

Establishing an Ensign to the Nations

Having successfully brought the first company of Saints across the plains to Utah, President Brigham Young now turned his attention to establishing God's kingdom in the desert. Through his vision and leadership, what was once an empty desert became a thriving civilization and a haven for the Saints. His plainspoken direction helped the Saints imagine the possibilities of their new home and led them forward in their quest to build God's kingdom.

Two days after the first company's arrival, Brigham Young and several of the Twelve climbed a round bluff on the mountainside that President Young had seen in vision before leaving Nauvoo. They looked out over the valley's vast expanse and prophesied that all nations of the world would be welcome in this place and that here the Saints would enjoy prosperity and peace. They named the hill Ensign Peak after the scripture in Isaiah that promised, "He shall set up an ensign for the nations, and shall assemble the outcasts of Israel" (Isaiah 11:12).¹

President Young's first public act, on 28 July 1847, was to select a central site for a temple and put men to work planning its design and construction. Placing his cane on the chosen spot he said, "Here we shall build a temple to our God." This declaration must have comforted the Saints, who only a short time before had been forced to discontinue temple worship when they left Nauvoo.

In August, Church leaders and most of the first pioneer company returned to Winter Quarters to prepare their families to come to the valley the next year. Shortly after they arrived, Brigham Young and the Quorum of the Twelve felt impressed that the time had come to reorganize the First Presidency. As President

of the Quorum of the Twelve, Brigham Young was sustained as the President of the Church. He chose Heber C. Kimball and Willard Richards as his Counselors, and the Saints unanimously sustained their leaders.

The First Year in the Valley

Two more companies of Saints arrived in the Salt Lake Valley before the summer of 1847 was over, and the almost 2,000 members were organized into the Salt Lake Stake. Late crops were planted but the harvest was marginal, and by spring many were suffering from lack of food. John R. Young, who was a boy at the time, wrote:

“By the time the grass began to grow the famine had waxed sore. For several months we had no bread. Beef, milk, pig-weeds, segoes [lily roots], and thistles formed our diet. I was the herdboy, and while out watching the stock, I used to eat thistle stalks until my stomach would be as full as a cow’s. At last the hunger was so sharp that father took down the old bird-pecked ox-hide from the limb; and it was converted into most delicious soup.”² The settlers freely cooperated and shared with each other and so were able to survive this difficult time.

By June 1848, the settlers had planted between five and six thousand acres of land, and the valley began to look green and productive. But to the Saints’ dismay, huge hordes of black crickets descended upon the crops. The settlers did everything they could. They dug trenches and turned streams of water on the crickets. They clubbed the insects with sticks and brooms and tried to burn them, but their efforts were useless. The crickets continued to come in seemingly endless numbers. Patriarch John Smith, president of the Salt Lake Stake, called for a day of fasting and prayer. Soon large flocks of seagulls appeared in the sky and descended on the crickets. Susan Noble Grant said of the experience: “To our astonishment, the gulls seemed almost ravenous while gobbling down the scrambling, hopping crickets.”³ The Saints watched in joy and wonderment. Their lives had been saved.



Through their faith and industry, the Saints began to establish a city in the Salt Lake Valley. This engraving shows the valley in 1853.

The Saints worked with energy and faith despite their difficult circumstances, and soon they had made great progress. A traveler on his way to California passed through Salt Lake City in September 1849 and paid tribute to them in this way: “A more orderly, earnest, industrious and civil people, I have never been among than these, and it is incredible how much they have done here in the wilderness in so short a time. In this city which contains about from four to five thousand inhabitants, I have not met in a citizen a single idler, or any person who looks like a loafer. Their prospects for crops are fair, and there is a spirit and energy in all that you see that cannot be equaled in any city of any size that I have ever been in.”⁴

Explorations

In the late summer of 1848, President Brigham Young again made the journey from Winter Quarters to the Salt Lake Valley. When he arrived, he realized that the Saints needed to learn what resources were available in their new environment. Much was

gained from Indians who lived in the area, but President Young also sent Church members on explorations to discover the medicinal properties of plants and the natural resources available.

He sent other exploring parties to find settlement sites. In their travels these members discovered mineral deposits, abundant timber, water sources, and grasslands, as well as suitable areas for settlement. To guard against land speculation, the prophet warned the Saints against cutting up their assigned property to sell to others. The land was their stewardship and was to be managed wisely and industriously, not for financial gain.

In the fall of 1849, the Perpetual Emigrating Fund was established under the direction of President Young. Its purpose was to assist the poor who did not have the means to travel to join the body of the Church. At great sacrifice, many Saints contributed to the fund, and as a result, thousands of members were able to travel to the Salt Lake Valley. As soon as they were able, those who received help were expected to repay the amount of assistance they had received. These funds were used to help still others. Through this cooperative effort, the Saints blessed the lives of those in need.

