

**GRAND RAPIDS STAKE**  
**OCT. 2003-OCT. 2012 OBSERVATIONS**

Scriptures sometimes say that even a hundredth part of what happened was not recorded. So it is with this little history. Many things, even some of the most important things, are not recorded. Sometimes it's because the most important things (per Elder Hallstrom) are hardest to observe: how deep is our understanding of deity? How faithfully do we let our covenants guide our daily walk? How profound is our sense of reverence for the Savior and his sacraments? These things, though hard to measure, will tell the real story of who we are and who we're becoming, for the Lord looketh on the heart. This small history, which mostly speaks of things of lesser importance—conferences, callings, camps, chapels, etc.—still serves as a reminder of God's work, and hopefully, we will recognize and remember his hand working in our lives, and our hearts will be filled with thanks for his outstretched arms reaching out to bless his children, one by one.

**BY THE NUMBERS**

Some look at growth of a church in terms of 3 B's: buildings, budgets, and backbones. Regarding buildings, during our service, we dedicated the Spring Lake chapel—really thanks to our predecessors (so much of what we did was prepared by those who came before us). This gave us 11 buildings, spread out over a diameter of maybe 150+ miles. The Holland building also was re-built and re-dedicated. Hours of service were rendered to care for and maintain our buildings.

Regarding budgets, much was given and expended to care for the poor, to carry out great youth programs, to further the work of missionaries, and for many good causes. Sacred funds were safeguarded by wonderful clerks and those who served on the audit committee. Many became more nearly self-reliant, even in challenging economic times of both national and state-wide recessions. Lives were blessed as people learned to pay tithing first, to honor the Lord with "the firstfruits of all thine increase." See Prov. 3:9.

Regarding backbones, many came to church, and hundreds were baptized. Membership tended to range between 4400-4800, with fewer numbers during the recession as many good members moved away to find work elsewhere. Attendance varied among some of the units but approximated that of the church's Northeast Region. Youth conferences and girls camps often drew more than 100 youth in attendance, with venues in Grand Rapids, Tustin (Kettunen Center), Nauvoo, Kirtland, MSU, and elsewhere, and themes including Family Is My Fortress, Hold Up Your Light, Seekers of Truth, Fishers of Men, Faith Builders, and iShine.

We could also measure miles. Our boundaries extended from Hastings and Holland on up to Ludington, well over 100 miles. The stake presidency probably drove 125,000 miles or more—enough to circle the planet close to 5 times. And the high council, stake auxiliary leaders, bishoprics, and so many others, including valiant hometeachers and visiting teachers, did so much more—attending many meetings but more importantly rendering countless hours of

service—all the members rendered service in many ways, including at service projects at Camp Gerber, Eagle scout projects, relief society projects making and sending blankets, dresses, and other items, sometimes overseas and sometimes for local needs.

Perhaps we could measure trends in technology. There was no Face Book in 2003. Instead, there was "Myspace." Thinking about where the trends could take us, one leader remarked that we need "more Thyspace and less Myspace." What if we dedicated some hallowed time to God, for turning not to friends for social chatter but to the Lord in reverence for inspiration? The technology is there: it's called prayer. Those who apply that app have benefited greatly and found the signal strength with heaven to be excellent. But other trends come and go. Some have used media appropriately to reach out and bless, while others not so much.

None of the numbers or economic or cultural trends matter as much as the people and their faith and discipleship, as reflected in part by commitment to covenants. As we have learned from Elder Golden, Elder Hallstrom, Bishop Edgely, Pr. Uchtdorf, and others, real growth in the church is harder to measure than the 3 B's and the outward performances—it's not just about the numbers, but rather who we are and are becoming.

