

# **The Mormon Church: Organization and Operation of an International Organization**

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## **Background**

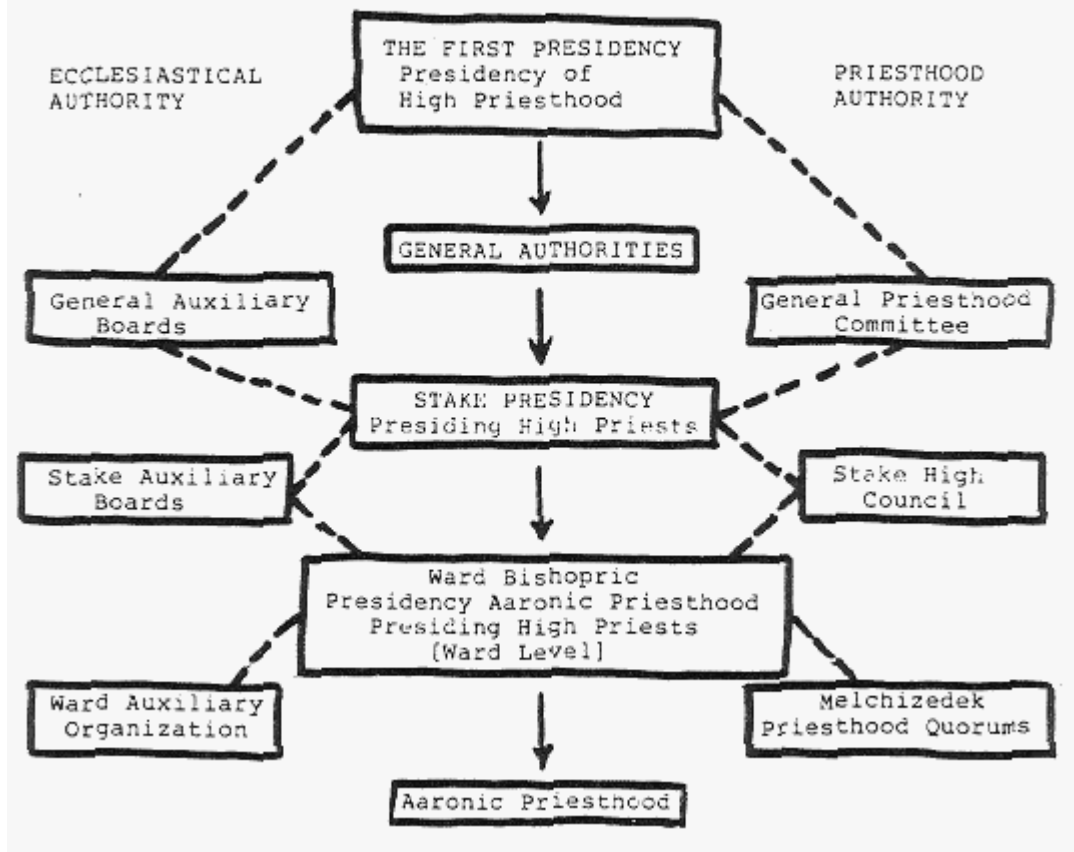
In the years since its inception, the Mormon Church has grown from a small band of believers in the US to a thriving international organization. Today this 157 year old establishment has over five million members residing on all major continents of the globe. How does an organization of this size operate? How does it coordinate its many activities? How does it secure necessary revenue? How does it integrate its members into hierarchical structure? It is hoped that an examination of these and related questions will provide some helpful insights for those directing the Church of the Nazarene in its effort to become a truly international.

## **Organization**

In the Mormon Church the flow of formal authority is from the top down. The following diagram, while somewhat simplified, illustrates the hierarchical nature.

## APPENDIX

Church Organization (1970)



## Church Growth

To fully appreciate the challenges confronting the Mormon Church, it is first necessary to have some familiarity with the growth rate of this organization. Within forty-three years of its beginning in 1830, the Mormon Church recorded 100,000 people on its membership rolls. In less than half this time (nineteen years) the membership doubled again. By 1911 it had 400,000 members. By 1939 the membership had doubled again and by 1959 official church figures placed the membership at 600,000. In eleven years 2,000,000 people were added to church rolls and today the membership is placed at just nearly 5 1/2 million people (1985 Church Almanac).