Missionaries Answer the Call

With the hum of labor and domestic life filling the air, President Brigham Young turned to the concerns of the Church. At the general conference held on 6 October 1849, he assigned several members of the Twelve, along with newly called missionaries, to serve foreign missions. They accepted these calls even though they would leave behind their families, their new homes, and many unfinished tasks. Erastus Snow and several elders opened missionary work in Scandinavia, while Lorenzo Snow and Joseph Toronto traveled to Italy. Addison and Louisa Barnes Pratt returned to Addison's former field of labor in the Society Islands. John Taylor was called to France and Germany. As the missionaries traveled east, they passed Saints headed to the new Zion in the Rocky Mountains.

In their fields of labor, the missionaries witnessed miracles and baptized many people into the Church. When Lorenzo Snow, who later became President of the Church, was preaching in Italy, he saw a three-year-old boy on the verge of death. He recognized an opportunity to heal the child and open the hearts of the people in the area. That night he prayed long and earnestly for God's direction, and the following day he and his companion fasted and prayed for the boy. That afternoon they administered to him and offered a silent prayer for help in their labors. The boy slept peacefully all night and was miraculously healed. Word of this healing spread across the valleys of the Piedmont in Italy. The doors were opened to the missionaries, and the first baptisms in the area took place.⁵

In August 1852, at a special conference held in Salt Lake City, 106 elders were called to go on missions to countries throughout the world. These missionaries, as well as those who were called later, preached the gospel in South America, China, India, Spain, Australia, Hawaii, and the South Pacific. In most of these areas, the missionaries had little initial success. However, they sowed seeds that resulted in many coming into the Church in later missionary efforts.

Elder Edward Stevenson was called to the Gibraltar Mission in Spain. This call meant a return to the place of his birth, where he boldly proclaimed the restored gospel to his countrymen. He was arrested for preaching and spent some time in jail until authorities found he was teaching the guards, almost converting one of them. After his release he baptized two people into the Church and by January 1854 a branch of ten members had been organized. In July, even though six members had left to serve with the British army in Asia, the branch had eighteen members, including one seventy, one elder, one priest, and one teacher, giving the branch the leadership it needed to continue to grow.⁶

Local governments in French Polynesia drove the missionaries out in 1852. But the converted Saints kept the Church alive until further proselyting efforts in 1892. Elders Tihoni and Maihea

were especially valiant as they endured imprisonment and other ordeals rather than deny their faith. Each of them tried to keep the Saints active and faithful to the gospel.⁷

For those who joined the Church outside the United States, this was a time for gathering to Zion, which meant traveling by boat to America. Elizabeth and Charles Wood sailed in 1860 from South Africa, where they had labored several years to acquire money for their travel. Elizabeth kept house for a wealthy man, and her husband made bricks until they obtained the needed funds. Elizabeth was carried aboard the ship on a bed 24 hours after delivering a son and was given the captain's berth so she could be more comfortable. She was very ill during the journey, almost dying twice, but lived to settle in Fillmore, Utah.

Missionaries became very dear to the Saints in the countries where they served. Joseph F. Smith, near the end of his mission to Hawaii in 1857, became ill with a high fever that prevented him from working for three months. He was blessed to come under the care of Ma Mahuhii, a faithful Hawaiian Saint. She nursed Joseph as if he were her own son, and a strong bond of love developed between the two. Years later, when he was President of the Church, Joseph F. Smith visited Honolulu and just after his arrival saw an old blind woman being led in with a few choice bananas in her hand as an offering. He heard her call, "Iosepa, Iosepa" (Joseph, Joseph). Immediately he ran to her and hugged and kissed her many times, patting her on the head and saying, "Mama, Mama, my dear old Mama."⁸

Callings to Colonize

Many communities in Utah and southern Idaho and later in parts of Arizona, Wyoming, Nevada, and California were founded by individuals and families called at general conferences. President Brigham Young directed the establishment of these communities, where thousands of new settlers could live and farm.

During his lifetime, all of the Salt Lake Valley and many surrounding areas were colonized. By 1877, when Brigham Young



Answering calls from President Brigham Young, many Saints left their established homes to colonize new communities.

died, more than 350 colonies had been established, and by 1900 there were almost 500. Early Church authority Brigham Henry Roberts noted that the success of Mormon colonization stemmed from “the loyalty of the people to their leaders and [their] unselfish and devoted personal sacrifice” in carrying out their calls from President Young.⁹ The colonists sacrificed material comforts, the associations of friends, and sometimes their lives to follow a prophet of the Lord.

At general conference meetings, President Young read the names of those brethren and their families who were being called to move to outlying areas. These colonizers considered that they were being called on missions and knew that they would remain in their assigned locales until they were released. They traveled to their new areas at their own expense and with their own supplies. Their success depended on how well they used the resources at hand. They surveyed and cleared fields, built gristmills, dug irrigation ditches to bring water to the land, fenced pastures for their stock, and built roads. They planted crops and gardens, built churches and schools, and tried to maintain friendly relations with the Indians. They helped each other in sickness, as well as in births, deaths, and weddings.

