



TYING IT TO THE PRIESTHOOD:
HAROLD B. LEE'S RESTRUCTURING OF
THE YOUNG MEN ORGANIZATION

A MONTH after the unexpected passing of President Harold B. Lee, Elder Boyd K. Packer observed, “The work of President Harold B. Lee will have effect just as long as this Church endures; until the Lord Himself says, ‘It is finished,’ until His work is done. Never through all generations can it be minimized or mitigated. Never will the Church be the same, always it will run with more precision, more power.”¹ Indeed, a hallmark of the Lee presidency remains the organizational changes that led some to call him the “great innovator.”²

Though President Lee’s administration was brief, one of the lasting changes effected during his tenure was the restructuring of the Young Men’s Mutual Improvement Association (YMMIA). Organized nearly a hundred years earlier at the direction of President Brigham Young, the YMMIA initially operated “separate from the Priesthood,

Scott C. Esplin is an assistant professor of Church history and doctrine at Brigham Young University.

A FIRM FOUNDATION

and yet so organized that they should be under its guidance, and tend to its strength and aid.”³ Under President Lee’s authorization, significant changes were made to this relationship. In 1972, President Lee directed an organizational restructuring of the Young Men organization, seeking to connect it more effectively to the priesthood. Later, at the June 1973 MIA conference, President Lee and others explained the impact of the changes. Speaking about the reorganization, Presiding Bishop Victor L. Brown noted: “Now, through inspiration from the Lord through His mouthpiece President Harold B. Lee, a most significant change has been brought about in this organization. The MIA is no longer auxiliary to the priesthood. It has now been brought directly under the umbrella of the priesthood. It is priesthood oriented and priesthood directed.”⁴ The youth of the Church were more closely connected to their priesthood leaders, accomplishing the desire of President Lee, who, “from the beginning of his involvement with Church organization at the general level, . . . was anxious to tie all organizations of the Church securely to the priesthood.”⁵

Looking back nearly forty years since these changes, what did President Lee see in the Young Men organization that needed restructuring? How could an organization formed under the direction of President Brigham Young find itself detached from the priesthood? Was there anything, either in its founding or in the intervening ninety-seven years, that raised Church leaders’ concern regarding the organization? Finally, how, as Elder Packer taught, has the Young Men organization run with “more precision, more power” in the thirty-eight years since its restructuring?

FORERUNNERS TO A CHURCH YOUTH ORGANIZATION

The formation of the Young Men’s Mutual Improvement Association began its unique relationship of being guided by the priesthood of the Church but remaining a separate entity. Histories of the movement trace the organization’s beginning to a founding meeting in Salt Lake City’s Thirteenth Ward on June 10, 1875. However, many leaders, including founding

Tying It to the Priesthood

father Junius F. Wells, have argued that forerunners to the organization stretch as far back as Joseph Smith and Nauvoo. In the winter of 1843, some youth of the Church met at the Heber C. Kimball home “lamenting the loose style of their morals—the frivolous manner in which they spent their time—and their too frequent attendance at balls, parties, &c. &c.”⁶ Elder Kimball proposed that they begin meeting to address these concerns and receive instruction. Throughout January and February 1843, the group met regularly under Kimball’s direction, moving meeting locations as the popularity of the organization increased, and finally gathering in the room above Joseph Smith’s red brick store. In March 1843, the Prophet attended and “praised their good conduct, and taught them how to behave in all places, explained to them their duty, and advised them to organize themselves into a society for the relief of the poor.”⁷ Specifically, the Prophet proposed that the youth begin by collecting funds to build a home for a crippled immigrant from England, the artist Sutcliffe Maudsley. The youth rallied to the cause, and a society composed of single young men and women under the age of thirty, known as the Young Gentlemen’s and Ladies’ Relief Society of Nauvoo, was formally organized on March 21, 1843.

The benevolent society sought to transform social life in Nauvoo. The *Times and Seasons* reported, “Instead of the young people spending their evenings at parties, balls, &c., they would now leave all, and attend to their meeting. Instead of hearing about this party and that party, this dance and that dance, in different parts of the city; their name was scarcely mentioned, and the Young People’s Meetings became the chief topic of conversation.”⁸ Short lived, it dissolved like its counterpart, the Female Relief Society of Nauvoo, with the death of the Prophet and the westward exodus of the Saints.⁹ However, while editing the *History of the Church*, B. H. Roberts linked this Nauvoo organization for the youth to its Utah counterpart, noting that the minutes “more clearly describe a Mutual Improvement Association than a Relief Society; and this incident may not improperly be regarded as the first step towards that great movement in the Church which

A FIRM FOUNDATION

has been such a mighty aid in holding to the faith of their fathers the youth of Israel.”¹⁰

