

A newsmaking Friday in New York: President Ballard talks Scouts and world peace

By [Tad Walch@Tad_Walch](#) Nov 15, 2019, 10:00pm MST

NEW YORK CITY — President M. Russell Ballard stood at the pulpit of the empty U.N. General Assembly Hall in New York City on Friday and reflected on the work that is done there by the 193 member-states.

“What we hope is that everyone can come here and get together and find ways of peace, joy and happiness, and turn people’s hearts to loving one another instead of trying to figure out how to hurt each other. That’s what we need,” said the 91-year-old acting president of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. “It’s possible to fix things if everybody that sits in those seats, when they’re together, can think in terms of what is best for the human family and not necessarily what they’re just concerned about for their own constituency.”

President Ballard cultivated new relationships for the church and continued old ones during a newsmaking Friday in the City That Never Sleeps. He met with a high-ranking U.N. official, gave separate interviews to reporters at the Associated Press and New York Times at their offices and toured a historic Jewish synagogue led by a rabbi friendly to the church.

He began the day at the AP’s offices on Liberty Street at 8 a.m., when the morning sunshine struggled to do more than peek down the city’s skyscraper canyons and steam billowed upward from food stands and pipes.

Asked a specific question, President Ballard provided the AP’s new, expanded global religion team with insight about why the church will end its century-long relationship with the Boy Scouts of America at the end of the year.

“The reality there is we didn’t really leave them; they kind of left us,” he said, according to a story published by the AP. “The direction they were going was not consistent to what we feel our youth need to have...to survive in the world that lies ahead for them.”

The interview covered a broad range of topics, according to President Ballard and the AP story, from civility and political discord, to church growth and youth retention to the

recent massacre of nine women and children in Mexico and the church's support for medical marijuana.

“We think this ought to be managed under the medical profession and understand the real need and the real purpose for administering marijuana medically,” he said, “but recreational marijuana, we think has consequences because addiction, one way or another, starts very subtle sometimes.”

With a chilly breeze flapping the national flags of member-states, President Ballard next visited the U.N. on the shore of the East River. He met with His Excellency Jerobeam Shaanika, a Nambian diplomat now serving as the deputy chef de cabinet to the president of the U.N. General Assembly.

“He informed us of what the church is doing,” said Shaanika, who previously served as Namibia's ambassador to Cuba. “I informed him of the priorities of the president of the General Assembly for this session, which are zero hunger, poverty eradication, quality education and climate change. We saw an intersection of those priorities and the church's activities, and we discussed ways in which we can cooperate together.”

Shaanika said one key intersection was the church's humanitarian aid. He was impressed the church asks its members to fast one Sunday a month and donate the money saved.

“That money goes to people on the ground in need,” Shaanika said.

The meeting was held in a 15th floor conference room in the U.N. Secretariat Building. President Ballard also toured the U.N. General Assembly building, including the General Assembly Hall.

Afterward, he shared his perspective on his first visit to United Nations.

“This is an important place for people of all nations, all cultures, to gather and try to resolve worldwide problems in the lives of our Heavenly Father's children,” he said, wearing a 17-color pin on the lapel of his dark, pinstriped suit. The pin represented the U.N.'s 17 sustainable development goals.

President Ballard then traveled to New York Times offices and met with faith and politics reporter [Elisabeth Dias](#).

“She wanted to know in some detail what we’re facing, what some of our major concerns are,” he said. “We’ve been able to explain without hesitation our message of the Restoration — Joseph Smith — Book of Mormon.

He said meeting with news outlets is important to the church’s work.

“If we’re going to bring the church out of darkness into the light of the world, we have to do that via the media because they’re the ones that are determining, basically, what people say or what they believe. Hopefully, we’ve been clear enough in what we’ve said that they won’t misrepresent us in what we’ve said. There’s always going to be some risk when you are willing to put yourself in front of the press, but I think our experiences so far today have been very positive,” he said.

President Ballard said the visit was about building bridges.

“That’s what apostles do. We’re supposed to declare that Jesus is the Christ and through him are the answers to life’s questions, and the real joy and peace that people can find inwardly has to come from the blessings of our Heavenly Father and His son.”

After visiting the Times, President Ballard and Elder Jack N. Gerard, a General Authority Seventy and executive director of Church Communication, toured the Spanish & Portuguese Synagogue as guests of Rabbi Meir Soloveichik. Rabbi Soloveichik will speak at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah, on Tuesday at 1 p.m. in the Gordon B. Hinckley Visitors Center. The event is hosted by BYU’s International Center for Law and Religion Studies.

The rabbi told President Ballard the synagogue’s congregation is America’s oldest. The congregation’s roots run back to 1492, when Spain expelled Jews, many of whom fled to Portugal, which soon forcibly converted them to Catholicism. Some resettled in Amsterdam, then joined Dutch settlers in Brazil. When Brazil expelled them, a French ship saved them from pirates and took them to New Amsterdam, what now is New York City, in 1654. When one of Rabbi Soloveichik’s predecessors attended George Washington’s inauguration, it was the first time a Jewish leader had participated in the installation of a head of state since Jerusalem.

“At the heart of our story is religious freedom and the gift of America,” he said.

The synagogue, which is located near a Central Park filled with the sweet smell of fallen leaves, recently joined with a local congregation of Latter-day Saints on a pack-a-thon, creating packages for the needy.

Rabbi Soloveichick showed President Ballard the synagogue's Torah scrolls. He had President Ballard hold two adornments for the scrolls, replicas of the Liberty Bell, which is engraved with words from Leviticus: "Proclaim liberty throughout the land unto all the inhabitants thereof."

Friday night, President Ballard hosted a dinner for two dozen ambassadors at a restaurant near Rockefeller Center.