

Africa Southeast Local Pages

AREA PRESIDENCY MESSAGE

“But Whom Say Ye That I Am?”

By Elder Dale G. Renlund, Area President

“**W**hen Jesus came into the coasts of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, saying, Whom do men say that I the Son of man am? And they said, Some say that thou art John the Baptist: some, Elias; and others, Jeremias, or one of the prophets.”¹

The question the Savior asked his disciples, “Whom do men say that I the Son of man am?” is as important today as it was when it was first asked. Just as in Jesus’s time, it is answered in many ways by different people. Today, some say that Jesus was an invention of New Testament writers. Others say that He was a remarkable man, a great teacher, philosopher, or political leader.

After hearing the responses of His disciples to His question, Jesus posed another critical question, “But whom say ye that I am? And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.”² Peter was right. Jesus is the Christ. He broke the bands

of death and performed the seminal act in all of human history. He rose from the dead. The Atonement, which all mankind depended on, was accomplished to perfection.

In essence, Jesus asks the same question of each of us—“But whom say ye that I am?” The divinity of Jesus Christ and the reality of His Atonement are either true or they are not. The tomb was either empty or it was not. It was not a little bit empty or almost empty. This concept is stated clearly by C. S. Lewis, an English Christian author, as he says, “I am trying to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him [Jesus Christ]: ‘I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept his claim to be God.’ That is the one thing we must not say. A man who is merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on the level with a man who says he’s a poached egg—or else he would be the



devil of hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God; or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon; or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God. But let us not come up with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.”³

The empty tomb makes all the difference in the world and in our lives. This was brought

home to me by an incident that occurred in an Area Seventy/General Authority Training meeting before the April 2005 general conference. The assembled Area Seventies and General Authorities were invited to ask any questions they wished of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles.

The first question was asked by Elder Joshua Subandriyo, an Area Seventy from Indonesia. His nation had just experienced a horrific tsunami on December 26, 2004, in which over 225,000 died.⁴ Elder Subandriyo asked: “What are we to say to people who are so weighed down by life’s tragedies and challenges?”

After one member of the Twelve gave a wonderful and thoughtful response, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland came to the pulpit and said, “I have a simpler answer. Tell them, ‘He is not here: for He is risen.’”⁵ Elder Holland was simply teaching that the tomb was empty that Easter morning, bringing hope, life, and resurrection to every member of the human family, regardless of circumstances.

Most in the Africa Southeast Area have experienced and are dealing with life’s ongoing tragedies. Very few have escaped the loss of loved ones. Very few

have escaped economic challenges. Very few have escaped societal conflict. None have escaped all. The Book of Mormon prophet, Mormon, illustrates how Christ and His Atonement can bring the proper perspective to life’s difficulties. In writing to his son Moroni, after detailing the destruction of their civilization and atrocities done by both sides of the conflict, Mormon said, “May not the things which I have written grieve thee, to weigh thee down unto death; but may Christ lift thee up, and may his sufferings and death, and the showing his body unto our fathers, and his mercy and long-suffering, and the hope of his glory and of eternal life, rest in your mind forever.”⁶

The scriptures tell us of witnesses, even a cloud of witnesses⁷ to the reality of Jesus’s Resurrection. Consider the testimony of these who all testified that they had seen the living Christ: Mary Magdalene;⁸ the remaining eleven Apostles;⁹ the 120 disciples Peter refers to as having been witnesses of Jesus’s Resurrection during the process of replacing Judas Iscariot in the Quorum of the Twelve began;¹⁰ the 2,500 assembled at the Temple Bountiful in the

Americas;¹¹ Saul on the road to Damascus;¹² Joseph Smith;¹³ Sidney Rigdon with Joseph Smith in 1832 in Hiram, Ohio;¹⁴ and Oliver Cowdery with Joseph Smith in the Kirtland Temple in Kirtland, Ohio in 1836.¹⁵

