BISHOP, HISTORY OF THE OFFICE

The work of the office of bishop in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has evolved over 160 years to accommodate changing Church needs. When the Church was small, bishops were concerned primarily with the temporal needs of the Church, and spiritual needs were left to the Prophet. At the 1846 exodus from Nauvoo, three kinds of bishops functioned: general bishops, ward bishops, and traveling or regional bishops. In 1847 the first presiding bishop was called, and was assigned Church-wide temporal and administrative duties. Ward bishops worked under the supervision of the presiding bishop, traveling or regional bishops, and stake presidents. In the late 1800s ward bishops were assigned greater responsibility for ward members, seeing to their spiritual as well as temporal needs. Thus the need for traveling or regional bishops gradually diminished and the office soon ceased altogether. Contemporary Church organization includes ward bishops and a presiding bishop who is a General Authority (see Presiding Bishopric).

Before Nauvoo, 1830–1839. Revelation to Joseph Smith restored the office of bishop in February 1831 (D&C 41:9; cf. 1 Tim. 3:1–7). Edward Partridge was called as the Church’s first bishop, and was made responsible for operating a storehouse to help the poor (D&C 42:30–39) and for administering property transactions connected with the Law of Consecration (D&C 42:58:17). In December 1831 Newel K. Whitney was also called as a bishop (D&C 72). The two served as regional or traveling bishops (D&C 20:66), Whitney for Ohio and the eastern states and Partridge for Missouri (Latter-day Saint Biographical Encyclopedia 1:219–20, 224). The First Presidency ordained them and called two counselors to assist each one. In November 1831, the Lord had revealed the Aaronic Priesthood organization, designating bishops as the presidents of the Aaronic Priesthood to preside over quorums of up to forty-eight priests (D&C 107:87–88). Bishops Partridge and Whitney helped organize these priesthood quorums and selected and set apart quorum presidents. After the organization of the first stakes in 1834, bishops functioned much like stake officers.

In response to additional revelations (D&C 42:30–39; 51:1–20; 84:103–104), bishops Partridge and Whitney managed such Church temporal matters as paying bills, buying and selling lands and goods, helping with construction projects, printing, and assisting the poor. In Missouri, where members consecrated and pooled belongings, Bishop Partridge signed the consecration deeds, received donations into a Bishop’s Storehouse, and deeded back donated and purchased properties based on members’ needs. He was remunerated for his full-time service.

Nauvoo Period, 1839–1846. In 1841, when the law of tithing replaced deeding all of one’s property to the Church, bishops helped receive and disburse tithes. However, the Prophet Joseph Smith as Church President and trustee-in-trust held title to Church properties and established Church financial policies.

The office of ward bishops began with the establishment of the first wards in Nauvoo. There, bishops Newel K. Whitney and George Miller, who replaced Bishop Partridge (who had died in 1840), had general jurisdictions and also served in an assigned municipal ward. By 1842 Nauvoo’s thirteen wards each had a bishop with two counselors. Their main tasks were to process tithes and to assist newcomers and aid the poor, which they accomplished with donated fast offerings. Bishops also carried a major responsibility for dealing with ward members in cases of wrongdoing. However, bishops rarely conducted Sunday worship meetings; such services were held outdoors on a citywide or stake basis or in individual homes. Nauvoo bishops collectively organized and directed the work of deacons, teachers, and priests quorums in the city.

By the time of the exodus from Nauvoo, the Church had three types of bishops: general bishops, who in 1845 became trustees for the Church; ward bishops; and traveling bishops sent beyond Nauvoo to receive Church funds.

Exodus and Early Utah, 1846–1900. During the exodus, ordained and acting bishops cared for the needy through tithes, offerings, and labor. Winter quarters was divided into twenty-two wards, each with a bishop. By 1848 bishops in Kanesville, Iowa, exercised civil as well as ecclesiastical authority. On April 6, 1847, Bishop Newel K. Whitney became the first presiding bishop for the entire Church.

When Latter-day Saints first settled in Utah, the norm was for each settlement to have a presi-
dent and at least one bishop (the nucleus of an embryonic stake). Salt Lake City, the largest settlement, was divided into nineteen wards in 1849, each with a bishop and two counselors. When Presiding Bishop Whitney died in 1850, he was replaced by Bishop Edward Hunter, who was given two counselors, thereby creating the first Presiding Bishopric. They were responsible for Church temporal affairs, for local bishops, and for stake Aaronic Priesthood quorums. Bishop Hunter met every two weeks with northern Utah bishops to coordinate efforts regarding public works, tithes, resources, immigration and immigrants, and the needy. However, the First Presidency, not the Presiding Bishopric, made finance and resource policy and called and released bishops.

