

Building the One Hundredth Temple: A Test Case of Religious Freedom in New England

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Thoughts of the Pilgrims and of Roger Williams's colony popularly evoke an image of New England as a haven of religious freedom. Unfortunately, those who fled religious persecution in Europe sometimes became the agents of the very intolerance they sought to escape. Examples of this phenomenon can be seen in the early New England religious experience as well as during the closing years of the twentieth century.

Latter-day Saints made New England an important missionary field as early as the 1830s. Although most of the Church's original members had a Yankee background, few remained in New England. During the greater part of the nineteenth century, they heeded the call to gather, joining the Saints in Ohio, Missouri, Illinois, and finally in the Rocky Mountains. But as the century drew to its close, leaders increasingly counseled converts to stay in their homelands and help to build up the Church there. Only then did a Latter-day Saint presence begin its slow growth in New England.

After being closed for a quarter of a century, in 1893 the Church's Eastern States Mission reopened. A decade later, there was still just one branch in New England. When the separate New England Mission was formed in 1937, it had about one thousand members, including those living in Canada's Maritime Provinces.

The 1950s and 1960s brought accelerated growth. During these two decades, the number of Saints in New England mushroomed from just over four thousand to about thirty thousand. In 1952 the Church built its first New England chapel in Hartford, Connecticut, and ten years later organized its first New England stake, in Boston.

The Dream of a Temple in New England

For Latter-day Saints, the highest gospel blessings, essential for exaltation in the celestial kingdom, can be received only in sacred temples. During the first three-quarters of the twentieth century, the temples nearest to the New England Saints were in Utah. These Saints typically traveled several days by automobile or train to reach the Salt Lake Temple. Therefore, the 1974 dedication of the temple in Washington DC was welcomed enthusiastically. Still, it was about a day's drive from most parts of New England. The Toronto Canada Temple, dedicated in 1990, was a little closer. Groups often left home on Friday evenings, traveled overnight on chartered buses, spent most of Saturday in the temple, and then journeyed into the night to return home before the Sabbath. Though the travel schedule was taxing, these "temple excursions" were eagerly anticipated experiences, and the travelers would often sing hymns or hold impromptu testimony meetings aboard the bus.

On October 3, 1992, during general conference, President Gordon B. Hinckley announced plans to build a temple in Hartford, Connecticut. Hartford was only about two hours' drive from either New York City or Boston. Several factors influenced the selection of a specific site in Hartford. First, it would need to be accessible by public transportation. "Since many Church members in the Boston–New York corridor do not own cars, planners must make sure any temple is only a short walk or cab ride from the nearest train or bus station." Still, the site should be in a setting that would likely continue to have "pleasant surroundings for a century." The site selection committee was even instructed to consider nearby areas that were important in the early life of President Wilford Woodruff.¹ For the next three years, the Church attempted to obtain both a site and government approval to build the temple.

By 1995 a tentative site had been selected. While in the East for an area conference, President Hinckley visited this site, but he felt "uneasy about it." Following a day of looking at other properties in New York and Connecticut, "he was still unsettled." On Saturday, April 22, 1995, at a luncheon with stake presidents in the Boston area, President Hinckley frankly admitted: "Brethren, I am frustrated. We have looked high and low around the Hartford, Connecticut,

area for property, and nothing has developed. Do any of you have any suggestions?" In response, Kenneth G. Hutchins, president of the Boston stake, indicated that "the Church owned a prime piece of property on a hill overlooking Boston that had never been developed." President Hinckley promptly turned the meeting over to Elder Neal A. Maxwell and left to visit the site. "As I stood there," he recorded later that evening, "I had an electric feeling that this is the place, that the Lord inspired its acquisition and its retention. Very few seemed to know anything about it. . . . I think I know why I have had such a very difficult time determining the situation concerning Hartford. I have prayed about it. I have come here three or four times. I have studied maps and tables of membership. With all of this I have not had a strong confirmation. I felt a confirmation as I stood in Belmont on this property this afternoon. This is the place for a House of the Lord in the New England area."²

The property had been acquired in 1978 when the Belmont Ward was seeking a place to build its new meetinghouse. "One afternoon, a member of the Church became lost on Belmont Hill while looking for property. . . . Noticing a sign on a tree in a field, she stopped and recorded the telephone number, even though there was no mention of selling the land. The owner was willing to sell." The ward members' sacrifice to buy the property was a unifying force. Mitt Romney,³ who was bishop of the Belmont Ward during the chapel's construction, pointed out in an interview that the meetinghouse was built in a lower corner of the property rather than on the crest of the hill, which would have been more typical. "The upper level seemed hallowed and an ideal spot for something loftier."⁴

Belmont is an upscale suburb of Boston. It is situated on Route 2, principal highway leading northwest from the center of the city. Specifically, the temple site was on one of the highest spots in the greater Boston area, exceeded only by Blue Hill in nearby Milton.

At the fall general conference in 1995, just over five months after he had visited the Belmont property, President Hinckley announced: "After working for years to acquire a suitable site in the Hartford area, during which time the Church has grown appreciably in areas to the north and south, we have determined that we will not at this time build a temple in the immediate area of Hartford, but rather we will build one in the area of Boston, Massachusetts,

and another in White Plains, New York.”⁵ The construction of both temples would stir lengthy controversy.

