

Franchising the Faith

From Village Unity to the Global Village

By Ron Molen

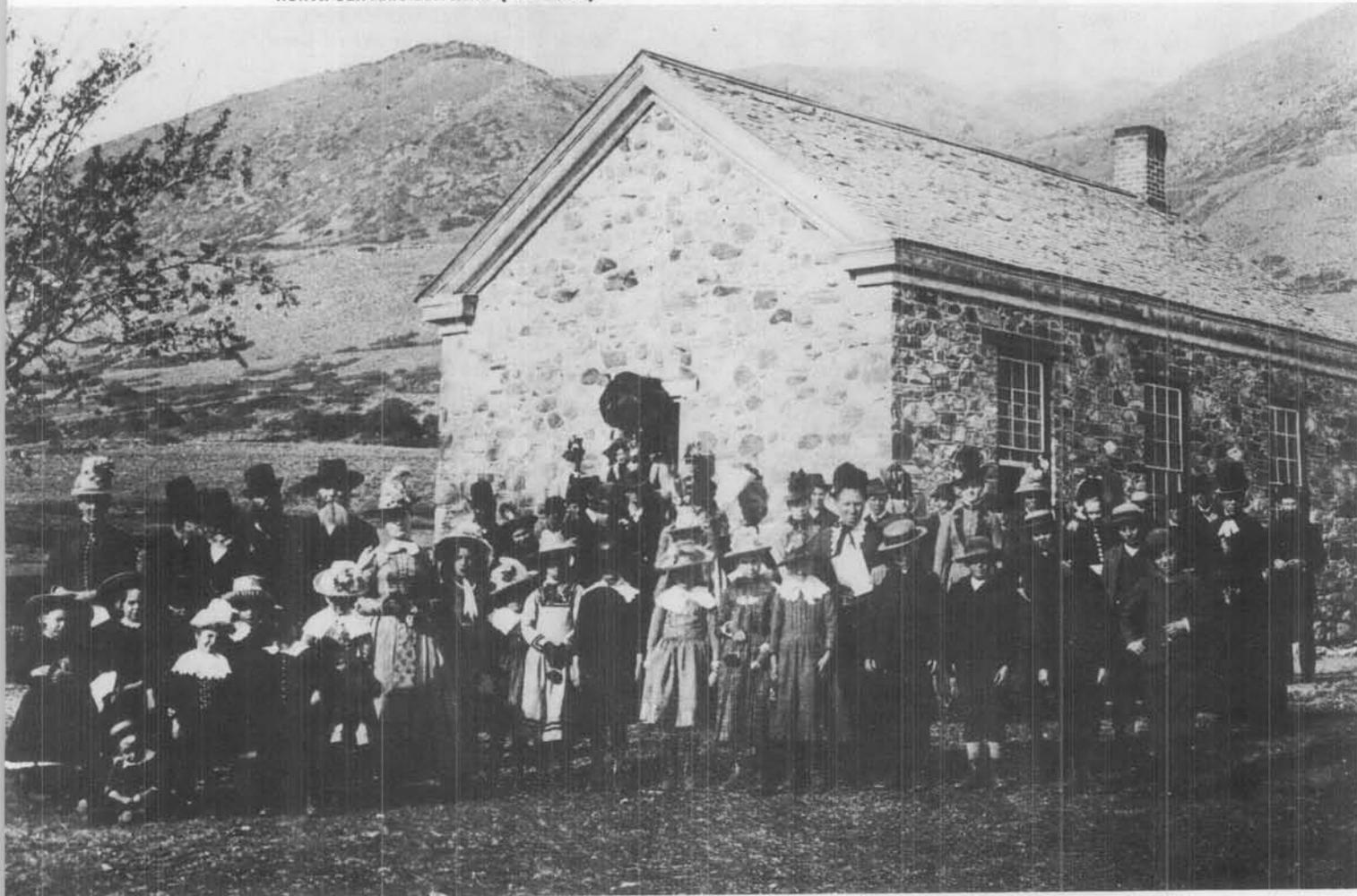
The essence, the lifeblood, and the organizational core of the Church is the ward. It is the place where the most important things happen and is responsible for the unique community spirit, the will to cooperate so characteristic of the faith. I would further suggest that there are many members today who tend to be active principally because of the quality of community still found in the ward.