In Utah, improvement associations and organizations also flourished before the Church’s formal founding of the Young Men’s Mutual Improvement Association in 1875. Early in the pioneer era, Elder Orson Pratt formed the Universal Scientific Society. Later, to promote intellectual advancement and appreciation for the arts, Elder Lorenzo Snow organized the Polysophical Society in the winter of 1852. After four years, the society was transformed by the First Presidency in 1856 into the Deseret Theological Class. An early participant, Henry W. Naisbitt, later attributed the success of the Mutual Improvement Association to these forerunning organizations: “This was the basis upon which all the Mutual Improvement Associations have been built; to it they were indebted for their ideas, which, utilizing the varied gifts and endowments found in gathering Israel, gave them a greater scope and mightier influence, providing recreation and scattering intelligence, being the nursery also for junior aspirants of both sexes, in the direction and presentation of their thoughts, as to art, literature, science, religion, politics, and amusement; refining, purifying, enlarging, under the control of the Priesthood, the mental forces and intellectual thrift of Israel in this our day and time.”¹¹

Naisbitt’s claim that his organization acted as the genesis for the YMMIA was not alone. In 1907 the Mutual Improvement Association’s official periodical, the *Improvement Era*, published a letter by Samuel L. Adams to President Joseph F. Smith acknowledging their joint involvement in an early mutual improvement society formed by President Heber C. Kimball in Salt Lake City in the fall of 1853. “President Heber C. Kimball called upon a brother by the name of George Gardner,” Adams recalled. President Kimball then charged him “to hunt up all the young men in and around the Church Farm, Mill Creek and Canyon Creek, and get them together at least once a week, and get them on their feet bearing testimony to the truth of the gospel. We want these young men for the harness.” Noting that he “sometimes sees matters which [he] think[s] are placed to the credit

Tying It to the Priesthood

of those to whom they do not belong,” Adams concluded that he believed theirs “was the first M. I. A. started in these mountains.”¹²

More formal Mutual Improvement Associations abounded in the early 1870s prior to general Church organization. Reminiscing on the founding of YMMIA, Edward H. Anderson, former general secretary of the Mutual Improvement Association, recalled, “In 1873 it became the rule in some of the more thickly populated settlements of the Saints for the young people to form associations for entertainments and improvement. These were called night schools, literary societies, debating clubs, young men’s clubs, or any other name that indicated the object of the gathering. Frequently they were solely for amusement, and, taking pattern after the early efforts in Salt Lake City, were formed to instruct the people by theatrical exhibitions and dramatic performances.”¹³ Institutes, literary associations, and instruction associations were formed in the sixth, tenth, thirteenth, sixteenth, and twentieth wards of the city, with prominent participants including the Cannons, Taylors, Lamberts, Goddards, Parks, and Morrisises.¹⁴ Eventually, Church leaders became involved in these early attempts at organization when President George Q. Cannon and Elder Franklin D. Richards created a youth association in Weber County in April 1873. All of these forerunners highlight the independence from central priesthood guidance of the original youth organizations.

FORMAL FOUNDING OF THE YOUNG MEN’S MUTUAL IMPROVEMENT ASSOCIATION

While acknowledging these forerunners, President Joseph F. Smith stressed that something different existed in the formation of the Young Men’s Mutual Improvement Association. In an editorial addressing controversies surrounding the founding, President Smith noted, “From time to time we are reminded that the origin of mutual improvement work does not date from June 10, 1875, when Elder Junius F. Wells, by instruction of President Brigham Young, called a meeting in the 13th ward, Salt Lake City, and organized the first Mutual Improvement Association in the

A FIRM FOUNDATION

Church. A number of people have written and protested that this, that, and the other organization was the origin, or first, from which grew the Mutual Improvement Associations.” An early participant in some of these YMMIA predecessors, Smith acknowledged, “All these preliminary organizations, as we may term them, were truly forerunners, and their history is interesting as pointing the way to the present proficient Young Men’s Mutual Improvement Association’s.” However, he also said:

Many of these organizations in the early 70’s degenerated into debating societies, in which much ill feeling was engendered, and while great good was obtained from them, they threatened to create considerable division and ill feeling. It was therefore, no doubt, evident to President Young that there existed a necessity for a general organization of the young people, for their mutual improvement, into associations that should be separate from the Priesthood, and yet so organized that they should be under its guidance, and tend to its strength and aid. Hence the call, in 1875, to organize the improvement associations. . . . This movement may very appropriately be called the first general movement to organize mutual improvement associations as we now have them throughout the Church.¹⁵

Junius F. Wells, the organization’s founder, likewise emphatically defended the organization’s genesis. “The inspiration of the general organization of the Young Men’s Mutual Improvement Association was from God, expressed by the President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. It was not derived from any other society then in existence either in or out of the Church. . . . Whatever rivalry, therefore, there might be in claims for priority of organization should be relegated to these and other societies like them. Upon none [of the earlier organizations] was the general organization inaugurated by President Brigham Young in 1875 built.”¹⁶

The founding of a formal, Church-sanctioned organization for young men is tied directly to the inspiration of President Brigham Young, a

