Closely connected with recognizing limitations and working within them is the idea that we don’t need to have everything in order to have something. I have come to the conclusion that if any part of the Church is present in a given place, the Church is there. The establishment of the Church is a process that continues to unfold as time progresses. It is not an end station. The work is never done until the Savior says it is. No single event or piece of the Church may be identified as the one piece that confirms the Church is “established.” The Church, even in its most mature expression, continues to change, develop, and grow according to the circumstances that surround it. Perhaps this is why we call it a living Church or why we believe that God has not yet revealed everything. Consequently, just because one area of the world does not have quite as much Church as another area, it does not mean the Church is any less present or established. The Church—not unlike our testimonies, faith, and knowledge—is built “line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little and there a little.”<sup>6</sup>

Simply put, we must at times be content with less than we desire in order to attain in time our plans. I worked for many years with the Czech national archivist, Dr. Sykora. The Church had been successful in filming genealogical sources in almost all the countries of Central Europe, including Slovakia, but not in the Czech portion. On one occasion, Dr. Sykora offered to produce and make available to us some fifty rolls of film each year. I turned him down, saying that it was not much and we wanted more. He asked how long we had been talking about filming, and I told him, “Four or five years.” He smiled and asked me how many films we had in our collection from Prague; I then realized that fifty rolls per year were fifty more than we had previously been receiving. If I had been satisfied with fifty per year over a five-year period, we would have already collected 250 rolls of film. I failed to realize fifty was the place to begin. An agreement for fifty rolls would have brought me back to the archives more often, because we would have had something productive to speak about; it would have opened doors of cooperation that were otherwise closed. In retrospect, I think we could have increased that amount each year. But no, I wanted everything. And in wanting everything, I had received nothing.

These lessons of patience, limitations, and small steps may easily be applied to the Middle East. In fall 1987, Egypt was assigned to the Austria Vienna East Mission. I soon was told that the registration of the Church in Egypt was imminent. Much good work had been done, and we had every indication we were making good headway. In 2008, twenty-one years later, I was assigned to what is known as the Middle East/North Africa desk, an assignment that brought me back in touch with the Middle East. Imagine my delight when I heard registration in Egypt was imminent. As of today, it is still imminent. Does this mean no progress had been made in twenty-one years? No, of course not! Missionary couples and members of the Church have done much good; we are still there and still doing significant work. Does the fact that we can't do everything we wish, even over a long period of time, mean we shouldn't do what we can? We must take satisfaction in the small steps or interim successes that come our way.

Please remember that though limitations are inevitable in establishing the Church, they don't mean we are powerless to act or we are not making progress. Focus on what you can do and be content with some things so that in time you may have all things and be happy for small steps and interim successes.

#### USE LOCAL LEADERS AND MEMBERS OF THE CHURCH AS FULLY AS POSSIBLE

One of the most frequently voiced criticisms from government leaders in Eastern Europe was that ours is an American church. As it was primarily the Americans they saw in their offices, I can see why they came to such a conclusion. The only way to put a local face to the Church is to use local faces. Let us never underestimate the conviction, abilities, courage, faith, and desire of our local members, even if they have been a short time in the Church. The long-term value of their participation may hardly be overemphasized. The Church is best established when local leaders and members carry their share of the responsibility. We may know the Church culture, policies, and procedures better than they, but they know the intricacies of their own culture into which the Church must fit.

Necessity taught me the importance of engaging local leaders and members in the process of establishing the Church. Obtaining recognition

in Ukraine was very difficult. The government officials did not want to negotiate with an American. Using a local member was really the only option. Consequently, we created a council in Ukraine. Its members consisted of the presidency of the Ukraine Association of the Church, the two mission presidents, legal counsel, and the Area President. The purpose of our monthly meetings was to discuss the challenges, chart a course of action, and then give instruction to Alexander Manzhos, the association president, prior to sending him off to visit with government officers. Once I conquered my ego and recognized that my presence in the eyes of the government was not nearly as important as was Alexander's, the Church moved ahead just fine.

The participation of local leaders and members in Church recognition is important for the members themselves. Their personal engagement permits them to learn. For example, Elder Manzhos has served as a mission president and now as an Area Seventy. His intimate participation in solving the challenges and problems that faced us years ago played a very important role in his administrative education and increased monumentally his ability to serve.

