

# Spencer W. Kimball: A Man For His Times

*Edward L. Kimball*

**S**pencer Kimball wrote in his journal in 1951, on the occasion of David O. McKay's becoming president, "I am positive that the appointments of His Twelve by the Lord and the subsequent deaths control the Presidency of the Church. No man will live long enough to become President of this Church ever who is not the proper one to give it leadership. Each leader in his own peculiar way has made a great contribution to the onward march of the Church. No one of the nine Presidents had all the virtues nor all the abilities. Each in his own way and time filled a special need and made his great contribution. This I know. This I know."

No one was more surprised than he when he succeeded Harold B. Lee 31 December 1973, but because of his firm belief in God's control over the circumstances, he accepted the challenge without hesitation.

No one ever worried more about press conferences than he did. I remember how he fretted the evening before his first. He worried whether he would make a mistake and embarrass the Church. During the conference itself, he answered a question about possible new directions by saying that he did not foresee much change since he had already been a part of developing the existing programs for thirty years. He indicated that he would stress home and family, training youth, missionary service, encouraging Indians of both North and South America, loyalty to country, and temple work. Duty, diligence, and hard work but nothing too exciting.

Considering his age (seventy-eight) and his health (recent throat cancer and open heart-surgery), no one anticipated a long administration. I remember thinking that with the burdens of this new calling he might not survive a year. (That shows how much of a prophet I am.) One of the General Authorities later told me that he had thought we would see a short, "caretaker" administration. "I've never been so wrong," he said.

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A dramatic moment occurred shortly before April conference, three months after President Kimball succeeded Harold B. Lee. He talked for more than an hour to the Regional Representatives about his vision of missionary work — that if we were to set higher expectations for ourselves and lengthen our stride, most nations where the Church is established could provide enough missionaries to teach their own people and provide a surplus to go to nations where the message is new. He painted a picture of a veritable army reaching into all the corners of the world with the restored gospel of Christ. President Benson said afterward, “President Kimball, in all the years these meetings have been held, we have never heard such an address as you have just given. . . . There is a prophet in Israel.” Elder Hinckley said, “None of us can ever be quite the same after that.” It was clear who was in charge and that the new president was a man of broad vision.

The message he presented was not new; he had presented it before, but now it came with special vigor, accompanied by a witness of the spirit.

Spencer Kimball served nearly twelve years as president. Those years have seen many changes. Some operate on the individual level — keeping personal journals, writing family history, gardening, keeping property in good repair. He provided two useful slogans, “Lengthen our stride,” and “Do it!”

There are also major changes in Church administration and practice:

- An increase in missionaries from 17,000 to 30,000 within a short time. He encouraged every worthy young man and many young women and older couples to serve missions.
- A new awareness in the centralized Church of the members all around the world. An area conference per year (1971–74) gave way to an explosion: fifty-nine area conferences from 1975 to 1981 in nearly every location where a substantial group of Saints could be gathered.

Between 1975 and 1977, President Kimball arranged fifty-eight solemn assemblies for local priesthood leaders throughout North America.

Beginning in 1975, General Authorities were called from non-Caucasian races and from countries other than the United States.

Around the world, temples sprang up, smaller in size and much more accessible.

President Kimball established the Church’s political neutrality as often as possible. On one swing through Central and South America, he met with five heads of state. He also visited Poland as the culmination of David Kennedy’s successful efforts to obtain formal recognition of the Church there. The temple in the Federal Republic of Germany represented the Church’s determination to subordinate political views to spreading the gospel and serving the members wherever they might live.

- An openness to revelation. In 1976, a general conference canonized a revelation by Joseph Smith on the celestial kingdom and another by Joseph F. Smith on redemption of the dead.

In 1978, President Kimball announced the Lord's will that the priesthood go to every worthy man of whatever race. Worthy men and women of every race could receive the blessings of the temple. I have no sense that this change reflected my father's personal agenda. While he had always been concerned for and considerate of individual black members of the Church, he had spent eighty-odd years defending the Church position. When the Lord's will became clear to him, he did not make an immediate announcement because he was deeply worried about the potentiality of major dissension in the Church.