Tying It to the Priesthood

significant difference frequently stressed by those comparing it to various forerunners. Josiah Burrows wrote, “In responding to the sentiment ‘The Origin, Mission, and Object of the Y. M. M. I. A.’ I will state that the origin can very readily be traced to President Brigham Young, who, as the humble instrument in the hands of God, first inaugurated this work in the summer of 1875. . . . There had been, however, prior to this time mutual improvement societies, debating societies, etc. . . . But not until this time did the organization of such societies become specially ordered under the general direction of the President of the Church.”¹⁷

On the fiftieth anniversary of the organization’s founding, Junius F. Wells further testified of President Young’s hand in the organization’s formation: “The inspiration of the general organization of the Young Men’s Mutual Improvement Association was from God, expressed by the President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.” Describing his own call to be involved, Wells, then a twenty-one-year-old recently returned missionary, continued, “On Saturday morning, June sixth, 1875, President Brigham Young, upon parting with his second counselor, President Daniel H. Wells [Junius’s father], sent the following message to me: ‘Tell Junius that I want him to organize the young men.’ . . . The spirit of the work fell upon me from the moment I was chosen to undertake it. I seemed at once to know what I should do. Nevertheless, I asked my father, and he replied, laconically: ‘I think, if I were in your place I’d do it.’ After conferring further with him I proceeded to arrange for a meeting to be held in the Thirteenth ward meetinghouse.” Seeking further direction from President Young, Wells met with the Church President, who informed him, “We want to have our young men enrolled and organized throughout the Church, so that we shall know who and where they are, so that we can put our hands upon them at any time for any service that may be required. We want them to hold meetings where they will stand up and speak—get into the habit of speaking—and of bearing testimony. These meetings are to be for our young men, to be composed of young men for their improvement—for their mutual improvement—a society of young men for mutual improvement. There is your name: The

A FIRM FOUNDATION

Young Men's Mutual Improvement Soci—Association.”¹⁸ Following his direction, Wells met with interested youth on Thursday, June 10, 1875, in the thirteenth ward meetinghouse, where the first ward Young Men organization was formed with an initial membership of eighteen. Henry A. Woolley was selected as president, with B. Morris Young and Heber J. Grant serving as counselors, and Hyrum H. Goddard as secretary.¹⁹ Shortly thereafter, under President Young's direction, Wells, together with Elders John Henry Smith, Milton H. Hardy, and B. Morris Young, began traveling the territory forming Mutual Improvement Associations in every ward and stake. By the organization's first general conference on April 8, 1876, fifty-seven organizations had been formed with a membership of twelve hundred young men.²⁰ Five years later, the organization boasted a membership of more than nine thousand.²¹

PURPOSE AND PRACTICE OF THE ORIGINAL MUTUAL IMPROVEMENT ASSOCIATION

Those guiding the new organization continued to look to President Young for leadership. Early leaders reported his original instructions, including an emphasis on spiritual development: “We want you to organize yourselves into associations for mutual improvement. Let the keynote of your work be the establishment in the youth of individual testimony of the truth and magnitude of the great Latter-day work; the development of the gifts within them, that have been bestowed upon them by the laying on of hands of the servants of God; cultivating a knowledge and an application of the eternal principles of the great science of life.”²²

The development of individual testimony seems to have been the guiding factor for President Young in pushing the work of the Mutual Improvement Association forward. B. Morris Young, Brigham Young's son and an officer in the first YMMIA, recalled his father's motivation: “My father's mind was considerably exercised over the conduct of some of the young men of those days, not only his own sons, but those of his friends, for youth is the same yesterday today and forever. Father knew that youthful vigor and

Tying It to the Priesthood

ambition needed guidance and direction into paths of safety and righteousness.”²³ President Young’s concern was rooted in the dangers he sensed facing the youth in 1875. Chief among them were threats from other religious bodies seeking to lead Latter-day Saint youth away from the faith of their fathers.

At the organization’s founding meeting, Junius F. Wells elaborated on these concerns: “Do you realize that you are surrounded with enemies, the hireling priests who seek to ensnare you and lead you from the counsels of your parents whom they would destroy, if God would suffer them to do so? This is their object and mission here, to overthrow this Church and kingdom, if possible, and they expect to accomplish it by the influence they exert over the youth of our people. They are not our friends, neither are they the friends of God; their motives are false, and their doctrines are false; they seek to destroy the priesthood and lead the heirs of the priesthood down to perdition.”²⁴ Wells later summarized other ills plaguing the youth that he hoped the organization could help combat. “We have unwittingly adopted many customs and some ideas that must be eliminated to make us the people we aim to become. Intemperance, swearing, uncouth language, and the memory-destroying habit of reading light literature are among the evils that we have to contend with, and that we hope to overcome by cultivating ‘the gift that is within us,’ that we may be examples of the believer in word, in conversation, in spirit, in purity, etc.”²⁵