The Battle of Belmont Hill

Following President Hinckley’s announcement, Bishop Grant Bennett of the Belmont Ward drafted a press release, which he personally took to the local newspaper. In light of the later controversy, it was ironic that the *Belmont Citizen-Herald* showed little interest in this item. After waiting a week, Bennett asked the editor: “Are you aware that in the sleepy town of Belmont, with only 26,000 people, we’ve announced that we’re building a \$30 million temple?” Unimpressed, the editor replied: “Well, we didn’t see much that was newsworthy in it . . . but if you think it’s newsworthy, we’ll print something.” Three weeks later, the temple got “a small, innocuous article.”⁶

Boston Globe reporter Jack Thomas recalls that although the local newspaper had been “nonchalant,” news of a temple being built in what was considered Belmont’s “most exclusive neighborhood . . . reverberated throughout the rest of the citizenry” and aroused “rancorous opposition.”⁷

Originally, Boston architect Richard Kobus planned for a thirty-million-dollar, three-story temple, which would measure 210 by 125 feet. This design was known as the “460 prototype” because it called for four sealing rooms holding sixty persons each.⁸ Its 94,100 square feet would have made it one of the dozen largest temples ever built by the Church, exceeding in floor area the temples in such places as Portland, San Diego, Chicago, Dallas, and Denver. It was to be surmounted by six towers ranging in height from 76 to 156 feet.⁹ A similar six-tower design had been used on the Washington Temple, dedicated in 1974, a conscious reflection of the Salt Lake Temple’s two sets of three towers. Smaller versions of a six-tower pattern characterized most of the temples designed during the 1980s.

Like other temples, the tallest tower on the Boston Temple was to be surmounted by a statue of the angel Moroni. Latter-day Saints associate Moroni with the angel that John the Revelator foresaw would bring “the everlasting gospel” (Revelation 14:6). Hence, as

President Thomas S. Monson pointed out, the statue “is a reminder to us all that God is concerned for all His people throughout the world, and communicates with them wherever they may be.”¹⁰ Specifically, Moroni is linked with the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, whose announced purpose is “the convincing of the Jew and Gentile that JESUS is the CHRIST” (Book of Mormon title page). The eastward orientation of many of these statues symbolizes looking forward to the Savior’s Second Coming, to the dawning of a new day. Before 1980 only the Salt Lake, Los Angeles, and Washington DC temples were adorned with the familiar angelic herald; since that time it has been customary to include the statue on almost all temples.

Local leaders later acknowledged that they might have erred by not informing neighbors about the temple’s design before it appeared in the press. Harvard business professor Clayton Christensen, a member of the local temple organizing committee, admitted, “We’d do it a lot differently if we had another shot at the process.”¹¹ Attorney Scott Ferson, a Unitarian hired by the Church for his public relations skills, believed the controversy “appeared to be a message problem.”¹² Belmont residents immediately became protective of their “tree-lined streets dotted with mansions . . . [and] had trouble imagining a massive church building towering above them on Belmont Hill.”¹³

As news of the temple plans spread, letters to the editor in local newspapers broached the subject. “Cartoonists lampooned both sides while opponents and proponents traded accusations of misrepresentation.”¹⁴ The Church was accused of buying the property seventeen years earlier expressly for building a temple and not for a meetinghouse, as was claimed at the time. Bishop Bennett, who became the Church’s point man, responded that only the Church’s president could make that decision. He conceded that the New England Saints had “dreamed that someday there’d be a temple closer than Washington” but denied that the property was purchased for that reason. “The Lord may have [had] that in mind, but we didn’t.”¹⁵

Latter-day Saints living in Belmont then held “a series of 50 neighborhood meetings” to explain the purpose of temples and discuss the impact the building would have on the neighborhood.¹⁶

“Church members even went door to door” to reach neighbors.¹⁷ During the meetings residents brought up their concerns.

Opponents complained that the temple would “serve only a small number of local Mormons, not the entire community.”¹⁸ Others worried that the new structure would look like the Washington Temple, called by critics “the Emerald City in the ‘Wizard of Oz,’ or Disney’s Magic Kingdom,” and worried that temple grounds would become a tourist attraction.¹⁹ Belmont residents complained that the building’s “bulk,” which was “two-thirds the size of a football field,” was too massive for a residential neighborhood.²⁰ Joyce Jones, whose property was across the street from the temple site, insisted, “If it were my very own church and they wanted to build a building of this size, I would oppose it.”²¹

Other neighbors were concerned that their property’s value would decline. This fear was supported in the press. Some in less affluent neighborhoods were delighted that the wealthy of Belmont might get their dues. For instance, Belmont’s Planning Coordinator, Jeffrey Wheeler, suggested: “There’s nothing offensive on Belmont Hill. . . . Belmont’s 98 percent residential, but [other] neighborhoods . . . have had to absorb schools, restaurants and commercial enterprises, and there’s a sense that it’s about time Belmont Hill took its share.”²²

There was also concern over increased traffic and the suggestion that a temple serving forty-one thousand Mormons in five New England states and southeastern Canada would cause a transportation bottleneck. Some critics even suggested that the temple’s giant shadow would cause accidents by allowing black ice to form on the adjacent highway. Bennett responded that there have never been reports of accidents caused by shadows from the numerous overpasses or the famed Hancock Tower.²³

In addition, when neighbors learned that the Church planned to light the temple and its spires until 11 p.m. each night, they claimed it would interfere with the “dark, starry skies” they enjoyed.²⁴ Further, noise during construction would hinder daily activities.

As the local Latter-day Saints discussed problems with their neighbors, they could not make any changes without first securing approval from Church headquarters in Salt Lake City. Clayton

Christensen believes that this made the situation “far more confrontational than it really needed to be.”²⁵ Still, the Church agreed to scale back the parking lots, increase the density of plants, and soften the lighting. Most resistance quickly diminished once neighbors were able to voice their concerns and receive answers, and “the overwhelming majority of those who once opposed the temple [were] now supportive.”²⁶ However, these measures did not appease all opponents.

