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THE MEN BEHIND THE PEN: THE CLERKS OF THE LDS GENERAL CONFERENCES

Alan Clark
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John Nicholson, March 1893:

I cannot tell exactly where my testimony of the truth of the work of God began, because I cannot by mental search find a place since my first acquaintance with it that I did not have a testimony of its divinity, so far as I was capable of comprehending its divinity.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints holds General Conferences every year. At these conferences, the leadership of the Church speaks to its entire membership, as well as any others who may be listening. The practice of holding such conferences has existed throughout the history of the organization. In April 2012, the 182nd Annual General Conference of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was held. Over the 18 decades that these conferences have been held, the format, location, and speakers have changed. Conferences have been held in New York, Missouri, Ohio, and Utah, in a number of different cities. Some conferences have lasted only a single day while others continued for as long as 4 or 5 days. Speakers, both male and female, have ranged in age from 12 years old to nearly 100 years old. Musical solos and full choirs have performed for the audiences, both on and off of radio and television waves. As the years have gone by, the General Conferences have evolved in order to be heard and participated in simultaneously from around the globe.

In spite of all these changes, the need to capture and preserve conference has existed since the Church was organized in 1830. Men and women have painstakingly recorded the words of the Latter-day Saint prophets from the time of Joseph Smith to the current prophet Thomas S. Monson. This paper chronicles the lives of those who sought

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2 The “Church” is used here to refer to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Throughout the rest of this paper, where the capitalized term “Church” is used, this is what it will be in reference to.
to capture “what the servants of the Lord have to give unto them.” Over the years, a number of people served as secretaries and clerks to the First Presidency of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Among their duties they attended, recorded, and produced the countless conferences that have occurred over the last 180 years. Speaking of them, President Thomas S. Monson recently said “there are countless individuals who work either behind the scenes or in less visible positions each conference. It would not be possible for us to hold these sessions without their assistance.” The history of these conferences could not be told fully without first uncovering the history and the lives of the clerks behind the scenes.

The early conferences of the Church were not annual and semi-annual conferences. They occurred according to need. Joseph Smith had received a revelation that he called the “Articles and Covenants”, which was later included in the Doctrine and Covenants as Section 20. In this revelation, the Lord required that “the several elders composing this church of Christ are to meet in conference once in three months, or from time to time as said conferences shall direct or appoint” (Doctrine and Covenants (D&C) 20: 61). So three months after the Church was organized, a conference was held on June 9, 1830, in Fayette, New York, at the Peter Whitmer home. At that conference, the Articles and Covenants were read and upheld by the members in attendance as divine revelation. From that time forward, conferences were held every three months, or as

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often as they could be arranged. A conference in September 1830 was followed by
conferences in January, June, October, and November 1831.\(^6\)

The usage of conferences was common among Methodist churches and other
Protestant churches in America at that time.\(^7\) Joseph Darowski argues that, “given the
early Church’s penchant for borrowing Protestant terms and then repurposing them, it
seems likely that the term conference carried a contemporaneous cultural meaning . . .”\(^8\)
Though Joseph Smith claimed that the revelation on the Articles and Covenants came
from the Lord, one could see how the organization of the newly formed LDS Church
shared in some of the cultural forms of its day.

Very little of what was said during these early conferences is available. Jay R.
Lowe and Joseph Darowski suggest that the early conferences dealt mostly with church
governance. Oliver Cowdery had been made clerk, and he kept minute books, but he did
not attempt to transcribe entire sermons or speeches.\(^9\) Instead, journal accounts from
Joseph Smith and others helped to infer some of the topics. John Whitmer had been
commissioned in April 1831 to keep a history of the Church, but he did not write his
record until much later and included few details.\(^10\) Sidney Rigdon joined the Church in
November 1830, and he too began keeping scanty records, but most of what was actually
said at these conferences remains unknown.

