



Elder D. Todd Christofferson and Ryan Christofferson during an interview for the *Religious Educator*.  
Photographs by Craig Dimond.

# Family History: A Conversation with Elder D. Todd Christofferson

*Ryan P. Christofferson*

*Elder D. Todd Christofferson is a member of the Presidency of the Seventy. Ryan P. Christofferson is Elder Christofferson's son and was an employee of the Religious Studies Center when he conducted this interview.*

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*In fall 2004, the Religious Educator asked Elder Christofferson to look back over his six years as executive director of the Family and Church History Department. During Elder Christofferson's tenure, the Church History and Family History departments, previously separate organizations, were consolidated. At the end of July 2004, Elder Marlin K. Jensen replaced Elder Christofferson in the Family and Church History Department.*

*RSC: How has the family history program of the Church changed during your six-year tenure in the Family and Church History Department?*

*Elder Christofferson:* Among other things, the past six years have seen a continuing move to the Internet. In the 1930s, the cutting-edge technology was microfilm. The Church used and, in some ways, pioneered the development of that technology. It moved the work of the redemption of the dead to a whole new level. Microfilm is now something of a dying technology, but it is still, and will be for many years yet, a crucial element of our program. Then came the computer, and now the Internet, which I believe was invented to facilitate and hasten the work of family history research and the redemption of the dead. Increasingly, people can access in hours or even minutes information that in the past would have taken many months and extensive travel to find. They can collaborate and share with one another as never before. This is the core technology that will move this work to a level that was

only dreamed of and that will make it possible to accomplish what the Lord has directed.

The other major change I would cite is our emphasis on serving the ordinary member of the Church. The department started out as the Genealogical Society of Utah, an organization to collect and make genealogical information available to researchers. It has always been a goal to have a large percentage of adult Church members participating in family history research. Even in the best of circumstances, however, this research is time-consuming and difficult. So over the years, only a fraction of members have actively participated, and we have catered to the needs of that fraction with more and more specialized services. We certainly don't want to abandon this relatively small but dedicated population of experts and professionals, but at the same time, we have been actively working toward being able to better help the novice as well.

*RSC: Where do you see the Family and Church History Department headed in the future? What improvements or developments may be in store?*

*Elder Christofferson:* Perhaps I could say a little more about the use of Internet technology and helping the ordinary member to give you an idea about what may be in store. When I became executive director of the department in 1998, the project to create the familysearch.org site was already under way. Originally, it was envisioned simply as a search engine to find genealogical information on the Internet. As it was developed, however, the greater focus came to be providing access to and searching the Church's own extensive databases. Familysearch.org was launched in May 1999 by President Gordon B. Hinckley and became a rousing success instantly. Even now, more than one hundred thousand people use this site every day.

Since then, we have been adding new information and working to make family history information and services on the Internet interactive. We envision a single database combining the best of all our automated databases that people will not simply view but will add to and correct in cooperation with others working on the same lines. Information about temple ordinances will be available to members, showing temple work performed as well as ordinances still needed. Names will be cleared for ordinance work online and sent to the temple directly. If you want to do the work yourself, the names will be reserved for some period so that others cannot clear the same names in the meantime and duplicate what you will be doing. Once performed, temple ordinances will be recorded with the person's name within days so that you and all those interested in that person have an accurate record. The system will then

not clear that name again for ordinances already performed, thus avoiding wasteful duplication.

With respect to what the family history experience will be in the future for the ordinary member, let me say that we have been studying what it is like for members “on the ground” in Guatemala and Ghana and Korea, all over the world in diverse circumstances and cultures, to search out their roots and prepare names for temple work. We think we better understand now the realities of their lives and situations, what their abilities are, what is and is not available to them, and so on. Everything we are designing and doing now takes that into account. You will see in the future that everyone, no matter their circumstances or the record-keeping practices of their culture, will have access to the simple resources they need to identify their ancestors and perform temple ordinances for them. Whether they have or can use computers and the Internet or have only paper and pencil or not even that, there will be a way for them to be involved and to have the benefit of our sophisticated (but for them unseen) technological resources. Our goal is not to make “every member a family history researcher” but to provide means so that all who wish can, in fact, participate successfully in family history.

