

Hard Questions in Church History

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1842—Female Relief Society Organized in Nauvoo and Given Gift of Healing

Questions to Consider

- Did Joseph “ordain” Emma?
- Did Joseph direct the Relief Society members to use oil and administer to the sick?
- Why did the women stop administering to the sick?
- Why did the Relief Society stop holding their formal meetings in March 1844?

Prior to the organization of the women, Joseph held women in great respect and advocated for them. The last two years of his life he spent a good deal of time organizing and teaching the women of the church. He was one of the first feminists in nineteenth-century America. To understand this, it is helpful to see his vision for the organization of the women. Sarah Granger Kimball remembered the Prophet Joseph Smith saying: “I will organize the women under the priesthood after the pattern of the priesthood. . . . The Church was never perfectly organized until the women were thus organized” (“Auto-biography,” *Woman’s Exponent* [September 1, 1883], 51). George Albert Smith hypothesized, “When the Prophet Joseph Smith who first turned the key for the emancipation of womankind, it was turned for all the women of the world” (Jennifer Reeder and Kate Holbrook, eds., *At the Pulpit: 185 Years of Discourses by Latter-day Saint Women* [SLC, UT: Church Historian’s Press, 2017], 189).

Timeline

Jan 18, 1827	Joseph Smith and Emma Hale marry
June 28, 1830	Emma is baptized a member of the Church of Christ by Oliver Cowdery
July 1830	Emma is the subject of a revelation given to Joseph and called an “elect lady” (D&C 25)
1835-1836	Women make veils for the Kirtland Temple
Feb 1842	Sarah Granger Kimball and Margaret Cook decide to help those working on the Nauvoo Temple
Mar 17, 1842	Foundational meeting of the Female Relief Society of Nauvoo; Emma elected president
Mar 31, 1842	Third meeting of the Female Relief Society of Nauvoo; Gifts of the Spirit poured out upon the society
May 4, 1842	Joseph gave the “endowment” for the first time to nine men in the upper floor of the Red Brick Store.
Sep 28, 1843	Joseph administered the washings and anointings to Emma in their home; Emma then began administering them to other women.
Mar 16, 1844	Last recorded meeting of the Nauvoo Relief Society (after two years, members number 1,331 sisters). They continued to gather informally to care and minister to the needy

Historical Overview

Preparation for the Organization and Empowerment of Women

Historical events prepared the way for the organization of the Female Relief Society of Nauvoo.

Harmony, Pennsylvania (July 1830)

In July 1830 the Prophet Joseph Smith received a revelation in behalf of his wife Emma Hale Smith. At the end of the revelation, the Lord’s blessing was extended beyond Emma to “all” (D&C 25:16).

This may refer to all disciples or all women (see D&C 61:18). In either case, the message has been a major step forward in empowering women. In the revelation the Lord promised that Emma would “be ordained under” the prophet’s “hand to expound scriptures, and to exhort the church, according as it shall be given thee by my Spirit” (D&C 25:16, 7). At the foundational meeting of the Female Relief Society of Nauvoo, Joseph added, “Not [Emma] alone, but others, may attain to the same blessings” (Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book,” p. 8. Joseph Smith Papers).

This divine mandate to teach scripture and to exhort the Church sharply contrasts with the view of Christianity which kept women silent in churches for eighteen centuries of misunderstanding the Bible (including passages like 1 Cor. 14:34). In a revelation given just a few months after the church was organized, the Lord defined “daughters in my kingdom” as those who “receive my gospel” (D&C 25:1). The Lord promised Emma that her sins were forgiven and that He would “preserve thy life, and thou shalt receive an inheritance in Zion” (D&C 25:2-3). The Lord referred to Emma as “an elect lady,” a title also found in 2 John 1:1 referring to the church as the bridegroom of Christ (Rev 19:7). Joseph Smith used the word differently, as he explained at their first meeting: “[Emma] was called an Elect lady . . . because, [she was] elected to preside” (Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book, p. 9. *Joseph Smith Papers*).

In the revelation the Lord asked Emma Smith to— 1) not murmur, 2) comfort Joseph, 3) act as scribe for the Bible translation, 4) expound scriptures, 5) exhort the Church, 6) learn and write, 7) lay aside things of this world, 8) prepare a hymnal, 9) continue in meekness, 10) beware of pride, and 11) keep the commandments. Nearly a dozen years later, she was able to expand her scripture study to exhort the sisters of the Relief Society.

