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Our Legacy of Religious Education

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In 1888 Karl G. Maeser was appointed as superintendent of the Church’s General Board of Education.

Photo by Thomas E. Daniels
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Some have suggested that one cannot appreciate the present without an understanding of the past. Our educational legacy provides the precedent and context by which we act in the present and plan for the future. We are compelled to feel, as our predecessors felt, that we have not yet arrived in our pursuit of excellence as educators. A nineteenth-century teacher expressed it this way: “I see the apocalyptic gate swing open, and far down the aisles of the future brightly revealed in the soft clear light, there stands the incarnate ideal of the coming teacher.”

I will attempt to present in short, sequential snapshots a look at the remarkable coming we share as colleagues in the Church Educational System. To the twenty-seven-year-old Joseph Smith, the Lord admonished, “I give unto you a commandment that you shall teach one another the doctrine of the kingdom. . . . Teach ye diligently and my grace shall attend you” (D&C 88:77–78).

Early Efforts in Education

The Lord’s command and promise were received with enthusiasm and high expectations by the youthful prophet and his associates. Schools were established in Ohio and Missouri for training the early elders.

The Prophet Joseph Smith was an eager and exceptional student, as characterized by his study in the Kirtland Hebrew School under the
mentorship of Joshua Seixas, a Jewish professor. During this initial twelve-week language schooling experience, the Prophet noted several events:

“In the evening, President Cowdery returned from New York, bringing with him a quantity of Hebrew books, for the benefit of the school. He presented me with a Hebrew Bible, Lexicon, and Grammar, also a Greek Lexicon, and Webster’s English Dictionary . . . . Spent the day at home, in examining my books, and studying the Hebrew alphabet.”

“Attended the Hebrew School, divided it into classes. Had some debate with Elder Orson Pratt concerning the pronunciation of a Hebrew letter. He manifested a stubborn spirit, at which I was much grieved.”

“My soul delights in reading the word of the Lord in the original, and I am determined to pursue the study of the languages, until I shall become master of them, if I am permitted to live long enough.”

“At evening went down to the Professor’s room to be instructed by him in the language. On account of the storm the class did not meet.”

“O may God give me learning, even language; and endure me with qualifications to magnify His name while I live.”

For Joseph all learning had one transcendent purpose: “Obtain a knowledge of history, and of countries, and of kingdoms, of laws of God and man, and all this for the salvation of Zion, Amen” (D&C 93:53; emphasis added).

In Kirtland the Lord directed William W. Phelps and Oliver Cowdery, a printer and a teacher, respectively, to “do the work of printing, and of selecting and writing books for schools in this church, that little children also may receive instruction before me as is pleasing unto me” (D&C 55:4). A teacher reported to the board of trustees in Kirtland: “Since the year 1827, I have taught school in five different states, and visited many schools in which I have engaged as teacher; in none, I can say with certainty, have I seen students make more rapid progress, William E. McLellin, teacher.”

In a similar vein, Sidney Rigdon stated in the Far West Record in 1838, “Next to the worship of our God we esteem the education of our children and the rising generation.”

**Education in Nauvoo**

A university charter for the City of Nauvoo was granted in 1840. The first mayor, Dr. John C. Bennett, was the principal player in securing the charter and was selected as chancellor. Orson Spencer, Sidney Rigdon, and Orson Pratt were titled professors and department chairmen. Professor Pratt advertised in the Nauvoo Wasp his course offerings for the upcoming quarter:
The Wasp

September 24, 1842

Orson Pratt

Professor mathematics and English literature in the University of Nauvoo

Tuition per quarter:

