

The Priesthood-Auxiliary Movement, 1928–1938

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Richard O. Cowan

While reviewing the chronology in the Sunday School handbook, I was surprised to learn that priesthood classes were conducted with the Sunday School not too many years ago. Even though I had studied twentieth century Church history extensively, I had never heard of this combination. Most Latter-day Saints regard priesthood correlation as a phenomenon beginning in the 1960s, but I was amazed to learn that many correlation principles were emphasized during the 1930s.

The decade 1928–1938 witnessed a series of extensive restructurings of Church activities and meetings. Most of these changes combined formerly separate priesthood activities with either the Sunday School or Mutual Improvement Association; hence the name, “Priesthood-Auxiliary Movement.” Major features of this relatively unknown movement have continued to influence the Church. The significance of these developments is most apparent when they are viewed as a continuation of even earlier efforts at correlation.

ANTECEDENTS

Although priesthood quorums and the auxiliaries were established during the nineteenth century, there was a substantial increase in the programs and activities sponsored by these organizations during the opening years of the twentieth century. For example, the Relief Society and Sunday School launched their classwork for adults and the MIA adopted such age-group programs as the Boy Scouts and Beehive Girls. The auxiliaries also commenced publishing their own periodicals including the *Improvement Era*, *Juvenile Instructor*, *Children’s Friend*, and *Relief Society Magazine*.

Amid this proliferation of auxiliary programs, President Joseph F. Smith looked forward to the time

when every council of the Priesthood . . . will understand its duty, will assume its own responsibility, will magnify its calling and fill its place in the Church. . . . When that day shall come, there will not be so much necessity for work that is now being done by the auxiliary organizations.¹

The General Priesthood Committee was formed in 1908 to help vitalize the priesthood. Under the chairmanship of Elder David O. McKay, this

committee introduced weekly ward priesthood meetings and the practice of ordaining young men to Aaronic Priesthood offices at specified ages. In some cases stake presidents sought permission to combine these priesthood sessions with either Sunday School or MIA in order to avoid adding an extra meeting to the existing schedule. At first the priesthood gatherings were scheduled on Monday evening, but by the early 1920s Sunday morning had become more popular.

Church leaders felt a definite need for correlating these expanding activities. In 1907 the Committee on Adjustments, representing various auxiliary organizations, recommended merging the similar Primary and Religion Class programs for children and also consolidating the Church's magazines for adults.² Many years passed before these recommendations were implemented. In 1913, President Joseph F. Smith organized the Correlation Committee "to prevent unnecessary and undesirable duplication of work in the various auxiliary organizations." Elder David O. McKay became chairman of this body as well as of the General Priesthood Committee.³

In 1920 an expanded correlation committee was assigned to define the relative roles not only of the auxiliaries, but of the various priesthood quorums as well. The committee formulated three basic premises to guide its work: (1) The auxiliaries are "helps" to the priesthood and therefore subject to its authority. (2) Programs exist only to meet the needs of Church members. (3) All organizations should adhere closely to their original inspired assignments. A specific recommendation was that the Sunday School should be given the responsibility of formal theological instruction; it should be extended to two hours and absorb priesthood class instruction.⁴

Even though the First Presidency concluded that "under existing circumstances" some of the proposed changes were "unnecessary and undesirable,"⁵ many of the committee's recommendations received continued consideration. For example, in 1923 the First Presidency urged stake presidents and ward bishops to conduct monthly correlation meetings with their auxiliary executives.⁶ In addition, Church leaders gave particular attention to the Aaronic Priesthood and in 1925 issued a list of "Standards" which emphasized the importance of quality supervision and regular quorum activity.⁷

NEW MEETING PATTERNS

By 1927 steps were being taken to implement sweeping modifications Church-wide. Under instruction from the First Presidency, the Council of the Twelve "sponsored the move." A special committee consisted of Elders David O. McKay, Joseph Fielding Smith, and Stephen L Richards.

Fundamental Principles

Two important guiding principles determined the course followed in planning the “priesthood-auxiliary movement.”

