

SEVENTIES QUORUMS: 1835-1986

by Richard D. Ouellette

IN THE 4 October 1986 priesthood session of General Conference, President Ezra Taft Benson announced that “the seventies quorums in the stakes of the Church are to be discontinued...” Yet at one time, seventies were the largest body of priesthood in the Church. The following historical overview may help to put the changing status of the seventies in perspective.

On 28 February 1835 Joseph Smith organized the First Quorum of Seventy. A revelation to the Prophet one month later stated that this First Quorum was equal in authority to the Twelve Apostles (D&C 107:26) and, under the direction of the Twelve, to regulate the affairs of the Church in all nations (vs. 34). Within this First Quorum were seven presidents, who could choose other quorums of seventy besides the one to which they belonged, if they were necessary (vs. 96). The seventies had a responsibility to preach the gospel (vs. 25). According to the revelation (D&C 107:25-28, 34) and the teachings of Joseph, the seventies had an apostolic calling: they were “Apostles and special witnesses to the nations” and had all the authority and keys necessary to ordain local Church leadership. In contrast to the elders quorums, which were to be standing ministers and to “preside over the churches from time to time,” (D&C 124:140).

During his lifetime, Joseph Smith organized three and one-half quorums of seventy. All were under the leadership of the seven presidents, usually call the First Council of Seventy.

In the pre-Utah period the seventies participated in various activities for the benefit of the general Church. They led 529 people 870 miles from Kirtland, Ohio, to Far West, Missouri, helped construct the Nauvoo temple, Seventies Hall and Council Hall, and for a time conducted the temple

work. Seventies constituted one-third of the Mormon Battalion and one-half of the original pioneer company that entered the Salt Lake Valley.

The seventies were also productive as missionaries. They aided the Twelve Apostles on their highly successful mission to England and filled one-third to one-half of all mission calls during this early period.

Shortly after the murder of Joseph Smith, the seventies were expanded over a sixteen month period to thirty-five quorums and became the largest body of priesthood in the Church. Members of the First Council of Seventy were sustained as General Authorities. The other sixty-three members of the First Quorum were divided into nine groups of seven to be presidents for quorums two through ten. Additional quorums chose presidents from their own ranks.

Unlike recent practice, a man remained a member of his original quorum as long as he was a seventy. Thus, when the Saints settled various parts of Utah, these quorums became completely scattered. Since seventies were traveling ministers (D&C 107:97) and not regarded as part of the ward or stake organization, they were on their own; church leaders made little effort to organize them. Eventually “mass” quorum meetings began; local gatherings of seventies who belonged to different quorums but lived in the same community.

During the first ten years in Utah only six new quorums were organized, new seventies were usually assigned to one of the existing quorums. In 1857 sixteen quorums were organized probably as a result of the Mormon

Reformation. From then until 1876, about one quorum a year was organized, with seventies constituting about two-thirds of the missionary force.

In the 1877 priesthood reformation many seventies were ordained high priests. A halt was ordered to any new ordinations and for the next seven years the percentage of missionaries who were seventies dropped to fifty-three.

Theoretically, seventies quorums were to train future missionaries, so they were encouraged to study all areas of knowledge to understand foreign cultures and ideas. Study classes, lectures, and schools were held. However, men usually were ordained seventies only after receiving a mission call.

The 1880's brought needed reorganization to the seventies and some limitations on their independent status. In 1880, seventies were temporarily reorganized along stake lines in 1880 with ward and stake seventies presidents called. However the original quorums were not dissolved. Beginning in 1881, prospective missionaries who were previously chosen solely by the ward seventies president now needed also a bishop's endorsement before a nomination was sent to the First Council of Seventy. In October 1882 John Taylor received a revelation which instructed him to organize the seventies. Subsequently, the First Presidency and the First Council of Seventy worked out a plan which was approved by the Lord in revelation on 14 April 1883. Seventies quorums were relocated geographically throughout the stakes and seventies were urged to join the nearest quorum. The existing quorums were filled, followed by the creation of twenty-five new quorums for an 1888 total of 101.

These efforts achieved the primary goal—more missionaries. Almost twice as many seventies served missions after the 1883 reorganization as in the pre-1877 years. The number of missionaries who were seventies increased to a high of ninety-two percent in 1900. Seventies were unquestionably the missionary force of the Church.

Despite the success there were still unresolved organizational problems. Since the 1877 reorganization, the auxiliary and ward programs influenced members greater than priesthood quorums did. The seventies did more as ward members than as a quorum. At the turn of the century as society became increasingly pluralistic, Church leaders took steps to fortify the Church. One step was the “New Priesthood Movement,” in which priesthood quorums

were strengthened by giving bishops and stake presidents more control over them. The seventies led the way in many changes.

First, in 1907 all seventies began using a systematized course of study. The course was successful enough that all priesthood groups began using regulated lessons in 1909, and that led to the adoption in 1914 of one uniform study program for all Melchizedek priesthood. Second, the seventies discontinued holding Monday evening priesthood meetings and increased quorum activity by holding Sunday morning meetings. About six years later, this schedule was used by the entire Church. Third, in 1909 mission calls for seventies became entirely the responsibility of the bishops. Fourth, in 1911 the Granite Stake president created the first stake mission. This idea spread until it became a church-wide program in 1936, with seventies doing most of the work. While these innovations brought the seventies quorums increased activity and purpose at home, the missionary force consisted of fewer and fewer seventies.