For reading and history ........................................... $2.50

Geography, Grammar and Arithmetic ............................. $3.00

Philosophy, Chemistry, Astronomy, Algebra,

Geometry, conic sections plane, trigonometry

and analytical geometry ........................................... $7.50

And for the study of the differential and integral

Calculus and Newton’s Principia ............................... $10.00

“Common schools” on a ward level were organized under the administration of the university. Teachers were trained and certified by the university. Schoolbooks were hard to come by, and the scriptures were often substituted as readers. Jesse N. Smith reminisces over his youthful school days in Nauvoo: “I attended school kept by a Miss Mitchell in Hyrum Smith’s office. Passing the Prophets house one morning, he called me to him and asked what book I read at school. I replied ‘The Book of Mormon.’ He seemed pleased, and taking me into the house he gave me a copy of the Book of Mormon to read in at school, a gift greatly prized.”

Perhaps the first formal religion class for the youth of the Church was held in Nauvoo, as reported by the Prophet Joseph under the auspices of the Young Gentlemen and Ladies Relief Society:

In the latter part of January, 1843, a number of young people assembled at the house of Elder Heber C. Kimball, who warned them against the various temptations to which youth are exposed, exhorting the young people to study the scriptures, and enable themselves to “give a reason for the hope within them,” and to be ready to go to the stage of action, when their present instructors and leaders had gone behind the scenes; also to keep good company and to keep pure and unpolluted from the world.

I addressed the young people for some time expressing my gratitude to Elder Kimball for having commenced this glorious work, which would be the means of doing a great deal of good, and said the
gratitude of all good men and of the youth would follow him through life, and he would always look upon the winter of 1843 with pleasure.\textsuperscript{10}

Schools in the West

Nauvoo’s educational system became the pattern for what the Church would do after immigrating to the Rocky Mountains. President Young encouraged the membership to pack in their wagons heading west “every book, map, chart, or diagram that may contain interesting, useful and attractive matter, to gain the attention of children, and cause them to love to learn to read.”\textsuperscript{11}

In the valley of the Great Salt Lake, shortly after the first seeds were sown, streams dammed, and trees felled for shelter, the Saints gathered their children for instruction. Seventeen-year-old Mary Dilworth and other devoted women, while coping with basic survival in the barren Great Basin, erected a tent, dusted off their primers, and rang the school bell for the children to gather for class.\textsuperscript{12}

The University of Deseret, the first university west of the Missouri River, began at the home of John Pack. Forty students were enrolled in 1850. Tuition was eighty cents per week. In lieu of money, lumber, potatoes, cabbage, and other produce accepted. A historian noted that “the teachers salaries instead of being drawn on the bank were drawn on wheelbarrows.”\textsuperscript{13}

Between 1847 and 1869, public common schools were for all intents and purposes ward schools. One remains in Salt Lake, newly restored, at the corner of Fourth South and Eleventh East. Some private family schools were built by Brigham Young, Heber C. Kimball, and other influential Latter-day Saints with large families. As the railroad brought a degree of increased prosperity and plurality of population, the school system began to broaden its base. With the federal government’s intervention through prejudicial legislation attempting to Americanize the Mormons, secularized “free schools” were mandated. Government-appointed officials vowed to crush the Church’s control. The platform of M. W. Ashbrook, who ran for the territorial school superintendency, vilified President Young: “Every child brought into being has rights. One of the most sacred of these rights is to a liberal education . . . where knowledge is not distilled by the brain of a theocratic leper.”\textsuperscript{14}

Free parochial schools were established. The primary objective of the mission schools—run by Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and others—was to Christianize the Mormons. Reverend Barrows, a Congregationalist, reported to his supervisors in Chicago from Salt Lake:
“There is no system of free schools. Great numbers of children are growing up in ignorance. And yet where schools are established they are well attended. . . . The Mormon people will send their children to our schools and Brigham Young and his bishops can’t prevent it.”

An increasing number of children of the Church patronized the denominational schools because of the commitment and quality of the mission teachers from the East and the nominal tuition.

**Church Academies**

It became increasingly clear that the Church must engage itself professionally in education. President Wilford Woodruff firmly resolved: “We feel that the time has arrived when the proper education of our children should be taken in hand by us as a people.”