## REAL GROWTH

We have witnessed and felt some real growth. When we watched preparations for our 2004 Youth Conference unfold, the theme became "Where Will We Be," and it featured a song by the same name by Br. Jeff Lewis (see <http://youtu.be/qw6qYHrgv6l>). After settling on this theme, we later noticed that Pr. Hinckley had already asked the youth: where will you be in 10 years? Our theme song asked whether, when we meet on the road again in 14 years like Alma and his brethren did, will we be "still . . . brethren in the Lord." See Al. 17:2-4. We hope the answer will be yes. Forever. And in the years since then, we have seen youth from that conference serve missions, make and keep sacred covenants, and marry in the temple and pursue education and careers and begin to raise families. That is a start on real growth.

In 2005, many responded to Pr. Hinckley's invitation to read the Book of Mormon and felt its power to change lives. Then in the October 2005 conference, Pr. Eyring told us that when we finish the book, we might want to start over. Some have followed that counsel. One has read from the Book of Mormon first thing every morning since the summer of 2005, even if getting up early to go to work or to the temple. Just yesterday in Sunday School a powerful testimony came from a young father about how reading scriptures daily has blessed his children not only spiritually but also in their education and schoolwork—what a blessing! We have learned the importance of dedicated scripture study in developing discipleship and real growth, as Elder Golden reminded us.

In 2006, Pr. Stoddard was called to serve as mission president in California, and the Logans and Shermans and other senior missionaries have since served from our stake. In 2007, our youth went to the Kirtland temple, bore testimonies there, and felt fulfillment of the dedicatory prayer/promise that "all people who shall enter upon the ***threshold of the Lord's house may***

*feel thy power*, and feel constrained to acknowledge that thou has sanctified it, and that it is thy house, a place of holiness." (DC 110:13.) They did it again in 2011, and had many other wonderful conferences and events in the meantime.

And on our journeys go. No need to detail every year—we can't say even the hundredth part of the many blessings we have witnessed—the outstanding girls camps, year after year; the scout camps and youth temple trips; the training we've received from visiting authorities for conferences and encampments (including Elders Richards, Smith, Pace, Temple, Garn, Pitts, Selden, Porter, Golden, Bluth, Bishop Burton, and, and Elder Bednar's leadership training in Ann Arbor in 2010, and Pr. Ochoa attending our 2011 scout encampment, and Sis. Cook from YW in Lansing, etc.). We were also blessed with training broadcasts (e.g., 2007 on Teaching, 2008 on Joy in Posterity) and other support from SLC and from above, and by the service rendered to one another by primary teachers, youth leaders, quorum and RS leaders, home and visiting teachers, scoutmasters, missionaries, and others, including caring mothers and fathers, right here at home.

The word has been taught by many wonderful teachers and, more importantly, by the quiet whisperings of the spirit, and it has been followed by many who found safety, peace, and comfort. Music has been inspiring, from the solos, to the primary children, to the Miracle Choir . . . not to mention the reverent prelude music that has invited revelation. We have had chances to work together, to be friends, to enjoy wonderful meals (gracias a la rama de Grandville-fue muy bien!), and to serve. It is hard to single out highlights, for they happened every week, often daily, in prayers, calls, seminary lessons, sacrament meetings, recommend and other interviews, setting apart missionaries, and in so many other ways.

For 9 years we personally have often witnessed Pr. Stevens' selfless service (staying late to clean up after meetings or clean windshields after a day-long snow storm) and heard his inspiring teachings, including this from Jacob 5:23, which teaches that as we labor in the vineyard and nourish and care, we can overcome a challenging environment, and great things beyond our imagination can happen: "***thou knowest that this spot of ground was poorer than the first. But, behold the tree.***" Real growth. And we have heard Pr. Brown's breathtaking "forestry talks," including "The Parable of the Maple" and "The Third Tree."

