



*We're trying to take people from being page-turners of the scriptures
to disciples who study and ponder the scriptures.*

The New Home-Centered, Church-Supported Curriculum

TAD R. CALLISTER AND SCOTT C. ESPLIN

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***Esplin:** Thank you, President Callister, for meeting with me and for helping our readers understand the role of the Church’s Sunday School General Presidency and, maybe most important, changes that have been announced regarding the curriculum and the organization of our classes. You have previously served as a General Authority and in the Presidency of the Seventy. What can you share about your calling and experience as the Church’s Sunday School General President? How has it shaped you as a teacher and as a learner?*

Callister: As a teacher, it has helped me be more observant as I have visited classes throughout the world, because I’ve wanted to find out what helps a teacher teach more like the Savior. I think it’s made me more observant knowing I have a responsibility to teach the same principles as employed by the Savior—in His way. I think it’s made me more aware and more humble to realize that there are a lot of ways I can improve and need to improve. In summary, I would say these are the two key ways: it has helped me be more humble, because I’ve seen so many good teachers and ways that I can improve and to be more observant and realize that if you try to learn from other teachers, there is almost always something you can learn.

***Esplin:** What opportunities do you get as the Church's Sunday School General President to observe teachers, to travel the world and either train or observe? How does that work?*

Callister: As a Sunday School Presidency, we have two international trips a year for about twelve or thirteen days. The last one was in Russia and Ukraine, and I will leave in a week for Thailand, Cambodia, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka.

When we go, we train on teaching in the Savior's way and how to make teacher council meetings effective. We have focus groups with teachers to find out what are the key challenges they face and how they try to overcome those challenges. We actually hold teacher council meetings with them, so we can train them in how to hold an effective teacher council meeting. Then we are given regional assignments to train in the United States and Canada over weekends. A few weeks ago I was in Little Rock, Arkansas. We have the chance to hold teacher councils—training on how to teach in the Savior's way and visiting teacher council meetings.

We have the chance to do that throughout all the world, and on weekends when I don't have assignments I sometimes will go to my own Sunday School classes, which I enjoy, and teacher councils. Sometimes I'll visit other wards in the area. That is what gives us exposure throughout the world.

***Esplin:** What are your roles as it relates to curriculum development? When you are not traveling on your international trips or when you are not on weekend assignments in the United States and Canada, what are some of the responsibilities of the Sunday School General Presidency relating to this curriculum?*

Callister: I think we have two key responsibilities. One has to do with the content of the curriculum. For example, we will read through the New Testament. We will list what we think are the key doctrines that ought to be taught. The curriculum staff will then take those key doctrines and put the flesh on the bones and give it back to us as a Sunday School General Presidency. We will review it and make suggested changes that we might have. For example, we might say we would like a balanced approach. We'd like to see some analogies and some stories and object lessons and reference to conference talks, not just doctrine, question, doctrine, question. We would like to use all of the ways the Savior used to teach to be incorporated into the curriculum that we have. Then the Primary will take the doctrinal highlights that we have set out, and they will translate them into language that is more relatable to the children. So we're basically focusing on the same doctrinal topics

in Primary, Sunday School, and the home. We identify the doctrinal topics for the individual and family book and for the Sunday School. The Primary then takes ours and probably uses a lot of them; sometimes they do their own, and other times they modify the language. So one responsibility is developing the content for the curriculum.

The other responsibility is developing training for the teachers to use the content in a way the Savior might use it, and that is through teaching in the Savior's way and teacher council meetings. The curriculum staff did a great job in writing *Teaching in the Savior's Way*. Then we give ongoing instruction through our website, lds.org, through videos, through talks, through emails that we send out to Sunday School presidencies that are designed to help them conduct more effective teacher council meetings, which are the heart of where teachers learn to be better teachers.

Esplin: So your role isn't confined to the operations of the Sunday School or Sunday School classes, but through the selection of doctrine and the preparation of key messages it influences Primary curriculum and the lessons for home and family? You are kind of the hub—if I understand it correctly—the hub for the integration of curriculum that is occurring at this point?

Callister: Yes, I think that would be fair to say. We have a specific responsibility for the Sunday School, but we also have a responsibility to oversee the general teaching in the Church.

Esplin: Not just Sunday School but the general teaching?