*RSC: How has your service in family history strengthened your own testimony of this work?*

*Elder Christofferson:* I came to the department with admittedly limited experience and expertise. The assignment has been a blessing to me and has opened my eyes to the vital mission of redeeming the dead. When one considers that only a minority of those who live prior to the Millennium will have been privileged to receive the essential ordinances of the temple for themselves, the importance and significance of work for the dead comes into sharper focus. Added to that, of course, is the Lord’s declaration at the end of the Old Testament and at the beginning of the Restoration in Doctrine and Covenants 2 that the very creation of the earth and our experience here would be utterly wasted but for the eternal union of families that family history and temple work make possible.

Additionally, I have witnessed divine intervention in and guidance of the department’s work. That has been true in both the past and the present. As I have studied the history of family history in this dispensation, it is easy to see the hand of the Lord at work, especially at critical junctures when it was important for the next step to be taken. In the last few years, key people have been brought to us just as they

and their unique skills were needed. These have been individuals who have joined the department and individuals within other organizations who, with their companies, came to our attention at just the right time. Resources, financial and otherwise, have been available as needed both from the Church budget and from donors. Insights have come in answer to prayer, particularly concerning the need for greater order in our records and processes. Keeping a “proper and faithful record,” as the Lord puts it in Doctrine and Covenants 128, is an essential part of the record “worthy of all acceptance” that must someday be presented to Him.

In 2000, I gave a talk in general conference titled “The Redemption of the Dead and the Testimony of Jesus.” My central thesis was that work for the dead is as powerful a statement and witness as we can make of the divinity of Jesus Christ and His mission. Our work for the dead, in essence, testifies of His Resurrection, of the infinite reach of His Atonement, that He is the sole source of salvation, that He has established the conditions of salvation through Him, and that He will come again. That is the testimony that has come to me in pondering the scriptures and through serving in this department.

*RSC: In your mind, how does the Church’s mission of redeeming the dead relate to the other missions of perfecting the Saints and proclaiming the gospel?*

*Elder Christofferson:* I think you could summarize the plan of salvation by saying that our obligation is to worthily receive those ordinances that the Lord has declared essential and then to keep the covenants that those ordinances entail. All those who do so are promised eternal life. That, in a nutshell, is the plan. So our whole effort in the Church is to teach faith in Jesus Christ so that people will repent, receive the ordinances, and keep the covenants. And that applies to everyone. For those who are not yet members of the Church, we start from scratch, proclaiming the gospel and offering the ordinances, beginning with baptism. With regard to members, we strengthen them in receiving all the ordinances and keeping the associated covenants, “enduring to the end.” The dead are taught in the world of spirits and the ordinances provided for them vicariously. So it is all one mission, the same work for everyone, whether, as the Prophet Joseph Smith said, they can attend “to the ordinances in their own propria persona, or by the means of their own agents” (see D&C 128:8).

*RSC: What are some of the challenges that the Family and Church*

*History Department faces as it continues to adapt to new technologies?*

*Elder Christofferson:* One of the challenges with technology is ensuring that it does not become the master but remains the servant. Technology can be a marvelous tool, an essential tool. As I said earlier, I believe that microfilm, computer, and Internet technologies have been and will be crucial to our success in family history and temple work. I believe that the Lord has inspired their development and granted us access to these and other technologies to make it possible to do what He has commanded and to hasten His work in its time. That being said, however, we still have to be cautious that we develop and use the right technology for the right need. Just because something is possible doesn't mean that we should do it or that we should adopt a certain technology because it is there. President Hinckley repeatedly cautions us not to let these things become "toys." In other words, we must control technology, not be driven by it.

Another challenge, of course, is cost. It is difficult and costly to keep pace with major technologies that are changing at a dizzying pace. It seem like things that were cutting edge yesterday are obsolete today. Generally speaking, we cannot afford to be at the leading edge (or as some say, referring to the expense required, the "bleeding edge") of technology. But we must be current with technology that is crucial for our mission, and in some cases, we must create the technology or software programs that will uniquely satisfy our particular needs. All of this costs money and could absorb limitless amounts if permitted. So we must be judicious and pace ourselves. For example, it makes sense now to acquire genealogical records with digital cameras rather than on microfilm so that the information can be shared via the Internet rather than through the somewhat cumbersome (and more costly) process of shipping rolls of film. The family history centers and many of our homes now have computers and Internet connections needed to share information digitally. But we have only limited experience with digital capture and preservation of records. So we are proceeding with a few digital cameras, gaining experience in the field in capturing and cataloging high-quality digital images. We are working with the industry to find ways of preserving and storing digital images that today may not last more than fifteen years. (By contrast, microfilm pictures are generally good for about one hundred years.) We are moving ahead at a measured pace, confident that with the Lord's help, preservation and other problems will be solved and that when the time is right, we will be ready to make the shift to digital.