From its very inception, the ward has been an extraordinary institution; but it is not a static one, for the ward has experienced dramatic changes during the last 150 years. I am interested in these changes, questioning what has been gained and concerned about what has been lost. Though I am not a sociologist, historian or an

anthropologist, and therefore do not intend to present a scholarly treatise, I can offer the perspective of a voice from the street. I will make some sweeping generalizations, as I am trying to look at the big picture and address general concepts.

Herbert Ganz, an eminent sociologist who speaks of the importance of scale in human institutions, doubts that human beings in a nuclear family can sustain a close relationship with more than ten or twelve other families. When that number is exceeded, the group tends to fragment. There is substantial sociological data to back up this proposition. Ganz refers to this scale of close interrelationships as a *social intensive unit*.

NORTH CENTERVILLE WARD (1895-1910)





SEVENTEENTH WARD MEETINGHOUSE (1900-1910)

Ganz also observes that a family cannot sustain a loose, more relaxed community relationship with more than 100 families. To exceed this number introduces an unmanageable overload; this causes some members to withdraw, and the 100 family level remains fairly constant. Ganz refers to this as the *social extensive unit*.

The Mormon ward is a *social extensive unit*. There is ample sociological proof that its scale meets the needs of those it serves and that it achieves this marvelous natural fit with a minimum of conflict and tension, providing an optimum community environment for rearing the young. I know of no other religious group that is so committed to maintain a specific size for its congregations. Church leaders enamored by the idea of growth have nevertheless demonstrated great wisdom in not allowing wards to exceed 500 members and thus to lose the magic that results in a community of this size. The ward, therefore, is a virtually perfect example of a *social extensive unit*.

The size of the ward, however, is one of its few

historical constants. The basic purpose, function, and organization of the ward have gone through some radical changes. These changes have occurred primarily in the ward's responsibilities to the individual and family, rather than the individual member's responsibilities to the ward. For example, historically the member has been obligated to follow the teachings of the Church, pay tithing and fast offerings, attend meetings and participate in a substantial number of activities. These requirements haven't changed significantly. The ward's obligations to the member, however, have changed dramatically. Indeed, over the years the community's commitment to the member has continually receded into something smaller, less ambitious, less communal, and therefore less dynamic.

This transition has passed through four phases. The first is the Rural Village Ward, followed by the Urban Territorial Ward, followed by the World Church Ward, followed by the Corporate Correlated Ward.

THE RURAL WARD (1830-1910)

One of the most spectacular social innovations of the early Church was the Mormon Village. It was an ideal plan for settling the Great Basin because it was a fully developed concept that made for ease of replication. Brigham Young's dream was that the territory would be filled with self-sustaining communities that would trade their surplus production. Although the Utopian ideal of the Mormon Village was seldom fully realized, and then for only a short period of time, it nevertheless captured the imagination of the early members, generating a vitality and idealism seldom encountered since.

One of the most important social organizations of this period was the ward. Although in secular terms *ward* refers to a particular section of the city

and has no religious roots whatever, in the Mormon Village the ecclesiastical and municipal authority was the same. Thus the ward began as a neighborhood with the ward building as its community center. It was a spiritual and secular community with a defined territory.

The main responsibility of the bishop of the ward in this period was to look after the temporal needs of his congregation, to make sure the aged, the sick, and the needy were taken care of. (Interestingly, stake leaders assumed responsibility for spiritual leadership.)

Of course, the real source of economic security came from the larger, self-sufficient Mormon Village, where the population did not exceed the carrying capacity of the land on which it survived, and the always sufficient surplus was used to care for those in need. To assist the community in this

CENTRAL STATES MISSION KANSAS CITY, MISSOURI (1937)



obligation, individuals were expected to pay fast offerings. This set a precedent that was to endure for some time.

