
THE LDS RESPONSE TO THE TETON DAM DISASTER IN IDAHO

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Just before noon on Saturday, June 5, 1976, the Teton Dam in southeastern Idaho collapsed, releasing eighty billion gallons of water down the Teton River. The surging water entered the Snake River and was finally trapped several days later at the American Falls reservoir west of Pocatello, Idaho. In the course of an 85-mile rampage this torrent spread out in some places up to eleven miles, engulfing the communities of Wilford, Sugar City, and Rexburg. In Wilford, for example, 120 of the 154 homes were destroyed almost immediately, and most of the others were severely damaged.¹ Down stream the communities of Ennis, Menan, Roberts, Idaho Falls, and Blackfoot were partly flooded. Fortunately, only six people drowned. However, this deluge wreaked havoc with all kinds of construction and machinery, killed about 11,000 head of livestock, damaged or ruined approximately 90,000 acres of crops, destroyed an estimated 5,000-10,000 acres of land, and damaged or destroyed approximately 360 businesses, more than 4,000 homes, and at least as many farm structures. The total loss in property was estimated at close to \$1.5 billion.²

In sudden, highly visible, severe, and widespread natural disasters, such as the Teton flood, most people spontaneously react with a sense of altruism, according to disaster research by social scientists.³ But communities normally do not maintain this almost utopian mutual concern and generosity past the first few days unless there has been an unusual indoctrination of such values and goals.⁴ Pre-disaster behavior and values are, therefore, the best predictors of behavior during and after a disaster;⁵ people tend to react differently as the norms of their respective groups differ.⁶ Fully 80 percent of the victims of the Teton Dam disaster lived in the twenty-mile swath between the mouth of the river canyon in Wilford and Rexburg. Nearly 95 percent of these people at the time of the flood were LDS. Rexburg, an LDS center because of Ricks College, served as the major hub of relief efforts.⁷ Because so many of those affected were Mormons and because so much of the relief effort in the Rexburg area was directed by Mormon leaders, the Teton Dam disaster provides a unique opportunity to examine how a particular set of values and institutions affected responses during an extreme emergency.⁸

The teachings of Mormonism's founder Joseph Smith and his successor Brigham Young urged return to a sacral and organic society distinct from the secular and individualizing modern world.⁹ Numerous writers, both scholarly and impressionistic, have described the willingness of Mormonism's adherents to sacrifice individual concerns for group interests and to defer to all Church officials in order to fulfill obligations and re-

sponsibilities within the Mormon commonwealth.¹⁰ Authority in the Mormon sense did not mean the power to dominate by compulsion, but instead it was a kind of moral and spiritual authority based on trust and faith in the destiny of the movement.¹¹ Church members felt that their leaders when called were divinely imbued with essential leadership qualities. In 1903 the well-known economist Richard T. Ely said that "the organization of the Mormons is the most nearly perfect piece of social mechanism with which I have ever, in any way, come in contact, excepting alone the German army."¹² This efficient structure was further elaborated, particularly during the Depression, by the development of the multi-faceted welfare system which buttressed the Church's long-standing commitment to care for the temporal welfare of its membership.

The Teton Dam disaster initiated the most extensive testing since the 1930s of these values and institutions. From the first hours after the dam broke, responses based on such teachings as respect for authority and the primary value of the group tended to help the relief effort. For example, almost to a person the people accepted the warning to evacuate, even though most thought the flood would not be nearly as devastating as it turned out to be. In contrast, later in the summer police complained that many people caught in the roaring flood waters in the Big Thompson Canyon in Colorado had belittled the warning of impending disaster.¹³ Respect for authority seemed to be an important factor in the success of the evacuation in Idaho.

Significantly, the Latter-day Saints also had a ready and tried hierarchical structure through which to organize, direct, and channel the altruistic impulses often present immediately after such a disaster. Through the Latter-day Saint lay priesthood structure the people were immediately organized to receive the needed material and psychological assistance and to begin the cleanup and reconstruction. LDS leaders, primarily stake presidents and bishops knew without question their responsibility was to act and lead. And the people almost instinctively sought and followed the direction provided for them. The government also organized and funneled some of its assistance through this structure. Such organized activity, according to federal disaster officials, was contrary to the quiescence among victims they usually find when they arrive at the scene of disasters. The success and scope of the Church response would thus seem to illustrate that certain group characteristics, historically important, are still prominent among the faithful.

