The ministering landmines to which I refer in this article don't come from ministering itself, but from us, the members of the Church. Ministering is the solution to our problems, not the problem itself. To help me make my points along the way, I will be quoting from a talk given in the April, 2018 General Conference by Sister Jean B. Bingham, General Relief Society President. Her talk is entitled, "Ministering as the Savior Does." All quotes are from her talk, unless otherwise stated.

Problem with Definitions

Many of us have problems understanding what it actually means to minister. We are so ingrained in the old home/visiting teaching mindset that our ability to see beyond a predetermined message and planned visit hampers our ability to see the broader picture of what it means to minister to others. The highly structured process of serving one another from our past sometimes gets in the way of a much freer way of serving others in the present. Our very habits can act as landmines that can damage our efforts to learn how to minister properly to one another.

> Sometimes we think we have to do something grand and heroic to “count” as serving our neighbors. Yet simple acts of service can have profound effects on others—as well as on ourselves. What did the Savior do? Through His supernal gifts of the Atonement and Resurrection—which we celebrate on this beautiful Easter Sunday—“none other has had so profound an influence [on] all who have lived and who will yet live upon the earth.” But He also smiled at, talked with, walked with, listened to, made time for, encouraged, taught,

> fed, and forgave. He served family and friends, neighbors and strangers alike, and He invited acquaintances and loved ones to enjoy the rich blessings of His gospel. Those "simple" acts of service and love provide a template for our ministering today.

Without a predefined message from the First Presidency or a pre-written visiting teaching message, sometimes we are left to wonder what qualifies as fulfilling our call to minister. We are just so accustomed to having something to bring to the people we visit. It feels strange and uncomfortable to come "empty handed." But look at what Sister Bingham includes in the example of the Savior's ministering. "He also smiled at, talked with, walked with, listened to, made time for, encouraged, taught, fed, and forgave. He served family and friends, neighbors and strangers alike, and He invited acquaintances and loved ones to enjoy the rich blessings of His gospel." Not once in that list was a bookmark or a refrigerator magnet mentioned. What we bring to our ministering assignment is our self, and that is enough.

Really? Can smiling at someone be considered ministering to someone? Just smiling? It sure can. The very definition of ministering is to provide for someone, to fulfill their needs and relieve their wants. If someone is lonely, depressed, feeling out of place or unwelcome, etc., doesn't a simple smile help them feel safer, more secure, more welcome? There is a man in my ward who is suffering in his advancing years from loss of memory and confusion, but we lived in the ward for almost two years before I found all that out about him. All I knew prior to that was that I always felt welcome in the ward when I saw him each Sunday. His warm and welcoming smile always spread across his face whenever he saw me look his way in Church. I was happy to be somewhere I felt so welcome. Despite his frustrations in life, he is still able to do this simple act of kindness that helps people feel included and wanted. It's not rocket science, it's love. Isn't it amazing what a thoughtful and sincere smile can accomplish?

Perpetual soloists

One of the universal problems of modern society, in most any country, is the separation that modern electronics introduces into our lives. Anything with earbuds or earphones cut us off from interaction and the company of all those who live and exist around us. Electronic devices, like the cell phone, tablet, or the portable gaming devices, cause us to separate ourselves from those around us as we focus our attention on the little screen

in front of us. These devices have created a generation of soloists. There is no one left to sing in the choir of life.

Before there were all these devices when we stood in line, got into an elevator, or sat in a waiting room, people at least had the opportunity to strike up a conversation and get to know those around them. How many friendships and acquaintances have been acquired over the years by these simple opportunities to interact with strangers around us? If you haven't tried it, you should. You will be surprised at the number of people, over the course of several years, you become familiar with and get to know. Your town will seem like a friendlier place as you begin to recognize more and more people on the streets and in the businesses you visit. And all of this because you put down the electronics and focused on the people around you.

Making time

One last reference to Sister Bingham's quote used above is her use of the words "made time for." Back in the 1950's and early part of the 1960's people still believed in the philosophy that it takes a village to raise a child. We were accustomed to adults other than our parents correcting us and giving us instructions. We were expected by our parents to show them the "proper" respect due to all adults. If we got out of line on the other side of town, someone who recognized whose child we were called our parents and told them what we were up to. We were pretty safe back then. It was difficult to get into too much mischief of the bad kind without someone catching us and telling our parents.