During this period the ward members decided on the kind of church building they needed, and the bishop had the responsibility of mustering the necessary resources to build one. The bishop had a great deal of power, particularly in the smaller communities, in collecting tithes and offerings and then determining how the money was to be spent. This gave the community of the ward a significant dimension of self-determination. As a result, this period saw the construction of some very interesting churches by a congregation that collectively owned their community center.

This was the golden age of the ward community, for it was the organizational keystone of a church whose overall goal was establishing the kingdom of God in a promised land. This was the rural, agrarian, life-supporting community functioning at its best.

This basic form persisted from 1830 until Utah acquired statehood, when the growing importance of industry forced a shift in population from rural to urban. By 1920 the Church population was mostly urban and the agricultural capacity of the state of Utah could no longer meet the needs of the population. For the first time food was imported. This led to the next phase in the ward's history.

THE URBAN TERRITORIAL WARD (1910-1950)

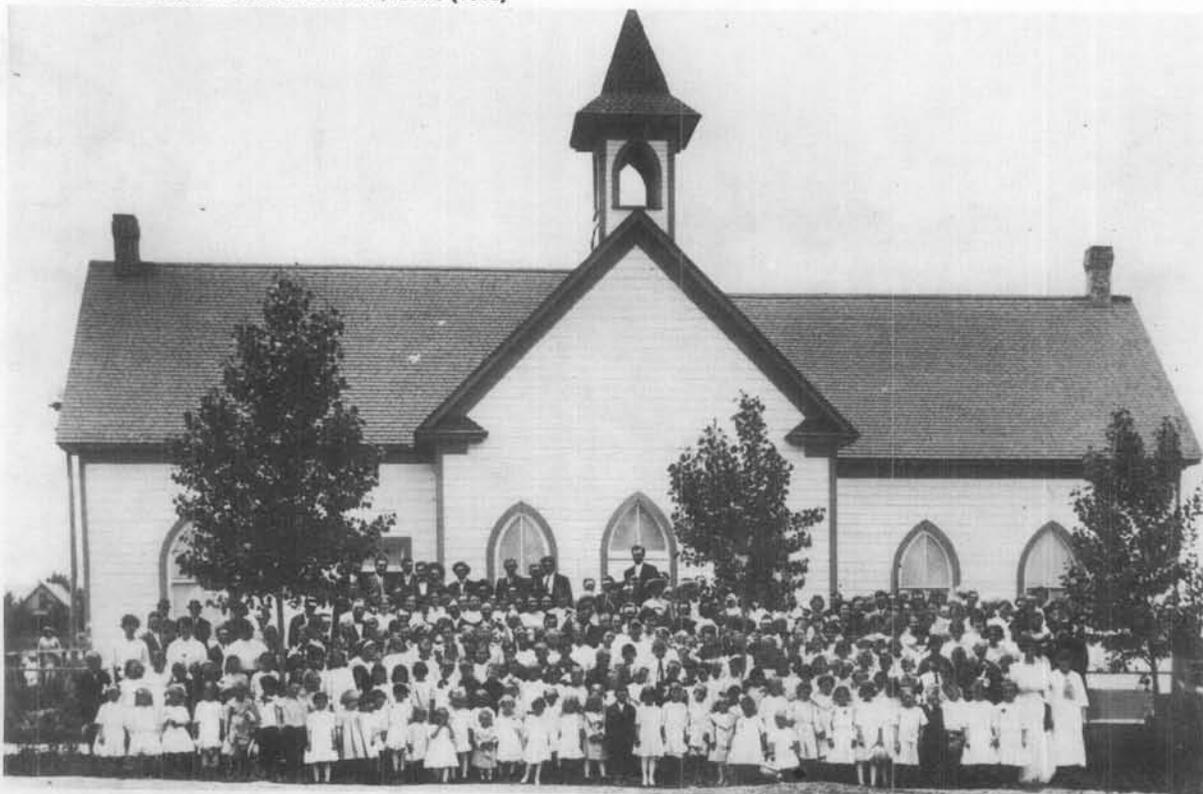
This was a period of significant expansion which resulted from an energetic missionary effort. As the social intensive and basic organizational unit, the ward easily replicated in urban centers.