Religious Freedom Put to the Test in Boston

On May 28, 1996, the Church officially applied to the Belmont Zoning Board of Appeals for a zoning variance. Zoning laws are administered locally in the state of Massachusetts.²⁷ The Church therefore applied under Belmont bylaws for a special permit to build the temple, arguing that “benefits to the Town will outweigh any adverse effects.”²⁸ Paul Killeen, a Boston attorney hired by the Church, reported that the temple was “considered an allowable use in the neighborhood,” and the Zoning Board thought it “conformed to all dimensional requirements” as far as height, setback, and so forth.²⁹

In addition, the Church petitioned that provisions of the 1950 Dover Amendment be applied to the temple.³⁰ The Dover Amendment had been enacted when “the town of Dover attempted to prevent the construction of a Catholic school.”³¹ Seeking to strike a balance between appropriate religious uses of property and legitimate municipal zoning concerns, the law “requires communities to allow schools, churches, daycare and other uses in any neighborhood, without undue regulatory interference.”³² The Dover Amendment enabled the Board to allow the temple’s steeples as “an integral part of the religious inspiration for the building” even though it might “deny a special permit for a tower of similar height on a non-religious building.”³³

A series of eight hearings held between July and October 1996 at the local high school, some attended by as many as seven hundred people, spawned heated debate.³⁴ Church representatives tried to respond to each concern. They explained that the temple would only be used for special ceremonies such as baptisms and weddings

and would never reach its theoretical capacity of 1,220 people: “If you fill every space in a three-bedroom colonial, you’d have 110 people. . . . But you rarely have people filling your kitchen, your living room and garage all the same time,” they reasoned, “The temple would draw 90 or fewer people on a typical weekday and 150 on a peak Saturday.” They also pointed out that the “proposed assembly room,” which would be the largest room in the temple, would seat only 380 people.³⁵ Further, only a small percentage of Latter-day Saints hold temple recommends.

Temple lighting was discussed to the point of tedium, with details such as “luminous flux density and the merits of quartz-halogen, mercury vapor and HP sodium lamps.”³⁶

The Church tried to portray that it was “deeply committed to being a good neighbor” and was willing to do more than was required to address the community’s concerns.³⁷ After the Church accommodated all of the other concerns, the hearings came down to the issue of the temple’s spires. Opponents had found a bylaw height restriction. The largest spire was to be 156 feet high, which was taller than Belmont’s 72-foot limit on the height of structures.³⁸ Opponents called the central 144-foot spire topped by the 12-foot angel Moroni “an architectural eyesore towering over a quiet, suburban community.”³⁹

Latter-day Saint representatives argued that spires had religious significance and were essential to the temple’s design; they were powerful symbols, beautiful and inspiring. At the hearings they showed lithographs of a nineteenth-century Boston skyline dominated by church spires. Both the Church and its opponents referred to the height of other local church spires. Former Belmont bishop Mitt Romney eloquently declared that “the world needs more tall spires, more spirit, more spirituality, more calling to God’s work.”⁴⁰

Opponents declared the spires were arrogant, ostentatious, dominating, oppressive, and looming. Arthur P. Keiger, an opposing attorney, argued that “higher is not necessarily better.”⁴¹ Alan Altshuler, a Belmont resident, Harvard Urban Planning professor, and former state transportation secretary, became one of the temple’s chief opponents. Interestingly, the Altshulers purchased their home in 1996 knowing the Church was planning to build a temple behind their property.⁴² Altshuler complained, using crude com-

parisons, that the main spire would be “in our faces.”⁴³ He quipped: “Now we look at trees and sky here. . . . With this temple, it would be like having a 25-story building right next to my house.”⁴⁴

A debate between Bennett and Altshuler developed. Altshuler insisted: “Religious symbols are usually displayed in this country in ways that respect the diversity of our religious pluralism. . . . This implies a certain modesty. When a single religious symbol is raised far above all others, and in such a way as to dominate a large area, this stirs very considerable discomfort. This is not a matter of bigotry. It’s a matter of modesty and respect for one’s neighbors.”⁴⁵

Bennett cited the spire of the Old North Church, where lanterns became an intricate part of the Revolutionary War, and declared: “The view that it’s arrogance for a steeple to rise above the surrounding community, that’s factually incorrect.” Bennett disclosed that the First Congregational Church of Woburn towered to 190 feet. He asked, “Does it convey that Woburn is a Congregational town? Is it oppressive? Does it loom in our faces?”⁴⁶

Amidst the debate, Latter-day Saints and others began to raise the specter of religious discrimination. Bennett said: “Fundamentally, they don’t want the Mormons. I think it’s a fact of life from the very beginning that prejudice seems to exist anywhere where Mormons are located, and it’s public knowledge that at one [local] hearing, there was vitriolic anti-Mormon literature handed out.”⁴⁷ *Boston Globe* editorial writer Eileen McNamara maintained that the hearings were not about the size of spires but “about fear of the unknown,” and suggested that the “Mormons’ struggle is nothing new.” She insisted that “the volatile mix of real estate values and religious bigotry” was as old as Boston itself.⁴⁸

On the other hand, “opponents swore that their opposition was to the structure, not the religion.”⁴⁹ John Forster suggested, “Every time anyone opposes the Mormons, they yell about ‘anti-Mormon discrimination.’”⁵⁰ Altshuler adamantly rejected the notion that the protest was rooted in bias: “The Mormons themselves turn this into a question of anti-Mormonism. . . . People are not unhappy to have Mormons there. It’s true some people are unhappy about the bulk of the building, but for better or worse, it meets regulations. If spires and lights conformed, this whole issue would go away.”⁵¹ Altshuler further argued, “What the Mormons have tried to do, is

to make this a freedom-of-religion issue, saying that high spires are fundamental to their freedom to practice religion. But when asked specifically, they concede it's not fundamental, because they've built temples without spires. It's only in recent years that they have started to build six-spire temples. Obviously, Salt Lake City pushes them to go as high as they can."⁵²

When Latter-day Saints feared that they were losing their hard-earned reputation of being "warm, caring and supportive," clergy and congregations of many denominations offered support.⁵³ One minister believed "the Church was being too patient. 'But I've had it!'"⁵⁴ he exclaimed. He invited Latter-day Saint leaders to speak to his Unitarian Universalist congregation and had his choir sing LDS hymns, urging his members to support the Church's right to build the steeple.⁵⁵