## Growth Commitment and Growth Strategy

One key component of the Mormon's growth strategy is missionary work. Almost from its inception the church stressed the importance of this activity. However missionary work was given renewed emphasis in the 1960s. By the middle of that decade the church had over 12,000 full-time missionaries in the field. By 1983 this number had increased to 26,850 (Allen & Leonard, p 613; 1985 Church Almanac).

A second component of the growth strategy district division. When a ward reaches between 300 and 500 members, the ward is divided. When a stake reaches between 6 and 10 wards, it is divided. Members attend their assigned wards and their efforts draw in new members.

## **Attitude Toward Growth in Foreign Areas**

In the decade of the 1960s strong emphasis was given to expanding the church in overseas areas. Judging from membership figures their efforts were quite successful. During this decade the church in Latin America grew by 750% from 18,700 to 135,000 members. During roughly the same period church membership in Asia grew by 500%.

The policy of church expansion in overseas areas was not always viewed positively by church officials. One August 1962 journal entry by Joseph Fielding Smith, who was then a church apostle, is indicative: "Our spending everywhere is to me alarming...We are constantly creating stakes in Europe, the islands of the Pacific, and on the American continent. I wonder if we have forgotten the commandment to gather. To come to Zion" (Smith and Stewart, 1972, pp. 325-26).

In recent years the attitude of church officials toward overseas expansion has changed from cautious acceptance to eager endorsement. As president, John F. Smith articulated his enthusiasm for the growth of an international church. In the 1971 general conference he declared:

We are members of a world church...

The day is long since past when informed people think of us as a strange group in the tops of the Rocky Mountains of America... we are coming of age as a church and as a people. We have attained the stature and strength that are enabling us to fulfill the commission given to us by the Lord through the Prophet Joseph Smith that we should carry the glad tidings of the restoration to every nation and to the people...

Thus the church is not an American church except in America. In Canada it is a Canadian church, in Australia it is an Australian church, and in Great Britain it is a British church. It is a world church; the gospel is for all men. (Allen & Leonard, p. 598).

## **Organizational Response to Growth**

What made Smith's comments particularly meaningful was that they were given at the first general conference of the church had ever held outside of the U.S. This was but one of a succession of such conferences. In 1972 the general conference was held in the Mexico area, the following year it was held in the Europe area, then in Latin America, then the Pacific, the Asia. This practice has evidence of the church's desire to officially recognize the international nature of the organization.

## Outside Consultation and Subsequent Adjustment

Out of concern for coming to grips with rapid growth, the President and his quorum sought professional assistance. In 1971 they employed the consulting services of Cresap, McCormic, and Paget, Inc. of New York and Safeway Stores, Inc., of Oakland. Based on this "self-study" the church embarked on a program of "correlation". The changes while many and varied, primarily involved further organizational elaboration. A few of the major changes may be outlined as follows:

1. Prior to the consultation the president had been sitting on the boards of church corporations. These included ZCMI, Hotel Utah, Utah-Idaho Sugar Co., Beneficial Life Insurance, and Deseret Management Corporation (a holding company for church-owned corporations). Following the consultation, it was determined that the president could better devote his energy and attention on other areas. Consequently his board representative responsibilities were turned over to assistants.
2. In 1975 President Kimball reorganized the First Quorum of the Seventies. This quorum had been established before the saints left Nauvoo, Illinois, but had not been filled. The quorum was introduced at the level between the President and the Regional Representative and thus absorbed the General Authorities.
3. Also in 1975 a new supervisory program was devised for the church outside North America. Six supervisory areas were established and one assistant to the twelve apostles was assigned to live in each area.
4. It was determined that the task of visiting new and prospective ward members was too great for the bishopric to handle alone. This responsibility was turned over to ward priests. (According to official church position, every man should aspire to the lay priesthood and undertake the necessary training.
5. Principles and techniques for the church outreach were refined and published in "A Uniform System for Teaching the Gospel." This publication was introduced into the churches for group study.
6. A concerted effort was made to reach all interested members with home-study materials. High school and college students who did not have easy access to a church "seminary" or "institute" were urged to take part in a newly-devised correspondence program.

