

Notes and Comments

Edited by Joseph Jeppson

THE FOUNDING OF THE L.D.S. INSTITUTES OF RELIGION

Leonard J. Arrington

The following essay is published in honor of the fortieth anniversary of the L.D.S. Institutes of Religion.

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An important facility near the campuses of colleges and universities in areas where there are substantial numbers of Mormons is the L.D.S. Institute of Religion.¹ In numbers of students the Institutes represent the most important system of higher education in the Church; and, indeed, one of the largest church-related systems of education in the nation. With approximately two hundred separate Institutes of Religion at as many colleges and universities, the combined enrollment is in excess of 35,000. This is almost twice the number of full-time students enrolled at Brigham Young University. A brief history of the founding of the Institute system seems appropriate at this time, since 1967 marks the fortieth anniversary of classes held at the first of these Institutes of Religion.

Almost from the date of its founding in 1830, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints stressed the importance of education. Indeed, the necessity of learning is probably the most frequently-repeated theme of modern-day revelations. The following scriptures are representative of theological bases for the higher educational demand that Mormonism places upon its members:

The glory of God is intelligence.

It is impossible for a man to be saved in ignorance.

¹ The writer is grateful for the help and suggestions of Wendell O. Rich, Frank M. Bradshaw, J. Wyley and Magdalen Sessions, Marc Sessions, Howard C. Searle, and George T. Boyd.

Whatever principle of intelligence we attain unto in this life, it will rise with us in the resurrection; and if a person gains more knowledge and intelligence in this life through his diligence and obedience than another, he will have so much the advantage in the world to come.

Seek ye diligently and teach one another words of wisdom; yea seek ye out of the best books words of wisdom; seek learning even by study and also by faith.

Man was created to dress the earth, and to cultivate his mind, and to glorify God.

To be learned is good, if they hearken unto the counsels of God.³

It is clear from these quotations—and there are many others with a similar admonition to acquire learning — that the Restored Gospel emphasized not only the importance of secular learning but also the necessity of balancing academic training with spiritual growth. A basic revelation announced by Joseph Smith in 1832 gave clear expression to the importance of uniting secular and religious education:

And I give unto you a commandment that you shall teach one another the doctrine of the kingdom. Teach ye diligently and my grace shall attend you, that you may be instructed more perfectly in . . . all things that pertain unto the kingdom of God . . . ; of things both in heaven and in the earth, and under the earth; things which have been, things which are, things which must shortly come to pass; things which are at home, things which are abroad; the wars and the perplexities of the nations, and the judgments which are on the land; and a knowledge also of countries and of kingdoms — that ye may be prepared in all things which I shall send you again to magnify the calling whereunto I have called you . . . ⁴

The implementation of these early commandments was exemplified by the founding of the School of the Prophets in 1833, at which advanced instruction was given in such varied subjects as Hebrew, geography, government, literature, and Christian history. When the Saints gathered in the Great Basin in 1847 and succeeding years, the local settlements established schools where instruction was given to children and adults in religious and secular topics.⁴ Problems arose, however, as the Mormon Commonwealth was increasingly “invaded” by people who “knew not Joseph.” With the passage of the Edmunds-Tucker Act of 1887, Congress intended, among other things, the strengthening of the tax-supported district public schools where, of course, religious instruction of the Mormon variety was to be excluded.

The Mormon response to the Edmunds-Tucker Act (in the field of education) was threefold. First, a Church Religion Class Board was established

³ Doctrine and Covenants 93:36, 131:6, 130:18-19, 88:118; *Journal of History* (Independence, Missouri, Vol. XV, p. 259, Book of Mormon II Nephi, 9:29.

⁴ Doctrine and Covenants 88:77-80.

⁴ Brief reviews of education in the early Church and in pioneer Utah are found in M. Lynn Bennion, *Mormonism and Education* (Salt Lake City, 1939); John C. Moffitt, *The History of Public Education in Utah* (Salt Lake City, 1946); Stanley S. Ivins, “Tax Free Schools Come to Utah,” *Utah Historical Quarterly*, XXII (October, 1954), 321-342; and in most of the dissertations listed at the end of this article.

to arrange for and supervise religious instruction in the elementary schools. For a period "Religion Classes" were held in the various wards after school. Eventually, this enterprise was discontinued as Sunday School and Primary instruction was expanded to fill the need. Second, Church academies or secondary schools were opened in most of the larger settlements. Financed partly by the general Church and partly by local congregations, the academies were supervised by a Church Board of Education. Their curricula included both classical and vocational training and religious education. Third, the Mormon-dominated territorial legislature approved a bill providing free compulsory education for all children over six and under eighteen years of age.

By the time of World War I, the Latter-day Saints realized that they could not support two systems of education. On the one hand, the Church could not build the requisite number of academies to accommodate all the children of member families. On the other hand, localities of members found it onerous to support the legally-required public schools and at the same time provide funds for the operation of the Church schools. The last of the twenty-two Church academies was opened in 1911. Beginning in 1920, most of the academies were transformed into public high schools or converted into community junior colleges and normal schools.