I personally grew up in a ward in Chicago that was a vital community where the members showed a highly developed sense of communal responsibility. During this period many similarities to the early organizational form remained, but there were also some significant changes.

To begin with, the ward building during this period for the most part remained in the ownership of the congregation in a kind of perpetual trust like any Protestant congregation. Also at this time a certain level of architectural freedom was still allowed for new buildings. Even as late as 1940 some rather interesting buildings were being completed. The use of stained glass windows, mosaics, frescoes, and sculpture gave each building a certain unique identity.

But the real shift occurred in the responsibility and calling of the bishop. He was now responsible for both the spiritual and temporal well-being of the membership. Also, the goal of the Church in general shifted from promoting the kingdom of God in a promised land to a rapidly expanding church in the nation and even the world. The concept of the Mormon Village now belonged to another era.

BURLEY STAKE SUNDAY SCHOOL BURLEY, IDAHO (1913)



Through the years the basic purpose, function, and organization of the ward have changed radically.

Many creative innovations in the Church auxiliaries were instituted during this period. The Relief Society, MIA, Sunday School, and other organizations had to adjust to the new urban setting. Many concepts that worked well in the wards were accepted by the general Church leadership and then recommended as Church-wide programs. A good example is the welfare plan, developed first by Harold B. Lee in the Pioneer Stake, which filtered up to the top and became general Church program. Although the plan didn't have time to fully respond to the needs of the Depression, it was an extremely creative effort.

Significantly, the Depression had brought into focus the problem of living away from the land and its accompanying life-support. The Mormon Village had been abandoned, and for a time no alternative survival strategy filled the void. Although the new welfare system met this challenge, its management was assigned to the stake rather than the ward. Unfortunately, the stake does not have the dynamic energy of the ward, probably because it is out of scale, cumbersome, remote, and lacks the territorial identity of the ward. The Church, not the ward, assumed the obligation to assist in the temporal well-being of its members.

