



EVENTS AND CHANGES DURING
THE ADMINISTRATION OF
SPENCER W. KIMBALL

THE administration of Spencer W. Kimball (1973–85) proved a significant period of Church history, its highlight the 1978 revelation on priesthood. There were, however, many other developments during that time.

President Kimball's presidency began with a shock the day after Christmas in 1973. Church President Harold B. Lee felt exhausted that day, and his doctor recommended that he check into the LDS Hospital to have some tests run. The first tests showed that he was anemic and experiencing some heart distress. In the evening he sat up in bed, spoke a few words to his secretary, Arthur Haycock, and tried for a moment to get out of bed but collapsed. His heart had stopped, and, in spite of frantic efforts by the doctors to rescue him, President Lee quickly slid toward death.

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Arthur immediately called Spencer Kimball, who, as President of the Quorum of Twelve, would be the ranking Church leader if the Church President should pass away. President Kimball rushed to the hospital and, when the attending physician pronounced President Lee dead, President Kimball assumed leadership responsibility.

News of the event surprised and shocked the Church membership. In 1941, when Elder Lee became an Apostle, he was more than twenty years younger than all the men senior to him in the Quorum of Twelve. For decades it had seemed practically certain that he would one day succeed to the Church Presidency, and he did. Because of his age and apparent good health, it also seemed likely he would preside for an extended period.

That Spencer Kimball would live to succeed Harold B. Lee had always been seen as most unlikely, because Spencer was four years older and had experienced major health problems, including typhoid fever, small pox, carbuncles, transient strokes, heart valve and bypass surgery, and recurrent cancer of the throat. During all the years the two men had sat next to one another in council, it had never seemed more than a theoretical possibility that Elder Kimball would be the survivor. The event surprised him more than anyone else when it happened.

In light of his health condition and his age, people expected some sort of a caretaker presidency. Elder W. Grant Bangerter of the Seventy said, “We knew, of course, that he would manage somehow, until the next great leader arose, but it would not be easy for him. ‘O Lord,’ we prayed, ‘please bless President Kimball. He needs all the help you can give him’” (8).¹

Spencer had not expected the calling, but when it came he accepted it without hesitation. Years earlier, in 1951, he had said, “I am positive that the appointments of His Twelve by the Lord and the subsequent deaths control the Presidency of the Church. No man will live long enough to become President of the Church ever who is not the proper one to give it leadership. . . . No one of the Presidents had all the virtues nor all the abilities. Each in his own way and time filled a special need and made his great contributions. This I know. This I know.” Although he felt himself weak and unworthy, he

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accepted that God had truly entrusted him to lead the Church. The calling was his, and he determined to pursue the task with all his energy, not knowing just where it would lead.

A PROPHE T' S MANTLE

In April 1974, before the general conference at which he would be sustained as Church President, Spencer W. Kimball addressed the regional representatives seminar about missionary work. This was his first major address as President, and it expressed his vision of how the gospel might spread over the whole earth. Elder Bangerter described the event:

He had not spoken very long when a new awareness seemed to fall on the congregation. We became alert to an astonishing spiritual presence. . . . It was as if, spiritually speaking, our hair began to stand on end. . . . President Kimball was opening spiritual windows and beckoning to us to come and gaze with him on the plans of eternity, . . . inviting us to view with him the destiny of the gospel and the vision of its ministry. I doubt that any person present that day will ever forget that occasion. . . . It was a message totally unlike any other in my experience.

When President Kimball concluded, President Ezra Taft Benson arose and, with a voice filled with emotion echoing the feeling of all present, declared, "No greater address has been given before any seminar. . . . There is in very deed a prophet in Israel" (18–19).

MISSIONARY WORK

This prophetic address laid out the challenge of worldwide missionary work. President Kimball exhorted, "We have been proselyting now for 144 years. Are we prepared to lengthen our stride? To enlarge our vision? . . . Somehow I feel that when we have done all in our power that the Lord will find a way to open doors. This is my faith. Is anything too hard for the Lord?" (v).

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He did not exclude himself from the mandate. He said, “Let *us* lengthen our stride.” That became a recurrent theme during the Kimball administration.

