



“A Godsend for the Salvation of Modern Israel”:

The Creation of the Seminary Program

One constant throughout the history of the Restoration is the Lord’s concern for the spiritual welfare of the younger members of the Church. Just as in our day, the rapid pace of societal change and moral decay at the start of the twentieth century alarmed the leaders of the Church. In the midst of these challenges, President Joseph F. Smith and the other leaders of his era found new and innovative ways to provide for the spiritual welfare of the youth of the Church, developing the methods which are the foundation of the worldwide Church Educational System (CES) of our day. Faced with the task of helping young Latter-day Saints gain testimonies of their own, Church leaders during the Joseph F. Smith era found new ways to teach the gospel. Just as important, these innovations helped gospel study remain a part of the education of the youth without infringing on the boundaries of church and state.

Joseph F. Smith and Education

Education was at the heart of Joseph F. Smith’s concerns over the future of the Church. In 1914 he wrote, “There are at least three dangers that threaten the

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Church within, and the authorities need to awaken to the fact that the people should be warned unceasingly against them. As I see these, they are the flattery of prominent men of the world, *false educational ideals*, and sexual impurity.”¹ Specifying the false educational ideals he was concerned with, President Smith continued, “Incorrect educational ideals are implanted in the hearts of our young people, often at home, and nearly always abroad. We have hundreds of young men, and young women, too, for that matter, who go abroad to receive their higher education, who partake to a great extent of the teachings of the world in these institutions.”² Continuing, President Smith made it clear that his concerns rested not in learning itself, but in the philosophies which could undermine a person’s faith in God. He worried that many of the Church’s youth who embarked into higher education returned “filled with the so-called ‘higher criticism’ which not only tends to disbelief in the inspiration of the Holy Scriptures, but disbelief in God, and in the saving mission and divinity of Jesus Christ our Lord, upon which Christianity and the faith of the Latter-day Saints are founded.”³

President Smith’s warnings still resonate in our time, and they only become more meaningful when the historical circumstances of his presidency are examined. First, he acknowledged that many of the dangerous educational ideals he spoke of were creeping in at home but also came from students going abroad to receive training. During his presidency, Mormonism as a religion continued to move away from the relative isolation enjoyed in the West and closer toward the American mainstream. Many young Latter-day Saints left the Mormon strongholds of the West to gain training in the eastern United States.⁴ When they returned, new ideas relating to higher biblical criticism and the scriptures came with them and stirred controversy among the Saints. One of the most pointed illustrations of these circumstances came at Brigham Young University in 1911, when several professors were dismissed for the teaching of evolution and higher biblical criticism.⁵ During Joseph F. Smith’s tenure, the First Presidency issued doctrinal statements clarifying Church positions on the origin of man, the relationship of the Father and the Son, and a number of other critical doctrines. All of these moves were devoted to combating the false educational ideals filtering in among the Saints.

The first effort to organize a unified system of education throughout the Church began in the 1870s, resulting in a loose confederation of Church-sponsored high schools spread through the Intermountain West. At these schools, formally referred to as “academies,” Latter-day Saint youth received instruction in a wide

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range of subjects, including religion. Church academies functioned with varying degrees of success throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century, but by the time Joseph F. Smith became President, some problems within the academy system began to become more evident.⁶

One of the most serious concerns with the academy system was the geographical limitations of the Church schools. During Joseph F. Smith's term as President, the increasing size of the Church membership, combined with the spreading of Church members into areas outside the Intermountain West, made it increasingly difficult for the Church to provide education to all of the youth of the Church. Still recovering from the antipolygamy crusades of the late 1800s, the Church lacked the financial resources to provide enough schools for all of its members. In addition, members began to gravitate towards the increasing number of public schools providing free education. As more LDS students moved toward the state-sponsored schools, Church leaders began to fear for the spiritual well-being of their youth. At Church-sponsored academies, students could be taught the scriptures alongside secular subjects, but in the public schools, no provision for spiritual education existed. As the number of state-sponsored schools grew in Utah, enrollments at the Church academies leveled off and then began to decline. By 1911, public school enrollment in Utah passed the academies, and it kept on growing. The pressures of supporting dual systems of education, combined with the limited resources of the Church, all but ensured the rise of public schools as the main vehicle for education in areas where Church members lived. All of these developments begged the question, Was there a way to provide a daily spiritual education for students attending public schools?

The answer to the dilemma lay in a different approach towards education. The Church could not duplicate what the public schools offered on the same scale, but it was possible for the Church to *supplement* the education of its youth with spiritual training. Instead of serving as the primary provider of education and reaching only a few students, state-sponsored educational systems could provide secular education to the youth of the Church, while the Church could work in concert to do what it did best—namely, teach the spiritual truths of the gospel. This philosophy, which came to dominate the educational plan of the Church, was woven with many different historical threads, each eventually coming together to create the seminary program. The seminary model was flexible enough to allow the Church to provide religious instruction in a wide variety of settings. These practices became the

foundation for a system adaptive enough to meet the needs of Church membership as Mormonism moved outside of the American West and on to a global stage. This new system grew gradually out of earlier efforts, most importantly what was known as the Religion Class program.

Forerunner of the Seminaries: The Religion Class Program

The first seminary opened in 1912, but the shift toward supplementary religious education began over two decades earlier. The Church's first experiment with supplementary religious education began in 1890, when the Church Board of Education established the Religion Class program at the suggestion of Elder Anthon H. Lund.⁷ President Smith did not have direct responsibility for the Religion Classes during the first eleven years of the program's existence, but his position in the First Presidency kept him apprised of the program's growth, development, and struggles during this period. During the early years of President Smith's administration, the Religion Class program raised a number of important questions about the nature of Church auxiliaries and Church education. These issues would ultimately play an important role in organizing the seminary program, making the Religion Classes a trial run for the seminary program.

