



# THE MILLENNIAL STAR

## Guest Post: The Fourth LDS Church Mission: To Practice ‘Pure Religion’

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*The following guest post comes from Warner Woodworth, author and co-author of a variety of LDS articles and books, including “Working Toward Zion” and “United for Zion,” among others.*

I rejoiced in recent days to learn the Church is ready to officially expand its original three-fold mission to a new fourth one. Beginning in October, two months before the first published article in the Salt Lake Tribune appeared, I had started emailing NGO associates around the globe, especially in Africa and Latin America, informing them that this would soon become a reality. What this will mean for Church members, as well as those of other faiths is open to conjecture. In this short essay, I attempt to review the history and context of this new development, and raise a few provocative issues at the end.

Since 1982 under the leadership of President Spencer W. Kimball, there have been key thrusts which focused as follows: 1) Proclaim the Gospel, 2) Perfect the Saints, 3) Redeem the Dead. These statements have guided much of Church policy-making and practices by providing a framework for emphasizing what we should do as a major global religious organization. They were articulated precisely at the time when many corporate consultants and CEOs were attempting to make their organizational purposes explicit so they could achieve maximum results in their work, higher output, larger profits, and greater excellence.

Yet for some of us in the Church, there was always a feeling that something was still lacking. Sure, we ought to preach our message to unbelievers and baptize as many who become converted. Clearly, LDS members needed to grow in truth and light until they became more holy as is humanly possible.

And obviously, the sacred work of genealogical research and performing temple ordinances for our ancestors, indeed the whole world's dead down through history, was critical. But for me, I often wondered and prayed for an additional driving purpose. While I certainly believed we should work to save the dead, I also deeply felt we should save the living.

Thus, over the years, I would suggest to others the need to expand the Church's mission by considering an emphasis on helping those in poverty. In meetings during my years of serving as an informal advisor on Church community outreach and service to reduce human suffering, I often argued such logic. In hundreds of fireside presentations, in Utah, the U.S., and around the globe, I tried to make the case for such an additional emphasis. In my writing of conference and Education Week speeches, in my BYU classes, and in various other settings, I pled the cause of the poor. Yet in many cases, the response was to demur. Many people's reaction was that of dismissing this idea as merely a secondary matter, and they countered that the essence of their religious effort ought to fit neatly within the official three-fold missions stated by the Brethren.

Gradually, over time, however, various and miraculous changes occurred. For me, the first one of recent decades was in the mid-1980s when the Church Humanitarian Fund was established. It was in part a response to the petitions of Mormons in America and Europe who called for Church headquarters to take action to address the massive East African crisis in which millions of children, their mothers and fathers were literally dying of starvation because of drought and civil wars. The Brethren were inspired to take action, and two general fasts were called for, resulting in the collection of more than \$10 million for relief.

While much good was accomplished through the Humanitarian Fund, LDS efforts could not reach some regions of the world because the Church had no official recognition or legal status. We had to partner with Catholic Relief Services or other entities. A number of us who were engaged in Third World development work professionally, suggested the necessity for establishing an LDS NGO through which material goods and LDS experts in poverty-alleviation, agriculture, and other aid strategies might be able to provide such expertise to those countries.

Therefore, the second innovation occurred which was the creation of a Mormon NGO, Latter-day Saint Charities. This happened in 1996 under the direction of the First Presidency. Pres. Gordon B. Hinckley had been keenly aware of the world's suffering masses as he became the most traveled prophet in the history of the world. Since then, LDS Charities has been registered as an NGO in a number of nations hit by civil unrest, floods, famines, earthquakes, and other disasters. These

activities have enabled the Church to channel hundreds of millions of dollars in relief and development throughout the earth.

The next major step in the evolution of service to those in need, was to set up the Perpetual Education Fund. This program was announced by President Hinckley at General Conference March 31, 2001. I had begun discussing this idea in the late 1980s, and proposed the creation of a Perpetual Education Fund (PEF), based on the early pioneer model known as the Perpetual Emigration Fund. It had brought thousands of converts from around the world to settle in Utah and build Zion. With a few associates, I began experimenting with the obtaining of private donations from wealthy Latter-day Saints since about 1995, and we created education funds for returned missionaries in such countries as Brazil, Chile, and Mexico. In spite of seeing the need, and in spite of realizing we could successfully pull together the necessary funding for private ventures through our NGOs, some officials did not like the idea, or felt it was simply unnecessary.

Imagine my absolute joy when the Church finally announced the creation of the new PEF for returned missionaries in 2001! I dropped to my knees and gave a prayer of thanksgiving because I had known firsthand how such small loans transformed many RM lives. As that fund has since swelled to many hundreds of millions of dollars, I have seen the transformation of many lives among our young adults in the Third World.

However, I also felt deeply that we as Mormons could make a larger difference in society, not only with our own members or missionaries. Back in the 1970s, I was getting a Ph.D. at the University of Michigan. During that time I sought to combat racism and poverty in inner cities such as Detroit and Flint, Muskegon and Grand Rapids. I had the opportunity to mobilize a number of LDS members in these projects. Later, I lived as a visiting professor for over a year in Brazil, where I learned so much about Latin American hunger and poverty. My feelings grew that more was needed, and that not only did the United Nations, the World Bank, and the U.S. government have contributions to make for the poor, but so did the Church.