1. The priesthood was to assume its proper place at the center and core of all Church activity. Declared the Presiding Bishopric:

The priesthood is the very foundation upon which the Church is built, as also the framework which supports the structure. It is the most potent means of real service. Unless the quorums of the priesthood generally are trained and active in the performance of their duties, there cannot be the progress that there should be.⁸

Official publications made frequent reference to President Joseph F. Smith’s 1906 prophesy of a time when the priesthood would more completely understand and fulfill its duty.

2. Church programs needed to be simplified. Because all Church organizations served the same groups of members, Elder Melvin J. Ballard asserted that “there must be one unified, simplified program for this work. No one organization in the Church can do everything for the entire group. There has been delegated to each organization its specific field.” He noted the frequent duplication in the lessons and activities of the priesthood quorums and auxiliary organizations and explained that the priesthood-auxiliary plan “was conceived as a solution to a rather complicated situation that was arising because of this competition and rivalry and multiplicity of meetings.”⁹

The “Church Sunday School”

President Heber J. Grant made the first public announcement of the “priesthood-auxiliary movement” at the October 1927 general conference when he explained that theological instruction was being shifted from weekly priesthood meetings to the Sunday School.

This plan was amplified the following month in instructions from the Council of the Twelve and from the general superintendency of the Sunday School. Quorums or priesthood groups as such would no longer meet weekly, but only monthly to consider their duties and assignments.

The hours from ten to twelve Sunday morning have been designated as a most suitable time for the study of the Gospel by all members of the Church, both male and female. It is suggested, therefore, that all members holding the Priesthood meet at this time, not as Quorums, but as members of the Church Sunday School, in which classes will be organized to suit the age, capacity, and calling of each.¹⁰

Youth age groupings were adjusted to coincide with priesthood divisions. Three classes would serve all boys and girls of deacon, teacher, and

priest ages respectively, with lessons prepared under the direction of the Presiding Bishopric. A new one-year missionary training class was created for twenty-one-year-olds and those called on full-time missions. The “Parents Class” for adults was renamed “Gospel Doctrine” and would study courses provided by the Council of the Twelve and the First Council of the Seventy. Priesthood quorum and Sunday School officials were to cooperate in selecting class instructors who would be subject to Sunday School regulations.

Sunday School superintendent, David O. McKay, declared that 1928 marked a “distinct epoch” in the seventy-nine-years history of Sunday School because of study were now prescribed by the General Authorities, departments were adapted to the need of priesthood quorums, Sunday morning was set apart as the best time for gospel study for all members of the Church, and priesthood courses were now studied coeducationally. He observed: “The Sunday School takes its proper place as a helper, as an aid to the Priesthood.”¹¹

The Priesthood-MIA

Even though the Twelve’s official instructions concerning the Church Sunday School recommended only monthly rather than weekly priesthood meetings, the General Authorities—notably the Presiding Bishopric—still felt the need of the weekly gatherings. The Bishopric stressed the need for “the training of all priesthood members in the performance of their duties and for developing quorum identity.”¹²

The concept of holding these weekly “priesthood activity meetings” in conjunction with the Mutual Improvement Association was developed during the opening weeks of 1928, and in March Church leaders announced the new Priesthood-Mia plan.

President Ruder Clawson of the Council of the Twelve explained: “By revelation, the Lord has indicated two great avenues through which the Priesthood of his Church should function; viz., in study and in activity.” Therefore the duties of the priesthood bearers would include studying the gospel in the appropriate class on Sunday mornings and also attending an “activity meeting” in conjunction with the MIA on Tuesday evenings at which time assignments for priesthood service would be considered. A separate weekly priesthood meeting was thereby eliminated. Elder Clawson urged each stake to initiate the new plan as soon as possible. “We recognize that the plans and work herewith submitted are comprehensive and, to some extent, novel. Questions will naturally arise as they are put into operation.” He promised that the General Authorities would be available to answer these questions and to confer with stake leaders concerning their problems.¹³

The plan for Tuesday evening called for a forty-five-minute business and instruction meeting for each priesthood quorum or group within the ward. During this same time the Young Ladies' departments would consider lessons related to "the growth and development of girlhood, young womanhood, and motherhood." Afterwards, the MIA would sponsor an hour-long "activity period" for all members, "each one going to the group to which he or she *has been assigned*, according to age groups and preference," These activities would be social, literary, recreational, etc.¹⁴

Age groups for the young men were coordinated with the priesthood ordinations. Deacons would be Scouts; the new Vanguards program was created for young men of teacher age; M-Men would include priests and unmarried elders. Similar programs were provided for the girls, with the "Seniors" being renamed "Gleaners."

