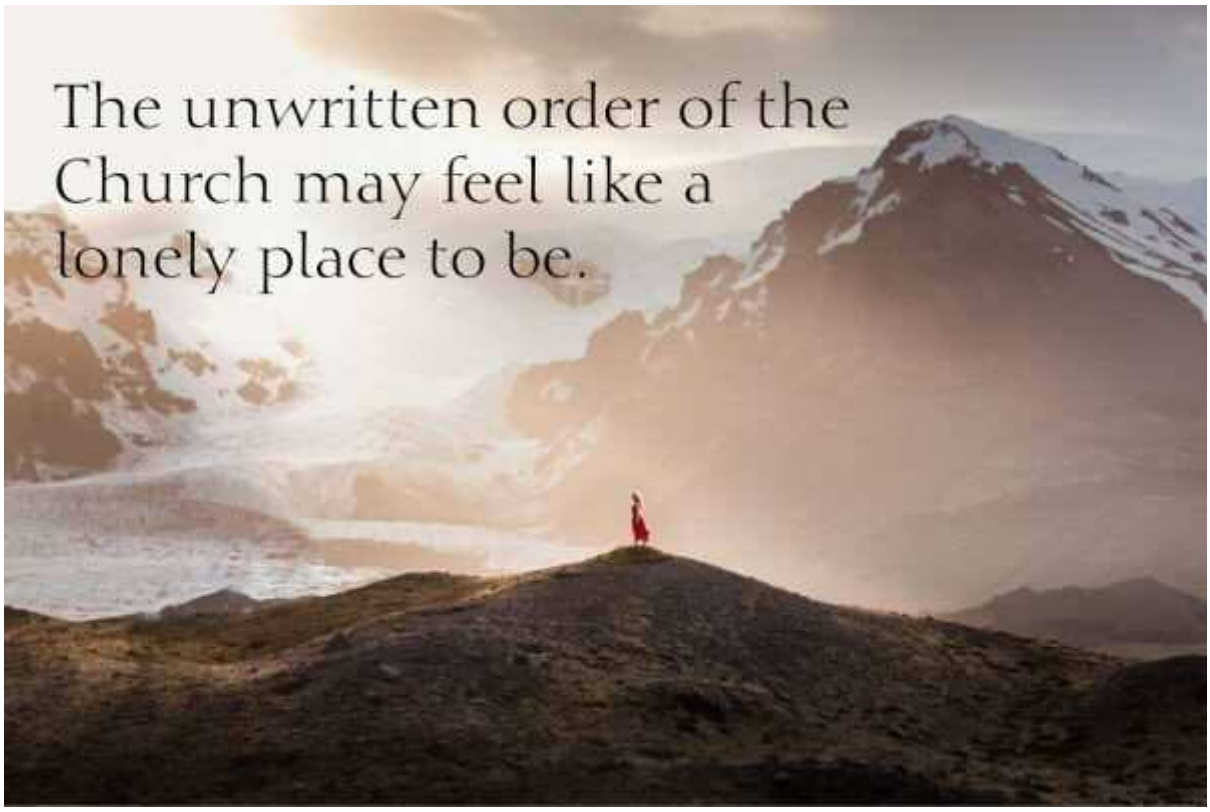

I honestly don't believe that most of the members of the Church have any idea how blessed we are to have the degree of organizational stability that is unique to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Order reigns supreme within the Church. For almost any day-to-day operational circumstance that might arise we have two handbooks of instruction that contain the answers as to how it is to be handled. The first handbook is only available to the Church leaders, like the Stake Presidencies and the Bishoprics. The second handbook of instruction is available to all adult Church leaders. These handbooks tell us how to handle ordinances, organizational needs, interviews, etc. I know of no other organization on earth that is as carefully regulated and documented when it comes to how it is to be run. This is the written order of the Lord's Church. But what about the unwritten order of the Lord's Church? What is deliberately left unwritten is, in many ways even more important than what is written.

Before I go any further into this subject, I want to make something as clear as I know how to do so. I am NOT stating anything on behalf of the Church. I am only talking about my personal experience. There are many who are far more capable of discussing this issue than I am. I am only discussing the subject of the unwritten order of the Church because one of my readers was disturbed about an issue that falls outside of the normal circumstances in the Church, and in my course of trying to help find an answer

to the question she asked me I started some very tender and raw conversations on social media about the issues of forgiveness and Church governance.

I wanted to write about this, but felt unequal to the task for several weeks now. It is only now that I feel I have a suitable response to her question. Her question revolved around the possibilities for service of someone who had been in a position of trust and responsibility in the Church, but had been excommunicated in the past. The person was now back in the Church, having been forgiven of the sins that caused the excommunication. She wanted to know whether that person would ever be considered for the same position of responsibility again.