Kirtland, Ohio (1835-1836)

In Kirtland men and women helped with temple construction. In addition to a few women working on the exterior by driving oxen to haul rock or worked with stone masons, several worked on the veils for the interior of the temple. Joseph praised them for their efforts, saying, “Well, sisters, you are always on hand. The sisters are always first and foremost in all good works. Mary was first at the resurrection; and the sisters now are the first to work on the inside of the temple” (Edward W. Tullidge, *The Women of Mormondom* [NY: 1877], p. 76).

Early Spring 1842

In spring of 1842 Sarah Granger Kimball and Margaret Cook desired to help with the building the Nauvoo Temple. Sarah wrote,

In the [spring of 1842], a Miss Cooke was seamstress for me. The subject of combining our efforts for assisting the Temple hands came up in conversation. She desired to help, but had no means to furnish. I told her I would furnish material if she would make some shirts for the workmen. It was then suggested that some of our neighbors might wish to combine means and efforts with ours, and we decided to invite a few to come and consult with us on the subject of forming a Ladies’ Society. The neighboring sisters met in my parlor [on March 1842] and decided to organize. I was delegated to call on Sister Eliza R. Snow and ask her to write a constitution and by-laws, and submit them to President Smith prior to our next meeting. When she read them to him, he replied that the constitution and by-laws were the best he had ever seen. “But,” he said, “this is not what you want. Tell the sisters their offering is accepted of

the Lord, and he has something better for them than a written constitution. I invite them all to meet with me and a few of the brethren next Thursday afternoon, and I will organize the women under the priesthood after the pattern of the priesthood (Hyrum L. Andrus and Helen Mae Andrus, *They Knew the Prophet* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1999], 131).

By reviewing the writings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, we come to understand the meaning of what he meant by “under the priesthood” and “the pattern of the priesthood.” In D&C 107:7 the phrase “under the priesthood” is used to describe “the office of an elder comes **under the priesthood** of Melchizedek.” As early as 1835, the “pattern” of the priesthood was organized as presidencies of individual stakes and priesthood quorums generally following the pattern of one president with two counselors (Instruction on Priesthood between ca. 1 Mar. and ca. 4 May 1835 [D&C 107:13–15, 21, 60–63]; Minutes and Discourse, ca. 7 July 1834).

By having the Female Relief Society of Nauvoo patterned after and “under the priesthood,” the society was blessed with the same divine organization, divine inspiration, gifts of the Spirit, and power from God that are associated with the priesthood quorums. In 1842 Joseph taught the sisters: “The Society should move according to the ancient Priesthood, hence there should be a select Society separate from all the evils of the world, choice, virtuou[s] and holy” (Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book, p. 22. *Joseph Smith Papers*).

Organization of the Relief Society

March 17, 1842

(1st Meeting—20 women were present in the Upper Room of the Joseph Smith Red Brick Store)

Joseph Smith’s journal records:

I assisted in commencing the organization of “The Female Relief Society of Nauvoo” . . . I gave much instruction, read in the New Testament, and Book of Doctrine and Covenants concerning the Elect Lady, and shewed that the Elect meant to be elected to a certain work &c and that the Revelation was then fulfilled by Sister Emma’s election to the Presidency of the Society, she having previously been ordained to expound Scriptures (History, 1838-1856, Volume C-1 [2 November 1838-1 July 1842]. *Joseph Smith Papers*).

Historical Context

The concept of priesthood was shunned in Protestant 17th through early 19th century America. “Priesthood” was seen as “popish phraseology.” The Prophet Joseph Smith’s revelations and angelic visitations taught him that priesthood was the power of God (D&C 50:26-27; 1 Nephi 17:29). Joseph’s view of priesthood developed over the next decade into a vast theology intertwining priesthood power with gifts and fruits of the Spirit in an interdependent way. From the beginning of the Restoration, the Prophet Joseph linked priesthood and spiritual gifts together: “The rights of the priesthood are inseparably connected with the powers of heaven, and that the powers of heaven cannot be controlled nor handled only upon the principles of righteousness . . . [If] the Spirit of the Lord is grieved; and when it is withdrawn, Amen to the priesthood or the authority of that man” (D&C 121:36-37). The Lord taught the Prophet Joseph that the power of the priesthood functions only when the fruits of the Spirit are present (see Gal 5:22; Eph 5:9). Joseph connected the gifts of the Spirit and power of the priesthood in organizing the Female Relief Society of Nauvoo.

