



As people throughout the world accept the restored gospel of Jesus Christ, they are able to receive the blessings of sacred ordinances.

The Present-day Church

President Ezra Taft Benson

Ezra Taft Benson became President of the Church after the death of Spencer W. Kimball. Early in his administration, he emphasized the great importance of reading and studying the Book of Mormon. He testified that “the Book of Mormon brings men to Christ,” and reaffirmed Joseph Smith’s statement that this book constitutes the “keystone of our religion, and a man would get nearer to God by abiding by its precepts, than by any other book.”¹

In the April 1986 general conference, President Benson declared: “The Lord inspired His servant Lorenzo Snow to reemphasize the principle of tithing to redeem the Church from financial bondage. . . . Now, in our day, the Lord has revealed the need to reemphasize the Book of Mormon. . . . I promise you that from this moment forward, if we will daily sup from its pages and abide by its precepts, God will pour out upon each child of Zion and the Church a blessing hitherto unknown.”² Millions around the world accepted the challenge and received the promised blessing.

Another major theme was the importance of avoiding pride. In the April 1989 general conference, he called for the members of the Church to “cleanse the inner vessel by conquering pride,” which he warned was the cause of the destruction of the Nephite nation. He counseled that “the antidote for pride is humility—meekness, submissiveness.”³

While he was serving as a member of the Quorum of the Twelve, Ezra Taft Benson had an unusual opportunity to be an example of gospel living. In 1952, with the encouragement of President David O. McKay, he accepted an appointment as the

Secretary of Agriculture under Dwight D. Eisenhower, president of the United States. This was the only time in the history of the Church that a member of the Quorum of the Twelve served in a United States president's cabinet. During his eight years of service, he gained widespread respect at home and abroad for his integrity and for his expertise in guiding and carrying out the agricultural policies of the United States government. He came into contact with leaders of nations and opened doors to representatives of the Church throughout the world.

Under President Benson's leadership, the Church made important advances worldwide. On 28 August 1987, he dedicated the Frankfurt Germany Temple in the Federal Republic of Germany, a meaningful privilege for him because he had been headquartered in Frankfurt while serving as president of the European mission from 1964 to 1965.

The Freiberg Germany Temple in the German Democratic Republic was dedicated on 29 June 1985. This dedication followed a number of miracles that occurred to make possible its construction. On his first visit to the German Democratic Republic in 1968, Elder Thomas S. Monson of the Quorum of the Twelve promised the Saints: "If you will remain true and faithful to the commandments of God, every blessing any member of the Church enjoys in any other country will be yours." In 1975, while on assignment in the same country, Elder Monson was impressed by the Spirit to dedicate that land to the Lord, saying, "Father, let this be the beginning of a new day for the members of Thy church in this land." He asked that the heartfelt desire of the Saints "to obtain temple blessings" might be fulfilled. His inspired promise and prophetic prayer of dedication were realized.⁴

On the last day of March 1989, Latter-day Saint missionaries were allowed to enter the German Democratic Republic. On 9 November 1989, the faith and prayers of many Saints were answered when the barriers between eastern and western Europe began to come down, leading to increased convert baptisms and construction of Church buildings. One convert first learned of the



Elder Russell M. Nelson with the vice president of the Russian Republic on 24 June 1991. The vice president announced that less than a month earlier, the Church had been given official recognition throughout the republic.

Church when he visited an open house in the newly completed chapel in Dresden, Germany, on 1 May 1990. Less than a week later he was baptized after he had received the missionary lessons, read the Book of Mormon twice from cover to cover, and acquired a strong testimony of the gospel's truthfulness.⁵

On 24 June 1991, at a banquet following the Mormon Tabernacle Choir's concert in Moscow, the vice president of the Russian Soviet Federal Socialist Republic announced that the Church was officially recognized in his country. This allowed the Church to establish congregations throughout this large republic. During the 1990s, a number of former Soviet republics and middle and eastern European countries were dedicated for the preaching of the gospel, including Albania, Armenia, Belarus, Bulgaria, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Russia, and Ukraine. Church facilities are being leased and built in each

of these countries, and many people are gaining testimonies of the truthfulness of the gospel. At the dedication of the first Latter-day Saint meetinghouse in Poland since before World War II, Elder Russell M. Nelson of the Quorum of the Twelve prayed that the meetinghouse might serve as “a refuge of peace for troubled souls and a haven of hope for those who hunger and thirst after righteousness.”⁶ This blessing is being fulfilled in the lives of Saints in many countries who have found the peace and joy of the gospel.

As a result of tremendous growth in Church membership and President Benson’s emphasis on missionary work, at the conclusion of his administration almost 48,000 missionaries were serving in 295 missions of the Church.

