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“The Lord’s Way”: The Genesis of the Church Security Plan, 1920–36

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The Great Depression of the 1930s marked a fateful passage in the annals of the American people. Against a backdrop of a nation deeply mired in an unrelenting economic and social crisis, dramatic events unfolded in the lives of the men and women who were members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The Mountain West, where the majority of the members of the Church resided, was particularly hard hit as economic troubles lingering from the previous decade intensified. Throughout, fidelity to their traditional values of independence, self-reliance, and self-sufficiency was sorely tried.

Church members would find succor in two almost diametrically opposed responses. President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal offered an amalgam of programs and panaceas through which the

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federal government sought to deliver relief, recovery, and reform. In contrast, under the leadership of President Heber J. Grant, the Church fused core principles governing the relief and rehabilitation of the worthy poor into a new, comprehensive, and centralized program designated the Church Security Plan.

The implications of the Church's innovative approach reverberate down to the present day. They are echoed in a familiar, if erroneous, adage that asserts that during the Great Depression, Latter-day Saints took care of their own.

Historically speaking, Latter-day Saints have diligently sought as a society to care for members' temporal as well as spiritual well-being. Collaborative economic practices among the earliest members included forms of consecration, stewardship, and tithing. Subsequently, after the exodus to Utah, fast offerings were introduced to provide for those in need during the agricultural crises of the 1850s. Later that century, under Brigham Young's guidance, cooperatives were established and the United Order was organized.[1]

Through these efforts the Church endeavored to provide members with a measure of economic equality and security. They were also a manifestation of an isolationist spirit that sought to wall off the Church's membership from the vicissitudes and vices of the national economy by promoting personal self-sufficiency, supplemented by community-wide industry and production. This impulse was gradually eroded by the coming of the railroad, the control of mining by out-of-state investors, and expansion of members' secular temporal interests. Nevertheless, efforts to develop and maintain some form of cooperative-based economy persisted into the 1880s. As the region's economics and politics, as well as the commitment of some members, changed with the times, most endeavors of this nature were abandoned.[2]

Despite the shift away from broad collective enterprises, the Church's nineteenth-century experiences established practices in caring for the worthy poor that persisted after the turn of the century.

In times of crisis, the priority remained the meeting of faithful members' essential temporal needs. Those who required assistance were to be aided and, when possible, given an opportunity to work for what was received.[3]

The 1920s proved to be the first of two decades of very hard times in the Mountain West, where 80 percent of the Church's population resided. Utah alone was home to 50 percent of the Church's total membership, with Latter-day Saints constituting 66 percent of the population.[4] The crux of the problem faced by Utah and the region was illuminated by Rolland A. Vandegrift and Associates' 1931 study, "Census Facts and Utah's Future." It noted that the state had just passed through a difficult decade economically and demographically and was inexorably entering another. The study reported that during the 1920s, Utah had become quite literally an exporter of its greatest resource—men of working age. During that decade, Utah's population had only increased by 58,000, when it should have increased by 89,000. Utah had in effect exported about 30,000 residents through out-migration.

The root cause was Utah's economy. The state's capacity to create new jobs was not expanding nearly fast enough to provide full employment for all its citizens. The study stated the matter succinctly: "It is apparent that, to have prevented losses by emigration . . . [the] industrial development of Utah would have had to increase half again as rapidly as it did." The grimness of this assessment was accentuated when Utah's losses through emigration were fully analyzed. The heaviest loss of population had been concentrated among men, ages twenty-four to sixty-four.

The study's prognosis offered little hope for a rapid turnaround. Mining, manufacturing, and wholesale distribution were the sectors most likely to generate sustained economic growth. Though only accounting for about one-third of Utah's employment activity at the time, they controlled the fate of the remaining components of the state's economy. But mining was deeply depressed, and little could be done to expand manufacturing in the short run. Furthermore, agriculture was acknowledged to be at a standstill.[5] Much the same could be said regarding the economy of the region in general.

