

# When the Prophet Dies: Reorganizing the First Presidency

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January 3, 2018



At 10:01 PM local time on January 2, 2018, President Thomas S. Monson of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints passed away. He was 90 years old and had nearly led the Church for 10 years.

But what happens when the Church's president passes away? Most will know that President Russell M. Nelson of the Quorum of the Twelve apostles will succeed President Monson as president of the Church. So why not President Eyring, President Monson's first counselor? And what happens to the First Presidency?

## 1844 Succession Crisis

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Thankfully, the death of the prophet today does not result in the same questions of succession as it did in the time of Joseph Smith. Indeed, at the time of his death, Joseph Smith had offered up eight possible scenarios of succession, based on interactions with others, as well as scripture:

1. The then-extant position of **Assistant President of the Church** could have been first in line. Initially that was Oliver Cowdery, but he left the Church. Then it fell on Hyrum Smith, but he was assassinated along with the Prophet.
2. **The Quorum of the Twelve** writ large: Doctrine and Covenants stated the Twelve were "equal in authority and power" to the First Presidency, and the First Presidency was effectively dissolved with the deaths of Joseph and Hyrum, as well as Sidney Rigdon's

estrangement from the Church. (Rigdon was also in Pennsylvania at the time of Joseph's death, attempting to secure residency to be Joseph's running mate in the US presidential election; law required presidential and vice presidential candidates to be from different states.)

3. **A counselor in the First Presidency:** an 1833 revelation stated that Sidney Rigdon and Frederick G. Williams, both counselors in the First Presidency, were "equal with thee [Joseph]" in holding the keys of the kingdom.
4. **Special Appointee:** records indicate that David Whitmer was ordained as Joseph's successor in 1834, but he apostatized.
5. **Council of Fifty:** At the final meeting of the Council before Joseph's death, he's reported to have said, "And in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ I now place it upon you my brethren of the council and I shake my skirts clear of all responsibility from this time forth."
6. **Lineage:** An 1841 revelation stated, "In thee and in thy seed shall the kindred of the earth be blessed," which many took to mean Joseph's son, Joseph Smith III was to lead the Church. Joseph Smith III's patriarchal blessing also said, "You shall have power to carry out all that your Father left undone when you become of age."
7. **Patriarch:** Misunderstanding surrounding the role of the patriarch as the "highest" office in the Church caused some to assume it meant leadership of the Church. Joseph's brother William lobbied to become patriarch following Hyrum's death, and succeeded. He then laid claim to Church presidency.
8. **Other Priesthood Bodies:** The Seventy also have equal authority as the Twelve, and Joseph made some remarks that high councils were collectively equal.

This article is not meant to go into depth on the succession crisis and the final result. We know that Brigham Young effectively lobbied the majority of the saints to align themselves with the Twelve and migrate to the Great Basin. Many others left, following aspirant leaders such as James Strang, Sidney Rigdon, Joseph Smith III (resulting in the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, now the Community of Christ), Granville Hendrick, and others.

## Brigham Young As Leader

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Although Brigham Young led the saints, he was not formally ordained as Church president until December 1847, after the arrival in the Salt Lake Valley. It took months of meetings to convince the Twelve to reinstate the First Presidency, as many believed it was a quorum meant specifically for Joseph. During Joseph's life, the First Presidency functioned separately from the Twelve, with Smith calling and releasing counselors at his consent. Brigham Young brought the organization of the First Presidency in line with that of the Twelve.

When Brigham Young died, there was another multi-year gap without a reorganized First Presidency even though John Taylor had assumed leadership as president of the Twelve. The same happened between the death of Taylor and instatement of Wilford Woodruff as president of the Church. Only when the administration passed to Lorenzo Snow was the gap reduced to 11 days, a model largely followed today.