Meeting Immediate Needs

Most people left the flood area with little more than the clothes on their backs and the vehicles they were

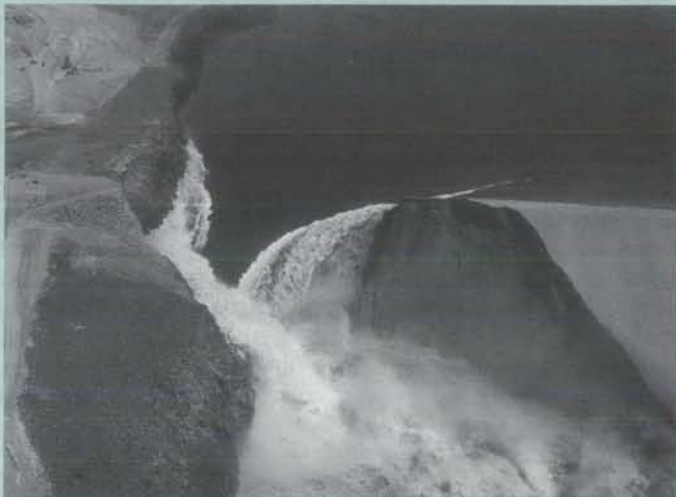
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driving. Those in the Rexburg and Sugar City region generally headed for the hill in the southeastern part of Rexburg where Ricks College is situated. As the torrent of water swept through, it was obvious that the people who lived below the flood line would not be able to return to their homes; Ricks College, under the direction of President Henry B. Eyring, became a home for the homeless. The higher elevation of the campus prevented loss of the water supply and permitted use of the sewage system. In addition, the electrical plant maintained by the college was not damaged by the flood.

Towards evening of the first day the food services director and his staff set up a soup line and in addition passed out milk and bread. The next day they began serving three meals a day for all who needed them with special attention given to nutritional needs and sanitation. While most meals were served in the Manwaring Student Activities Center, the food service staff also delivered hot meals to other places and passed out sack lunches. The day after the flood they provided 10,000 meals and by the middle of the first week were serving 30,000 meals per day. When the program concluded shortly after mid-August the total number of meals supplied had reached nearly 400,000 or an average of just over 5,200 each day.¹⁴ This food was provided from various sources, with most of it ultimately coming from the LDS Church Welfare Department.¹⁵

Before the first afternoon was over people began asking where they could get baby food and diapers. The college administration immediately set up a baby center and put out calls on citizen band radios for the necessary commodities. Soon people were bringing in disposable diapers, bottles, baby food, and even such things as goat's milk and goats for infants needing special formula. Infant supplies were also included in the welfare goods trucked in from Salt Lake which began arriving the day after the flood.

The first night of the disaster everyone obtained



Water breaking through Teton Dam.

lodgings. Some people stayed with relatives or friends in communities outside the flood area. However, most flood victims were able to find places in Rexburg, either in homes not flooded or in the college dormitories. The first night the dormitories admitted 1,600 or 1,700 individuals, and this soon rose to the maximum 3,000. Extra state police and Utah Power and Light personnel were allotted 160 beds for several days. The Adjutant General of the Idaho National Guard, General James Brooks, said it might have been necessary to substantially evacuate the community of Rexburg had not the college been available to feed and house people.

Early attempts by priesthood and Relief Society leaders to organize the allocation of housing proved unnecessary. In most cases those in need who did not go to college housing simply gravitated to homes on higher ground. Many homes accommodated more than one extra family, and in some cases as many as half a dozen families moved into one residence that first night. One lady reported that her family stayed in a home which housed a total of fifteen children, with four babies in diapers. This pattern was followed throughout the flooded area, though of course with less crowding than in Rexburg.

On June 6, the day after the flood, the stake presidents organized a special conference in the college fieldhouse to encourage Church members, give them counsel and advice, start the accounting for missing persons, and commence organizing the people to combat pressing problems. After this the stake presidents met with the bishops daily, then after several weeks less frequently. Each bishop was asked to meet daily if possible with his ward so he could pass on information, build morale, assess needs, and correlate the programs providing assistance. The bishops also made strenuous efforts, with the help of their counselors or other priesthood leaders, to visit each family individually. One bishop, with his elders quorum president and secretary, visited every home in the ward each day for two weeks.

At the ward level most of the work of answering questions, passing out information, giving encouragement, organizing, and providing assistance fell upon the bishops. In the crisis the people generally looked to their bishops for guidance and help. These men suddenly were propelled into roles comparable to those of the all-encompassing early pioneer bishops. While there were some exceptions, most bishops were reluctant to ask their priesthood subordinates for administrative assistance, especially if these subordinates had suffered flood damage themselves and seemed deeply involved with their own problems. The bishops sometimes neglected their own needs and finally were instructed by their stake presidents to take care of their own homes. After the first couple of weeks the bishops began to delegate more responsibility to the various quorums and ward and stake Relief Societies.

