As the Church becomes more comfortable with the concept of ministering, our imaginations can still run amok. This is a higher, holier way to serve, but are many of us tossing out that which is sacred and needed in our quest for the new and the different?

The definition of throwing the baby out with the bath water is to get rid of something that is good in our effort to get rid of something bad. In this instance I prefer to think of it in terms of our neglecting something vital in our efforts to do something better than we have done in the past. I'm talking about the effect I am seeing, and is being felt by many, that in our efforts to move away from home and visiting teaching we are severing ties and connections that are vital. So many of us are, in effect, causing hurt as we try to implement this higher and holier form of service.

A Church of assignments

We hear that we are a Church of assignments. What does that mean? Isn't all of our service in the Church voluntary? We also talk about the fact that we have no paid ministry, that all positions at the ward and stake level are voluntary. So where do these assignments come into play? In a New Era article from 1977 Franklin D. Richards commented about accepting calls to serve in the Church. When we are asked to accept a call to serve, and we are concerned about how busy we are we need to first consider whether we can simplify our lives and get rid of time fillers that aren't as beneficial to our salvation as our time spent serving the Lord then "... remember your covenants with the Lord wherein you have covenanted to give of your time, talents, and means liberally to the upbuilding of the kingdom of God."

It is because we have all made sacred covenants with the Lord to give of our time, energy, and all that we have to help in accomplishing His work that we are told that callings, though offered in the form of a request, are really an assignment given by the leaders the Lord has called to look after the welfare of His children. This is why we are told we should never turn down a calling without first counseling with our priesthood leader.

Assignments handle the necessities of the kingdom

Bishops are called to keep a body of saints in a geographic area organized and functioning. He looks after everyone's physical and spiritual welfare through the various callings/assignments that are extended throughout the ward. The Relief Society President looks after the needs of the women. The Primary President looks after the needs of the children, etc. Every organization is responsible for just a part of someone else's needs. And all of these Presidents answer to the Bishop and report back to him so he knows about the welfare and needs of those within the ward or branch boundaries. It is important to the Lord that these needs be met. He cares about His children.

Just as the Bishop cannot minister to each and ever person in the ward/branch by himself, so too can the presidents of the organizations not handle the needs of everyone they are responsible for. This is why we have callings within each of the organizations. Specifically in Elders Quorum and Relief Society members are called/assigned to watch over the needs of specific people/families. In ancient Israel it was like calling the captains over 10, 50, and 100. These calls to minister are meant to break down the load of needed service to manageable sized pieces.

It is the responsibility of each person assigned to visit an individual/family to learn of their needs and meet those needs as Christ would if he were given the same assignment. This is the goal, and we are all still working on how to fulfill it to that level of accomplishment. In this respect there is absolutely no difference between what was supposed to have been accomplished in home and visiting teaching and what is now supposed to be accomplished by ministering. What has changed is our needed attitude and outlook to these assignments. At least our attitudes were supposed to change. That is the problem. For some of us, our attitudes about assigned visits serve as a fly in the ointment.

The fly in the ointment

The expression "a fly in the ointment" refers to an attempt to do something good, but something bad messes it up. It is like putting antibiotic ointment on a cut finger, only to have a fly land on your finger and get stuck in the ointment. Now the whole dressing is contaminated and has to be reapplied. In this discussion many of us didn't want to have to visit the people we were assigned to. We felt obligated. We don't know these

people. In the past we often felt like we were considered intruders in their homes, and therefore we didn't feel all that welcome when we finally got there on the last day of the month to deliver our obligatory message.

But then we were set free of such obligations. We were told that the spirit of ministering lies in following the promptings of the Spirit to help and bless the lives of all those around us. We don't have to have a formal sit-down with a message. We can text them if we want. With heady abandon we now run out and start doing good for every stranger on the street, but we completely neglect those we have been assigned to watch over and care for. In other words, we have just thrown the baby out with the bath water. Our attitude about those we have been assigned to minister to is the fly in the ointment, the cause of the problem.

What problem is that? If you haven't experienced it yourself, you probably have heard someone else mention that ever since ministering was begun in April of 2018, those assigned to minister to your/their family haven't shown up. It's like our ministers have fallen off the face of the earth. Mind you, I'm not saying all are doing this, but many are.

Some resent having to be told to be Christlike to someone. They want to feel free to bless wherever and whenever the mood hits them. They don't like to feel obligated to learn to love a particular person or family. That isn't spontaneous, and it isn't "natural" to "love on command." The assumption is that somehow the Spirit is going to be more present in our lives serving people of our choosing than when we serve those our Bishop has called us to serve. And in case you aren't aware of it, all ministering assignments in the ward are reviewed by, and approved by the Bishop. When I am called to serve the Jenkins family down the street by my Elders Quorum President that call is being extended with the express approval of the Bishop.

We fulfill our baptismal covenant by accepting that call/assignment to serve. The Bishop needs us to become his eyes and ears so he can bless us in ways only a Bishop can bless us, just as the Lord needs us to be His hands and His feet in blessing all of His children in His physical absence. I guess it never occurred to me that the Bishop is also being required by his assignment to learn to love everyone in his ward, whether they are nice to him or not.

It is this mistaken attitude that is acting like a fly in the healing balm of the Lord in our lives. Serving people with whom we will possibly never have any other contact is easier, and less threatening, than the service we render to those with whom we live and worship. It is not easy to learn to love some people. And some of us resist having a person come into our home and try to learn everything that is going on within our walls. So we withhold information and pretend we are "fine." How are we supposed to help our visiting ministers report back to the Bishop with an accurate picture of the welfare of our home if we are, in essence, lying to our ministering brothers and sisters by being secretive about our real needs and situation?

Ministering is a two way street. If someone comes into my home and tries to get to know me and my family, I have to let them into not just the front door, but into my heart. That requires trust and respect. It is true they need to earn my trust and respect, but it is also true that I shouldn't make doing so a series of Herculean tasks that are almost impossible to accomplish. We can help them by opening our home and hearts, extending our hospitality, and remembering that they may be just as uncomfortable being in our home as we are having them there.

Becoming Zion

The whole point of the gospel of Christ is to teach us how to become Zion or celestial people. Celestial people are of one heart and one mind. They love without requirement. They love unconditionally. They accept the love of others as quickly as we would all hope others would accept our love. This requires a certain amount of vulnerability. It is this process of becoming more Zionlike in our attitudes that makes ministering both exciting and terrifying. Ministering is, in essence, a two-edged sword. It cuts both ways.

Do we need to expand our efforts to love all those with whom we come in contact on a daily basis? Yes. But we also need to learn to love those the Lord, through the covenant path we accepted at baptism and in the temple, has placed under our care and watchful eye. We are directly responsible for those we have been called or assigned to serve. We are not as directly responsible for those we meet on the street, though we are still accountable for how we treat them.

We have to return to our priesthood and auxiliary leaders and report on our efforts to pray for the individuals/families to whom we have been assigned. We have to be able to

answer their interviewing questions about how the Spirit has directed us in our efforts to do as Christ would with that person or family. We have to answer for those to whom we have been assigned to minister. To forget this significant responsibility in favor of running willy nilly down the street being nice to people, really would be an act of throwing the baby out with the bath water.

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Ministering: Are We Throwing the Baby Out with the Bath Water?