One other issue regarding technology that comes to mind is that

while we will necessarily require some very sophisticated programs and tools, they must be largely invisible to users. This is a spiritual work, and we are anxious to keep the emphasis on hearts being turned to the fathers. Technology must not become a distraction. We have used the analogy of the telephone. The user does not need to understand or even be aware of the technology that allows him or her to place a long-distance call—the routers, switches, microwave antennas, and so forth. He or she just needs to know how to punch in the right number. We want it to be that way for ordinary members. They should not have to be adept at any technology to do family history and use the help we are providing. We want them to have a spiritual experience, not a technology experience.

*RSC: From time to time, the Church may face opposition from groups that oppose or misunderstand family history or temple work. What approach does the Church take in such situations?*

*Elder Christofferson:* There is, in fact, as you suggest, a good deal of misunderstanding regarding the doctrine of redemption of the dead and vicarious ordinances. While many religions have prayers or ceremonies intended to benefit the souls of the dead, our understanding of life after death and the role of living proxies acting in behalf of the deceased is unique and therefore foreign to the understanding of others. As you know, some have even thought that we baptize the dead rather than perform baptisms for the dead. I ran across an article in a French paper that objected to a microfilming project we have under way in Corsica. In explaining to readers the Church's interest in family history, the article said that we baptize the persons whose records are filmed by "plunging the microfilm rolls in water."

I think the best approach is the one taken by President Boyd K. Packer in the late 1970s in Israel when he was assisting in negotiations for access to genealogical records there. He met with a group of archivists, scholars, and rabbis to explain our request for the particular records in question. Among other things, he was asked what the Church would do with the records. President Packer replied without equivocation that in addition to preserving and making the information available to persons searching out their roots, we would also send many of the names to the temple for vicarious ordinances. This caused some stir, but one Jewish official present, I believe one of the rabbis, noted that a person would have to believe Mormon doctrine to believe that vicarious baptisms had any meaning, and since he didn't believe it, he had no basis for objecting. He did not state the corollary, but I suppose everyone realized that

if our doctrine is valid, there again is no basis for objecting—how could anyone object to a vicarious baptism being offered to someone if it really does have merit? The final decision was that the Church was given access to most government records and also given permission to request other records held by nongovernment custodians.

Some Jewish groups, led by a Jewish Holocaust survivors' organization, continue to object to proxy baptisms in behalf of any Jew who is not an ancestor of a Church member. There are some current discussions occurring on those issues, but it is important for all Church members and leaders to remember that the First Presidency has directed that we research our own family lines and not pursue what could be termed private extraction projects, submitting names of celebrities, Jewish Holocaust victims, or other unrelated groups or persons. Some claiming good intentions, but acting contrary to the First Presidency's policy, have subjected the Church and vicarious ordinance work to unnecessary ridicule and opposition.

While some objections or misunderstandings may never be overcome, despite our best efforts, it is important always to emphasize that there is no element of coercion involved. The moral agency of each individual is fundamental in our doctrine, and no one, either in life or after death, can be compelled to accept a baptism or any other ordinance. It is fundamental in the justice of God that everyone be offered the benefit of a baptism, if not here, then hereafter. But it is equally fundamental that everyone be free to accept or reject a proffered baptism. Without the unfettered right to choose, the entire plan of salvation falls. Therefore, a vicarious baptism is no baptism unless and until it is freely accepted as valid by the intended beneficiary. Contrary to the misunderstanding of some, we do not count persons for whom proxy baptisms are performed as members of the Church, and we do not create membership records for them. With a few exceptions, in my experience, once people understand this essential element of our doctrine, their concerns about work for the dead disappear.

