

WHO R U?

By Sis. Cheryl Cervone

Mistaken identities, stolen identities, identity crises – the issue of identity has taken on great significance in today's society. Juggling many different hats and excelling at multi-tasking is the norm for most of the sisters who attended the Ladies' Uplift Circle Fellowship Weekend from April 7-9, 2006 in Laguna Woods, CA. However, developing and keeping a *spiritual* identity, both as individuals and as a group in the church, is our ultimate challenge. And – how do we reconcile the spiritual and natural facets of our identity? Under the enthused/uplifting direction of seminar leaders Sis. Carolyn Light and Sis. Christina Paxon (age 15 and under), this inspired theme of “**Who R U? Women Have Outstanding Reasons to be Uplifted – Developing and Retaining Our Identity**” – was explored in thought-provoking depth.

After a Friday evening of fun and games, fellowship, food and joyous reunions, the Saturday session began with opening remarks and a warm welcome from Pacific Region Ladies' Uplift Circle President Sis. Debbie Kyriakakos. In introducing the seminar topic of identity, Sis. Carolyn shared how this idea had first come to her two years prior when she was graduating from college as a doctor and had difficulty transitioning through her changes in identity. While she was comfortable being Sister Carolyn, Erin's mom and Bro. Stacey's wife, becoming a doctor was a new uncomfortable part of her identity. She pondered how to relate this on a spiritual level.

When Sis. Diane McDonnell asked her to consider a topic for the fellowship weekend, Sis. Carolyn could not find her notes on another topic requested and went to sleep disturbed and somewhat frustrated. When she awoke, she prayed and was directed to a black notebook containing an experience from Sis. Becky Tarbuk, the gist of which was that one may lose his/her identity as a member of the church when feeding on other doctrines. Romans 12:2 reinforced this: “And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.” Another confirmation of the topic of identity came when Sis. Carolyn found herself humming a song while preparing the seminar which eventually took on the form of the new Song of Zion, “To Keep the Gospel Pure”; the words of which relate to this very subject.

At the same time, the Lord was working with Sis. Christina Paxon, who expressed to Sis. Diane that she wanted to address the young girls about their identity and the importance of having a strong foundation in the Lord. Her heart ached for the young people who make a wrong turn and somehow seem to get lost without a solid identity in Christ. Sis. Diane shared that both she and Sis. Carolyn were on a similar wavelength with regard to the identity theme. God unfolded and revealed His plan and purpose for our fellowship weekend in His time!

Why study identity?

Sis. Carolyn stressed the importance of developing our spiritual identity to equip us to fend off the endless negative identity messages with which we are bombarded by the media, most often relating to beauty, sex, looks, etc. “Identity” can be defined as a set of traits- behavioral or personal characteristics - by which we are known or recognizable. In contrast to popular opinion, we need to look and *be* different – what is different about *you*?

What is our purpose?

Even as saints, we sometimes feel adrift in our purpose, but the scriptures are very clear and reassuring regarding our purpose and why we were created. Above all, we were created to worship, praise and glorify God, but have you considered your purpose in the context of joy, help, a calling or being one in Christ? According to II Nephi 2:25: “Adam fell that men might be; and men are, that they might have joy.” Galatians 3:27-28 assures us that “For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.”

In bringing these concepts to life, several sisters came forward one at a time to portray women of purpose from the scriptures. It seemed we were instantly transported back to ancient times as Sis. Martha, Sis. Rebecca, Queen Esther, Sis. Debra, Sis. Naomi and Eve shared their identities, stories and advice with us. These vignettes revealed ordinary women who were used for God’s extraordinary purposes and plan. Like us, they were far from perfect, sometimes alone and were dealing with many of the same fears and worries.

In discussing the evolution of purpose, Sis. Carolyn contrasted the American Superwoman with the Ancient Superwoman, based on Proverbs 31: 10-31 about a “virtuous woman”. In modern terms, the virtuous woman can be described as someone who is valuable, has a good marriage, good intentions, is a worker, caretaker, entrepreneur, has strong character, knows what’s good for her, is self-aware, self-driven, diligent, charitable, a nurturer, prepared, courageous, beautiful, stylish, a businesswoman, has hope, fears the Lord and is worthy to be praised for fearing the Lord. This led to a discussion of sisters – past and present – who have been influential in the work of the modern church. A defining characteristic of these women is that they all had a sense of their purpose and *knew* their identity. Christ set the ultimate example and always knew his identity and purpose was to be about his father’s business.

Identify who you are

In the spirit of keeping things lively and interactive, Sis. Carolyn gave an assignment, “Imagine you’re at a gathering and the hostess gives you a minute to tell who you are.” As the sisters shared, many descriptions ensued that encompassed what we do, family and other relationships, gifts and talents, roles in church and the home, spiritual desires and our relationship with the Lord. Some of these descriptions evolved into beautiful and spirit-filled testimonies. Sis. Karen Tucker, who has been severely afflicted, powerfully expressed how the Lord changed her life. In another riveting testimony, Sis. Patty Giannetti shared how she had come from a broken family and was raised in a Catholic orphanage. It was in the church that she found the love she never had and her identity was forever changed.

Identify your possibilities – gifts and talents

Sis. Carolyn then asked everyone to think about the most cherished, tangible gift they had ever received and to take that passion and channel it into God’s purpose for our lives. Our gifts and talents are a unique part of our identity and have purpose; the scriptures tell us that we all have talents and need to use them for good. What emerged clearly from this discussion is that it is often easier to see the gifts, traits and talents in others than in ourselves. Nevertheless, we are all necessary and one in the body of Christ, as discussed in 1 Corinthians 12:1-27 concerning spiritual gifts. We must also think of ourselves as able with the help of God. As Philippians 4:13 states, “I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me.”