Eliza R. Snow recorded in the *Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book*:

. . . The meeting was address’d by Pres^t Smith, to illustrate the object of the Society—that the Society of Sisters might provoke the brethren to good works in looking to the wants of the

poor—searching after objects of charity, and in administering to their wants—to assist; by correcting the morals and strengthening the virtues of the female community . . . Pres^t Smith further remark'd that an organization to show them how to go to work would be sufficient. He propos'd that the Sisters elect a presiding officer to preside over them, and let that presiding officer choose two Counsellors to assist in the duties of her Office—that he would ordain them to preside over the Society—and let them preside just as the Presidency, preside over the church; and if they need his instruction—ask him, he will give it from time to time.

Let this Presidency serve as a constitution— all their decisions be considered law; and acted upon as such. If any Officers are wanted to carry out the designs of the Institution, let them be appointed and set apart, as Deacons, Teachers &c. are among us. The minutes of your meetings will be precedents for you to act upon— your Constitutio[n] and law. He then suggested the propriety of electing a Presidency to continue in office during good behavior, or so long as they shall continue to fill the office with dignity &c. like the first Presidency of the church (*Joseph Smith Papers*).

After Emma was elected president, “President Smith read the Revelation to Emma Smith, from the book of Doctrine and Covenants; and stated that she was ordain'd at the time, the Revelation was given, to expound the scriptures to all; and to teach the female part of community; and that not she alone, but others, may attain to the same blessings” (*Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book*, p. 8. *Joseph Smith Papers*).

Name and Purpose

Female societies sprang up in nineteenth century America to promote reform. From 1815-1861 there were female societies in large cities throughout the United States that promoted Protestant missionary work, benevolence, abolition, female education, etc. So many of the societies used the word “Benevolent” in their title, the societies became known as “The Benevolent Empire.” At the foundational meeting of what became the Female Relief Society of Nauvoo, Elder John Taylor proposed that the word “benevolent” be included in the name of the society. His proposal was discussed. Emma suggested the word “benevolent” was too popular and that the well-known Benevolent Societies were corrupt. She preferred “Relief Society” as that was the aim of the sisters. Her counselor Sarah Cleveland added, “We design to act in the name of the Lord—to relieve the wants of the distressed, and do all the good we can” (*Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book*, p. 12. *Joseph Smith Papers*).

Relief Society minutes reveal how the discussion turned to support the views of Emma Smith:

Pres^t Emma Smith remark'd— we are going to do something extraordinary . . . Elder Taylor arose and said— I shall have to concede the point— your arguments are so potent I cannot stand before them— I shall have to give way—Pres. J. S. said I also shall have to concede the point, all I shall have to give to the poor, I shall give to this Society” (*ibid.*).

The name selected for the society was Female Relief Society of Nauvoo. The Society began with 20 women and boasted a membership of 1,341 sisters by 1844.

Numbers at First Relief Society Meetings

Minutes from eight of the first few meetings of the Female Relief Society of Nauvoo follow (most of the minutes can we seen in the handwriting of Eliza R. Snow in *JosephSmithPapers.org*):

Mar 17	Mar 24	Mar 31	April 14	April 19	April 28	Mar 1844
20 members	68 members		88 members	(Healings referenced)	>151 members	1,341 members

March 24, 1842 (2nd Meeting – 68 members)

The Prophet Joseph Smith attended the second meeting of the Female Relief Society of Nauvoo. He recorded in his journal,

I attended by request, the Female Relief Society, whose object is the relief of the poor, the destitute, the widow and the orphan, and for the exercise of all benevolent purposes. Its organization was completed this day. Mrs. Emma Smith takes the presidential chair; Mrs. Elizabeth Ann Whitney and Sarah M. Cleveland are her counselors; Miss Elvira Cole[s] is treasurer, and our well-known and talented poetess, Miss Eliza R. Snow, secretary. There was a very numerous attendance at the organization of the society, and also at the subsequent meetings, of some of our most intelligent, humane, philanthropic and respectable ladies; and we are well assured from a knowledge of those pure principles of benevolence that flow spontaneously from their humane and philanthropic bosoms, that with the resources they will have at command, they will fly to the relief of the stranger; they will pour in oil and wine to the wounded heart of the distressed; they will dry up the tears of the orphan and make the widow's heart to rejoice” (*History of the Church*, 4:567).

