

Latter-day Saint leaders tackle big issues elections, racism, protests and pandemic

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Body

Breaking with the more general approaches of the past, top leaders in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints on Saturday confronted pointedly and powerfully such contemporary issues as racism, a recession, protests and contentious elections — and, of course, a global pandemic — acknowledging hard times and hard lessons.

They also spoke of optimism and reliance on the comforting power of Jesus Christ.

“Unusual times can bring unusual rewards,” 96-year-old church President Russell M. Nelson said during the faith’s second straight all-virtual General Conference. “...Amid social distancing, face masks and Zoom meetings, we have learned to do some things differently, and some even more effectively.”

Latter-day Saint leaders wore masks while seated and socially distanced in the virtually empty theater in downtown Salt Lake City’s Conference Center. Speakers removed their face coverings when they gave their sermons. The microphone and podium were not scrubbed down with disinfecting wipes between talks.

Following is a look at the topics they covered — via the internet, television and radio — with the church’s 16.5 million members around the world.

Protests, racism, elections

In a sermon about loving your enemies, Dallin H. Oaks, first counselor in the governing First Presidency and a former Utah Supreme Court justice, denounced racism in the church and in the United States as a whole.

As citizens and Latter-day Saints, “we must do better to help root out racism,” he said, adding that “this country should be better in eliminating racism, not only against Black Americans, who were most visible in the recent protests, but also against Latinos, Asians and other groups. This nation’s history of racism is not a happy one, and we must do better.”

In a pointed and topical talk about the tensions over race, Oaks, who is next in line to take over the church’s presidency, supported peaceful protests while condemning violence and looting.

“Though Jesus’ teachings were revolutionary,” the 88-year-old church leader said, “he did not teach revolution or lawbreaking. He taught a better way.”

Some seem to have forgotten that “the First Amendment to the United States Constitution guarantees the ‘right of the people peaceably to assemble and to petition the government for a redress of grievances,’” Oaks said in

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Saturday morning's concluding speech. "That is the authorized way to raise public awareness and to focus on injustices in the content or administration of the laws."

He acknowledged that "there have been injustices. In public actions and in our personal attitudes, we have had racism and related grievances."

Still, Oaks did not offer unconditional support for police actions.

"This does not mean that we agree with all that is done with the force of law," he said. "It means that we obey the current law and use peaceful means to change it."

After the brutal killing of George Floyd at police hands, Nelson, the church's president, joined with top NAACP brass in calling for an end to "prejudice of all kinds." In June, Nelson also lamented the "recent evidences of racism and a blatant disregard for human life," adding that "any of us who has prejudice toward another race needs to repent."

In his sermon Saturday, Oaks waded into political waters as well, condemning the threatened rejection of the results from this year's looming U.S. election.

"We will not participate in the violence threatened by those disappointed with the outcome," he said. "In a democratic society, we always have the opportunity and the duty to persist peacefully until the next election."

President Donald Trump, who currently is battling a COVID-19 infection, has come under fire for showing reluctance to accept the ballot counts from this fall's contest against his chief rival, former Vice President Joe Biden.

Oaks, who did not name any specific candidates or parties, pointed out that the current partisan bitterness has sometimes crept into the church.

"We live in a time of anger and hatred in political relationships and policies. We felt it this summer where some went beyond peaceful protests and engaged in destructive behavior," he said. "We feel it in some current campaigns for public offices. Some of this has even spilled over into political statements and unkind references in our church meetings."

There will always be differences over proposed candidates and policies, he said. "However, as followers of Christ, we must forgo the anger and hatred with which political choices are debated or denounced in many settings."

He urged his listeners to let go of anger, which sows "division and enmity," and rather try to listen and even "learn from" their opponents.

Apostle Quentin L. Cook also called on members to do more to avoid the anger and division common in today's politics.

This is "a moment of particularly strong divisions," Cook said. "However, the millions who have accepted the gospel of Jesus Christ have committed themselves to achieving both righteousness and unity. We are all aware that we can do better, and that is our challenge in this day. We can be a force to lift and bless society as a whole."

The "clarion call" to church members, he said, "is to strive to be a Zion people who are of one heart and one mind and dwell in righteousness."