During the post-WWI era, the Church initially sought to alleviate any impoverished member's most urgent needs through the local wards. Bishops were responsible for the temporal as well as ecclesiastical well-being of ward members. Ward Relief Society presidents, who at times in the past acted independently, were encouraged to assist bishops in their duties. Aid was provided primarily through the distribution of ward fast offerings, which included cash and in-kind donations, Relief Society funds, and commodities. Ward employment committees attempted to facilitate job placement among the underemployed and unemployed.[6] No one knowingly went hungry even though resources were sometimes meager.

Stakes also took steps to provide aid. Salt Lake County, as a major metropolitan area, experienced a higher incidence of poverty than neighboring rural areas.[7] Several stakes there banded together and created a multistake employment committee, introducing an incipient form of regional cooperation. The Salt Lake, Ensign, Liberty, Pioneer, Granite, Grant, and Cottonwood Stakes participated.[8]

Whenever deemed appropriate, Church headquarters extended additional financial support. It acted through the Office of the Presiding Bishopric, which was responsible for overseeing efforts throughout the Church. At times, tithing and the general funds of the Church were utilized in support of local efforts. Leaders also collaborated with city, county, and private charitable agencies when possible. Beginning in 1928, the Presiding Bishopric counseled that in times of need faithful members should turn to their family first, then to the county, and finally to the Church.[9]

In the Salt Lake area, the Relief Society General Board maintained a fully functioning social services department. An outgrowth of experiences gained during World War I, this department introduced professional social work practices into the Church. A formal division of responsibility between Salt Lake County and the Relief Society Social Services Department regarding Church members dated from 1926. Sylvester Q. Cannon, the Presiding Bishop, and Amy Brown Lyman, a member of the General Relief Society Presidency, enjoyed a close working relationship with key social service administrators in the county. Through this arrangement, state and local government and the Church were able to husband their limited resources more effectively. This relationship continued through the early stages of the Great Depression, ceasing only when New Deal legislation mandated the reorganization of state and county welfare programs to such an extent that cooperation was no longer feasible.[10]

If conditions had not been so drastically altered by the onset of the Great Depression, Church welfare practices might have continued along the same lines indefinitely. They could have remained essentially decentralized and ward oriented with some collaboration with county and private charitable agencies. Needs would have been met as they had been throughout the 1920s, without ever developing a comprehensive, Church-wide program.

Without explicit recognition of the broader issues underlying unemployment and poverty in the region, the Church's admirable relief efforts would have remained as they had during the 1920s, more Band-Aid than cure. The resources available to the Church, counties, and private charities were able to take up the challenge of dealing with individuals' and families' immediate needs, but regional systemic weaknesses were virtually beyond reach under the prevailing approach.

But then the curtain rose on the most calamitous economic crisis the nation had yet experienced. The Great Depression's full impact was astonishing, and Utah, already mired in a regional recession, was exceptionally hard hit. Three critical economic sectors immediately experienced dramatic downturns. The value of minerals produced in the mining industry plummeted from $115 million to $23 million.

Manufacturing fell 65 percent, while agriculture declined by 66 percent.[11] Farmers faced declining prices while the prospect of foreclosure constantly loomed.

In July 1931 a report published in *Proceedings: Utah Academy of Sciences* noted that the "present depression" was already one of the most severe on record. Several indices charted the impact on business activity in Utah. One showed a decline of 22.9 percent through December 1930. Another pegged the regression at around 25.5 percent by January 1931, while yet another pointed to a decline of 33.8 percent for the same period. Regardless of the specifics, all registered a continuous downward spiral over a fourteen-month period.[12]

During the depth of the Depression, almost 36 percent of Utah's predominantly Latter-day Saint workforce was unemployed.[13] The traditional and sometimes innovative approaches to welfare implemented during the 1920s by the Church and other charitable agencies were in peril of being overwhelmed.