The same persons were to direct both the priesthood meetings and the MIA activity periods. "Remember," MIA official pointed out, "the best men should now be available for these positions, as they will give leadership to both groups."¹⁵

Church leaders saw this plan as placing the MIA in its proper role as an auxiliary to the priesthood. "We recognize that the priesthood is the very life of the Church." While the Sunday School provided the setting for gospel study, the MIA could "help the Priesthood in the leisure time field." ". . . if we are yielding something," Elder Ballard commented, "it is to help keep the Priesthood where it belongs, at the head of the procession."¹⁶

REVITALIZING THE MELCHIZEDEK PRIESTHOOD

Church leaders expressed their hopes for the Melchizedek Priesthood in these words:

For over a hundred years the Lord has had in his Church . . . a force for good: but until recently part of this force (the quorums of the Priesthood) has been left unutilized. . . . The clarion call for the present is to turn this potentiality into actuality.¹⁷

First Melchizedek Priesthood Handbook 1928

In 1928 the Church issued *A Guide for Quorums of the Melchizedek Priesthood*. In his preface, Elder Rudger Clawson wrote:

This guide contains suggestions for the promotion of the spirit of brotherhood and of personal and quorum activity among those who hold the Priesthood; the essential thought being that by a simple but definite organization for quorum activity, the miscellaneous and scattered undertakings of the Priesthood may be concentrated and made more effective for the good of the Priesthood and the Church.¹⁸

The *Guide* may well be recognized as the Church's first Melchizedek Priesthood handbook. Its material was quoted repeatedly and extensively in subsequent instructions, and it became the foundation for later handbooks. When Elder John A. Widtsoe compiled his *Priesthood and Church Government* a decade later, he drew heavily from this work.

Quorum Objectives

In his preface to the guide, Elder Clawson challenged priesthood quorums to reach their potential.

The Priesthood of God on earth has been organized into quorums for the mutual good of the members, and for the advancement of the Church. A quorum, which meets merely to study lessons, only partially accomplishes its purposes. . . . The spirit of brotherhood should be the directing force in all the plans and operations of the quorum. If this spirit be cultivated, wisely and persistently, no other organization will become more attractive to the man who holds the Priesthood.

Every quorum member should so thoroughly identify himself with his quorum that it would become as it were a clearing house for all the serious affairs of his life. For example, the spiritual labors of the Priesthood, such as ward teaching, visiting the sick, of service in the auxiliary associations, should be reported to the quorum as the converging point of his Church activities.¹⁹

“A main purpose of a quorum of the Priesthood,” the *Guide* asserted, was “to help every individual member of the quorum, and his family, to attain a condition of thorough well being in body, mind, and spirit. Every need of a man holding the Priesthood should be the concern of the quorum to which he belongs.” The handbook continued: “One great purpose of the Priesthood quorum is to develop a group of brethren who will care for each other’s welfare.”²⁰

Church leaders described the “new era confronting the Priesthood” as “characterized by greater activity.” They affirmed that:

Every quorum should have something to do—that an idle quorum is not only a useless, but potentially a dangerous unit in the Priesthood. It is vital to the Priesthood that it be kept active; to allow any quorum to stagnate is to invite decay.²¹

In the same spirit, Elder Clawson concluded: “If the quorums of the Priesthood are to achieve and maintain the high standard of efficiency that is expected of them, they must keep as their constant aim service to their members and to the church.”²²

Standing Committees

A Guide for Quorums of the Melchizedek Priesthood outlined the creation of four “standing committees” whose duties reflected priesthood concerns.

