

RELIEF SOCIETY GENERAL PRESIDENTS



Emma Smith
1842–1844

*"We are going to do something extraordinary. . . . We expect extraordinary occasions and pressing calls."*⁴

Emma Smith



Eliza R. Snow
1866–1887

*"There is no sister so isolated, and her sphere so narrow but what she can do a great deal towards establishing the Kingdom of God upon the earth."*²

Eliza R. Snow



Zina D. H. Young
1888–1901

*"May we as women of Zion, ever know and honor our true position."*³

Zina D. Young



Bathsheba W. Smith
1901–1910

*"Cease not while life lasts to study diligently, for the knowledge which is of greatest worth."*⁴

Bathsheba W. Smith



Emmeline B. Wells
1910–1921

*"I want the sisters to study the scriptures and become familiar with the Bible and the Book of Mormon. Let them be holy books unto you."*⁵

Emmeline B. Wells



Clarissa S. Williams
1921–1928

*"We have been given such blessings as have never been given to women in any other age, and we should in every way endeavor to live up to them."*⁶

Clarissa S. Williams



Louise Y. Robison
1928–1939

*"Go where you're needed, do what you can."*⁷

Louise Y. Robison



Amy Brown Lyman
1940–1945

*"Little did the original members of the organization realize, as they walked to and from their meetings in Nauvoo, how great their beloved Society would become."*⁸

Amy Brown Lyman



Belle S. Spafford
1945–1974

*"There is within this society a great life-giving element . . . binding together women of all nationalities into a great sisterhood, unifying them in purpose and impelling them on to worthy accomplishment."*⁹

Belle S. Spafford



Barbara B. Smith
1974–1984

*"Women can begin in their own spheres—with their little children at home, among adult friends, in their extended families, and in their professions. But the important thing is to reach out in love to serve someone every day."*¹⁰

Barbara B. Smith



Barbara W. Winder
1984–1990

*"And so it is that I feel for the sisters of the Church this love, and sense the worth of each individual. I want so, and desire so, that we be unified, one together with the priesthood, serving and building the kingdom of God here today and spreading the joy of the gospel to those who are so in need of it."*¹¹

Barbara W. Winder



Elaine L. Jack
1990–1997

*"I look forward with a perfect brightness of hope to the offerings of Relief Society sisters in the new century that is before us. Our joy in the gospel of Jesus Christ and our place in His plan will draw people to us and change lives. We will lift and inspire a world so desperately in need of goodness."*¹²

Elaine L. Jack



Mary Ellen W. Smoot
1997–2002

*"When we are truly converted, our focus shifts from self to others. We can find inner strength through service. Nothing would please the adversary more than for us to be distracted by selfish concerns and appetites. But we know better. Service will help us to stay on course."*¹³

Mary Ellen W. Smoot



Bonnie D. Parkin
2002–2007

"If I could have one thing happen for every woman in this Church, it would be that they would feel the love of the Lord in their lives daily as they keep their covenants, exercise charity, and strengthen families."

Bonnie D. Parkin



Julie B. Beck
2007–2012

"It is my desire that Latter-day Saint women be strong and immovable in our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. We live and share testimonies of Him and His restored gospel, we uphold, nourish, and protect families, and we provide relief to those in need."

Julie B. Beck



Linda K. Burton
2012–

"My earnest hope for all of Heavenly Father's daughters is that we will increase our faith in the power of Christ's Atonement, cheerfully keep our covenants, strengthen families, and work in unity with the priesthood to seek out and help those in need."

Linda K. Burton



RELIEF SOCIETY GENERAL PRESIDENTS

The following are short biographical sketches of the Relief Society general presidents.

Emma Smith was long remembered for ministering with compassion to the needs of her neighbors. She married the Prophet Joseph Smith in 1827. Their shared faith and love for each other and their children enabled them to weather intense persecution and personal sorrows. Emma became the first of several scribes to assist Joseph in translating the Book of Mormon, and she compiled the first hymnal for the Church. Joseph Smith stated that Emma's election as president at the founding meeting of the Relief Society fulfilled an 1830 revelation he had received declaring her to be "an elect lady" called of God (D&C 25:3). In 1842, Emma led a delegation of Relief Society women to the office of the governor of Illinois, petitioning him to protect Joseph Smith and the Nauvoo Saints. She was known as a remarkable woman of strength and influence.

Eliza R. Snow was well known as a poet and writer of hymn texts. She was elected secretary of the Female Relief Society of Nauvoo, and she later brought to the Salt Lake Valley her record of its meetings from 1842 to 1844. She was sealed to Joseph Smith and after his death married Brigham Young and lived in his household. In 1866, President Young appointed her to assist bishops in reestablishing and regularizing branches of the Relief Society in local wards, and she drew from the Nauvoo Relief Society minutes to teach women the society's guiding purposes and organizational pattern and procedures. She led the effort of Relief Society from 1866 to 1887, working with Latter-day Saint women to establish Church associations for young women and children, a women's newspaper and hospital, and Relief Society halls and cooperative stores. She was known for her spiritual gifts and for her decades of involvement in temple ordinances, and she emphasized the sacred, eternal significance of family and community responsibilities.

