

GERONTOCRACY AND THE FUTURE OF MORMONISM

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The sudden and unexpected resignation of Pope Benedict XVI in 2013 broke a centuries-old tradition within Roman Catholicism of service-until-death of its top leader. If, as many expect, Pope Francis I eventually follows Benedict's lead, it is likely that a new and enduring tradition will have been effected.¹ The astounding transformation of the Roman Catholic Church under the younger and energized Francis underscores the importance of Benedict's courageous decision.

Of the major Western religious traditions in the United States, only The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints retains the service-until-death policy for its top leader. For more than a century following its founding in 1830, longevity was such that physical or mental incapacitation were not a significant issue. Medical science was not sufficiently advanced to be able to prolong life once a terminal illness began, and lifespan was not sufficiently long that age-related dementia was significant, if even present. However, advances in medicine have increased lifespan without concomitantly avoiding age-associated medical issues, most notably dementia. This has created a problem for Church leadership since policy holds that members of the Quorum of the Twelve

1. See Alan Holdren and Andrea Gagliarducci, "Full Transcript of Pope's In-Flight Interview from Korea," *Catholic News Agency*, Aug. 18, 2014, <http://www.catholicnews-agency.com/news/full-transcript-of-popes-in-flight-interview-from-korea-96141/>.

and First Presidency (together abbreviated Q15) serve for life² and that upon the death of a sitting Church president his successor is the senior member of the Q15.

Gordon B. Hinckley (1910–2008) was the exception among recent presidents of the LDS Church. In full command of his faculties at age ninety-seven, he paused while writing, by hand, a sermon at his office, noting to his secretary that he was not feeling well. He returned to his apartment earlier than usual, leaving the sermon unfinished, and three days later died peacefully at home. For half-a-century prior to President Hinckley's death, however, the transition from one Church president to the next was often characterized by long periods of decline in the physical and/or mental health of the sitting president; and, upon his death, the succession of a man of increasingly advanced age. Although a gradual shift of administrative oversight from the First Presidency (composed of the president and two assistants) to the Quorum of the Twelve, which began at the death of David O. McKay in 1970, lessened the impact on day-to-day church function of an ailing president, several episodes during the past half-century illustrate the risk of gerontocracy on Church governance. The incapacitation of President Thomas S. Monson (born in 1927), the incumbent president, and the recent controversy over divisive anti-LGBT policies³ engender a discussion of reasons for current LDS governance, insights provided by medical science into future expectations, historical consequences of lengthy periods of presidential incapacitation, and options for alternative outcomes.

2. In the nineteenth century some counselors in the First Presidency were chosen from outside the Quorum of the Twelve and did not have guaranteed lifetime tenure. Since the turn of the twentieth century, all counselors in the First Presidency have remained in the Q15 until death.

3. The current policy, announced in November 2015, calls for excommunication of any Church members who are in legal same-sex marriages, brands them "apostates," and disenfranchises their children from the Church.

Policy of Presidential Succession and Tenure

The assassination of Joseph Smith (1805–1844), founder of Mormonism, created a crisis for the Church. The problem was not that he had given no instructions regarding the means by which his successor should be chosen, but rather that he had given *too many* instructions. Several hints were provided in LDS scripture (Doctrine & Covenants, section 107), but none was dominant over the others:

The residual council of the First Presidency.

The traveling high council (a.k.a. Quorum of the Twelve Apostles).

The combined standing (stake or diocese) high councils.

The Seventy.⁴

In addition, other claims arose from non-scriptural sources:⁵

A counselor in the First Presidency.

A special or secret appointment by Joseph Smith.

The Associate President of the Church.

The Presiding Patriarch.

The Council of Fifty.

A son of Joseph Smith.

Brigham Young (1801–1877), on behalf of the Quorum of the Twelve, prevailed in the minds of the majority of Church members, but significant numbers eventually followed Sidney Rigdon, James Strang, Lyman Wight, Alpheus Cutler, and, most notably, Joseph Smith III, who

4. The Seventy, an office introduced by Smith in 1844, collectively represent the third-highest council in the church, behind the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve.