The founding of the Religion Class program came in response to the various challenges plaguing Mormonism during the late 1800s. With the end of Reconstruction in the mid-1870s, the federal government began to focus significant attention on what the nation viewed to be the theocratic government of Utah and Mormonism's peculiar institution of polygamy. The government used a variety of measures aimed at quelling polygamy and eliminating Mormonism's less democratic features, such as its hierarchical government and the practice of block voting.

In an effort to respond to the "Mormon Question," the government attempted to utilize the territory's schools to curb the religious commitment of Latter-day Saint youth. Americans had long understood and used the power of education to assimilate immigrants and other social, religious, and racial outsiders into American democracy.⁸ Utah's public schools became an important part of the government's effort to undermine Mormonism. In 1890, Jacob S. Boseman, the federal commissioner of schools in Utah, reported to the secretary of interior that Mormon leaders were "unfriendly to the district schools" and that the development of a public school system would "work in Utah a wonderful

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change in a very few years."⁹ Such attitudes culminated in the passage of the territory's Free Schools Act on February 18, 1890. The law provided for the establishment of tax-supported schools throughout Utah and mandated school attendance for children who were not otherwise enrolled in private schools. The act also expressly forbid the teaching of any "atheistic, infidel, sectarian, or denominational doctrine" in the territory's schools.¹⁰

While the wording of the law seems innocuous to readers today, Church officials at the time viewed the Free Schools Act as a direct affront to the Church and their children. The First Presidency worried that the new law would create a system of "Godless education"¹¹ that would cause many Mormon youth to "lose all liking for religious principles and become alienated in their feelings toward the gospel."¹² Church superintendent of education Karl G. Maeser worried that the territory's educational laws would enable the spread of agnosticism, "the common enemy of all religion."¹³

Noting the significant problems posed by the Free Schools Act, the Church Board of Education began discussing measures to protect the faith of the rising generations from the dangers posed by free schools. Maeser and others suggested that the Church establish primary schools to complement its growing number of secondary academies. The economic conditions of the Church during the 1890s, however, rendered Maeser's proposal entirely unfeasible and compelled Church officials to consider establishing programs that would supplement rather than replace the public schools.¹⁴ At the urging of President George Q. Cannon, Elder Anthon H. Lund proposed an alternative to Maeser's plan for primary schools. Elder Lund suggested that the Board establish a series of classes where Mormon children could receive a half hour of religious instruction after school each day. For the sake of convenience, wherever possible, Elder Lund advised leaders to hold classes in the schoolhouses, led by the local teachers.¹⁵

Although Elder Lund's idea showed promise, the members of the Board of Education expressed a number of reservations about the program. First, they questioned the propriety of using the schoolhouses and territorial teachers for a religious education program. Second, they feared that the program would violate the separation of church and state by introducing sectarian doctrine into the schools, thus creating additional problems with the government. Finally, some board members worried that the parents of the youth would resist the program because of the time it would keep their children away from their homes and their assigned chores.

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Even as Elder Lund acknowledged each of these potential problems, however, he continued to argue for the program's importance, maintaining, "We can not afford to lose our childrens [*sic*] souls."¹⁶ Time would ultimately validate each of these initial concerns about the Religion Class program. However, each of these questions and the associated challenges they created proved instrumental in providing the Church with a template from which the more efficient seminary program was finally created.

Despite their initial concerns, the members of the Church Board of Education voted to establish the Religion Class program on October 8, 1890, providing for "daily theological classes in those settlements where church schools could not be established."¹⁷ The board appointed Karl G. Maeser to serve as superintendent of the program and charged him with developing an appropriate curriculum for the classes. Although he initially favored building additional private schools, Maeser became an instant convert to supplementary religious education. He later wrote that supplementary religious education, with its capacity to provide programs for each denomination, was the only answer to the "great defect in [the] public school system."¹⁸ After prayer and significant thought, Maeser developed a plan and curriculum for the classes. Elder Lund described Maeser's plan in the April 1916 general conference:

The classes are opened by singing, led by the teacher or by one of the children, as he or she may direct. . . . After the children have sung a hymn, their hearts are attuned for the second step, which is prayer. Here one of the boys or girls will volunteer to offer the prayer . . . and the boy or girl chosen to lead will utter a short sentence or a short phrase, which all repeat in concert, and then the next sentence will be given and repeated, and so on until the prayer is ended. . . . The third step is to learn a memory gem or good thought. . . . Then comes the fourth step, which is the real lesson, and takes the longest time. . . . The fifth step is testimony bearing. . . . The sixth step is singing and prayer, conducted as were the opening exercises.¹⁹

Negotiating Church and State Problems

Although the Religion Class program was well intentioned and experienced varying measures of success throughout the 1890s, it suffered from a number of organizational flaws. These problems challenged both the program's legal standing and

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its relationship with the other auxiliaries and organizations of the Church. These deficiencies became a source of increasing discussion during President Smith's tenure as Church President and led to a number of important policy changes eventually affecting the whole population of the Church.²⁰

