Joseph F. Merrill, an individual fairly unknown to the contemporary Church, was a key figure in the development of many of the educational programs now taken for granted by Church members. (© Intellectual Reserve, Inc. All rights reserved.)

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Joseph F. Merrill and the Transformation of Church Education

In the history of the Church there is no better illustration of the prophetic preparation of this people than the beginnings of the seminary and institute program. These programs were started when they were nice but not critically needed. They were granted a season to flourish and to grow into a bulwark for the Church. They now become a godsend for the salvation of modern Israel in a most challenging hour.—Boyd K. Packer[1]

Looking over the vast international reach of the Church Educational System today, with thousands of dedicated teachers serving the needs of Latter-day Saints in dozens of different countries, it is difficult to imagine that less than a century ago the educational program of the Church consisted of a few struggling schools confined to the Intermountain West.

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Church education at the beginning of the twentieth century was largely based around the academy system, a group of loosely associated Church schools begun by local stakes and found in larger Latter-day Saint population centers. Because of the geographical limitations of this system, thousands of LDS students had no access to Church education. As Church members began to expand beyond the mountain strongholds of the Church, there was no clear plan to bring religious education to them. Like a number of other Church programs, the educational program of the Church underwent a radical transformation in the early decades of the century. Understanding the historical and prophetic threads that led to the formation of a system of education flexible enough to allow the Church to reach all of its members is a critical part of the administrative history of the Church. Thousands of Church members and leaders deserve the credit for this miraculous undertaking. Heber J. Grant, David O. McKay, and a host of other Church leaders played crucial roles in this endeavor. One individual whose life was inextricably woven into the fabric of this great work was Joseph F. Merrill. A crucial figure in the twentieth-century history of the Church, he shepherded many Latter-day Saint educational programs through the crucial transitional changes they experienced at the beginning of the century.

Joseph F. Merrill, an individual fairly unknown to the contemporary Church, was a key figure in the development of many of the educational programs now taken for granted by Church members. He was responsible for the creation of the first seminary program, played a key role in creating the institutional guidelines of the first institute of religion, and helped to keep Brigham Young University open in the midst of the worst economic crisis the nation has ever faced. He assisted in the painful but necessary task of transferring Church schools to state control. When members of the Utah State Board attempted to strike down the seminary program while it was still in its relative infancy, Merrill waged a public battle to allow the weekday religious program of the Church to survive and mature. Understanding Merrill's background, his labors, and his leadership provides a window into understanding how the current system of Church education came to be.

EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND

Joseph F. Merrill was born in 1868 in Richmond, Utah, the son of Apostle Marriner W. Merrill. His early years were devoted to difficult work on the family farm, occasionally broken by stints of labor in railroad camps operated by his father in Idaho and Montana. Marriner was the father of a large family because of plural marriage, and he realized his property could not be easily divided among his large progeny. Marriner explained that "all his life he had been handicapped because of a lack of education and that years ago he had concluded that the best thing he could do for his children was to give them all the opportunities of an education rather than to leave them material things to quarrel over after he was gone."[2] He urged his sons to receive as much education as possible, even going so far as to hire a private teacher to run his own family school. As a result, the Merrill family produced a large number of highly educated individuals. Of twelve brothers younger than Joseph, ten later graduated from college, three received PhDs, four earned master's degrees, and two others obtained medical degrees—a family record almost unprecedented for the time and place.[3]

Joseph Merrill was the beneficiary of his father's love of learning. As soon as he was of age he attended the University of Utah. Falling in love with the academic environment of the university, he decided to further his education by traveling to the eastern United States to attend school. Merrill spent the better part of the 1890s performing graduate work at the University of Michigan, University of Chicago, and Johns Hopkins University. In 1899 he received a PhD, becoming the first native Utahn to do so.[4]

Running parallel to Merrill's intellectual development was his spiritual growth. Although raised in a faith-filled home, he noted his frustration as he strove to receive a divine witness of his religion. Beginning at age ten, he began praying for his own answer. For nine years he prayed without receiving any special feelings or manifestations. At the age of nineteen, shortly before he left for college, he received a spiritual witness. Commenting on the fortunate timing of the incident, he later said, "A few weeks later I left home to go to the University. Had I left without an answer, I may have forgotten

to continue to pray, for college life is none too helpful to a religious faith. Many students begin to study science, as I did, and many students of science begin to feel sooner or later that there is no personal God. I always remembered the remarkable way in which the Lord answered me, so I never forgot to pray."[5]

During his schooling in the East, his faith was challenged by the isolation he felt being one of the only Latter-day Saints present. Engaged in an intense courtship with Annie Laura Hyde, he sent letters to her that reflect some of the isolation he felt and guilt over occasional lapses in his Sabbath observance. With no Latter-day Saint meetings to attend, he was frequently present at the worship services of other faiths. He later wrote, "I usually attended one non-Mormon church service, sometimes two services, every Sunday. For a considerable number of years I was out of intimate contact with my own Church so I went to all the churches in the communities where I lived . . . and attended their services at least 350 times during that period."[6]

While there is no indication that Merrill's faith in the Church ever seriously faltered during this period, Merrill did experience firsthand the tension which could sometimes exist between the realms of faith and academia. Even during his early years at the University of Utah he felt this strain. Reflecting back on this time he wrote, "We at the University felt we were between 'the devil and the deep blue sea.' The Gentiles regarded us as a Mormon institution. The Mormons (some of them) looked upon our school as an 'infidel factory.' Hence we did not enjoy the whole-hearted support of either faction."[7] Returning from his education in the East, he had made up his mind to remain true to the faith privately but to remain neutral publicly. He believed he could have a greater influence in the scholarly community if he displayed no partisanship and therefore accepted no calls to Church service for a time. Laboring under this dilemma, Merrill experienced what he would consider the second great theophany of his life.