Joseph wanted a very small select group of women in the new society. He hoped they would be raised up as priestesses. He repeatedly asked for caution in allowing in members. The timing was important as it was these women who would soon officiate as priestesses in the Temple.

March 31, 1842 (3rd Meeting)

In the third meeting of the Female Relief Society,

Prest. Joseph Smith arose—spoke of the organization of the Society—said he was deeply interested that it might be built up to the Most High in an acceptable manner—that its rules must be observed—that none should be received into the Society but those who were worthy. . . . thus have a select Society of the virtuous and those who will walk circumspectly. Commended them for their zeal but said some times their zeal was not according to knowledge. . . . all must act in concert or nothing can be done, that the Society should move according to the ancient Priesthood, hence there should be a select Society separate from all the evils of the world, choice, virtuous[s] and holy. Said he was going to make of this Society a kingdom of priests

Ordained as Presidents and Priestesses

The first few meetings of the Female Relief Society of Nauvoo suggest that the women were organized after the pattern of the priesthood. In an 1839 letter written in Liberty Jail, the Prophet Joseph wrote of the keys of the kingdom and the priesthood, before penning, “And now Dear and Well beloved Brethren and when we say brethren, we mean those who have continued Faithful in Christ, Men, Women, and Children, we feel to exhort you in the name of the Lord Jesus, to be strong in the faith in the new and everlasting Covenant, and nothing frightened at your enemies.” (*History 1838-1856 volume C-1 [2 November 1838-31 July 1842]. Joseph Smith Papers.*

a[s] in Enoch's day—as in Paul's day—that it is the privilege of each member to live long and enjoy health” (*Joseph Smith Papers*, Minute Book, 22-23).

The minutes also include lists of donations offered by the women—monetary and in kind. Many appear as widow's mites, and each is listed beside a woman's name.

April 14, 1842 (4th Meeting – 88 Members)

Pres^t E. Smith arose and address'd the meeting by saying . . . her desire was to do good—wish'd all the members of this Society to assist her— said it was necessary to begin at home—to eradicate all evil from our own hearts— and warn those who wish to join, with us, to come calculating to divest themselves of every thing wrong and unite to expose iniquity, to search it out and put it away— She said the Society had other duties to attend to than seeing to the wants of the poor. Exhorted the members so to conduct as to have the honor of commencing a good work and of carrying it out— enforce'd the necessity of walking in a manner that would be approbated of God. (1.2.4. April 14, 1842. *The Church Historian's Pres*).

Though not mentioned in the minutes, Joseph encouraged women to heal the sick through the gift of the Spirit. There must have been something said at the first four meetings of the Female Relief Society of Nauvoo about women healing the sick and instructions about the laying on of hands because it is mentioned at the next meeting as having occurred after the April 14, 1842 meeting.

April 19, 1842 (5th Meeting) Relief Society Sisters Heal the Sick

After the first month of meetings, the gifts of the Spirits were openly used and recorded as this excerpt shows:

Mrs. [Elizabeth Davis] Durfee bore testimony to the great blessing she received when administered to, after the close of the last meeting, by Prest. E. Smith & Councillors Cleveland and Whitney. she said she never realized more benefit thro' any administration— that she was heal'd, and thought the sisters had more faith than the brethren.

Miss [Eliza R.] Snow after making observations with regard to the Society— the importance of acting in wisdom & walking humbly before God &c. said she had a blessing for Mrs. Buel, that inasmuch as she had become a member of this Society, as the spirit of a person pervades every member of the body, so shall the Spirit of the Lord which pervades this Society be with her—she shall feel it and rejoice— she shall be blest wherever she is, and the Lord shall open the way and she shall be instrumental in doing much,—thro' her own exertions by the instrumentality of others, she shall be enabled to contribute much to the fund of the Society— she shall warm up the hearts of those who are cold and dormant, and shall be instrumental in doing much good—Mrs. [Abigail] Leonard, Councillor W. and Councillor C. bore testimony to the truth of what Miss Snow had said to Mrs. Buel—

Councillor Cleveland stated that she many times felt in her heart, what she could not express it in our own language, and as the Prophet had given us liberty to improve the gifts of the gospel in our meetings, and feelings the power resting upon, desired to speak in the gift of tongues; which she did in a powerful manner.