As anticipated, the Religion Class program raised significant questions about the nature of religious education in the public schools and the relationship of the Church to the state. Wards throughout Utah frequently held Religion Classes in public school buildings. Utah laws permitted school buildings to be used "for any purpose which [would] not interfere with the seating or other furniture or property,"²¹ providing that rent was paid for the use of the building. Under these terms, Church officials felt they had "a perfect right to ask for the use of these buildings" for Religion Class purposes.²² Further, the Church leaders declared that they were "perfectly willing for the Catholics, Presbyterians, or any other religious denomination" to also use the buildings for religious purposes. Such statements, however, did little to pacify the members of Utah's non-Mormon community, which argued that the practice violated the separation of church and state.²³

During the first five years of the twentieth century, the use of school buildings for religion classes continued to cause contention in Utah. The practice was even discussed in the US Senate during the Reed Smoot senate confirmation hearings, making it a part of the larger national issues and questions about Mormonism.²⁴ The Smoot hearings uncovered the fact that Religion Classes made extensive use of school buildings throughout Utah with the classes frequently being taught by "the regularly employed teacher of the school." State Superintendent of Public Instruction A. C. Nelson suggested that the practice likely led "a large percentage of the children" to view the Religion Classes as a part of their school activities, regardless of the amount of time separating the classes from the regular school day. He accordingly deemed these practices a "violation of the spirit of the constitution and the statutes of the State of Utah."²⁵

As a result of these discussions, General Authorities began to question the propriety of continuing to use public school buildings to house Religion Classes. In 1904, B. H. Roberts expressed his concerns that the classes were "needlessly irritating people not of our faith by the use of public school buildings for imparting religious instruction" and urged the Brethren to consider alternate locations for the classes. According to one report, Elder Roberts's opinion reflected "the sentiments of most of the brethren," signaling an important shift in Church relations

with the state and federal governments.²⁶ Following the series of questions about the program during the Smoot hearings, President Smith and the First Presidency issued a circular advising ward and stake leaders to remove Religion Classes “from the public school buildings.” While the First Presidency maintained that the classes had not violated the separation of church and state and had done nothing to endanger the public schools, they noted a desire “to be in harmony with the statutes of our state and nation,” and to maintain cordial relationships with citizens of other faiths.²⁷ Although some wards and stakes apparently ignored this counsel, leading to a few complaints, the controversy over public buildings did not generate as much animosity or as many problems for the Church after 1905 as it had during the early years of the Religion Class program.²⁸

Church Relationships and the Need for a Better System

While church and state questions plagued the Religion Class program throughout much of its history, the most significant complaints about the program ironically came from within the Church rather than from outside of it. Almost from its inception, several ward and stake officials throughout the Church questioned the necessity of the Religion Class program. Commenting on this rocky beginning, Karl G. Maeser stated that during the early years of the program, “Religion Classes were either not started at all, or ceased after a feeble existence.” To remedy this problem, Maeser publicized and praised the program in wards and stakes from 1891 until his death in 1901. He also wrote circulars pleading with stake presidents throughout the Church for their “earnest co-operation in the establishment of these classes.”²⁹ Further, in 1900 the Church organized a presidency and board to oversee the Religion Class program.³⁰ These efforts to bolster the classes yielded a modest amount of success, but participation in the Religion Classes fluctuated throughout the program’s history. Extant documents reveal high enrollment statistics for the program during many years but also demonstrate frequent discrepancies with regard to attendance. At its height in 1919, attendance was roughly 70 percent of enrollment, while attendance in earlier years was often little more than 50 percent of the program’s enrollment.

Several complaints about the program came from stake presidents and bishops who noted the program’s tendency to overlap with and duplicate the duties and responsibilities of the other auxiliaries. Its similarities with the other organizations caused some local leaders to see it as “a superfluous burden” and a “fifth wheel”

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The Salt Lake Twenty-Ninth Ward religion class, 1905. Courtesy of Church History Library.

rather than a critical component of the Church's auxiliary system.³¹ This problem is most visible when examining the program's complicated relationship with the Primary Association. Primary leaders believed that the "original purpose for organizing the Religion Class was to gather boys and girls between the ages of twelve and fourteen who would not attend Primary," rather than the elementary-aged children that the Religion Classes most frequently served. Accordingly, the two organizations quickly found themselves competing with each other for the patronage of children as well as for the services of the same capable teachers to instruct them.³²

In an effort to resolve these problems, the First Presidency began encouraging the auxiliaries to correlate their efforts to avoid unnecessary overlap and develop greater cooperation with the priesthood quorums.³³ In 1906, President Smith authorized the organization of a committee with representatives from each of the auxiliaries, except the Relief Society, to investigate the possibility of a "correlation and adjustment of the work pertaining to the several auxiliary organizations of the Church," establishing the beginning of a movement which would eventually lead to the Church's correlation program.³⁴ Among the committee's suggestions was that the Primary Association and the Religion Class program be combined into "one organization whose field shall be the teaching of manners, morals, and religion." Additionally, the committee suggested that the Church reinforce the

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importance of the home as the place that was “most valuable for the instruction of the youth in religion, morals, polite deportment, and patriotism.”³⁵ This suggestion countered the occasional criticisms of parents that the Church auxiliaries had kept children away from their homes too frequently, making it difficult for parents to adequately teach the gospel to their children. Among the foremost critics of this problem was Granite Stake President Frank Y. Taylor, who in 1909 initiated the family home evening program to give parents more time to teach the gospel to their children at home.³⁶

While no immediate actions were taken to implement this original correlation committee’s suggestions, many of the ideas were later implemented. Despite its many deficiencies, however, the Religion Class program had helped to change the entire trajectory of Mormonism’s educational programs. Troubled though it had been, the Religion Class program had outlined many of the key issues that any successful supplementary religious education program would have to deal with in order to succeed. In this sense, the Religion Class program became a necessary precursor and guide for the more successful seminary and institute programs established in later years.