Early activities of the YMMIA stressed the acquisition of truth and the development of testimony to attack these social blights. However, leaders also used social activities to attract pioneer youth. Edward H. Anderson, former general secretary of the YMMIA, recalled:

The exercises at first were simple and in many places were of an entertaining character only. The young people had not been accustomed to study. The very circumstances and conditions surrounding them for the first quarter of a century after the arrival of the Pioneers, naturally tended to a species of wildness, so that horse-racing, trading, ranching, indifference to schools and

A FIRM FOUNDATION

religious exercises were more the custom than were intellectual pursuits or devotion to the study of theology. As it is a fact that interest must first be secured and attention riveted before the mind can be impressed, it becomes necessary to have such programs in the associations as will enlist the attention and interest of the young who, though having rough exteriors, were men of integrity and virtue at heart. Music, songs, recitations, literary entertainments, intermingled with testimonies and religious references were employed, until the young became more thoroughly interested in intellectual pleasures, when it became an easy task to lead them on into heavier studies. Hence the lighter character of the programs of the earlier societies.²⁶

Within a few years, however, greater emphasis was placed on the spiritual side of gospel study in the YMMIA. In 1877, the organization's central committee, headed by Junius F. Wells, Milton H. Hardy, and Rodney C. Badger, outlined how association meetings should be conducted. "The exercises should be such as will prepare the young people to promote the interests of the work of the Lord, and may be of a sufficiently diversified character to render them interesting," Wells instructed. "The greater portion of the time at meetings should be devoted to seeking to receive and impart a better and more extended acquaintance with the principles of the gospel. It should be considered the duty of all who have not yet received a testimony of the truth of the gospel, to take steps to obtain it, and generally a portion of time in the meetings should be devoted to bearing testimony to the truth of the work of God." The "handing in of written questions" for answer by other members was considered "a commendable exercise," as was the delivering of addresses, the writing of essays, and giving of readings. Debates, "being, in the opinion of this committee, contrary to the commandment to 'have no disputations among you,' are in opposition to the spirit and genius of this mission of mutual improvement" and were discouraged.²⁷ In 1879, Junius F. Wells wrote President John Taylor summarizing YMMIA priorities: "The object of this extensive organization is, to introduce our young men

Tying It to the Priesthood

to an order of religious and intellectual exercises that will secure to them a knowledge of the truth, and put them in possession of the evidences to advocate and defend it. . . . While the above is the first object had in view, as secondary, and leading to its attainment, we have given our attention to improvement in other respects: In our manners, our entertainments, our social gatherings, our conversations, our readings and our writings, which brings me to the subject upon which I, at present, desire to confer with you.”²⁸

SEPARATE FROM BUT GUIDED BY PRIESTHOOD

The desire “to confer” with President Taylor highlights the final characteristic of the YMMIA’s early founding. From the beginning, its relationship with the priesthood had been unique. President Joseph F. Smith, who was familiar with the organization from its founding, stressed that Brigham Young’s desire was for “a general organization of the young people, for their mutual improvement, into associations that should be separate from the Priesthood, and yet so organized that they should be under its guidance, and tend to its strength and aid.”²⁹ This separation from the priesthood was evident even in the founding meeting, which President Young authorized but did not attend. Highlighting the unique relationship, Junius F. Wells announced to the assembled body that he was acting “at the suggestion, and by the authority of President Brigham Young.” However, bishops and other prominent men present declined Wells’s invitation to join him on the stand, noting that it was not their meeting.³⁰ Indeed, though Church leaders at the highest levels gave official support to the early YMMIA, the organization seemed to go to great lengths to distinguish itself from the priesthood, a relationship that presented the body with challenges. Two years following the death of President Young, Junius Wells described having “many conversations with Elder Joseph F. Smith,” who “became fully aware of the handicaps the organization was subjected to.”

By March 1880, Wells was ready to make a change. Writing President Taylor and the rest of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, Wells confessed, “We feel that the interests of the organization require the sanction and direct

A FIRM FOUNDATION

recognition of the Presiding Authority of the Church.” Specifically, he requested that a general superintendency for the YMMIA be created, headed by at least one Apostle. At the organization’s fourth semiannual general conference in April 1880, Church leadership agreed, calling President Wilford Woodruff as the first general superintendent of the Young Men’s Mutual Improvement Association, with Elders Joseph F. Smith and Moses Thatcher as his counselors.³¹ From then on, the organization had central Church oversight. The listing of general superintendents leading up to President Harold B. Lee’s restructuring reads like a who’s who in Church leadership: Wilford Woodruff (1880–98), Lorenzo Snow (1898–1901), Joseph F. Smith (1901–18), Anthony W. Ivins (1918–21), George Albert Smith (1921–35), Albert E. Bowen (1935–37), George Q. Morris (1937–48), Elbert R. Curtis (1948–58), Joseph T. Bentley (1958–62), G. Carlos Smith (1962–69), and W. Jay Eldredge (1969–72).³²