Several Protestant leaders, along with the Catholic Church and the regional chapter of the American Jewish Congress, filed briefs supporting the Church's position.⁵⁶ In a three-page letter to the Zoning Board of Appeals, A. Van C. Lanckton, regional president of the Jewish Congress, urged that if "safety is not a factor" the ruling should favor the temple. He suggested: "As long as there is no disturbance of the public trust nor obstruction for others in their religious worship . . . then the Massachusetts Constitution protects all religious expression, including the configuration of church buildings."⁵⁷

This support from other denominations had grown out of a tragic event in 1983. When the Church was constructing a new meetinghouse in Belmont, a "suspicious" fire caused half a million dollars of damage and a year's delay in construction. "Within days of the fire, [Belmont] Bishop Mitt Romney received offers from at least eight denominations to use their facilities. Some offered to help raise funds for another meetinghouse." During the next nine months, Belmont Ward members met in several buildings. Whereas it would have been "more convenient to use just one building," the local bishopric "decided to use every building" where the facilities would be adequate, as a "means of befriending congregations." Then "in appreciation for the use of their facilities, five families were assigned each Monday morning to clean the building after Sunday's meetings. 'We wanted to be guests they would not forget,'"

Romney said. Although costly and inconvenient, the disaster increased community awareness and fostered feelings of fellowship. The fire changed the attitude of the townspeople toward the Saints.⁵⁸ When the temple was opposed, “these ministers wrote letters to the editor in support” of the Church.⁵⁹

Supportive letters to the editor also circulated in Utah. For instance, Lance Pitcher, who had lived in the Boston suburbs for twenty years, questioned the notion that all of Belmont “was adorned with mansions dotting the streets” and that the temple would not fit in.⁶⁰ Another letter came from James O. Dean, who identified himself as “the only non-Mormon member of a large Utah family,” finding himself “in rare sympathy with the LDS Church.” Dean suggested the temple would “be good for local business, as they draw people from a wide area to do their religious duty or merely to look at the edifice in awe or otherwise. Visitors have to eat and sleep, and they love to shop.” He added, “I am no admirer of the skewed Mormon attitude toward marriage and human sexuality, nor their aggressive recruitment campaigns, but I do admire the tenacity they exhibit in building these temples in the face of so much opposition.”⁶¹

After the hearings, the five-member Belmont Zoning Board of Appeals voted four to one in favor of the Church on December 9, 1996, deciding “the height limit was unreasonable.”⁶² The *Boston Globe* labeled the decision a victory and proclaimed, “This is Massachusetts, where state law expressly prohibits local elected officials from interfering with the construction of religious buildings for reasons other than public safety.”⁶³

Even though the temple’s design had been approved, Church officials were “sensitive to feelings of those of the neighborhood” who had opposed it. Therefore, the Church announced that it would reduce the temple in size and hopefully provide a “more neighborhood-friendly”⁶⁴ design. On January 4, 1997, before a written decision could be drafted, Bennett asked the zoning board to hold off until the Church could submit an amended application.⁶⁵ Leaders also announced their intention to review other large temples then being designed to see if they might also be made smaller.⁶⁶ This move was consistent with an already existing pattern of building smaller temples in more locations so that they might be closer to

the people. President David O. McKay had enunciated this concept in 1952 when he announced construction of the temple in Switzerland.⁶⁷ In the fall of 1997, President Hinckley disclosed plans to build even smaller temples, especially in remote areas.⁶⁸

Some opponents appeared appeased. "I am surprised and delighted," said Joyce Jones, a strong opponent of the previous temple design. "I hope the design will be more fitting than it was so we can all live together amicably."⁶⁹ Though Jones made this statement in January, within a few months she became a plaintiff in a court battle against the Church.

On February 11, 1997, the Church announced it would scale back the temple from a 460 to a 450 prototype, meaning the four main ordinance rooms would seat only fifty, rather than sixty persons.⁷⁰ The temple would have only one steeple, 139 feet tall. The new design would have "a more traditional New England church style."⁷¹ The building size had been reduced by approximately one-third, now measuring 190 by 90 feet. Its 69,000 square feet would still make the Boston temple larger than most Latter-day Saint temples.⁷² The revised plans were formally submitted on March 10, 1997.

Two weeks later the Belmont Zoning Board of Appeals unanimously ruled that the Dover Amendment applied to this case and therefore granted relief for the revised temple plan, issuing a special permit. Accolades came for the Church's decision to scale down. Board member Anthony Luccesi praised, "It's pretty clear in general the revised plan with one steeple and a smaller building is an improvement over the plan we approved in December."⁷³ Bill Monahan, the chairman of Belmont's Governing Board of Selectman, indicated that he "felt strongly all along that the church had the right to build the steeple. They went about it in a proper way, and I'm happy they finally prevailed. I believe most people in town are, too." He called it a "small, vocal minority" who opposed the construction.⁷⁴ The town clerk filed the revised decision on May 8, 1997. However, within a matter of weeks, plaintiffs appealed both aspects of the board's decision.⁷⁵ "Introducing the delay of litigation into the equation," neighbors requested an appeal to dissuade the Church from starting construction.⁷⁶ Religious groups, including

associations of Baptists, Catholics, Christian Scientists, Jews, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Seventh-Day Adventists, and United Methodists, filed briefs supporting the Church.⁷⁷ Two years would pass before this matter would be brought to trial.⁷⁸

Going Forward with Faith

Even though legal challenges to the temple had not been resolved, Church leaders felt they could not delay any longer in getting construction under way. John Forster, one of the temple's vocal opponents, decried the Church's decision to move forward as "a tactic of intimidation and an attempt to change the momentum in their favor."⁷⁹ On Friday, June 13, 1997, ground was broken for the new structure. The ceremony was conducted by Elder Richard G. Scott of the Twelve, assisted by Elder Marlin K. Jensen of the Seventy, President of the North America Northeast Area. Despite a cloudburst, three hundred gathered under colorful umbrellas to witness the proceedings. Besides Church members, the congregation included local civic and religious leaders who supported the temple project. Elder Scott was convinced that those present were "joined by many beyond the veil," including Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, John Taylor, and other early Church leaders. The rain continued through most of the proceedings, but the sun broke through the clouds just before the ground was broken.⁸⁰ Shortly thereafter, excavations began for the temple's foundation.