The Creation of the Seminary Program

The ups and downs of the Religion Class program made it clear that a more efficient system was needed to meet the needs of the Church. The matter became more urgent as the enrollment in Church academies continued to decline steeply. In 1910 the number of high school students enrolled in public schools in Utah surpassed the academies for the first time and kept on climbing.³⁷ In this environment came the creation of the first released-time seminary program. Though similar in many ways to the Religion Class program, the seminaries emerged in a much different way. The Religion Classes began as a Churchwide initiative, created at the highest levels of Church government and implemented simultaneously in all the wards and branches of the Church. Seminary, on the other hand, began as a grassroots program, started as an experiment by one stake and then gradually introduced to the rest of the Church. Religion classes began in the highest councils of the Church government, while seminary was inspired by a meeting of the most basic unit of the Church, a single family.

The seminary program came about as the efforts of many different people, but the individual perhaps most responsible for its creation was Joseph F. Merrill.

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In many ways, Merrill fit the mold spoken of by President Smith as a young man who went abroad to receive his education and was exposed to the teachings of the world. The son of Apostle Marriner W. Merrill, Joseph Merrill left Utah as a young man to attend school in the eastern United States, first at the University of Michigan, and later at Johns Hopkins University and the University of Chicago. Navigating the often treacherous waters of faith and academia, Merrill was aware of the concerns other Church members might hold over his pursuit of higher education. He wrote his fiancée back in Utah about the concerned letters he received from his mother, "Ever since I first left for Ann Arbor there have been busy tongues always telling her that I would deny the faith—for college education in the east always 'ruins our boys.'"³⁸

Merrill's experiences in the East deeply affected his religious development. Thrust into a sea of secularism, he often longed for the fellowship of other Latter-day Saints or just a simple place to be taught the tenets of the gospel. He later reflected, "I usually attended one non-Mormon church service, sometimes two services, every Sunday. For a considerable number of years I was out of intimate contact with my own Church so I went to all the churches in the communities where I lived . . . I listened to many eloquent sermons, but never once did I hear the preacher use the word 'know' with the meaning we give it in our testimony bearing."³⁹

When Merrill returned to Utah, he married, started a family of his own, and began teaching at the University of Utah. In 1911 he was called as a member of the Granite Stake presidency and given responsibility over the education of the youth in the stake. Many of the younger members of the Granite Stake were attending public schools without access to the religious instruction offered at the Church academies. Recognizing this, Merrill began to search for some way to allow them to receive religious training. The initial inspiration for the seminary program struck Merrill during a family home evening where his wife, Laura, acted as the teacher.⁴⁰ During the family meeting, Merrill was enraptured by his wife's ability to tell stories from the Bible and Book of Mormon to his own children. He later remarked, "Her list of these stories was so long that her husband often marveled at their number, and frequently sat as spellbound as were the children as she skillfully related them, preparatory to the children's going to bed."⁴¹ When Merrill asked his wife where she had learned these stories, she replied they had come from James E. Talmage's Bible class when she was a student at the Salt Lake

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Joseph and Annie Merrill family, 1914. Courtesy of Annie Whitton.

Stake Academy. Merrill concluded, “If Bible study in school could thus make one girl an effective religious teacher of her children at home, it could do the same for other girls.”⁴² Inspired by his wife’s example, Merrill became possessed by the idea of bringing the same kind of opportunity his wife had experienced at the Church academy to the students in his stake attending public schools.

Influenced by religious seminaries he had seen in Chicago during his education,⁴³ Merrill worked out a plan to teach religion courses to students at Granite High School who would be released from their studies for one period a day. The teaching would take place in a building constructed by the stake adjacent to the high school. Merrill’s plan included some aspects of the earlier Religion Class program while improving on it in other ways. The new plan took advantage of the fact that the students were already gathered together at the high school during the day, and made religion course work a part of their regular studies. Holding the classes in a completely separate building from the high school solved many of the tricky issues of church and state which had troubled the Religion Class program. In the months leading up to the 1912–13 school year Merrill worked enthusiastically on the new program, meeting with the Granite Stake presidency, the Church Board of Education, the Granite School

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District Board, and even the Utah State Board of Education to ensure the legality and acceptance of the new venture.⁴⁴

The First Seminary Teacher

With the support of the school administration, the next task facing Joseph Merrill was the selection of the right teacher for the venture. In a letter outlining the qualities he wanted for the position, he wrote: May I suggest it is the desire of the presidency of the stake to have a strong young man who is properly qualified to do the work in a most satisfactory manner. By young we do not necessarily mean a teacher who is young in years, but a man who is young in his feelings, who loves young people, who delights in their company, who can command their respect and admiration and exercise a great influence over them. . . . We want a man who is a thorough student, one who will not teach in a perfunctory way, but who will enliven his instructions by a strong, winning personality and give evidence of a thorough understanding of and scholarship in the things he teaches. . . . A teacher is wanted who is a leader and who will be universally regarded as the inferior of no teacher in the high school.⁴⁵

The man ultimately selected for the task was Thomas J. Yates, a member of the Granite Stake high council.⁴⁶ He held no specific expertise in religion, nor was he a career educator. His only experience in teaching had come twenty years earlier during a one-year stint at the Church academies in Millard County, Utah. A graduate of Cornell University, at the time of his call Brother Yates was working as an engineer on the construction of the nearby Murray power plant. Yates did not fit the traditional mold of a teacher, but he did excel as a disciple. He served faithfully on the stake high council and in a number of important missionary assignments. Frank Taylor, the president of the Granite Stake, once commented, "Brother Yates always reminds me of Joseph who was sold into Egypt; he is a tower of purity and strength."⁴⁷

With the right teacher selected, Brother Merrill and Brother Yates set about working out the details of the new venture. They made the vital decision to center the class around the scriptures, with two courses for credit—a class on the Old Testament and another on the New Testament—and a third course, offered without credit, combining the study of the Book of Mormon and Church history.⁴⁸ Brother Yates met with the faculty of Granite High School several times to secure full cooperation. During the same time,

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Granite Seminary. Courtesy of Church History Library.

