

GOSPEL BY THE MONTH

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Ensign

In 1971, all official church magazines were literally swept away and replaced by three colorful, professional, slick publications, each aimed at a different age group—the *Ensign* for adults, the *New Era* for young people and the *Friend* for children. At the same time fifteen “unified” international magazines began publishing articles in fifteen languages taken from the other three. (They had earlier replaced locally published missionary magazines.)

Among publications axed was the oldest continuous magazine in the church, the *Millennial Star*. Begun in 1840 by Parley P. Pratt in London, with the promise that it would “stand aloof from the common political and commercial news of the day,” it had covered the death of the Prophet Joseph Smith.

With the demise of the *Relief Society Magazine*, Mormon women lost their official magazine voice for the first time since 1872 when the *Women’s Exponent* first appeared.

The new publications meant the discontinuance of advertising, a feature of most official church periodicals since 1929. No official mention was made of this change. One can only speculate on whether it was the result of the Church’s increasing growth outside Salt Lake City—most advertising was aimed at Utahns—or whether concern was raised over possible implied church sanction of advertisers. At any rate, church sources say the magazines are now largely self-sustaining. And at 50 cents or less an issue, they are among the least expensive periodicals sold.

The comments of editors of church publications abolished at the end of 1970 show a sometimes begrudging acceptance of the new era in church publications.

The *Millennial Star* published letters from several British stakes. A spokesman for the Manchester Stake wrote that the *Star* had reported “everything possible of happenings here in more detail than we will be able to expect in the new church magazines.”

The editor of the Sunday School magazine, *The Instructor*, wrote: “We have an optimistic view of the new Church magazines to appear starting in January. This does not prevent a touch of regret and nostalgia for the magazine that has been part of the Sunday School almost since the *Juvenile Instructor* began publication in 1866.” The magazine was described as one of the oldest in America, but its editor acknowledged the new church publications would be “even more interesting, more instructive, more spiritual, and more authoritative than the periodicals they replace.”

The most supportive statement came from Marianne C. Sharp, first counselor in the Relief Society, in an editorial in the last issue of the *Relief Society Magazine*.

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But even she made it clear who killed the magazine. "As we detail and recall nostalgic memories, we will, obedient to the priesthood and receiving direction from them, face forward in step with the new era of the 1970's with anticipation and a sense of dedication and support for the all-adult magazine. *Moriurae te salutamus.*" She urged members to preserve copies of the defunct magazine, as "a treasure house of inspiring material."

The promise of the new magazines went beyond that. The *Ensign's* editor, the late Doyle L. Green, suggested an effort that would make it "the best religious magazine for adults published anywhere in the world."

That boast contrasts with the humble beginnings of an earlier church magazine, *The Contributor*, published between 1879 and 1896, forerunner of the *Improvement Era*, now the *New Era*. Wrote its editors: "We do not claim high literary excellence or profundity of matter in the columns of our magazine, its merit in those respects will be whatever the talent of the young ladies and gentlemen in whose interest it is published will make it."

Although no specific reasons were given for abandoning the long-standing church publications, the purpose of the new magazines was clear. President Harold B. Lee in 1972 said, "They are designed not only to strengthen the faith of Church members, to promulgate the truths of the everlasting gospel, and to keep members informed on current and vital policies, programs and happenings, but also to provide worthwhile articles to entertain and enrich their lives."

The new publications—like the new lesson material, the new visitors centers, the new church office building and a host of new General Authorities—have apparently gained wide acceptance as the unchanging gospel adapts to changing times.

"General reaction around the church to the changes of the past five years has been positive," said church spokesman Don LeFevre. "Many letters are received, most of them laudatory and many of them are published."

No circulation figures are released, but certainly a majority of the world's 3.75 million church members have some exposure to one or more of the magazines. If the latest issue isn't found in the home, discreetly placed on an end table when home teachers call, then church-going members are exposed to the magazines' stories disguised as 2½-minute talks or their lavish illustrations held aloft by an instructor.

President Joseph Fielding Smith heralded the new publications with the statement: "Recognizing a need to strengthen the family, the basic unit of the Church, the brethren have directed that three new publications . . . begin publication in January."

The most obvious changes to readers of the new magazines were the graphics. Modern typesetting, more colorful and creative illustrations and an all-around cleaner, crisper, more-professional look characterize each. No longer the quaint reflections of a peculiar people, the new magazines have a fresh, creative, modern look—something in keeping with the modern technology that has become a prominent component of the modern Gospel.

Through it all, an aura of wholesomeness, of conformity to Gospel principles prevades. Even though format of the July 1976 interview with Church Historian Leonard J. Arrington is modern, the questions and answers are, with few exceptions, middle-of-the-road. Only one question approached controversy:

"*Ensign*: What happens if some of the research shows aspects of Mormon life that might not fit our image of the ideal pioneer ancestor?"

Arrington acknowledged this does happen. "These people weren't perfect," he says, adding that descendants might not want it mentioned that an early bishop "occasionally served coffee or performed acts for which he was later sorry."