By 1933, with no upturn in sight, the First Presidency began considering what additional steps might be taken to augment current efforts.[14] At that juncture a career civil servant, J. Reuben Clark Jr. was called to the First Presidency. He brought tremendous administrative and intellectual capacities to his new calling. The dimensions of the challenge, once it was understood, required a big solution, or so it seemed to Clark.[15]

From the outset, Clark began formulating a plan to move the Church's relief efforts closer to what he believed to be the gospel ideal and away from what he saw as the political and institutional dangers of a growing dependency on government expenditures. His prescription called for a partial retrenchment in terms of core values and, simultaneously, a Church-wide, correlated mobilization of members and resources.[16] In an October 1933 general conference address, he suggested that "if people shall shun idleness, if they shall cast out from their hearts those twin usurpers ambition and greed and re-enthrone brotherly love and return to the old-time virtues industry, thrift, honesty, self-reliance, independence of spirit, self-discipline, and mutual happiness we shall be on our way to returned prosperity and worldly happiness."[17]

In June 1933 Clark sketched the structure of such a program in a series of handwritten notes that he subsequently developed into a set of detailed instructions.[18] It called upon every member to participate in a dynamic, multipronged, priesthood-administered initiative coordinating employment services, storehouses, commodity and labor exchanges, as well as a variety of production projects Churchwide. Under the plan, stakes were to be organized into regions like one then functioning in Salt Lake County. All relief efforts were to be directed by the Presiding Bishopric supplemented by a central welfare committee. Members would no longer be counseled to turn to the county after first turning to their family. The Church would now assume that secondary role.[19]

Though "Suggested Directions," as Clark christened his proposal, was initially approved, it was not immediately implemented. The Presiding Bishop, holding to an assessment that would prove myopic, failed to see any urgent need for change, while Church President Heber J. Grant felt the time was not yet right. A welfare survey conducted by the Presiding Bishopric suggested to them that the existing decentralized program was adequate for perceived needs. Encouraging statements from the White House and the enthusiastic passage of New Deal legislation implied that economic recovery might be imminent.[20]

Responding to the delay, Clark expressed his dismay in a letter to Presiding Bishop Sylvester Q. Cannon. Clark argued that the present program fell far short of what was needed, that more "precision and direction" were required. His "Suggested Directions" would provide these elements. Reflecting his and some other Church leaders' philosophical hostility toward Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal, he further contended that greed, graft, and corruption had "characterized the use of relief funds among us during the last two years." He argued that this was "destroying morale and undermining moral and spiritual stamina."[21]

Clark's arguments did not prevail. Presidents Heber J. Grant and Anthony W. Ivins of the First Presidency concluded that "it was not necessary to issue [Suggested Directions at the time] for the reasons that the relief work throughout the Church was being carried out effectively, and the instructions in the pamphlet might cause some confusion and misunderstanding."[22]

Disappointed but undaunted, Clark continued his crusade for a more ambitious and correlated approach to Church relief. And, as the New Deal expanded and direct relief became more widely available, Clark became increasingly alarmed at what he saw as the constitutional implications of recent legislation and the enervating effect the dole would have upon recipients. Over the course of the next two years he spoke directly about his belief in the evils of the dole and the sacredness of the Constitution.[23]

In 1934 and again in 1935, the First Presidency came close to taking some substantive action. Each time, a lack of consensus regarding direction and emphasis resulted in further delays. However, matters came to a head by the latter part of 1935.[24] Welfare surveys revealed that local Church-unit resources were being overwhelmed. Members were relying on government-sponsored direct and work relief in growing numbers. Federal programs appeared to be in flux, with President Roosevelt creating an air of uncertainty about their future direction when he suggested the administration of direct relief might be turned over to the states. Fearing that matters could rapidly exceed the Church's capacity to deal with them effectively, the First Presidency finally agreed that the time was right to move forward.[25]

The First Presidency called upon Pioneer Stake president and Salt Lake County commissioner Harold B. Lee to serve as managing director of the new program. While Lee served as a stake president, he earned the respect of many eminent Church leaders with his very aggressive and determined approach to providing for the needy. In 1932 the Pioneer Stake created a storehouse and began operating a cannery. Arrangements were made with farmers in the vicinity to exchange labor for agricultural commodities. These initiatives and others like them provided both work and commodities for the needy.[26]