Member participation does not come without cost to them. But it is a cost that every Latter-day Saint must, sooner or later, be willing to pay. When we were gathering signatures from the few Church members in Romania for the submission of required petitions to the government, I met with each individual member to explain the process and, as best I could, the danger they might face. After I had done so with one dear older sister, a very recent convert to the Church, she looked at me and said, "But this is my Church too." I have never forgotten her words or the rebuke that came with them. This dear sister taught me I could not hand the gospel or the Church to the members like some gift-wrapped package for them to enjoy at no cost to themselves. Not only did they want to be part of the process, they needed to be part of it.

The long-term well-being of the Church will always be in the hands of local leaders and members. I share with you two accounts of wonderful, courageous, and faithful local leaders who fulfilled exceptional roles in establishing the Church in their respective countries. Without them, I think the Church would not be what, or where, it is today. The Church was introduced into Vyborg, Russia, very early in its expansion into the Soviet Union.

Andrey Semyonov was among the first converts. He soon became the president of the local religious association and eventually the district president. The first chapel in Russia was built in Vyborg. President Semyonov faced intense and vicious personal opposition through the whole process of finding a site and constructing the chapel. Nonetheless, he faced his difficulties with courage and in good spirit. Elder Oaks and I visited the site while the chapel was under construction. In passing, he told me he would like to have me dedicate the building, but the closer the dedication crept, the more uncomfortable I became. I finally called Elder Oaks and asked him whether someone other than the presiding officer could pronounce the dedicatory prayer. He said that no one had ever asked the question and wanted to know why I had. I told him that after all the trouble President Semyonov had faced, he, not a foreigner, should dedicate the building. Permission was given. He wrote the beautiful prayer of dedication and pronounced it flawlessly. I can still see President Semyonov in front of the people, some of whom had been his most vicious detractors, exercising his priesthood with equanimity and confidence. Personally, I am forever grateful that the first Church building in Russia was dedicated by a Russian.

I would now like to tell you of Ivan Valek, district president in Zagreb, Yugoslavia. Without his courage and spiritual sensitivity, I think the Church would have been delayed significantly in its registration in Slovenia. He had come to Ljubjana from Zagreb to meet with the minister of religious affairs, who was in the process of leaving his position on the day President Valek called on him. He was packing up his office, and President Valek's request for registration was flatly denied. This man had previously threatened to have President Valek thrown in jail or exiled or to have his business confiscated. President Valek came out of that meeting very distressed and downtrodden. He walked with the missionaries some distance, then stopped and asked them whether he should return to the office. They told him to follow the Spirit; twice more he stopped to ask them the same question. Finally, he said he must return—an act of great courage in the face of terrible threats from one who could see them through. President Valek reported that when he returned to the office, he bore a strong testimony and asked that the Church be recognized. The man pondered for some time, took out a piece of paper, and prepared an official document

granting the Church its registration. I assume that at some point the Church would have been registered, but President Valek's courage and spiritual sensitivity moved the process forward very rapidly.

What, then, is my counsel to you regarding local members and leaders? Counsel with them, teach them, and trust them. They are capable and courageous. They have testimonies and are willing servants in difficult circumstances. Their engagement in the process of establishing the Church is not only vital to the long-term well-being of the Church but to them personally.

## CONCLUSION

By way of review, I commend to you five fundamental principles in establishing the Church: (1) represent the Church with integrity, (2) respect and keep the laws of the land, (3) work with government officials who have responsibility for religious matters, (4) work to the limit that conditions and situations permit, and (5) use local leaders and members of the Church as fully as possible.

Each of us must take interest in the establishment of the Church throughout the world. Please be assured that your prayers and good work make a significant contribution to that end. You are engaged in the most important work any person can do. Do it well, learn from it, and love it! I express my testimony of the divinity of Jesus Christ, of His Atonement, and of the veracity of His words.

## NOTES

1. 2 Nephi 9:41.
2. See Helaman 5:12.
3. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2002), 237–40.
4. Doctrine and Covenants 58:21.
5. Doctrine and Covenants 78:14.
6. 2 Nephi 28:30.