Riding on a train across Wyoming, Merrill read in a newspaper a notice that Richard R. Lyman, an old friend from his time at the University of

Michigan, had been called to be stake superintendent of YMMIA. To himself he said, "Congratulations, Richard." That instant a sign came suddenly that radically altered the course of his life. "No sooner had these words passed through my mind than I was surprised by the words 'You are to be his first counselor.' These last words were not read from the paper or audibly spoken in my ears but they were forcibly impressed upon my consciousness as if they had been uttered in thunderous tones."[8] When he arrived in Salt Lake City, Richard Lyman was at the train station to deliver the expected call. Merrill accepted unhesitatingly. He came to regard this experience as the spiritual bookend to his higher education. Merrill would spend the rest of his life striving to build a bridge between the realms of scholarship and faith.

THE FIRST SEMINARY, 1912

Finished with his education, Merrill took up a teaching position at the University of Utah. He also enthusiastically accepted any call to serve in the local Granite Utah Stake, eventually becoming a member of the stake presidency. As the counselor given stewardship over education, Merrill was troubled by the increasing number of youth in his stake attending public high schools without the kind of religious education offered at the Church academies.[9] Possibly inspired by the religious seminaries he saw during his education at the University of Chicago, Merrill struck upon the idea of requesting the release of students from their studies for one class in order to receive instruction at a local Church-owned facility.[10] After receiving approval from the Granite Stake presidency and the Church Board of Education, Merrill launched into the process of searching for the right teacher, designing the curriculum, and building a home for the new institution. Describing his ideal candidate to the stake presidency, Merrill laid down a set of standards still largely observed today in the selection of seminary teachers:

> May I say that it is the desire of the Presidency of the Stake to have a strong young man who is properly qualified to do the work in a most satisfactory manner. By young we do not necessarily mean a teacher young in years, but a man . . . who can command their respect and admiration and exercise a great influence over them. We want a man who can enjoy student sports and activities as well as one who is a good teacher. We want a man who is a thorough student, one who will not teach in a perfunctory way, but who will enliven his instruction with a strong winning personality and give evidence of thorough understanding of and scholarship in the things he teaches. It is desired that this school be thoroughly successful and a teacher is wanted who is a leader and who will be universally regarded as the inferior to no teacher in the high school.[11]

Thomas Yates, a forty-one-year-old electrical engineer, member of the high council, and graduate of Cornell University, was selected as the first seminary teacher.[12]

Working together, Merrill and Yates designed the first seminary curriculum using the scriptures as the primary texts for the course. Merrill made arrangements with the school district for the students to receive academic credit for biblical studies, and a noncredit course in Church history and Book of Mormon studies was included as well. A $2,500 loan from Zion's Bank financed the first seminary building, and construction was begun only a few weeks before school started. It was not fully finished until three weeks into the school year. The limited finances resulted in the most spartan of accommodations. The building consisted of four rooms: a cloak room, an office, a small library, and a classroom. While the building was equipped with blackboards and a stove for heating, there were no electric lights. The seminary's entire library consisted of a Bible dictionary owned by Yates. Students used their scriptures as the textbooks and made their own maps to decorate the room.[13] Despite the rough conditions, seventy students enrolled the first year. The program found even greater success in its second

year when Guy C. Wilson, a professional educator who had recently moved to Salt Lake City from the Latter-day Saint colonies in Mexico, arrived and took over for Yates.

In the years following the launch of the released-time program at Granite, the concept of released-time seminary spread rapidly throughout the Church. The expense involved in operating the Church academies meant they would always be geographically limited, but seminaries could be brought quickly and inexpensively to every stake in the Church. As the number of seminaries grew rapidly, the academies declined. The Church Board of Education made a major decision in 1920 to close most of the academies. However, the Church continued to maintain Brigham Young University and a few of the larger academies, which were converted into Church-sponsored junior colleges. Ricks became a junior college in 1918. Weber, Dixie, and Snow Colleges in Utah, as well as Gila College in Arizona, became junior colleges in 1923. During the same time, the seminary program continued to grow rapidly. Between 1922 and 1932, seminary enrollment rose from 4,976 to 29,427 students.[14] Looking back on the explosive growth of the released-time system, Merrill modestly commented, "We sometimes 'build better than we know.'"[15]

CHURCH COMMISSIONER OF EDUCATION, 1928

After thirty-five years as a professional educator at the University of Utah, a new call came to Joseph Merrill in 1928. Adam S. Bennion, the Church superintendent of schools, had chosen to resign and Merrill was asked to fill his post. Based on Bennion's recommendation, the title "Superintendent of Church Schools" was dropped in favor of "Commissioner of Church Schools."[16] Merrill brought a wealth of experience to the position. As head of the School of Mines at the University of Utah, he had been involved with the state legislature. His long career in higher education brought many connections throughout the academic community as well.[17] It also helped that many of his close associates from the University of Utah,

among them James E. Talmage, John A. Widtsoe, and Richard R. Lyman, were serving as members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles.