From 1875 to 1911, twenty-two academies were organized throughout the stakes of Zion. Brigham Young Academy in Provo was the first; Dixie in St. George, the last. Two future prophets attended the Oneida Stake Academy in Preston, Idaho—Harold B. Lee from Clifton and Ezra Taft Benson from Whitney.

These academies produced not only great leaders but also memorable moments. For example, Spencer W. Kimball studied at the Gila Academy in Thatcher, Arizona. President Kimball reflected upon his academy school days as an athlete. Their coach challenged the University of Arizona in Tucson to a basketball game. The university team arrived in Thatcher with their noses in the air, thinking they were playing a mere Mormon high school team. Spencer W. Kimball wrote his memory of the game:

> It is a great occasion. Many people came tonight who have never been before. Some of the townsmen say basketball is a girl’s game but they came in large numbers tonight. Our court is not quite regulation. We are used to it, our opponents not. I have special luck with my shots tonight and the ball goes through the hoop again and again and the game ends with our High School team the victors against the college team. I am the smallest one and the youngest on the team. I have piled up the most points through the efforts of the whole team protecting me and feeding the ball to me. I am on the shoulders of the big fellows of the Academy. They are parading me around the hall to my consternation and embarrassment. I like basketball. I would rather play this game than eat.

In a similar setting, President Benson recalled a game-day experience as a student at the Oneida Academy: “Ezra remembers his father swearing only once. The Oneida Stake Academy was playing Brigham Young
College in Logan, and late in the game Oneida trailed by a point after failing to convert on several attempts. Ezra suddenly got the ball and an exasperated George yelled. ‘Hell, T. put it in!’ It was shocking to the local citizens coming from George Benson, but apparently they understood his enthusiasm and anxiety.” Ezra continued, “When we finished with a one-point victory, Father was overjoyed.”

Today only three of the twenty-two academies remain—BYU in Provo, BYU—Idaho in Rexburg, and Juárez Academy in Colonia Juárez, Mexico.

**Church Board of Education**

In 1888 the Church General Board of Education was organized to regulate the work of the academies and other educational endeavors. Karl G. Maeser was appointed superintendent. Dr. Maeser was born in Meissen, Germany, and was educated and taught in Dresden. His father was an accomplished artist who told his bright, industrious son the following story while showing him one of his paintings:

> Years ago I painted this scene. It was exhibited with the best work from our school and attracted the attention of an important china manufacturer. He asked the artist’s name and was told it was the work of John Gottfried Maeser. The manufacturer offered me a flattering salary to enter his employ and paint chinaware, but I refused. Soon a more alluring offer came, but it was as promptly refused. After due consideration, the manufacturer made a third and still more attractive offer for my talent. Poverty stared us in the face and with an over-burdened wife and an under-privileged family I yielded to the temptation and practically sold my birthright for a mess of pottage.

> My son, if it had not been for this temporary touch of success, the creations of my mind might have adorned the great art galleries of the world, and my name might have been written with the great artists of my time, but, Karl, I painted for bread too soon.

Karl Maeser never taught for bread. In the Salt Lake Cemetery stands Dr. Maeser’s granite grave marker with the inscription “Erected by his pupils.” No greater epitaph for an educator could be inscribed.

**Seminaries**

To counter the “Godless” secularization of the public school system, the Church organized in 1890 a system of weekday religion classes for children to be conducted after school hours, one of the first churches to do so in America.
The public schools continued to increase in resources and students. The membership of the Church felt the financial strain of supporting two school systems—the public through taxes and the Church through donations. In 1909, the Church Board of Education decided to shift the mission of the academies from secondary curriculum to that of normal colleges—to train and supply the public school system with qualified, faithful Latter-day Saint educators.