The Pioneer Stake's activities were not entirely unique. Other stake presidents in the area had also been innovative, but Lee stood out nonetheless.[27] Now his ecclesiastical and administrative experience was to be applied to this critical issue on a full-time basis. In April 1935 the First Presidency invited Lee to assume a direct role in the planning and development of a comprehensive Church welfare plan. He would serve as managing director of the welfare program until 1941.[28]

The Church Security Plan was announced in the Church's general conference on 6 April 1936. The federal government's role in providing some much-needed relief was acknowledged, but it was emphasized that it could not be relied upon to be constant in its efforts. Instead, to restore true independence and security, the Church would take care of its own and attempt to remove all worthy members from government relief rolls.[29]

In subsequent remarks recounting the inauguration of the plan, President Heber J. Grant emphasized the following: "Our primary purpose in organizing the Church Security Plan was to set up . . . a system under which the curse of idleness would be done away with, the evils of a dole abolished, and independence, industry, thrift, and self-respect be once more established among our family. The aim of the Church is to help the people help themselves. Work is to be re-enthroned as a ruling principle in the lives of our church membership."[30]

The Security Plan's goals were immediate as well as long-term. The most urgent challenge was the creation of a "surplus of foodstuffs and other commodities during the ensuing summer months and to provide work for all employable persons who are receiving assistance from the Church." The ultimate objective was to "set up within the Church an organization to make it possible for the Church to eventually take care of its people exclusive of government relief and to assist them in placing themselves on a financially independent basis."[31]

It was further suggested that the Security Plan would not only alleviate the immediate distress of faithful members but that it could also offer "a solution to grave national problems." Members were reminded that the world was watching: "The Church has a great opportunity to attract the attention of the Depression ridden world by showing them the way out with this new cooperative program." The Church would once again stand as a "city upon a hill."[32] In effect, apart from expanding relief efforts among its members, the Church leadership was inherently offering a potential alternative to the New Deal's approach to the crisis with all its accompanying political implications.

To some members, aspects of the plan seemed reminiscent of earlier Church cooperative efforts. In many of their remarks the First Presidency and other Church leaders held up the past as an example, frequently referring to the laws of consecration and stewardship as practiced in the early days of the Church. The United Order and the Order of Enoch were both cited as examples of what cooperation could achieve and also of the consequences of the failure of faith. Statements connecting these earlier efforts directly with the Church Security Plan were often ambiguous. While carefully indicating that the current plan was not the initial phase of a new United Order, J. Reuben Clark Jr., Melvin J. Ballard, and other authorities occasionally suggested that it might lay the foundation for such.[33]

Stakes were organized into regions presided over by executive councils. Regional storehouses were developed, and ward employment committees more efficiently organized. Storehouses were to be operated in such a way that surplus commodities could be preserved, eliminating the waste endemic in the market place. To the extent possible, the urban unemployed were to be shifted to farming, mining, and other industrial activities.[34]

The plan was also designed to "provide a means of distribution which will permit farmers in one section to use all available lands for production, for laborers and tradesmen in other sections to work to a full capacity in order that all may have work to do and that none should be found in want." Surpluses would provide needed commodities, and distribution would be regulated through an internal barter system among regions and storehouses. The result would be, in effect, the creation of a Church-centered mini-economy, operating separate from the secular economy and free of external control.[35]

Almost immediately the Church Security Plan resulted in a substantial increase in the Church's relief efforts. Though not spectacularly dramatic, Church statistics documented a steady and tangible expansion in member participation in relief-related activities. The program provided a call to action that many answered. A Church survey in the latter part of 1936 indicated that significant progress had been made in most stakes in preparation for the coming winter. Tithing and fast offering receipts rapidly increased. Welfare projects were implemented in most wards and stakes. Substantial numbers of members were assisted in one way or another. Evidently, the regional structure superimposed on the existing Church organization steadily improved cooperation and coordination.