## Church Operation: Official Meetings

The frequency of official church meetings and the means for involving members in them is noteworthy. Every six months there is a *general conference* which church leaders attend. On the day of the conference regular church services are suspended and ward members meet at their local stakes. Conference proceedings are televised to each stake in the contiguous areas of Canada and the U.S. via satellite. Video and audio tapes are made available for areas which do not receive the telecast and for members who cannot attend their stake assembly.

Every alternate six months, a local stake conference is held. The stake president directs this conference. With this system, local people are exposed to an official conference *every three months*.

## **Church Operation: Revenue Collection and Management**

All members are encouraged to give 10% of their income to the local church ward. (It is estimated that about 50% of the membership tithe.) All tithe and fast offering monies are sent directly to the church headquarters in Salt Lake City. This includes monies collected in each of the overseas areas as well as areas within the continental U.S. and Canada. Recently a system has been set up to permit fund transfer by phone.

General authorities meet and determine the disbursement of monies directed to church headquarters. (Money from fast offerings are used exclusively for the economic assistance of needy lay members.) Currently more money is returned to overseas areas that is paid in by them.

Disbursements are made by the general authorities to cover the costs of missionary supervision. (One person may supervise 150 to 200 missionaries.)

## **Funding Church Construction**

When a request has been made to put up a church building, the committee of general authorities will consider the need, the number of people in the area, the percentage of tithers, etc. In the event that the request is granted, 96 to 97% of the building expense will be covered; only 3 to 4% of the cost is paid locally.

In the old days, the local ward might pay 30% of the building cost relying on donated labor, etc. Consequently there was wide variation in the shape, and quality of church construction. With the current system, the plan and quality of the building must be approved by a centralized body, the board of general authorities.

Under this new system the risk of a congregation going out on a financial limb by taking on the burden of building a church is substantially reduced. Also decisions can easily be made to put up quality church buildings in areas not populated by Mormons. Since it is understood that wards will automatically split upon obtaining 300 to 500 members, there is little danger of "super churches" blocking the development of "rival" congregations.

Another consequence of the building funding system is the provision of quality buildings in economically blighted areas. One church official recalled a situation in Georgia in which a Southern Baptist congregation established a home mission church in a ghetto area. The building walls were constructed of cinder block and covered with a tin roof. (It could be said that the building blended well with other construction in the area.) Occasionally members would visit the home mission church. However when they returned to the home church they reached a lavish brick building constructed in grand plantation style. The Mormon system insures that such inequities in building construction do not take place.

One possible drawback to the Mormon system of church financing involves psychological "ownership". In the old days when a congregation had to pull together to erect a building, the

members had a substantial psychological investment in the structure. However the present system may reduce some of the problems which crop up when a church building is shared by multiple congregations.

## **Funding Church Education and Medical Ministry: Some Changes**

Some interesting and significant policies have been established with respect to the maintenance of schools and hospitals. At one time every stake had its own educational academy. The official justification was the provision of quality education at a time when quality public schools were nonexistent. However in 1920 it was determined that the existence of these academies, at least in the U.S. and Canada, was no longer warranted. In place of the academies the church set up "seminary" facilities adjacent to high school campuses. In this way the church is able to maintain a significant presence in the public high school environment without the burden of operating and maintaining parallel institutions.

Because of the need for quality education, the Mormons continue to operate schools in some overseas areas. However it remains willing to close these institutions when other educational facilities become available. The recent divestiture of church academies in Mexico is one such example.

At the college level the church continues to support Brigham Young University in Utah along with a few smaller colleges. However here again the church has opted for a policy of taking the church to existing colleges and universities by locating church "institutes" adjacent to these campuses where significant numbers of Mormons are enrolled. These institutes offer classes which are parallel in structure to those offered at the adjoining schools.