Mrs. Sessions arose and gave the interpretation of what Councillor C. had spoken in an unknown tongue, and said that God was well pleas'd with this Society, that if we would be humble and faithful the Lord would pour out upon the members generally the gift of prophecy— that when the speaker laid her hand on the head of Sister Snow, she said that not only she should have the spirit but that all should have it also— that the speaker then address'd herself to Mother Smith saying that the prayers of father Smith were now answered upon the members of the Society— that the days of Mother S. should be prolong'd and she should meet many times with the Society, should enjoy much in the society of the [p. [32]] sisters & shall hereafter be crown'd a mother of those that shall prove faithful &c.

The meeting was very interesting, nearly all present arose & spoke, and the spirit of the Lord like a purifying stream, refreshed every heart. . . . The meeting clos'd with prayer by Mother Smith and singing by the choir— after which Mrs. Leonard was administered to for the restoration of health, by Councillors f & Whitney. (“After the Order of Heaven,” *ChurchofJesusChrist.org*).

The Prophet Joseph Smith encouraged sisters of the Female Relief Society of Nauvoo to exercise gifts of the Spirit. He asked them to “live up to their privileges.” (History, 1838-1856, Volume C-1 [2 November 1838-1 July 1842]. *Joseph Smith Papers*).

In a similar manner President Russell M. Nelson said,

I plead with my sisters of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to step forward! Take your rightful and needful place in your home, in your community, and in the kingdom of God—more than you ever have before (Russell M. Nelson, General Women’s Session, October 2015).

Nearly every year Pres. Nelson has added to this call to the women to , seek for the blessings of the Melchizedek Priesthood as women also have “access to ‘all the spiritual blessings of the church’” in the temples (Oct 2019 Conference).

“Gifts of the Priesthood”

The April 28, 1842 entry in the Manuscript History of the Church records Joseph Smith speaking to members of the Female Relief Society of Nauvoo gathered upstairs in his Red Brick Store. Joseph spoke on the non-biblical phrase—“gifts of the priesthood”—to describe the gifts of the Spirit.

[I, Joseph] gave a lecture on the Priesthood shewing how the sisters would come in possession of the privileges, blessings, and gifts of the Priesthood, and that the signs should follow them, such as healing the sick, casting out devils and that they might attain unto these blessings by a virtuous life and conversation and diligence in keeping all the commandments” (Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith : The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo*

Sickness Historically

Illness and pain were part of nearly everyone’s daily life in past centuries. If you didn’t have a tooth-ache, you ate or drank something that didn’t agree with you. Without clean water, sewage, refrigeration, and immunizations, serious diseases and death plagued children and many adults. One in ten died of smallpox. Cholera ran rampant as did typhus fever, whooping cough, tuberculosis, and strep throat.

Medicine was not then a series of applications tested by the scientific method. In fact, some medical practices caused more problems as germs were passed from one patient to the next. This is one reason why healings were so needed, and why faith was exerted to be healed. For women, this was especially the case during childbirth.

Discourses of the Prophet Joseph [Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1980], 119).

In his sermon on “gifts of the priesthood,” Joseph presents to the sisters of the Relief Society a broad definition of priesthood. He does not reserve the “gifts of the priesthood” or power of God to the men. Rather, he talks of access to the priesthood as a spiritual power available to believing men and women, both young and old. Of course, elsewhere, Joseph reserves priesthood roles (namely keys, administration, and the performing of certain ordinances) to male priesthood holders (D&C 107:15-16; 128:9; etc.).

In spite of Joseph Smith’s request to keep the organization of the Relief Society a small, select group, the Female Relief Society of Nauvoo grew rapidly. Women yearned to be of service.

April 28, 1842 (6th Meeting >151 members)

Joseph Smith again spoke on one of his favorite topics, spiritual gifts. He emphasized healing the sick, casting out devils, and promised these gifts follow all that believe “whether male or female.” He read 1 Corinthians 12, gave instructions regarding different offices, “the necessity of every individual acting in the sphere allotted him or her,” not considering lower offices dishonorable, “rejoice that the sick could be heal’d,” and encouraged church efforts to complete the Temple so that the church might be organized in its proper order. He then read the whole chapter of 1 Corinthians 13. Coming from this chapter, the women to later adopt "Charity Never Faileth" as their moto. Joseph emphasized generosity, kindness, charity and love, mercy, and he closed with instruction respecting the propriety of females administering to the sick by the laying on of hands and said it was according to revelation, and new needs and circumstances (*Josephsmithpapers.org*; Discourse, 28 April 1842, Reported by Eliza R. Snow, p.35-41).