5. D. Michael Quinn, “The Mormon Succession Crisis of 1844,” *BYU Studies* 16, no. 2 (Winter 1976): 187–233.

founded the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (now Community of Christ).⁶

For three years following Joseph Smith's death, the Quorum of the Twelve, as a group, governed the church that ultimately settled in Utah. In December 1847, Brigham Young persuaded his fellow quorum members, with difficulty, to reconstitute a First Presidency separate from the Quorum of the Twelve and to designate him as the Church president within the First Presidency. Since he was the senior apostle, his accession to the presidency began a policy observed since that time, albeit by custom rather than scriptural mandate.

While Brigham Young's claim to the presidency derived from his being the senior apostle, and while each subsequent Church president had also been the senior apostle, serious questions as to the permanency of the policy arose periodically for the following half-century. Heber J. Grant, who became Church president in 1918, wrote in his journal on April 5, 1887 that "I do not think it is absolutely necessary that in case of the death of the President of the Church and the subsequent reorganization of the First Presidency that the President of the Twelve Apostles should be made the President of the Church." George Q. Cannon suggested that, even though Brigham Young and John Taylor were presidents of the Twelve before becoming Church presidents, "it did not follow that that principle would be carried out hereafter." And, in 1896, two years before he became Church president, Lorenzo Snow told Quorum of the Twelve members that they "had the right and power to select a First Presidency either in or outside of the Council of the Twelve."⁷

6. See Steven L. Shields, *Divergent Paths of the Restoration: A History of the Latter Day Saint Movement*, 4th ed. (Independence, Mo.: Herald Pub House, 2001) and Newell G. Bringhurst and John C. Hamer, eds., *Scattering of the Saints: Schism within Mormonism* (Independence, Mo.: John Whitmer Books, 2007).

7. Quoted from Gary James Bergera, "Seniority in the Twelve: The 1875 Realignment of Orson Pratt," *Journal of Mormon History* 18, no. 1 (Spring 1992): 54, n. 111.

Although the senior apostle has always become the new president, significant changes in the way the term has been defined have occurred, in each case preventing one or more men who would otherwise have become president from advancing to that position:⁸

Change #1: Date of Ordination. When the Quorum of the Twelve was first constituted in 1835, seniority was determined by chronological age, rather than date of ordination. As vacancies occurred in the quorum, however, date of ordination became the basis of seniority. For example, when Lyman Wight was added to the Twelve in 1841 he was older than any other member of the quorum, but he was listed as the junior member. If the original policy of chronological age had held up, Wight would have been the senior apostle at the time of Joseph Smith's death, and thus the new church president.

Change #2: Uninterrupted Tenure. During the lifetime of Joseph Smith and at a time when membership in the Church or a quorum within it was often terminated for causes that now seem trivial, Orson Hyde and Orson Pratt, two of the original members of the Quorum of the Twelve, were excommunicated and dropped from that quorum. A short time later both were re-baptized and reassumed their original positions of seniority in the quorum. In 1875, however, Brigham Young ruled that one clock stopped when they were excommunicated, and a new one started when they were re-baptized. The move dropped each man three positions. If Young had not made the change, both Orson Hyde (d. 1878) and Orson Pratt (d. 1881) would have been Church president.

Change #3: Quorum Membership, not Office of Apostle. Since the Quorum of the Twelve was organized in 1835, nine men have been ordained to the office of apostle at a time when there was no vacancy in the quorum, the most recent being Alvin R. Dyer in 1967. (Brigham Young ordained three of his sons apostles-without-quorum, the youngest being eleven years old, and did so without the knowledge of the Quorum of the Twelve, thus demonstrating the rarely invoked authority of the Church president to operate without consensus—which, as discussed below,

8. Reed C. Durham and Steven H. Heath, *Succession in the Church* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1970).

allows an alternative pathway in the future.) Of the nine, four eventually moved into the quorum as vacancies occurred, one of them being Brigham Young Jr. Apparently since the April general conference in 1869, seniority had been determined by the date of ordination to the *office of apostle*, rather than to the date of entrance into the Quorum of the Twelve. There was no written policy governing the issue, and since it had no immediate effect on succession to the presidency it remained unchallenged for three decades.

During the presidency of Lorenzo Snow, the question arose as to who his successor would be. Brigham Young Jr. was ordained an apostle in 1864 but was not added to the Quorum of the Twelve until 1868, whereas Joseph F. Smith was ordained an apostle *and* member of the Quorum of the Twelve in 1867. In a meeting of the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve on April 5, 1900, “It was unanimously decided that the acceptance of a member into the council or quorum of the Twelve fixed his rank or position in the Apostleship. That the Apostles took precedence from the date they entered the quorum.”⁹ If the policy had not been changed at that date, Brigham Young Jr. would have been Church president for a year-and-a-half.