Christ's "ministry and message have consistently declared all races and colors are children of God," Cook said. "...The culture of the gospel of Jesus Christ is ... not determined by the color of one's skin or where one lives. While we rejoice in distinctive cultures, we should leave behind aspects of those cultures that conflict with the gospel of Jesus Christ."

Apostle Gerrit W. Gong — the faith's first Asian American apostle, who gave a recorded speech because he was "potentially exposed" to COVID-19 — also stressed that "God's love for all people is affirmed throughout scripture. In the household of faith, there are to be no strangers, no foreigners, no rich and poor, no outside 'others.'"

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Latter-day Saints are “invited to change the world for the better, from the inside out, one person, one family, one neighborhood at a time,” Gong said. “This happens when we live and share the gospel.”

He added, “...We need God’s help to create lasting justice, equality, fairness and peace in our homes and communities.”

The 66-year-old Chinese American “is feeling well,” church spokesman Eric Hawkins said in a news release, “but out of an abundance of caution is participating in General Conference from home this weekend.”

William K. Jackson, a general authority Seventy, encouraged the world to join what he called the culture of Christ — which he said would end disputes among other cultures.

“Most of our world’s problems are a direct result of clashes between those of differing ideas and customs arising from their culture,” he said. “But virtually all conflict and chaos would quickly fade if the world would only accept its ‘original culture,’” which he insisted God’s children enjoyed before birth in the Almighty’s presence.

In Christ’s culture, Jackson said, “there is no prejudice or ‘us versus them’ mentality in the ‘greatest of all cultures.’ We are all ‘us.’ We are all ‘them.’ We believe that we are responsible and accountable for ourselves, each other, the church and our world.”

Pandemic pains

Apostle Dieter F. Uchtdorf acknowledged the suffering caused by the coronavirus.

“To those who mourn the loss of family and friends, we mourn with you,” he said. “We plead with Heavenly Father to comfort and console you.”

Beyond that, Uchtdorf said, “Many families have lost incomes and are threatened with hunger, uncertainty and apprehension. We admire the selfless efforts of so many to prevent the spread of this disease. We are humbled by the quiet sacrifice and noble efforts of those who have risked their own safety to assist, heal and support people in need.”

The church leader noted that much remains unknown about the virus.

“But if there is one thing I do know, this virus did not catch Heavenly Father by surprise,” he said. “He did not have to muster additional battalions of angels, call emergency meetings, or divert resources from the world-creation division to handle an unexpected need.”

Even though COVID-19 “is not what we wanted or expected,” Uchtdorf said, “God has prepared his children and his church for this time.”

Latter-day Saints will “move forward,” he said, “and we will be better as a result. ... Our best days are ahead of us, not behind us.”

That does not mean, however, that there won’t be “turbulence in our flight through mortality,” said Uchtdorf, a former airplane pilot. “It doesn’t mean there won’t be unexpected instrument failures, mechanical malfunctions and serious weather challenges. In fact, things might get worse before they get better.”

God never promised that the righteous would have a “free pass that allows them to avoid the valleys of shadow,” he said. “We all must walk through difficult times, for it is in these times of adversity that we learn principles that fortify our characters and cause us to draw closer to God.”

But the Almighty will be with those who suffer, Uchtdorf said, “Because we are his children, he will not abandon us.”

Apostle David A. Bednar said the coronavirus pandemic is providing a test that may help people learn and prove their faith in God.

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"The year 2020 has been marked, in part, by a global pandemic that has proved, examined and tried us in many ways," he said. "I pray that we as individuals and families are learning the valuable lessons that only challenging experiences can teach us."

For example, when COVID-19 was spreading rapidly and after earthquakes had hit his home in Utah, Bednar said he and his wife decided to take an inventory of their food storage and emergency supplies.

"We learned a great deal. In many areas, our preparatory work was just right," he said. "In some other areas, however, improvement was necessary because we had not recognized and addressed particular needs in timely ways."

Bednar said they were afraid to open some long-forgotten food containers "for fear of unleashing another global pandemic! But you should be happy to know that we properly disposed of the hazardous materials."

He urged people similarly to look at how well prepared they are in all aspects of their lives.

"What do we need to improve in our lives spiritually, physically, socially, emotionally and intellectually?" he asked. "Now is the time to prepare and prove ourselves willing and able to do all things whatsoever the Lord our God shall command us."

Nelson, the church president, also urged members to use "this unique time to grow spiritually." He noted that, "We are here on earth to be tested, to see if we will choose to follow Jesus Christ, to repent regularly, to learn, and to progress."