The President taught that every healthy young man in the Church should keep his life righteous so that he could fulfill a mission. “There may be some who can’t, but they *ought* to go on a mission” (115). There was no established tradition of missionary service by young men from outside the United States and Canada. In Buenos Aires he put the matter starkly: “Do you know of any reason why I should send my sons but that you shouldn’t send yours? This is a great nation and great people, and it is your responsibility to teach the gospel in these nations. When you have sent all the boys from this area on missions [here], we can send all the North American missionaries to India or China, or Russia, or somewhere else” (118–19). During the Kimball administration, the number of such missionaries greatly increased. He also said, “Many young women have a desire to serve a full time mission, and they are also welcome in the Lord’s service. This responsibility is not on them, as it is on the elders, but they will receive rich blessings for their unselfish service” (120).

President Kimball did not preach a new gospel of missionary work, but his administration did give that responsibility increased emphasis. In five years after he became President, the approximately seventeen thousand missionaries in the field swelled to over twenty-seven thousand. Some of the increase came from natural growth of the pool of missionary-age young men in the Church, but another part of the increase reflects the higher percentage of eligible young men who elected to accept a mission call.

In 1982, missions for men changed from twenty-four to eighteen months. I understand that the objective was to enable more young men to serve these shorter missions, particularly in countries with compulsory military service. However, after three years the practice ended. It did allow some additional young men to serve, but they were being released just when their language skills and proselyting efficiency were maturing. The Brethren quipped that they were unable to figure out how to cut off the first six months of the mission experience rather than the last six months.

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In 1981, the financing of missions changed. The IRS claimed that the money parents and others sent to missionaries for their support should not be considered a deductible charitable contribution to the Church but rather a nondeductible gift to the missionary. Because of the litigation, which ultimately sustained the IRS position, the Church adopted a new mechanism. Rather than sending money directly to the missionary, as had been the practice, the family or other persons providing support made contributions to the ward missionary fund, and then in turn the ward supported the missionary.

In 1974, the First Presidency called David Kennedy to serve as their special ambassador. His experience as banker, secretary of the treasury in the Nixon cabinet, and US ambassador to NATO gave him valuable international connections. For example, he was able to obtain recognition of the Church in Portugal through decree of a new military government.

AREA CONFERENCES

The administration of Spencer W. Kimball reflected his personality. He was persistent, hardworking, loving, open to change, and deeply concerned with fairness. One of the emphases of the Kimball administration was “taking the Church to the people.” For several years, the Church had held annually an area general conference in some distant place, reaching people who would probably never attend a general conference and never see or hear the President of the Church in person. The fourth such conference had already been planned for Stockholm when President Kimball took office.

He believed strongly in the concept, and the next year he expanded area conferences to seven areas in South America and East Asia, which he attended personally. Even when he could not travel, the area conferences continued. Between 1975 and 1981, fifty-nine more area conferences brought members and general leaders of the Church together.

In an analogous move, President Kimball initiated a sequence of about sixty solemn assemblies between 1975 and 1978, gatherings of priesthood leaders from a designated area meeting with General Authorities for several

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hours of specific instruction about Church policies. During the years these were held, tens of thousands of local leaders were exposed at close range to general leaders of the Church.

BUILDING TEMPLES

In his first year as President, Spencer dedicated the Washington (DC) Temple, begun several years earlier in President McKay's time. Some large temple building continued, but the Kimball administration saw a great increase of smaller temples—another instance of taking the Church to the people. At the beginning of the twelve Kimball years there were fifteen operating temples. At the end there were thirty-six operating temples, with eleven more either under construction or announced.

The most dramatic story of temple building is that of the Freiberg temple. In 1978, Elder Henry Burkhardt met with Communist East German officials, seeking permission for six couples at a time to leave the country and be sealed in the Swiss Temple upon their solemn promise to return, but the GDR officials would allow only one individual from a couple to leave the country, not both at the same time. After petition proved futile, one of the Communist officials finally said, "Instead of going to Switzerland, why don't you just have your own temple here?" (368). Elder Thomas S. Monson reported the statement to the First Presidency, and in just a few weeks, he traveled to Germany to show local Church leaders drawings of a possible temple. Emil Fetzer, the Church architect, drew up thirteen different designs for the temple before the German state architects finally gave their approval. President Gordon B. Hinckley dedicated the temple in 1985.

