

# Grain Storage: The Balance of Power Between Priesthood Authority and Relief Society Autonomy



The developmental history of the Church shows most conspicuously, perhaps, not in purposes and theology but in details. A twentieth-century visitor to the nineteenth-century might be most struck not by the pioneer conditions as by the general attitudes. A Relief Society might be discussing the need to support home industry and the United Order, ways of caring for silkworms, and the growth of the grain storage program. Priesthood meetings would be held only once a month on Wednesday night, and the brethren might be deciding whose turn it was to water and whether young boys should be allowed to care for the town cow herd. Missionaries would preach to convert the Church membership to MIA or Relief Societies. And each auxiliary, with breathtaking independence, would plan its own programs and curriculum locally.

The history of changes in the Church tracks shifts of philosophy that only gradually appeared in programs. Just as the correlation program of the 1960s has gradually affected the members' view of the Church, earlier reforms slowly altered the nineteenth-century Saints' perception of their religion. And just as some members today respond negatively to changes in the Church, the earlier modifications were not always completely smooth.

One of these difficult transfers of power came as the priesthood line of authority took over areas formerly managed by the auxiliaries. During the 1870s, the auxiliaries received sanction from the Church leaders to plan their own programs. They each had a central board, and the ward organizations turned to it, rather than to the bishops and stake presidents, for advice and programs. During this same period of time, the local priesthood quorums were loosely organized, met irregularly, and determined their own course of study.<sup>1</sup>

During general conference in April 1906, Joseph F. Smith, then president of the Church, and J. Golden Kimball, a member of the First Quorum of the Seventy, spoke on the need to strengthen the priesthood as the governing body of the Church, and President Smith promptly launched a reform movement

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to organize the priesthood quorums and to correlate activities.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, he centralized the activities of the Church auxiliaries under the priesthood authority in preparation for a day when there would “not be so much necessity for work that is now being done by the auxiliary organizations because it will be done by the regular quorum of the Priesthood.”<sup>3</sup>

The reorganization of the priesthood and the auxiliaries that President Smith initiated continued from 1908 to 1922. By 1922, the auxiliaries had become advisory boards to the priesthood line of authority. As the priesthood quorums and officers moved into areas once controlled by the auxiliaries, occasional misunderstandings of purpose created conflict and tension. The Relief Society grain storage program is an example of this not-always-easy centralization and its difficult implementation. Although this example is a conspicuous one and has the unique element of restricting women’s activities in favor of men’s, it is helpful to realize that the women’s organization was not being singled out for exceptional treatment except, possibly, for the question of whether the Relief Society had viewed itself, founded by Joseph Smith, as a true “auxiliary.”

When the Mormons arrived in Salt Lake Valley in 1847, they hoped to establish an economic and spiritual kingdom of God on earth. The Church leaders asked the members to separate themselves from the world and “to be self-sustaining; to produce all that is possible . . . at home.”<sup>4</sup> The leaders also encouraged the Saints to store grain and other necessities in preparation for pre-Millennial famines and destruction. The harsh winters that followed within a few years and the destruction of crops strengthened the Saints’ belief that they needed to “lay up stores of grain against the time of need.”<sup>5</sup> At first the men were called to direct the storage program. When the men failed to conserve their wheat because “their wives and daughters want[ed] the proceeds . . . to buy hats and bonnets,”<sup>6</sup> Brigham Young called Emmeline B. Wells and the women to store grain. Sister Wells, editor of the *Woman’s Exponent* and later president of the Relief Society, was also the seventh wife of Daniel H. Wells, then a counselor to Brigham Young.

Sister Wells, though overwhelmed by the size of the grain storage project, saw herself as “a modern Joseph” in Egypt and asked for the support of the Relief Societies. In October 1876, she published an editorial in the *Woman’s Exponent* calling upon the “Sisters [to] Be in Earnest” and to collect funds to buy wheat and to build granaries.<sup>7</sup> A month later the leaders of the Relief Society met, and President Eliza R. Snow appointed a Central Grain Committee with Sister Wells as chairman to organize the program and to coordinate the activities to the local societies.<sup>8</sup> The ward and stake Relief Societies then set up committees to plan ways of gathering wheat and constructing storage bins.