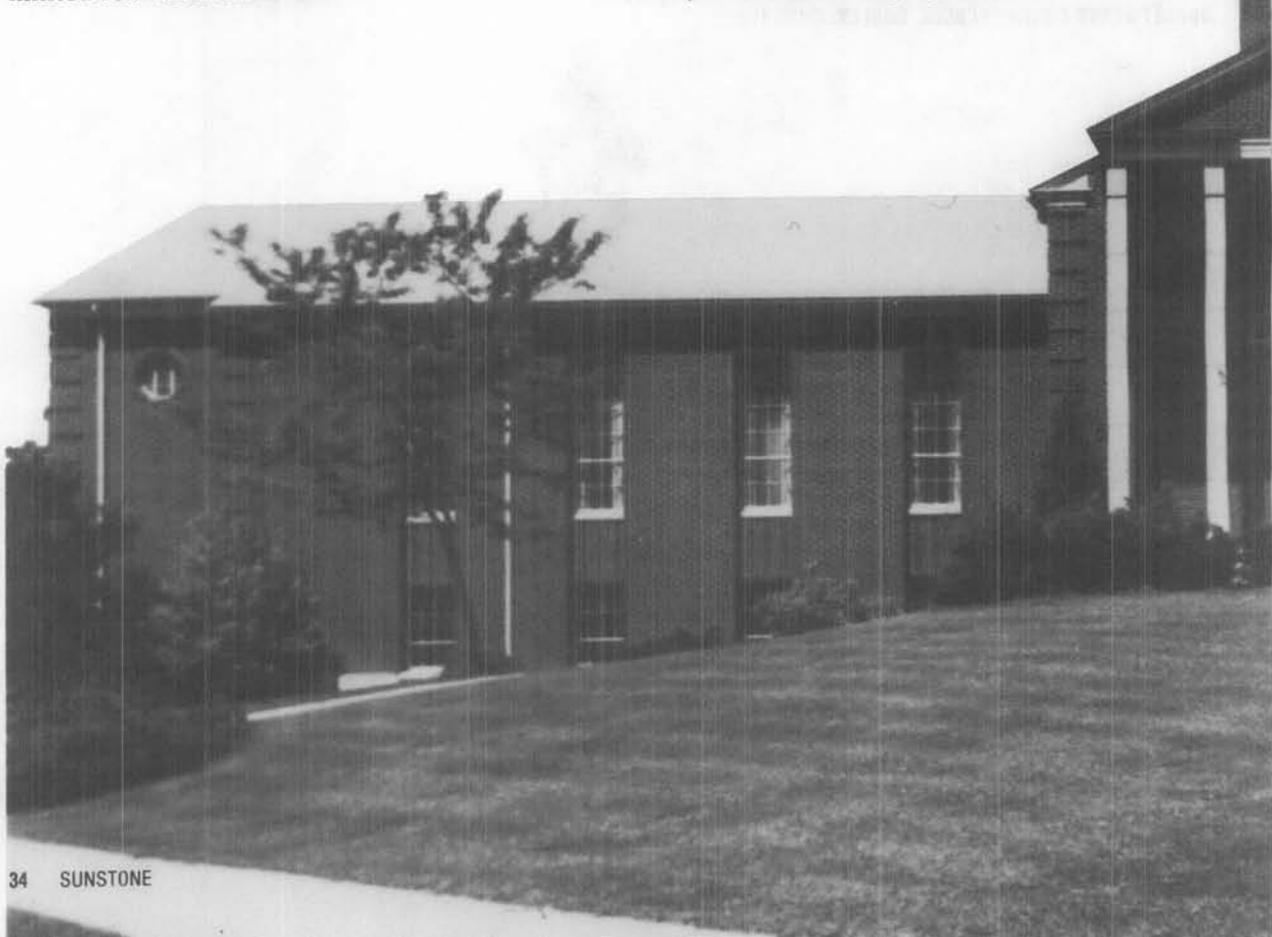
Still, the Urban Territorial Ward made a reasonably successful transition from the rural setting to the new urban environment. The territory that the ward served remained fixed, the ward building retained a strong community identity, and the community itself retained a limited self-determination.

THE WORLD WARD CHURCH (1950-1975)

After the war and the great immigration of members from Europe, General Authorities began to think of the Church as a world organization. During this period perhaps the most radical changes occurred, and for good reason. Managing a world church required a vast bureaucratic expansion and centralization. No longer could the Church in Utah serve as the pattern for the rest of the world but rather had to adjust to a new model that could be replicated with ease around the globe. The one exception was that the Church in the United States had to pay its own way, while the foreign Church received a heavy subsidy. Because wards in the United States needed to carry their own costs as well as those of wards in other countries, there had to be some definite adjustments.

The very simple economic solution to this problem was to let two or three wards use the same building even though this forced the wards to abandon their territorial identity. The financial burden of building new meeting houses for the vastly expanding Church population was cut in half and thereby made manageable. Because of the territorial attachment of some congregations to their building, the central church took over the ownership of all Church buildings.

At this point the ward ceased being a community in the classic sense. It had no self-determination, no defined territory, but functioned as a unit of the central church, an outlet, a franchised operation. No longer was the typical Mormon congregation afforded the same rights and powers as any Protestant congregation.



In addition, the warm, folksy relationship between the central church and the local church was lost. The Church leadership was isolated by the expanding bureaucracy as it began to develop more rigid controls and programs in order to make the administrative task more manageable.

