Diplomatic Relations

Joseph Smith undertook his first diplomatic mission for the Church when he journeyed to Washington, D.C., in 1839 and met with President Martin Van Buren to seek federal intervention on behalf of Church members who had lost their lives or property during the Missouri persecutions. Since then, the diplomatic contacts of the Church with the governments of the world have been aimed mostly at securing legal recognition for the Church and freedom for its members to preach the gospel to others, meet together for religious worship, and live according to their religious precepts.

For a century and a half the Church had no formal diplomatic office; mission presidents or General Authorities on special assignment were responsible for creating a favorable climate for the Church’s missionary effort and for resolving problems with host governments. In 1842, Lorenzo Snow, an apostle, sought to establish a favorable impression of Latter-day Saints by presenting a handsome bound copy of the first British edition of the Book of Mormon to Queen Victoria and Albert, the Prince Consort. As the Church began practicing plural marriage, the task of maintaining a favorable public image became more difficult. That effort was not helped by a note sent by the U.S. government in 1887 to the governments of Great Britain and Scandinavia asking them to curtail immigration of Latter-day Saints to the United States—a move intended to stem the growth of polygamy. Since the Scandinavian countries did little and the note was ridiculed by the British press, the Church found it unnecessary to take any diplomatic initiative.

Fifty years later, a statute adopted by the legislature of Tonga barring entry of LDS missionaries was the subject of a diplomatic protest by the Church to the British government. The matter landed on the desk of Winston Churchill, who was then colonial secretary. He took no action because the British government could not veto a Tongan statute, and the Foreign Office informed him that the U.S. government would not protest if the statute did not apply retroactively to missionaries in the country but only to those subsequently applying for entry. The Church took no further action, since the mission president was able to convince the Tongan legislature to repeal the statute.

The rather limited extent of the Church’s diplomatic relations with the governments of northern Europe, where the Church’s missionary effort was concentrated in the nineteenth century, gave way in the twentieth to more extensive contacts as the Church became more ambitious in the reach of its missionary program. In many countries the right to proselytize was limited not only by statute but also by informal practice and tradition, stemming in part from the influence of an established state church with a special legal status. Moreover, the spread of communism had raised ideological barriers to missionary work in general. Still the Church maintained its policy of leaving the conduct of any needed diplomatic relations in the hands of mission presidents or General Authorities either permanently or temporarily in the country. That policy changed after 1975 when Spencer W. Kimball became President of the Church. He was determined to increase the Church’s missionary effort, including gaining legal recognition in the countries where such recognition had been denied either as a matter of government policy or through the opposition of the established state churches. The decision resulted in a policy that required organizational changes at Church headquarters. Such changes had been discussed during the tenure of President Harold B. Lee, but no steps had been taken before his death. N. Eldon Tanner, who served as first counselor to both President Lee and President Kimball, reviewed with President Kimball those previous discussions. They decided to appoint a special representative responsible to the First Presidency who would negotiate with governments outside the United States for removal of restrictive visa policies and for legal recognition of the Church where it had been denied. The special representative would also serve as liaison between the Church and U.S. embassies in foreign countries.

President Kimball appointed David M. Kennedy as the special representative of the First
Presidency. Kennedy had extensive experience working with international governments and leaders as an international banker, as U.S. secretary of the treasury under U.S. President Richard M. Nixon, as ambassador-at-large, and as ambassador to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

Since the Church wanted to gain legal recognition as rapidly as possible, the First Presidency and its special representative examined countries one by one, exploring the possibilities each offered. Barriers existed in each country. Some had statutes limiting freedom of religion. There were long-standing religious and cultural barriers in others. In some, legal recognition was possible, but statutes severely limited the right to proselytize. When President Kimball decided that legal recognition should be the first goal, he sent Kennedy to Greece, where recognition had long been withheld despite the vigorous efforts of Church leaders. Kennedy learned from his contacts in the Greek government and the U.S. embassy there that the key to recognition as "a house of prayer" required the approval of the Archbishop of Athens and All Greece, His Beatitude Seraphim. In a crucial interview, Kennedy pointed out that the Greek Orthodox Church enjoyed full freedom of religion in the United States, that the Greek government had honored President David O. McKay for the aid the Church had sent to Greece after the devastating earthquake of 1953, and that the Church was fully recognized by most of the other countries of Western Europe. Greece eventually gave legal recognition to the Church. Other countries where recognition would be sought and eventually granted included Yugoslavia, Portugal, and Poland.

When it became known that the Church was seeking recognition from communist countries, representatives of the media began asking how such action could be reconciled with the Church's ideological opposition to communism. Kennedy responded to those queries by referring to the Church's belief in "being subject to kings, presidents, rulers, and magistrates, in obeying, honoring, and sustaining the law" (A of F 12). The essential reality, Kennedy emphasized, is that the Church could enter, and prosper in, any country that would "permit us to offer our sacraments, . . . permit us in our homes to have our family organization and live within our religious patterns" (Hickman, p. 340). These minimal freedoms were all Latter-day Saints needed to live consistently with their general beliefs. Kennedy also drew a distinction between the economic and political systems that Church members preferred as private citizens and those restrictions on individual freedoms that would make it impossible for the Church to exist as an institution or prevent its members from following its fundamental precepts. Through Kennedy, the Church reemphasized that its mission was to preach the restored gospel to all the world and to help its members' lives to be marked by moral and spiritual growth—not to import the American political and economic systems.