Merrill also brought a unique perspective to the work. His experiences during his own education had convinced him of the absolute necessity of providing religious education to every youth of the Church. Speaking in general conference, he said, "I believe that I have been called to the finest and the best educational position in America." Waxing prophetic, he continued, "The time will come, I verily believe, and before very many years, when week-day religious education will be offered to every high school boy and girl, to every college and university boy and girl in this Church."[18]

Just as vital as Merrill's deep feeling of the importance of the work was the perspective he brought as an outsider to the system. As a newcomer to the Church hierarchy, he had been removed from the battles already fought to streamline the educational programs of the Church. This allowed him to diagnose the problems facing Church education dispassionately and seek solutions. Not having been present at earlier discussions on educational policy, Merrill also pushed the board to clarify their positions on items where no clear decision of policy had been made. Merrill's service over the next five years would provide numerous opportunities to make major shifts in the educational policies of the Church.

BEGINNINGS OF THE INSTITUTE PROGRAM

As Church commissioner of education, Merrill inherited several vital projects from his predecessor, Adam S. Bennion. Among the most important was the launch of a new "collegiate seminary" program in Moscow, Idaho. Prior to Merrill's call as commissioner, Church leaders had already sent J. Wyley Sessions, a returning mission president from South Africa, to Moscow to begin working within the community to prepare the way for the new program. Sessions faced a difficult task. In his own recollection, he was given no guidance other than a directive from the First Presidency to "take care of our boys and girls that are up there and to see what the Church ought to do for our college students who are attending state universities."[19]

Initially meeting with opposition in the community from those who feared he would "mormonize"[20] the university, Sessions dove into his assignment with gusto, winning friends for the Church and paving the way for the program to be launched.

By the time the program was handed off to the incoming Merrill administration, Sessions had spent several years preparing the community. At the same time he was finalizing the plans to construct the first building and working to design the curriculum for the new venture. Feeling overwhelmed, Sessions wrote to Merrill, "I have been working on a plan for the organization for our Institute and the courses we should offer in our weekday classes. I confess that the building of a curriculum for such an institution has worried me a lot and it is a job that I feel unqualified for." Perhaps reflecting on his own experiences during his education in the East, Merrill wrote to Sessions, advising him to keep sight of what the program was meant to accomplish. In Merrill's mind, the objective of institute was to "enable our young people attending the colleges to make the necessary adjustments between the things they have been taught in the Church and the things they are learning in the university, to enable them to become firmly settled in their faith as members of the Church." Merrill saw the need for an institution that could help students reconcile the truths of secular learning with spiritual things. He continued, "You know that when our young people go to college and study science and philosophy in all their branches, that they are inclined to become materialistic, to forget God, and to believe that the knowledge of men is all-sufficient. . . . Can the truths of science and philosophy be reconciled with religious truths?" Reflecting on his own hard-won testimony, he concluded, "Personally, I am convinced that religion is as reasonable as science; that religious truths and scientific truths nowhere are in conflict; that there is one great unifying purpose extending throughout all creation; that we are living in a wonderful, though at the present time deeply mysterious, world; and that there is an all-wise, all-powerful Creator back of it all. Can this same faith be developed in the

minds of all our collegiate and university students? Our collegiate institutes are established as means to this end."[21]

Deeply involved in the project, Merrill maintained a close eye on the construction of the building, pushing Sessions to keep costs under budget. Years later, Sessions would recall Merrill's involvement with shades of admiration and even exasperation, calling Merrill "the most economical, conservative General Authority of this dispensation."[22] Sessions even went so far as to visit the First Presidency, stating he couldn't "build a little shanty at the University of Idaho."[23] After a fair amount of wrangling, a beautiful building was completed, and the new structure opened its doors in 1928. It was soon followed by similar programs in Logan, Utah; Pocatello, Idaho; Laramie, Wyoming; and a host of other locations. Initially referred to as collegiate seminaries, Merrill approved the name "Latter-day Saint Institute of Religion" after it was suggested by Jay G. Eldridge, the non-LDS dean of faculty in Moscow.[24]

Born in the midst of opposition in Moscow, the institutes were received warmly. Some educators hailed them as the solution to the problem of Church and State in collegiate education. F. J. Kelly, the president of University of Idaho, wrote of the institute program, "All the great churches should recognize their responsibility of providing this religious training at state supported colleges and universities. These church institutions should be recognized as an intrinsic part of the educational scheme."[25]

SAVING THE CHURCH SCHOOLS

Perhaps the most controversial actions of Merrill's tenure as commissioner involved the transfer or closure of the existing Church schools. Most of the Church network of academies were closed or turned over to state control in 1920, when Adam S. Bennion became the head of the Church school system. By the time Merrill was called as commissioner, however, it was clear that Church finances could no longer support the schools, and changes needed to be made. The successful launch of the institute program also provided reason to believe that the Church could provide for the

spiritual needs of its youth while allowing Latter-day Saint youth to attend state universities. When Merrill became commissioner, his instructions were clear. Remembering this period, he wrote to his brother, "When I was asked by the First Presidency if I would accept the position being vacated by Dr. Bennion, I asked for a statement of policy. They replied, 'We have concluded to spend all the money we can afford for education in the field of religious education.' My first duty would be to eliminate the junior colleges from the Church School system . . . and to promote the extension of the seminary system, just as widely as our means would permit. . . . The First Presidency told me that this was the plan they would like to see followed. But the junior colleges were to be closed."[26]