In establishing Church oversight for the Young Men’s Mutual Improvement Association in 1880, the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles also took the opportunity to clarify the organization’s place within the priesthood. Several of these declarations are significant because they highlight the separation between the youth priesthood quorums and the youth organization evident in the founding of the YMMIA. “This institution must not interfere with the priesthood of any of its members,” the Council declared. “Each individual member must be subject to the quorum of which he may be a member, and to the regularly organized authorities of the stake with which he is associated.” Placing it under stake control, the body further outlined, “Every stake organization [is] to be under the authority of the stake organization of the priesthood in that stake, and to have for its superintendent a High Priest selected by the president of the stake and his counselors, sanctioned by the high council of the stake, and voted for and sustained by the stake conference and associations of the stake.” Finally, the Quorum announced, “It must be understood that this organization is not formed as a separate or distinct Church organization or body of priesthood, but for the purpose of mutual improvement of the members and all connected therewith.”³³

Tying It to the Priesthood

CONNECTING THE YOUNG MEN BACK TO PRIESTHOOD

With these guidelines in place, the YMMIA slowly transformed itself over its first hundred years of existence into the organization with which most Church members today are familiar. Between 1898 and 1900, the central committee became the general board. In 1901, the organization graded youth into two classes—junior and senior—and began the activity program of the YMMIA, adding social and cultural activities to theological studies. On May 21, 1913, it received a national charter from the Boy Scouts of America, a relationship that continues to influence both organizations heavily.

Becoming part of the Boy Scouts of America movement led to what Charles E. Mitchener Jr., former executive secretary of the YMMIA, called “the real beginning of the age-group departments in the YMMIA.”³⁴ In 1920, three grades were formed: juniors (MIA Scouts) for ages twelve through sixteen, seniors (M Men) for ages seventeen through twenty-one, and advanced seniors (adult) for ages twenty-two and older. In 1928, the MIA Scouts were further divided, with the oldest age-group (fifteen and sixteen-year-olds) forming the Vanguard program (they adopted the Boy Scout name of Explorers in 1935). The 1930s and ’40s saw additional restructurings, specifically in the age classifications for YMMIA members over twenty-five. Finally, in June 1950 the Church solidified the organization: Scouts (ages twelve and thirteen), Explorers (ages fourteen through sixteen), Junior M Men (ages seventeen and eighteen), M Men (ages nineteen through twenty-five), and Special Interest (ages twenty-six and over). During this restructuring, the YMMIA also significantly expanded its activity program, creating annual all-Church athletic contests for softball, basketball, volleyball, and, for a brief time, tennis. The YMMIA also strengthened its ties to the Young Women’s Mutual Improvement Association, joining with them for the annual June Conference beginning in 1896. This traditional event highlighting the Young Men’s and Young Women’s Mutual Improvement Associations flourished for the next seven decades, combining instructional sessions by

A FIRM FOUNDATION

Church leaders with a variety of dance, music, drama, and speech festivals to rival the all-Church athletic events.³⁵

With a growing and flourishing program, the changes enacted by President Harold B. Lee to the Young Men's Mutual Improvement Association on November 9, 1972, when he restructured the program must have been shocking. In fact, the response may explain President Lee's general conference plea the following April: "Just a word now about what has been said regarding the Aaronic Priesthood MIA and the Melchizedek Priesthood MIA. . . . We are asking you to . . . not go out as a Monday morning quarterback and try to do all the second-guessing. I want to say to you that there is no topic that has received longer and more searching, prayerful discussion by the General Authorities of the Church than the matters that pertain to the young people of the Aaronic and Melchizedek Priesthood groups, and the women of similar ages. . . . Suspend judgment, then, and ponder what has been said tonight until you receive further instructions." Concluding his priesthood session address, President Lee further testified, "I bear you my solemn witness, my beloved brethren, that these things that have been spoken tonight have been spoken under the inspiration of the Lord, and we give it to you for your pondering, for your prayerful consideration, suspending judgment, and not raising your voices in criticism, but carrying on the youth organizations as they now exist until these brethren have given you the full details of just what lies ahead; then you can begin to see the merits of what it is all about."³⁶

In explaining the changes, Church periodicals noted that the restructuring of the Young Men organization was done "to meet the increasing demands of a fast-growing, worldwide Church and to improve priesthood correlation."³⁷ To accomplish this end, in 1972 the First Presidency created two separate priesthood-oriented MIAs. The Aaronic Priesthood Mutual Improvement Association served youth ages twelve through seventeen, and the Melchizedek Priesthood Mutual Interest Association assisted young single adults ages eighteen through twenty-five as well as special interest groups of single persons twenty-six and older (generally including widowers, divorcés, and others with special situations). Describing the change at the