The prophet’s message at this meeting has become one of the best defenses of women serving in the church with God’s power and healing through faith and the laying on of hands. Eliza R. Snow’s notes include:

President Smith arose and said that the purport of his being present on the occasion was, to make observations respecting the Priesthood, and give instructions for the benefit of the Society That as his instructions were intended only for the Society . . . 12th Chap. Of 1st Cor. ‘Now concerning spiritual gifts’ . . .

He continued to read the Chap. And give instructions respecting the different offices, and the necessity of every individual acting in the sphere allotted him or her; and filling the several offices to which they were appointed— Spoke of the disposition of man, to consider the lower offices in the church dishonorable and to look with jealous eyes upon the standing of others—that it was the nonsense of the human heart, for a person to be aspiring to other stations than appointed of God— that it was better for individuals to magnify their respective callings, and wait patiently till God shall say to them come up higher. He said the reason of these remarks being made, was, that some little thing was circulating in the Society, that some persons [p. 35] were not going right in laying hand son the sick &c. Said if he had common sympathies, would rejoice that the sick could be heal’d: that the time had not been before, that these things could be in their proper order— that the church is not now organiz’d in its proper order, and cannot be until the Temple is completed_— Pres^t Smith continued the subject by adverting to the

commission given to the ancient apostles “Go ye into all the world” &c.— no matter who believeth; these signs, such as healing the sick, casting out devils &c. should follow all that believe whether male or female. He ask’d the Society if they could not see by this sweeping stroke, that wherein they are ordaind [*sic*], it is the privilege of those set apart to administer in that authority which is confer’d on them— and if the sisters should have faith to heal the sick, let all hold their tongues, and let every thing roll on.

He said, if God has appointed him, and chosen him as an instrument to lead the church, why not let him lead it through? Why stand in the way, when he is appointed to do a thing? Who knows the mind of God? Does he not reveal things differently from what we expect?— He remark’d that he was continually rising—although’ he had every thing bearing him down— standing in his way and opposing— after all he always comes out right in the end.

Respecting the female laying on hands, he further remark’d, there could be no devil in it if God gave his sanction by healing— that there could be no more sin in any female laying hands on the sick than in wetting the face with water— that it is no sin for any body to do it that has faith, or if the sick has faith to be heal’d by the administration.

. . . He exhorted the sisters always to concentrate their faith and prayers for, and place confidence, in those whom God has appointed to honor, whom God has plac’d at the head to lead— that we should arm them with our prayers

. . . if you live up to your privilege, the angels cannot be restrain’d from being your associates— females, if they are pure and innocent can come into the presence of God; for what is more pleasing to God than innocence; you must be innocent or you cannot come up before God. . . . You need not be tearing men for their deeds, but let the weight of innocence be felt; which is more mighty than a millstone hung about the neck. Not war, not jangle, not contradiction, but meekness, love, purity, these are the things that should magnify us. . . .

This Society is to get instruction thro’ the order which God has established— thro’ the medium of those appointed to lead— and I now turn the key to you in the name of God and this Society shall rejoice and knowledge and intelligence shall flow down from this time— this is the beginning of better days, to this Society

When you go home never give a cross word, but let kindness, charity and love, crown your works henceforward. . . .

Pres^t S. then offered instruction respecting the propriety of females administering to the sick by the laying on of hands— said it was according to revelation &c. said he never was plac’d in similar circumstances, and never had given the same instruction.

He clos’d his instructions by expressing his satisfaction in improving the opportunity. The spirit of the Lord was pour’d out in a very powerful manner, never to be forgotten by those present on that interesting occasion (*ibid.*, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-28-april-1842-as-reported-by-eliza-r-snow/1#full-transcript>).