Merrill's earlier work with the Utah State legislature during his time at the University of Utah was a key asset in arranging for the majority of the Church colleges to be transferred to state control rather than be closed outright. Merrill's style was markedly different from his predecessor, Adam S. Bennion. Where Bennion was an English literature major and an eloquent speaker and writer, Merrill's background in science lent itself to communicating in blunt facts. Soon after his call as commissioner, Merrill began negotiating with the state to take over the Church junior colleges, leaving no room for error. Utah legislators were initially enthusiastic to receive an entire system of junior colleges free of charge. However, some began to waver when the darkening shadows of the Great Depression brought the viability of state finances into question. During this time, Merrill wrote to C. R. Hollingsworth, a state senator, "In the Church colleges there are now enrolled approximately fourteen hundred junior college students. I am telling you only the plain truth when I say the Church will no longer carry this burden and it will drop it much sooner than otherwise if the University and the State do not care to accept our offer."[27] Advising the proponents of other schools, Merrill organized community support for the survival of every school he felt could be saved. When a school superintendent in Ogden wrote regarding the possibility of the closure of Weber College, Merrill

replied, "Does Ogden want a junior college? If so, my suggestion is that Ogden get its coat off and go to work."[28]

While the closure or transfer of most of the Church schools was certain, questions still remained: How far Church leaders were willing to carry the transformation of the Church school system? Were *all* of the Church schools, including Brigham Young University, to be eliminated in favor of the seminary and institute system? Finding no clear answer in the minutes of the Church Board of Education, Merrill asked for a clear statement of policy. This in turn led to a lively discussion among board members as to the policy. Board members had mixed feelings concerning what should happen next. President Heber J. Grant felt Church policy should be to close schools as quickly as possible. David O. McKay, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve at the time, felt strongly that the junior colleges should be retained in order to allow Church influence in teacher training throughout the state. McKay also felt that the seminary system was untested and that more time was needed to prove that they were a suitable replacement for the Church schools. The meeting ended with President Grant declaring that the policy covered *all* Church schools, including BYU. President Grant expressed remorse, saying that it "almost breaks one's heart" to close all the schools but that Church finances simply could no longer support the school system.[29]

What were Merrill's feelings in that matter? While it is clear that Merrill felt some school closures were inevitable, it is also clear that he felt a university was a vital component of the Church Educational System. The day after the board meeting where the decision was made, he wrote to a BYU official, expressing his own desires for the university: "At the Board meeting yesterday it was not definitely stated so, but it seemed to be the minds of most of those present that the BYU as a whole was included in the closing movement; and that is specially the reason why I am writing you. My own hope and fondest desire is that we may retain the BYU as a senior and graduate institution, eliminating its junior college work, and make the University outstanding, a credit to the Church, and a highly serviceable and necessary institution."[30] Writing to BYU president Franklin S. Harris,

Merrill expressed similar hopes: "As I have told you before, I think it perfectly feasible and logical to make the BYU the most outstanding institution between the Mississippi and the Pacific coast."[31]

Merrill also defended the need for a Church school in the press. Part of reasoning for keeping BYU under Church control stemmed from the need of an institution where seminary teachers could be trained. Merrill may have been attempting to tie the seminary system and BYU together, making the survival of both vital to the future of Church education. In the *Deseret News* he laid out three key reasons for the retention of BYU:

> A university is an essential unit in our seminary systems. For our seminary teachers must be specially trained for their work. The Brigham Young University is our training school. . . .
>
> We need in the Church a group of scholars learned in history, science, and philosophy, scholars of standing and ability who can interpret for us and make plain to us the results of research and the reasoning of the human mind. . . .
>
> I offer as a third reason why we need a university the fact that Latter-day Saints' ideals are in many respects different from and higher than those of the average non-Latter-day Saints. . . . Do we not need a university that shall hold up Latter-day Saint ideals so high in the educational world that all students in all schools of all grades may see beauty thereof, and perhaps be influenced by them?[32]

Considering the considerable pressure placed on Church expenditures during some of the darkest days of the Great Depression, Merrill's vision for the Church school system was remarkably farsighted.

During Merrill's tenure as commissioner, arrangements were made to transfer Weber, Snow, and Dixie Colleges to state control. Through a process of delicate negotiations, each school was successfully transferred to state control, along with Gila College in Arizona. The two most difficult schools to save were Ricks College in Idaho and LDS College in Salt Lake

City. Attempts were made to transfer control over Ricks College to the state of Idaho, but the state legislature rejected the offer several different times. Merrill persisted in trying to save Ricks College. He wrote to one school official, "The cause of the College is just. Let the support of the people be so generous that the College shall never die."[33] When Merrill left the commissioner's office in 1933, the fate of Ricks College was still unresolved. However, strong community support and Church funding, as meager as circumstances allowed, kept the school on life support until the situation improved. Today renamed BYU–Idaho, the school serves as a vital component of the Church Educational System.

The only outright school closure during Merrill's service was LDS College in Salt Lake City in 1931. More of a Church-sponsored high school than a college by this point, the school may have met its fate because alternative schools were already abundant in the Salt Lake City area. The closure of the school may have also acted as a kind of sacrificial lamb to convince the Utah State legislature of the seriousness of Merrill's intentions to close schools outright if the state would not accept them.[34] Though the school closed, a portion of it still endures today. The business department of the school was allowed to stay open and eventually grew into the LDS Business College.

The closure or transfer of Church schools was among the most difficult tasks Merrill was asked to oversee during his service. It does, however, illustrate an important principle of Church administration. While the available minutes from the period show that different opinions existed over the issue, Church leaders presented a united front once the decisions were made. Even Elder McKay, the most concerned opponent of the schools' closure, was willing to defend Merrill in his labors. When Elder McKay attended a particularly rancorous meeting dealing with the possible closure of Ricks College, Merrill was harshly criticized. One witness recorded that she thought "Br. McKay would go through the ceiling" when one official criticized Merrill.[35] Even though McKay and Merrill may not have seen eye to eye every issue surrounding the educational system, McKay supported Merrill in his actions.