Also during his administration, the Church welfare program began offering increased humanitarian assistance to members of other faiths worldwide. This assistance is provided to relieve suffering and to foster long-term self-reliance. Large amounts of food, clothing, medical supplies, blankets, cash, and other items are distributed to the needy, and long-term projects provide health care, literacy training, and other services. This compassionate service is reaching thousands of people today in many parts of the world.

Afflicted by the infirmities of old age and the loss of his beloved wife, Flora, President Benson died on 30 May 1994 at the age of 94, having valiantly completed his mission as prophet of the Lord. He was succeeded by Howard W. Hunter, who was then serving as President of the Quorum of the Twelve.

President Howard W. Hunter

In his first news conference on 6 June 1994, President Howard W. Hunter established some of the important themes of his administration. He said: “I would invite all members of the Church to live with ever-more attention to the life and example of the Lord Jesus Christ, especially the love and hope and compassion He displayed.

“I pray that we might treat each other with more kindness, more courtesy, more humility and patience and forgiveness.”



Dedication of the Orson Hyde Memorial Garden in Jerusalem on 24 October 1979. The garden, on the Mount of Olives, commemorates Elder Orson Hyde's dedication of the land of Palestine on 24 October 1841.

He also asked members of the Church to “establish the temple of the Lord as the great symbol of their membership and the supernal setting for their most sacred covenants. It would be the deepest desire of my heart to have every member of the Church temple worthy.”⁷ Many thousands of Church members took these messages into their lives and were blessed with a greater depth of spirituality.

President Hunter had a keenly developed mind that was of great value to the Church. In the late 1970s he received an assignment that required all his skills. He played an important role in negotiating the acquisition of land and in overseeing the construction of the Church’s major building in the Holy Land—Brigham Young University’s Jerusalem Center for Near Eastern Studies. This center is located on Mount Scopus, an extension of the Mount of Olives. It houses the residences and study activities of students studying in depth about this choice land, its people (Jews and Arabs alike), and the places where Jesus and his ancient prophets walked. This center has been a blessing to those who have studied within it, and its beauty has inspired many who have visited there.

President Hunter also played an important part in the development of the Polynesian Cultural Center, located adjacent to Brigham Young University—Hawaii in Laie, Hawaii. He was the founding chairman of the board for this 42-acre visitor attraction that is owned and operated by the Church. Its purpose is to preserve Polynesian culture and to provide employment for students. Built in 1963, it is a major attraction that is now visited by nearly a million people each year, who come to enjoy the music, dances, arts, and crafts of the Polynesian islands.

Before he became Church President, Elder Hunter served for eight years as president of the Genealogical Society of Utah, the forerunner of today’s Family History Department. During this time, the society sponsored the first World Conference on Records in 1969, which, he said, “has created much good will for the Church and has opened doors for our work all over the world.”⁸ He developed a great love for all people, living and dead, and

often taught that we are all part of one great family. He was known as a man who possessed Christlike love.

During his lifetime, President Hunter faced many adversities. With faith and fortitude, he dealt with serious and painful health problems, the long-term debilitating illness and death of his first wife, and other difficulties. In spite of these obstacles, he actively served the Lord, traveling much and working hard in administering the affairs of the Church. His example was consistent with his message: "If you have troubles at home with children who stray, if you suffer financial reverses and emotional strain that threaten your homes and your happiness, if you must face the loss of life or health, may peace be unto your soul. We will not be tempted beyond our ability to withstand. Our detours and disappointments are the straight and narrow path to Him."⁹

President Hunter presided in Mexico City, Mexico, on 11 December 1994 as the Church's 2,000th stake was created, an important milestone in Church history. To those assembled he said: "The Lord, through His servants, has brought this miracle to pass. This work will continue to go forward in strength and vitality. The promises made to Father Lehi and his children about their posterity have been and are continuing to be fulfilled in Mexico."¹⁰ During the time President Hunter served as a General Authority, the Church in Latin America grew dramatically. At the time he became President of the Church, there were over 1.5 million Latter-day Saints in just the countries of Mexico, Brazil, and Chile, more Church members than lived in Utah at that time.

Although President Hunter served as President of the Church for only nine months, he had a powerful effect upon the Saints, who remember him for his compassion, long-suffering, and profound example of Christlike living.

President Gordon B. Hinckley

When Gordon B. Hinckley became President of the Church following the death of President Hunter, he was asked what would be the focus of his Presidency. He replied: "Carry on. Yes,

our theme will be to carry on the great work which has been furthered by our predecessors who have served so admirably, so faithfully and so well. Building family values, yes. Fostering education, yes. Building a spirit of tolerance and forbearance among people everywhere, yes. And proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ."¹¹

President Hinckley's extensive experience with Church leadership prepared him well for the Presidency. He was sustained to the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles in 1961. Beginning in 1981, he served as a Counselor in the First Presidency to three Church Presidents—Spencer W. Kimball, Ezra Taft Benson, and Howard W. Hunter. During some of these years, he carried extraordinarily heavy responsibilities when these Church Presidents suffered from the infirmities of age.