\(^6\) Joseph F. Darowski, “Seeking After the Ancient Order: Conferences and Councils in Early Church
Governance, 1830-1834”, in A Firm Foundation: Church Organization and Administration, ed. David J.
\(^7\) Lowe, 23.
\(^8\) Darowski, 99-100.
\(^9\) Lowe, 21. The minute books themselves are in the possession of the LDS Church. For this period, the
minute book is commonly referred to as the Far West Record, or Minute Book 1 and 2.
\(^10\) See John Whitmer, “Book of John Whitmer”, BX8670.A1a no. 10, L. Tom Perry Special Collections,
Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.
The newspapers produced by the Church held snippets of information about conferences that occurred from 1832 to 1837. During the September 1831 conference, W. W. Phelps was requested to “stop at Cincinnati on his way to Missouri and purchase a press and type, for the purpose of establishing and publishing a monthly paper at Independence, Jackson County, Missouri, to be called the Evening and Morning Star.”\(^{11}\) The Evening and Morning Star was succeeded by the Messenger and Advocate. Within these papers, news of the Church was disseminated to members in their various locations.

Joseph Smith had a number of scribes during the 1830’s as well, who assisted with keeping records. W. W. Phelps and Warren Parrish were most notable among the men who kept journals for the prophet.\(^{12}\) Even so, throughout the decade, little more than the dates and locations of the conferences are apparent among the surviving documents.

These newspapers and scribes assisted in recording the conferences of the Church until the April 6, 1838 conference of the Church. Lowe believes that “the first real annual General Conference to be held on the birthdate of the Church should probably be designated as the one which was held in Far West, Missouri, April 6, 1838.”\(^{13}\) At this conference, George W. Robinson was appointed “General Church Recorder and clerk to the First Presidency.”\(^{14}\) He had previously been called as a Church Recorder in September 1837, but this conference allowed more members of the Church the opportunity to recognize him in that position. John Corrill and Elias Higbee were

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\(^{11}\) Lowe, 65.
\(^{13}\) Lowe, 128.
\(^{14}\) Andrew Jenson, *Latter-day Saint Biographical Encyclopedia: A Compilation of Biographical Sketches of Prominent Men and Women in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, vol. 1 (Salt Lake City: Andrew Jenson History Company, 1901), 1:253.
appointed as Church historians alongside George W. Robinson at the April 1838 conference.

Of the three called, none lasted very long in their stations. George W. Robinson acted as one of the earliest clerks and secretaries to the First Presidency. He joined the Church in connection with the Sidney Rigdon family. He married Sidney’s daughter Athalia. From 1837 – 1840 he kept records and minutes for Joseph Smith and his counselors. He was released from this position in October 1840, and shortly thereafter Robinson defected from the LDS Church. He left Nauvoo around 1843, in connection with events surrounding John C. Bennett.15

John Corrill served for many years in the Church, but none of those years did he serve as an historian. Corrill was baptized January 10, 1831, by Oliver Cowdery. Later that year he was made a counselor to Bishop Edward Partridge. He helped to found Far West, and he was “chosen to be keeper of the Lord’s store house.”16 He was called at the conference of April 1838 to become a Church Historian, but the only history that he produced was written after his excommunication from the Church in 1839.17

Elias Higbee also served as a Church Historian for a very short period. Called in April 1838, he soon afterward was forced to flee Missouri and resettle in Commerce, Illinois (better known as Nauvoo). He died in Nauvoo in June 1843.

Once the main body of the Church found its way to Nauvoo, the Times and Seasons served as the organ of the Church for dispensing news. As such, the conferences

15 Jenson, 1:253.
16 Jenson, 1:242.
17 See John Corrill, “A Brief History of the Church Christ of Latter-day Saints (commonly called Mormons): including an account of their doctrine and discipline; with the reasons of the author for leaving the church”, BX8672.2.C829c 1839, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.
of the Church were reported in its pages. Many of Joseph Smith’s sermons, as well as the business of conference, found a place in the Times and Seasons newspaper from 1839 to 1845. Reports on the business of the Church took up much of the time in conference, whether it was the airing of grievances performed against the members of the Church in Missouri, or the calling and ordaining of new members into the priesthood. These practices became almost completely eliminate in the conference of April 1840, when it was decided that “this type of business should be attended to apart from the regular sessions of the conference by a committee which was appointed for [that] purpose.”