Furthermore, today we have 15 who we sustain as prophets, seers, and revelators who are special witnesses of the Savior. They know Him well. Jointly they say, “We solemnly testify that His life [the life of Jesus Christ] which is central to all human history, neither began in Bethlehem nor concluded on Calvary. . . . He rose from the grave to ‘become the firstfruits of them that slept’ (1 Corinthians 15:20). . . . Jesus is the Living Christ, the immortal Son of God. He is the great King Immanuel, who stands today on the right hand of His Father.”¹⁶ Is it any wonder that when asked, “What are the fundamental principles of your religion?” the Prophet Joseph Smith would reply, “The fundamental principles of our religion are the testimony of the Apostles and Prophets concerning Jesus Christ; that He died, was buried, and rose again the third day, and ascended into heaven; and all other things which pertain to our religion are only appendages to it.”¹⁷

Our lives will be blessed when we accept the testimony of these witnesses and come to know for ourselves through the Holy Ghost that the Savior lives. Then we can answer the Savior's question as Peter did, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." That is how I answer the question, "But whom say ye that I am?" As an especial witness of the Savior, I testify that Jesus is the Christ and that He lives. I know that the

tomb was empty because He is risen. Through His Atonement, He brings peace and solace. Because of what He offers, our perspectives can be changed, our fears can be replaced with hope, and we can have the promise of the greatest of blessings, that of eternal life.¹⁸ ■

NOTES

1. Matthew 16:13–14.
2. Matthew 16:15–16.
3. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 55–56; also quoted by Tad R. Callister in "The Book of Mormon—a Book

- from God," *Ensign*, Nov. 2011, 74.
4. See <http://www.drgeorgepc.com/Tsunami2004Indonesia.html>.
 5. Matthew 28:6.
 6. Moroni 9:25.
 7. See Hebrews 12:1.
 8. See John 20:14–17.
 9. See John 20:19–29.
 10. See Acts 1:15–22.
 11. See 3 Nephi 11:7, 15–17.
 12. See Acts 9:4–6.
 13. See Joseph Smith—History 1:17.
 14. See D&C 76:22–24.
 15. See D&C 110:2–3.
 16. "The Living Christ: The Testimony of the Apostles," January 1, 2000; <http://lds.org/study/living-Christ>; *Ensign*, Dec. 2004, 9.
 17. *Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith*, (2007) 49.
 18. See D&C 14:7.

Ministry in Africa: Blessing the Lives of the People

By Gerry Avant, *Church News* editor

Elder Russell M. Nelson conducted a ministry in Africa from October 21 through 30, 2011, that could be described as the fulfillment of scripture.

In the company of Elder Ronald A. Rasband of the Presidency of the Seventy and Bishop Richard C. Edgley of the Presiding Bishopric, Elder Nelson dedicated Malawi and visited several other countries, where he presided over area reviews, addressed priesthood leadership conferences and spoke to members in various meetings.

"During the trip, a scripture kept coming to mind," said Elder Rasband. "That scripture is found in Doctrine and Covenants 107:35: 'The Twelve being sent out, holding the keys, to open the door by



Elder Russell M. Nelson and his wife, Wendy, pose with a young child during their trip to Africa.

the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. . . .'

"We were literally able to witness this verse

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Elder Russell M. Nelson and his wife, Wendy, gather with the Saints to dedicate the land for missionary work in Blantyre, Malawi.

in action as Elder Nelson dedicated the country of Malawi and as we visited the various nations,” Elder Rasband said.

Elder Nelson, Elder Rasband and Bishop Edgley were together for various meetings held in Johannesburg, South Africa; Antananarivo, Madagascar; and Blantyre, Malawi. While Elder Nelson was presiding over stake conferences in Nairobi, Kenya, Elder Rasband was in Kampala, Uganda, and Bishop Edgley was in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.

Also with the Brethren in various places were members of the Africa Southeast Area Presidency: Elders Dale G. Renlund, Ulisses Soares and Carl B. Cook, all of the Seventy.

Traveling with their husbands were Wendy Nelson, Melanie Rasband, Pauline Edgley, Ruth

Lybbert Renlund, Rosana Soares and Lynette Cook. While the General Authorities conducted priesthood leadership conferences, their wives met with and taught leaders of the Primary, Young Women and Relief Society organizations.

“We were trying to bless the lives of as many people in as many countries as possible,” Elder Nelson said after his return to Salt Lake City.