As the grain program was being organized through the Church, Sister Wells encouraged the women to report their storage successes and questions to the *Exponent*. During the years that followed, the newspaper carried articles about women donating Sunday eggs, gleaned the harvested fields, and contributing money and wheat. It also proffered advice on how to build granaries and how to store wheat.

Although the Relief Societies were successful in gathering grain, from the outset the sisters had problems maintaining control of the program. Before some of the wards built their own granaries, the wheat was often stored in a local member's or the bishop's bins. Sometimes the Relief Society grain was not separated, and the granary's owner sold it without permission. Later when the sisters built their own granaries to forestall such incidents, local ecclesiastical leaders asked to borrow the wheat to distribute to the poor or to loan to a farmer for seed. As a rule the Relief Society General Board advised the women to keep the wheat in storage.<sup>9</sup> However, for special celebrations like the Year of Jubilee in 1880, the sisters responded to President John Taylor's request in general conference that they loan their wheat, without interest, to the poor to be used as seed. In a letter "to the President of the Central Grain Committee and Presidents of the various branches of the Relief Societies," President Taylor cited the recent "unanimous vote of the sisters present at our late General Conference" that Relief Societies "loan" the local bishop the wheat he wanted for "the deserving poor." He also recommended that the bishop give the sisters a receipt so that the exact amount of grain borrowed could be returned. He added that once the grain was paid back the bishops should not borrow it again.<sup>10</sup>

Many bishops ignored this counsel. They felt that once the granaries had been opened for their use, they should continue to be allowed to use the contents to help the poor and support the Church. Local Relief Society presidents appealed to the general board for guidance. The general board asked them to remind the bishops of the importance of grain storage and to inform them that the grain was the Relief Society's, not ward property. When consultation and reminders failed to stop the grain requests, the general board protested to the First Presidency. In 1883 the Church leaders wrote the bishops: "The wheat has been collected by members of the Society in the various wards at considerable trouble and they are the proper custodians thereof and responsible therefore to the parties from whom it has been obtained. No bishop has any right because of authority as a presiding officer in the ward, to take possession of the grain."<sup>11</sup> This was still the Church policy in 1896 when Wilford Woodruff told Zina D. Huntington Young, Eliza R. Snow's successor as head of the Relief Society, that even the president of the Church "had no right to take a handful of wheat and dispose of it."<sup>12</sup>

Despite such warnings to the bishops, the Relief Society still received requests to donate the grain to build temples and chapels, to contribute to the poor and to meet the community's needs. Usually the local Relief Societies refused such requests, but the general board and the local Relief Societies were willing to modify the policy if the project was worthwhile and the borrower offered security.<sup>13</sup>

Despite repeated encroachments, however, the Relief Society still controlled the grain storage program. Requests to use the grain were directed to the ward Relief Society president; questions on how to handle the grain were sent to the Relief Society General Board. But as the storage program grew at the turn of the century, local situations sometimes made it impractical to store wheat, and

the general board's advice could not always account for unique conditions. At the same time, President Joseph F. Smith started his program to centralize the Church's organizations through priesthood lines and augment the importance of priesthood leaders' roles. During the first decade of the twentieth century, priesthood leaders began to ask President Smith grain storage questions. For example, by 1911 the granaries in the Salt Lake Stake that had been the pride of the Relief Society were inadequate, and grain in the area was expensive. Harriet B. Harker, president of the Salt Lake Stake Relief Society, asked her stake president, N. L. Mann, if the sisters should continue to store grain. Because he was not sure, President Mann wrote to the First Presidency who replied that the Relief Societies in Salt Lake Stake should not store grain but should continue to collect money for a wheat fund.<sup>14</sup>

Although this policy was meant only for urban Saints, some of the women in outlying areas who were having difficulty storing wheat decided to sell theirs. In 1911 the Oneida (Idaho) Stake Relief Society president proposed selling the grain and saving the money because it would be better to have money earning interest in a bank than grain rotting in a storehouse. Five years later when Emmeline B. Wells, then president of the Relief Society, visited the stake, she disagreed with the policy and told the sisters, "Money will not feed us if the grain is not in the granary."<sup>15</sup>