Joseph Smith hoped to be able to reserve the time in conference for preaching and spiritual education. Many of his greatest sermons were recorded by those in attendance at the conferences of the Church in Nauvoo. Even so, those sermons had to be pieced together using journals and reminiscent accounts of members such as Wilford Woodruff and Brigham Young.

The historical records of the General Conferences of the Church improved dramatically with the conversion of a single British immigrant. George Darling Watt was born on Mary 18, 1812 in Manchester, England. He struggled for survival in early 19th century Liverpool much like Charles Dickens’ classic character Oliver Twist. In the end, he survived the Industrial Revolution in England and found the LDS church. Watt met with the first missionaries to arrive in England, later recalling that “I was at the first meeting that those American Elders attended, which was a Sunday morning prayer meeting. I then knew that they were the true servants of the Most High, before they had

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18 Lowe, 140.
opened their lips to say a single work in my hearing." According Heber C. Kimball, Watt was the first British person to be baptized in England on July 30, 1837.

In 1841, G. D. Watt acquired the skill that would serve as a most precious gift to the Church for decades to come. While serving a mission in Edinburgh, Scotland, he decided to learn Pitman shorthand. Crafted by Isaac Pitman, shorthand allowed a person to take notes in an abbreviated fashion. This skill permitted the transcriber to capture entire speeches in real time. While in Edinburgh, Watt decided the skill might be useful and learned how to write in shorthand. Shortly afterward, he returned with his family to England, and then headed on to America and the body of the Church.

The Watt family arrived in Nauvoo in April 1844. Perhaps because of his ability to write in shorthand, G. D. Watt attended a meeting of the First Presidency and the Twelve Apostles on one occasion, before he was off again on another mission for the Church. His brief association with the prophet Joseph Smith and subsequent call to serve as a missionary prevented him from keeping any records containing sermons or speeches from the prophet. Joseph Smith died at the hands of his enemies before Watt returned to Nauvoo.

After a discussion with Willard Richards in January 1845, Watt decided he should offer his services to the Church, recording sermons of the Church leadership. In April 1845, G. D. Watt recorded sessions of the General Conference. Brigham Young gave him a job almost immediately within the historian’s office. He also began recording meetings of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. Watt recorded the General Conferences

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20 Watt, 21.
21 Watt, 33.
22 Watt, 50.
of 1845, left on another mission for the Church in 1846, and then traveled to Salt Lake City with his family, arriving there in September 1851. With his return, Brigham Young snatched him up again. Ronald Watt writes that “sometime before the April General Conference of 1852, Brigham Young appointed Watt to be the stenographic recorder for the entire meeting.”

The Journal of Discourses comprises the vast majority of G. D. Watt’s work reporting the conferences of the Church during the years of 1852 to April 1868. It was a tumultuous period of G. D. Watt’s life. He received wages for his position as the General Conference recorder, but he did not feel the pay was sufficient. He fought over pay with Willard Richards, the editor of the Deseret News, during 1852 and 1853, until on June 1, 1853, Brigham Young and the First Presidency “officially granted him [him] the privilege of preparing and publishing Young’s discourses in magazine-like form. . .”

The Journal of Discourses were created under Watt’s full discretion.

Yet the journal did not sell as well as hoped and Watt continued living in financial straits. He sought other employment through teaching shorthand and involving himself in a number of social organizations in the Salt Lake area. When in May of 1868 he argued with Brigham Young over the possibility of a raise in pay, the conversation heated up, and Watt stormed away, his honor having been offended and his desk empty. He remained a loyal member of the Church for a number of years after that, but he never managed to restore the bonds of friendship that he had broken with his friend and former employer Brigham Young. Eventually his attentions wandered from the mainstream.