On July 18 a "blasting accident" showered "neighboring houses and cars" with "rocks and rubber debris." Even though nobody was hurt, the fire marshal delayed further excavation until he could review the incident and put new restrictions into place. The *Belmont Citizen-Herald* named this errant blast the most significant event of the year.⁸¹

Problems with noise caused further delays. In October, construction was three months behind schedule. The contractors agreed to place a "three-sided, 12-foot-high, sound-absorbing curtain" that would bring decibel levels of the blasting below the level required by town bylaws.⁸² They also erected eight-foot-high "noise baffles" along eighty feet of the property's perimeter. Neighbors, however,

regarded this as an ineffective “token effort.” During fourteen out of fifteen workdays in December, construction noise still exceeded legal limits. Nevertheless, town officials cautioned the complaining residents that delaying the project would only make the noise last longer.⁸³

Then, on the evening of January 13, 1998, heat from a blast ignited a rubber mat used to “contain flying rock.” Twenty-foot-high flames slowed traffic on the nearby highway and sent acrid smoke into the neighborhood.⁸⁴

In March 1998 officials announced that Route 2 would “be shut down in both directions” for about ten minutes each day over a two-week period during “dynamite blasting” at the adjacent temple site.⁸⁵

The builders took steps to minimize other potential sources of complaint. A water truck wet down the grounds to minimize dust. Berms (low, earthen barriers) were built around the edge of the property to restrict dust from blowing into neighboring areas. Trucks were even washed before leaving the construction site to avoid dropping rocks or other debris on nearby streets.⁸⁶

By the end of May, excavation had been completed, and workers began pouring cement for the temple’s foundation. During that same month, a neighborhood couple who had opposed the project sold their home to the Church; it would become the residence of the temple president.⁸⁷

By the opening weeks of 1999 the structural steel framework was completed. During the following summer much of the temple’s exterior was constructed, and work commenced on the interior. While the temple itself was faced with Olympia white granite, many of the retaining walls on the grounds were covered with granite of a contrasting darker gray.

A Church newsletter reported in July 2000 that “those intimately involved in the day to day building of the temple marvel at its elegance and beauty as it emerges out of the welter of detail and the complexity of construction. There is a great spirit on the site and in the temple.”⁸⁸

The same newsletter had reported a few months earlier that those working on the temple “regard this as a unique, once-in-a-lifetime building. They are doing things that are never done in

total in one building. It is a remarkable project, morale is very high and the work is going well.”⁸⁹ For instance, “the construction crews continue to be amazed at the high level of detail work and finish in the building. The latest example is in the boiler room. The concrete block walls in the boiler room will be sealed and painted, and all the pipes will be color coded and painted. As one person said, ‘This is unlike any boiler room we’ve ever seen!’”⁹⁰

Millwork on the upper ordinance room floor was also “intricate and time-consuming. For example, the header on one of the doors will require the combination of thirty pieces of finely crafted wood.”⁹¹

During these later stages of construction, Church officials and contractors still kept the temple’s neighbors in mind. A major concern had been runoff from the hill, which had, over the years, flooded area basements. To remedy this situation “an elaborate system of drains and pipes was built underground to collect the runoff and release it into the town’s system at a calculated rate.” To correct another potential problem, trees were planted around the edge of the temple ground to screen light from shining on neighboring homes. “Light around the perimeter of the temple property is now less than the light in an aisle in a movie theater.”⁹² Once again, the temple’s builders were doing more than was required, in the interest of being good neighbors.

Many members of the Church had followed the temple’s construction with rapt attention. At the end of 1999, local Latter-day Saint leaders asserted that “clearly, the focus of stake activities, meetings, and prayers of the members this past year has been on the new temple being built in our stake.”⁹³ As far away as Spencer, Maine, Primary children wrote letters of appreciation that were sent with homemade cookies and care packages to the seventy-five construction workers.⁹⁴ In March and April 2000, the Derry New Hampshire Ward presented the musical *Come to the House of the Lord*, with music composed by Steven Kapp Perry. The production was designed to reach members who had not yet gone to the temple and also to provide an opportunity for sharing the gospel with friends and neighbors of other faiths. Less than half of the 270 who attended the initial performance were members of the Church.⁹⁵

Contention Continues in State and Federal Courts

As the temple construction moved forward, legal challenges expanded. Some questioned whether construction should continue or even whether the building should be removed. Opponents pursued two separate lawsuits against the completion of the building, one in state courts and the other in a federal suit.

Taking over a year to schedule a state court date, in July 1999 six plaintiffs sued the Church, the Belmont Zoning Board of Appeals, and the board's individual members. In Massachusetts, only those with property abutting a parcel of land in dispute can appeal a local zoning board's decision.⁹⁶ This stipulation reduced the list of plaintiffs to Arleen Martin, Jenny Altshuler, Margaret Boyajian, and Joyce Jones. The plaintiffs' cost for the suit was estimated at fifty thousand dollars.⁹⁷ Seeking relief from the Massachusetts Middlesex Superior Court, they demanded the Church reduce the steeple's height.