I won't answer her question in a direct manner. Instead I will defer to an experience I have had with what is known as the unwritten order of the Church. I will draw from my personal experience to try to demonstrate how this unwritten order works. Please bear with me as I set up and tell you my story so my conclusions and observations will make more sense to you.

My Story

Many years ago I went through a divorce. I became a single father with four children ranging from pre-school to junior high. At that time all government programs for single parents were geared solely for single mothers. Men so rarely had custody of their children that all programs were only geared to the needs of women. Unfortunately, so were the mindsets of the members of the Church.

My High Priest's quorum continued to expect me to participate in every way like a married man. I would tell them that I couldn't make it at certain hours of the day because someone needed to be there to feed my children. They told me to have my wife do it. They just didn't get it. There was no wife. I was in the bishopric at the time, and was also the ward organist. While I played the organ my children would roll around on the carpet between the benches and the organ, and not a single person would help out by stepping in and helping me keep them under control.

As a member of the Bishopric I still had to conduct the meetings and sit on the stand, because the Bishop didn't see any reason to release me, so my children raised Cain during sacrament meeting every week. The Relief Society would have nothing to do with me, because there was no wife in the home. The Young Women's and Primary organizations wouldn't help in any way, again, because they were uncomfortable

dealing with a single man. So I struggled along on my own, trying to figure out how to do my daughters' hair and keep order in the home while trying to hold down a job.

I soon needed to move, so we went to a small town in rural Utah. We loved our new town, but it was populated with farmers, who had a farmer's mentality about everything. While I got enrolled in the nearest university to try to finish my degree so I could better support my family, we received some help from the Bishop. Nothing unusual about that. What was unusual was the response of the Stake President.

I was almost finished with my first year back in school when the Stake President called me into his office. There sat all three members of the Stake Presidency. I was read the riot act for being a neglectful father. I was told that my efforts to go back to school was completely irresponsible. To quote my Stake President, 'No self-respecting WOMAN would try to improve herself when she still had mouths to feed at home.' My responsibility was to my children, not to my education. If my job couldn't pay the rent then go get a second or third job. I was told pointedly that I was not to return to school until all my children had graduated from high school.

I was stunned. I had seen many a woman receive help from the ward or stake so she could finish her degree and better support her children. Now I was being told I was less of a man than any woman is for trying to do what any self-respecting woman wouldn't think of doing. The whole Presidency took turns telling me how I was failing as a parent then they told me that the Church was withdrawing all support and help from me from that hour onward. I would not get another penny. I told them that if they could just help me for the next two months I would have all my financing in order for the next semester and I wouldn't need any more help. I would even drop out of school and take out loans to go to barber school if they preferred, but I needed help just two months more. I was told to go get a job.

I was a full tithe payer, temple worthy, and active in the Church. All my life I had been taught that when you were in need the Church would help you. And at that time the Church taught that it was better to go to the Church before going to the government for help. My family was all tapped out, so I had exhausted all my resources. If I followed the counsel of my priesthood leaders I would have to move away from this small town to find work in a larger metropolitan area, because there was precious little work in the little country town.

I became angry at this perceived betrayal by my priesthood leaders. Doubts raged within me, and thoughts of leaving the Church over what I considered to be unjust accusations flooded my soul. I was becoming truly desperate. Then came General Conference.

I felt alone and in the dark. Yet I was also being told to take a step forward in that darkness. I knew with every fearful fiber in my being that if I took that step it would be off a cliff, plunging me into an abyss. I was terrified beyond my ability to describe. I knew that destruction awaited me if I did what my leaders were telling me to do, these very leaders who had betrayed me and unjustly accused me. In Conference there was a talk about the importance of following our priesthood leaders. Then there was another one, and yet another one.

As I prayed and struggled with all these feelings surging through my soul, I could come to only one conclusion. Either the Church was true or it was not. If it was then I had no choice but to follow the counsel of the Brethren and obey those who were being so seemingly hurtful to me at the moment. I felt they were fools, but I had always been taught that if we obey our Church leaders, even if we disagree with them, the Lord will bless us for our obedience.

I decided I had no viable alternative but to obey the Stake President's counsel. I moved out of town, feeling like I had just been kicked out of the city, and was homeless for several months. My children and I moved from friend's house to friend's house, and empty apartment to empty apartment until even my mother told me that we couldn't stay any longer.