The concept of supplementing public high school curriculum with religious education began to germinate in the mind of Dr. Joseph F. Merrill, a counselor in the Granite Stake presidency and a professor at the University of Utah. The Church Board of Education was impressed with the Granite Stake’s proposal of release-time seminary classes for their youth. “President Merrill outlined his plan to the stake presidency. His plan was to teach the same religion classes as those taught in the Salt Lake Academy. . . to students released from high school for one class period each day. Classes would be held in a building erected by the stake close to Granite High School.”

Twenty-five hundred dollars was borrowed from Zions Bank, land was purchased, and a building was constructed consisting of a cloak room, an office with a small library, and one classroom. Next was the selection of a teacher. Joseph F. Merrill described the qualifications to the superintendent of Church schools, Horace H. Cummings:

April 23, 1912

Superintendent Horace H. Cummings, City,

Dear Superintendent:

. . . May I say that it is the desire of the man who is properly qualified to do the work in a most satisfactory manner. By young we do not necessarily mean a teacher young in years, but a man who is young in his feelings, who loves young people, who delights in their company, who can sympathize strongly with them and who can command their respect and admiration and exercise a great influence over them. We want a man who can enjoy student sports and activities as well as one who is a good teacher. We want a man who is a thorough student, one who will not teach in a perfunctory way, but who will enliven his instructions with a strong, winning personality and give evidence of thorough understanding of and scholarship in the things he teaches.

It is desired that this school be thoroughly successful and a teacher is wanted who is a leader and who will be universally regarded as the inferior to no teacher in the High School.
At the earliest convenience I shall be pleased to call on you and discuss this matter further with you.

(Signed) Joseph F. Merrill

Thomas J. Yates was the man. Raised in the sage-surrounded fields of Scipio as a boy, he studied in Provo at the feet of Karl G. Maeser. Brother Yates became a graduate of Cornell University in electrical engineering, a fine student of the scriptures, and a friend of youth. He was also a member of the Granite Stake high council. One of Brother Yates’s inaugural students in 1912 was Mildred Bennion. Many years later she wrote a letter upon request from a Granite Seminary graduating class:

In 1928 I was married to Henry Eyring, who is now Dean of the Graduate School at the U of U. We have 3 sons.

The oldest is now a sophomore at the U of U and attends the LDS Institute [today, Edward is a retired professor of chemistry at the University of Utah]. The second is at East High and attends seminary there [today, an Apostle and commissioner, Elder Henry B. Eyring]. The youngest is a Blazer in Primary [today, Harden is an administrator in the commissioner’s office for higher education in the State of Utah]. . . .

We moved to Utah at a considerable financial sacrifice in order that our sons could attend Seminaries and Institutes and find friends among our own people. That should answer the question of my feelings about such things.

I am very happy to know that I am counted among the students at the first Seminary organized by the Church.

Very Sincerely, Mildred Bennion Eyring.

Institutes

With increasing numbers of Latter-day Saint students attending colleges and universities, the next step was an extension of the seminary arrangement to non-Church institutions of higher learning. The early twenties were marked by the rising reputation of science and a decline in the influence of churches. Scientists were taking over the study and interpretation of the Bible by what came to be called higher criticism. Social scientists were endeavoring to provide a new scientific ethic, and behavioristic psychology was replacing sacred and philosophical literature in the study of man. Churches across America responded with religious foundations at the university level that were designed to persuade aspiring intellectuals of the validity of their theology and church message.
During this period of turmoil, there came a call for help to the First Presidency from Latter-day Saint professors at the University of Idaho in Moscow. As the First Presidency discussed the Moscow appeal for an institute of religion, President and Sister J. Wyley Sessions, former members of the university’s agricultural department, were just returning from a seven-year mission to South Africa. President Sessions related their conversation with the First Presidency and call to Moscow:

It was generally understood that after our release from the South African Mission that I would be assigned a job in Idaho with the church-controlled Utah-Idaho Sugar Company.