The stake presidents and bishops were able to draw upon several Church resources. In addition to Ricks College a special bishop's storehouse was set up at the college physical plant by stake president Mark Ricks and the Church Welfare Department. Trucks from Salt Lake arrived regularly with a great variety of food items, infant supplies, mattresses, bedding, furniture, clothing,

and cleaning items such as buckets and mops. When the operation was concluded in late August the cost of these supplies plus the cost of the provisions for Ricks College amounted to about \$1,000,000.¹⁶ The stake presidents and bishops authorized all requisitions for goods in the storehouse to Mormons and non-Mormons alike. The reverend of the community Protestant Church was given a bishop's order book for his parishioners. Interestingly enough, several inactive Mormons went to the reverend for bishop's orders.

Two other arms of the Church welfare system furnished assistance. Deseret Industries in Idaho Falls provided clothing and furniture to flood victims. People who generally think of Deseret Industries as little more than a depository for worn out clothes and junk were amazed at the abundance, quality, and variety of clothing, which came clean, sized, and mended.¹⁷ President Ricks used several professionals from LDS Social Services to provide counseling. However, there was not a great need for the service. By the end of 1976 about 320 hours of professional counseling had been called for.¹⁸ Regular worship services and auxiliary meetings tended to fill the psychological, social, and spiritual needs. President Spencer W. Kimball's visit to Rexburg for special conferences eight days after the flood greatly boosted the morale of members as they began the difficult task of cleaning and rehabilitating the area.

Private and government agencies supplemented these immediate relief efforts by the LDS Church. Most significant were the Red Cross, which utilized numerous LDS volunteers, and the government food stamp program.¹⁹ Some members were hesitant to utilize these two programs because of long-standing advice from Church leaders that members should rely upon Church relief rather than government assistance insofar as possible. Apparently confusion arose when several priesthood leaders indicated that food stamp assistance, for example, would be permissible in this case since the federal government was responsible and liable for the flood damage (it was a federal dam which had failed). Some of the flood victims felt that they were hurried through the government service centers so quickly with so many papers placed in their hands they did not fully comprehend what had happened until later. Local Church leaders finally asked the First Presidency for instructions to resolve the controversy. The reply, which was read in the various wards, indicated that loans and assistance from the government for rebuilding should be accepted but that items which the Church could readily provide such as food and clothing should be refused.

Sufficient evidence is not available to ascertain the percentage of LDS flood victims who followed this counsel. Quite possibly a majority or even most did, at least after the initial allotment of food stamps and Red Cross certificates were used. Some of the families never used the stamps and certificates they received. In at least one family the parents decided not to use the Red Cross funds for clothes, but the teenage children did use their share. One bishop counseled his members to use the initial allotment of stamps but to keep track of their worth and deduct that amount from any government reimbursement for damage. In any case, both the food stamp and Red Cross programs closed the special dispersal outlets

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about a week and a half after they opened.

Coordination of Church and Government

Although there often appears to be a high value placed on organizational autonomy by the various groups involved in American disasters, generally some kind of loosely coordinated action gradually emerges among the diverse organizations, officials, and people responding to the situation.²⁰ However, this cooperation tends to break down with time as organizations compete to insure recognition of their efforts, thus reducing the potential output of the disaster relief system.²¹ In contrast, closely coordinated efforts quickly developed after the Teton dam break, competition, though present, was minimized, and government efficiency was greatly increased.

The day after the flood county commissioners and stake presidents met and decided in almost theocratic fashion that the commissioners would be the unit of government through which to coordinate the efforts of other local, state, and federal agencies. They further concluded that all agencies with programs relating directly to people should work through the stake presidents. As a first step they concluded that restoring roads, bridges, canals, and utilities—services which affected the whole community—was the highest priority. Church leaders agreed to assume responsibility for meeting the immediate needs of victims which would in turn free the county commissioners, as well as city officials in Rexburg and Sugar City, to devote their efforts to the repair of public facilities. The fact that these Church and community leaders were all committed Latter-day Saints facilitated cooperation.

Within several days of the flood, county officials and Church leaders had worked out a schedule of holding daily "correlation" meetings, based on the Church model, to coordinate the efforts of all those involved in the relief and rehabilitation efforts.²² State and federal representatives were amenable to this and joined in an arrangement which seemed to be particularly productive



Man with remains of home

Courtesy of LDS Welfare Department

The stake presidents told bishops to assume as much responsibility for assisting non-LDS within ward boundaries as for members.

and effective. These daily correlation meetings continued for two and a half months; thereafter they occurred weekly. Commencing in January 1977 they were held monthly. A month after the flood, government officials indicated they were "two weeks ahead of what they normally would be if they didn't have the Church to work through," and within close to four months they exclaimed that they were a "couple of months ahead of schedule."

Two declarations set in motion the state and federal components of the coordinated effort. Immediately after the dam broke Governor Andrus officially declared an emergency. Later that night he requested that President Gerald Ford declare the five Idaho counties in the path of the flood a federal disaster area; this was done the next day.