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23 Watt, 127.
24 Watt, 134.
beliefs of the LDS Church, and he was excommunicated on May 3, 1874, for his connections to the Godbeite movement.\(^{25}\)

The Journal of Discourses continued as an official publication of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, even after G. D. Watt left the Church historian’s office. David Woolley Evans replaced Watt as the lead stenographer over General Conference. Born on January 6, 1833, in England, David had already been a member of the Church for some time and worked alongside G. D. Watt recording sermons given in the Tabernacle and at General Conference.\(^{26}\) Despite the lack of details concerning his personal life, he continued faithfully serving the Church until his death on July 5, 1876.

Upon his death, George F. Gibbs replaced him as the General Conference reporter. Gibbs was born on November 23, 1846, in South Wales. His family joined the Church in 1850, and in 1868 Gibbs emigrated to Salt Lake City. He worked a variety of jobs around the state of Utah until Brigham Young requested that he return to Salt Lake City and work as a clerk and reporter for the Church.\(^{27}\)

The 1880’s presented many difficulties for the Church and recording the conferences of the Church. The United States government reigned down endless legislation against the practice of polygamy, threatening to incarcerate Church members practicing polygamy and confiscate Church property and finances. Brian Stuy observes that “Salt Lake City was the normal site of these Conferences, but during the years 1885-\(^{25}\) Watt, 254.

\(^{26}\) There is very little information on David W. Evans. Some of his vital information can be accessed at http://trees.ancestry.com/tree/29885165/person/12238366166, and he is referred to tangentially in Watt, 227-228. Also, a small portion of his writings are available at the L. Tom Perry Special Collections under David W. Evans shorthand papers, 1842-1876, MSS6857, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah. References to his authorship can be found throughout the Journal of Discourses.

\(^{27}\) George F. Gibbs, as recorded by Eliza R. Snow, Biography and Family Record of Lorenzo Snow, one of the Twelve Apostle of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Company, 1884), 352-358.
1887, when the persecution raged at its strongest, and many of the leaders were in hiding, it was decided to hold the Conferences in various other cities, including two in Logan, one in Coalville, and two in Provo.”\textsuperscript{28} As the U. S. government hunted the leaders of the LDS Church, this affected the General Conferences as well. Many of the discourses were not recorded, a few of the recorders themselves were arrested for practicing polygamy, and only a few of the conference sermons are currently available today.

George F. Gibbs was replaced by John Nicholson as the clerk of General Conference. Gibbs became more involved as a secretary for the First Presidency and needed assistance in reporting on the General Conferences of the Church. John Nicholson had spent his life in the service of the Church. Born on July 13, 1830 in Roxbury, Scotland, Nicholson was baptized as soon as “the gospel reached his ears,” in 1861.\textsuperscript{29} He served a mission to England and then emigrated to Salt Lake City, arriving October 1, 1866. During the war over polygamy, Nicholson fought vocally on behalf of the Church and was incarcerated for his outspoken ways.

Upon being released from prison in 1886, he resumed a career as associate editor and recorder of the Deseret News. When the Salt Lake Temple was completed, Wilford Woodruff desired Nicholson to serve as a temple recorder, helping members through the ordinances performed therein. In April 1901, Joseph F. Smith gave Nicholson a new assignment to be the Clerk of the Conference, in charge of recording and preserving the


General Conferences of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. He continued as clerk of the conference until October 1906.

The publication known as the Conference Report of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints had taken the place of the Journal of Discourses in 1880. However, the Church could not afford to continue producing it during the 15 years that followed. The publication became a permanent fixture of the Church in April 1898. It is likely that John Nicholson was already recording conference with George F. Gibbs during the 1890’s, but there is no established evidence of his involvement at that time, nor is there specific data on which clerks were recording General Conference at the close of the 19th century.