1. The Personal Welfare Committee was concerned with personal fitness—spiritual, intellectual, and financial as well as physical—and with the individual's relationship to his family, church, country, and fellowmen.
2. The Class Instruction Committee distributed lesson leaflets and directed how courses of study were to be taught.
3. The Church Service Committee promoted ward teaching, missionary work, and other activity in Church organizations; it also encouraged instruction in performing ordinances.
4. The Miscellaneous Activities Committee gathered and compiled useful information, planned social and athletic events, and assisted with transportation.

This "committee system" of administering quorums, though modified somewhat from time to time, continued until 1964 when it was supplemented by the home teaching program.

STRENGTHENING THE AARONIC PRIESTHOOD

The 1928 "priesthood-auxiliary movement" continued the emphasis on improving Aaronic Priesthood programs and leadership which had begun earlier during the decade. Church leaders devoted considerable thought to how the Aaronic Priesthood should be strengthened even further. Their attention focused on qualifications for missionary service and on the various Church organizations working with the youth. Expanding on the concept of the Priesthood-MIA, they realized that "there should be, and necessarily must be, correlation of the work of these various agencies . . . to prepare young men for missionary activity."²³

Aaronic Priesthood Correlation Plan, 1931

After extensive preparation, the "Aaronic Priesthood Correlation Plan" was introduced at a special meeting held 4 April 1931 in conjunction with the general conference: Quorums would emphasize performance of ordinances and other priesthood duties, and would provide for social and fraternal needs. The Sunday School would teach gospel principles and ordinances, Church history and doctrine. Program of the Young Men's Mutual Improvement Association would provide "proper application of Gospel principles to personal habits and conduct." This would include the physical, moral, mental, social, vocational, recreational, cultural, as well as the spiritual dimensions of the young men's lives. Seminaries were to provide weekday formal education in the scriptures and Church history.²⁴

The above assignments did not represent a redefinition of the roles of these Church organizations, but the contribution of the new plan was to

correlate the work of these agencies more completely than ever before. Under the personal direction of the bishopric a monthly ward “correlation meeting” coordinated the efforts of executives and teachers working with the boys in Aaronic Priesthood quorums, Sunday School and YMMIA. Special attention was given to leadership training and to involving the youth in planning and directing their own activities.²⁵ More importance was placed on the men working directly with the youth. Church leaders reaffirmed that the same outstanding individuals who served as leaders of the Scouts, Vanguards, and M-Men should also be the supervisors of the deacons, teachers, and priests quorums respectively. This consolidation would not only bring desired correlation but would also expand the influence of these key leaders. The Presiding Bishopric had declared: “There is no work required of those who hold the Priesthood which carries with it greater responsibility and greater opportunity for real service than training young men.”²⁶

The Place of the Auxiliaries

Under the new “correlation plan,” each auxiliary was to have a definite role to play. Elder George Albert Smith, who served as YMMIA superintendent, agreed:

We have stressed Sunday School; we have stressed M.I.A., and have succeeded wonderfully, but while we have been doing that in some instances we have overlooked the fact that Sunday School is but an auxiliary, M.I.A. is but an auxiliary of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, while Priesthood is an essential part of the Church. Some Priesthood leaders have felt that they did not have the cooperation of the auxiliary workers, and some of the auxiliary workers have thought that the men in the Priesthood were not interested in the auxiliaries. Some who have majored in Sunday School have apparently thought that it was the most important, and some M.I.A. leaders have appeared to be little concerned about the Sunday School or the Priesthood, but have been enthusiastic about M.I.A.²⁷

Elder Melvin J. Ballard, also a member of the YMMIA superintendency, wanted every boy to be active in Scouting, “which is the first stepping stone to bring him into the Deacons Quorum.” Similarly, he saw sponsoring basketball as a means to a greater end. The emphasis on physical conditioning and on the team’s being successful should help the young man “to put his life into such shape that he can succeed.”²⁸