In addition to making changes in the definition of apostolic seniority, Church leaders broke from a well-established tradition when, in 1898, they sustained a new Church president immediately upon the death of his predecessor. Previously, following the deaths of Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, and John Taylor (1808–1877), governance by the collective Quorum of the Twelve occurred for periods ranging from eighteen months to three years before a new Church president was selected. In contrast to the above-noted changes, which came about by administrative action, this one came through direct revelation, as recounted in the minutes of the meeting at which it was announced: “[The Lord] had shown and revealed to him [Lorenzo Snow, the new

9. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Life of Joseph F. Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1938), 310–11.

Church president] several days ago that the First Presidency should be organized before the next conference.”¹⁰

In summary, the procedure governing succession to the presidency was never scripturally delineated, continued to evolve for over seven decades following the founding of the Church in 1830, and did not assume its current formulation until the turn of the twentieth century. Although there have been no evolutionary steps since the turn of the twentieth century, there is no doctrinal basis for denying the possibility of future changes.

Lifetime tenure, which held for all three of the presiding councils of the Church (First Presidency, Quorum of the Twelve, and First Council of Seventy) for well over a century, is a policy without a scriptural mandate. As will be detailed below, its abandonment for the First Council of Seventy leaves open the door to reconsideration for the other two councils.

Medical Science and Church Governance

For more than a century the policies of apostolic succession to the presidency and lifelong tenure carried little or no downside for the Church. This was largely due to the relatively young age at which nineteenth-century apostles were chosen, which translated to younger Church presidents and the relatively brief interval between onset of terminal illness and death of the president.

The trend since the beginning has been for the age at entry into the Q15 to increase gradually. Taking the entire first century of the Church's existence, the average age of new Q15 members was thirty-six years, while the average age during the second century (1930 to the present) has been fifty-eight years. Despite the increase of twenty-two years, the *total time served* has remained essentially unchanged due to the concomitant increase in average longevity. That is, instead of extending from ages forty

10. Journal History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Sept. 13, 1898, 4, <https://eadview.lds.org/findingaid/CR%20100%20137>.

to seventy as in the nineteenth century, service of twentieth-century Q15 members now spans ages sixty to ninety.

If men in their eighties and nineties were as healthy and alert as those in their sixties and seventies, the shifting age of Church leaders would not have much relevance. Unfortunately, the eighties and nineties are notoriously difficult years medically, with the greatest challenge being the “epidemic” of dementia that is now superimposed on the other debilitating ailments of old age. According to one 2007 study, the prevalence—i.e., the proportion in the population—of dementia is about five percent among men ages 71–79, about eighteen percent among men ages 80–89, and over forty-five percent among men age ninety and over.¹¹ For those age ninety and above, the incidence—i.e., new cases each year expressed as a percent of that population—is about thirteen percent per year in those 90–94, about twenty-one percent in those 95–99, and about forty-one percent per year in those 100 and older.¹²

Church leaders have proven just as vulnerable to the challenges of old age—including dementia—as the population in general. About half of those who have reached their nineties since 1950 eventually had some degree of mental incapacitation, which is much more problematic than physical infirmities in terms of discharging leadership responsibilities.

The health challenges facing increasingly aged Q15 members were amplified for Church presidents, for two reasons. First, as the age of entry to the Q15 rose, so did the age of the Church president. That is, the average age of the Church president over two-decade intervals beginning in 1830 rose from forty (1830–49), to seventy (1870–89), to eighty-one (1950–69), to ninety (1990–2009). Second, in addition to assuming office at increasing ages, twentieth- and twenty-first-century Church

11. B. L. Plassman et al., “Prevalence of Dementia in the United States: The Aging, Demographics, and Memory Study,” *Neuroepidemiology* 29 (Nov. 2007):125–32.

12. Maria M. Corrada, et al., “Dementia incidence continues to increase with age in the oldest old: The 90+ study,” *Annals of Neurology* 67 (2010):114–21.

presidents have generally lived to an older age than their nineteenth-century counterparts, in large measure because of advances in medical care that favor physical acuity over mental.