In the 1936 welfare survey, 112 stakes reported out of a possible 117. Fast offerings had more than doubled, from $50,623 in 1935 to $106,450. Over 360 projects had been undertaken with 19,000 participants. More than 1,000 members had been placed in private employment, and 23,000 had been assisted in some respect. Of the 112 stakes, 87 indicated they could meet members' needs through the coming winter. Two years later, in June 1938, it was reported that over 56,000 members received some form of assistance under the plan and there were sixty-seven regional and stake storehouses in operation. By 1943, after the Depression had subsided, ninety storehouses and sixty-five canneries were in operation.[36]

Clearly, from at least an institutional perspective, the Church Security Plan proved a boon to struggling members, as the worst aspects of the Depression gradually began to subside. In 1936 it was estimated that 88,000 members of the Church were receiving some form of relief. During the period from 1930 to 1935, prior to the Church Security Plan, the Church expended $3.68 million on what it identified as charity. A crude calculation suggests this was the equivalent of $7 per year per person when divided by 88,000. From 1936 through 1940 the Church expended about $7.2 million for charity, or about $16.36 per year per person, again using the 1936 estimate of 88,000 members in need of relief. The Church supported many additional activities designed to get needy members back on their feet, such as employment and agricultural relocation projects, but in the final analysis there were not enough means available in terms of dollars and cents and other resources to fully care for the entire Church in a truly meaningful way.[37]

Whatever the Church Security Plan accomplished, it must be remembered that it did so within the context of the New Deal and the massive federal expenditure of recovery dollars poured into Utah and the other states. For the period from 1933 to 1939 the federal government spent $174 million in Utah in grants, payments, and other expenditures. During this period, an additional $97 million in federally sponsored loans were extended in the state. Utahns also benefitted from about $18 million through New Deal insurance programs. The total outlay reached over $289 million ($5 billion in 2017 dollars), for an average of $41.3 million per year (about $78 per person per year for every man, woman, and child in the state). In comparison, the Church's outlays averaged about one million dollars per year Church-wide.

In 1938, to avoid confusion with the government's Social Security program, the Church Security Plan became the Church Welfare Plan. By 1939 the program was sufficiently established for the Church to issue a handbook containing a full outline of the program. Though the plan did not immediately achieve all its objectives, it proved remarkably resilient. It remained essentially intact until substantially reorganized in 1960.[38]

For two full decades, the members and leadership of the Church sought to provide succor in times of need. As circumstances intensified, the First Presidency took bold steps to expand the help provided to the members while attempting to insulate members from the dangers they believed were inherent in the dole and other government-sponsored subsidies. Despite limited resources, many were lifted and cared for at a time when it seemed everyone was in distress. The tenets and ideals that were embedded in the Church's approach to welfare from its very earliest days were sustained; it was only the ways and means expressing that commitment that changed over time.

Notes

1. Albert Fisher, "Mormon Welfare Programs: Past and Present," *Social Science Journal* 15, no. 2 (April 1978): 75–99.
2. Roy N. Doxey, *The Welfare Program of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1960), 16.
3. Fisher, "Mormon Welfare Programs," 75–99.
4. In 1920 Church membership stood at 525,987 and in 1930 at 670,017. See *Deseret News 2011 Church News Almanac* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2011), 191.
5. Rolland A. Vandegrift and associates, "Census Facts and Utah's Future," 15 June 1931, Lowry Nelson Papers (hereafter Nelson Papers), L. Tom Perry Special Collections Library, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah (hereafter Perry Special Collections); see pages 4, 6–8, 18, 21, 48–49.
6. Garth Mangum and Bruce Blumell, *The Mormon's War on Poverty: A History of LDS Welfare, 1830–1990* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1993), 89–91.
7. Mangum and Blumell, *War on Poverty*, 89–91.
8. Glen L. Rudd, *Pure Religion: The Story of Church Welfare since 1930* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1995), 5–6.
9. Mangum and Blumell, *War on Poverty*, 89–91.
10. Memorandum of understanding with Campbell M. Brown, chairman of Salt Lake County Relief Committee, 4 October 1933, J. Reuben Clark Jr. Papers

(hereafter Clark Papers), Perry Special Collections; Presiding Bishopric, *Care of the Poor* (n.p., 1934); Mangum and Blumell, *War on Poverty*, 117.