The new bureaucracy carried out its responsibility with such rapid efficiency that members used to the older methods were often horrified. The tasks of collecting and distributing money were computerized even before many large corporations had applied the new technology. The Church building committee became very efficient at cost controls by simply disregarding any recommendations from the local congregation. Because of the frequent shifting of ward boundaries and the use of chapels by as many as three congregations, it became necessary to serve the central church rather than the nebulous congregation.

During this time the Church architecture continued its deterioration with the construction of bland ward buildings and often bizarre temples totally devoid of any semblance to the long evolving traditions of Christian architecture.

Because of the rather tenuous relationship between the central church and the local church, local leaders had to be chosen on the basis of their capacity to respond to the dictates of higher authority. Programs, methods, and systems emanating from the central church were applied whether they worked or not. Once they were labeled as "inspired", they were integrated into the system with mindless obedience. Two-way communication ceased. The central church issued

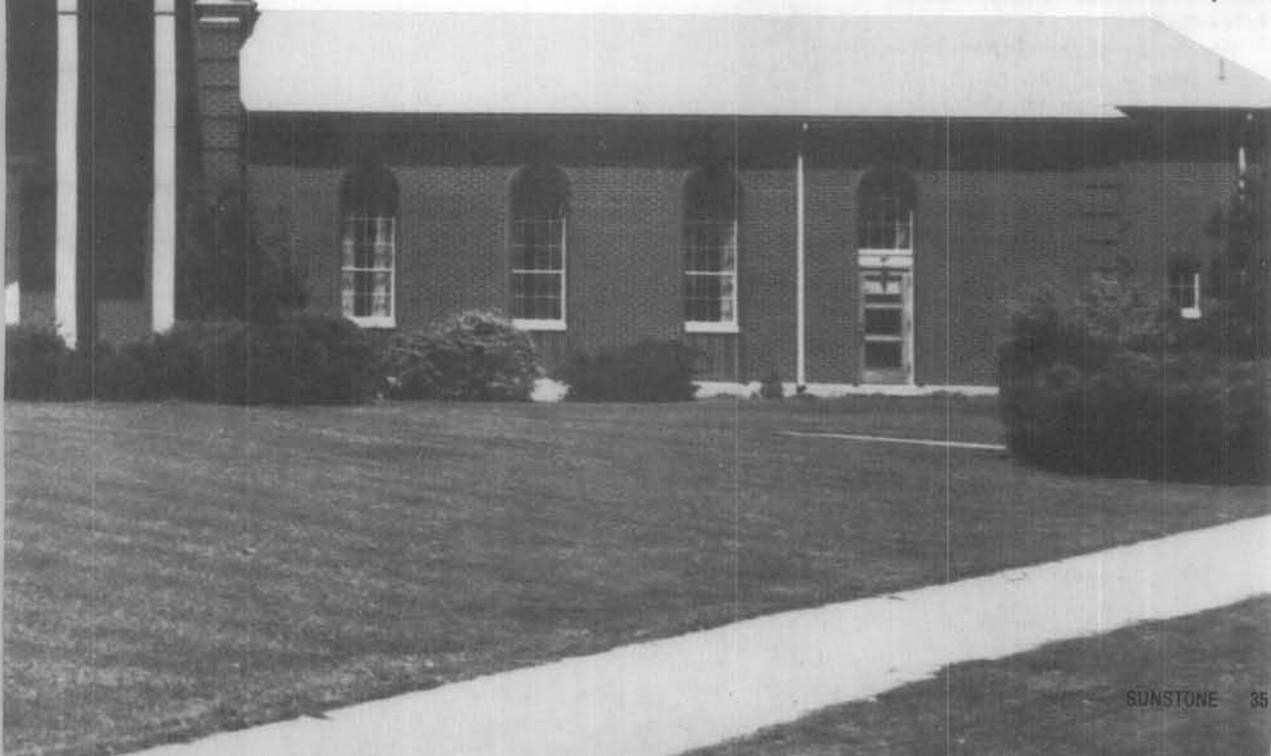
its edicts, and the local church responded. The oft-heard complaint about dull lesson manuals is a good example: No one at the top seems to listen, nor for that matter to care.