*RSC: You recently had an opportunity to visit China on behalf of the department. How is family history helping to open doors for the Church there and elsewhere?*

*Elder Christofferson:* The Church has had particular success collaborating with Chinese authorities to microfilm records there. We have partnered with the national archives and with the extensive government libraries in Beijing and Shanghai to preserve records that are important to the Chinese and that we believe will be increasingly



important to Church members in the years ahead.

As you know, ancestors and the records of ancestors have been important in Chinese culture for centuries. A significant exception was the Cultural Revolution in which, tragically, many records were destroyed. But by and large, the Chinese have preserved excellent records and documents useful for genealogical research, at least for portions of the population. The Shanghai Library has become the foremost institution in the country for family history research, and, among other things, we have supplied some equipment and film for a genealogical reading room in their new, very modern facility. They have a sign posted there expressing their gratitude.

During our visit we met with an official of the national archives in their offices just inside the wall of the Forbidden City complex. We discussed the value of historical and family history records. I suggested, as President Hinckley has stated, that a knowledge of our background helps us appreciate what we enjoy as a result of the sacrifices of our forebears and awakens a sense of obligation in us to honor their sacrifices in the way we live. Our Chinese host gave us an example from his own family. He said one of his ancestors served as a government official in a Chinese dynasty and was approached by someone offering him a bribe to do something improper. The party who wanted the favor stated, as part of his argument, "No one will know." In refusing, the official responded, "You will know; I will know; the earth will know; and heaven will know." This account had come down in his family through the generations, and they refer to it simply as "The Four Knows." Our host said that they all know what that means and that it has inspired them to be honest men and women in all they do.

Family history and records gathering and preservation do engender goodwill. We have even been able to replace crucial vital records for island nations in the South Pacific when the originals have been destroyed by fire or storm. It is true that some record custodians deny us access or resist partnering with us because they object to the possible use of information for vicarious ordinances, but in most cases, our proffers to help have opened doors.

*RSC: From an educational perspective, how does the Family and Church History Department approach the challenge of educating both those with little or no family history experience and those family history experts who need to keep up to date with newer methods that are being developed?*

*Elder Christofferson:* The department has many capable staff who

can deal with issues in family history work from the simplest to the most advanced. They have prepared instructional materials that help those all along the spectrum, and they continue to update and simplify these helps. Additionally, the department has several employees whose job it is to evaluate materials in all media and ensure that they are presented in an understandable, useful, and appealing way. They make sure that they actually serve the intended audience and are not just an academic exercise, so to speak.

Increasingly, department staff participate with, and in many cases are members of, genealogical and archival organizations in the United States and internationally where they both stay current and also contribute to the development of new technologies and enhanced processes and procedures for record keeping and record preservation. It is a very active field, and the Church and its representatives are recognized as having valuable experience and expertise to offer. Happily, we are not alone, and many other entities, private, public, and commercial, are also making valuable contributions that we learn from as well.

One of the department's main objectives at present is to find the best ways to make its help readily available to members of the Church wherever they live. And we want to do it through the priesthood line, not around it. A worldwide support organization is being put in place that will help leaders help their members in family history. It will rely heavily on high priests group leaders and ward family history consultants, among others, and will provide them the training and backup they need to help members in their units. It will not be a complex organizational structure, but it will for the first time reach across the Church in providing assistance that fits the varying circumstances of members as they strive to identify their kindred dead and offer them the ordinances of salvation.

*RSC: What sort of counsel or advice would you give to those who may feel somewhat overwhelmed by the task of doing family history work?*

*Elder Christofferson:* That's probably everybody. There is really no way not to be overwhelmed, and family history work will always be work. The important things to remember are that this is a spiritual work and that the Lord is behind it and through it. Those who make the effort can count on divine assistance in one form or another. In fact, no matter how good or expert we become, and despite all the technology and all the records that still exist, it will never suffice. All of us have to rely on that divine help to succeed in family history and temple work. As I said earlier, the redemption of the dead is a preeminent part of the mission of

the Church, and the Lord will not let it fail, particularly since otherwise, as He Himself said, the earth would be utterly wasted at His coming.

