

Elder Marlin K. Jensen



FOREWORD

READING the collection of symposium papers that make up the chapters of this book about the organizational and administrative history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was an exhilarating exercise for me. Part of the reason for this, I believe, is the “of the people” nature of the restored Church, a religious organization built largely upon a lay ministry. The Lord declares in the Book of Mormon, “I am able to do mine own work” (2 Nephi 27:21). How grateful we should be, however, that He chooses not to. Out of love and a desire that all of God’s children have opportunity to achieve their divine potential, Christ has organized His Church so “that every man might speak in the name of God the Lord” (D&C 1:20). This unique organizational feature—allowing for individual participation in Church affairs at many levels and at all ages—effectively makes His Church our Church, and His work our work. It also makes His Church’s organizational and administrative history our history. Ownership works wonders in many contexts.

It appears that the business of creating organizational and administrative structure in the Lord’s work began at least as early as the time of Moses (see Exodus 18:15–26; Deuteronomy 1:9–16). Later, in

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New Testament times, the Apostle Paul described a higher level of Church organization when he wrote to the Corinthians: “God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues” (1 Corinthians 12:28). This organization, established by God to deliver saving ordinances and covenants and to promote order, service, learning, and the personal development of Church members, was not viewed as temporary or transitory in nature. As Paul explained to the Ephesians, God’s designated polity was “for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: till we all come in the unity of faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:12–13).

Although Joseph Smith was acquainted with the biblical record of Christ’s Church, he and subsequent prophets in this dispensation required contemporary revelation to know how to proceed with the organization of the restored Church. In 1884, President John Taylor described the early prophets’ revelatory experience: “We have embraced the Gospel of the Son of God, and God has taught us how to organize His Church. Had He not taught us we should not have known anything about its organization. Joseph Smith knew nothing about it; Brigham Young knew nothing about it; I could not have known anything about it, nor any of the Twelve, nor any man living on earth, until God introduced it and taught us in all these things.”¹

Happily, the revelation confirming the formal commencement of the restored Church on April 6, 1830, and designating Joseph Smith as the first Church officer also included what might be termed an administrative order that “there shall be a record kept among you” (D&C 21:1). For the past 180 years, a goodly portion of that record has dealt with the rise and progress of the restored Church, including the maturation of its organizational and administrative dimensions. These abundant historical sources confirm that the development of the Church’s organizational and administrative structure was not an event but a process that continues to the present day. The Lord deals in matters of Church government, as He does in all other

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categories of truth and knowledge, by giving us “line upon line, precept upon precept” (D&C 98:12). Moreover, He provides refinements and innovations in Church organization and administration according to the needs and circumstances of the times.

Some of these inspired developments in the restored Church are chronicled by the skilled historians who have contributed the chapters in this book. For instance, we read of how the authority of the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles was defined and how the Lord guided the Church through the succession crisis after Joseph Smith’s death. We learn details about the initial founding of the Primary and Young Women organizations and are informed of later inspired changes that were made in both the Young Men and Young Women organizations. We are acquainted with adjustments in the way in which missions have been administered, the transformation of the Church Educational System in the first third of the twentieth century, the evolving role of the Seventy, the significance of the correlation program, and much more. We also come to know more intimately some of the key men and women, such as N. Eldon Tanner and Ardeth Greene Kapp, who have exerted lasting influence on Church organization and programs.

President Harold B. Lee, who had unique gifts of administration, provided insight into the evolving nature of Church organization:

When asked for reasons for our growth, we have said, “We believe in the same organization that existed in the primitive church, founded on apostles and prophets, with Jesus Christ as the chief cornerstone.” Then we have added one more dimension. While the principles of the gospel are divine and do not change, the methods in dealing with the problems change to meet the circumstances, and so our methods have had to be flexible. We have adopted a welfare program. We have adopted a family home evening program. We have intensified the work of our priesthood in home teaching in a more direct way to help the fathers.

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We have . . . said to [members], “We want to find out what you need. It is still the same gospel, but we are endeavoring to reach those for whom we have had no adequate programs. Man wasn’t made for the Church, to paraphrase what the Master said, but the Church was made for man.”

And so we have become flexible in adapting our methods in order to take care of the needs of our people, wherever they are. But we have built on a foundation laid down by the prophets, and we have not deviated from the principles and teachings of the gospel of Jesus Christ.²

As President Lee observed, the Church has been built on a foundation laid down by the prophets. There is great security in this firm foundation, but there is also, as President Lee’s words and the chapters in this book confirm, a “living” dimension to the Church’s organization and administration. God’s hand is always outstretched, His Spirit is ever ready, apostles and prophets continue to speak, and the destiny of His Church and people in these changing and often calamitous times is therefore secure. With all the Saints of this dispensation, we can gratefully pray, “Wherefore, may the kingdom of God go forth, that the kingdom of heaven may come” (D&C 65:6).

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NOTES

1. John Taylor, in *Journal of Discourses* (London: Latter-day Saints’ Book Depot, 1884), 25:265.
2. Harold B. Lee, *Ye Are the Light of the World: Selected Sermons and Writings of President Harold B. Lee* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1974), 348–49.