President Frank Y. Taylor secured a \$2,500 loan from Zion's Savings Bank for the construction of a building near the high school. Construction on the first seminary building began just a few weeks before school started. The finished structure consisted of three rooms: an office, a cloak room, and a classroom. The classroom itself had a blackboard, armrest seats, and a furnace for heat. There were no lights, and the only textbooks were the Bible and the Book of Mormon. In fact, the seminary's entire library consisted of a Bible dictionary belonging to Brother Yates. Students made their own maps of the Holy Land, North America, Mesopotamia, and Arabia.⁴⁹

The first class in the fall of 1912 consisted of about seventy young men and women.⁵⁰ Many students were unable to take seminary the first year because the building wasn't finished until three weeks into the school year.⁵¹ For the entire first year, Thomas Yates spent the morning working at the Murray power plant, then he rode his horse to the seminary to teach during the last two periods of the day.⁵² In a 1950 interview he described how the class operated that first year: "Students were asked to prepare a whole chapter in the Bible and then report to the class. Then the class would discuss it. No textbooks were used. The students

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did not have any form of recreation, there were no parties, no dances, no class affairs or anything in recreation to deviate from the regular pattern of things."⁵³

Thomas Yates taught for only one year. President Taylor asked him to return for the second year, but the strain of traveling back and forth from the Murray power plant proved to be too much, and he declined. As his replacement, Brother Yates recommended Guy C. Wilson, a professional educator who had recently moved to Salt Lake City after completing a year of studies at Columbia University. Wilson's assignment to the Granite Seminary demonstrated the deep commitment of Church leaders to the fledgling program. He was the former head of the Church academy in Colonia Juárez.⁵⁴ A gifted teacher, Wilson was informed by Church leaders after his arrival from Columbia that he could "take [his] choice" of any of the Church schools, but he chose the new seminary in the Granite Stake.⁵⁵ During his tenure Wilson began urging bishops and stake presidents to let his students speak to their congregations about the virtues of the seminary program. At the same time, he had a profound effect on his students, even baptizing several non-members attending the seminary classes.⁵⁶

Brother Wilson later commented that he generally felt that the lack of funding and facilities had prevented Brother Yates from giving the work a longer trial.⁵⁷ Despite the difficulties, the new venture had already begun to bless the lives of the students in ways still felt in our day. Nearly a century later, President Henry B. Eyring of the First Presidency commented on the impact of the first class at Granite Seminary. Feeling overwhelmed as the newly appointed deputy commissioner of the Church Educational System, President Eyring recalled:

My assignment to help such a vast number of teachers seemed overwhelming until someone handed me a small roll book. It was for the first class of seminary taught in the Church. It was for the school year 1912–13. . . .

In that roll book was the name of Mildred Bennion. She was 16 years old that year. Thirty-one years later she would become my mother. She was the daughter of a man we would today call "less active." Her mother was left a widow the fall of the year after that first seminary class began. She raised and supported my mother and five other children alone on a small farm. Somehow that one seminary teacher cared enough about her and prayed fervently enough over that young girl that the Spirit put the gospel down into her heart.

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That one teacher blessed tens of thousands because he taught just one girl in a crowd of 70.⁵⁸

“No Better Illustration of Prophetic Preparation”

Granite remained the only seminary in the Church until 1915, when the Box Elder Seminary in Brigham City, Utah, opened with Abel S. Rich as the teacher.⁵⁹ Throughout the remainder of the decade the seminary system began to pick up momentum, with more and more seminaries being established throughout the Church.⁶⁰ The basic pattern started in the Granite Stake was repeated in different areas throughout the Church.⁶¹ By the end of Joseph F. Smith’s presidency, twelve more seminaries had been established at different locations throughout the Church.⁶² In 1920 the Church Board of Education proposed the closure or transfer to state control of nearly all the remaining Church academies and called for a major expansion of the seminary program to meet the needs of the youth in the Church.⁶³ In the years after the organization of the academy system, Church members grew more comfortable with public education, and now seminary accorded students a chance to study the scriptures alongside the secular subjects taught in the high schools. With the closure of most of the academies, the Church focused its efforts on the kind of education only the Church could provide—religious training. With the majority of the academies closing, the number of seminaries grew at an explosive rate during the 1920s. The number of operating seminaries nearly quadrupled from twenty to eighty-one by the end of the decade.⁶⁴

As the seminary program became the preferred model used by the Church, it even grew to overshadow and replace its forerunner, the Religion Classes. Seminary used almost the same curriculum as the Religion Class program, but with superior organization. These two sister programs operated in conjunction, sharing resources, teachers, and methodology.⁶⁵ Seminaries and Religion Classes operated side by side until 1929, when after a turbulent forty-year history, the Religion Class program was combined with the Primary Association, bringing an end to the Church’s first program of supplementary religious education.⁶⁶ Even though the Religion Class program ended, its methodology continued through the seminaries. As Church leaders looked for ways to adapt the seminary program to areas where smaller numbers of Latter-day Saints lived, the methods used in the Religion Classes received new life. Early-morning seminary programs fused