Elaborating on the role of the auxiliaries, President J. Reuben Clark, Jr., urged that the MIA, like other organizations, should stress building testimonies of the gospel so that the youth “may live in accordance with its lofty principles.” There were also other “great truths which should be taught; he believed that the Primary and the MIA were particularly well suited to give

“spiritual instruction” in music, art, literature, drama, etc. Nevertheless, President Clark concluded, these cultural activities should be the “handmaid of righteousness and spirituality.”²⁹

OTHER ACTIVITIES CORRELATED

The prime thrust of the “priesthood-auxiliary movement” was to coordinate more fully the programs of various agencies serving given groups of Latter-day Saints. This spirit of correlation and consolidation affected a variety of Church activities.

The 1928 Priesthood-MIA program provided that genealogy might be one of the electives for the Adult Department during the MIA-sponsored activity period on Tuesday evenings. By 1929 most wards had opted for this alternative and were therefore able to eliminate the formerly separate weekly genealogy meeting.

Similarly, the “priesthood-auxiliary movement’s” spirit of simplifying Church programs was seen in the decision to combine the two MIA-sponsored magazines. Since 1889 the *Young Women’s Journal* had served the Young Ladies’ Mutual Improvement Association as its official organ. In 1897 the *Improvement Era* replaced the *Contributor* as the official publication of the Young Men’s association. As the work of the two MIA’s came more and more to be united, the idea of consolidating these two magazines gained popularity. At the 1929 June conference, a storybook wedding dramatized the union of the two publications. The name *Improvement Era* was retained because it fit the two associations equally. The first of the combined issues appeared in November 1929. Not only had the size been enlarged, but other improvements in format were made as well. As noted above, the consolidation of these magazines had been proposed as early as 1907 by the Committee on Adjustments.

Another of this committee’s recommendations was also carried out during the year 1929. Beginning in 1878, the Primary Association provided religious training for boys and girls one afternoon each week. Another program organized in 1890 to supplement secular instruction in public elementary schools was the Religion Class. This auxiliary usually met on Thursday afternoons and stressed religious *instruction*, while the Primary met earlier in the week and focused on religious activity. In 1929 the First Presidency approved the consolidation of these similar weekday programs for elementary school children.³⁰

DIFFICULTIES IN THE “PRIESTHOOD-AUXILIARY MOVEMENT”

As has been seen, the “priesthood-auxiliary movement” inaugurated in 1928 called for the elimination of separate priesthood meetings. Quorum

members were to study gospel doctrine in the “Church Sunday School.” “Priesthood activity meetings,” held in conjunction with MIA on Tuesday nights, were to include discussion of quorum business and instruction in priesthood duties.

As early as 1929 Church leaders acknowledged that even though the Sunday morning study program was functioning well, the Tuesday evening “activity meetings” were not being conducted with “that degree of clearness and energy” necessary to maintain interest. Consequently priesthood meeting attendance declined from 21% in 1926 to 15.5% in 1928.³¹ The presidents of many “leading stakes,” the Presiding Bishopric reported, hoped that in the near future the priesthood might again meet separately from the MIA. Concerned about this decline in attendance, the Bishopric recommended returning to the former pattern of holding priesthood meetings on Sunday morning in order to better train priesthood bearers and to build quorum identity.³²

Adjusting Priesthood Meeting Schedules

In 1930 the Presiding Bishopric authorized local leaders to schedule priesthood meetings at whatever time would “secure the best attendance and activity” and could remain unchanged throughout the year. Specific options included holding these meetings Tuesday night with the MIA or on Sunday mornings, either in conjunction with or apart from the Sunday School.³³

A review of minute books from this period reveals that many wards never made the shift to Tuesday night in the first place and that Sunday morning continued to be the overwhelmingly preferred priesthood meeting time.

Allowing more flexibility led to new problems; many wards experienced difficulties in scheduling priesthood meetings. To eliminate this confusion, beginning in 1933 the General Authorities directed that priesthood business be conducted in the Sunday School class, either before or following the lesson.³⁴ Beginning in 1935 another plan provided for half-hour quorum business meetings and separate sessions for sisters to follow directly after the Sunday School lessons.³⁵ A third modification in 1937 provided for twenty-five-minute Aaronic Priesthood and simultaneous girls’ sessions to precede Sunday School lessons and for Melchizedek Priesthood business to be conducted in the Gospel Doctrine class.³⁶ None of these variations proved completely satisfactory, and many wards ceased holding priesthood meetings altogether.