In each stake, bishops called men, and later, boys, to fill stake-level deacons’ quorums, teachers’ quorums, and priests’ quorums, and gave them responsibilities in their wards. The basic ward officers for the pioneer Utah period were the Bishopric and the teachers’ quorum, then called block teachers or ward teachers (see Home Teaching). Under direction of the bishop, teachers visited members in their homes, settled disputes, and helped the needy. Teachers and bishoprics heard charges of wrongdoing and decided guilt or innocence. Bishops, as Church judges, conducted inquiries regarding sin and held bishops’ courts, if necessary, to excommunicate, disfellowship, or exonerate (see disciplinary procedures). During the Reformation (LDS) of 1856–1857, bishops and teachers saw to the catechization interviews, and rebaptism of members.

Bishops spent much of their time managing tithing. Most tithes were “in kind,” necessitating the creation of bishop’s storehouses, which included corrals for animals and bins for farm products. Tithing houses sometimes became commerce centers, serving as trading posts, banks issuing and receiving tithing scrip, wayside inns, and transportation and mail hubs. The Presiding Bishopric issued price valuations for donated and traded products, creating uniform prices for the territory. In the largely cashless Pioneer Economy, bishops used two-thirds of the local tithes to help the poor and to pay for public improvements. They forwarded one-third of the tithing commodities to Salt Lake City to pay laborers on the Salt Lake Temple and various public works projects. Bishops received a small percentage of the tithes to cover personal expenses incurred while managing the donations. By the mid-1850s, ward bishops had taken over the Presiding Bishopric’s task of conducting annual tithing settlements with members.

During the consecration movement in the 1850s and the United Order efforts in the 1870s, bishops received, recorded, and dispersed donated properties. Ward bishops recruited resources for use elsewhere, such as products in short supply, special funds, supplies for the militia, and teamsters and wagons to take immigrants west from staging points and supply depots in Nebraska, Iowa, and, later, Wyoming (see Immigration and Emigration).

The First Presidency and the Presiding Bishopric supervised local bishops through visits to wards, two annual general conferences requiring the attendance of bishops, distribution of circular letters, and the reports of traveling and regional bishops. Stake presidents served as the bishops’ ecclesiastical superior line officers. In the Salt Lake, Cache, and Utah valleys, stake presidents held regular bishops’ quorum meetings.

During this period, bishops had both temporal and spiritual responsibility for their wards and communities. They called ward officers, conducted meetings and presided over funerals, supervised ordinances, and gave blessings. They assisted the needy through the use of tithes, fast offerings, and volunteer labor. During the 1856 famine, bishops requisitioned foodstuffs to distribute within a ward and to share with other wards. In the mid-1850s some wards created relief societies to aid needy Indians. Ward Relief Societies became widespread in the 1870s, and the bishops relied on them to seek out and help the needy.

Elders, seventies, and high priests met in stake quorums and were not directly subject to the bishops. In the 1860s and 1870s bishops helped organize and supervise Relief Societies for women, and other ward auxiliary organizations, such as Mutual Improvement Associations for youth and adults, Sunday Schools, and Primaries for children.

In 1877 bishops presided over wards varying in size from 171 members in Morgan Stake wards (northern Utah) to 808 members in Utah Stake wards (central Utah). Each stake contained an average of twelve wards. An average ward had 432 members, 81 families, 13 high priests, 19 seventies, 38 elders, 6 priests, 6 teachers, and 10 deacons. During a thorough reorganization of the priesthood in 1877, President Brigham Young
added 140 wards to the existing 101, retaining 56 bishops and ordaining 185 new ones. Most bishopric counselors were newly called, too, and were required to be high priests. Thus in 1877 new personnel comprised about 80 percent of the Church’s bishoprics.

New instructions directed bishops to account for their ward members; keep Aaronic Priesthood units staffed; attend weekly Aaronic Priesthood meetings and monthly stake priesthood meetings; operate an effective ward teaching program; conduct the sacrament during Sunday School; turn in monthly and quarterly reports of membership, finances, and ward activities; keep accurate records of disciplinary proceedings; support temple laborers; and hold proper Sabbath meetings, thus setting basic patterns for ward organization and procedures today. Bishops’ agents replaced regional presiding bishops. In response to instructions to involve boys eleven to nineteen years old in an Aaronic Priesthood office, bishops called them to be deacons in their wards, beginning the shift of Aaronic Priesthood work to the youth. Bishops continued to call elders and high priests as acting priests and acting teachers to do the ward teaching.

Nineteenth-century Utah bishops were the civic leaders in their communities. They encouraged immigrants to become citizens and to vote. They discussed political matters at Church meetings; backed the development of the telegraph, railroad, mines, canals, and cooperative stores; and established and superintended local schools. The average length of service for all nineteenth-century Utah bishops was eleven years, but 15 percent served for more than twenty years. Bishops had above-average incomes. They entered into plural marriage more than other male members; at least 60 percent of bishops had one or more plural wives.

Because of federal antipolygamy efforts during the 1880s, many bishops were prosecuted or were forced into hiding, thus virtually halting their political involvement. Their wards were incorporated so that they, rather than the general Church, owned meetinghouses, saving them from confiscation by the federal government. The tithing system was disrupted and tithing paying declined. In 1889, stake tithing clerks replaced the bishops’ agents.