General James Brooks of the Idaho National Guard and chief of the state Bureau of Disaster Services directed state efforts. First, he mobilized the National Guard in eastern Idaho and directed its emergency efforts. He also coordinated the activities of other state agencies in the flood area. The local LDS Church leaders expressed nothing but the highest of praise for the way he conducted his responsibilities and the way he cooperated with them. General Brooks was likewise deeply impressed with the response of the Church and its people. In summing up his comments he explained that he thought "the Church organization functioned marvelously under these kinds of [disaster] conditions, and I would have to say more effectively than most anything I've seen."

The federal government likewise responded quickly and effectively to the disaster. In situations such as the Teton flood the Federal Disaster Assistance Administration (FDAA) is responsible for calling in, funding, and coordinating the work of other needed federal agencies. In this particular crisis the FDAA established a disaster field office in Idaho Falls and conscripted the services of eleven different agencies. For example, the FDAA asked

both the Corps of Engineers and the Soil and Conservation Service to work on debris removal, the Bureau of Reclamation to work on restoration of canals, and the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to provide temporary housing. Each of these agencies directed and carried out its work with its own personnel and in addition hired private subcontractors or individuals for many specifically designated jobs. The FDAA also cooperated with the Idaho State Bureau of Disaster Services in creating what they called one-stop service centers in four locations throughout the flood zone [St. Anthony, Rexburg, Idaho Falls, and Blackfoot.] In these centers representatives of all federal and state agencies which render service to disaster victims set up booths where people were able to apply for the various kinds of assistance and loans available.

The most serious difficulty was the problem of providing temporary housing until damaged homes could be repaired or new homes built. This was the responsibility of HUD, which would pay a disaster victim's rent for one year, make minimal repairs to the damaged home if feasible, or provide a mobile home. Because of the destructive force of the flood about two-thirds of the families declared eligible for HUD assistance needed mobile homes. HUD employed about 300 truckers to haul the trailers in from various staging areas around the country where they had been refurbished for use. There were, of course, many families who were able to fix their damaged homes without applying for the HUD program.

The Church organization greatly facilitated the work of HUD. Normally the problems of communications between HUD and the applicants would have been very difficult, especially with people not living in their own homes and with telephones out. However, HUD was able to work through the bishops and other priesthood leaders to contact people and carry out its inspections, etc. In each ward a HUD inspector with a priesthood representative went up and down the streets visiting each house to decide if the homeowner was eligible for minimal repair or a mobile home. In one ward the process was completed in two days instead of several weeks. HUD completed its inspection weeks ahead of schedules based on other disasters. HUD also used the bishops to find applicants after the initial inspection and even to decide sometimes in what order people would receive trailers. The stake presidents told their bishops to assume as much responsibility for assisting the non-LDS within their ward boundaries as for their members. The HUD director of applicant assistance felt very positive about working through the Church organization to help make his program serve the people better, and he declared that it had made HUD's work easier than in other disaster situations.

Volunteer Cleanup Efforts

The massive effort to mop up the damage left in the wake of the flood involved every family struck by the calamity and thousands of volunteers who donated labor. One of the bishops in the Rexburg North Stake estimated that it took 400 man-hours just to clean the muck and debris out of a single house in his ward, which illustrates the immensity of the problem. Local Church leaders believed it important to clean up as quickly as possible because this would get some families



Flood victims at Ricks College

Courtesy of LDS Welfare Department

back into their homes, prepare the way for reconstruction, keep the people occupied, and greatly relieve psychological depression associated with the tragedy.

Numerous people, many of them friends and relatives of disaster victims, flocked in to lend assistance.²³ In addition, LDS Church leaders around the area and beyond quickly volunteered help. Some non-Mormon volunteers, most notably a Mennonite contingent which remained in the area for several months, helped. In virtually all disasters to which people can travel such mass convergence takes place. Yet generally there is not a very effective use of the volunteers. In the fairly recent but already classic study of disasters, *Communities in Disaster*, it is suggested that "perhaps the most important single device for improving the effectiveness of volunteer labor would be collaboration between the mass public's informal rescue-relief work and that of organizations The proper kind of organizational framework could have a multiplier effect on the output of mass activity."²⁴ This was essentially the result in the Rexburg region of the Teton Dam flood.