Callister: The general teaching of the Church. One of the more effective ways we can do that is in teacher council meetings, where we of course have teachers from all auxiliaries and leaders from all auxiliaries, but it's generally led by a member of the Sunday School presidency.

Esplin: I have noticed in the materials that have been released that those teacher council meetings are changing with the new curriculum, that instead of meeting monthly like we are currently doing, we are meeting quarterly in conjunction with the changes in curriculum. Is that correct?

Callister: Yes, it is. The meetings will be quarterly, and the Primary teachers have the option to meet separately to address the needs of their children that are a little different than the youth and adults. And also because it is sometimes very difficult for them to get substitutes, it allows them some flexibility as to what time they do it.

Esplin: Especially under this new curriculum, where we'll be overlapping in all the instruction at the same time that way. Now, a few questions specifically

for our audience. As you know, the audience and the readership of the Religious Educator are educators within the Church—be those full-time educators in the Seminary and Institute program and Religious Education in our various institutions or Sunday School instructors, Primary teachers, or others—we hope this message can be helpful for them.

I'm turning to some of the changes that have been announced. In the recent general conference, President Nelson stated, "For many years, Church leaders have been working on an integrated curriculum to strengthen families and individuals through a home-centered and Church-supported plan to learn doctrine, strengthen faith, and foster greater personal worship."¹

Elder Cook added, "In pilot test stakes across the world, there was a highly favorable response to the new Come, Follow Me home resource. Many reported that they progressed from reading scriptures to actually studying the scriptures. It was also commonly felt the experience was faith promoting and had a wonderful impact on the ward."²

What can you share about the development of the Come, Follow Me curriculum for Sunday School? What success have you found in the testing of that curriculum, and what cautions should we seek to avoid as it is implemented worldwide?

Callister: That's a good question. In terms of successes, we have two books about two to three inches thick each just filled with comments of those who engaged in the testing process. I think that the emphasis of those comments is the following.

One is that we study the scriptures more frequently in our home because we have some helpful resources.

Number two is that the quality of our study is much better. Rather than each just read a verse and we're all done, we now have some questions or activities to help us make it a more meaningful experience.

Three is that now when we go to Church, our class experience is better because we have prepared, and other people have prepared, so we came with greater insights to benefit each other from that spiritual and intellectual preparation.

I would say those were the key highlights. In addition, there is an overall alignment and a great incentive to study together as a family, knowing when we come home from church we have all studied the same thing, and we can ask questions around the dinner table and all be in sync. I saw one video of a sister who said, "I was trying to help my Primary children prepare for their

classes on Sunday,” but, as I recall, she had three children in Primary and one in the youth program, and they all had a separate manual, studying separate things, and it was just too difficult for her as a mother with her time constraints to try to cover four different doctrinal subjects for a given Sunday. “This new curriculum,” she said, “made it so much easier for me.”

Esplin: *That’s exciting! I’m smiling because I have young children, and I think you have captured exactly many of our scripture experiences. It’s a verse at a time, and then we’re done. I also get a chance to teach Sunday School in my ward, and it will be really helpful to have people that have studied this in advance, so I’m excited about both of those prospects.*

How long has this been in development? I know President Nelson said “for many years,” and I’m guessing this may be a related question—what is the integrated curriculum, and how did it come about? Did it predate your Presidency, or how long has this been in the works?

Callister: Yes, it did predate our Presidency. The *Come, Follow Me* Curriculum for the youth commenced in 2013, and I don’t know how long that took—I’m guessing three or four years to get there. I came in in 2014, and at that point in time, the feeling of the Brethren was “We like this content material of *Come, Follow Me* for the youth. We’d like to see something like that developed for the adults.” But another comment was from teachers, who said, “You know, we like this content, but we’d like some teacher instruction course that would show us how to use it.” So that led to the development of *Teaching in the Savior’s Way* that came out in 2016. The question was raised, “How can we employ *Come, Follow Me* principles with adults?” Then the thought came, “But how can we make it home centered and Church supported?” I think this was truly an evidence of revelation coming line upon line, and there was direction from above, there was direction from the curriculum staff—input that they received from all the auxiliaries.