The severity of the medical problems increasingly experienced by Church presidents has been hidden from the general Church membership for as long as possible, and generally quite successfully. Functional limitations have been masked by controlling public appearances, taking advantage of periods of lucidity characteristic of dementia, and ghost-writing talks and editorials based on the president's earlier writings. For familiar themes, teleprompters have allowed those with modest limitations to read talks prepared by others as though they were original. When the limitations are more advanced, such talks have been read by someone else. Prime examples of these strategies come from the late years of David O. McKay's life, when his secretary, Clare Middlemiss, rearranged prior talks or writings and had one of his sons read them in general conference—until, in a family conference, Lawrence, David O.'s oldest son, put his foot down. His rationale was that Church members were getting the inaccurate impression that his father was still capable of writing the talks.¹³

While the Church has shied away from revealing details of a president's health and at times has gone to great lengths to make it appear that a president is functioning at a higher level than reality, the semi-annual general conferences provide a public setting wherein a crucial measure of physical and intellectual function cannot be hidden: speaking from the pulpit. Since at least the end of the nineteenth century, Q15 members have spoken in each general conference unless excused for health reasons or out-of-town assignments, and Church presidents have spoken in multiple sessions at each conference. Conference reports have been

13. For an extended treatment of this issue, see Gregory A. Prince and Wm. Robert Wright, *David O. McKay and the Rise of Modern Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2005).

published for every general conference since 1897, allowing tabulation of the best available index of the level of function of Church presidents:

Wilford Woodruff (1807–1898) spoke at every conference prior to his death at age 91;

Lorenzo Snow (1814–1901) missed only one general conference prior to his death at 87;

Joseph F. Smith (1838–1918) spoke at every conference prior to his death at 80;

Heber J. Grant (1856–1945) missed only one conference prior to his death at 88;

George Albert Smith (1870–1951) spoke at every conference prior to his death at 81;

David O. McKay (1873–1970) was unable to speak at the last six conferences prior to his death at 96;

Joseph Fielding Smith (1876–1972) spoke at every conference prior to his death at 95;

Harold B. Lee (1899–1973) spoke at every conference prior to his death at 74;

Spencer W. Kimball (1895–1985) spoke only once in the last nine conferences prior to his death at 90, and then for less than one minute;

Ezra Taft Benson (1899–1994) was unable to speak at the last nine conferences prior to his death at 94;

Gordon B. Hinckley (1910–2008) spoke at every conference prior to his death at 97.

David O. McKay, Spencer W. Kimball, and Ezra Taft Benson missed a combined total of twenty-three conferences, and that this pattern of incapacitation is likely to remain the rule rather than the exception is suggested by focusing on the current president, Thomas S. Monson. His participation in general conferences documents a steady and significant decline in function. After conducting three of the five sessions in the first

three conferences after he became president in early 2008 (as was typical also for previous presidents), he conducted only one session in October 2009, and has not conducted a single session since then. In the October 2014 and prior conferences he spoke at four sessions (also typical for previous presidents), but in April and October 2015 he spoke at only two sessions in each conference, and in the latter he appeared physically distressed during one of his two addresses. While the official position of the Church is that he is “feeling the effects of advancing age,” it is an open secret, if not common knowledge, that he has been suffering from dementia for several years.¹⁴

Consequences of Incapacitated Church Presidents

A power vacuum at the top, caused by the incapacitation of the Church president, can put the entire church at risk of damage that might otherwise be prevented by a competent president. Three examples that occurred since the late years of the McKay presidency demonstrate the point.

Blacks and the Priesthood: In the late 1960s, when David O. McKay was incapacitated sufficiently that the Quorum of the Twelve declared

14. David Noyce, “At 87, Mormon Leader Thomas S. Monson ‘Feeling the Effects’ of His Age, LDS Church Says,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, May 1, 2015, <http://www.sltrib.com/lifestyle/faith/2465653-155/at-87-mormon-leader-thomas-s> on July 9, 2016. Although Church leaders and public affairs officials have steadfastly declined to go on the record and use the word “dementia” to refer to Monson’s mental state, I (Prince) have had private conversations with several LDS General Authorities over the past half-dozen years in which each has independently and voluntarily described Monson’s condition as dementia. Recently, R. B. Scott published an online article in which he wrote, “More of the day-to-day duties of running the worldwide church fall to the counselors of Thomas S. Monson, the 88-year-old 16th president of the church who has long suffered from diabetes and, more recently, from age-related dementia” (R. B. Scott, “With Rising Lifespans of Mormon Prophets Come Increasing Dementia and Leadership Dilemmas,” *The Muss*, Dec. 15, 2015 (<http://www.themuss.net/articles/2016/1/5/with-rising-lifespans-of-mormon-prophets-come-increasing-dementia-and-leadership-dilemmas-1>), accessed Jul. 9, 2016).