After John Nicholson retired, Duncan M. McAllister, one of Nicholson’s close associates, replaced him as Clerk of the Conference. McAllister, like his predecessor, had served as first assistant to the office of recorder of the Salt Lake temple. McAllister lived the life of the underdog, joining the Church with his mother while his father fought viciously against it. He lived very poor, working from the age of 11 on in many different labor-oriented jobs. When his mother died, he served the Church in a number of capacities, ending up emigrating to Salt Lake City in 1863. Unlike many of the other clerks before him, McAllister had very little formal education. His office skills were learned as a missionary working in the Liverpool mission office. Eventually John Nicholson took note of his indefatigable work ethic and requested that he assist him in the recorder’s office of the Salt Lake Temple. When Nicholson’s health began to fail,

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30 Joseph F. Smith, Conference Report of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (April 1901), 45.
31 Jenson, 1:653.
McAllister had already been primed to succeed him in the office of Clerk of the Conference. He served as the clerk from October 1906 through October 1916.  

Edward H. Anderson followed D. M. McAllister from October 1916 to April 1928. Anderson might have lived a life very comparable to McAllister if not for his mother’s decision to send him to America with an adopted family. Anderson was born October 8, 1858, in Sweden, by the name of Heinric Edvard Bernz. His parents had intended to marry but never completed the paperwork due financial difficulties. His mother, having converted to the LDS Church, sent Heinric with another LDS family that was emigrating to Salt Lake in 1863. So Heinric became Edward Henry Anderson.

His life changed as he had the opportunity to learn English and gain an education in Utah. His family moved from Salt Lake to a farm in Huntsville, Utah. Under his mentor George Hall, Anderson acquired a great deal of grammar education at his local school. He recalled that “it was he [George Hall] who induced me to study grammar, something unheard of in the village school up to the time he undertook to introduce it. . . . The experiment was looked upon with curiosity, not to say apprehension, by the good people of the village.” He became a teacher at the Huntsville school, continued his education at the University of Deseret, and by age 21, he became the manager and editor of the Ogden Herald in 1879.

The latter half of his life was spent in the service of the Church. He served as president of the Scandinavian mission, counselor in the Granite Stake presidency, and worked as a clerk in the offices of the apostles and First Presidency. Pres. Joseph F.

32 Conference Report of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (October 1916), 154.
34 Nielson, 5.
Smith once stated “I do not need to read what Edward H. Anderson writes. I endorse it without reading it, and know that it will be sound.” As Clerk of the Conference, he revised the layout of the Conference Report and included an index reference guide in the back of the publication. He died February 1, 1928, after presiding 12 years over the recording of the General Conferences of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Few might have guessed that Joseph Anderson, who became the Clerk of Conference at the age of 39 in 1928, would continue serving in that position for the next 42 years. A pamphlet produced on his 100th birthday in 1989 remarked that “the year Joseph was born, 1889, the Endowment House was torn down and the Eiffel Tower was officially opened in Paris.”

There were approximately 180,000 members of the Church that year, with 3 operational temples. By 1989, the membership of the Church had reached approximately 6,650,000, with 41 operational temples and 6 announced or under construction.

By the age of 15 Anderson had prepared him for success in life. He had completed elementary education in Weber county followed by an education from Weber Academy “as a skilled Pitman-system shorthand writer.” He served a mission to Switzerland and Germany from 1911-1914, where he served as secretary of the mission. Shortly after returning home, he began working as a clerk for the Church.

Joseph Anderson served simultaneously as the secretary of the First Presidency from 1922 until he was called to be an Assistant to the Twelve Apostles in April 1970.

35 Nielson, 12.
36 Joseph Anderson: The Best of His 100 Years (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1989), 7.
Joseph Anderson recalled sitting in General Conference that April. As secretary to the First Presidency, he knew a great many things in advance, but callings of new General Authorities was not something to which he was always privy. Anderson commented, “it was a great surprise, so much so that it was very difficult for me to take further notes.”