The battles waged over the fate of the Church schools did leave some lingering questions. Educationally, the Church had placed all its eggs in one basket: the seminary and institute systems. As David O. McKay had pointed out, the seminary system was still relatively young and untested. A return to the Church schools would be difficult, if not impossible. If anything threatened the seminaries, the entire educational program of the Church could be at risk.

THE 1930–31 CHURCH EDUCATION CRISIS

Merrill's worst fears seemed to have materialized in January 1930. A report to the state school board from Isaac L. Williamson, the state inspector of high schools,[36] was issued on January 7, 1930. The report was a scathing critique of the relationship between Utah high schools and seminaries. At the time there were few indications that the attack was coming. Merrill had tried to meet with Williamson's committee before it made its report to the state board but had been refused permission.[37] Church leaders, Merrill included, found themselves blindsided by the report and quickly organized themselves to issue a response.

The report was published in full in the *Salt Lake Tribune* the next day, taking up an entire page of the paper. Williamson's concerns with the seminary program were quite lengthy, but in summary he felt that the Church educational program was a violation to constitutional law, a barrier to the academic achievement of Utah students, and an unfair financial burden to the taxpayers of the state. Williamson charged that sectarian doctrine was taught in Latter-day Saint classes where credit was offered and that inappropriate sharing of resources between seminaries and public schools was also happening in some areas. He even accused the state of giving financial support to the seminaries by providing buses to take them to their schools located near the seminaries. He charged, "The school and the seminary are so intimately linked together that in the minds of the public, pupils, and patrons, they are thought of as one institution."[38]

Recognizing the danger of the situation, Merrill fired back by publishing a lengthy response in the *Deseret News* the next day. He accused Williamson of "straining at a gnat and swallowing a camel." Rather than costing the state money, Merrill countered, the Church system *saved* the state thousands of dollars by providing teachers and facilities for a portion of the school day, without any charge to the state.[39] Other prominent educators rushed to defense of the seminary system as well. D. H. Christensen, a former superintendent of Salt Lake City schools, wrote another *Deseret News* piece stating, "A high school student who spends one-fifth of his school time in the study and discussion of things spiritual, loses nothing and he may gain much by the uplifting and wholesome influence of such effort."[40]

Meanwhile, things turned from bad to worse with the state board. Responding to the Williamson report, the Utah State Board of Education assigned a three-man subcommittee to investigate the seminary system. When the committee returned with its results in March 1930, two of the three subcommittee members recommended a complete disassociation between schools and seminaries, the end of credit for Bible studies, and refusal of permission to excuse students during the day for seminary studies. Joshua Greenwood, the only Latter-day Saint on the subcommittee, refused to sign the report. If the committee's suggestions were enacted, it would have effectively ended the released-time program in Utah, a devastating blow to the Church's educational efforts. With the Church schools gone, there were few alternatives left. Experimental early-morning classes had begun in the Salt Lake school district, where released-time was not allowed, but enrollment in the early morning programs was about 10 percent, compared to 70 percent in areas where released-time was available. [41]

With so much at stake, Merrill and other Church leaders began to plead their case to the public. At a meeting for Church educators held in conjunction with the April 1930 general conference, President Grant addressed the conflict directly, saying, "It is up to us who hold a vote to see that this liberty [seminary] is granted." Milton Welling, the Utah secretary of state, stated, "We can't be successful without such institutions and in my judgment if

they are lost to the state it will be the fault of the people of the Church." The proceedings of the entire meeting were published in the *Deseret News* under the headline "Pres. Grant Calls on Saints to Defend Rights."[42]

A month later, Merrill took the fight to the state board itself. Merrill used his connections in the Utah educational system to construct a firm response to Williamson's charges.[43] Contacting officials at BYU and Utah State University, Merrill cited statistics showing that seminary graduates had higher grades, on average, than their non seminary counterparts. Further, Merrill showed that in 1928 only *one* high school dropout in the entire state of Utah had listed seminary as a cause for his academic difficulties. The next year, only three listed seminary as a factor. Citing these statistics, Merrill charged, "Can there be any justification for a school official making grave charges against an institution without having facts to substantiate his charges?"[44]

Regarding the charges of a financial burden placed by the seminaries, Merrill responded with written statements from sixteen different Utah superintendents, with none citing seminary as an additional burden. The superintendent of the Cache School District cited thousands of dollars saved by the seminary program and continued: "The seminaries were expected to give the high school pupil a foundation for moral integrity and character development. They are doing so to a surprisingly successful extent. They seem one thing that is coming up to expectations."[45] Pointing out the absurdity of some of Williamson's charges, Merrill wrote, "As to bus transportation, we admit frankly that the seminary is benefited by the transportation system of the high school. So is the corner grocery, the refreshment stand, the shop, the business house, and the town as a whole." Merrill argued, "No sane person would assert that because these places are benefited by the presence of the high school in the community they are therefore supported, in part, in any legal sense whatsoever, by the money of the taxpayers."[46]

Merrill continued by pointing out all the states where released-time was allowed without sanction. He further argued that seminaries were technically private schools, and acceptance of credit from private schools had been standard in public education for years. Recognizing that similar programs

proceeded unmolested by other denominations in other states throughout the country, Merrill finally raised the ugly possibility of religious intolerance as a motivating factor behind the report. He wrote:

> The adoption of the Committee's suggestions means the death of the seminary, and the enemies of the seminary all know it. But why do they want to kill something that every high school principal and school superintendent of experience says is good, being one of the most effective agencies in character training and good citizenship that influences the student? Is religious prejudice trying to mask in legal sheep's clothing for the purpose of stabbing the seminary, this agency that has had such a wonderful influence in bringing a united support to the public schools?[47]

Merrill's defense sent a clear message to the state board that the Church was willing to fight for the seminary program and held compelling legal reasons to believe they would win if the question came to a court decision.