In every country visited, the Church's first goal was to gain recognition that included the right to open a mission, entry rights for missionaries, the right to proselytize openly, and the right to hold public worship meetings. The most notable success in reaching these goals was achieved in Portugal, where the 1974 revolution had resulted in the adoption of a statute granting freedom of religion. In other countries, notably Poland, the Church was successful in gaining legal recognition permitting it to own property, to hold religious meetings, and to send Church representatives to the country, but the right to proselytize was refused. Despite that limitation, Church leaders believed that legal recognition was a significant step forward and that the Polish government's offer should be accepted even though it did not contain the right to proselytize. The Church was granted legal recognition in Yugoslavia on essentially the same terms. In each country where the Church undertook negotiations, Kennedy, as special representative of the First Presidency, emphasized that the Church was recognized in many countries of the world and that in the United States members held important positions in government, education, and business. He also stressed that Church members were recognized in the United States for their honesty, reliability, and work ethic.

In recent years there have occurred several changes that have improved the diplomatic relations of the Church. Changes in Eastern Europe have made it easier for the Church to gain recognition than it was in 1975, and restrictions on proselytizing are also being removed. The revelation announced by President Kimball in 1978 granting the priesthood to every worthy male member of the Church has been followed by the establishment of more missions in Africa (see Africa, The Church in; Doctrine and Covenants: Official Declaration 2). Because of these changes, the First Presidency decided that the task assigned to
its special representative had been achieved; hence, in 1900, Kennedy was released from that calling, and no replacement was named. The responsibilities of the special representative were assumed by the area presidencies and mission presidents.

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MARTIN B. HICKMAN

DISCERNMENT, GIFT OF

The gift of discernment consists of the spiritual quality or skill of being able to see or understand, especially that which is hidden or obscure. This ability is shared in a general way by all of God’s children, but “discerning of spirits” is one of the gifts of the spirit that comes, under certain circumstances, especially from God (1 Cor. 12:10; D&C 46:23). The fuller gift of discerning in all spiritual matters—to know whether their occurrence is of God or not—is given by the Lord to “such as God shall appoint and ordain to watch over the church” (D&C 46:27). To possess this gift is to receive divinely revealed understanding of opposing spirits—the spirit of God and the spirit of the devil. Persons possessing such a gift also correctly perceive the right course of action (D&C 63:41).

Not only can the power of discernment distinguish good from evil (Moro. 7:12–18), the righteous from the wicked (D&C 101:95), and false spirits from divine (D&C 46:23), but its more sensitive operation can also make known even “the thoughts and intents of the heart” of other persons (Heb. 4:12; D&C 33:1). “The gift of discernment [embodies] the power to discriminate . . . between right and wrong . . . [and] arises largely out of an acute sensitivity to . . . spiritual impressions . . . to detect hidden evil, and more importantly to find the good that may be concealed. The highest type of discernment . . . uncovers [in others] . . . their better natures, the good inherent within them” (Richards, p. 371).

Every Latter-day Saint has spiritual leaders who, by virtue of their callings, are entitled to the gift of discernment to enable them to lead and counsel correctly. “The gift of discernment is essential to the leadership of the Church [of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints]. I never ordain a bishop or set apart a president of a stake without invoking upon him this divine blessing, that he may read the lives and hearts of his people and call forth the best within them. The gift and power of discernment . . . [are] essential equipment for every son and daughter of God. . . . The true gift of discernment is often premonitory. A sense of danger should be heeded to be of value” (Richards, p. 371).

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LEON R. HARTSHORN

DISCIPLESHIP

Like many other Christians, Latter-day Saints believe that only the transformational discipleship of those who believe in and follow Jesus Christ leads to a fulness of joy and peace in this life and eternal life in the world to come. Hence, true disciples are those who make the resurrected, revealing Christ the center of their lives, as did the faithful referred to in the New Testament who sat at the feet, followed in the footsteps, mourned the death, and rejoiced in the resurrection of Christ.

“Faith in the Lord Jesus Christ”—the first principle of the gospel as stated in the fourth article of faith—is the explicit foundation of discipleship. From this principle all other principles and ordinances of the gospel derive their efficacy, power, and harmony.

Through his perfect earthly life and infinite atoning sacrifice, Jesus Christ became not only the model and mentor but also the Savior and Redeemer and mankind’s advocate with the Father. The atonement, meaning “at-one-ment,” empowered the plan whereby all men and women can eventually become like Father in heaven and mother in heaven. Through the atonement, Christ took upon himself not only the original transgression of Adam and Eve but also the per-