Arrington says, "We consult with members of the family, with friends, with professional historians, both members and nonmembers, and with appropriate church officials. We also pray for good judgment, wisdom, and proper direction and try to be prayerful in carrying out all of our assignments and callings."

But controversy is hardly the staple of church magazines.

The new publications are a key part of the great, self-reinforcing gospel mandala. They put into writing, drawing and photograph the same ideas that flow from the pulpit. Spiritual ideas, once outlined only in grey type find a lively format. Film, tape and records do the same thing. But it is the print media that is the most enduring, the most direct and the most personal. While the images of a day in church, of a church-produced film, or even a cassette scripture fly by, a devotee can curl up with his *Ensign* and take in the gospel at his own pace. A bedside *Bible* or *Book of Mormon* offer a similar experience. But the new magazines provide something else. They have taken the additional step of putting gospel ideas in formats more acceptable to modern taste.

In some cases, even the ideas themselves represent a halting step away from the inspirational story, cute poem, "in" joke, talk by a General Authority and more good news about the Church.

There have been no in-depth articles on the Equal Rights Amendment, racial prejudice, political attitudes of Mormons, challenges to the authenticity of church scriptures, church businesses, attitudes towards homosexuals or numerous other issues recently in the gentile news. But there have been short, usually one-sided, pieces touching on these and other subjects. And a few articles in both the *Ensign* and *New Era* show a willingness to deal with problems previously ignored.

In the March 1976 *Ensign* issue on "Women and the Church", Associate Editor Lavina Fielding writes of inadequate marriages, of failure in motherhood and of women who are concerned about their own needs beyond that of their families. She even suggests that separation or divorce might be an acceptable answer for some problems.

Ms. Fielding notes advice from spiritual leaders concerning children and quotes a grandmother looking back on a life of financial hardship and cultural deprivation as saying, "The children made it all worthwhile." Then the writer adds "... like other couples in today's society, Mormon couples usually can choose to remain childless or to choose a predetermined number of children." She quotes another mother, after prayer about having another baby, as saying, "The answer I got was just that having another child right now is not something I'm required to do. When the time comes again, I'll be ready."

That is a sentiment likely shared by many Mormon women but one rarely, if ever, acknowledged from the pulpit.

The September 1971 issue of the *New Era* reports on an international conference of the church Student Association, covering such mildly controversial subjects as the environment, campus unrest and women's issues.

One young participant was quoted as saying, "I'm a good member of the church, and have full respect for all it teaches. But dissension and protest do not mean to me the opposite of patriotism, especially when they are performed within constitutional law."

A search of the five-year index of church periodicals, with nine columns under conversion, shows only a handful of references to such potentially controversial topics as abortion, birth control, Negroes, ecology or women's issues.

A fair appraisal of church magazines must recognize, however, that most church members are not as concerned with controversy as they are with strengthening their own faith. The magazines reflect this. Certainly, most, if not all of the material published by the Church has value for a segment of church members. To fulfill the spiritual and intellectual needs of all members is beyond the scope of any magazine.

The periodicals have obvious reference value for teachers, speakers, writers and, most importantly, parents. The conference issues, now published literally within a few days of the close of semi-annual conferences, are a valuable tool, providing complete texts of nearly all speeches. Although it is difficult to imagine anyone rereading all the conference speeches after having heard them, the texts can fill gaps, contribute to discussions of things heard or misheard and provide complete reminders of what for many are spiritual experiences.

The authoritative nature of speeches by General Authorities is rarely questioned. But other features in church magazines lead to the question of whether their contents should be taken as official doctrine.

The August 1977 issue of the *Ensign* addresses the question to Elder Dean L. Larsen of the First Quorum of the Seventy, who oversees church magazines.

Elder Larsen notes that articles "receive not only the scrutiny and judgment of the editing staffs, but are also subject to clearance by the Correlation Review committees. Committee members are called as a result of their expertise in such areas as Church doctrine, Church history and Church administration, and serve three different age groups: adult, youth and children."

He continues, "Much care is exercised to make certain that the official publications of the Church carry messages that are sound in doctrine and fully in harmony with currently approved policies and procedures. A constant effort is maintained to upgrade and correct the content of these materials so that they can merit the confidence and approval of church leaders and the general membership."

That everything written in church magazines has been somehow homogenized into doctrinal harmony by the Correlation Review committees is a worrisome matter for anyone looking for more openness and diversity in church publications. In journalistic terms, the inevitable conclusion is that church publications are highly censored and can never accurately reflect the true spirit of a free people. It is censorship for a worthwhile purpose, to be sure, and probably censorship more often self-imposed by the writer than by any Correlation Review committee. But how much valuable thought goes unspoken because a well-intentioned, devout writer has second-guessed the General Authorities or their representatives in lower echelons?

On the other hand, perhaps the assurance that church magazines carry only messages that are "sound in doctrine and fully in harmony with currently approved policies and procedures" is a comforting one for those seeking the spiritual solace which seems to be the main offering of these magazines.