1900–1930. Beginning about 1900, after Utah had gained statehood (1896), the economic practices of the Church were modified. By the early 1900s tithing had changed from donations of commodities primarily to cash; tithing houses gradually disappeared and the collection task became simpler. Fast offerings also were most often donated in cash rather than food.

A priesthood reform movement from 1908 to 1922 designated the Aaronic Priesthood for boys, with ordination ages of twelve for deacons, fifteen for teachers, and seventeen for priests. Each age group received new duties and standardized lesson manuals. Bishops supervised the ward-level quorums and became presidents of the wards’ Aaronic Priesthood.

Another change in 1908 required that all ward priesthood quorums cease meeting at separate times and instead meet together weekly in a ward priesthood meeting on Monday nights. For the first time bishops regularly met with and presided over all ward priesthood groups at once. In the 1930s ward priesthood meetings shifted from Monday nights to Sunday mornings.

1930–1960. Stakes and wards continued to spread beyond the Rocky Mountain region. Bishops in outlying areas with LDS minorities faced new problems not found in the predominantly LDS state of Utah. Away from the Intermountain West, Church meetinghouses were few in number, and members often lived long distances from one another.

Changes during this period include the creation by the Presiding Bishopric of a central membership file so bishops could receive or send membership records more efficiently, a uniform ward budget system, achievement award programs for the youth, the regular publication of a bulletin from the Presiding Bishopric to be disseminated to all bishops, arrangement of funds for bishops to attend general conferences, and the improvement of the handbook for bishops. Since ward teachers were ward officers and personal representatives of the bishop, the bishopric personally selected and interviewed the ward teachers, and conducted monthly report meetings with them.

With the introduction of the welfare services program in the late 1930s, bishops established and operated ward welfare projects and mobilized ward support for stake projects. They introduced more efficient methods of collecting and utilizing fast offerings and allocated food and clothing from the new bishop’s storehouses to the needy.
DEVELOPMENTS SINCE 1960. The postwar “baby boom” and rapid increases in convert baptisms produced sudden and steep growth in Church membership during the 1960s, which required more wards, bishops, and meetinghouses. The Church established stakes and wards internationally, producing a growing number of non-English-speaking bishops.

To help new bishops, the Church published a wide array of instruction manuals for the various organizations and activities of the Church. By the 1980s new bishops in the United States received several such manuals, a GENERAL HANDBOOK OF INSTRUCTIONS, and various priesthood guidebooks. Because the bishop’s tasks became so numerous that many bishops in the 1950s and 1960s were spending most weeknights as well as all day Sunday attending to Church duties, the Church moved to ease and simplify the nature of the bishop’s assignment.

In 1964, as part of a new Church emphasis on CORRELATION, “ward teaching,” now known as home teaching, became a responsibility of Melchizedek Priesthood quorum leaders, thus removing a major supervisory assignment from the bishops, though bishops continued to visit members in their homes and conduct funerals, visit the sick, and bestow blessings. In the 1970s and 1980s the bishop’s service tenure was generally shortened, although length of service was not set; and ward sizes were reduced. Computerization of membership and financial records simplified bishops’ record-keeping tasks. LDS SOCIAL SERVICES became a counseling resource to which bishops could refer members with difficult problems. Monday nights were reserved for FAMILY HOME EVENINGS, when no ward activities were to be held, thus giving both bishops and members more time for their families. By the 1980s the Church had consolidated all ward meetings, previously spread throughout the week, into one three-hour block on Sunday, saving bishops and members much travel and meeting time, particularly in wards that covered large areas. In 1990 Church headquarters began a quarterly allotment from the general tithing fund to cover ward expenses for wards in North America. This eliminated the bishop’s need to solicit ward budget money through donations and fund-raising activities. The Church also simplified its disciplinary procedures.

[See also Bishop; BishorpriC.]

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BISHOPRIC

The bishorpriC, consisting of the BISHOP and two counselors, is the presiding or governing council in a WARD (congregation). These three men oversee all Church programs in the ward. They are assisted in the clerical, financial, and other administrative work by an executive secretary, a ward CLERK, and assistant clerks as needed. (See also PRESIDING BISHOPRIC.)

A bishop is called by the Lord to this office through the STAKE PRESIDENT, who presents the prospective bishop’s name to the GENERAL AUTHORITIES for clearance and approval. The bishop selects two adult men to serve as his counselors and submits their names to the stake presiding for approval. Upon approval, the STAKE PRESIDENCY presents the names of the complete bishorpriC in a meeting of ward members for their sustaining vote. The stake president or a visiting General Authority ordains the bishop by the LAYING ON OF HANDS and sets him and his counselors apart in their positions.

The bishorpriC selects other men to serve as ward executive secretary, ward clerk, and assistant clerks; they are likewise approved by the stake president and priesthood executive committee, sustained by the members of the ward, and set apart by the stake president or his representative. The bishop and his counselors are ordained high priests (except in student wards, where elders may be called as counselors in the bishorpriC). All give voluntary, unpaid service.

The bishorpriC is charged to (1) promote the spiritual and temporal welfare of the members of the ward, with a primary focus on youth; (2) super-