The presiding authority was Judge Elizabeth Fahey. Paul Killeen, who represented the Church, characterized Fahey as "a young judge who had never heard a zoning case before," who "was very hostile to the project," and who "made her own decision about what the Church really needs."⁹⁸

Among others, temple architect Richard Kobus testified, defending his steeple design on the "rule of proportionality." Fahey ruled that Kobus's testimony was based on a "lack of education," and only represented his "personal appreciation of aesthetic concepts."⁹⁹

The plaintiffs disliked the project's architecture and argued that the temple's steeple "would dominate their neighborhood of \$500,000-plus homes and would cast shadows on their properties," even though the temple was at least a football field's distance away and was located north of most of the homes.¹⁰⁰ They objected to having an imposing spire with a statue of the angel Moroni towering over them, and they further claimed that they would suffer injuries to the value of their property.¹⁰¹

After hearing both sides of the argument, Judge Fahey called the steeple an "uninhabited projection" and insisted the "Temple would have exactly the same use and efficacy under Mormon theology whether the Temple is with or without a spire." Hence, this

was “purely an aesthetic issue.”¹⁰² Fahey felt the Church had not carried its burden of proof and had failed to demonstrate that the temple would benefit the town of Belmont as a whole. Therefore, the decision handed down on February 22, 2000, held that the Board’s action was invalid and annulled it.¹⁰³ Bishop Bennett described Fahey’s logic as “unusual.” He felt the fourteen-foot steeple allowed by the new ruling would be an ugly stub and was baffled that anyone could conclude that “a steeple doesn’t have religious significance.”¹⁰⁴ In addition, he asked, “How can you say for certainty a special permit to care for six preschoolers in a home benefits the town as a whole.”¹⁰⁵

Community reaction was swift. The *Boston Globe* called the decision ironic, citing that it was the Puritans who came to America seeking religious freedoms and building towering spires. Stanley Smith, executive director of Historic Boston, Inc., demanded the steeple be preserved as a symbol of community and continuity. Reverend James Field, director of the Boston Archdiocese, defended that “brick and mortar are part of theology.” And the First Congregational Church’s Reverend Jeffrey P. Johnson stated that “buildings reflect the values of society” and that with opinions like these it was a sad commentary that “the tallest buildings today are our financial institutions,” instead of houses of worship.¹⁰⁶ With such community support, there was no doubt that Judge Fahey’s decision would be appealed.

Meanwhile, the same people who had funded the state lawsuit had simultaneously executed a suit in the federal courts. Plaintiff attorney Mark White claims that more than a hundred neighbors funded litigation, mounting a suit in the United States District Court.¹⁰⁷ The suit declared that the Dover Amendment was unconstitutional and violated the Establishment Clause, which states that churches should neither be encouraged nor deterred by the government. Seeking to void the building permit as construction proceeded, opponents claimed they were entitled to have the temple torn down.¹⁰⁸ Though during construction local Church leaders had met weekly with neighbors to hear concerns, the suit brought by Margaret Boyajian, Jean Dickinson, and Charles Counselman, a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, still said

that the temple's size was offensive.¹⁰⁹ Now in 1999, wanting the temple to be removed, they reiterated that when they filed suit two years earlier, there was just a hole in the ground.¹¹⁰

On May 24 U.S. District Court Judge Douglas P. Woodlock sided with the Church, stating that the "Dover Amendment has a secular purpose of prohibiting discrimination."¹¹¹ The "courts ruled that a law that keeps government away from religious decision-making, by exempting churches from regulation, is perfectly appropriate under the Constitution"¹¹² and stated that the law "does not create favoritism toward religion." Instead the court clarified it was a secular judgment "that religious institutions . . . are compatible with every other type of land use and thus will not detract from the quality of life in any neighborhood." In response, lawyers representing the Belmont building inspector said the decision would also benefit nonreligious uses of land such as schools or child-care centers.¹¹³

Within a week of Woodlock's decision, the plaintiffs filed an appeal. Upholding the appellate court ruling, the United States Court of Appeals for the First Circuit also rejected the plaintiffs' premise.¹¹⁴ Mark White then secured a petition for a writ of appeal to the Supreme Court of the United States. On January 8, 2001, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the decision of the U.S. District Judge that the Dover Amendment was constitutional and refused to hear the case, making it clear that "all challenges to the Boston Temple, with the exception of the height of the steeple, are at an end."¹¹⁵ In response, Sheila R. Decter, executive director of the American Jewish Congress's New England office told the press, "We're pleased that the Supreme Court did not take this case, because we think the state's special protection for religious institutions is appropriate."¹¹⁶

In June 2000, as construction neared its end, the First Presidency announced the appointment of Loren C. Dunn as president of the Boston Temple. Although born in Utah, Elder Dunn had lived in the Boston area for several years. He received a master of science degree from Boston University in public relations and was an executive with a Boston economic board at the time of his 1968 call to become one of the Church's General Authorities. He served as a

member of the Seventy until being designated an emeritus General Authority in summer 2000. When Elder Dunn was called as temple president, his wife, Sharon, daughter of former General Authority John Longden, became the temple matron.¹¹⁷ Elder Dunn expressed that he was “grateful, but not surprised” that the court decided not to hear the appeal. Relieved, he added, “We assume that since it’s a Supreme Court decision, the issue has now been resolved. We hope that everyone now can accept this and we can move ahead.”¹¹⁸ However, Elder Dunn’s hopes of simply moving ahead were not to be yet realized as the state court proceeding still loomed over the temple’s completion.

The Temple Completed, Almost

Even though these court cases had not been resolved, on June 7, 2000, the Church announced plans for an open house. On Sunday, August 27, 2000, the *Boston Globe* carried two articles about the temple. One described the “hulking rectangle of white Sardinian granite” as a “homecoming” for the Church, whose first two presidents came from Vermont. It also noted that the Latter-day Saints had had virtually no presence in New England for ninety years during the era when converts were encouraged to gather in the Rocky Mountains. The article described the “Belmont Temple” as a “victory” for the Saints, who had been persecuted during much of their history. It noted that President Hinckley was a descendent of Thomas Hinckley, the last governor of the Plymouth Colony, pointing out that both leaders headed a “controversial religious” group that had sought religious freedom and had interest in proselytizing Native Americans. Finally, the article explained that the open house was “a rare opportunity for the public to see the spaces used for ceremonies that have long been secret.” Instructions were then given for obtaining free tickets to the temple’s open house.¹¹⁹

This and other articles generated a surge of interest in the temple’s open house. Church leaders noted that the electronic media also “made sure that everyone within local television’s broadcast range” learned about the temple.¹²⁰ Requests for tickets swamped the Church’s Web site, overloading it and temporarily shutting it down.¹²¹

The temple's open house began on Tuesday, August 29, even though construction was not quite completed. Scaffolding still surrounded the building's main entrance. Referring to the sound of bulldozers laying strips of sod into place, Grant Bennett, now a member of the stake presidency, quipped, "That's the sound of grass growing very fast."¹²² Visitors seemed to enjoy the experience of being able to see close up the finishing touches being completed around the temple.¹²³ It almost seems fitting that the Boston temple, which had faced so many obstacles, would be the one having work still going on when the open house began.