Discontinuing the “Priesthood-Auxiliary Movement”

Petitions from stakes to hold priesthood meetings before Sunday School continued in a steady stream. By 11 May 1937, Bishop Sylvester Q. Cannon recommended to the First Presidency that “Aaronic Priesthood meetings be held at a separate time from any other organization.”³⁷ A committee representing the Twelve, Presiding Bishopric, and Sunday School considered this matter during the following months. A “very thorough and extensive questionnaire covering every phase of the problem” was sent to ward, stake, and quorum leaders. It disclosed an “overwhelming sentiment in favor of a separate meeting for the Priesthood,” preferably scheduled near the Sunday School hour.³⁸

The change was announced by the Council of the Twelve in a circular letter in October 1937. A separate hour-long quorum or group meeting school be held each week just before or following Sunday School or on a weeknight. Additional monthly meetings would be required only if a quorum’s membership was divided among two or more wards. Sunday School was shortened to ninety minutes and assumed the pattern which would characterize its work for many years.³⁹

Thus ended the “priesthood-auxiliary movement” which for a decade had sought to combine weekly priesthood meetings with those of the Sunday School and MIA. Introducing the 1937 announcement, Elder John A. Widtsoe declared that the change was “in line with progress.” He affirmed that:

The foundation of the Church . . . is its authoritative Priesthood. . . . The Priesthood gives life to the Church. . . . The progress of the Church depends upon the activity of the Priesthood. When the Priesthood is active the Church surges forward; when inactive, the Church creeps along.

Elder Widtsoe declared that the priesthood quorums must be examples to all other organizations. “Necessarily, if a man must choose between loyalty to his Priesthood quorum and some other Church organization however good, his duty is to the quorum.” Elder Widtsoe believed that priesthood quorums must assume preeminence in all Church activities and so suggested the slogan “The Priesthood Quorum First.”⁴⁰

Notice how Elder Widtsoe’s language closely paralleled statements made when the program was inaugurated ten years earlier. This is a classic illustration of how specific programs and activities may change while basic principles and goals remain constant.

CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE “PRIESTHOOD-AUXILIARY MOVEMENT”

Although the “priesthood-auxiliary movement” as such lasted only ten years, its achievements have continued to influence Church organizations

and activities. It focused attention on principles that would later be reemphasized with the implementation of priesthood correlation in the 1960s.

The General Authorities placed great stress on the primacy of the priesthood in Church organization and function. The auxiliaries' role as "helps" to the priesthood was reflected in the Sunday School's assuming responsibility for basic theological study and in the MIA's being described as the "activity arm" of the priesthood. The Church's first Melchizedek Priesthood handbook sought to strengthen quorums by defining their objectives, emphasizing the vital importance of activity and service, stressing a spirit of brotherhood, and by outlining a more effective organization.

The "priesthood-auxiliary movement" also encouraged a conscious effort at simplifying Church meetings and activities. General Authorities declared that there must be but one unified program serving any given group of Latter-day Saints. Specific consolidations that continued to benefit the Church included shifting the formerly separate weekly genealogy class to the MIA, merging the *Young Women's Journal* with the *Improvement Era*, and amalgamating the afternoon programs of the Religion Class and Primary. The "Aaronic Priesthood Correlation Plan" instituted monthly correlation meetings to coordinate the efforts of all organizations working with the youth. Unifying the age-groupings in these organizations further facilitated cooperation. In fact, the idea was to have the same qualified people serving a given youth group in both priesthood and auxiliary capacities.

Not all these goals were achieved during the 1930s, but they were not forgotten during later decades. Many have now been attained. As Church leaders direct the unfolding of priesthood correlation, they can rely on experience gained during the relatively unknown yet significant "priesthood-auxiliary movement."

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