him to be mentally incompetent,¹⁵ a letter written by Sterling McMurrin to McKay's son Llewelyn touched off an internal power struggle that resulted in a deep and damaging rift at the highest level of Church governance. In a private meeting in 1954, McKay had told McMurrin that the century-long exclusion of Blacks from priesthood ordination—a major source of concern to McMurrin—was a policy rather than a doctrine, and that the policy would eventually change. McMurrin had considered the conversation private and had not publicized it, and McKay had not discussed the policy/doctrine issue with any of the Q15. McMurrin's letter to Llewelyn, which was intended to memorialize the incident for the benefit of McKay's family, was shared by the family with two of McKay's counselors in the First Presidency, Hugh B. Brown and Alvin R. Dyer.

When Brown learned that President McKay considered the matter policy rather than doctrine and anticipated that it would change one day, he attempted to change it administratively, not realizing (since McKay had not broached the subject with him) that McKay would not change the policy without first receiving a supporting revelation—something that he repeatedly sought but never received. Dyer, seeing that Brown was attempting to change the policy by administrative action, secured the support of Elder Harold B. Lee, the presumptive *de facto* successor to McKay since Elder Joseph Fielding Smith, already well into his nineties, was already suffering age-related health issues. Lee and Brown clashed privately, and because Lee was significantly more senior in the Q15 than Brown (despite Brown's being in the First Presidency), Lee prevailed and obliged Brown to sign a First Presidency letter that he, Lee, had drafted (absent McKay's signature due to his incapacitation), which reinforced the *status quo* of the policy on ordination.

15. "Minutes by President Alvin R. Dyer of Meeting of First Presidency," Nov. 12, 1969, in David O. McKay diaries of the same date.

McKay died only weeks after the letter was publicized.¹⁶ The general Church membership was not aware of the clash that had occurred in the backdrop of the letter, largely because the policy's *status quo* had been maintained, and few realized that it was the cause of Brown's release from the First Presidency as soon as McKay died—the first time since the death of Brigham Young a century earlier that a counselor in the First Presidency was not retained by a new Church president. Brown was devastated by the release, and while it occurred after McKay's death, the real damage happened at a time when McKay lacked the capacity to prevent it.

The History Division and the Intellectuals: One outcome of a general reorganization of the Church bureaucracy in the early 1970s was the creation of the History Division directed by Leonard Arrington, the only professional historian ever to have the title of Church Historian. The new prospect of professional historians writing the sacred history was deeply challenging to some, most notably senior apostles Ezra Taft Benson (who would become Church president) and Mark Petersen. The two men, with an occasional assist from junior apostle Boyd K. Packer, worked behind the scenes to dismantle the History Division, despite the fact that Church president Spencer W. Kimball expressed support and appreciation for Arrington and his franchise. As a series of cranial surgeries greatly reduced his vitality, President Kimball's ability to counteract the push from Elders Benson, Petersen and Packer to dismantle the organization diminished. Arrington was eventually relieved of his title as Church Historian and the History Division was dissolved.

Emboldened by the dissolution of the History Division, Elder Petersen moved to tamp down activities of LDS intellectuals across a broader front. In 1983, acting independently at a time when Kimball was

16. The First Presidency Circular Letter was dated December 15, 1969 and was widely read from the pulpit by bishops and branch presidents. For a detailed account of this episode, see Prince and Wright, *David O. McKay and the Rise of Modern Mormonism*, chapter 4.

essentially not functioning either physically or mentally, Elder Petersen drew up a list of Church members—including Arrington—who had published historical articles in the independent publications *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, *Sunstone*, and *Seventh East Press*. He then called the stake presidents of the authors, spoke “very harshly” about their publications, and instructed them to meet with them and “take some appropriate action.”¹⁷ When Gordon B. Hinckley heard about Peterson conducting what was then being termed the “witch-hunt,” he said that the apostle had been acting on his own and that he, Hinckley, had known nothing about it. Soon after, Hinckley apparently brought it to an abrupt end, but not before considerable damage had been done.¹⁸

The September Six: In the fall of 1993, when Church president Ezra Taft Benson was totally incapacitated, senior apostle Boyd K. Packer initiated disciplinary actions against a small group of LDS intellectuals, similar in nature to Petersen’s action a decade earlier. This time, however, instead of the nebulous instruction to “take some appropriate action,” the mandate was the more serious measure of excommunication. Within the space of a few weeks, six people were brought before Church disciplinary councils and charged with apostasy or “conduct unbecoming a member.” Five were excommunicated and a sixth received the lesser penalty of disfellowshipment. Collectively they became known as the September Six.