Two organized systems emerged to bring in help from the outside. The first system, which commenced operating the week after the flood, developed under the sponsorship of President Ferron Sonderegger for his Rexburg North Stake. Under this plan each of the six flooded wards within his stake was given a neighboring unaffected stake, generally from the Idaho Falls area, to act as a helper. This method of coordinating the needed assistance was orderly and efficient, but the need of labor was much greater in each ward than a single stake could provide over a period of weeks.²⁵

The second system commenced shortly after the first and soon encompassed all stakes requiring help. Church welfare leaders and the area welfare director President Ricks asked President Harold Hillam of the Idaho Falls South Stake to request and coordinate volunteers. President Hillam then regularly contacted the various area leaders or regional representatives in Idaho and northern Utah, who arranged for the laborers through the regional welfare leaders under them. From there the chain of command went through stake presidents, bishops, and priesthood quorum leaders.

In the Rexburg region President Ricks assigned this coordinating responsibility to President Keith Peterson of the Rexburg East Stake. He had the bishops report the number of helpers they could use in their respective wards each day, and then as the busloads arrived these helpers would be allocated to each bishop who would distribute them in his ward. Within two weeks of the flood the bishops became so exhausted that they finally delegated more of this responsibility to the priesthood leaders under them.

During this period the Relief Society and Primary organizations of the only slightly flooded Rexburg East Stake conducted a nursery for the children of the flood victims. The purpose was to keep these infants and youngsters out of the unsanitary conditions in the flooded homes during the day and allow the parents to concentrate their efforts in cleaning, repairing, and rebuilding.

On Saturday, June 19, approximately 5,000 Church volunteers went into the flooded area to help in the

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cleanup. This was the largest single contingent. In the five days previous about 3,000 people each day journeyed in to work. During the rest of June the size of the volunteer work force daily varied from 1,000 to 3,000 individuals, and then it started to taper off in July. Also after June 19 leaders selectively requested skilled laborers such as electricians along with the regular volunteers. Many of the volunteers left their own homes as early as 3:30 or 4:00 a.m. with lunches and cleaning utensils such as mops, rakes, buckets, and shovels. By the end of July when this program was virtually brought to a conclusion at least one million hours of labor had been contributed.²⁶

People in the region expressed gratitude and praise for the volunteer help and commented on how it raised their spirits and gave them renewed strength and optimism. One lady announced with obvious satisfaction that her basement was in better shape after the volunteers had cleaned it than it was prior to the flood. Hugh Fowler, the FDAA Deputy Director, stated that the efforts of both the volunteers and victims had "speeded . . . up immensely" the work of the government. President Peterson declared only a month after the flood and three weeks after the program commenced: "These people have literally lifted us up out of the mud and set us on our feet again . . . Without them we never would have made it!"

Conclusion

Near the end of August 1976, about two and a half months after the dam broke, the crisis period of the response to the disaster was over. The cleanup had been virtually completed, public utilities had been restored, flood victims were either back in their own homes or else in HUD mobile trailers, those who lost employment were generally back to work, and schools were starting. However, the long process of rebuilding was just commencing. The following month the federal government provided \$200 million to begin the long process of rebuilding, and eventually promised to pay for the replacement



Former farm land

Courtesy of Susan Oman

Local priesthood leaders intimated that the Lord may have provided a trial run for other great problems which are to appear prior to the Apocalypse.

value of all flood losses,²⁷ in effect accepting responsibility for the flaws in its dam.

Many of the flood victims are now better off materially than they were before the flood because of this policy, and some people have been able to rebuild residences much larger or more elaborate than they previously owned. While the LDS response to the disaster was quite exceptional and unique during the two and a half month time of crisis, it appears from casual observation by several that during this period of longer-term reconstruction Mormons have acted the way one would expect other Americans to act in this materialistic, consumer-oriented society.²⁸

Committed Mormons in the disaster area tended to assess the flood in terms of its religious significance.²⁹ They did not blame God for the disaster but simply indicated, with their still strong millennialist orientation, that he may have allowed it to happen when it did as a sign of the last days and to test and train his people and his Church. They noted that the collapse of the dam, if necessary, happened at the most opportune time of the day and year when people could be warned and most easily provided for. They also saw the hand of God in small, personal, and seemingly miraculous events. Numerous Latter-day Saints believed the loss of material possessions had taught them anew that their religion and their families were of supreme value. These expressions were common in Rexburg region where the flood was cataclysmic, but toward the end of the flood route where the danger of lost life was missing and the flood was closer to a terrible nuisance instead of a major catastrophe, the religious element was more generally missing from the commentaries.

Local priesthood leaders believed there were lessons to be learned from the disaster experience not only by the victims but also by the Church. They intimated that the Lord may have provided a trial run for other great problems which are to appear prior to the Apocalypse. These

local Church leaders pointed specifically to a number of examples where lessons could be derived.