Tying It to the Priesthood

following general conference, President Lee stressed that “these announced Aaronic Priesthood and Melchizedek Priesthood MIAs do not do away with the Young Men’s and Young Women’s Mutual Improvement Associations.” Rather, two separate general Church bodies were created to oversee the new organizations. At the Aaronic Priesthood level, a new YMMIA presidency was created, headed by President Robert L. Backman, with LeGrand R. Curtis and Jack H. Goasland Jr. as counselors. For the Melchizedek Priesthood MIA, Elders James E. Faust, Marion D. Hanks, and L. Tom Perry, all Assistants to the Twelve, formed the leadership committee. However, priesthood quorums took specific guidance of each group, with the Presiding Bishopric overseeing the Young Men organization and a committee of four Apostles (Elders Thomas S. Monson, Boyd K. Packer, Marvin J. Ashton, and Bruce R. McConkie) directing the Melchizedek Priesthood MIA. Of this change, President Lee concluded, “What is intended, as you see this unfold, is that the programs will go forward, but with priesthood identity the like of which they have not enjoyed before.”³⁸

As outlined by President Lee, tying the youth of the Church to the priesthood became the overarching theme of the change. Describing the “crazy mixed-up world” the youth face, President Lee stressed that “in these new movements with our young people, our only hope is that by intensifying the responsibility of the priesthood with the youth organizations we can strengthen their hands and reach out to these young men and women who need so much the shepherding influence of the priesthood.”³⁹ Presiding Bishop Victor L. Brown expressed similar faith that the change would better connect the youth to priesthood: “The MIA is no longer auxiliary to the priesthood. It has now been brought directly under the umbrella of the priesthood. It is priesthood oriented and priesthood directed. . . . By clarifying and shortening the priesthood lines of responsibility on the ward and stake levels, the influence of the priesthood will be felt in the lives of young men and women. The priesthood is the power to act in the name of God. It is important that our young people understand that it is the power unto salvation for everyone, both men and women.”⁴⁰

A FIRM FOUNDATION

Ultimately, the change accomplished two purposes. On the one hand, it blessed the lives of youth by bringing them in closer connection to the priesthood and priesthood leaders. Elder Perry, associate director of the newly formed Melchizedek Priesthood MIA committee, stressed that youth “have found themselves on tributaries lined with sharp rocks, rapids and swift currents that have tossed them to and fro.” Comparing the priesthood to a safe harbor, Elder Perry continued, “Now a channel has been cut to bring them into the main stream of the church where the waters are deep and the ride can be smooth with many new ports of opportunity, study, activity, service and spirituality.”⁴¹ For the bishoprics, however, the change also served as a blessing, as noted by Robert L. Backman, Aaronic Priesthood MIA Young Men president. “What a marvelous opportunity this gives for the presidency of the Aaronic Priesthood to help our youth leaders learn the duties and responsibilities of their respective callings,” Backman declared. “And what a blessing it will be for our youth leaders to enjoy a close relationship with the great youth leaders of the ward.”⁴²

The direct connections between the youth and the priesthood were further solidified less than two years later, when, at the June 1974 MIA conference, the term “MIA” was discontinued altogether, replaced by the name “Aaronic Priesthood”. At the same time, Church President Spencer W. Kimball released entirely the general presidencies and boards of both the Young Men’s and Young Women’s MIAs, placing them instead under the direction of the Presiding Bishopric. “These changes will provide greater priesthood direction and involvement,” President Kimball explained. “We have placed the responsibility directly upon the Presiding Bishopric who, by revelation, constitute the presidency of the Aaronic Priesthood.” Hoping that the change would have the same effect at the ward level, President Kimball stressed, “It is the utmost importance that the bishops realize that their first and foremost responsibility is to the Aaronic Priesthood and Young Women of their wards. . . . It is our intent that no one stand between the bishopric, at either the general or ward level, and their ministry with the Aaronic Priesthood.”⁴³

Tying It to the Priesthood

As founders of the YMMIA had done with Brigham Young, Church leaders during the Lee and Kimball organizational changes stressed the inspiration attendant to the restructuring. Explaining the change, President Lee affirmed divine guidance in the programs of the Church.⁴⁴ President Lee, Bishop Brown, and Elder Perry all linked the change to prophecy, connecting the restructuring to President Joseph F. Smith's prediction:

We expect to see the day, if we live long enough (and if some of us do not live long enough to see it, there are others who will), when every council of the Priesthood in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints will understand its duty; will assume its own responsibility, will magnify its calling, and fill its place in the Church, to the uttermost, according to the intelligence and ability possessed by it. When that day shall come, there will not be so much necessity for work that is now being done by the auxiliary organizations, because it will be done by the regular quorums of the Priesthood. The Lord designed and comprehended it from the beginning, and he has made provision in the Church whereby every need may be met and satisfied through the regular organizations of the Priesthood.⁴⁵

Bishop Brown further noted that “now, through inspiration from the Lord through His mouthpiece President Harold B. Lee, a most significant change has been brought about.”⁴⁶