In the aftermath of Merrill's rebuttal, the board did not show much inclination to back down, though it now had to consider the consequences of legal action if it did move to end credit and released time. In June 1930, the board briefly considered the possibility of a "friendly lawsuit" to answer the constitutional questions raised by the Williamson report, briefly initiating a search to find a taxpayer who would bring the suit.[48] Merrill expected that the fate of seminary might ultimately have to be decided in court, and he was ready for the challenge. In July 1930, he told a gathering of BYU students that the Church would "fight to the last ditch" to save its seminaries and that the controversy might eventually end up in the Supreme Court.[49]

Fortunately, such measures were unnecessary. In September 1931, the Utah State Board voted six to three in favor of retention of credit and released time. Williamson argued passionately before the state board several times against the seminaries but appears to have been ineffective.[50] The conflict served as an uncomfortable reminder of the religious rift still existing in the state. All six of the board members who voted in favor of retention

were Latter-day Saints, while the three dissenters were not.[51] Minor skirmishes continued over the seminary issue in the ensuing decades. At a 1932 meeting of Utah educators, one school principal called the seminaries an "evil more subtle, farther reaching, more dangerous, and unwise than the cigarette evil."[52] The lawsuit desired by the state board never materialized, and the seminary system continued and operated relatively free of controversy for several decades. The legal issues over released time and credit were finally resolved in 1978 when a lawsuit brought by the American Civil Liberties Union in Logan, Utah, established through trial the legal operational boundaries for the Church program.[53]

The battle over the seminary system caused significant reverberations in Church education. In truth, the Williamson report had raised some legitimate concerns over the way the system operated. Even while the controversy was raging, administrative changes were initiated to comply with the wishes of the state board. New policies ensured that seminary registration was carried out in separate buildings, seminary photographs and activities were not allowed to be shown in high school yearbooks, and seminary teachers were forbidden from seeking any privileges not already available to any citizen in their respective communities.[54] The episode also radically altered the mindset of Church educators for a brief time. The conflicts with the state board may have in part inspired Merrill to create the Department of Religion at BYU in order to prevent Church teachers from making the same errors that had led to Williamson's report.[55] Several outside scholars from the University of Chicago were brought in to instruct the Church's religious educators, and several promising young teachers were sent to the University of Chicago Divinity School to receive advanced training.[56] After Merrill's departure, the rising secularism in Church education caused some concern among Church leaders. However, during the crisis years of 1930–31, it cannot be disputed that Merrill succeeded brilliantly in securing the future of the Church's educational program. With his connections throughout the Utah educational system and his extensive experience working in higher education, there may have been no person better suited to fight the battle to save the seminary program.

FROM EDUCATOR TO APOSTLE

The crisis of 1930–31 represented a kind of climax in Merrill's tenure as commissioner. Less than a week after the state board made its decision, Merrill was called to serve as a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. He continued to serve in his capacity as commissioner until 1933, when he was called to preside over the European Mission of the Church. In his service there, he continued his tradition of innovation, pioneering the use of media in presenting the message of the gospel. One of the missionaries he worked most closely with was the young Gordon B. Hinckley, future President of the Church.[57] After his return from Europe, Merrill continued to work as a passionate advocate of Church education until his death in 1952.

What was the institutional impact of Merrill's service? He was critical to the survival of Church education for several reasons. First, he has rightly been called as "the father of the Church Seminary."[58] The institute program, largely an application of seminary principles to the college level, was also deeply influenced by him. With his experience working as an administrator in Utah higher education, Merrill also played a vital role in the final stages of shepherding the Church Educational System from Church schools to the seminary and institute program. Without this change, it is difficult to imagine that the Church education could have the kind of worldwide impact it enjoys today. Merrill was a key player in the retention of BYU and the inception of a professional department of religion at the school. It is all the more amazing to consider that Merrill carried out all of these changes under the most trying of economic circumstances. From a high of $958,440 spent on education in 1925, expenditures declined to a record low of $459,580 in 1934, the year after Merrill left office.[59] In 1930–31 alone, Church expenditures on education were lowered by $100,000.[60] Merrill's emphasis on thrift has had an impact even into our day. Faced with his own difficult financial decisions, President Hinckley often recalled hearing Merrill's voice ringing in his ears: "I will be more careful with the Church's money than I will with my own."[61]

Today the effect of Church educational programs is immeasurable. At the present time, over 363,000 students worldwide are enrolled in seminary programs.[62] Early-morning seminary and the home-study programs both grew out of these early efforts and then expanded across the globe to bless the lives of scores of young Latter-day Saints. The institute program expanded along with the Church as well, allowing religious education to be brought to college-age youth almost anywhere they chose to attend school. Today over 150,000 students are taught the gospel in institute at over 500 different locations.[63] Merrill's vision has become a transformative factor not only in Church education but in the lives of countless numbers of Latter-day Saints.