While Elder Nelson had been to many countries in Africa, his visit from October 21 through 24 was his first to Madagascar, which is located in the Indian Ocean east of Mozambique. It is the world’s fourth largest island. The first branch of the Church was established in Madagascar in 1990, nearly a year before missionaries were assigned to serve there full time. The Church received legal status in 1993.



Church leaders met with the Saints in Nairobi, Kenya. Pictured from left: Lynette Cook, Elder Carl B. Cook, Elder Russell M. Nelson, Wendy Nelson, Consolata Usi, Elder Hesbon O. Usi, Melanie Rasband, Elder Ronald A. Rasband, and Bishop Richard C. Edgely.

“They told me I was the first Apostle to visit Madagascar since Elder Richard G. Scott was there to dedicate the country [on October 27, 1999],” Elder Nelson said. “For them to know about prophets and apostles is an abstraction; to see one gives them a connection to the leadership of the Church, which they really appreciate. I wish we could get around more often. However, they’re blessed to have an Area Presidency, members of the Seventy. They are so good, so competent. We fulfill our scriptural responsibility through these men.”

While the first branch of the Church in Malawi was organized in 1999 and there are now about 1,000 members in four branches, the land had not been formally dedicated. Elder

Nelson and others met as a small group for that purpose on October 25.

“We have a chapel in Blantyre,” he said. “That is where we chose to dedicate the land, thinking that this was probably the most sacred spot in the country. After we dedicated the country, we held a meeting for the members and missionaries.”

Of his visit to Kenya from October 29 to 30, Elder Nelson said, “We were there for a priesthood leadership conference. We taught men from five countries: Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Ethiopia and Rwanda.

“I dedicated Ethiopia and Tanzania on earlier trips there, so for me to meet priesthood leaders from those countries was personally a real thrill.”

Asked what impressions he brought home of the members in Africa, Elder Nelson paused

a moment to collect his thoughts. “I would say reverence and competence would be at the top of the list,” he said.

In most places he visited, the Church is seeing its first generation of members; in other areas there are second-generation members. (In South Africa, where the Church has been long established, there are multi-generation members.)

Young men and young women are being called to serve as missionaries, not only to their

own countries but also to other nations.

Bishop Edgley said, “Everywhere I went I found wonderful Saints who were eager to learn and to do things right. I found great faith and great levels of activity among the people. There is a maturing leadership.

“In certain areas of Africa, especially in Congo and DR Congo, the Church is growing rapidly with a high level of faith. Everywhere we went, they were excited about the temple



[to be built in Kinshasa, DR Congo; a temple is also to be built in Durban, South Africa], even if it will be inconvenient to get to. It is a symbol to them that the Church is growing in Africa and that at some time there will be a temple closer to them.”

Elder Nelson said, “We also see the fruits

of the humanitarian efforts of the Church. You and I contribute dollars to the humanitarian fund. We see women who used to walk three hours a day from their village to where the water is and then walk back, day after day. Now the humanitarian efforts of the Church have brought clean water to their communities. When Elder

Missionaries of the Johannesburg Mission gathered together to hear from Elder Russell M. Nelson in a special session at the Bedfordview Stake Center.



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PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF THOMAS HATCH

Saints gather outside of the Church building in Blantyre, Malawi, after the dedication of the land for missionary work.

Rasband went to a community without any Latter-day Saints, the women danced around him with thanks for clean water.”

Of their meetings during their visit to Africa, Elder Rasband said, “The leaders and members were very receptive to the teachings and messages given by all in our group.”

Asked what he foresaw for those African nations where the Church has been established for only two decades or less, Elder Nelson used one word: “Hope.”

Then he said, “After centuries of cycles of poverty, with no relief in sight and every generation doing what the previous generation did in poverty and squalor, there is now a way up and out; there’s light and education, the promise of prosperity—both spiritual and economic—as they learn the commandments of God and learn to keep them. So it is hope that the Church can provide for this new generation.” ■



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Elder Dale G. Renlund, Area President, and Elder Russell M. Nelson greet those who attended the dedication of Malawi for missionary work.