Problems like those in the Salt Lake and the Oneida stakes continued. In desperation the Relief Society General Board once again looked to the First Presidency and to the Presiding Bishopric for guidance. The priesthood leaders concluded that the program was sound but that storage methods were the basic problem. Arrangements were made to put grain in commercial elevators or in modern storage facilities. Where there was not a safe place to keep the wheat, the Relief Societies were allowed to sell the grain and send the money to the Presiding Bishopric's office where it was maintained in a separate account.<sup>16</sup>

Just as the general Relief Society now turned to the Presiding Bishopric and the First Presidency for counsel on grain storage, local Relief Society executives were encouraged to turn to their local priesthood leaders. The general board minutes record a list of commonly asked questions and the standard replies:

"Would you advise the sale of wheat when there are no elevators but good granaries?"

"If the priesthood advises it."

"If the granaries are being built, should the money given for wheat be used in building the granaries?"

"According to the advice of the priesthood."

"Is it advisable to take the money donated for wheat to buy portable steel granaries?"

"Follow the advice of the priesthood."<sup>17</sup>

However, shifting direction of the details of the program from the general Relief Society to the local priesthood executives did not give control of the program to the local ecclesiastical leaders or to the Presiding Bishopric. The Relief Society was still in charge of the wheat and expected matters of general policy to be cleared through them. They were willing to accept the advice and aid of the priesthood brethren, but they were not willing to turn the entire program over to the men.

World War I, however, strained this division of labor. During the worldwide grain shortage, members of the Church were encouraged to plant more wheat, and Relief Societies without granaries were asked to have wheat and flour on hand even if it had to be kept in the members' homes. Prudently, the Relief Society guarded its wheat by removing it from commercial elevators to Church-owned facilities.<sup>18</sup>

As the Church stepped up its grain programs, the United States government in the spring of 1918 asked that all surplus wheat be sent to Europe to feed allied and American soldiers. Federal food administrators in Utah and Idaho approached ward Relief Societies and asked them to sell their grain. Local organizations requested advice from the Relief Society General Board and the Presiding Bishopric. Bishop Charles Nibley said on May 2 that the grain was not to be sold and that when the government understood the program they would not demand the sale.<sup>19</sup>

However, within two weeks, the food controller for Utah told Bishop Nibley's counselors, Orrin P. Miller and David A. Smith, that the grain was needed immediately. The women could refill their granaries with the fall's bumper harvest. As a final ounce of pressure, he called the sale a "matter of loyalty of the Relief Society to the government."<sup>20</sup> Bishop Nibley, out of town, returned to find a letter from the federal food administrators asking once again for the grain. Because of this pressure, the Presiding Bishopric asked the First Presidency how they should handle the request. Anthon H. Lund and Charles W. Penrose, President Joseph F. Smith's counselors, told them to comply.<sup>21</sup>

With this direction, Bishop Nibley sent a letter on 16 May 1918 to the "bishops of wards where grain is stored." He asked them to discuss the grain situation with the Relief Society presidents, determine how much grain was on hand, and send the information to him. Then the local priesthood leaders would be told where to ship the grain. The money for the grain was to be deposited in a bank until the Presiding Bishopric or the First Presidency advised the wards to buy wheat. Nibley signed the letter and added the name of Emmeline B. Wells, Relief Society General President.<sup>22</sup>

In his haste to fulfill the government's request, Bishop Nibley neglected to notify Sister Wells of the change in policy; she did not learn of the sale until a week later. Recognizing that the sisters might not understand the sudden shift in policy, President Joseph F. Smith asked Bishop Nibley to discuss the sale with the Relief Society General Board. On 23 May 1918, Bishop Nibley attended the board's meeting, apologized for his actions, and explained why the wheat had to be shipped before the board met. President Wells accepted the new policy and conceded that, given the circumstances, she was not op-

posed to the sale of the wheat. She added, however, that she was hurt that Bishop Nibley had not consulted her before mailing the letter. Furthermore, she emphasized that although the Relief Society had asked the Presiding Bishopric to aid in making decisions about the program, the wheat was the sisters' responsibility and they should judge how the wheat was distributed. Bishop Nibley agreed to consult with the general board before making any further decisions on the storage program.<sup>23</sup>