In 1862 Charles Lowell Walker received a call to settle in southern Utah. He attended a meeting for those who had been called and recorded: “Here I learned a principle that I shall not forget in awhile. It showed to me that obedience was a great principle in heaven and on earth. Well, here I have worked for the last seven years through heat and cold, hunger and adverse circumstances, and at last have got me a home, a lot with fruit trees just beginning to bear and look pretty. Well, I must leave it and go and do the will of my Father in Heaven, who overrules all for the good of them that love and fear him. I pray God to give me strength to accomplish that which is required of me in an acceptable manner before him.”¹⁰

Charles C. Rich, a member of the Quorum of Twelve Apostles, also received a call to colonize. Brigham Young called him and a

few other brethren to take their families and settle in the Bear Lake Valley, about 150 miles north of Salt Lake City. The valley was at a high altitude and was very cold with deep snows in the winter. Brother Rich had recently returned from a mission in Europe and was not anxious to move his family and start over again in difficult circumstances. But he accepted the call and in June 1864 arrived in the Bear Lake Valley. The next winter was unusually severe and by spring, some of the other brethren had decided to leave. Brother Rich realized that life would not be easy in this cold climate but said:

“There have been many hardships. That I admit . . . and these we have shared together. But if you want to go somewhere else, that is your right, and I do not want to deprive you of it. . . . But I must stay here, even if I stay alone. President Young called me here, and here I will remain till he releases me and gives me leave to go.” Brother Rich and his family did stay, and he became the leader of a thriving community for the next several decades.¹¹ Like thousands of others, he willingly obeyed his leaders in order to help build the kingdom of the Lord.

Relations with the Indians

As colonists moved further into the frontier, they often had dealings with the Indians. Unlike some settlers of the West, President Brigham Young taught the Saints to feed their native brothers and sisters and try to bring them into the Church. Proselyting efforts among the Indians were tried at Fort Lemhi in the Salmon River region of Idaho Territory and in the Elk Mountain settlement on the upper Colorado in the Utah Territory. President Young also instituted Relief Societies whose members sewed clothing for their Indian brothers and sisters and raised money to help feed them.

When Elizabeth Kane, who was the wife of Thomas L. Kane, a great nonmember friend of the Saints, traveled through Utah, she stayed at the home of a weary Mormon woman. Elizabeth did not think much of the woman until she saw how she treated the

Indians. When the woman called her guests to supper, she also spoke a few words to the Indians who were waiting. Elizabeth asked what the woman had said to the Indians and a son in the family told her, "These strangers came first, and I have only cooked enough for them; but your meal is on the fire cooking now, and I will call you as soon as it is ready." Elizabeth was unbelieving and asked if she really would feed the Indians. The son told her, "Mother will serve them just as she does you, and give them a place at her table." She did serve them, waiting on them while they ate.¹²

Organization of Priesthood and Auxiliary Functions

In his later years, President Young clarified and established some important priesthood responsibilities. He directed the Twelve to hold conferences in every stake. As a result, seven new stakes and 140 new wards were created throughout Utah. The duties of stake presidencies, high councils, bishoprics, and quorum presidencies were clearly defined, and hundreds of men were called to fill these positions. He counseled Church members to put their lives in order and pay their tithing, fast offerings, and other donations.

In 1867 the prophet appointed George Q. Cannon as general superintendent of the Sunday School, and within a few years, the Sunday School was a permanent part of the Church organization. In 1869 President Young began giving formal instruction in modest living to his daughters. He expanded this counsel to all young women in 1870 with the formation of the Retrenchment Association (*retrench* means to cut back excesses). This was the beginning of the Young Women organization. In July 1877 he traveled to Ogden, Utah, to organize the first stake Relief Society.

President Brigham Young's Death and Legacy

As a leader, President Brigham Young was practical and energetic. He traveled to the settlements of the Church to instruct and

encourage the Saints. By direction and example, he taught members to fulfill their callings in the Church.

In evaluating his life, President Young wrote the following in response to an editor of a New York newspaper:

“The result of my labors for the past 26 years, briefly summed up, are: The peopling of this Territory by the Latter-day Saints of about 100,000 souls; the founding of over 200 cities, towns and villages inhabited by our people, . . . and the establishment of schools, factories, mills and other institutions calculated to improve and benefit our communities. . . .

“My whole life is devoted to the Almighty’s service.”¹³

In September 1876, President Young bore powerful witness of the Savior: “I testify that Jesus is the Christ, the Savior and Redeemer of the world; I have obeyed his sayings, and realized his promise, and the knowledge I have of him, the wisdom of this world cannot give, neither can it take away.”¹⁴

In August 1877, President Young fell very ill, and in spite of physicians’ care, died within a week. He was 76 years old and had led the Church for 33 years. Today we remember him as the dynamic prophet who led modern-day Israel to their promised land. His sermons touched on all aspects of daily life, making clear that religion is part of everyday experience. His understanding of the frontier and his sensible guidance inspired his people to accomplish seemingly impossible tasks as with the blessings of heaven they created a kingdom in the desert.