Zina D. H. Young was a nurturer and a healer within and beyond her family circle. She married Henry Jacobs (with whom she had two sons), was sealed to Joseph Smith, and later married Brigham Young (with whom she had a daughter). She also reared as her own the four children of Clarissa Ross Young, who had died. A competent midwife, she delivered hundreds of babies and ministered to the sick with faith and compassion. She traveled with Eliza R. Snow to strengthen Relief Society women and programs, supervised women's participation in Utah's silk industry, supported medical training and suffrage for women, and visited branches of the Relief Society in the Sandwich Islands, New York, and Canada. As the society's general president from 1888 to 1901, she helped build bridges to women of other faiths by attending women's congresses at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago and supporting Latter-day Saint women's membership in the National and International Councils of Women. She assembled women for the first general conference of the Relief Society and exhorted them to gather often to strengthen the bonds of sisterhood.

Bathsheba W. Smith was 79 years old when she began her service as the organization's fourth general president (1901–10). Her upbringing on a genteel Virginia plantation nurtured her creativity and love of beauty. She became a self-sufficient homemaker who wove cloth and adorned her home with quilts, embroidered linens, and watercolors of her own design and making. She married George A. Smith in 1841, and they became parents of a son and a daughter who bore their names. Her son was killed in 1860, and her husband died in 1875. She officiated in temple ordinances with devotion, serving in the Nauvoo Temple, the Endowment House in Salt Lake City, and the Logan, Manti, and Salt Lake Temples. She engaged younger women in Relief Society by appointing younger counselors to the general presidency and establishing mothers' classes. She encouraged women to be prayerful and eager learners.

Emmeline B. Wells was resilient and resolute and knew women's challenges firsthand. She experienced the desertion of her young husband, James Harris, and the deaths of her later husbands, Newel K. Whitney and Daniel H. Wells. Her only son died as a newborn, and two of her five daughters died as young women. Economic reverses forced her to be self-reliant. As editor of the *Woman's Exponent* from 1877 to 1914, she defended the Church against its detractors and advocated women's suffrage and the equality of women and men. She became a personal friend of Susan B. Anthony and a charter member of the National and International Councils of Women. She directed the Relief Society's grain storage program and served as Relief Society general secretary for 20 years. During her tenure as general president, from 1910 to 1921, the Relief Society adopted a uniform pattern of lessons, a social service program, and an official publication, the *Relief Society Magazine*.

Clarissa S. Williams was a schoolteacher and a woman of humility and exceptional executive ability. Her presidency witnessed an increase of Relief Society involvement in the community. At her recommendation, the interest accrued from the Relief Society wheat fund was used for health, maternity, and child welfare projects. The Relief Society Social Services Department, established in 1919, trained social workers, found employment for women, and offered adoption services. The Relief Society also trained nurses, aided refugees, and established a maternity home as part of an emphasis on maternity and health issues. Sister Williams considered the success of health care efforts one of the highlights of her presidency. She and her husband, William N. Williams, had eleven children.

Louise Y. Robison grew up in Scipio, Utah, where she learned much about compassionate service from her mother, a stake Relief Society president. Sister Robison loved the temple and enjoyed the Relief Society's role in the Temple and Burial Clothing Department. She also loved music, and during her presidency the Relief Society singing mothers' choruses were organized. She led the Relief Society during the difficult years of the Great Depression, during which the organization cooperated with government relief agencies and the Red Cross and helped lay the groundwork for the Church welfare system. In 1937 the Relief Society opened Mormon Handicraft, a shop where women could sell their handwork to supplement their family income. Sister Robison and her husband, Joseph L. Robison, had six children.

Amy Brown Lyman, a gifted administrator, cared deeply about social work. For 16 years she directed the first social welfare department of the Church, which was part of the Relief Society until 1969. She also served in the Utah legislature. While her husband was president of the European Mission, she presided over the Church women's organizations in Europe. During her presidency the Relief Society celebrated its centennial with a membership of 115,000. She led the Relief Society during World War II and emphasized wartime thrift and emergency preparedness as well as relief for war victims. At a time when war industries were pulling many women into the workforce, Sister Lyman focused on strengthening families and championed the role of mothers in the home. She and her husband, Richard R. Lyman, had two children.

Belle S. Spafford, an able teacher, writer, and administrator, led the Relief Society for nearly 30 years. After World War II the Relief Society helped with relief efforts for the people suffering in Europe. The organization shipped clothes, bedding, soap, and other necessities to war-torn areas. During the 1950s the Relief Society increased its emphasis on education, especially homemaker education, and on social services. Sisters around the world raised funds for the Relief Society Building, which was dedicated in 1956. Membership rules for the Relief Society changed during the 1970s to automatically enroll all Latter-day Saint women ages 18 and older. Sister Spafford was widely known and respected outside the Church as well, and from 1968 to 1970 she served as president of the National Council of Women. She and her husband, Willis Earl Spafford, had two children.