The final blow for the now beleaguered ward was the complete turnabout of the long-held commitment of the Church to assume responsibility for the temporal well-being of its members. A revolutionary change in the welfare plan was instituted, and again with good reason. During the recession of the mid-seventies the leadership had come to the realization that Church welfare could not care for more than three percent of the membership. It was also clear that the welfare plan could not expand fast enough to handle the needs of a rapidly increasing membership. Since half the Church was carrying the financial burden for the other half, the added burden of subsidizing welfare would have been intolerable. The new position taken by the central church was that the family must assume the obligation of caring for the temporal needs of the members. The Church welfare plan was to be used only as a backup for more extreme cases. In addition, the management of the welfare system was removed from the stake and conducted by the region, further reducing the obligation of the central church to the individual member. Welfare was still available, but it was now almost as remote as government assistance.

But somehow through the aforementioned changes, the ward, this extraordinary institution, retained its life. And although much of its vitality was drained off and dried up, there was still some remaining magic.

In the postwar era, the warm relationship between the central church and the local church was lost.

THIRTEENTH WARD MEETINGHOUSE (1950's)



THE CORPORATE CORRELATED WARD (1975-1985)

The ultimate realization of bureaucratic control came in the form of Correlation. The Church leadership, isolated from the reality of ward dynamics and the human qualities of those it was meant to serve, idealized the membership beyond reality and then instituted such rigid programs that Church participation became a monotonous burden.

Consolidation of church meetings and correlation of teaching materials has created an atmosphere in the anonymous ward building that works against enthusiasm. This robotization of procedures finds the average member performing his religious obligations by the numbers, hurrying to get it over with and then fleeing to something more satisfying. Communal interaction has been reduced to a minimum. After three hours of meetings, the members are too nervous and exhausted to interact.

Young children are being conditioned to Sundays with three hours of tedious boredom that for some obscure reason needs to be endured. A vital local community would never institute a three-hour meeting for anyone, let alone young children. Only planners remote from the institution served could expect positive results.

But even after the onslaught from the central church this extraordinary community miraculously retains some vitality. The question now becomes how long community can be sustained on three hours a week in a building with no community identity, grinding through the required programs which few, if any, enjoy. How unfortunate that this ingenious, inspired concept is no longer allowed to be a community in the full sense.

We send out missionaries to convert people to the faith, but we must remember that the ward is the physical embodiment of that faith. If this singular direction,

this mindless reduction is allowed to continue then soon, to paraphrase Gertrude Stein there is no there there. As it is, there, there is less and less there.

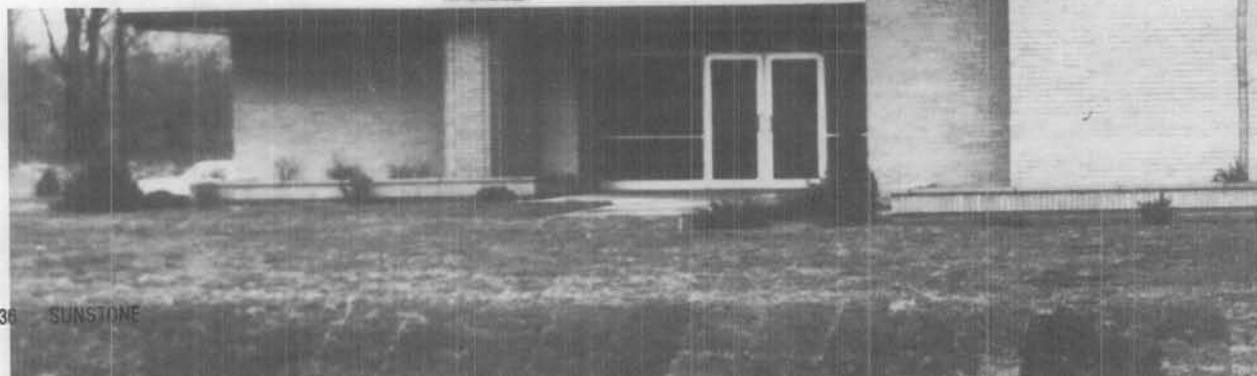
What are the basic requirements for a valid community?