- An emphasis on spirituality. Elder Packer has commented that when meetings were planned, even meetings dealing with administrative questions, President Kimball wanted a spiritual component planned for.

His desire to make temples available to many more members had, as one underlying motive, to increase individual spirituality. He also involved himself personally in temple ordinance work.

The temple recommend questions were revised to include a question on belief in God and a testimony of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ. Previously the questions had focused on conduct alone.

- A willingness to speak out on appropriate public policy. One First Presidency statement decried the international arms race and specifically opposed basing the MX missile system in the Utah-Nevada desert.

Another opposed the Equal Rights Amendment as an unwise way of achieving a good end, that of protecting women against unfair discrimination.

Many sermons decried abortion on demand. A change in many Church administrative structures including multistake conferences, area presidencies as line officers, reconstitution of the First Quorum of Seventy, abolition of Assistants to the Twelve, creation of emeritus status for some General Authorities, appointment of temporary General Authorities, and the consolidated meeting schedule. I once asked my father how that had come about. He said, "We received a letter from a man in Iowa, telling about the difficulties of driving long distances to attend all the different meetings during the week."

A recently returned missionary in my ward referred to "the silent prophet." That caused me to think, "Of what value is a silent prophet?" For one thing, we have not yet accomplished all that he taught us when he did speak. For another, he offers a personal example of character traits worth emulating. It happens that he is perhaps better known than any recent president because of his biography, which showed the many ways in which he was an ordinary man who transcended those limitations by his deep commitment to a cause beyond himself.

His patience in illness and suffering epitomize his great endurance. He maintained a sense of humor even near the end. When a nurse undertook to shave him with an electric shaver, she worked away for several minutes without

much progress. Finally he said gently, "Perhaps it would work better if you took off the cap."

He worked harder than anyone else. His brother once said, "Spencer, you can't keep burning the candle at both ends like you do." He replied, "I have to; my brethren are so much better prepared than I am."

His wholehearted devotion to the interest of American Indians shows his openness to other races. One of his most impassioned sermons was his public response to a letter from a woman who said she had never thought to see the day when there would be Indians in the temple and tabernacle. His reply to "Mrs. Anonymous" decried the sin of intolerance, especially intolerance of the children of Lehi.

His warm, generous, loving nature shows him a true follower of Christ. Shortly after his first brain surgery, I visited him at his home. I began carrying a box of books to my car and set them down on a chair to do something else. When I turned around, I saw him tottering off with the box toward my car. I hurried after him, grabbed the box, and said, "You can't do that!" He said plaintively, "Why can't I do what I want to do?"

He showed a sense of shared responsibility. He usually said, "Lengthen *our* stride," not "Lengthen *your* stride." At the end of general conference 1975, he said, "I have made up my mind that when I go home from this conference there are many areas in my life that I can perfect. I have made a mental list of them, and I expect to go to work as soon as we get through with conference."

He was open to inspiration. Shortly before his brain operations, he named as third counselor Gordon B. Hinckley who proved to be the critical actor in the last years of the Kimball administration, a man who loyally furthered the established programs, never failing to acknowledge he acted under the leadership of the president.

His lack of self-aggrandizement showed his humility. When a committee of fellow professionals met with me in Salt Lake City, I showed them around the city. After we drove past the Governor's Mansion they asked to see where the president of the Mormon Church lived. They remarked on the contrast between the mansion and the modest Kimball home.

Elder Ronald E. Poelman tells of returning from an area conference on the same plane as President Kimball. As Elder Poelman got up to stroll in the aisle, President Kimball caught his arm and asked, "Where are you going?"

"I was just stretching my legs."

"You don't need to do that; they're long enough already. It's little people like me who need to stretch their legs."

I don't think there has ever been in the Church such a little man with such a long stride.