That being said, my advice to anyone would be the advice President Hinckley has given at various times: “Do your best.” Start wherever you are with whatever you have. Begin by capturing on paper or computer what you know, and then gather information from family and extended family. Research in records comes only after this foundation is laid. In other words, first draw on living memory and then on recorded memory. You will learn as you go, and there will always be someone along the way, if you look for them, to help you take the next step. Whether your progress at a given moment is rapid or painfully slow, just keep going, doing what you can.

At certain stages in our lives, we can do a lot, and at other times, only a little. A young mother, for example, with all the demands of a growing family, may not be able to do more than keep a box with memorabilia and scraps of paper preserving information about the past that may come to her from time to time. At a different period in her life, she will have time to sort out what she collected, record her family’s history, and pursue research for information to fill the gaps. What we should remember is that we can all do something in family history during the different stages of our lives, and if we do our best, it will all work out in the end. We can rely on the Lord for that. So don’t worry overmuch about what remains; enjoy the experience as you go.

*RSC: At the stake and ward level, what should a well-run family history program consist of?*

*Elder Christofferson:* There are some changes coming in the *Church Handbook of Instructions* that will simplify somewhat and give greater clarity to the family history organization at the stake and ward levels. I think that will help, but the key to a well-run program will always be simplicity. I believe if I were a bishop again, my approach would be to charge the high priests group leader with the responsibility to lead out in the ward council on this subject. I would ensure that we had one or more (depending on resources) ward family history consultants who were “people persons” who could work under his direction. With the help of the ward council, we would guide the consultant or consultants to work individually with specific members or families to help them in taking their first steps or next steps in family history. The consultant might spend a few days or many days over several weeks helping. I imagine that in the course of a year we could help at least ten families. In five years, we could have a corps of fifty families active

at some level in family history and its attendant temple work. That to me would be a successful, well-run program.

As suggested by my hypothetical situation, everything does not have to be accomplished in one year, and not everyone has to move at the same speed or be doing the same things. I think it is a mistake to try to move the whole ward at the same time and to expect everyone to dedicate the same time and resources to family history.

May I mention also that a well-run family history program will seek to involve new members early on in their Church experience. It immediately gives them a responsibility, as President Hinckley has counseled. The spirit of Elijah, the Holy Ghost, nurtures them, and they find at least one, sometimes many friends as they get involved in tracing their roots, preparing names for temple ordinances, and even going to the temple to perform vicarious baptisms for deceased ancestors. New members should be a high priority for the ward council and family history consultants. And the same can be said for less-active members. Family history involvement is a great reactivation tool.

*RSC: What guidance would you give to those who are called to teach family history at the local level?*

*Elder Christofferson:* I suppose I would reiterate what I said about helping people one by one or family by family. Take them where they are, and help them figure out what to do next and how to do it. To someone teaching the Sunday School family history course, I would also emphasize making it as practical as possible. People do need to understand the underlying doctrine, because, among other things, it provides context and motivation, but they also need some hands-on exercises; they need to get a little how-to experience.

Teachers and consultants should stay abreast, insofar as possible, of developments in technology relevant to family history and of developments in the Church program. I realize that conditions vary widely, and some will be lucky to have pencil and paper, let alone Internet access, but all should become as adept and competent as they can be. All should know how to prepare and submit names to the temple. That is the most important thing.

Let me add one more word about the spiritual underpinnings of our family history work. I mentioned that the doctrine of family history work gives context and motivation. We have been surprised in our research at the family history department to learn that a very significant percentage of Church members are not familiar with the doctrine or principles on which family history and temple work are based. Others

have a limited understanding at best. That is troubling because these are fundamental concepts and are essential to our salvation, for we without our dead cannot be made perfect just as they cannot achieve salvation without us (see D&C 128:15). Joseph Smith declared that this plan that enables us, in this dispensation, “to redeem [the dead] out of their prison” was ordained or prepared even before the world was (D&C 128:22). The Prophet Joseph calls out to all of us, “Shall we not go on in so great a cause?” All Church leaders should understand and teach the doctrine of the redemption of the dead. It will lead to the same enthusiasm that gripped the Saints in Nauvoo when they first heard it preached and inspired them to rush to the Mississippi River and begin performing baptisms for their dead. Who can fault them for their joy or even the initial lack of order or proper record keeping? We need the order and we are getting that under control, but we also need the rush of enthusiasm and Spirit that only the doctrine brings. ■■

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