1. First, there must be self-determination, or the right for the local community to decide on what is best for it, what things would enhance its condition. A community cannot, must not be required to respond to rigid programs established by remote planners. Goals can be set from a distance, but the means and methods of achieving these goals must be the result of local initiative and even local inspiration, for it is often local inspiration, insight, and creativity that eventually produces the exciting idea, the breakthrough.

The local community must have control over its resources, or those elements critical to its survival. These physical, human, and financial resources must be available to respond to immediate community needs first. A community that cannot finance its own operation can never be its own community. For half the church to carry the financial burden of the other half is unnatural and unbalanced. The wards of Latin America must become financially self-sufficient, and the wards in both the United States and the rest of the world must be given the freedom to discover new possibilities.

2. A community must have the commitment of its members, and this commitment must be self-generating. A shared faith in the binding myth is not enough. The critical additional dimension is the joy and celebration of being part of something exciting and fulfilling, of working on the edge of

Consolidated meetings and correlated teaching materials have created an atmosphere that works against enthusiasm.



discovery in a dynamic community committed to human progress and that is willing to go wherever that leads. "The glory of God is intelligence." "Man is that he might have joy." These are exciting concepts that often seem forgotten.

Community gatherings cannot be restricted to once a week, nor can the main Sunday meeting be so filled with repetition that no time is allowed for members to get to know each other and discuss the real needs of the community. With the new consolidated schedule, visiting has deteriorated. In most contemporary religious organizations, either before or after church the members gather at a kind of reception where light refreshments are served and people have the opportunity for fellowship. I believe this is an excellent idea. In addition, I would suggest that if the wards were given the freedom of accomplishing certain things each Sunday, they would quickly resolve a more satisfactory, even more enjoyable solution that would make more sense.

3. The community must have a defined territory. It must be a special place, a holy place where many of the most important matters of life are accomplished and a sense of identity established. This can never be accomplished in a building that is clean, barren, and anonymous, owned by a remote corporate institutions and is shared by other congregations without the slightest hint of who inhabits the space. Great religious architecture is the ultimate community architecture, for it has been the product of many generations contributing their own additions and embellishments to create a sense of locality and history. Early Mormon ward buildings achieved this by starting with a strong design and adding stained-glass windows, frescoes, mosaics, painting,

and sculpture. Music was composed, hymns written. It was a culture that was alive, always reaching. Unfortunately this hardly describes our present condition.

4. A community achieves its validity through the commitment of its members to each other. The member donates to the community, the community in turn obligates itself to the member. A community is a cooperative, a sharing of burdens. That was true of the classic Christian community of the New Testament, as it was true of the early Mormon community. The welfare program might function more successfully were its management located at the ward level.

None of this is to suggest that the solution lies in some idealized reversion to the past. Times change. Needs change. Solutions change. Of prime importance is our realization that the ward is an extraordinary human institution with incredible potential. With the freedom to search out these possibilities, extraordinary things could be realized.

Ashley Montague, eminent anthropologist, insists that the evolutionary progress of the species came not only through the survival of the fittest, namely, the strongest and most intelligent, but rather through the collective strength of an intelligent community. Man's capacity to cooperate and the strength derived therefrom cannot be overestimated. In a world of self-centered materialism, which clearly has not been an optimum one for the nuclear family, the magic of a cooperative institution like the ward and its inherent benefits to the family should be given every possibility to develop to its full potential.

In conclusion, I would suggest that although there is great inspiration at the top of the Church, there is also highly significant inspiration at the bottom. As we are obligated to follow those who lead, they too are obligated to listen to those who follow, for in the final sense, the community belongs to us.

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AKRON WARD, CLEVELAND, OHIO (1960-1970)



We must recognize that the ward is an extraordinary institution with incredible potential.