Honestly, it truly was a combined effort, and I think it was integrated in two ways. One way is that the family was included in an aligned study. But the curriculum was also integrated in that all of the auxiliaries were participating, realizing that the individual and family book involves every single auxiliary in the Church—the priesthood, the Relief Society, the youth, the Primary, the Sunday School. They all had to be in harmony on what that ought to be.

We’ve learned that more discussion was necessary, that we didn’t want talking heads. The pendulum sometimes swings too far, and sometimes we ended up with people who would have *all* discussion and thought that’s what

a Christlike teacher was—solely discussion. But a Christlike teacher also discourses, gives context, has discussion, extends invitations, uses music and art—all these other resources—and reaches out to those who don't attend class. The instruction given at this last conference training was that we call our people “teachers,” not “facilitators,” not “discussion leaders,” not “moderators,” and that they are to teach like the Savior teaches, using all of the methods that he uses. We're not saying to this person that you should use 50 percent discussion and 50 percent discourse; we're saying you need to find the balance that works for you. Now if I'm going to a class with Elder Bruce R. McConkie I might want 80 percent discourse and 20 percent discussion. For someone else, maybe the reverse. But we're saying this is where you have to use personal revelation and decide. We need a balance. But don't become that one-note player on the piano—only a discussion leader or only a talking head. Use all those resources that the Savior used that made Him such a wonderful, balanced teacher.

Esplin: I think that's marvelous. I noticed some of that reflected in the instructions that were sent, the idea of not calling them discussion leaders but teachers teaching in the Lord's way. That's wonderful!

President Nelson gave several reasons for the recent changes for how we will study the gospel in Church. He stated, “The long-standing objective of the Church is to assist all members to increase their faith in our Lord Jesus Christ and in His Atonement, to assist them in making and keeping their covenants with God, and to strengthen and seal their families. In this complex world today, this is not easy. The adversary is increasing his attacks on faith and upon us and our families at an exponential rate. To survive spiritually, we need counterstrategies and proactive plans. Accordingly, we now want to put in place organizational adjustments that will further fortify our members and their families.”³ In what specific ways do you see the curriculum as well as the meeting schedule changes accomplishing these goals of counteracting the adversary's effects and strengthening and fortifying families?

Callister: We believe that the past curriculum—the existing curriculum—has been a good curriculum, but the Lord wants us to continually improve. And maybe I can share some ways I think there are improvements in the new curriculum that will lead to greater faith and greater testimonies. One of the ways is that instead of the subtitles being basic factual statements such as “Jesus entered the Garden of Gethsemane,” it would read, “Jesus suffered in the Garden of Gethsemane so he could pay the price for our sins.” All



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the statements are doctrinal statements or questions that lead to doctrinal conclusions. And all the content underneath it—whether it be reading the scripture or a conference talk or an analogy or a story—is designed to support the doctrine. The doctrine has become the focus, not a story or a lesson. The latter may be good resources, but they are to support the doctrine.

The second major change is that we're asking the teachers to read the scriptural block before they read the rest of the lesson and then to pray and get inspiration as to what they think is the most important doctrine in that block that will help their class, what questions they ought to ask, what resources they ought to use to support the doctrine. Then they can read the rest of the lesson so that the lesson doesn't replace their personal revelation—it supports it.

I had my own experience with this when writing on a gospel subject. When I would have questions, the first thought that came to my mind was “Go to the commentaries.” Then the impression came, “Don't do that—try to figure it out yourself first.” And when I did that I found one of two things happened. Either I got the same answer as the commentary, but now it was my personal revelation, not someone else's, or second, because I wasn't prejudiced by the commentary, I came up with an insight that was customized for me. So what we're really trying to say to people is “We don't want you just to present a prescriptive lesson. We want you to stay with the scriptural material—those are the boundaries—but we want you to honestly seek personal revelation and then let the rest of the lesson be a supplement and an aid, but not a replacement for personal revelation.” That's one of the significant differences, I think.

Third, there are a lot more videos that are being prepared that will be helpful as support, particularly for people who are visual learners. There's a lot of encouragement to use analogies and stories. And I think there's been a real key emphasis and effort by the staff, and I give the staff great credit for really trying to ask inspired questions. I think if you have an inspired question it more easily lends to an inspired discussion.

Then, of course, because all of this takes place and you have the teacher councils helping prepare us to be better teachers, I think the parents will be better teachers for two reasons. One is they'll go to classes where they'll see better teachers so they can observe how teaching should be done. A second is many of those teachers in the teacher council, of course, are parents who are learning good principles to take back to the home. I think the teacher council meeting has a double benefit.

