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The Economics Behind the Construction of the General Relief Society Building

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Kiersten Robertson and Mary Jane Woodger, Church History and Doctrine

Introduction

A building designated specifically for the use of the women of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was first proposed in 1893, shortly after the dedication of the Salt Lake Temple. In response, the First Presidency offered a lot just east of the Salt Lake Temple for this purpose. Fundraising began in 1900 and continued for years to earn a required \$20,000 amount. However, to the great disappointment of the Relief Society, the First Presidency decided that a Presiding Bishop's building was to be built on the lot instead, with the Relief Society given offices in it.

As such, in 1945, when Belle S. Spafford was called as the General Relief Society President, a new building for the Relief Society was among her first priorities. During the first general Relief Society meeting held after World War II, Spafford presented a new proposal for a Relief Society Building. In response, President George Albert Smith donated a lot near Temple Square, but asked that the Relief Society raise almost one million dollars to construct the building, promising that the First Presidency would match contributions dollar for dollar. Spafford then devised a plan where the over 100,000 members of Relief Society would donate \$5 each over the course of one year, from October 1947 to October 1948, in order to reach the required amount. Five years after obtaining the full sum, Spafford turned a shovel of dirt at the groundbreaking ceremony on October 1, 1953. The building was finished and dedicated on October 3, 1956 by President David O. McKay, becoming the headquarters of the Relief Society.

Our intent was to explore this unique intersection of finance and religion in the Relief Society from 1945-1956, and to take a fresh look at this aspect of Mormon women's history through the vantage point of economics and finance.

Methodology

Primary sources were the main focus of the research process. Secondary sources were used to give a more comprehensive understanding of the subject. The main methodology used was qualitative analysis of journal entries, letters, conference talks, publications in the Relief Society Magazine, the official Journal History of the Relief Society Building, and other articles focused on the finances of the construction of the building. We did not attempt to create a comprehensive history of the building of the Relief Society Building but focused more closely on the financial aspects of the project and how its economics affected the centralization of the Relief Society.

Discussion

The process by which the Relief Society Building was finally brought to fruition emphasizes the role of gendered religious fundraising which supported female independence. The initial pairing of the Bishopric and the Relief Society is interesting in that it highlights that the Church predominantly empowered men to govern Church finances, though it appeared that they were also trying to empower women to control the

finances of the construction of the building. This pairing was eventually dissolved when President George Albert Smith let the women completely control the financing of their own building.

The interaction between General Relief Society President Belle Spafford and male leadership, most especially President George Albert Smith, can be viewed as an example of gendered dynamics where soft power was used by female leaders. Soft power is defined as “the ability to get what one wants by attraction and persuasion rather than coercion or payment.”¹ In many instances, Spafford used soft power strategies. Her emotional, persuasive approach talked of the culture of ideals, hopes, dreams and sisterhood. The building itself was spoken of as a home rather than an office building and Spafford helped to shape the preference that the building would stand as a monument to Latter-day Saint women. Her non-coercive, soft power approach used ingenuity, strength and service rather than coercion. The timing of this gender dynamic was critical in that the cultural shift brought about by World War II placed Spafford and her General Relief Society Board in a more independent and influential social position with their male counterparts.

Conclusion

The exploration of the financial records of the Relief Society Building has helped illuminate the history of the Relief Society and its members and broadened our understanding of how economics affected the centralization of the Relief Society. Indeed, the Relief Society building serves as a monument to one generation’s ability to control finances and raise money. The Relief Society represents the unified activities of females, as well as their ingenuity, strength, and service. These qualities are evident in how women successfully financed their own building through cottage industries, personal sacrifice, and teamwork.² When the sisters realized they had a dream, they saw it all the way through, from the planning, to the fundraising, to the construction and furnishing. It is a tribute to Relief Society women that such a great feat was accomplished with relative ease. Through their unique financing and fundraising, the Relief Society women brought about, “a home of the heart of Relief Society of which every Relief Society member is a part. A home containing the loveliest offerings of the world-wide sisterhood. Unitedly, through sacrifice. . . the Relief Society Building stands an ensign to women.”³

1 Joseph Nye, “China’s Soft Power Deficit to catch up, its politics must unleash the many talents of its civil society,” *The Wall Street Journal*. May 8, 2012.

2 Vesta P. Crawford, “A Journal History of the Relief Society Building,” Vesta P. Crawford Book Drafts, Vault MSS 1282, box 1, folder 1, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT.

3 Marianne C. Sharp, “A Dedicated Home for Relief Society,” *Relief Society Magazine*, December 1956, 817.

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