The Church adopted a number of policies affecting temple attendance. Ward and stake leaders interviewing for issuance of recommends were not to set quotas for temple work to be done; it must be a matter of free will. Interviewers were told to stay with the prescribed questions and not pursue their own notions. The questions were changed to ask about proper relations with family members and about testimony (matters not addressed specifically before). And the First Presidency approved the use of two-piece temple

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garments. In this period the Church also created a marvelous genealogy library, perhaps the best in the world.

ORGANIZATION

Important organizational changes took place in the Kimball administration. For example, the First Council of the Seventy had repeatedly recommended to the First Presidency, without effect, that the First Quorum of the Seventy be organized. But when the recommendation was made again in 1975, President Kimball acted upon it. He organized the First Quorum of the Seventy, made up initially of the seven men in the First Council of the Seventy, the twenty-one Assistants to the Twelve, and three men newly called. Of the thirty-seven men called in the next few years, eleven were not white Americans. Men in that group spoke among them eight different mother tongues—Navajo, French, Japanese, Dutch, German, English, Spanish, and Portuguese. It appears that this reflected a deliberate choice to broaden the base of Church leadership. (255)

In 1984, on behalf of the First Presidency, President Gordon B. Hinckley announced the appointment of new members of the First Quorum of the Seventy and explained that they would serve from three to five years. These seventies did many of the tasks previously given to the Twelve. They constituted a new intermediate rank of Church leadership.

In 1978, an emeritus status was created for General Authorities who became seventy years of age or suffered ill health. However, because the Apostles stood in the line of succession to the Presidency, they were not subject to this retirement.

In 1979, the Church Patriarch received emeritus status but no one was sustained in his place, leaving the office vacant.

In 1984, the Church was divided into thirteen administrative areas supervised by Area Presidencies. Similarly the Presiding Bishopric established area or zone offices to handle the Church's temporal affairs.

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To identify locations more easily, the names of wards, stakes, missions, and temples changed form to include geographic information, such as the Provo Utah Oak Hills Ninth Ward.

MEETINGS

Meetings constitute an important aspect of Mormon worship and culture. In 1980, a three-hour block of Sunday meetings was adopted, largely to reduce the amount of travel required in areas where Church members are scattered. The area conferences that had been held all over the world and the annual general auxiliary conferences ended. Stake conferences shifted from quarterly to twice a year. General conference was reduced to two days and no longer necessarily included April 6. The installation of satellite dishes at stake centers made it possible for Church members to observe general conference in their own area. The first experimental telecast to stake centers occurred in 1975, and by the end of the Kimball administration 900 of 1,500 stakes had satellite dishes.

PUBLICITY

The Church was often in the public eye, sometimes for good, other times for ill. The Church created a Public Communications Department to deal with such matters. The Tabernacle Choir traveled overseas more than ever. *Reader's Digest* was paid to insert pamphlets concerning the Church. A disputed "Howard Hughes will" turned up in the Church Offices. Mark Hofmann followed his forgery of historical documents with murders. And murders by the Ervil LeBaron family drew attention to fundamentalist sects. Church involvement in political issues drew attention, particularly to the question of installing a long-range MX missile system in the Utah/Nevada desert (the plan was withdrawn) and the Church's opposition to ratification of the proposed Equal Rights Amendment (ratification failed). The Church agreed with the amendment's objectives while objecting to the means.

W O M E N

Despite its opposition to the ERA, the Church displayed significantly increased concern for fairness to women. It convened meetings for women and girls analogous to the priesthood sessions of general conferences. General leaders of the women's organizations sat on the stand and spoke in general conference. Wards received instruction to recognize girls' achievements just as they did boys' achievements. Brigham Young University scholarships were made equally available to women. And women were invited to offer prayers in sacrament meeting.