Sis. Carolyn challenged us to identify our own talents and to also identify the gifts and talents of two selected sisters, then later share the findings with them. Feeling untalented or bereft of gifts? We were reminded that Moses stuttered, Naomi was a widow, David committed adultery and murder, Peter denied Christ, Martha worried too much, the Samaritan was divorced several times and Lazarus was dead! Despite these difficulties or shortcomings, God used these ordinary men and women for extraordinary purposes and to fulfill His plan. By developing and retaining our identity in Christ, we know we were created for a purpose, we know who we are and we all have a job to do – may we always use our gifts and talents to the honor and glory of God!

Bridging life's stages

Sis. Carolyn commenced the afternoon seminar session by relaying an experience she had when Erin was 18 months old and didn't particularly like sitting quietly in church. Like many new moms in similar circumstances, Sis. Carolyn felt frustrated, but was greatly helped by the wise words of a sister who came to her and said, "This is your ministry right now – this is what you're here to do *now*." Bridging life's different stages means supporting each other through trials, growth and life's changes. It also means learning to be content at whatever stage you find yourself, as apostle Paul wrote in Philippians 4:11-12.

During the morning seminar session, Sis. Christina Paxon led the teen/pre-teen group and rejoined Sis. Carolyn's group in the afternoon, bridging generations and life stages of experience. Sis. Christina had given identity clues to the girls with the objective being to figure out who the clues described. In thinking further about their identity, the girls were asked to consider how their parents would describe them as well as others. Finally, they were asked to supply reasons as to why "Women Have Outstanding Reasons to be Uplifted". Sis. Christina summarized by stressing that we all need each other, prayers and mentoring to bridge between generations and life stages as young women face so much in today's society.

After identifying group stages of life, we roughly divided into those groups (e.g., pre-teens, teens, young adults, adults, parents, pre-seniors, seniors) and were asked, "What do you offer the body of the church?" With responses too numerous to count, recurring themes included mentoring, being a good example, helping and encouraging each other, fellowshiping, testifying, being quick to pray and being supportive. As Sis. Pearl Nester aptly expressed with regard to bridging life's stages, "Where you are, I once was. Where I am, you will be."

As our wonderful seminar concluded, Sis. Carolyn thanked everyone for their participation, expressed hope that "the Lord's message has come through today" and reminded all the sisters that "you were created with a special identity and purpose – you have gifts and talents that God has given you." WHO R U? Why – "Women Who Have Outstanding Reason to be Uplifted", of course!

With no shortage of talents and gifts, the Saturday night Singspiration/Talent Show inspired laughter, awe and admiration from an appreciative audience! Saturday evening drew to a close with Sis. Diane Surdock commenting that we are servants in the service of the Lord and the more we open up our talent for Him, the more he'll bless us. Our memorable, blessed and jam-packed day came to an end with Sis. Jacqui King closing in prayer.

Sunday blessings

Still savoring the events of the previous day, the sisters reconvened on a bright and glorious Sunday morning, anticipating a double portion of God's blessings. The Sunday service

commenced with Sis. Jody Greger, Vice President of the Pacific Region Ladies' Uplift Circle, opening in prayer, followed by Sis. Erin Light singing "To Keep the Gospel Pure". Sis. Jody shared a touching experience in which the theme of the fellowship weekend was once again confirmed. When she initially learned of the theme and abbreviation of "Who R U?", Sis. Jody had no idea what these letters represented, but she began writing down words that began with "R" and "U". Before she knew it, she had an entire page and the very last phrase she had written was, "As a woman of Christ, I now definitely have outstanding reasons to be uplifted." God always has a way of putting it all together!

Sis. Debbie Kyriakakos introduced guest speaker Bro. Jim Cotellesse. In pondering the theme of "Who R U", Bro. Jim conveyed that it evoked a sad feeling of "being a stranger in a foreign land", not unlike how we feel when we go out into the world as believers. One might feel fear in a foreign land, but not when we are gathered together with like-minded saints as we are today and as it will be in the Peaceful Reign. In II Timothy 1:7, we are reminded: "For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and a sound mind." Bro. Jim encouraged us to come from a position of strength in our identity, not fear.

Bro. Jim continued, "In both Romans and Galatians, it states that we are the children of God because of our faith in Jesus Christ. Knowing our identity is a great possession we hold in our heart – this is who we are." We need to hold fast to the scriptures that state, "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord" because we know who we are and who we have believed and we are persuaded. Praise God because we are the children of God! We develop our identity when we talk about Zion, the songs of Zion, our church and our church's mission to win over the world for Christ. Just by saying "The name of my church is The Church of Jesus Christ", we are strengthened in our identity.

Bro. Jim passed sacrament, followed by the anointing of Sis. Karen Tucker and Sis. Harriet Meo. Sis. Karen relayed her powerful testimony and the meeting was opened for testimony shortly thereafter. Sis. Diane McDonnell began by thanking God for giving her the ability to put the Ladies' Uplift Circle Fellowship Weekend together and to do so without fear or anxiety. Many sisters expressed heartfelt gratitude for the hard work and dedication of all the sisters involved in making this fellowship weekend a reality.

Reluctantly, the time drew near to bring our fellowship weekend to a close and bid our precious sisters farewell until the next spiritual reunion! The closing hymn was "Blessed Assurance" and Sis. Elizabeth Simpson offered the closing prayer as we joined hands in a circle of love. Sis. Elizabeth petitioned the Lord that each sister would take home at least one special insight or memory that would sustain her in the months to come. But how could it be limited to one when **Women Have (so many) Outstanding Reasons to be Uplifted?**