Merrill believed strongly in the power of education to change people's lives. As one who had successfully navigated the treacherous shoals of intellectualism and survived with his faith intact, he felt an obligation provide as much guidance as possible to those who would follow. To this end, he labored tirelessly to create an educational system which could do just that. Expressing the value of this, he wrote:

> Many of us believe that a sound religious faith, practically applied in our daily living, gives a balance, a guide and an inspiration to the believer that makes his life meaningful, courageous, and sweet—therefore entirely worth while. But such a faith comes to most people only by effort. They are not born with it. This faith is of such a nature, however, that those who possess it always have joy in helping their fellows to acquire it. If they succeed a priceless service has been rendered, some of us believe. "If it so be that you should labor all your days . . . and bring save it be one soul unto me, how great shall be your joy with him in the kingdom of my Father!"[64]

NOTES

1. Boyd K. Packer, "Teach the Scriptures," address to Church Educational System full-time religious educators, October 14, 1977, 1–9, in Boyd K. Packer, *Mine*

Errand from the Lord: Selections from the Sermons and Writings of Boyd K. Packer (Salt Lake: Deseret Book, 2008), 358–59.

2. Richard R. Lyman, "Dr. Joseph F. Merrill of the Council of the Twelve," *Improvement Era*, November 1931, 10; see also Gordon B. Hinckley, "Church Mourns the Passing of Elder Joseph F. Merrill," *Improvement Era*, March 1952, 146; and Melvin Clarence Merrill, *Utah Pioneer and Apostle*; *Marriner Wood Merrill and His Family* (n.p.: privately published, 1937), 341.
3. Lyman, "Dr. Joseph F. Merrill of the Council of the Twelve," 10.
4. *Dedication of the Joseph F. Merrill Engineering Building* (Salt Lake City: Utah State Historical Society, n.d.), 1; see also Alan K. Parrish, *John A. Widtsoe* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 117. Parrish notes that John A. Widtsoe was studying in Germany at the same time, completing his doctoral work only a few months after Merrill. I have been unable to verify absolutely that Merrill was the first native Utahn to earn a PhD, though in the source cited, which was produced by the University of Utah, he is cited as such.
5. Joseph F. Merrill, "Boyhood Experiences," *Improvement Era*, May 1944, 146.
6. Joseph F. Merrill, "Knowing the Gospel Truth by Personal Revelation," *Church News*, December 7, 1946.
7. Joseph F. Merrill, "The Lord Overrules," *Improvement Era*, July 1934, 413.
8. Merrill, "The Lord Overrules," 413.
9. Joseph F. Merrill, "A New Institution in Religious Education," *Improvement Era*, January 1938, 54–56.
10. Richard O. Cowan, *The Church in the Twentieth Century* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1985), 89.
11. Charles Coleman and Dwight Jones, comps., *History of Granite Seminary*, unpublished manuscript, 1933, MS 2237, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, 5–6.
12. Thomas Jarvis Yates, *Autobiography and Biography of Thomas Jarvis Yates*, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, 78; see also Casey Paul Griffiths, "The First Seminary Teacher," *Religious Educator* 9, no. 3 (2008): 114–29.
13. Coleman and Jones, *History of Granite Seminary*, 6–7.

14. James B. Allen and Glen M. Leonard, *The Story of the Latter-day Saints*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake: Deseret Book, 1992), 502.
15. Merrill, "A New Institution in Religious Education," 55.
16. William Peter Miller, *Weber College, 1888–1933* (n.p., 1975), MSS 7643, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, 31. David O. McKay was appointed the first Church commissioner of education in 1919. He was succeeded by John A. Widtsoe in 1922. In 1925 the commission was disbanded, and Adam S. Bennion, who had been serving as Church superintendent of education, became the executive officer of Church education, still serving under the direction of the Church Board of Education. In 1927, Widtsoe's departure for the European Mission, which closely coincided with Bennion's resignation, opened the way for another restructuring. The creation of a new office of commissioner was designed mainly to shorten the lines of communication between Church leaders and the chief educational officer of the Church. See Parrish, *John A. Widtsoe: A Biography*, 357–59.
17. "New Superintendent of Church Schools," *Improvement Era*, February 1928, 325–26.
18. Joseph F. Merrill, in Conference Report, April 1928, 37.
19. J. Wyley Sessions and Magdalene Sessions, June 29, 1965, interviewed by Richard O. Cowan, transcript and audio recording in author's possession (hereafter Sessions 1965 oral history); James Wyley Sessions, August 12, 1972, interviewed by Marc Sessions, MS 15866, Church History Library, Salt Lake City (hereafter Sessions 1972 oral history); see also Leonard Arrington, "The Founding of LDS Institutes of Religion," *Dialogue* 2, no. 2 (Summer 1967): 137–47, and Ward H. Magleby, "1926, Another Beginning, Moscow, Idaho," *Impact*, Winter 1968.
20. Sessions 1972 oral history, 5.
21. Magleby, 31–32. As one of the first native Utahns to obtain a PhD, Merrill was intimately familiar with the struggles he describes in his letter. He experienced them himself as a young man as he attended Johns Hopkins University. See Merrill, "The Lord Overrules," 413, 447.
22. J. Wyley Sessions, *J. Wyley Sessions Remembrance*, January 6, 1967, Laguna Hills, UA 156, box 2, folder 5, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University.