In past years, substantial funds were designated for the establishment and support of church-run hospitals. However in 1975 the church elected to give away fifteen hospitals in Utah, Idaho, and Wyoming as it became evident that this medical work could be carried on just as well under other auspices. This freed up additional monies to be channelled into "overseas" areas in which there was greater need for medical assistance.

## **Mechanism of Change**

Despite its hierarchial structure of authority, there is some evidence of change occurring at the local level. For example while the church publishes an official hymnal, there are instances — particularly in overseas areas -- in which music has been written and disseminated for local use.

Such tolerance of local tastes and preferences suggest flexibility. However local ward and stake representatives must normally secure permission "up the line" before catering to local interests. A recent departure from the traditional all-church celebration of the "days of the forty-seven" is illustrative.

The "days of the forty-seven" are celebrated on July 24 and commemorate the arrival of the Mormons into the Salt Lake valley. This celebration has a great deal of meaning for people in Utah and the surrounding area. However representatives of the church in Japan expressed concern that this celebration lacked significance for Japanese Mormons. After some deliberation permission was subsequently granted by the board of General Authorities to replace this commemoration with one marking the day on which the first Mormon missionaries arrived in Japan.

Mormons hold that innovations or modifications in doctrine must come from divine revelation. The church maintains that God reveals himself to His apostles today just as he did in the upper room encountered in Acts 12. As God's representative on earth, the church President — and his quorum — is the correct one to receive and disseminate divine revelation. The policy concerning the consumption of alcohol, tea, coke, and coffee came from one such (1830) revelation.

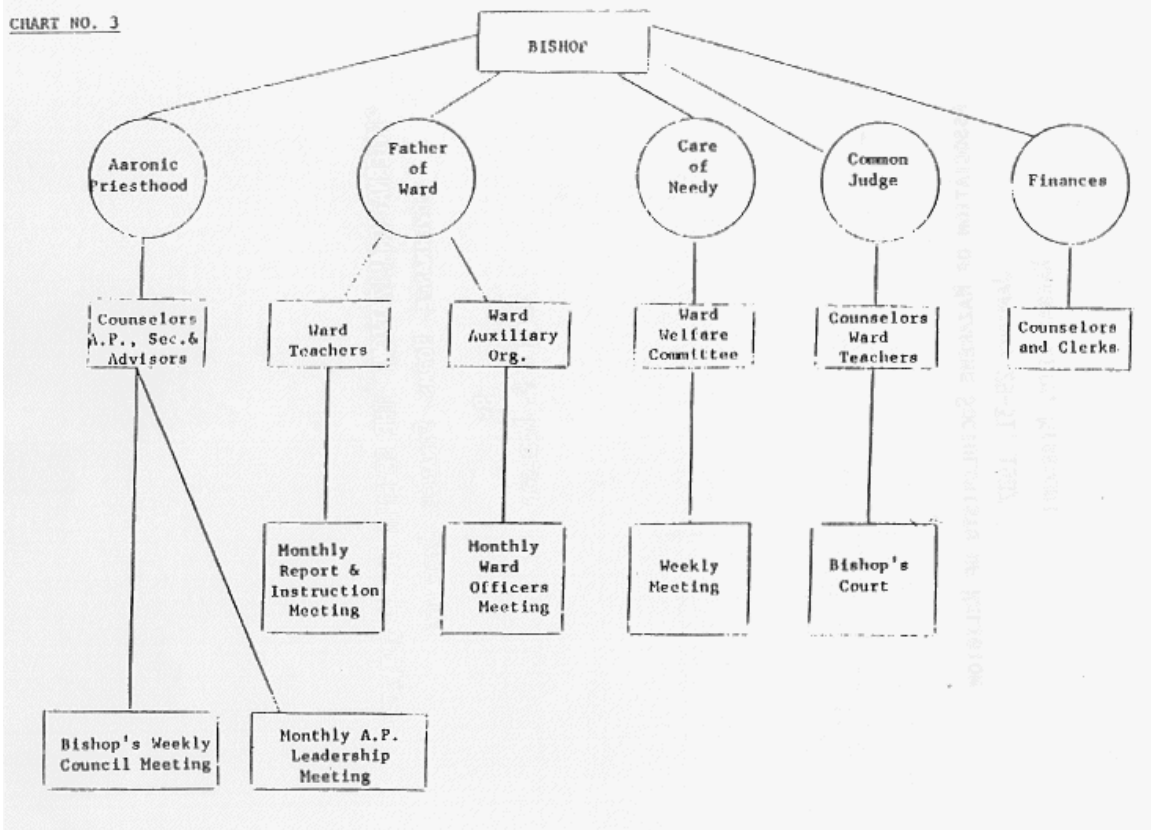
Sometime revelation comes in the context of intense pressure. Until recently the Mormon church refused to allow blacks into the priesthood. (This policy was seen as consistent with Jesus' response to the plea of a Canaanite woman in Matthew 15:21-28.) Throughout the sixties and seventies this policy created numerous problems for the church. Outsiders accused Mormon officials of bigotry and labeled the policy on priesthood racist. The NAACP put pressure on African and Caribbean nations to exclude Mormon missionaries. Finally in 1978 the president along with twelve apostles (quorum of twelve) had a revelation in the temple in which it became clear to them that God had decided to allow blacks into the priesthood. Cries of bigotry promptly ceased and the church experienced a new wave of growth in predominantly black areas.