W E L F A R E

The Church Welfare Program, begun in the 1930s, changed somewhat in emphasis during the Kimball administration from creating and operating stake welfare farms to individual and family preparedness. The Church disposed of many of its welfare farms and, similarly, disposed of its fifteen hospitals in three western states. The leaders realized that they could not care for even a small portion of the growing membership in a time of widespread and prolonged distress, but the Church could develop greater capacity to respond to a short-term crisis. For example, in the 1976 Teton Dam disaster, the Church called on its storehouses to feed people and recruited workers to repair the massive damage from the dam's collapse. In 1985 the drought conditions in Ethiopia brought a request from the Church that its members undertake a special fast and contribution. Six million dollars was raised for humanitarian relief in one day. This effort has continued and expanded, and the Church has now given more than a billion dollars in humanitarian aid.

D O C T R I N E

During the Kimball administration, the Church published a new edition of the Bible, including a topical guide and alternate readings from the Joseph Smith Translation. The Church also issued a new edition of the other standard works. A subtitle was added to the Book of Mormon: "Another

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Testament of Jesus Christ,” emphasizing that the Book of Mormon is a Christian document. In the same spirit, building signs and letterheads of the Church now present “JESUS CHRIST” in larger letters than the rest.

The new edition of the Doctrine and Covenants includes three additions—a vision of Joseph Smith of his brother Alvin in the celestial kingdom (section 137), a vision of Joseph F. Smith of the redemption of the dead (section 138), and Official Declaration 2, a revelation to Spencer W. Kimball extending priesthood and temple blessings to all worthy male members of the Church.

The First Presidency said in a 1978 formal statement: “The great religious leaders of the world such as Mohammed, Confucius, and the Reformers, as well as philosophers including Socrates, Plato, and others received a portion of God’s light. Moral truths were given to them by God to enlighten whole nations and to bring a higher level of understanding to individuals” (97–98).

As another doctrinal pronouncement, President Kimball stated in general conference, “We denounce that [Adam-God] theory” (95–96). He also made specific positive reference to a Mother in Heaven, reaffirming her existence (164).

REVELATION ON THE PRIESTHOOD

By my judgment, the most significant event during the Kimball administration was the revelation on priesthood, announced June 9, 1978. Like many Church members I can clearly recall the moment I first learned of it. I was in Boston visiting my son.

Over the years, my father and I had exchanged a number of letters about the priesthood restriction. Basically I was urging that we ought to be praying for change, while he was urging patience. I was talking fairness; he was talking loyalty. He said in a letter, “Perhaps what the prophet needs is not pressure, not goading, not demands. He needs in every city and place defenders—a million men and women to encourage patience, understanding and faith . . . saying, ‘President, we realize we do not know all there is

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to be known about this problem. We have faith and confidence in you and in the Lord that if relaxation is to come, it will come when the proper time comes. We shall stand and defend as did Peter, though the whole world be against us” (204). His position was that of a loyal follower.

When he became President in 1973, his responsibility was no longer to be loyal to and defend the President. His responsibility was to determine what the Lord wanted now. It was for him and no other person on earth to speak to this issue.

As the leader, President Kimball controlled the agenda, and in the 1970s he repeatedly directed his brethren’s attention to the priesthood restriction. He made the issue a matter of extended personal prayer. He often went alone to the Salt Lake Temple. He wrestled in the night with the consequences and criticisms that would follow a decision to extend priesthood. But he gradually found all those complications and concerns dwindled in significance. He later explained, “There slowly grew a deep, abiding impression to go forward with the change” (318).

In March he reported this to his counselors but continued to pray for unity among the Church leaders. He continued to discuss the question and to pray. Then on June 1, 1978, he presented the matter to the Presidency and Twelve in the Salt Lake Temple and asked if they would pray with him for final resolution of the question. He proposed to the Lord in group prayer that the change be made, and during that prayer the men in the circle experienced confirmation, each in his own way, sharing a unique feeling of unity and of assurance that the change was to be made.

When announced to the Church, this change met with nearly universal and delighted approbation. The people were grateful for the substance of the decision, but they were also appreciative of this example of modern revelation. This crowning event, together with the other significant developments of that twelve-year period, marks the administration of Spencer W. Kimball as having signal importance in the history of the Church.

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NOTE

1. This article is condensed from my book *Lengthen Your Stride: The Presidency of Spencer W. Kimball* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005); page references are in parentheses.