23. Magleby, "Another Beginning," 23.
24. Magleby, "Another Beginning," 23, 27.
25. Gary A. Anderson, "A Historical Survey of the Full-Time Institutes of Religion of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1926–1966" (PhD diss., Brigham Young University, 1968), 65.
26. Joseph F. Merrill to Amos N. Merrill, Salt Lake City, December 13, 1951, Joseph Francis Merrill Collection, MSS 1540, box 4, folder 2, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, BYU.
27. Joseph F. Merrill to C. R. Hollingsworth, Salt Lake City, February 6, 1929, Merrill Collection, MSS 1540, box 5, folder 1, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, BYU.
28. Joseph F. Merrill to W. Karl Hopkins, Salt Lake City, February 9, 1929, Merrill Collection, MSS 1540, box 5, folder 3, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, BYU.
29. William E. Berrett, CES History Resource Files, 1899–1985, CR 102 174, Church History Library, Salt Lake City. This meeting is also discussed in Ernest L. Wilkinson, ed., *Brigham Young University: The First One Hundred Years* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1975), 2:87.
30. Wilkinson, *Brigham Young University*, 2:87.
31. Joseph F. Merrill to Franklin S. Harris, January 8, 1930, Harris Presidential Papers, in Wilkinson, *Brigham Young University*, 2:221; emphasis added.
32. William E. Berrett and Alma P. Burton, *Readings in L.D.S. Church History from Original Manuscripts* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1958), 3:341–42.
33. David L. Crowder, *The Spirit of Ricks: A History of Ricks College* (Rexburg, ID, 1997), 113.
34. Miller, *Weber College, 1888–1993*, 40–41. While the minutes of the Church Board of Education are currently restricted to researchers, Miller's history of Weber College contains many of the minutes crucial to understanding this critical period of transformation in Church education.
35. T. Edgar Lyon to parents, February 15, 1933, Rexburg, ID, T. Edgar Lyon Collection, MSS 2341, box 13, folder 3, reel 10, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, BYU.
36. Williamson was a non-Mormon and a former superintendent of the Tintic School District. He had previously served as superintendent over the Wakita, Oklahoma,

school district after obtaining his degree from Harvard University. Shortly after the 1930–31 crisis was resolved, he left Utah to return to the Midwest. "Prof. Adams Will Go To Park City," *Eureka Reporter*, May 31, 1912; see also Frederick S. Buchanan, "Masons and Mormons: Released-Time Politics in Salt Lake City, 1930–56," *Journal of Mormon History* 19, no. 1 (1993): 77.

37. William E. Berrett, *A Miracle in Weekday Religious Education* (Salt Lake City: Salt Lake Printing Center, 1988), 43.
38. "Seminaries of LDS Church Put Under Study by School Officials," *Salt Lake Tribune*, January 9, 1930.
39. "Head of System Answers Attack upon Seminaries," *Deseret News*, January 9, 1930, 1.
40. D. H. Christensen, "Seminary Students Not Deficient in Scholarship," *Deseret News*, January 21, 1930, 3.
41. Allen and Leonard, 502–3.
42. "Church Leaders Protest Battle on Seminaries," *Deseret News*, April 7, 1930.
43. Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *A Reply to Inspector Williamson's Report to the State Board of Education on the Existing Relationship Between Seminaries and Public High Schools in the State of Utah and Comments Thereon by a Special Committee of the Board*, issued as a letter to the Utah State Board of Education, May 3, 1930, box 57, folder 13, Buchanan Collection, AO149.xml, Special Collections, Marriott Library, University of Utah, 4 (hereafter referred to as Merrill Report). While it is likely that several figures authored this report, it was sent under Merrill's signature. For the sake of clarity, and so as to not confuse this report with the Williamson report, I will refer to the words in this report as Merrill's work, knowing other unidentified Church officials may have also had a hand in writing them.
44. Merrill Report, 8.
45. Merrill Report, 7.
46. Merrill Report, 9.
47. Merrill Report, 23–24.
48. "Status of Church Seminaries Seek Court Decision," *Deseret News*, June 28, 1930, 3.
49. "L.D.S. Church to Wage Seminary Fight to Finish," *Salt Lake Telegram*, July 3, 1930, 6.

50. Utah State School Board Minutes, June 28, 1930, courtesy of Twila Affleck, Utah State Board of Education.
51. Buchanan, "Masons and Mormons," 80.
52. "Teacher Flays Seminaries at U.E.A. Session," *Deseret News*, October 29, 1932, 1.
53. Berrett, *A Miracle*, 188.
54. Berrett, *A Miracle*, 46.
55. Minutes of the Church General Board of Education, February 5, March 5, 1930, copies in author's possession; see also Wilkinson, *Brigham Young University*, 2:286. The decision to send Guy C. Wilson, the first full-time religious instructor to BYU, occurred during the days immediately following the Williamson Report.
56. See Russel B. Swensen, "Mormons at the University of Chicago Divinity School: A Personal Reminiscence," *Dialogue* 7, no. 2 (Summer 1972): 39.
57. See Rob Taber, "The Church Enters the Media Age: Joseph F. Merrill and Gordon B. Hinckley," *Journal of Mormon History* 35, no. 4 (Fall 2009): 218–32.
58. "New Superintendent of Church Schools."
59. Wilkinson, *Brigham Young University* 2:211.
60. General Board Minutes, November 4, 1931, cited in Thomas Alexander Scott, "Eastern Arizona College: A Comprehensive History of the Early Years" (EdD diss., Brigham Young University, 1985), 638; see also Milton L. Bennion, *Mormonism and Education* (Salt Lake City: The Department of Education of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1939), 200–1, 223, 225.
61. Sheri L. Dew, *Go Forward with Faith: The Biography of Gordon B. Hinckley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1996), 218–19.
62. "Seminary Program," http://www.newsroom.lds.org/ldsnewsroom/eng/background-information/seminary-program.
63. http://institute.lds.org/faq/index.
64. Merrill, *The Truth-Seeker and Mormonism* (Salt Lake: Zion's Press, 1946), vii.