When President Heber J. Grant and President Charles W. Nibley were giving me the “final instructions,” President Nibley suddenly stopped, looked at President Grant, and said, “Heber, we are making a mistake.” President Grant replied, “Yes, I am afraid we are; I have not felt just right about assigning Brother Sessions to the sugar business.”

President Nibley looked at me and said, “Brother Sessions, you are the man to go to Moscow to take care of our students at the University.” I replied, “No, no; are you calling us on another mission?” President Grant chuckled and said, “Of course not; we are giving you a chance to render a great service to the Church, and a fine professional opportunity for yourself.” Sensing my disappointment, President Nibley arose and put his arm around me and said, “Don’t be disturbed, Brother Sessions, this is what the Lord wants you to do. God bless you!”

In 1926 the first institute of religion began at the University of Idaho.

Early Morning and Home Study Seminary

William E. Berrett, who served as administrator of seminaries and institutes of religion for seventeen years (President Boyd K. Packer and Elder A. Theodore Tuttle served as his assistants) reported in his history: “Beginning in 1953 the Department . . . began an expansion that was destined to reach around the world. Early morning daily seminary. Many bishops were at first skeptical that daily early morning classes could succeed and there was considerable reluctance on the part of many parents.”

In 1967 the seminary home study program was authorized by the Executive Committee of the Church Board of Education on a pilot basis. The home study format was field tested in the Iowa-Indiana area. Much was learned about procedure, teacher training, and the development of a curriculum compelling enough to carry itself on a home study basis for teenagers. The vehicle had been found for responding to
the Board of Education’s call to transport religious education throughout the earth wherever the Church had been established.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, full-time CES personnel and their families were assigned to inaugurate the seminary and institute program worldwide. I share a personal note of experience on this era of international expansion.

In 1972 my wife Patricia and I, with a toddler and infant, boarded a Pan Am flight for the Philippines. After weathering a typhoon and the declaration of martial law during our first week in Manila, I headed north to the province where I had labored as a young missionary. In San Fernando, I visited friends and converts of seven years prior.

One family, in particular, was the Macapagals. Maria, a vivacious twelve-year-old, and her mother were faithful members of a struggling new branch when I left in 1964. I knocked at the door of their cinder-block, corrugated-steel-roofed home near the train station. Sister Macapagal answered. I had a difficult time convincing her that I was Elder Iba. I explained to her why I had returned and explained the seminary home study program.

I asked about Maria, who would have been nineteen or so. She responded by pulling the curtain that partitioned the room, and there, lying on a cot, mannequin-like, weighing fifty or sixty pounds, was Maria, in the last stages of Hodgkin’s disease. She lit up with her wonderful smile and sparkling eyes as I walked to her side. She asked if she could begin the seminary home study course she had heard me explain through the curtain. She said she had only six months to live and wanted to be better prepared to teach her relatives in the spirit world. I promised that as soon as the materials arrived in Manila she would be the first to receive them. When I returned a few weeks later, Maria was ready to study.

Her father, now the branch president, had suspended a mirror over her head so she could look up and read and write upside down and backwards. Due to her weakened condition, she could not sit up. One week before her death and passage into the world of spirits, Maria completed the last home study Book of Mormon lesson—nine months of work, a thousand pages or more, every written exercise completed. Her mother received a certificate of completion for Maria at the conclusion of that first seminary year in the Philippines.