Something changed during the 1960's, and parents began to become sue happy. If someone corrected their child people took them to court to force them to leave their child alone and butt out of their family business. People became afraid to correct other people's children. Only close friends dared to speak out. Children became more bold in doing what they wanted, knowing that adults didn't dare correct them. It has only gotten worse with each passing decade. Now even the schools dare to tell parents that the parents have no right to tell the children what is right and what is wrong. The State has taken on that responsibility, and the courts are upholding that opinion more and more.

Today's neighborhoods are made up largely and often of families who are isolationists. They don't interact with each other. They don't dare get involved in each other's lives, often for fear of lawsuits. When I served my mission in the late 1970s I sprained my ankle on the doorstep of a good member's home in California. Their first two comments to me were, "Are you okay?" and "Are you going to sue us?" That was such a foreign concept for me, but now it is almost expected, even among neighbors.

So families live, in essence, alone, even in the midst of many neighbors. We have stopped dropping by unannounced for a visit. We have stopped calling just to chat. We don't dare discuss sensitive social topics. We have forgotten how to disagree with someone, yet remain friends. All these social skills need to be relearned. And it has to start with the recognition of our neighbor's importance. We can't fulfill the second great commandment to love our neighbor as ourselves if we are so afraid to get involved in their lives that we won't even talk to them.

> He also smiled at, talked with, walked with, listened to, made time for, encouraged, taught, fed, and forgave. He served family and friends, neighbors and strangers alike, and He invited acquaintances and loved ones to enjoy the rich blessings of His gospel.

This is the key to our reconnecting with our neighbors. We must learn to open ourselves to each other, despite the growing tendency of society for everyone to shun each other. We need to talk with our neighbor, listen to them, learn from them, and make time for them. In other words, our neighbors need to become important to us once again. Neighbors need to be seen as something of value in our lives, and not something to be shunned or avoided at all costs.

I recognize that this doesn't describe all neighborhoods and all communities. But this does describe an ever-increasing number of neighborhoods and communities. And all of these include Latter-day Saints who are having the above described difficulties with ministering. These problems are especially prevalent among the younger families who haven't ever experienced what it really means to live in a tightly knit neighborhood and community. Part of this problem is the amount of commuting and moving we all do these days. Life was very different when people were born and grew up in one place most of their life.

Box Tickers

How many of us are box tickers? Our jobs, the government, the schools, etc. all require that we be able to fill out a form and this form defines us. Many surveys require box ticking. Look at what was perceived as being expected from the old visiting/home teaching program of the Church. Did you visit the family last month? Tick. Did you present the prescribed message? Tick. Did you take a companion along with you? Tick. Did you ask if there was anything you could do for them? Tick. It is sad, really.

Ministering gets rid of all our boxes. What will we do? It makes many of us uncomfortable. How do we measure our performance? What is our standard? How are we supposed to tell if we are living up to the expectations of the Brethren, our Stake President, our Bishop, and our immediate leaders? How are we going to be judged? Where does my performance stand in the eyes of the Lord? It's enough to drive one to distraction.

The real danger here is that human nature will assert itself and some will timidly shrink back into their home and not even contact their companion. Others will recognize that they are not ever going to have to report on their performance (no boxes to tick, no reports to fill out), so they don't do anything at all. Others, not understanding the spirit behind ministering, will gladly text their families once a month and consider their job well done. After all, contact was made. They completely miss the point. Remember, the prophet said that this is a "holier approach to caring and ministering to others."

Ministering and revelation

What makes ministering more holy than the service most of us provided under the old program is that this method of serving cannot be done well without the guidance of daily revelation. In the same Conference President Nelson warned us that we will not be able to survive the coming days ahead if we aren't experiencing daily revelation.

> But in coming days, it will not be possible to survive spiritually without the guiding, directing, comforting, and constant influence of the Holy Ghost.

Forget about ticking boxes. Work on becoming more socially vulnerable. Pray for the people or families you have been assigned to visit. Be the friend they need.