He attended over 125 General Conferences as Clerk of the Conference and then as a General Authority of the Church. He served as secretary to Heber J. Grant, George Albert Smith, David O. McKay, and Joseph Fielding Smith. When he died in 1992, President Gordon B. Hinckley said “I think Joseph Anderson knew more and said less than any man I have ever known. . . He kept the trust that was imposed on him. He served always in faith and confidence and trust in his own quiet way. He was a man who was trusted, and it was President David O. McKay who said it is a greater thing to be trusted than to be loved.”

Under Joseph Anderson’s supervision, the Conference Report evolved into an international publication. By 1968, it was printed in English, Danish, Dutch, Finnish, French, German, Italian, Norwegian, Portuguese, Spanish, and Swedish. The layout and index had again been improved and enhanced so that readers could better study the words of the First Presidency and Apostles of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. While of course, not all of the renovations and modifications were a direct product of Joseph Anderson’s persevering efforts, he dedicated more time and energy on bringing General Conference to the entire membership of the Church than any other Clerk of the Conference, before or after his tenure in the position.

39 Joseph Anderson: The Best of His 100 Years, 4.
Joseph Anderson was the first Clerk of the Conference to hold both positions, but every Clerk after him followed suit. Francis M. Gibbons replaced Joseph Anderson in April 1971. He lived in the same LDS Ward as Joseph Anderson, where Anderson informed him that he would no longer be serving as Secretary to the First Presidency – the position would be available. Gibbons was a well-respected lawyer with a prosperous career ahead of him. Even so, he made the leap and applied for the job, receiving it in 1970. He stayed as the secretary to First Presidency until his call to the First Quorum of the Seventy in 1986. F. Michael Watson took over the position in April 1986. He had been associating with the First Presidency since 1970 as an assistant secretary to the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. From 1972 forward, he worked as an assistant secretary to the First Presidency. F. Michael Watson continued as the Secretary to the First Presidency and Clerk of the Conference until he was called to the First Quorum of the Seventy in April 2008. Relating his feelings at being called to serve, Watson declared, “I’ve associated with General Authorities all these years, but being one among them is a humbling experience.”

The closing years of the twentieth century and the dawn of the twenty-first century have seen an increase in technology that has changed the way that the Clerk of Conference operates. When Francis M. Gibbons applied for the job of Secretary to the

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41 George F. Gibbs acted in both capacities during the 1880’s and 1890’s. However, at that time, the Clerk of Conference was not an official position. So he did not technically hold both positions. For this nitpicky reason, Joseph Anderson was the first to actually hold both positions.


43 “News of the Church”, *Ensign* (May 2008), available online at http://www.lds.org/ensign/2008/05/news-of-the-church?lang=eng, accessed on July 1, 2012. F. Michael Watson currently serves as a member of the Quorum of the Seventy as of the writing of this paper.
First Presidency, the need for shorthand and stenography was still requested. Yet more available radio and television broadcasts, not to mention the more recent advent of electronic data storage, resulted in less necessity for stenography and recording. The Clerk of Conference today, Brook P. Hales (who has held the dual position of Secretary to the First Presidency and Clerk of the Conference since 2008), acts as more of an organizer of conference than a clerk. Approximately 4 to 5 months prior, preparations for the upcoming General Conference commence, with musical numbers and choirs needing to be approved and organized, followed by inviting all of the speakers, as well as coordinating all of the radio, television, and internet transmissions. At the start of the 182\textsuperscript{nd} Annual General Conference of the Church in April 2012, Thomas S. Monson intoned, “We can’t all be together under one roof, but we now have the ability to partake of the proceedings of this conference through the wonders of television, radio, cable, satellite transmission, and the Internet—even on mobile devices. We come together as one, speaking many languages, living in many lands, but all of one faith and one doctrine and one purpose.” The Clerk of Conference today acts as the first contact for all of the multitudinous details that make up a General Conference of the LDS Church.