***Esplin:** Thank you. That will be especially helpful for us not only for our teaching audience, but at the Religious Studies Center we also are charged to prepare and publish materials to aid teachers, so that discussion of commentaries*

and how we can be of assistance but not replace personal revelation will be really helpful for us as a producer of materials.

Turning to a few practical matters, how do the resources Come, Follow Me—For Individuals and Families and Come, Follow Me—For Sunday School complement each other? Any suggestions for those teachers and families that are being introduced to these new materials for the first time? How can they work together with the various materials and having talked with you, I now realize this also includes your involvement with Come, Follow Me—For Primary, so how do these all complement each other?

Callister: Good question. Sunday School teachers actually have two manuals to work from. On any given Sunday, they work from the individual and family resource and from the Sunday School resource. The individual and family resource might have four doctrinal topics to emphasize, and the Sunday School might have four doctrinal topics. Now, three of those might overlap with the individual and family manual but take a different approach and have different activities. There might be one doctrinal topic that's just completely different. So the teacher has the opportunity to take the best of the material from both. There's enough overlap, however, that by inviting the parents and the youth to participate in class they'll have enough common ground that they can share ideas that developed during the week. So that's how they work together.

Esplin: *Good. Staying with some questions about curriculum, I've noticed that the Sunday School curriculum for next year is now organized by date rather than lesson number and has a lesson for every week. What recommendations do you have for Sunday School teachers who, with the changes to the Sunday meeting schedule, will meet with their classes twice a month? The instructions, I believe, talk about trying to stay on a schedule so that you are in alignment with the family and home curriculum. It also talks about possibly teaching two lessons in one hour or skipping every other lesson. What guidance do you have for teachers who have nearly fifty lessons but they meet potentially twenty-two times (due to general conference)? What do you recommend?*

Callister: So sometimes they'll have, since they're meeting the first and third weeks, they'll have two lessons, or if there is a general conference they could have three or even four that could turn out.

Esplin: *Yes, with stake conference or others that could really impact it.*

Callister: Yes, or a fifth Sunday or whatever. So we have left it open to them to say, "You take whatever material from the last lesson that you gave

up to the current lesson this week that families were studying—if that’s two or three lessons—you take whatever material from those two or three lessons that you think would be most helpful to the members of your class.” So instead of having six pages of material, you might have twelve pages of material. You won’t lack for material! The biggest concern is that we’re concerned that the teachers may feel that they have to cover everything that is in there. We hope we can get away from that. Cover the points that you think are most important. If you cover only three of the twelve, that’s fine.

***Esplin:** And then the Church will continue to move on because everything is fixed now by date rather than by lesson numbers.*

Callister: Yes, and then because it’s by date you may have seen also that on Easter Sunday, there’s a special lesson for Easter on the Atonement of Jesus Christ, so you’re not going to be talking about Balaam and the talking donkey because that’s where you are in the Old Testament. Then you get to Christmas, you will always have a lesson on the life of Christ.

***Esplin:** Regardless of the curriculum, so not just New Testament year but Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, or Old Testament year.*

Callister: Every year. So you can bring your friends on Easter Sunday and Christmas and know they’re going to have an appropriate lesson. Now somewhere else in the world Christmas is on a different day or Easter’s a different day, which is fine. Just adjust—here’s the Easter lesson, here’s the lesson for Christmas—so that we feel comfortable bringing nonmember friends or less actives, that it’s going to be a subject that they ought to be hearing about.

***Esplin:** They will have a lesson that is appropriate for their culture. I had looked and noticed the fifty lessons and that they are assigned by date now, but I hadn’t picked out particular holidays—that’s great!*

Curriculum instructions state that supplemental classes like missionary preparation, temple preparation, family history, or strengthening marriage and family will no longer be held during the second hour. I think it also states that Gospel Principles will be discontinued in January 2019. However, under the direction of the bishop, the other classes can be taught at other times. What counsel do you have for these classes and these situations? Do they still fall under the purview of the Sunday School General Presidency, and what recommendations, if any, do you have for these classes?