Although disciplinary councils are purported to be local matters initiated by local leaders, apostles confided to Steve Benson, Ezra Taft’s grandson and a Pulitzer Prize–winning editorial cartoonist for the

17. Lester E. Bush Jr., “Writing ‘Mormonism’s Negro Doctrine: An Historical Overview’ (1973): Context and Reflections, 1998,” *Journal of Mormon History* 25, no. 1 (Spring 1999): 267.

18. Fletcher conveyed this information to Lester Bush, who in turn reported it to me (Prince). It is recorded in my diary under the date of May 18, 1983. For a more detailed account, see Gregory A. Prince, *Leonard Arrington and the Writing of Mormon History* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2016), chapter 27.

Arizona Republic, that Packer had initiated them.¹⁹ Benson went public with the information, which was published broadly in newspapers, and subsequently resigned his Church membership in large part because of the duplicity he had witnessed. The adverse action taken against the September Six sent a chill through the LDS intellectual community that continues to have negative consequences over two decades later.

Options for the Future

A starting point for exploring options for changing the LDS Church's succession policy is to examine the history of three other religious traditions that, until recent decades, had lifelong tenure—including hierarchical power—for the top church leader: the Episcopal Church, Roman Catholic Church, and Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (RLDS, now Community of Christ). The Episcopal Church paralleled the LDS Church in elevating the next-senior officer upon the death of the top leader, while the Roman Catholic and RLDS churches employed selection processes that did not rely on institutional seniority.

The Episcopal Church abandoned both lifetime tenure and seniority succession in 1926, with the result that the average age-at-succession of its Presiding Bishop dropped from 70.3 years prior to 1926, to 59.0 years since 1926.

Next to abandon lifelong tenure was the RLDS Church. Departing from a tradition that had been observed since the founding of the church in 1860, President W. Wallace Smith announced to the World Conference in 1976 that at the subsequent conference in 1978 he would step down and his son, Wallace B. Smith, would be his successor. The transition was seamless, and the tradition of self-retirement has been

19. Vern Anderson, "Cartoonist Says Oaks Lied to Protect Fellow Apostle," *Salt Lake Tribune*, Oct. 12, 1993, B-1 and B-2.

perpetuated by Wallace B. Smith (1996) and his successor, W. Grant McMurray (2004).

In February 2013, Pope Benedict XVI stunned the world by announcing his voluntary retirement—which occurred later the same month—thus becoming the first Roman Catholic Pope in over seven centuries to step down voluntarily. His successor, Francis I, seemingly suffered no sense of crisis of legitimacy among the world’s one billion Roman Catholics, and he stunned them and non-Catholics by moving quickly to restore to Roman Catholicism the moral authority that had declined greatly in the face of decades of scandal. If Pope Francis follows the example of Pope Benedict and voluntarily retires, it is likely that a tradition of limited tenure will become the rule for the Roman Catholic Church—and will leave the LDS Church as the only significant church in the United States with lifelong tenure for its top leader.

Three questions face the LDS Church if it is to move away from the current system of gerontocracy. First, would a change in the mode of succession, with the senior surviving member of the Q15 becoming the new Church president, be required? Second, is there a doctrinal, immutable mandate for lifelong tenure for the Q15? And finally, if not, is there a viable alternative?

To the first question, the answer is that apostolic succession, while not the only possibility prescribed by Joseph Smith, has worked well—if one overlooks the detrimental effects of gerontocracy that can be addressed through other reforms. Successors to the presidency since the death of Brigham Young in 1877 have served an average of 41 years in the Q15 by the time they became Church president, and while it is obvious that service in that group prepares one to become president, four decades of such service places the new incumbent in an age bracket laden with medical challenges.

To the second question, the answer is an unequivocal no. Service until death is a tradition but not a scripturally-based doctrine. Although the tradition has remained in place for nearly two centuries for the Q15, it was abandoned after nearly a century-and-a-half for the next-ranking governing council in the Church.