11. A. Smith Pond, "An Analysis of Effective Income Distribution in the State of Utah," *Proceedings: Utah Academy of Science* 11 (1934): 121–22. Richard D. Poll, David E. Miller, Eugene E. Campbell, and Thomas G. Alexander, *Utah's History* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1978), 482.
12. Dilworth Walker, "A Statistical Analysis of Periods of Prosperity and Depression from 1875 to 1930," *Proceedings: Utah Academy of Science* 8 (1931): 78.
13. Poll et al., *Utah's History*, 482.
14. D. Michael Quinn, *Elder Statesman: A Biography of J. Reuben Clark* (Salt Lake City: Signature, 2001), 383–88.
15. D. Michael Quinn, *J. Reuben Clark: The Church Years* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1983), 265.
16. J. Reuben Clark Jr., in Conference Report, October 1933, 102; Mangum and Blumell, *War on Poverty*, 121.
17. Clark, in Conference Report, October 1933, 103.
18. J. Reuben Clark Jr., "Course of Action," holograph notes, Clark Papers.
19. J. Reuben Clark Jr., "Suggested Directions for Church Relief Activities," 15 July 1933, Clark Papers; J. Reuben Clark Jr., "Final Draft," 23 October 1933, Clark Papers; Quinn, *J. Reuben Clark*, 260; Mangum and Blumell, *War on Poverty*, 124.
20. J. Reuben Clark Jr., "Tentative Notes for Group Meeting with Stake Presidents," October 1936, Clark Papers; "1932 Church Welfare Survey," Clark Papers. See also Quinn, *J. Reuben Clark*, 263.
21. J. Reuben Clark Jr. to Sylvester Q. Cannon, 9 November 1933, Clark Papers.
22. Minutes of First Presidency meeting, 27 November 1933, quoted in Quinn, *J. Reuben Clark*, 262–63.
23. J. Reuben Clark Jr., "Remarks at Special Meeting of the Presidents of Stakes, Bishops, and Mission Presidents," 2 October 1936, Clark Papers; Leonard J. Arrington, Feramorz Y. Fox, and Dean L. May, *Building the City of God: Community and Cooperation among the Mormons* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 349.
24. Quinn, *Elder Statesman*, 385–93.
25. Draft statement by First Presidency announcing Security Plan [not released], April 1935, Clark Papers; J. Reuben Clark Jr., manuscript of remarks presented at special priesthood meeting, 7 October 1935, Clark Papers; J. Reuben Clark Jr., note in file, November 1935, Clark Papers.
26. Rudd, *Pure Religion*, 8–10; Mangum and Blumell, *War on Poverty*, 108.
27. Mangum and Blumell, *War on Poverty*, 107–9.

28. L. Brent Goates, *Harold B. Lee: Prophet and Seer* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1982), 141.
29. First Presidency, "Important Message on Relief," press release, 6 April 1936, Clark Papers; Leonard J. Arrington and Wayne K. Hinton, "Origin of the Welfare Plan of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints," *BYU Studies* 5, no. 2 (Winter 1964): 71; Mangum and Blumell, *War on Poverty*, 128; Goates, *Harold B. Lee*, 144.
30. Heber J. Grant, in Conference Report, October 1936, 3.
31. Henry A. Smith, "The Church Security Program Organized," *Improvement Era*, June 1936, 337; see 331–37.
32. J. Reuben Clark Jr., "Remarks at Special Meeting of Presidents of Stakes, Bishops, and Mission Presidents," 2 April 1936, Clark Papers; Clark, in Conference Report, April 1936, 114–15.
33. Arrington, Fox, and May, *Building the City of God*, 344, 350; Conference Report, April 1945, 25.
34. Smith, "Church Security Program," 334.
35. Smith, "Church Security Program," 337.
36. "1936 Church Welfare Survey," updates, Clark Papers; J. Reuben Clark Jr., "Church Welfare Plan: A Discussion," 30 June 1939, Clark Papers; J. Reuben Clark Jr., in Conference Report, October 1943, 12–14.
37. See April Conference Reports, 1930 to 1940.
38. Poll et al., *Utah's History*, 488–89; Mangum and Blumell, *War on Poverty*, 157.