One past revelation which is creating problems for the church as it expands into some areas concerns polygamy. In the early years of the church polygamy was encouraged and men fathered large numbers of children through multiple wives. However the Mormons encountered tension from within and hostility and persecution from without. In the late 1800s Mormons believe that the Lord revealed his desire that the practice of polygamy cease. Today Mormons are excommunicated for practicing polygamy.

As the church expands into areas where polygamy is deeply entrenched as it once again encountering problems. How will the church respond? Will new revelations occur?

These and similar issues confront the church as it continues to expand itself in "foreign" cultures. For the time being the Mormon church seems to have found the necessary means for accommodating change without seriously jeopardizing the integrity of its hierarchical structure.

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APPENDIX

Church Organization (1970)

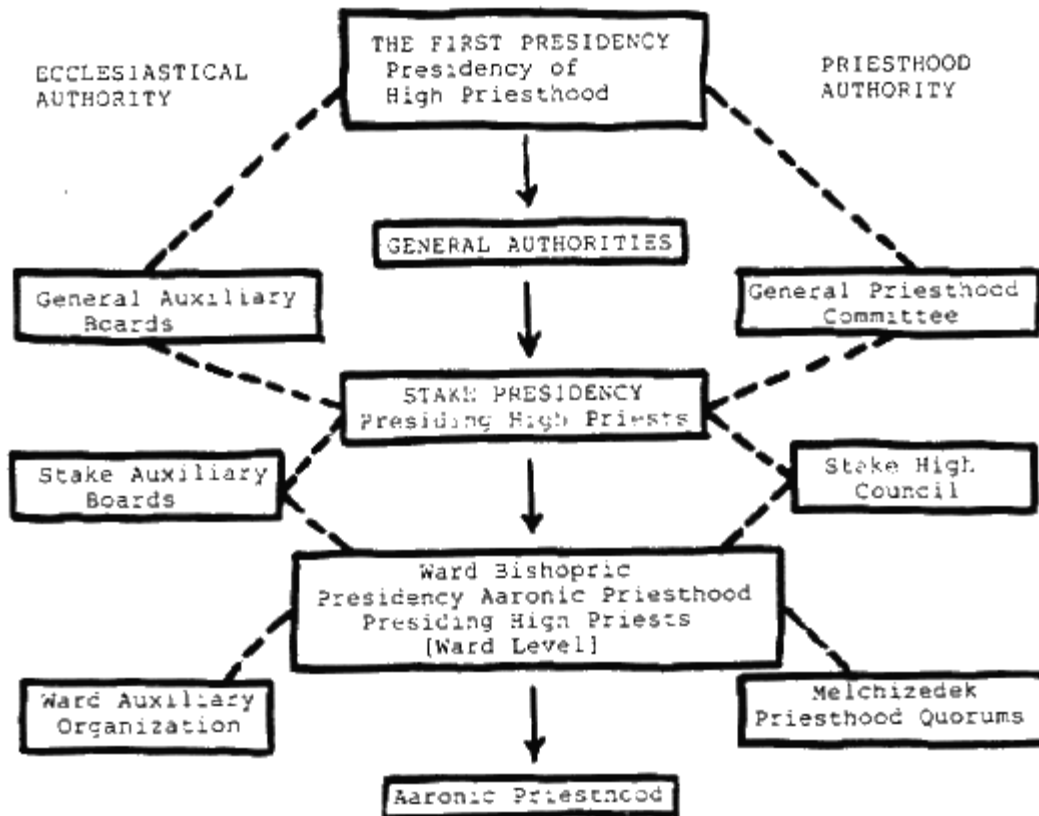
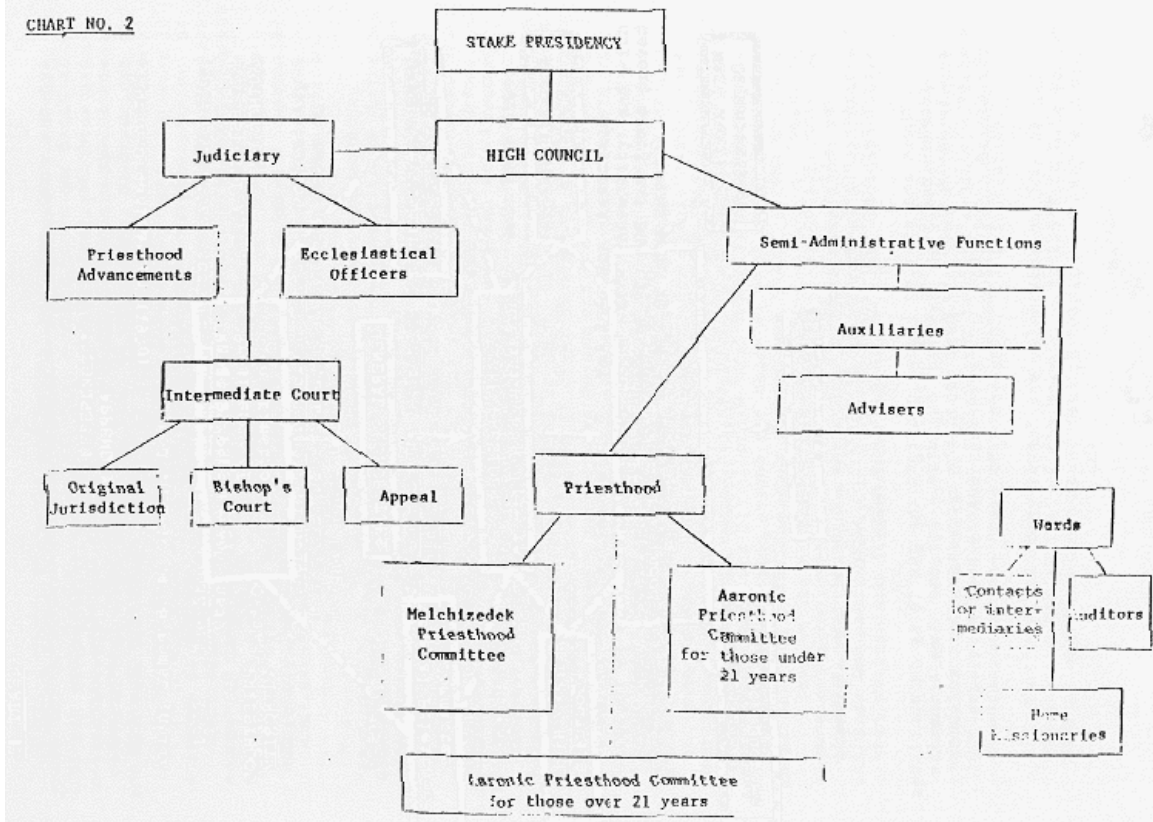


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