He said the church is moving forward despite challenges from the pandemic.

He noted the Utah-based faith "has provided pandemic humanitarian aid for 895 projects in 150 countries." That outreach represents the largest-ever charitable effort in the faith's 190-year history.

Latter-day Saint missionaries and leaders have been "resourceful, resilient and truly remarkable," Nelson said, at finding "new, creative ways" to find converts. "Many missions have reported doing more teaching than before."

He noted the church "had to close temples for a time, and some construction projects were briefly delayed, but now they are all moving forward." The faith has broken ground on 20 new temples this year.

Following prophets will help people prepare to handle future calamities — just like heeding advice in recent years to build a reserve of food and money helped many during the current pandemic, said W. Christopher Waddell, the newly named first counselor in the Presiding Bishopric, which oversees the church's vast financial, real estate, investment and charitable operations.

To all who have been affected by the pandemic, he said, "we express understanding and concern for your situation, as well as a firm conviction that better days are ahead."

But, he warned, "In an ever-changing world, we must prepare for uncertainties. Even with better days ahead, we know the temporal peaks and valleys of mortality will continue. As we seek to become temporally prepared, we can face the trials of life with increased confidence."

Waddell cautioned against trying to build new financial or food reserves too quickly.

"It would be inconsistent with a compassionate Savior to ignore the reality that many are struggling, and ask them to begin building a reserve of food and money for the future," he said. "The Lord does not expect us to do more than we can do, but he does expect us to do what we can do... when we can do it."

Hope in trying times

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Michelle D. Craig, first counselor in the Young Women general presidency and the first female speaker at this fall's conference, said that during trying times, hope may be found by praying for God to open our eyes to see more of his power and plan for us — and also how he sees others.

She retold the Bible story of a young servant of the ancient prophet Elisha who worried when they were surrounded by a vast army. Elisha told him to fear not, and the servant's eyes were opened to a vision to see an even bigger heavenly army with them full of horses and chariots of fire.

"There may be times when you, like the servant, find yourself struggling to see how God is working in your life — times when you feel under siege — when the trials of mortality bring you to your knees," she said. " ... You, too, can pray for the Lord to open your eyes to see things you would not normally see."

That includes seeing how God sees us so that we can also see others as he does. "Jesus Christ sees people deeply. He sees individuals, their needs, and who they can become," she said. "Where others saw fishermen, sinners or publicans, Jesus saw disciples; where others saw a man possessed by devils, Jesus looked past the outward distress, acknowledged him and healed him."

General authority Scott D. Whiting of the Seventy urged people to become more like Christ one step at a time, and avoid discouragement by realizing that is a lifelong process.

"The commandment to be like [Christ] is not intended to make you feel guilty, unworthy or unloved," he said. "Our entire mortal experience is about progression, trying, failing and succeeding."

Apostle D. Todd Christofferson said that building a truly sustainable culture requires responsibility and looking toward God. On the other hand a society "in which individual consent is the only constraint on sexual activity is a society in decay."

In such a society, "adultery, promiscuity, elective abortion and out-of-wedlock births are but some of the bitter fruits," he said, "that grow out of the immorality sanctioned by the sexual revolution."

The consequences that follow work against a healthy society include "growing numbers of children raised in poverty and without the positive influence of fathers, sometimes through multiple generations," Christofferson said, "women bearing alone what should be shared responsibilities, and seriously deficient education as schools, like other institutions, are tasked to compensate for failure in the home."

The coronavirus pandemic may have temporarily closed many temples and limited sacred ordinances performed in them, but apostle Ronald A. Rasband still urged church members to redouble their efforts to prepare to enter them.

"Being worthy to attend the temple, however, has not been suspended," he said. "Let me emphasize, whether you have access to a temple or not, you need a current temple recommend to stay firmly on the covenant path."

Members who follow key commandments are given by their leaders a "temple recommend," a small card, that allows them to enter temples. Rasband said it is even more than that.

"Your temple recommend opens the gates of heaven for you," Rasband said.

He also noted, "This has been a most unusual year."

Patrick Kearon, a member of the faith's Presidency of the Seventy, offered the invocation, pleading with God for an end to the pandemic, seeking heaven's blessings on those who are ill or grieving, and urging a return to civility in public life.

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