# What Happens Today?

We do not have to guess who will be the next President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The senior apostle, who is the president of the Twelve, succeeds the fallen prophet and is called as President of the Church. Here's a rough timeline of what will happen over the next few days:

- January 2, 2018 – LDS Church president Thomas S. Monson passes away.
- The First Presidency dissolves immediately and the remaining counselors resume their place in the seniority organization of the Twelve.
- Funeral for the former Church president.
- The senior apostle is voted in as President of the Church by the 14 (currently 13) members of the Twelve, typically within 7-10 days. Apostolic seniority is based simply on date of call to the Twelve, not age.
- The new President calls counselors, holds press conferences, etc.
- Church work moves forward.



This is a simplified model, and there are a few caveats worth exploring.

The First Counselor in the First Presidency does not necessarily become President of the Church, as we will see in the coming days with President Nelson, who has never been in the First Presidency. It's easy to be of the mentality that the First Counselor "moves up" because President Hinckley was First Counselor to President Howard W. Hunter upon the latter's passing. Likewise, President Monson was First Counselor to President Hinckley. However, both were concurrently the President of the Twelve, which is why Boyd K. Packer had the title of "Acting President" of the Twelve for so many years.

Today, it is common practice for counselors from a previous First Presidency to be retained, but there is no doctrinal basis for it. Most recently, Marion G. Romney was a counselor to President Spencer W. Kimball, but he was not kept in the First Presidency of President Ezra Taft Benson, who succeeded Kimball. Therefore, more recent precedent would suggest Presidents Eyring and Uchtdorf will be re-called (not recalled) as counselors, but it's no guarantee. President Nelson could feel strong inspiration that Elder Cook needs to be his counselor. (Oh, and there's also no limit on the number of counselors even though the overwhelming trend has been for there to be two.)

Also, members of the First Presidency do not technically have to be ordained apostles. The last time this occurred was when Thorpe B. Isaacson, an Assistant to the Quorum of the Twelve, served as a counselor to President David O. McKay from 1965-1970. In addition, Sidney Rigdon was not an ordained apostle, but that's less current. We Mormons aren't supposed to bet, but if you were to do so, don't count on an Isaacson situation with President Nelson.

As for vacancies in the Twelve related to the passing of the Church's president, they are typically filled in the General Conference following the prophet's death, not along with the reorganization of the First Presidency. Because of the October 2017 passing of Elder Robert D. Hales, there will likely be two vacancies filled in the Twelve in the April 2018 General Conference.

It's worth noting how many contingencies are in place to ensure leadership of the Church continues unabated. As historian D. Michael Quinn said in 1976:

“As part of apostolic succession, however, the Quorum of the Twelve and apostolic First Presidency have clearly outlined the pattern of succession implied in the 1835 and 1841 Revelation. The succession of the senior apostle of the Quorum is automatic, but in the event that some catastrophe eliminated all but one member of the Quorum of the Twelve, then that surviving apostle (having all the keys of the priesthood) would be President of the Church and would then ordain others to fill up the Quorum of the Twelve. If the case were that the President of the Church and entire Quorum of the Twelve Apostles were to be removed, then the seven men comprising the First Council of Seventy would call sixty-three other seventies to fill up the full First Quorum of Seventy, which body in such circumstances would have the keys of authority to direct the Church and priesthood until the Quorum of Seventy ordained men to comprise a new Quorum of Twelve Apostles. If at the extreme, the President of the Church, the entire Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, and the entire Quorum of Seventy were removed by death or church discipline, then even in such an extremity the succession would be unclouded, for the presidents of all the ecclesiastical stakes of the Church would then hold as a body the keys of the priesthood sufficient to govern the Church and ordain men to the Quorum of the Twelve, who then would govern and organize the Church according to the clearly established pattern of apostolic succession.”

Some find the lack of white smoke at Temple Square when choosing a new Church leader to be a bit staid and predictable, but as our own Church history shows, debate over the continuation of leadership is not what will help the most in ensuring the affairs of the Church—and transitively, the gospel—continue forth successfully.