Despite this promise, the Relief Society fought a losing battle to retain the last vestiges of control. In June the general board asked the Presiding Bishopric not to answer questions about the sale of the grain without consulting them, then, when this appeal did not solve the problem, asked the First Presidency to clarify the role of the Presiding Bishopric in the grain program. Cooperatively, the Presiding Bishopric agreed to discuss all policies with the sisters, but it soon became apparent that the men planned to make the final decisions. In August 1918, David A. Smith, counselor in the Presiding Bishopric, told the Relief Society not to buy grain while the price was so high. Later when the food controllers complained about the poor quality of wheat, the Presiding Bishopric asked that the money from wheat sales be sent to their office where it would be put in a special trust fund. The grain storage program came to a halt and was not begun again until the 1940s as part of the Welfare Plan.<sup>24</sup>

Between 1876 when Emmeline B. Wells started the grain storage program and 1918 when she saw all the wheat sold without her permission, she saw a number of changes in her commission from Brigham Young. These changes included a shift in decision-making from the Relief Society General Board to the Presiding Bishopric and from the local Relief Societies to the bishops and stake presidents. The transfer of power was gradual and not completely smooth, as might be expected in any organization redistributing authority.

Similarly, corporations constantly face "the pressure for centralization of authority to assure corporate integrity and the countering pressure for decentralization in administration to secure efficiency through ready response to diverse conditions."<sup>25</sup> The LDS Church faced this same dilemma, which spurred Joseph F. Smith's reforms in the 1900s and 1910s to centralize Church organization through priesthood channels. At the same time the Church was growing so rapidly that the organization needed to be decentralized to hold the members together and meet local needs. The Church was able to accomplish both goals by strengthening the priesthood line of authority so that the general priesthood leaders made decisions but the local bishops could adapt them to their needs. The auxiliaries, however, lost control of their own programs. Since conflicting instructions would confuse local organizations, all auxiliaries were directed to consult the Church priesthood leaders for general policies and local priesthood authorities for specific instructions.

Questions and tension arose during this period of reform because the pre-1906 auxiliaries were essentially independent "companies," free to direct their own policies. President Smith's changes merged these small companies with the main corporation, not as equals but as advisors. Part of the difficulty between the Relief Society and the general priesthood leadership emerged be-

cause the Relief Society was not informed how the change would affect their programs.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, the Relief Society was rather suddenly deprived of access to the "top management" and instead was subordinated to the mid-level Presiding Bishopric, another blow to its autonomy. The sisters were shocked and hurt when the Presiding Bishopric started to direct the grain storage program so authoritatively. Although the women appreciated the men's advice, they wanted to determine the destination of the program.

Yet the merger of the Relief Society and the priesthood organization was smoother in other areas than it was in grain storage, and the transfer of the grain program might have been easier if the Presiding Bishopric had not felt compelled to sell the grain during World War I. Questions before the war about the control of the wheat had been successfully handled by both the Relief Society and priesthood leaders. The dispute occurred when an outside force, the United States government, forced a decision on control of the grain. The disturbance broke the balance between the Relief Society and Presiding Bishopric and precipitated a shift in control that might have occurred more easily given time. After the grain was sold, the Presiding Bishopric continued to make decisions concerning the grain storage program with the advice of the Relief Society.

Business analysts have found that when a struggle for equilibrium occurs in a corporation, one party gives in or the company collapses.<sup>28</sup> In this case the Relief Society yielded. The sisters, though disappointed, accepted the decision because they accepted priesthood authority as divine in origin. At a general board meeting, Clarissa Smith Williams, Sister Wells's first counselor, explained, "The Priesthood had instituted the grain storage movement; they had closed the work. . . . As the Relief Society operates under the direction of the Priesthood, it was simply in conformity with them that the grain saving had been discontinued."<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, although the grain storage program ended and the funds were held by the Presiding Bishopric, the sisters used their influence to convince the Presiding Bishopric that the interest from the grain money should be used to build maternity hospitals and to provide layettes for expectant mothers.<sup>30</sup> Thus, Relief Society activities moved to a more restricted but still valuable sphere.

## NOTES

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