For example, throughout the length of the flood route they complained about the lack of communications once the flood waters destroyed telephone lines and cut roads. Several noted that citizen band radios had helped, but not all leaders had access to them, and for those who did a schedule of emergency channels had not been worked out in advance. One stake president suggested the creation of some type of organized Church CB system. Church leaders soon began considering the possibilities of installing a combination short-wave and CB arrangement to improve communications in emergencies, and by the spring of 1979 the Church was in the process of implementing such a system.³⁰

In order to complement this communication improvement and react more quickly to disasters, Church leaders have authorized the Welfare Department to create two emergency response units which can be placed either on a large truck or an airplane to take to the disaster area. These will contain tents, medical supplies, a system for distilling water, and other supplies to help people through the first several days of a crisis. One unit will be kept in Salt Lake City and the other probably on the west or possibly the east coast.³¹

Another example pointed to was that Church members in some cases were reluctant to receive assistance from the Church. One stake president commented that the Church in the past may have "overkilled" in teaching its members to be independent. The lesson has been taught so forcefully, he explained, that a few very committed Mormons would not take Church assistance. Many others found it difficult to receive help even though they had always been willing to fulfill the large monetary and time commitments the Church asked of them.

In the confusing aftermath of this disaster, communication between local priesthood leaders and local Relief Society presidents sometimes broke down. Because of this the Relief Societies did not often have input in the planning meeting and did not always receive instructions on what their role should be. Consequently a significant resource was at times under-utilized throughout the area. One of the stake Relief Society presidents felt as if she were kind of a "fifth wheel." This may be a reflection of the male priesthood dominance within the Church. In spite of the problems, ward Relief Societies functioned and filled vital roles in the response to the flood. Since that time the Church Relief Society president has taken steps both to define more clearly the role of the Relief Society in the total Church welfare program and teach Church members that role to minimize recurring problems in future crises.³²

A welfare policy of the Church is to have its members store stocks of food for emergencies. In this case virtually all flood victims immediately lost their food storage. However, Church members on the perimeter were able to draw upon their own supplies to assist the families who moved in with them. Since the flood the Church Welfare Department and the Relief Society have jointly recommended that all LDS families create a small emergency supply of goods which could easily be taken with only a moment's notice and which could serve all



Damaged business after flood

Courtesy of LDS Welfare Department

basic needs for several days if necessary. They also suggested that important family documents be kept together with this supply to prevent their destruction in an emergency.³³

The response of stake presidents and bishops appeared close to Church expectations in such situations, but leaders below the level of bishop generally did not respond as effectively during the first two weeks, in some cases because authority and responsibility were not delegated to them.³⁴ Of course there were exceptions, particularly in wards where the flood covered only part of a ward and left some of the lower echelon leaders free from personal family responsibilities.

Several of the leaders stressed that training of all the priesthood must take place before a disaster strikes, a response which reflects reinforced commitment to the system of hierarchical priesthood structure within the Church. Leaders must be willing to delegate authority to subordinates, allowing them to gain the needed experience for crises such as flood disaster.³⁵ The Welfare Department has also prepared a disaster manual to help local leaders determine responsibilities.³⁶

Local Church leaders may have been a little too wary of outside government and private agencies at first, and as a result some representatives of outside agencies initially believed the Mormons did not appreciate the service they were rendering. Part of the problem was that Church members and leaders in the area at first were not certain what help Church headquarters could provide. They were, therefore, unsure what help to accept and what to forego.³⁷ The federal and state disaster representatives were very sensitive to the religious situation in the area and were willing to work through the local Church leadership. The overwhelming dominance of the LDS population and the feeling that the federal government was responsible for the dam break may have had something to do with this. In any case, these representatives soon recognized the increased efficiency the comprehensive Church structure made possible.

In any disaster or poverty situation the same questions about Church and government programs arise. In general many Church members seem to lack a complete understanding of the full role or reasons for Church welfare. Mormons sometimes see their own welfare programs as a needless duplication of government programs—in essence a wheel within a wheel. However, in this disaster the viability and importance of the Latter-day Saint welfare programs were reinforced and strengthened by the success of Church responses at the local and central levels.

In comparing this disaster to others in which he had been involved, FDAA Deputy Regional Director Fowler believed there were fewer “people problems” associated with the Teton flood and was amazed at the people’s patience, which again may illustrate respect for authority. He felt it had been easier to work in this particular disaster than some others which were smaller in scope. He credited this to state officials such as General Brooks, to the general Church influence and its welfare programs, and to local LDS political and Church officials.

The lay priesthood leadership structure and the respect which Church members felt for these men, the direct Church assistance provided, and the Latter-day

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Saint impulse for cooperation among themselves during the crisis were significant factors in mitigating the effects of this calamity. The Teton, Idaho, flood demonstrated that these characteristics have not significantly eroded away within the modern Mormon Church and because of them the Church was able to make a successful response to a major disaster.