Callister: They don’t fall under the purview of the Sunday School General Presidency, and this is something we were in favor of because we feel that the greatest value of the new curriculum is the alignment between home

and church. If you start having other classes during Sunday School, it becomes an open-ended box, and you are taking people out of the alignment process.

For family history, most of that now can be done one on one, and we have family history consultants who do that very well.

For temple preparation, it's unusual that six or eight people are ready to attend the temple at exactly the same time. Rather, it is usually one or two at a time. Accordingly, this preparation can also be done one on one.

As for missionary preparation—I think that you'll find more and more in the curriculum for the youth that will lead to the natural development of missionary preparation, and if stakes still want to have their missionary preparation classes, that's just fine. Honestly, they were not usually held on a ward basis anyway because there were not enough youth to have a critical mass, so those can still be done on a stake basis.

***Esplin:** Thank you. I noticed some of that was discussed in the instructions, so I thought I would ask. Introducing the changes, President Nelson stated, “This morning we will announce a new balance and connection between gospel instruction in the home and in the Church. We are each responsible for our individual spiritual growth. And scriptures make it clear that parents have the primary responsibility to teach the doctrine to their children. It is the responsibility of the Church to assist each member in the divinely defined goal of increasing his or her gospel knowledge.”⁴ What must change in us as teachers and members to bring about this vision? How can we as teachers and members change to bring about what President Nelson is hoping will happen?*

Callister: I think President Nelson took us from home teaching to ministering, which was, as he declared, a holier way of doing it. I think we're trying to take people from being page-turners of the scriptures to disciples who study and ponder the scriptures. We're hopeful for families that, with these manuals as resources and activities as resources, it will help them truly study the scriptures rather than go through the checklist mentality of “Everybody read a verse, and then we go to bed.” That's a good start, but it can be better. Better is pondering.

So, number one, it's to take us to a higher plane in terms of our spiritual study.

Number two, there is a very clear emphasis that the parents have the prime role of teaching in the home, and now they have extra resources to help them. We used to have the old family home evening manuals years ago, and my wife and I used them all the time; they were really helpful to us. We're



The curriculum team, from left to right: Mike Barber, Ted Barnes, Paul Murphy, and Brian Hansbrow.

hopeful that this will be the same. They won't take away the inspiration of parents, but there will be enough help to parents to add or build upon that. So I think it will lift parents in terms of their vision of the responsibility to be prime gospel teachers in the home, give them the resources to do so, and take us from a checklist mentality to a real pondering mentality that will give us greater faith and make us a holier people.

Esplin: Wonderful! Thank you. In explaining the changes, Elder Cook cautioned, "There is so much more to this adjustment than just shortening the Sunday meetinghouse schedule."⁵ What can we do as members and teachers to catch our leaders' vision for these changes? Is there anything you think of as it

relates to the fear that this will just be viewed as “We’re shortening the meeting schedule”?

Callister: Well, I think the individual and family booklet is designed to be available every day of the week. We say to members, “We’ve given you more time on Sunday. This is a key time when you can really study the scriptures and have aids to help you, so we’re not just shortening it an hour so you can watch one more hour of NFL football.” We’re saying, “You’ve got some resources; now there’s no excuse for not gathering your family and teaching them the gospel.” So I think there is both the emphasis on doing it, and there are the resources to do it, and I think you have to have both. Someone once said, “If you motivate people but you fail to train them, you frustrate them.” I think we’ve got the motivation and the vision, but we’ve also got the resources so we have both ends of the stick. It will be a long-term process, I’m sure, but I think it’s a significant step.

Esplin: Some concluding counsel. What message would you share with families regarding the new curriculum? Do you have any particular message for families as they try to implement these in their homes and in their situations?

Callister: Well, I think Elder David A. Bednar gave us some good counsel about family home evenings. He said, “Be consistent.”⁶ I remember my daughter was in a cello recital, and at the end of the recital the teacher said to the parents that they could ask questions. One parent asked, “Does my child need to practice the cello every single day?” And the teacher said, “No, she only needs to practice the cello on the days she wants to eat.” [laughter] I would just say, “If you eat as a family that day, you read the scriptures as a family that day; and you feed yourself spiritually as well as physically.” How many of us have gone to bed at night and we just never thought about eating the entire day? It just never crossed our mind until we went to sleep. But how many people go to bed at night and they never fed themselves spiritually? We now have a resource so we can feed ourselves spiritually every single day, and that’s just as important as feeding ourselves physically.