CONCLUSION

“It is change in the heart and not a change on a chart,” President Kimball emphasized, “which really makes a lasting difference.”⁴⁷ While the organizational changes effected in the Young Men's Mutual Improvement Association in the early 1970s may seem like semantics, the results should have eternal implications. By shortening the lines of responsibility, the restructuring brought the youth of the Church in closer contact to local priesthood leaders and, importantly, to the keys they exercise. Bishop Brown, participant witness to it all, highlighted the effect these changes would have: “This decision

A FIRM FOUNDATION

by the First Presidency and the Council of the Twelve will have great impact on the lives of the members of the Church in years to come. President Lee referred to it as potentially one of the most significant changes in the Church in our lifetime. Having been involved in the development of the plan, I can testify to you that it came through inspiration from the Lord.⁴⁸

Over the course of nearly one hundred years of existence, the Young Men's Mutual Improvement Association enjoyed a unique relationship with the priesthood. Formed at the insistence of President Brigham Young, it originally enjoyed priesthood blessing and, with the formation of a general superintendency, priesthood oversight. However, without connection to the revealed priesthood quorums for deacons, teachers, and priests, the organization was separated from the priesthood at the ward and stake levels, something that appears to have worried President Harold B. Lee. Describing President Lee's concerns, Elder Boyd K. Packer noted, "He saw some drifting and felt some anxiety, and he carried that concern with him for years."⁴⁹ In the early 1970s, President Lee acted on the situation, closing the gap between the youth and the priesthood by replacing the Mutual Improvement Association with an Aaronic Priesthood model connected directly to the bishops of the Church. Near the end of his brief administration, President Lee sensed that the changes he effected were nearly complete. "Brethren, we must begin to gear down," Elder Packer reported him saying. "We must begin to reduce the pattern of changes. We must now turn from restructuring, remodeling, and overhauling, and dedicate ourselves and employ ourselves to maintenance and to operation."⁵⁰

To allay the concerns of those impacted by President Lee's brief tenure and the extensive administrative changes it produced, Elder Packer offered an instructive parable:

Imagine a group of people who are going on a journey through a territory that is dangerous and unplotted. They have a large bus for transportation, and they are making preparations. They find among them a master mechanic. He is appointed to get their vehicle ready, with all of us to help. He insists that it be stripped down

Tying It to the Priesthood

completely, every part taken from the other part and inspected carefully, cleaned, renewed, repaired, and some of them replaced.

Some of the gears are not efficient. They are not producing the power they should for the amount of fuel they use. And so they are replaced. This means a change in linkage, a change in the pattern of connections and delivering the power. So they go to work, with this master mechanic directing the retooling and refitting of this vehicle.

There are steep inclines that must be made and there has to be sufficient power. There will be curves and switchbacks, there will be places where control will have to be perfect, where the braking will have to be perfect.

So, painstakingly and deliberately, without undue pressure, the bus is disassembled and ultimately put together again.

Then comes the time when there has to be a shakedown, a test run, if you will. The signal comes that this master mechanic will also be appointed the driver. He will head the journey.

So the test is run. It is not a very long one, but there are some very difficult obstacles in it so that it is a full test. All of us, as we stand by, are delighted with the result. It is roadworthy. Now we know that it will make every hill and it will go over and, if necessary, through any obstacle in its way.

We see the master mechanic, pleased with his work, step down, and say that it's ready. He dusts a little dust off the radiator cap.

Then comes the signal that another will drive. And the protest comes: "Oh, but not another! We need him to drive. There's never been anyone who has seen so much and knows so much about the vehicle we are going to use. No man in all history has so completely gone through this vehicle and no one knows as much as he knows. No one is so thoroughly familiar with it."

But the command is definite. Another will drive. Some protest that the new driver isn't so much a mechanic. "What if there is trouble along the way?" And the answer comes back, "Perhaps

A FIRM FOUNDATION

that's all to the good that he may not be a mechanic. It may well be, for should there be a little grinding of the gears he won't be quite so inclined to strip it down, take out all the gears, and start to overhaul it again. He'll try first a little lubrication perhaps, a little grease here and there, and that will be all it needs." . . .