And to the third question, the answer already exists in a reform introduced four decades ago. In the mid-1960s the idea of placing General Authorities on emeritus status first began to be discussed within inner circles. The First Council of Seventy, acting under the direction of David O. McKay, reviewed the office of Seventy and the function of the First Council of Seventy (on a general level) and the various Quorums of Seventy (on a local level). McKay asked them to produce written recommendations for change, but with the caveat that all such recommendations reflect the unanimous sentiment of the council. Early in their deliberations, they discussed the possibility of abandoning lifetime tenure by granting council members emeritus status at a specified age. One council member, Elder Paul Dunn, reported, “When we first brought it up in that first meeting, one of the brethren went right through the roof to the steeple. And so, because we couldn’t agree, that was left out of that first paper.”²⁰

McKay’s successors Joseph Fielding Smith (1970–72) and Harold B. Lee (1972–73) asked the First Council of Seventy to continue the evaluation and recommendation process, but each time the council was unable to achieve unanimous consent for emeritus status. By the time Spencer Kimball (1973–85) asked the council to go back a fourth time, the holdout on emeritus status had died, thus clearing the way for what was implemented on September 30, 1978, and has been the policy for the First Quorum of Seventy ever since.²¹ Though never announced publicly, the age for emeritus status has been seventy years.²²

20. Paul H. Dunn, interviewed by Gregory A. Prince on February 18, 1995.

21. The First Quorum of Seventy had been formed in 1835 but was discontinued in the late 1830s, with the First Council of Seventy (consisting of seven men) being retained and having General Authority status. In 1975 Church president Spencer W. Kimball reconstituted the First Quorum of Seventy and gave it General Authority status.

22. Emeritus status was also granted in 1979 to Eldred G. Smith when his office of Presiding Patriarch was discontinued, and in 2012 to two members of the Presiding Bishopric. None of the three men ever held a position within the Q15.

When asked if emeritus had been suggested for members of the Q15, Elder Dunn said that such a suggestion had been above the pay grade of his council, but that they had certainly opened the door if the Q15 had wished to walk through. In fact, Hugh B. Brown of the First Presidency did propose to the Q15 emeritus status for apostles, although not the Church president. Brown's grandson, Edwin Firmage, recalled:

He concluded that there needed to be an emeritus system, that age would take its toll, whether the person was a prophet or not, they were still humans, and age could take its toll. There should be a system of removing people from sort of lock-step advancement to the presidency. So, he proposed an emeritus system. It was later adopted, but only in part, a far lesser part. There is one now that has come directly from grandfather's proposal, but they excluded the Quorum and that was the whole matter of concern to grandfather. . . . He proposed it and he deliberately placed it, thinking he could tempt a few votes of people who weren't terribly fond of him, by putting himself the first victim of the new process. He would have emeritized himself out of the Quorum. . . . He was chagrined when it was turned down. He smiled at me in kind of a half-hearted way and said, "I thought I could sweeten this up by making myself the first victim, but it didn't go."²³

Given the absence of a scriptural mandate for lifelong tenure, along with the abandonment of such tenure for one of the leading councils of the Church, the door remains open for the Q15. To address the medical problems coincident with advanced age, a new policy would need to set age limits for service in the Q15 so that new Church presidents would not begin their terms in their ninth or tenth decades of life; and for the Church president himself, so that the end-of-life medical issues that have had an adverse effect on the majority of presidents since the middle of the twentieth century could be avoided. A plausible scenario would be to adapt the precedent of the First Quorum of Seventy and place Q15 members (aside from the Church president) on emeritus status at age

23. Edwin B. Firmage, interviewed by Greg Prince on October 10, 1996.

seventy-five, and Church presidents at age eighty-five. In cases where health issues arose before the stated age, medical emeritus status could be granted (as is already the case with the First Quorum of Seventy).

How might such a change be implemented? Given that the change would remove from many members of the Q15 the possibility of becoming Church president, the change likely would need to occur in the same manner as in the Roman Catholic Church and the RLDS Church, where the top leader, while still in undisputable command of his faculties, announced the change publicly. While the LDS Church generally works by consensus among the Q15, there are precedents for unilateral action by the Church president, which in some instances caught the entire Quorum of the Twelve by surprise. Given the special deference of LDS laity and hierarchy to the prerogatives of the Church president, a pronouncement from the top, even of this magnitude, would likely be received with joy—and with increased hope for the future of the Church.