This sermon was a powerful message that was reprinted for decades as seen in the following chart:

May 27 1842 (10th Meeting)*Printing of the Joseph Smith's Sermon at the April 28, 1842*

- **1850:** During the editing of the Prophet Joseph's Relief Society sermons, no edits were made to the portions regarding the sisters' blessings the sick.
- **1850-1880** Printed periodically in the *Woman's Exponent* and *Deseret News*.
- **May 17, 1884** Following the dedication of the Logan Temple, reprinted in the *Woman's Exponent*.
- **1888** Emmeline B. Wells, with the support of President Wilford Woodruff and Elder Franklin D. Richards, published a reiteration of the Relief Society sisters' role in the gift of healing.
- **March 17, 1892** At the Fiftieth Anniversary of Relief Society, the sermon was reprinted in the Jubilee Reports; the sermon was also referenced by Elder Franklin D. Richards in Ogden and his wife Jane Snyder Richards in their sermons in Logan, Utah.
- **1913-1915** Accounts of healing published in Relief Society periodicals.

Bishop Newel K. Whitney “arose and after some preliminary remarks, proceeded to address the congregation by saying that he rejoic'd and did rejoice at the formation of the Society that we might improve upon our talents and prepare for those blessings which God is soon to bestow upon us—

In the beginning God created man male and female and bestow'd upon man certain blessings peculiar to a man of God, of which woman partook, so that without the female all things cannot be restor'd to the earth it takes all to restore the Priesthood. It is the intent of the Society, by humility and faithfulness; in connexion with those husbands that are found worthy. Rejoice while contemplating the blessings which will be pour'd out on the heads of the saints. God has many precious things to bestow, even to our astonishment if we are faithful. I say again I rejoice in the prospect of what lays before. It becomes us to prepare by striving for union one with another . . . if we have intelligence we have pow'r— knowledge is power (*josephsmithpapers.org*, Minutes of the Female Relief Society of Nauvoo, May 27, 1842).

August 13, 1843

After a list of needs and donations, the minutes include the words of Reynolds Cahoon:

. . . There are many Benevolent Societies abroad designd [*sic*] to do good but not as this ours is according to the order of God connected with the priesthood according to the same good principals & knowledge will grow out of it reproved the Sisters for their fearfulness said they were not acting in the Bishop's place nor intruding upon them in their calling That the eelief [*sic*] Society was organised according to the mind of God that Emma had directed to the appointment of this Com^{tee}. . . there would be a lack in the Church the Order of th[e] Priesthood is not complete without it; let every one act in their place, then all will move on most gloriously the purposes of God will be accomplished chided the Committee who had expressed fears of acting out of their place— In the Bishop's place sa[i]d they were in their place and those who would act perseveringly in their place— Should be bless'd with great blessings more than they could conceive The organisation [*sic*] of this Society & the Church is similar according to the mind & order of God in it every want may be suppli[e]d every place filled— take couredge [*sic*] and use every exertion within your power Every on[e] has their duty and place you may do much good in cheering the hearts of the pilgrim Saints who come to Zion as stran[g]ers a word of consolation may ennab[e] [*sic*] them to rise up in the Spirit of God with cheerfulness” (*josephsmithpapers.org*, Minutes of the Female Relief Society of Nauvoo, August 13, 1842).

Historical Evidence of the Gift of Healing Given to Females Outside of the Relief Society

Lucy Mack Smith

Lucy Mack Smith includes in her memoirs her own healings. For example—

I was taken sick, The physician declared my case to be confirmed consumption . . . my Husband came to my bed and caught my hand and exclaimed as as well as he could amid sobs and tears <Oh!> [“]Lucy! My Wife! My wife! you must die the doctors have all given you up they <and> all say you cannot live[.”] I looked to the lord and begged and plead with the Lord that he would spare my life that I might bring up my children and comfort the heart of my husband, thus I lay all night my <mind> at one moment <Time> slowly raising gradually borne away to Heaven above all hight then reverting back again to my babes and my Companion at my side and <I> covenanted with God if he would let me live I would endeavor to get that religion that would enable me to serve him right whether it was in the Bible or where ever it might be found even if it was to be obtained from heaven by prayer and Faith At last a voice spoke to me and said seek and ye shall find knock and it shall be opened unto you let your heart be comforted ye believe in God g -g from the dead (Lucy Mack Smith History, 1844-1845, Bk. 1, p. 9. Joseph Smith Papers).