While young Gordon B. Hinckley was on his mission in England, he received some counsel that has served him well throughout his years of challenging responsibilities. Being somewhat discouraged, he wrote a letter to his father, saying, "I am wasting my time and your money. I don't see any point in my staying here." After some time, he received a short letter from his father that said: "Dear Gordon. I have your letter. . . . I have only one suggestion. Forget yourself and go to work. With love, Your Father."

President Hinckley said of that moment: "I pondered that, and the next morning in our scripture class we read that great statement of the Lord: 'For whosoever will save his life shall lose it; but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel's, the same shall save it' (Mark 8:35). It touched me. That statement, that promise, in conjunction with my father's letter, prompted me to go upstairs, . . . get on my knees, and make a covenant with the Lord that I would try to forget myself and go to work. I count that as the day of decision in my life. Everything good that has happened to me since then I can trace back to the decision I made at that time."¹²

President Hinckley is well known as a person of irrepressible optimism, always filled with faith in God and in the future. " 'Things will work out' may well be President Hinckley's most

repeated assurance to family, friends, and associates. 'Keep trying,' he will say. 'Be believing. Be happy. Don't get discouraged. Things will work out.' "¹³

When asked by a reporter to identify the greatest challenge facing the Church, he responded, "The most serious challenge we face and the most wonderful challenge is the challenge that comes of growth." He explained that increased growth presents the need for more buildings, including more temples: "This is the greatest era in the history of the Church for temple building. Never has the construction of temples gone forward with the momentum that is now being carried forward. We have 47 operating temples. We have 13 other temples in some course of construction reaching back to the drawing board. We will continue to build temples."¹⁴ Increased Church growth has also made necessary the translation of the Book of Mormon into many languages.

President Hinckley has had personal experience with the dramatic growth of the Church. While attending a conference in Osaka, Japan, in 1967, he looked out at the audience, which included many young people, and said: "In you I see the future of the Church in Japan. And I see a great future. We have scarcely scratched the surface. But I feel impressed to say what I have felt for a long time, and that is that the day is not far distant when there will be stakes of Zion in this great land."¹⁵ Within a generation, there were 100,000 Latter-day Saints in Japan, many stakes, missions, and districts, and a temple.

President Hinckley is also very interested in the growth of the Church in the Philippines, where the first stake was organized in Manila in 1973. Two decades later, at the time he became President of the Church, over 300,000 Philippine members were receiving the blessings of the gospel, including a temple in their country. President Hinckley has shown great concern for the growth of the Church in other parts of Asia as well, including Korea, China, and Southeast Asia.

The spirituality of many members in Asia is evidenced by the experience of a General Authority who was assigned to call a

new stake president in a Philippines stake. After interviewing a number of priesthood brethren, he was impressed to call a man in his mid-twenties to be the stake president. He asked the young brother to go into an adjoining room and take some time to select his counselors. The brother came back in about 30 seconds. The General Authority thought he had misunderstood, but the new stake president said, "No. I knew through the Spirit of the Lord that I was going to be the stake president a month ago. I've already selected my counselors."

It is fitting that President Hinckley, who has done so much to assist in the establishment of the Church throughout the world, was able to announce during his administration: "Our statisticians tell me that if the present trend continues, then some time in February of 1996, just a few months from now, there will be more members of the Church outside the United States than in the United States. The crossover of that line is a wonderfully significant thing. It represents the fruit of a tremendous outreach."¹⁶

A major emphasis of President Hinckley's administration is the importance of good family life, especially in a world that often does not support family values. Under his direction, the First Presidency and Council of the Twelve issued a special proclamation to the world on the subject of the family, which states in part:

"The family is ordained of God. Marriage between man and woman is essential to His eternal plan. Children are entitled to birth within the bonds of matrimony, and to be reared by a father and a mother who honor marital vows with complete fidelity. Happiness in family life is most likely to be achieved when founded upon the teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ. . . .

"We warn that individuals who violate covenants of chastity, who abuse spouse or offspring, or who fail to fulfill family responsibilities will one day stand accountable before God. Further, we warn that the disintegration of the family will bring upon individuals, communities, and nations the calamities foretold by ancient and modern prophets."¹⁷

During the April 1995 general conference, President Hinckley announced that on 15 August 1995 the Church's regional representatives, who had served so well, would be released and that a new position, that of Area Authority, would be established. Area Authorities preside at stake conferences; reorganize or create stakes; provide training to stake, mission, and district presidents; and carry out other assignments given by the First Presidency and their Area Presidencies. This new position allows Church leaders to live and work closer to the people they serve and facilitates increased growth throughout the world.

One General Authority explained how each Saint can best sustain President Hinckley: "As he assumes the holy office to which he has been called—prophet, seer, revelator, Presiding High Priest and President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, . . . the best thing we can do to sustain him in his office is to 'carry on, carry on, carry on!' "¹⁸