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the positive aspects of released-time seminary and the old religion classes, operating outside the regular school day, and utilizing a wide number of buildings, ranging from Church meetinghouses to the homes of local members.⁶⁷

The seminary program continued to expand to meet the growth of the Church. Church leaders adapted seminary methods to bring religious education to the collegiate level. The first Institute of Religion opened in Moscow, Idaho, in 1928.⁶⁸ When the Salt Lake School District refused to allow released-time seminary, early-morning seminary classes began in the area during the 1920s. Harold B. Lee and a young returned missionary named Gordon B. Hinckley both served for a time as teachers in these early-morning programs.⁶⁹ In 1950, the first early-morning seminary classes outside of Utah began in Los Angeles, designed as an effort to bring religious education to areas with smaller and more scattered populations of Latter-day Saint youth. During the 1960s further efforts brought seminary to the global membership of the Church through the utilization of home study seminary.⁷⁰

Today over 700,000 students are enrolled in seminary and institute programs, taught by a dedicated force of nearly 50,000 full-time and volunteer teachers. Speaking on the critical role these programs have played in the last century of the Church, President Boyd K. Packer, a veteran seminary teacher, commented:

The seminaries were an outgrowth of the old religion classes, and the institutes of religion were an outgrowth of the seminaries and were originally called college seminaries. In the history of the Church there is no better illustration of the prophetic preparation of this people than the beginnings of the seminary institute program. These programs were started when they were nice but not critically needed. They were granted a season to flourish and to grow into a bulwark for the Church. They now become a godsend for the salvation of modern Israel in a most challenging hour.⁷¹

With the benefit of over a century of hindsight, the inspiration of the leaders of the Church during Joseph F. Smith's era is clear. Hundreds of thousands of youth throughout the Church are blessed in our time because of the innovations made during this period. Through the religion classes and other programs, the modern seminaries and institutes trace their pedigree back to Karl Maeser, Anthon Lund, and the earliest educational pioneers of Mormonism. The revelations which sparked the programs represent the best of the highest and the lowest levels of Church government. From ideas received in the meetings of Joseph F.

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Smith and his fellow leaders, combined with spiritual whisperings given in the simple meetings of Joseph F. Merrill's family, all came together to show the way to bring the knowledge of the gospel to the youth of the Church.

Notes

1. Joseph F. Smith, "Three Threatening Dangers," *Improvement Era*, March 1914, 476–77; emphasis added.
2. Smith, "Three Threatening Dangers," 477.
3. Smith, "Three Threatening Dangers," 477.
4. See Thomas Wendell Simpson, "Mormons Study 'Abroad': Latter-day Saints in American Higher Education, 1870–1940" (PhD diss., University of Virginia, August 2005).
5. See Gary James Bergera, "The 1911 Evolution Controversy at Brigham Young University," in *The Search for Harmony*, ed. Gene A. Sessions and Craig J. Oberg (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1993).
6. For an excellent study on the Church academies, see Scott C. Esplin, "Education in Transition: Church and State Relationships in Utah Education, 1888–1933" (PhD diss., Brigham Young University, 2006).
7. The standard history of the Religion Class program is D. Michael Quinn, "Utah's Educational Innovation: LDS Religion Classes, 1890–1929," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 43, no. 4 (Fall 1975): 379–89.
8. David B. Tyack, *The One Best System: Public Schools in a Diverse Society* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 22; David Wallace Adams, *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875–1928* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1995), 8–9; Lawrence A. Cremin, *The Transformation of the School: Progressivism in American Education, 1876–1957* (New York: Vintage Books, 1964), 66–67; Michael McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 292; Margaret D. Jacobs, *White Mothers to a Dark Race: Settler Colonialism, Maternalism, and the Removal of Indigenous Children in the American West and Australia, 1880–1940* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009).
9. Congress, "Letter from the Secretary of the Interior, transmitting a letter of the Governor of Utah and a report of the Commissioner of Public Schools," 51st Cong., 1st sess., 1890, S. Exec. Doc 27, Serial 2682, page 5.
10. *An Act to Provide for a Uniform System of Free Schools Throughout Utah Territory Passed at the Twenty-ninth Session of the Legislative Assembly of the Territory of Utah, 1890*, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT.
11. First Presidency, circular letter, October 25, 1890, in James R. Clark, comp., *Messages of the First Presidency of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1833–1964*, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 3:196.
12. George Q. Cannon, quoted in Karl G. Maeser, "Church School Papers—No. 16," *Juvenile Instructor*, October 1, 1892, 607–8.
13. Karl G. Maeser, *School and Fireside* (Salt Lake City: Skelton & Co, 1898), 130.
14. Quinn, "Utah's Educational Innovation," 380–81; Church Board of Education Minutes, June 2, 1890, General Church Board of Education Meeting Minutes, 1888–1902, UA 1376,