Belmont city officials and the temple's neighbors were among the special guests invited on the first day. Mitt Romney hosted Edward Kennedy, against whom he had waged an unsuccessful campaign for the Senate six years earlier. "It's a beautiful building, and clearly an incredible amount of time and thought went into it," admitted one neighbor. "Even though it is not my faith, I can see why the Mormons are so proud of it." "I'm hearing things I would never have guessed," one Unitarian observed. "People want to attend the temple open house out of curiosity. They are intrigued with the building. But after the tour, when they come out, they are reverent. They are able to make the connection between the building and loftier spiritual perspective." He noted that he had heard no one say that the temple should not get its steeple. Members of the clergy were especially interested, asking many questions about ordinances for the dead and marriage for eternity. "They were supportive during the zoning process and were now celebrating with us," Bennett remarked.¹²⁴

Many teachers and administrators who had been impressed with Latter-day Saint youth in their schools also came to the open house. "Two principals after the tour said they saw how the temple could influence students' behavior, motivating them to . . . honesty so they could return to perform baptisms for the dead."¹²⁵

Presidents of at least thirty universities or colleges toured the building. "One university president was awed by the beauty of the temple," reported Kent Bowen, co-chair of the open house organizing committee and professor of business at Harvard University. "At the end of the tour, we sat in the Celestial Room for a while

before going to a sealing room. There we spoke of the temple. When it came time to leave, the president didn't move. After a long while, he shook his finger at me and said, 'Do you know what you have here? This is the most peaceful place I've ever been. I've visited all the religious places around the world, and this is the most peaceful.'¹²⁶

The open house continued through September 23, and a total of 82,600 people visited the temple. Church officials estimated that 80 percent of Belmont's residents attended. "If only you had told us how beautiful this was going to be, we wouldn't have fought it," one neighbor conceded. The intense opposition to the temple, Bennett believed, "actually generated feelings of affection and affinity for the Church." Many regretted that the temple did not yet have its tower. Even a group of Catholic nuns indicated that they were "praying for the steeple."¹²⁷

Bill Monahan, chairman of the three-man governing board in Belmont, reflected on the controversy surrounding the temple's construction: "I can't identify the motives [of the opponents], but I think the Church and its members did everything possible to get along." He praised the Church, which he believed had "taken a rock and turned it into a striking garden."¹²⁸

The temple's open house provided the occasion for residents of the area to learn more about the blessings of a temple. As reported in the *Boston Globe*, Church member Michael D. Schetzel, director of sales for the Red Sox, affirmed that "the experience of going to the temple . . . helps you anchor your life." "This marriage service," another member quoted by the *Globe* testified, "will ensure that not only will my husband and I be together after death, but our children will also be able to be with us." The paper also referred to a local Latter-day Saint couple who had lost a child. "Just to know that he will be forever a part of our family, and we'll be able to raise him again," the mother gratefully reflected, "it gave us a peace that I don't know we would have had otherwise."¹²⁹

On September 2, just a few days after the temple open house had begun, the *Boston Globe* published excerpts from an interview its reporters had conducted with President Hinckley at Church headquarters in Salt Lake City. He acknowledged that difficulties

had arisen during the construction of the temple. “It’s rankled some of our neighbors, we’re sorry to say. We don’t mean to offend anybody. We think that when the temple’s up and running that that antagonism will largely disappear. That’s been . . . our experience in very many places.” The article spoke favorably about the Church’s progress worldwide. When asked, “Why is the church growing?” the prophet simply answered, “Because it’s true.”¹³⁰ At a press conference in Boston the evening before the temple’s dedication, President Hinckley declared: “It’s time we had a temple in Boston. We’re so glad it’s here. We wish the steeple were on it. I regret that it isn’t. But we can get along without it while awaiting the outcome of the legal action. In the meantime, we’ll go forward performing the ordinance work of this sacred house.”¹³¹

The temple was dedicated in four sessions on Sunday, October 1, 2000. To avoid crowding the neighborhood with traffic, those attending the dedication were shuttled in by bus.¹³² It was fitting that the Boston Temple became the one hundredth operating temple because it is located in the area where the first steps were taken for the formation of a new nation that would become the host of the Restoration and because so many early Latter-day Saint leaders came from New England.

In his dedicatory prayer, President Hinckley referred to this being the one hundredth operating temple and recognized other significant aspects of its construction: “We have looked forward to this occasion. We have prayed for this day. We extend our gratitude to all who have labored so faithfully and diligently, often in the face of serious opposition, to bring to pass the miracle of the completion of this temple. To us it is indeed a miracle. The ground on which it stands, the circumstances of its preservation for this use, and the decision to build it here—all are miracles unto those who have been a part of this process.” He then expressed gratitude for the Lord’s “overruling actions which have made all of this possible.” The President then prayed that “those not of our faith look upon it as a hallowed structure, and do so with respect.” After referring to attempts to delay, or even stop the temple’s construction, the prophet petitioned, “We pray that those who have been bitterly opposed may experience a change of feeling. May their



*The Boston Massachusetts Temple, photo by Francis Doyle;
courtesy of Visual Resources Library*

hearts be softened. Wilt Thou touch them by Thy Holy Spirit, that their animosity may turn to gratitude.” Even though the building did not yet have its tower, President Hinckley concluded, “We dedicate it as being complete, but pray that the way may be opened for the placement of a steeple with the crowning figure of Moroni, Thine ancient prophet.”¹³³