It's been inspiring to watch members follow counsel to increase faith and righteousness, to change and repent and come back to church, to turn to the Lord with full purpose of heart, to be kind and forgiving, to strengthen marriages and relationships with children, to be industrious and provide for families, to tithe and be generous in fast offerings, to serve missions, to reach out and rescue, to visit the poor and sick, to do home and visiting teaching, to look to God in every thought and to rely wholly on the merits of Christ and show thanks abundantly to him by following in his path, witnessing his name, and overcoming temptations and adversity through faith in him. By his grace, his enabling power, blessings were given and received, deep hurts were healed, addictions were overcome, and ministry continued and the doors of salvation were opened to many. There were those who sought out the poor, the lonely and oppressed of different backgrounds, and blessed lives and shepherded them to the temple

## MORE GROWTH TO COME

And there is much yet to be done. I was learning even as I was being released, learning from Elder Golden and Elder Bluth and from our new stake president, Pres. Allen Smith, and his counselors. They have encouraged us to, like David, prepare for challenges by gathering "5 smooth stones": personal and family prayer, personal and family scripture study, FHE, and regular church and temple attendance. With these in our shepherd's bag, we will be prepared to face the Goliaths—the big challenges that seem insurmountable—that may come our way. I am delighted to have the chance to listen to wonderful leaders, to be "still brethren in the Lord," and to still be part of the caravan—any part—that is pursuing this journey together.

## GRATITUDE FOR GREAT JOY

Perhaps no greater account of joy exists than that described in Alma 26. Ammon says "how great reason have we to rejoice; for could we have supposed when we started from the land of Zarahemla that God would have granted unto us such great blessings? And now I ask, what great blessings has he bestowed upon us? Can ye tell? Behold, I answer for you [probably good-may have seemed like a trick question given the deprivations they suffered]; for our brethren, the Lamanites, were in darkness, yea, even in the darkest abyss, but behold, how many of them are brought to behold the marvelous light of God! ***And this is the blessing which hath been bestowed upon us, that we have been made instruments in the hands of God to bring about this great work. Behold, thousands of them do rejoice, and have been brought into the fold of God.***"

This exemplifies true joy. Ammon rejoices in blessings to others. He says ***his blessing is that others were blessed***. What a great thought. How we all belong to each other. If the community of mankind looked not with envy and greed but rather rejoiced in the blessings of others it would change the world. Ammon had faced hunger, thirst, imprisonment, threats on his life—and felt compassion when his brethren were bound, whether with chains or sins. Yet his keenest memory of the journey was not sufferings, sorrows, and afflictions, but rather "incomprehensible joy, and the reception and safety of the brethren." (See Alma 28:8.) We rejoice in seeing the Lord's hand reach out—often through you and many others—to his children and in seeing many respond and come unto him by making covenants (like Elmer Ybema did being baptized at age 91, then the next year going to the temple). We rejoice in the plan of happiness and in seeing many renew covenants and hold FHE, pray in their families, search the scriptures daily, attend the temple and invite friends with them, and love and serve.

Ammon says: "I do not glory of myself, but . . . this is my glory, that perhaps I may be an instrument in the hands of God to bring some soul to repentance; and this is my joy. And behold, ***when I see many of my brethren . . . coming to the Lord their God, then is my soul filled with joy . . .***" Alma 29:9-10. (Cf. Is. 53:10: when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in his hand.) We had that joy and saw many come to the Lord. Sometimes they turned to him in

sadness, sickness, or sin. But all who truly turned to him were blessed. It was a joy to witness that.

Though the joy was deep, there were sad times, including the December 2007 death of Pr. Smith's father, who then served as the Greenville bishop, on icy roads as he traveled home from work. But even in this, we remembered the Lord's power to restore, and the caravan moved on. We remember the Lord's great power to restore and bring back greater blessings, as reflected in these words of Haggai 2:

*3 Who is left among you that saw this house in her first glory? and how do ye see it now? is it not in your eyes in comparison of it as nothing?*

*4 Yet now be strong. . . be strong . . . be strong . . .*

*5 According to the word that I covenanted with you when ye came out of Egypt, so my spirit remaineth among you: fear ye not.*

*6 For thus saith the Lord of hosts; Yet once, it is a little while, and I will shake the heavens, and the earth, and the sea, and the dry land;*