Notes

The basic source of information for this paper was thirty-eight tape-recorded interviews conducted by the author, Bruce Blumell, with residents in the Teton flood area, including local LDS Church and government leaders. The author also conducted several interviews with outside government, Red Cross, and LDS Church representatives. Twenty-nine of these interviews were held in the devastated region about one month after the flood. Most of the others took place during the next nine months. These interviews have been transcribed and fill 700 single-spaced pages bound into three volumes, and comprise the Teton Flood Oral History Collection in the LDS Church Archives. *Sunstone* has a complete list of the footnotes but in the interest of space decided not to publish them. Following is a list of the interviews.

Mark G. Ricks, president, Rexburg Stake; Keith L. Peterson, president, Rexburg East Stake; Ferron W. Sonderegger, president, Rexburg North Stake; C. Kay Wilkins, bishop, Rexburg Third Ward; K. Merle Jeppesen, bishop, Rexburg First Ward; Keith G. Larsen, high counselor, Rexburg Stake; Harry J. Brian, elders quorum president, Rexburg Twelfth Ward; Ila H. Agren, president, Rexburg Stake Relief Society; Arlene M. Klingler, president, Rexburg Third Ward Relief Society; Diana R. Godfrey, counselor, Rexburg Third Ward Relief Society; T. Bardell Klingler, county commissioner, Madison County, and counselor, Rexburg Stake presidency; John C. Porter, mayor, Rexburg; Lyle H. Moon, mayor, Sugar City; Zeruah H. Belnap Moon; Henry B. Eyring, president, Ricks College; Steven “Pat” Price, director of food services, Manwaring Center, Ricks College; Gary Olsen, director Manwaring Center, Ricks College; Johnny R. Watson, Rexburg resident; Irene Watson; Edward P. Evans, Sugar City resident; Lowell Wasden, Rexburg resident; Harold G. Hillam, president, Idaho Falls South Stake, coordinator of volunteer labor effort; Richard Barth, Church Welfare Services Department; Harold Brown, Church Social Services Program; James Brooks, commander, Idaho National Guard and chief of Idaho Bureau of Disaster Services; Hugh Fowler, Federal Disaster Assistance Administration; Carlos Renteria, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development; Robert Smith, president, St. Anthony Stake; George L. Stone, bishop, Wilford Ward; Diana Leslie H. Stone; Eldon P. Romrell, counselor, St. Anthony stake presidency;



Teton Dam, one week after the flood.

Courtesy of Susan Oman

Delray Holm, bishop, Roberts Ward; O. Dallas Raymond, bishop, Menan First Ward; Dale L. Christensen, president, Firth Stake; Robert M. Kerr, Jr., president, Blackfoot Stake; Allan F. Larsen, president, Blackfoot West Stake, and Speaker of the Idaho House of Representatives; Barbara B. Smith, general president of the Relief Society; S. Corry Tanner, disaster coordinator, Golden Spike Division, American Red Cross.

¹All of the oral history interviews cited on this paper were conducted by myself and are contained in the Teton Flood Oral History Collection, 3 vols., 1976-1977, The James Moyle Oral History Program, Archives, Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.

²*Tragedy: A Chronology of the Teton Dam Disaster*, compiled by the staffs of *The Blackfoot News* and *The Standard Journal* of Rexburg (Blackfoot, 1976), p. 22; *Deseret News*, Salt Lake City, June 29, 1976, July 16, 1976, July 17, 1976, September 27, 1976, January 27, 1977, May 16, 1978, p. B1; A Documentary of the Teton Flood, KUTV Channel 2, Salt Lake City, June 5-6, 1977.

³Thomas E. Drabek, "Sociology of Natural Disasters: Major Findings of Methodological Dilemmas," Paper presented at the Twelfth National Colloquium on Oral History, San Diego, California, October 1977, pp. 6-8; Allen H. Barton, *Communities in Disaster: A Sociological Analysis of Collective Stress Situations* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1969), pp. 206-207, and pp. 216-179, passim.

⁴Barton, *Communities in Disaster*, p. 305.

⁵E.L. Quarantelli and Russell R. Dynes, "Response to Social Crisis and Disaster," *Annual Review of Sociology* 3 (1977): 34.

⁶Barton, *Communities in Disaster*, p. xxi.

⁷Bruce D. Blumell, "The Latter-day Saints Response to the Teton, Idaho, Flood, 1976," *Task Papers in LDS History*, No. 16 (Salt Lake City: Historical Department of The Church of Latter-day Saints, 1976), pp. 4-8.

⁸Drabek, "The Sociology of Natural Disasters," pp. 3-8; Barton, *Communities in Disaster*, p. 49.

Social scientists have often conceptually divided post disaster responses into two or three sequential phases in order to provide some systematization for their research. The first phase focuses on the immediate and relatively unorganized emergency reactions; the second on the more organized response and longer term relief of victims and the restoration of their lives and property to a semblance of order; and the third sequence on the permanent reconstruction of housing and services, etc.