Church members had been “heavily involved” in all these events. The bishopric of the nearby Arlington Ward had issued special invitations for members to participate. They reported that the ward was “truly electrified by the experience of working together toward the goal of making the opening of the Boston Temple the experience of a lifetime.”¹³⁴

The Final Struggle

Events were occurring on a national level that had an impact on developments in Boston. During the temple controversy, republican Senate Judiciary chairman Orrin Hatch of Utah sponsored the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act in Congress. It clarified that “cities may no longer be able to zone religious groups out of a jurisdiction, and it appears that any land-use regulations that restrict religious buildings must now be justified by a strong state interest.” Eight other senators, including democrats Edward Kennedy and Joseph I. Lieberman, also sponsored the bipartisan bill. It was passed in the Senate without amendment and by unanimous consent on July 7, 2000, and it was signed into law by President Bill Clinton on September 22, 2000.¹³⁵ The passage of this bill was seen as a victory for religious liberty.¹³⁶ The U.S. Supreme Court’s decision in the Boston temple case was seen as upholding the principles of this law.

In this climate of increasing attention to religious concerns, the Church appealed Judge Fahey’s ruling to the Massachusetts Appeals Court. In response, plaintiffs cross-appealed as a procedural protective measure. The case was then sent directly to the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court.

The Supreme Judicial Court heard arguments beginning on January 12, 2001. This top state court ruled on May 16 that the steeple could be built atop the Belmont temple. Citing Notre Dame’s rose window and the balcony of St. Peter’s Basilica, Chief Justice Margaret Marshall, who wrote the seventeen-page opinion, clarified that “it is not for judges to determine whether the inclusion of a particular architectural feature is ‘necessary’ for a particular religion.”¹³⁷ Fahey’s “attempt to segment the project into religiously necessary and unnecessary parts was strongly rebuked.” Marshall instructed future judges to “keep their distance from any question . . . [of] what is doctrinally important to a congregation.”¹³⁸

Church attorney Paul Killeen called the decision “three victories in one.” He declared: “It’s a victory for the Latter-day Saints Church, which is pleased to be able to complete the project; it’s a victory for the people of Belmont and the Zoning Board of Appeals, which exercised praiseworthy reason; and it is clearly a victory for the

Dover Amendment, because if the Dover Amendment doesn't protect your right to build a building that looks like a church, what does it protect?"¹³⁹ He wrote in retrospect, "I loved this engagement and I would like to again have the pleasure of helping the LDS church."¹⁴⁰

Temple President Loren C. Dunn lay critically ill on the day of the decision to let the steeple be built. Right before he passed away, his wife quietly whispered in his ear that the Church had won the case and the steeple along with an angel Moroni would be added to the already dedicated temple.¹⁴¹

Latter-day Saints everywhere applauded the decision, and Church spokesman Dale Bills said in a press release that the ruling "has ratified and affirmed the earlier judgments of those who are best able to make such decisions on behalf of the community," acknowledging there were "many friends not of our faith, who have supported us."¹⁴² The *Boston Herald* called the decision a "victory for sound . . . architecture."¹⁴³ A leading Jewish group that had urged the court to vote in the Church's favor also lauded the outcome. Attorney James O. Fleckner, a lawyer for the American Jewish Congress, declared the case mattered to people of all faiths.¹⁴⁴ Truly, the Boston temple's victory did have ramifications for religious freedom and not only produced heated debates and the introduction of two bills in the Massachusetts Legislature to modify the Dover Amendment in 2001,¹⁴⁵ but also spawned a bill in the United States Congress.

The eagerly awaited placement of the angel Moroni occurred on Friday, September 21, 2001. On this date, the anniversary of Moroni's initial appearance in 1823, statues of the angelic messenger were placed atop three temples—one in the Netherlands, and the others in Nauvoo and Boston. In Boston, "crews began several days earlier attaching the steeple that was prefabricated in two major pieces." When the statue of the angel was uncrated, families posed for pictures beside it. The statue was raised without much public fanfare. "Even though no announcement was made to publicize the event, approximately 200 attended." Intermittent showers delayed the placement until midafternoon.¹⁴⁶ Finally, the temple appeared complete.

While most temples dedicated in the year 2000 featured a newly sculpted figure of Moroni, the Boston temple was one of the few to have a nine-foot replica of the twelve-foot angelic figure atop the Salt Lake Temple. This statue had originally been produced in 1891 by Utah sculptor Cyrus Dallin. Placing this version of the statue atop the Boston temple was appropriate because Dallin spent most of his productive years as an artist in Arlington, a community adjoining Belmont. Although not a member of the Church, Dallin reflected: "I consider that my 'angel Moroni' brought me nearer to God than anything I ever did. It seemed to me that I came to know what it means to commune with angels from heaven."¹⁴⁷

The Boston temple proved to be a great blessing to the Saints in New England, who were grateful to have the house of the Lord in their midst. As Belmont neighbors became accustomed to the temple's presence and better acquainted with those who worshiped there, the old animosities almost completely faded away. Meanwhile, Saints in the New York City area were still awaiting similar blessings, since White Plains and then Harrison were withholding permission to construct the temple there. It appears that in these areas, the principle of religious freedom is still on trial.

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²⁶Stahle, "Banner Year," 3.

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²⁸*Martin v. Board of Appeals*, 7, 31. This was submitted under bylaw 7.4.2, "Special permits shall be granted only if the Special Permit Granting Authority . . . (Board) determines that the proposal's benefits to the Town will outweigh any adverse effects."

²⁹Killeen, e-mail message.

³⁰General Laws chapter 40A, section 3, paragraph 2, commonly known as the Dover Amendment. "No zoning ordinance or By-law shall . . . prohibit, regulate or restrict the use of land or structures for religious purposes . . . provided, however, that such land or structures may be subject to reasonable regulations concerning the bulk and height of structures and determining yard sizes, lot area, setbacks, open space, parking and building coverage requirements."

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Wilbur Cox in his navy whites at Bowdoin, Maine, in 1942.