*7 And I will shake all nations, and the desire of all nations shall come: and I will fill this house with glory, saith the Lord of hosts.*

*8 The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, saith the Lord of hosts.*

*9 The **glory of this latter house shall be greater than of the former**, saith the Lord of hosts: and in this place will I give peace, saith the Lord of hosts.*

God has the power to make things far better than they were, to grant great surprises, so that the glory of the latter house will be greater than of the former. So as said in Alma 26:16: "Therefore, let us glory, yea, we will glory in the Lord; yea, we will rejoice, for our joy is full; yea, we will praise our God forever. Behold, who can glory too much in the Lord? Yea, who can say too much of his great power, and of his mercy, and of his long-suffering towards the children of men? Behold, I say unto you, I cannot say the smallest part which I feel."

We hope our paths will cross again on splendid journeys and missions and that we always will be "still . . . brethren in the Lord," that our last house will be greater than our first, and that there will be no empty chairs. Tcmo

=====EXHIBIT A=====

[Note: in case any wonder what we tried to focus on, below is a summary of some priorities that we sometimes asked the HC to review as they visited wards/branches. I always have some fear that there will be a temptation to run the church from a checklist rather than from revelation. That's not how it works. But to the extent these reminders were helpful and reflect some areas of focus, we invited the HC to use them.]

1. Building FAITH and the effectiveness of teaching (regularly review the Feb. 07 broadcast and the June 07 Ensign on teaching). See also Elder Oswald's 09 Oct. talk; also June 2012 Ensign. Faith comes by hearing the word of God. Are we teaching pure, true doctrine?
2. FAMILIES--FHE, family prayer, family scripture study, wholesome family recreation as first priorities. Have all viewed the Feb. 08 broadcast for EVERYONE on building up a righteous posterity? Do families receive and review the church magazines, watch conference, and learn to look to the right sources for protection? Do they have emergency plans?
3. MISSIONARY work. FOCUS ON FINDING!!! Review ward mission plan and progress in PEC and ward councils. 20 lessons per wk; prequalify 5 from RS, HP, EQP. Is this a top 1 or 2 priority of the bishop? WML? AWML?
4. YM-scouting; are ALL leaders (bishopric, YM etc) registered with BSA before being sustained? Leader training. Duty to God. Pray over each boy; spirit of Box B. Exceptions list re AP--age appropriate ordinations. FOS. New book.
5. Prospective elders; 90-day list. Print and review the list periodically with EQP and review youth about to turn 18 and have MPH preparation/training classes. Remember the strong correlation between the strength of the church and Melchizedek priesthood holders. "Nurturing ratio."
6. Hometeaching--this is perhaps the closest thing we do to true Christian ministry. We will be better off when we just do it. Consider the motto "every member every month"—some form of contact—if they don't attend church, or get a visit, at least a phone call or postcard or email or something. TO THE RESCUE!
7. Preparedness/welfare, including 90 days storage, managing debt and expenses, self-reliance (taking care of oneself and striving to improve health physically, mentally, spiritually, emotionally, socially, etc.), getting good education, etc. Activate/get quorums involved; 09 April conf. READING. EMPLOYMENT SEMINARS.
8. Temple (review endowed w/o recommends monthly). EQP, HPGL, and RS should take the lead in shepherding people to the temple, planning regular trips and getting people ready for them so bishops can focus on youth and missionary work. Seek temple workers, but the bishop can call temple patrons if there are people who can't regularly work in the temple but who almost can.

9. ARP-is attendance at this being promoted to those you are counseling, helping with welfare, and others? Could you invite and attend a session with someone? All HPG and EQP and RS leaders should attend at least a few sessions so they can see the power available here to change and bless. Also consider FSG/Family Support Group.

10. YSA-SA. Are all aware of conferences, institute, and other activities? The momentum at institute is building—last few weeks attendance has been around 20-25, with one coming from Ludington! And all of us should regularly review