By 1905 the percentage of foreign missionaries who were seventies dropped from ninety-two to twenty-seven. Seventies were ministering at home and elders were traveling missionaries. Although this role reversal caused uncomfortable ambiguity for the seventies, there were several reasons why it was happening.

1. While it would have been easy to ordain missionaries seventies, that caused problems after their missions when their leadership skills were never used because they could not return to the elders quorum where they were most needed.

2. Nevertheless, seventies could be called to serve in auxiliary and Sunday School programs. However, oftentimes they acted aloof due to the "seventy apostles" teaching, with its aura of exclusivity. Their usefulness was also limited because they were not completely part of the stake organization.

3. After some discussion, in 1901 the general authorities decided that an elder had all authority necessary to preach the gospel and therefore did not need to be ordained as a seventy.

4. Since seventies at this time were usually middle-aged, many had responsibilities that made it difficult to leave home. At an earlier time this would not have been an obstacle, but the practice of going on missions destitute rarely occurred in the twentieth century. Besides, many seventies were already sup-

porting children on missions. Functionally, Joseph's concept of traveling "seventy apostles" was not in operation.

Aware that many seventies could not fulfill their calling, the General Authorities instructed stake presidents in 1907 to ordain only probable missionaries as seventies. Once their missions were over they were to be recommended to be ordained as high priests. In 1915 new ordinations of seventies were temporarily forbidden and mission calls to seventies were only given to those who had never served a mission.

Disputes had erupted from the very beginning in the 1830's as to who had more authority, seventies or high priests? Ideally, their authority was the same but their respective appointments and callings were different. As "apostles," some claimed that the seventies could do at least as much as high priests. Functionally, however, it was not so clear. Beginning in the 1890's the idea of the high priests' superiority gradually gained acceptance and was generally believed by the 1930's. The concept of seventies being apostles faded away since they were no longer allowed to organize bishoprics and other leadership as they were once able to do; only high priests could do so. As a result, assistants to the Twelve Apostles in 1941 and regional representatives in 1967 were added to the growing church hierarchy and played a role the seventies could have filled at one time. This was in spite of the scriptural injunction for the Twelve to call upon the seventies for assistance "instead of any others" (D&C 107:38). Perhaps because of this, steps were taken to strengthen the General Authority Seventies. In 1961 members of the First Council of Seventy were ordained high priests to give them the authority to organize local leadership; ironically in the previous century they had been able to do this as seventies. In 1975, after 130 years of dormancy, the First Quorum of Seventy was reorganized. But for the stake and ward seventies no strengthening formula was given. They continued to have no unique function.

During the past eighty years there have been periods where General Authorities expressed new hope that seventies would once again become the missionary force of the Church. Around 1935 there was talk of this nature which never came to full realization, although from 1938 to 1941 seventies did constitute about twenty-seven percent of the missionary force. During World War II more women were called as missionaries than seventies and this trend continued to the present.

On the local level, seventy and stake mission organizations often overlapped. For instance, in 1936 stake mission presidents and missionaries were usually chosen from among the seventies. In the 1960's three members of the seventies quorum formed stake mission presidencies. In 1974, entire stake seventies quorum presidencies comprised the stake mission presidency and quorums were named after their stakes instead of receiving a number.

The stakes were given control of the local seventies, leaving the First Council of Seventy without any direct supervision of them. In 1936 the First Council supervised seventies work in collaboration with stake presidents. One year later Stake Melchizedek Priesthood Committees were added to the supervisory function. Finally, in 1952 a General Missionary Committee consisting of some member of the First Council and other General Authorities took command of all missionary work.

Since the New Priesthood Movement, seventies' work has undergone little change. Stake missionary work is their main responsibility. Besides this, they have supported foreign missionaries financially. Seventies have taught fellow members how to share the gospel, home taught inactive and part-member families, fellowshipped investigators and recent converts and distributed millions of copies of the Book of Mormon. Clearly their contribution has been important to the building up the Church. With regularity articles appeared detailing what the local seventies' responsibilities were and reminding them that their work was important. Yet, there seemed to linger a feeling of an unfulfilled prophetic calling and an uncomfortable ambiguity about its unique mission. This, of course, was not entirely their fault. Seemingly no job they did could not be done by elders, high priests and women. Resulting in the question: Why do they exist at all? Especially since D&C 107:96 indicated that stake seventies are optional anyway. The text of the First Presidency's statement discontinuing stake seventies quorums says this action is for "...the needs of the growth of the Church..." Today, the remaining First Quorum of Seventy more fully approaches the chartering revelation: their General Authority status provides them with an apostolic aura and they do travel continually under the direction of the Twelve regulating the Church. Thus the words of Elder S. Dilworth Young, a senior president of the First Council of Seventy, on 5 October 1968 are true today: "Each President of the Church has used the seventy as he felt inspired for his day."

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