Barbara B. Smith demonstrated sound judgment and tolerance as president of the Relief Society during a time of intense conflict over women's issues. She was often interviewed about her stand against the proposed Equal Rights Amendment to the United States Constitution. She encouraged Latter-day Saint women to be involved in their communities and to represent Church attitudes about women without being combative or divisive. Sister Smith continued the Relief Society's emphasis on disaster relief, emergency preparedness, and welfare. She also emphasized homemaker education and the importance of the family. During her presidency the Relief Society grew to about two million members worldwide. Sister Smith asked the women of the Church to personally commit to a lifetime of learning and active service. She and her husband, Douglas H. Smith, had seven children.

Barbara W. Winder was known as a woman of great compassion and humility. Under her direction the Relief Society emphasized personal spirituality and gave special attention to the needs of single adult sisters and the family. Sister Winder summarized the mission of the Relief Society in four basic principles: building faith and testimony, strengthening families, giving compassionate service, and sustaining the priesthood. During her presidency the general officers of the Relief Society, Young Women, and Primary moved into the remodeled Relief Society Building, where they could work more closely in a sisterhood of organizations. By the end of Sister Winder's presidency, the Relief Society had more than three million members in 135 countries and territories. She envisioned the Relief Society as an organization that could bless each woman. She and her husband, Richard W. Winder, have four children.

Elaine L. Jack was raised in Cardston, Alberta, Canada. Her vision of Relief Society was characterized by her confidence in the goodness of women, in the unique contributions women make individually and collectively, and in the importance of strengthening families. She encouraged sisters to make Charity Never Faileth a motto of such personal significance that the whole world would be blessed. During the 1992 Relief Society sesquicentennial, sisters throughout the world engaged in service projects to help their individual communities. Also during her presidency, a literacy effort was initiated by the Relief Society to help all Church members gain the basic reading and writing skills necessary to read the word of God and to encourage lifelong gospel study and self-improvement. She and her husband, Joseph E. Jack, have four sons.

Mary Ellen W. Smoot emphasized the importance of working closely with priesthood leaders to help women and their families come unto Christ. Sister Smoot traveled more than 200,000 miles during her administration and helped with humanitarian efforts in Kosovo. She served on the World Congress for the Family Committee. She also published the Relief Society declaration to help women realize their divine potential as daughters of God. Homemaking meeting was replaced with home, family, and personal enrichment meeting. The monthly visiting teaching message was reformatted to focus on gospel principles, scriptures, and quotations from Church leaders. Sister Smoot wanted the women of the Church to be spiritually prepared to meet their challenges. She and her husband, Stanley M. Smoot, have seven children.

Bonnie D. Parkin taught that all women could feel the love of the Lord each day as they kept their covenants, exercised charity, and strengthened families. With her characteristic energy and determination, she focused on preparing and nurturing young women in the transition from youth to womanhood. Her desire was that in Relief Society, sisters of all ages would find a place where they felt at home in a bond of trust, friendship, and support. She also taught that visiting teaching is the heart and soul of Relief Society. Women throughout the world were encouraged to practice welfare principles and to share their time and talents in their wards and stakes. She and her husband, James Parkin, have four sons.

Julie B. Beck learned to speak Portuguese as a young girl and developed a testimony of the gospel of Jesus Christ in São Paulo, Brazil, where her father presided over the Brazilian Mission. She later learned Spanish, which enabled her to speak without interpretation to over 80 percent of the nearly six million women in the Church. She emphasized the divine role of motherhood and the power and influence of righteous women to strengthen the homes of Zion and build the kingdom of God on the earth. She taught that Relief Society resources should be used to help increase faith in Christ, strengthen families, and continue the organization's grand tradition of providing relief to those in need. She and her husband, Ramon P. Beck, have three children.

Linda K. Burton came to a realization of her testimony of the gospel as a teenager living in New Zealand, where her father served as a mission president. Living within the shadow of the New Zealand Temple, she saw firsthand the great sacrifices Church members were willing to make to receive the blessings of the temple as they came from long distances. Later she served with her husband as he presided over the Korea Seoul West Mission, another experience that increased her love and admiration for people willing to sacrifice in order to make and keep covenants. She hopes to help women of all ages and cultures increase their faith in Jesus Christ and His Atonement. She and her husband, Craig P. Burton, are the parents of six children.

1. Relief Society Minute Book, Mar. 17, 1842, 12.

2. *Woman's Exponent*, Sept. 15, 1873, 62.

3. *Woman's Exponent*, Apr. 15, 1889, 173.

4. *Woman's Exponent*, Jan. 1906, 41.

5. *Relief Society Magazine*, Aug. 1919, 439.

6. *Relief Society Magazine*, Dec. 1921, 696.

7. In Belle S. Spafford Oral History, Church History Library, 40.

8. *Relief Society Magazine*, Mar. 1944, 139.

9. *Relief Society Magazine*, Mar. 1949, 148.

10. *Ensign*, Mar. 1984, 17.

11. *Ensign*, May 1984, 59.

12. *Ensign*, May 1997, 75.

13. *Ensign*, May 2002, 13.

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