Those who will be speaking in the upcoming conference have only around 6 to 8 weeks to prepare. Where once upon a time speakers could be called up on the spot to come to the podium, it is now the practice to receive a letter of assignment from the office of the First Presidency sometime in mid-August. The talks are due back to the Clerk of Conference two weeks or so before the actual conference – there are no dress

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\item \textsuperscript{44} “Elder Francis M. Gibbons of the First Quorum of the Seventy”, \textit{Ensign} (May 1986).
\item \textsuperscript{45} Thomas S. Monson, “As We Gather Once Again”, \textit{Ensign} (May 2012): 4.
\item \textsuperscript{46} Brook P. Hales, phone interview conducted by the author on July 26, 2012.
\item \textsuperscript{47} August when preparing for an October conference, of course. Mid-February for an April conference.
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The speaker is usually only informed of the time limit they have to speak, which session of conference they will speak in, and whom they will follow in that session. The topic, the style of delivery, and the spirit of the message are the sole responsibility of the person asked to speak. The daunting task of discovering the right message for the entire membership of the Church at that annual conference can be a harrowing task to complete in a little over one month’s preparation.

The work is only just begun, however, by the time the conference goes on the air waves. The General Conference must be prepared for publication and the internet as soon as it is completed. For nearly a century, conferences of the Church were available only through the Conference Report of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. While that particular pamphlet is still published for every General Conference, it is no longer widely distributed. Since 1971, the *Ensign* magazine has printed conferences of the Church in its pages. Early on, written copies were used to compare what was actually spoken by the authorities in each session of conference. Then runners would take comparisons of the written and spoken versions of the talks to the individuals for a confirmation of what should be printed in the *Ensign*. The actual physical process for preparing the printer layout, the editing and proofing, as well as the preparations for translation into foreign language versions of the *Ensign* magazine sometimes delayed the distribution of the magazine for months following the conference.

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48 While there is no full dress rehearsal, most speakers will schedule a time to rehearse their talk individually in an available practice room.
49 Paul V. Johnson, phone interview conducted by the author on November 9, 2011.
50 The Conference Report is still produced for archival purposes, but not even the Church itself uses it any longer for the purpose of citations. The Ensign magazine has replaced it as the major publication for General Conference. There are minor differences in the content of the two publications. The Conference Report takes the completed talks from the Ensign and then adds the continuity between the talks, as well as sub-headings throughout the talks. Otherwise, the two are practically the same.
As digital technology has improved, the process has become easier to complete, at an ever increasing speed. The Monday following a General Conference, editors compare paper copies of the talks to the video copies. Any differences are sent to the speaker, in order to confirm how the talk should be finalized and printed. The photographs taken at conference are collected, reviewed, and final pictures selected by Thursday of that same week. Everything is primed and approved for the English edition of the *Ensign* to go to the press by the Thursday following the conference. In total, the process takes roughly 3 weeks to complete, and the conference issue of the *Ensign* is available the 1st of the month following the month of the General Conference.\(^5\) This monumental task is completed at breathtaking speeds compared to the laborious effort that used to be required by clerks as they hurriedly captured each speaker’s words in shorthand, to be reviewed and transcribed at a later date before the speaker would even be able to read what he had spoken.

The words of the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, as given in General Conference, are considered by most members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to be the very instructions that the Lord has given them for the current day and circumstances. For nearly 200 years, clerks have been striving to safeguard those instructions and counsels given in conference, hoping to preserve the spirit of the prophets’ and apostles’ messages for future generations. This labor of love could not be possible without the many men and women who sacrificed long hours to produce the publications of both the Conference Report and the *Ensign*. Without these dedicated secretaries and clerks, the words of God would have been lost to countless millions of members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and literally

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\(^5\) Val Johnson, phone interview conducted by the author on October 31, 2011.
billions of people all across the world who are seeking the gospel of Jesus Christ. This is the history behind the history of General Conference. May their labors and their lives not be forgotten.