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- box 1, L. Tom Perry Special Collections. For a discussion of economics in Utah during the 1890s, see Leonard J. Arrington, “Utah and the Depression of the 1890s,” *Utah Historical Quarterly* 29, no. 1 (January 1961): 3–18.
15. *Program of Lund Day Exercises in Religion Classes*, 1912, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, (hereafter cited as CHL); Anthon H. Lund, diary, June 2, 1890, in *Danish Apostle: The Diaries of Anthon H. Lund, 1890–1921*, ed. John P. Hatch (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2006), 7.
 16. Lund, diary, June 2, 1890, in *Danish Apostle*, 7–8.
 17. Church Board of Education Minutes, October 8, 1890, D. Michael Quinn Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT; Alma P. Burton, “Karl G. Maeser, Mormon Educator” (master’s thesis, Brigham Young University, 1950), 106.
 18. Maeser, *School and Fireside*, 131.
 19. Anthon H. Lund, in Conference Report, April 1916, 10–11.
 20. For a discussion of the successes and failures of the Religion Class program during the 1890s, see: Brett D. Dowdle, “A New Policy in Church School Work: The Founding of the Mormon Supplementary Religious Education Movement” (master’s thesis, Brigham Young University, 2011), 60–103.
 21. Revised Statutes, Sec. 1822, quoted in “Laws and Religion Classes,” Journal History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, October 19, 1904, CHL.
 22. Joseph W. McMurrin, in Conference Report, April 1902, 57.
 23. McMurrin, in Conference Report, April 1902, 57.
 24. *Proceedings Before the Committee on Privileges and Elections of the United States in the Matter of the Protests Against the Hon. Reed Smoot, a Senator from the State of Utah, to Hold His Seat*, 5 vols. (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1904), 2:105–38, 366–74; 3:77–78, 201–3, 263.
 25. *Proceedings Before the Committee on Privileges and Elections*, 2:369–70, 372–73.
 26. Journal History, December 1, 1904, CHL.
 27. First Presidency, circular letter, February 1905, in Clark, *Messages of the First Presidency*, 4:101–2.
 28. In 1912, Adolf Merz, president of the North Sanpete Stake, reported to the General Board of Religion Classes that “the best reports of [Religion Class] attendance were from the Wards in which the schoolhouses are used for holding the classes.” General Board of Religion Class Minutes, November 6, 1912, Quinn Papers, Beinecke Library, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut. In 1914, Carl R. Marcusen, superintendent of the Carbon County schools complained that Religion Classes were being held in a number of schools throughout Carbon County, with the district schoolteacher often teaching the classes as well. Carl R. Marcusen to School Boards of Carbon County, January 21, 1914, in General Board of Religion Class Minutes, June 3, 1914, Quinn Papers, Beinecke Library, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut.
 29. Karl G. Maeser to Presidents of Stakes and the Stake Boards of Education, September 12, 1893, Salt Lake Stake Board of Education Files 1893–1896, CHL.
 30. General Board of Religion Class Minutes, January 19, 1900, Quinn Papers, Beinecke Library, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut.
 31. Karl G. Maeser, “Church School Papers—Series II, No. 2,” *Juvenile Instructor*, November 15, 1895, 695; “Religion Class Department,” *Juvenile Instructor*, January 1, 1907, 13–14; L. John

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- Nuttall, diary, August 5, 12, and 14, 1899, L. Tom Perry Special Collections; Karl G. Maeser, "Church School Department," *Juvenile Instructor*, February 15, 1901, 117–18.
32. General Board of the Primary Association Minutes, April 6, 1901, quoted in Conrad A. Harward, "A History of the Growth and Development of the Primary Association of the LDS Church from 1878 to 1928" (master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 1976), 131.
33. Dale C. Mouritsen, "Efforts to Correlate Mormon Church Agencies in the Twentieth Century: A Review," CHL.
34. First Presidency to Deseret Sunday School Union Board, November 15, 1906, quoted in James E. Talmage and Mae T. Nystrom to First Presidency, July 29, 1907, Scott G. Kenney Research Collection, L. Tom Perry Special Collections.
35. Talmage and Nystrom to First Presidency, June 29, 1907, L. Tom Perry Special Collections.
36. President Taylor had consistently pled for "fathers and mothers . . . to be more careful in regard to the rearing of our youth," taking time "to sit down by the fireside with them and explain unto them the Gospel." He wanted Latter-day Saints to make the home "the center of attraction" and "the most pleasant place that a boy or girl can find in this world." Frank Y. Taylor, discourse, October 5, 1902, in Conference Report, October 1902, 59. As a corollary to such sentiments, President Taylor later opined, "I sometimes think that many of our parents leave entirely too much to [the auxiliaries] to educate their boys and girls in the fear of the Lord, and it does not seem that is right." Frank Y. Taylor, in Conference Report, April 1913, 50.
37. Milton L. Bennion, *Mormonism and Education* (Salt Lake City: Department of Education of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1939), 175.
38. Joseph F. Merrill to Annie Hyde, March 11, 1896, Joseph F. Merrill papers, MSS 1540, box 14, folder 1, L. Tom Perry Special Collections.
39. Joseph F. Merrill, "Some Fundamentals of Mormonism," *Church News*, December 7, 1946.
40. The two most complete accounts of the circumstances surrounding this meeting are Joseph F. Merrill, "A New Institution in Religious Education," *Improvement Era*, January 1938, 55–56, and A. Theodore Tuttle, "Released Time Religious Education Program of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints" (master's thesis, Stanford University, 1949). The first account was written by Merrill himself; the second draws from an interview conducted by A. Theodore Tuttle with Joseph F. Merrill.
41. Merrill, "A New Institution," 55.
42. Merrill, "A New Institution," 55.
43. Thomas G. Alexander, *Mormonism in Transition* (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 168. Alexander cites an interview with Merrill's daughter as the source for his inspiration being the religious seminaries he saw during his time in Chicago. An interview conducted by one of the authors with two of Merrill's grandchildren confirmed this story as common knowledge within the Merrill family. Annie Whitton and Joseph Ballantyne, interview by Casey Paul Griffiths, November 17, 2011; notes in author's possession.
44. Tuttle, "Released Time Religious Education Program," 57–59.
45. Merrill, "A New Institution," 55.
46. See Casey Paul Griffiths, "The First Seminary Teacher," *Religious Educator* 9, no. 3 (2008): 115–30.
47. Thomas J. Yates, "Autobiography and Biography of Thomas Jarvis Yates," 42, CHL.