Esplin: That’s a great message. Thank you. Similarly, what message might you have for members whose circumstances may not support regular family scripture study—single individuals, widows, widowers—those who aren’t in a what we might term a traditional family relationship? How can they embrace and benefit from these curriculum changes?

Callister: Well, I think there’s two ways. One is it is called the individual and family booklet because it’s designed to help your individual study. So I think somebody can benefit even if they are a widow or single or

whatever—they can still benefit from the individual study, but I think Elder Cook also encouraged people to get together—young single adults, widows, friends—and there is a benefit from doing that—discussing with other people and getting their ideas and input in a nice informal friendly setting. So I think both of those ways are ways that people can benefit from the new curriculum.

***Esplin:** Some concluding questions: What message would you share with teachers regarding the new curriculum? We've talked about families and parents, we've talked about individuals. Do you have any message as the Church's Sunday School General President for teachers with this new curriculum?*

Callister: Well, I would say a couple of things. One is that they seek personal revelation and not rely just on the curriculum—that it's a supplement, it's not a replacement for revelation, that they go to the effort to think of their own questions, their own resources, their own invitations that they might extend, prior to reading the rest of the lesson. If they do that, I have no doubt that they will receive personal revelation that will be very, very rewarding to them and to the class.

Number two is that they start thinking about the lesson at least a week in advance. I think we all understand the reasons for doing that. Revelation doesn't come only on Sunday morning from 8 to 9 a.m.; that's not the only time revelation comes. Revelation comes line upon line, precept upon precept, and if people will start at least a week early, I think that revelation will come at various times. Maybe when they drive the car, maybe when they're in the shower, maybe at the dinner table. They may hear a conversation and say, "Oh wow, that's a good thought! I could use that in my lesson on this subject!" It may inspire them to live that doctrinal teaching a little better during that week. If they start at least a week in advance, I think they increase the opportunities for revelation to come into their lives by giving the Lord the chance to work through them and not just that little narrow one-hour period on Sunday morning.

***Esplin:** That would be, of course, in alignment with President Nelson's message from the April 2018 general conference where he encouraged us to rely upon and receive more revelation. By way of conclusion, what are your greatest desires for the new curriculum and the organizational changes? If you could have anything happen because of these changes in the Church—in families and individuals and in our wards and stakes—what would be your greatest desire?*

Callister: I would hope that individuals and families would not only study the scriptures on a daily basis but that they would rise to that new level

of pondering the scriptures on a daily basis—where they have families, discuss it with families. We see so many places in the scriptures where it essentially says, “I was pondering, and then the spirit of revelation came.” Revelation will come into their lives as a result of pondering, and it will increase their faith in our Father in Heaven and their faith in the Savior Jesus Christ. So I think this daily scripture study, individual and family, and really pondering the scriptures will bring increased revelation and testimony and faith that will help people cling to the iron rod and not be swayed by the temptations of man.

Esplin: *Thank you. Is there anything else that you can think of that I should have asked or that would have been helpful that I've missed as I've tried to prepare for things that might be of help to our audience? Anything that you thought of?*

Callister: I thought you were pretty thorough—unless you want to go talk to the curriculum staff. I can't pay them enough tribute for what they've done. They get kind of lost in receiving credit sometimes, not that they want recognition—that's not their way—but what they have done has been monumental in terms of the revelation I think they have received. It was a witness to me that revelation comes not only to our highest ecclesiastical leaders but to every person in his or her calling. They have received revelation that has been very helpful in getting us where we are. I think that's a good leadership lesson to learn—that you need to let people exercise their agency so they can maximize their capacity for revelation in their callings. I think these brethren have really done that. **RE**

Notes

1. Russell M. Nelson, “Opening Remarks,” *Ensign*, November 2018, 8.
2. Quentin L. Cook, “Deep and Lasting Conversion to Heavenly Father and the Lord Jesus Christ,” *Ensign*, November 2018, 11.
3. Nelson, “Opening Remarks,” 7.
4. Nelson, “Opening Remarks,” 8.
5. Cook, “Deep and Lasting Conversion,” 9.
6. David A. Bednar, “More Diligent and Concerned at Home,” *Ensign*, November 2009, 19.