We must now move forward and move out. The signal comes to all of us who are on the crew. "Climb aboard. Another's been appointed to drive." We obediently and with acceptance move out into that journey.⁵¹

With the passing of the master organizational mechanic President Lee, the Church, and the Young Men organization he restructured moved on. However, "never will the Church be the same," Elder Packer declared regarding the changes. "Always it will run with more precision, more power."⁵² Hopefully, the closer connection between the youth of the Church and their priesthood leaders will lead to the sort of experience described by YMMIA participant B. Morris Young: "My early association with the Young Men's Mutual Improvement Association made a profound impression upon my mind and left upon my character an influence for righteousness which has enriched all my life, strengthened my testimony, and aided me in developing and maintaining the principles of truth in my home and in all my public and private affairs."⁵³

NOTES

1. Boyd K. Packer, *That All May Be Edified* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1982), 124.
2. Francis M. Gibbons, *Harold B. Lee: Man of Vision, Prophet of God* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1993), 478.
3. Joseph F. Smith, "Origin of Mutual Improvement," *Improvement Era*, October 1907, 985–86.
4. "Priesthood MIA Era Opens," *Church News*, June 23, 1973, 3.
5. Gibbons, *Harold B. Lee*, 478.
6. James M. Monroe, "A Short Sketch of the Rise of the Young Gentlemen and Ladies Relief Society of Nauvoo," *Times and Seasons*, April 1, 1843, 154.

Tying It to the Priesthood

7. Monroe, "Short Sketch of the Rise," 155.
8. Monroe, "Short Sketch of the Rise," 156.
9. Glen M. Leonard, *Nauvoo: A Place of Peace, A People of Promise* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2002), 226–27.
10. *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1957), 5:320–21, footnote.
11. Henry W. Naisbitt, "'Polysophical' and 'Mutual,'" *Improvement Era*, August 1899, 747.
12. Smith, "Origin of Mutual Improvement," 986–87.
13. Edward H. Anderson, "The Past of Mutual Improvement," *Improvement Era*, November 1897, 1.
14. Junius F. Wells, "Historic Sketch of the Y. M. M. I. A.," *Improvement Era*, June 1925, 714.
15. Smith, "Origin of Mutual Improvement," 985–86.
16. Wells, "Historic Sketch, June 1925, 713–14.
17. Josiah Burrows, "Origin and Mission of the Y. M. M. I. A.," *Contributor*, August 1890, 384.
18. Wells, "Historic Sketch," June 1925, 713–15.
19. Wells, "Historic Sketch," June 1925, 716.
20. Wells, "Historic Sketch," June 1925, 721–22.
21. "Report of the Young Men's Mutual Improvement Associations for the Year Ending March 31, 1880," *Contributor*, June 1880, 214–15.
22. Anderson, "The Past of Mutual Improvement," 2–3.
23. B. Morris Young, "Recollections," *Improvement Era*, August 1925, 955.
24. Wells, "Historic Sketch," June 1925, 717.
25. Wells, "Historic Sketch," *Improvement Era*, September 1925, 1070.
26. Edward H. Anderson, "The Past of Mutual Improvement," *Improvement Era*, December 1897, 85.
27. Wells, "Historic Sketch," June 1925, 728.
28. Wells, "Historic Sketch," September 1925, 1069.
29. Smith, "Origin of Mutual Improvement," 985–86.
30. Wells, "Historic Sketch," June 1925, 716.

A FIRM FOUNDATION

31. Wells, "Historic Sketch," *Improvement Era*, 1072–74.
32. *Deseret News 1974 Church Almanac* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1974), 214.
33. Junius F. Wells, "Historic Sketch," *Improvement Era*, October 1925, 1149.
34. Charles E. Mitchener Jr., "Young Men's Mutual Improvement Association," Young Men's Mutual Improvement Association History, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, 5.
35. Mitchener, "Young Men's Mutual Improvement Association," 5.
36. Harold B. Lee, "Follow the Leadership of the Church," *Ensign*, July 1973, 96–97, 99.
37. "FYI: For Your Information," *New Era*, January 1973, 46.
38. Lee, "Follow the Leadership of the Church," 96.
39. Lee, "Follow the Leadership of the Church," 99.
40. Victor L. Brown, in "Priesthood MIA Era Opens," *Church News*, June 23, 1973, 3.
41. L. Tom Perry, in "Sessions Outline Priesthood MIA," *Church News*, June 23, 1973, 5.
42. Robert L. Backman, "Youth's Opportunity to Serve," *Ensign*, July 1973, 85.
43. Spencer W. Kimball, in J. M. Heslop, "Priesthood to Direct Youth of the Church," *Church News*, June 29, 1974, 3, 14.
44. "Priesthood MIA Era Opens," *Church News*, June 23, 1973, 3.
45. Joseph F. Smith, *Gospel Doctrine*, 5th ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1986), 159; see also "Priesthood MIA Era Opens," 3; Victor L. Brown, "The Aaronic Priesthood MIA," *Ensign*, July 1973, 80; and "Sessions Outline Priesthood MIA," 5.
46. Brown, quoted in "Priesthood MIA Era Opens," 3.
47. Spencer W. Kimball, in Heslop, "Changes Prepare Way for Aaronic Priesthood Lead," 14.
48. Brown, "Aaronic Priesthood MIA," 80
49. Packer, *That All May Be Edified*, 121.
50. Packer, *That All May Be Edified*, 124.
51. Packer, *That All May Be Edified*, 122–23.
52. Packer, *That All May Be Edified*, 124.
53. Young, "Recollections," 954.