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48. See Merrill, “A New Institution,” 55. The Book of Mormon was covered as part of the Church History year. Interestingly, the Book of Mormon did not receive its own year as permanent part of the seminary curriculum until the 1970s. See Joe J. Christensen, “Abiding by Its Precepts,” in *Living the Book of Mormon: Abiding by Its Precepts*, ed. Gaye Strathearn and Charles L. Swift (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2007), 1–24.
49. See Coleman and Jones, “History of Granite Seminary, 1933,” 6–7.
50. See Coleman and Jones, “History of Granite Seminary, 1933,” 7.
51. See Yates, “Autobiography,” 80.
52. See “New Building Dedicated at Granite, the Oldest Seminary in the Church”; www.LdsChurchNews.com/articles/24154/New-building-dedicated-at-Granite-the-oldest-Seminary-in-the-Church.html (accessed September 10, 2012).
53. Ward H. Magleby, “Granite Seminary 1912,” *Impact: Weekday Religious Education Quarterly*, Winter 1968, 15.
54. See Coleman and Jones, “History of Granite Seminary,” 8; Yates, “Autobiography,” 81.
55. Anna Lowrie Ivins Wilson to Guy C. Wilson, March 8, 1913, Wilson Correspondence, CHL.
56. See Dowdle, “A New Policy in Church School Work,” 146–47.
57. Coleman and Jones, “History of Granite Seminary, 1933,” 32.
58. Henry B. Eyring, “To Know and to Love God,” *An Evening with President Henry B. Eyring*, February 26, 2010, 5.
59. See Tuttle, “Released Time Religious Education,” 69–70. As an illustration of historic continuity, it should be noted that Abel S. Rich stayed at Box Elder Seminary for nearly forty years after it opened, eventually training another young seminary teacher, Boyd K. Packer. See Lucille C. Tate, *Boyd K. Packer: A Watchman on the Tower* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1995), 98.
60. The Religion Class program continued to function until 1929, when it officially ended by Joseph F. Merrill, who by then was serving as the Church commissioner of education. See Clark, *Messages of the First Presidency*, 5:267–68.
61. It should be noted that released-time religious education was not only a Latter-day Saint movement. During the 1910–30 period specifically, similar programs spread throughout the nation. One historian has argued that the Religion Class program represents the first American attempt at supplemental religious education (see Quinn); however, most released-time programs trace their beginnings to the a program established in Gary, Indiana, in 1914 that came to be known as the “Gary Plan.” Granite Seminary was in operation three years prior to the opening of the Indiana program, and the Religion Class program existed more than twenty years prior to that! Officials from Indiana even contacted LDS leaders requesting “literature in relation to the Religion Class work of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.” See Joseph W. McMurrin, in Conference Report, October 1914, 119.
62. See Tuttle, “Released Time Religious Education,” 71–74.
63. See Bell, “Adam Samuel Bennion,” 51–54. While the majority of the academies closed, several schools were retained and even upgraded to serve as junior colleges for the training of teachers. Among the schools retained were Dixie College, Snow College, Weber College, LDS University in Salt Lake City, Brigham Young College in Logan, Gila College in Arizona, and Ricks College in Idaho. The Juárez Academy in Mexico was retained and remains open

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- even today. See Scott C. Esplin, "Education in Transition: Church and State Relationships in Utah Education, 1888–1933" (PhD diss., Brigham Young University, 2006), 164–65.
64. See Tuttle, "Released Time Religious Education," 71–73.
65. From 1912 to 1919, Church seminaries actually operated under the direction of the General Board of Religion Classes rather than the Church Board of Education. See Brett Dowdle, "A New Policy in Church School Work: The Founding of the Mormon Supplementary Religious Education Movement" (master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 127).
66. First Presidency to Presidencies of Stakes, May 29, 1929, in Clark, *Messages of the First Presidency*, 5:267.
67. See David B. Rimington, *Vistas on Visions: A Golden Anniversary History of Church Education in Southern California*, (Anaheim, CA: Shumway Family History Services, 1988), also Dennis C. Wright, "Good Morning Los Angeles: The Beginning of the Early Morning Seminary Program," in *Regional Studies in Latter-day Saint History: California*, ed. David F. Boone and others (Provo, UT: Department of Church History and Doctrine, 1998), 224.
68. See Dennis A. Wright, "The Beginnings of the First LDS Institute of Religion at Moscow, Idaho," *Mormon Historical Studies* 10, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 72; also, Casey Paul Griffiths, "The First Institute Teacher," *Mormon Historical Studies* 11, no. 2 (2010): 175–201.
69. Harold B. Lee taught an early-morning seminary class at South High in Salt Lake from 1931 to 1933. He later described his experience as "the most enjoyable teaching I ever did." L. Brent Goates, *Harold B. Lee: Prophet and Seer* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 90. In 1935, Gordon B. Hinckley was to teach a seminary class at South High School in Salt Lake City at a salary of thirty-five dollars a month. See Sheri L. Dew, *Go Forward with Faith: The Biography of Gordon B. Hinckley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1996), 85.
70. See Jon Thomas, "The Worldwide Expansion of Seminaries and Institutes to English-Speaking Countries During the Administration of William E. Berrett" (master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 2011).
71. *Mine Errand from the Lord: Selections from the Sermons and Writings of Boyd K. Packer*, ed. Clyde J. Williams (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2008), 358–59.