⁹For good expositions of this see Leonard J. Arrington, Feramorz Y. Fox, and Dean I. May, *Building the City of God: Community & Cooperation Among the Mormons* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book Company, 1976); Leonard J. Arrington, *Great Basin Kingdom: An Economic History of the Latter-day Saints, 1830-1900* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1958); and Richard L. Bushman, "Mormonism as a Sacral Society," unpublished paper in the possession of the author.

¹⁰The most comprehensive scholarly account illustrating this is Arrington, *Great Basin Kingdom*; see also Richard T. Ely, "Economic Aspects of Mormonism," *Harper's Monthly Magazine* 56 (April 1903).

¹¹For a fine examination of the idea of this kind of authority as it has developed throughout western civilization see Leonard Krieger, "The Idea of Authority in the West," *American Historical Review*, 82, no. 2 (April 1977).

¹²Ely, "Economic Aspects of Mormonism," p. 668.

¹³The Madison County Civil Defense Director said there were so few deaths in the Teton Dam disaster "because people believed their leaders and followed an effective evacuation plan," quoted in the *LDS Church News*, Salt Lake City, September 11, 1976, pp. 4, 12; Wayne Boss, conversations at the time with police officers on duty in the Big Thompson Canyon area during the flood disaster, 1976.

¹⁴Statistics compiled by Steven "Pat" Price, the director of Ricks College

food services, in his possession and in the possession of the author of this paper.

¹⁵Janet Thomas et al., eds., *That Day in June: Reflections on the Teton Dam Disaster* (Rexburg, Idaho: Ricks College Press, 1977), pp. 172-74; 182-87, 189; Statistics compiled by the LDS Church Welfare Department in its possession and in the possession of the author of this paper.

¹⁶Statistics compiled by the Church Welfare Department in Salt Lake City, in its possession and in the possession of the author of this paper.

¹⁷The Rheim Jones family reminiscence, unpublished typescript, copies are in the possession of the LDS Church Relief Society Department, Salt Lake City, and in the possession of the author of this paper.

¹⁸Statistics compiled by the LDS Church Welfare Department in its possession and in the possession of the author of this paper.

¹⁹Rheim Jones family reminiscence, p. 1.

²⁰Drabek, "The Sociology of Natural Disasters," p. 7; Barton, *Communities in Disaster*, pp. 181-83, 284-85.

²¹Barton, *Communities in Disaster*, pp. 130, 161-62, 181, 182, 284, 294-95.

²²Ricks and others, "Basic Madison County Disaster Correlation Plan and Flow Chart," (June 17, 1976), in the possession of the author of this paper.

²³Ruth Barrus, "Teton Saga," an account of the first month in Sugar City, Idaho, following the breaking of the Teton Dam, June 5, 1976, in the possession of Ruth Barrus in Sugar City, and a copy is in the possession of the author of this paper.

²⁴Barton, *Communities in Disaster*, pp. 184, 188-93, 197.

²⁵By their actions of organizing a massive volunteer effort other priesthood leaders in effect indicated which system they thought best in that particular situation.

²⁶Harold Hillam to Bruce Blumell, telephone conversation, March 21, 1977.

²⁷*Deseret News*, Salt Lake City, September 7, 1976, August 25, 1976, September 28, 1976.

²⁸Conversations with Brooke Derr, and Richard and Susan Oman.

²⁹Rheim Jones family reminiscence, p. 6; Marilyn Sonderegger, "The Summer of '76—A Pilot Study for These Latter-days," unpublished typescript, copies are in the possession of the LDS Church Relief Society Department, Salt Lake City, and in the possession of the author of this paper; see also Janet Thomas et al., eds., *That Day in June*, passim, in which numerous people express a religious interpretation.

³⁰Lowell Wood Oral History, interviewed by Bruce Blumell, 1979, pp. 58-59, typescript, The James Moyle Oral History Program, LDS Church Archives.

³¹*Ibid.*, p. 59.

³²Minutes of Meeting of Stake Relief Society Presidents in the Rexburg, Idaho, area and President Barbara B. Smith, July 27, 1976, LDS Church Relief Society Department, Salt Lake City; Harold Brown, "The Teton Disaster: A Study of the Event with Recommendations," unpublished typescript, LDS Welfare Department, Salt Lake City.

³³Barbara Smith, "She is not Afraid of the Snow for her Household . . ." *Ensign* (November 1976): 121-22.

³⁴Brown, "The Teton Disaster: A Study of the Event with Recommendations."

³⁵*Ibid.*

³⁶Conversation with Richard Barth of the LDS Welfare Department during March 1977.

³⁷Brown, "The Teton Disaster: A Study of the Event with Recommendations."

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