The One Hundredth Country

Let me share one more personal story of CES’s entrance in the one hundredth country while serving as a zone administrator for Asia.
In 1993, Tim Kwok, area director, and I attended a seminary class held in a member’s home in Bangalore, India. An excerpt from my personal trip report reads:

Tim and I joined 12 smiling students in a small 7x11 foot plaster block room partially painted, with a bench, end table, woven floor mats and a picture of the Savior on the wall. The eight young ladies were dressed in western dresses and native Indian sarees with three young men and their teacher, Samson. After singing a hymn with the volume of a mini-Tabernacle Choir, which brought a number of curious neighbors to the open door, a humble prayer was offered. Samson then exchanged with the students their weekly home-study assignments from the New Testament student manual. The pages were loose and somewhat disorganized; three-ring binders do not exist in India. The lesson for the week was on the missionary journeys of the Apostle Paul. Bibles were shared as Samson referred to episodes in the book of Acts. The students, most sitting on the floor, eagerly listened and read and responded to questions asked by Samson. They were, as Samson later shared, somewhat reserved in their class participation due to our presence. He said they usually probe deeply into the scriptures and ask him very difficult questions. Samson, though a returned missionary, lacked polish by way of skills and methodology, but truly conveyed through his love for the scriptures and missionary work, in a land not unlike the world of Paul’s day, a powerful message and testimony.

I sometimes, in such circumstances, seriously reflect upon where all our high-tech teaching techniques and commodious, color-coordinated classrooms have brought us in the highly developed programs of Church Education. For certain, I am clearly awakened to the reality that the “sine qua non” of our teaching is a meekness of mind and childlike dependence on divine intervention for significant education to occur in matters of the Spirit. I was richly blessed for being in the presence of those beautiful and bright Indian students. I saw in their eyes the joy and hope found only in learning of one’s true heavenly ancestry as children of God and the realization of his matchless love.

Hundreds of such examples could be published demonstrating the blessing of religious education in the lives of the youth across the earth.

There are many other important snapshots of our educational legacy that I have not developed, such as schools in the Pacific and Mexico, special needs and incarcerated programs, continuing education, and literacy.

As religious educators, we are under contract as teachers and administrators, drawing our income from the sacred funds of the Church. We are about the Lord’s business as trusted agents of the Church Board of Education and the priesthood. President Boyd K. Packer wrote a letter of appreciation and encouragement to Stanley A.
Peterson, then serving as administrator, which was forwarded with the letter of appointment to each full-time teacher in 1996:

April 22, 1996

Dear Brother Peterson:

I wish it could be possible for me to meet privately with each seminary and institute teacher. Each time I meet with our young people, there is affirmed to me again the incomparable value of and the urgent need for the work our teachers do.

Donna and I talk now and then about how wonderful it would be if I could return to the seminary class. Knowing what I now know of the Church and of the future awaiting our youth, we could work with the assurance that the teaching of the gospel to them is of crucial importance. We could be content with the knowledge that what I would do in the classroom, while different from, would compare in importance to what I do now. The realities and challenges faced by our teachers and their families would be more bearable if they could know as we who lead the Church know, how indispensable they are to the work of the Lord.

As you travel among them, will you please tell them how much we appreciate them. They deserve and I am sure they receive the approval and the blessings of the Lord.

Faithfully yours,

Boyd K. Packer
Acting President
Quorum of the Twelve

May we sense the immeasurable blessing and associated responsibility that are ours as religious educators to build upon the rich legacy we are beneficiaries of, from the School of the Prophets in the Whitney Store in Kirtland to our personal classrooms in over 135 countries throughout the world. 

Notes

3. Smith, History of the Church, 2:356.
6. Smith, History of the Church, 2:344; emphasis added.
7. Milton L. Bennion, Mormonism and Education (Salt Lake City: Depart-
ment of Education of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1939), 19.
8. Sidney Rigdon, Oration delivered by Mr. Sidney Rigdon on the 4th of July, 1838 (Far West, Missouri Journal Office, 1838), 9.
12. See Kate B. Carter, “The University of Utah and Other Schools of Early Days,” Daughters of Utah Pioneers, lesson for October 1950, 1.
17. Edward L. Kimball and Andrew E. Kimball Jr., Spencer W. Kimball (Salt Lake City Bookcraft, 1977), 65.
22. Quoted in C. Coleman, History of Granite Seminary, 142.