The night before we were completely without any place to live I plead with the Lord. I told him I didn't think I could handle having to live in my car with four children. I was at the end of my rope. I had done everything in my power to find work and a place to live, but had been unsuccessful at both. I was trying to do what my leaders had told me to do, even though I so strongly disagreed with them, but I didn't know if I could face this next trial.

Imagine my surprise when I awoke the next morning and got a phone call offering me a full-time job, and a second call moments later telling me I had a house to rent, and we could move in directly?

Lessons learned

It was then that I gained my testimony that God is always acutely aware of me. He may not be talking to me at the moment, but I now know that he is still very much aware of me, and mindful of my welfare at all times. He let me struggle for multiple months before stepping in and offering me the aid I felt I so desperately needed. I had lessons to learn that helping me right off the bat wouldn't have allowed to happen. I had to prove my willingness to do the hard things first. I had to put my own opinions, no matter how strongly held, in abeyance while I obeyed my Church leaders. Only then did the Lord step forward and give me the help I needed.

The unwritten order

So what does this have to do with the unwritten order of the Church? For one thing, there is nothing in the manuals that tells a priesthood leader what specific advice to give someone in every situation. Such situations have to be handled through the Spirit and by priesthood leader's personal experience. Different Church leaders would have handled my situation differently. But those particular leaders set me up to have my soul tested in ways I didn't know I could handle until I had to face those terrible situations. Does this mean they were right to do what they did, that they were inspired? I can't answer that question. All I know is that because of their narrow view of life I was able to be tested and tried in ways that have blessed my life ever since. I'll leave the judgment of their choices up to the Lord.

What about my reader's question about someone who is excommunicated then re-enters the Church and has their blessings restored? Can they be called again to former positions of responsibility? Sometimes they are. Often times they aren't. I struggled with that second scenario until I talked with a friend of mine who is a former Mission President. He was the one who instructed me about the unwritten order of the Church.

When someone's name is put forward for consideration as Bishop, for example, his name will be put with a number of other names. The names being considered for approval to be interviewed by the Stake President and the General Authority are carefully weighed. Where there are large numbers of faithful brethren who haven't been Bishops before, the chances that the brother who has been rebaptized will be seriously considered is probably small. After all, there are all these other people who are perfectly worthy, who haven't held the office before, who haven't sinned away their privileges and have always been faithful to their priesthood covenants. That is a human call. The Lord is letting his leaders wrestle with this decision being made under the

influence of the Holy Ghost. The Lord has forgiven the sins of this rebaptized member, but that doesn't wipe everyone else's memory. Remember that there are many factors that enter into the consideration for a calling of responsibility. If the Lord really wants someone to be called to a particular office, I have faith that the Spirit will impress the name of that person on the mind and heart of the one issuing the call.

What if the person in question lives in a country or area where there are very few priesthood holders who are prepared for the challenge of being the Bishop? In such a circumstance the chances of our former Bishop might be higher that he would be considered again for the calling. It has happened before.

The point is this, there are many circumstances in the Church where you simply cannot regulate and write rules for how to handle every situation. It would be worse than the U.S. tax code if you tried to find a way to pin down procedures for every possibility. These situations require a reliance on the Spirit. They also require us, as members of the Church to forgo being judgmental about what should or should not happen. It is not our call.

The full body of the tax code is currently more than 74,000 pages.

Final Thoughts

Most of us think of the Church in terms of all the rules and procedures for getting the day-to-day tasks done. In this respect the Church is a well-oiled machine. It works so well because of all the written helps we have to refer to for doing things the same way in one city as they do in another.

But the real power of the Lord's kingdom, I believe, lays in the unwritten order of the Church, that part of the Church governed by the Spirit and the spiritual laws. It is in this realm of unwritten rules and events that many of the greatest tests, miracles, and wonders of mortality take place. This is a place governed by the laws controlling faith and obedience.

The scriptures are full of circumstances where the prophets and the covenant makers of Israel dealt with things outside the natural order of the Lord's well-defined kingdom. Think of the Law of Moses. The law tightly regulated all the affairs of the

children of Israel. But where were the regulations for the people like Moses who had to take all those Israelites out of Egypt, or for Jonah, who had to be taught a lesson through a big fish, or Elijah who blessed the widow with food to last her through the famine for her faithfulness?

The written order of the Church keeps us sane and the Church running efficiently. But it is the unwritten order of the Church that tests our faith and rewards our obedience.

Here is Elder Boyd K. Packer's talk on The Unwritten Order of Things. This is a masterful talk by one of the greatest teachers of this dispensation. This talk is just part of one lesson in a whole course on leadership.

Click the link below to

print a PDF copy of the file.

What I Have Learned About the Unwritten Order of the Church