During the 1980s, after the three-fold mission was proclaimed, I sensed something was still lacking. It was the need for a fourth. My feelings and prayers for this new emphasis have grown stronger over those several long decades. Then, as rumors began to circulate months ago that a new fourth mission of the Church would be announced, I began to rejoice because I already knew in my heart what it would be. My guess is that was true with a number of other individuals as well.

Pres. Monson is the precise leader for making such a change in Church focus. After all, he is best known for his personal sensitivity regarding those near death's door, whether in a hospital, or at home. He is the one admonishing us by precept and example to "visit the fatherless and the widows in their affliction," to give of our time and energy to minister to the have-nots, in our own community, as well as around the world.

This new fourth-fold purpose of the Church will raise the prominence of doctrines admonishing us to be more aware of suffering, reaching out to others, and providing community service to the downtrodden.

We should remember, however, that this new emphasis has actually been among the core elements of Church teachings since the early days of the restoration.

Declared President Joseph F. Smith: "It was the doctrine of Joseph Smith, the original revelator of 'Mormonism,' that the spirit and body constitute the soul of man. It has always been a cardinal teaching with the Latter-day Saints, that a religion which has not the power to save people temporally and make them prosperous and happy here, cannot be depended upon to save them spiritually, to exalt them in the life to come."

Likewise, Brigham Young argued: "We will take a moral view, a political view, and see the inequality that exists in the human family.... It is an unequal condition to mankind.... What is to be done? The Latter-day Saints will never accomplish their mission until this inequality shall cease on the earth."

This additional mission helps fulfill a scriptural mandate: "For I will consecrate of the riches of those who embrace my gospel among the gentiles unto the poor of my people who are of the House of Israel" ([Doctrine & Covenants 42:39](#)).

Why it took so long, no one really knows. But I have a few ideas with which to open up dialogue with readers of this essay.

First, maybe we as members were not yet ready for it. Many Saints in the United States seem tired of funding the bulk of donations through fast offerings to the needy, especially those of other countries. Whether it's a racial issue, or a political agenda, they seem to feel that the poor of our inner cities and the Third World brought their problems on themselves: They are unemployed because they are lazy. They are sick because they are drug or alcohol addicts. They are alone because they simply weren't

married in the temple. I disagree with such assertions, but I have heard such stereotypes often over the years.

A second explanation as to why this change took so long is that we as a people never really got over the consecration ideals of the Church in Nauvoo, as well as later in Deseret's mountains. Fully accepting and practicing the laws of selflessness and love were hard back then, and probably much more so now when we are swimming in a flood of materialism and greed. Our society is bombarded by ads touting such values as consumption is good, simplicity is bad, and having a bigger home or fancier car is essential to our public image, both in the Church as well as in the world of Manhattan and Palo Alto, on the foothills of Salt Lake City or Bountiful.

Yet another reason this new emphasis is occurring now may be the context of human suffering that we see around us. There are more poor today in the world than ever before. Some 25 million children die each year, most because of poverty and preventable diseases. While many families became richer than ever, and America had a huge jump in numbers of millionaires over the past decade, millions have suffered from the growing gap between haves and have-nots. This new initiative has particular significance in these times of economic recession, the fact that tens of millions of Americans have no access to healthcare, the realities of countless families losing their homes because of unscrupulous lenders, as well as the greed and predatory practices of Wall Street.

Perhaps the prophets of today sense that neither Big Business nor Big Government is going to solve society's inequities on their own. It's going to take a new sector, a social innovation movement in which average folks like you and me, begin to assert our agency and act on our own to design new initiatives, not from the top down, but the bottom-up.

Probably, many rich Mormons will be offended by such a radical idea of a new fourth mission, that of the redistribution of wealth. Perhaps some within the Church's leadership were themselves not convinced. Factors such as these can help explain why there has been no big public announcement about this sea-changing idea. Instead, it may be floated quietly as a sort of trial balloon to gauge members' reactions before it becomes a formal and much-heralded decree.

I know there were many debates over a variety of such policies over the years. These have included disagreements over having missionaries spend time each week doing volunteer community service, LDS donations going to Catholics, Muslims, and those of other faiths, and the channeling of Church resources to other nationalities, especially those of leftist or socialist political ideologies, and so

forth. Yet the cries of the poor have not been unheard. The suffering of the widow has not been ignored. And now, under the inspiring leadership of President Thomas S. Monson, a new fourth mission, or “purpose,” as it will be called, is becoming official.

In my view, having this addition to the Church’s past three-fold mission will serve to have the Church perceived as a caring institution, not just a Sunday meeting image which many friends have of us. May we never forget the admonition of the Apostle James: “Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world” ([James 1:27](#)).

So when you next get on your knees in prayer, give thanks that you belong to a Church that seeks to more heavily care for the poor and to increase the emphasis on practicing genuine charity today.