In 1813 Lucy’s daughter Sophronia Smith suffered from typhus fever and teetered between life and death. Lucy and Joseph Sr. prayed mightily that Sophronia’s life would be spared. Yet she continued to suffer and “lay utterly motionless with her eyes hal wide open with that peculiar set which most strikingly exhibits the hue of Death.” Lucy continued,

Her Father was with me[,] we clasped our hands together [*sic*] and fell upon our knees by the bed side and poured our grief and suplications into the His ears who hath numbered the hair upon our heads then think if not strange if he heard us— he did hear us and I felt assured that he would answer our prayers but when we rose to our feet the appearance was far otherwise my child had apparently ceased to breathe I seized a blanket threw it round her and caught her in my arms and commenced pacing the floor those present remonstrated with me saying Mrs Smith it all of no use you are certainly crazy Your child is dead but I would not for one instant relinquish the hope of seeing her breathe again and . . . would you then feel to deny that God had power to save to the uttermost— all who call on him I did not then and I do not now at last She sobbed I still pressed her to my breast and walked the floor she sobbed again and then looked up into my face with an appearance of natural life breathing freely (Lucy Mack Smith History, 1844-1845, Bk. 1, p. 10).

In 1838 in Far West, Missouri, Lucy was voice in calling on God’s power to heal the daughter of Mary Isabella Horne. Mary Horne recorded that her daughter “was taken very ill, and her life despaired of, in fact it seemed impossible for her to get better. The mother of the Prophet, Mrs. Lucy Smith, came and blessed the child, and said she should live. This was something new in that age, for a woman to administer to the sick” (Jonathan Stapley and Kristine Wright, “Female Ritual Healing in Mormonism,” *Journal of Mormon History*, 37 [Winter 2011], 1-85).

D&C 46—March 8, 1831

Even before the organization of the Relief Society, we find examples of women willing to use their faith in healing blessings. The direction given on March 8, 1831 when the Lord instructed Joseph Smith on the gifts of the Spirit, all were encouraged to bless others with these gifts (D&C 46). Lucy Mack Smith exercised the gift of healing also. Sarah Leavitt's healings are also exemplary:

In early Kirtland, Sarah Leavitt clearly viewed herself as both able and qualified to receive and act upon a personal revelation to heal her daughter. An angelic visitation instructing Leavitt to lay hands on her daughter not only sanctioned her to act within the limits of her own conscience, but also within her developing Mormon community (Jonathan Stapley and Kristine Wright, "Female Ritual Healing in Mormonism," 4).

According to Stapley and Wright, by 1837 Father Smith gave patriarchal blessings that instructed women to administer to the sick by laying on of hands. In 1838, "while on a mission in Maine, Phoebe Woodruff administered to her sick husband, Wilford. The apostolic missions appear to have spread the practice of female ritual healing as British women were also anointing the sick by 1838" (Stapley and Wright, "Female Ritual Healing in Mormonism," 5). In the earliest known examples of women healing, the healer's hands were placed on the area of the body that needed to be healed. In so doing, this process had similarities with the ritual anointings in early Christianity and washing and anointings in the Kirtland Temple.

Female Healing Blessings Regulated from 1880 to 1955

Reaction to Protestant Pentecostal healings, post polygamy, temple ritual changes, and clarification of vocabulary used with the priesthood played a part in the policy changes that occurred within the Church from 1880 to 1955. The changes affected the early practice of women administering healing blessings. Stapley and Wright wrote,

The last general instruction on female participation in healing rituals was also an instruction on collaborative healing and was delivered by Joseph Fielding Smith, then president of the Quorum of the Twelve, in 1955. In response to a question in his regular "Answers to Gospel Questions" column in the Improvement Era, Smith quoted his father, Joseph F. Smith, as saying that it was "no uncommon thing" for a man and women to join their faith in administering to their children together. He also quoted Joseph Smith's 1842 revelation on female healing from his popular *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Stapley and Wright, "Female Ritual Healing in Mormonism," 83).

As the church grew and correlation committees published general guidelines, the protocol changed for women to anoint and administer only in the Temple. Most of the prophets up through Russell M. Nelson, have encouraged women to seek more of God's priesthood power in their lives—to seek the Gifts of the Spirit and call on God to bless them and their loved ones. It should be noted that there has never been a time when sisters have *not* been encouraged to seek the gifts of the spirit or to call upon the Lord to bless themselves or their loved ones. My experience has led me to believe that prayers of faith are answered in blessings of faith.

Sources:

<https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/nauvoo-relief-society-minute-book/1#full-transcript>