> As you have the privilege to represent the Savior in your ministering efforts, ask yourself, “How can I share the light of the gospel with this individual or family? What is the Spirit inspiring me to do?”

What does this kind of ministering look like? Yes, that text message checking up on the family falls into this category. But what the Lord expects of us now goes so much further than just a text message. Here is Sister Bingham again.

> It looks like going for a walk, getting together for a game night, offering service, or even serving together. It looks like visiting in person or talking on the phone or chatting online or texting. It looks like delivering a birthday card and cheering at a soccer game. It looks like sharing a scripture or quote from a conference talk that would be meaningful to that individual. It looks like discussing a gospel question and sharing testimony to bring clarity and peace. It looks like becoming part of someone's life and caring about him or her. It also looks like a ministering interview in which needs and strengths are discussed sensitively and appropriately. It looks like the ward council organizing to respond to a larger need.

Each of the activities Sister Bingham mentions in the above paragraph comes as a demonstration of love, care, and concern for one of God's children. Each of these things, and there are many, many more, demonstrate a way in which the Savior himself might show his love for any one of us. Most acts of love are small. Many of them are unseen. For example, a man was walking through his neighborhood and noticed someone's garbage can had spilled packing peanuts all over the lawn. The wind was blowing them all the way down the street from yard to yard. He could have continued his walk and gone home, noting that someone would have quite the mess to clean up, eventually. But instead, he quietly started picking up the packing peanuts and returning them to the garbage can. He went from yard to yard picking them up until they were all back in the garbage. He wasn't aware that anyone saw him, and he didn't seek credit for what he had done. It was just quiet service.

How will this change us?

Can you see how this form of service will change us as a people? I see it as helping us to become more sensitive to the needs and wants of others. We will become more readily able to detect people's needs and help them fulfill those needs as we listen to the Spirit's promptings to help others, even when it is inconvenient to us. One of the changes that some of us need to make is to be willing to set aside our personal wants in the service of someone else's need. This is not easy. It takes practice - deliberate practice. But what a change it will make in our spiritual maturity!

One of the first things we need to do is to go back to President Nelson's talk on revelation (see the link above) and print it out. Mark each of the steps he lists to becoming more spiritually sensitive to the promptings and feelings we receive from the Holy Ghost. Once you have a list in front of you of all the ways in which he says we can become more spiritually sensitive, set one of them as a goal and figure out how you can practice that aspect of spiritual sensitivity. You will find that the more of these you master, the happier you will be in this life, no matter what your physical circumstances are.

> After all is said and done, true ministering is accomplished one by one with love as the motivation. The value and merit and wonder of sincere ministering is that it truly changes lives! When our hearts are open and willing to love and include, encourage and comfort, the power of our ministering will be irresistible. With love as the motivation, miracles will happen, and we will find ways to bring our “missing” sisters and brothers into the all-inclusive embrace of the gospel of Jesus Christ.
>
> The Savior is our example in everything—not only in what we should do but *why* we should do it. “His life on earth was [an] invitation to us—to raise our sights a little higher, to forget our own problems and [to] reach out to others.” As we accept the opportunity to wholeheartedly minister to our sisters and brothers, we are blessed to become more spiritually refined, more in tune with the will of God, and more able to understand His plan to help each one return to Him. We will more readily recognize His blessings and be eager to extend those blessings to others.

Final Thoughts

The hidden dangers in our ministering efforts are that we will not learn to minister well because we aren't growing into the principles of love and revelation. Our old habits can act as landmines, damaging or destroying our every effort to do better. Without the two keys to our ministering, love and revelation, we will continue to perform at our old, lower levels. Only when we recognize where our weaknesses in charitable service lie, and we commit ourselves to work to eliminate those weaknesses, will we finally begin to experience the holier form of service our prophet has placed before us.

Sister Bingham has given us many good examples and ideas to follow. We do not need to fear ministering as a way of service in the Church. Our happiness will increase, and our friendships abound as we deliberately reach beyond our comfort levels to provide

succor where the Spirit tells us it is needed. Joy will be the result of our new way of being and behaving.

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Ministering Landmines