In order to assure the continuation of religious education for its youth, the Church established a Seminary program. Local school districts granted released time, separate Church-owned facilities were erected adjacent to high schools, and qualified teachers were employed to teach the classes. The whole program was supervised by a General Church Board of Education and a Church-appointed Commissioner. The system was later extended, particularly to schools not giving released time, by means of early morning classes. At the end of 1966 there were approximately two hundred released-time Seminaries and more than a thousand early morning Seminaries, with a total enrollment in excess of 100,000 students.⁵

With increasing numbers of L.D.S. students attending colleges and universities in the 1920's, the next step was an extension of the Seminary arrangement to non-Church institutions of higher learning. To understand the founding of the Institute system it is necessary to recall that the early 'twenties were marked by the rising reputation of science and a decline in the influence and power of the churches. Scientists were taking over the study and interpretation of the Bible by means of the "Higher Criticism." Social scientists were endeavoring to provide a new "scientific ethic," while behavioristic psychology was replacing sacred and philosophical literature in the study of man.

The reaction of religious leaders was sometimes irresponsible, as when Fundamentalists made wholesale denunciations of "Godless" scientists. Laws were passed prohibiting the teaching of evolution and other new scientific theories.

⁵ In 1965 there were 2,223 released-time Seminary classes and 1,615 non-released-time classes. The position of Commissioner of Education was created in 1919. In 1925 this title was changed to Superintendent of Church Schools. In 1928 the title was again changed to Church Commissioner of Education. In 1953 the Commissioner was released and all church schools were placed under a central administrative head, with Ernest L. Wilkinson, Chancellor. In 1964 the Unified Church School System was discontinued, as Brigham Young University was given independent status. Administrator of the Church Schools is Harvey Taylor, with Joseph Bentley and Keith Oakes, Assistant Administrators.

The most effective religious response was the spread of "Religious Foundations" at the university level. Designed to persuade intellectuals of the validity of the Church's message, these provided opportunities for religious instruction and study at a level fully commensurate with that in the secular departments of the universities.

During this period of ferment there came a "Macedonian call for help" to the First Presidency of the Church from L.D.S. professors at the University of Idaho. George L. Luke, William J. Wilde, Elmo Call, and others requested the establishment of an L.D.S. foundation at Moscow. The problem of the rather considerable number of L.D.S. students on that campus was somewhat unique, in the sense that the university was located in a region outside of "Mormon Country," where there was no chapel at which students could worship nor a ward with which students could unite in Sacrament meeting, M.I.A., and Sunday School.

As the First Presidency were discussing the Moscow appeal, President and Sister J. Wyley Sessions, former members of the faculty of the University through the Agricultural Extension Department, were just returning from a seven-year mission to South Africa. President Sessions, who was born and reared at Marion, near Oakley, Idaho, relates their call to Moscow as follows:

It was generally understood that after our release from the South African Mission that I would be assigned a job in Idaho with the church-controlled Utah-Idaho Sugar Company. After visits to the offices of the First Presidency and the sugar company, I was assured a satisfactory position with the company, and Magdalen and I were very pleased.

When President Heber J. Grant and President Charles W. Nibley were giving me the "final instructions," President Nibley suddenly stopped, looked at President Grant, and said, "Heber, we are making a mistake." President Grant replied, "Yes, I am afraid we are; I have not felt just right about assigning Brother Sessions to the sugar business."

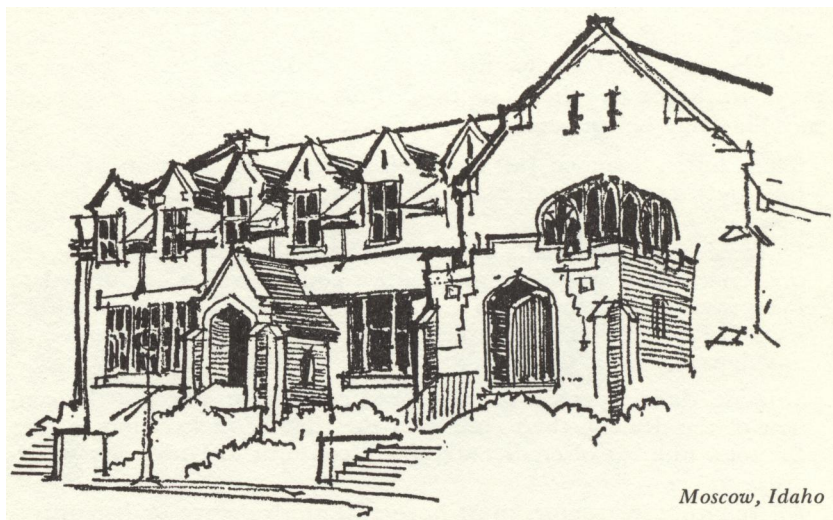
President Nibley looked at me and said, "Brother Sessions, you are the man to go to Moscow to take care of our students at the University." I replied, "No, no; are you calling us on another mission?" President Grant chuckled and said, "Of course not; we are giving you a chance to render a great service to the Church, and a fine professional opportunity for yourself." Sensing my disappointment, President Nibley arose and put his arm around me and said, "Don't be disturbed, Brother Sessions. This is what the Lord wants you to do. God bless you!"⁶

Seven days thereafter, in October, 1926, the Sessions arrived in Moscow. Their charge was simply to "take care of the L.D.S. students registered at the University and to make studies and recommendations as to what the Church should do for its members registered at all state universities."

The problem which the Sessions found is one which has become commonplace to university professors who teach Latter-day Saint and other young people with a strong religious background. In the fashion of science, students are taught to be critical of accepted theories and beliefs. This is intended to

⁶ This and other information in this article has been kindly supplied the writer by J. Wyley and Magdalen Sessions, who now live at Leisure World, Laguna Hills, California.

force them to think and to test ideas in the never-ending search for truth and new knowledge. As students deepen their understanding of the universe and of man and society, however, it frequently happens that the religious ideas which they formed when children do not stand up under their maturing scrutiny. They do not understand that these youthful ideas are often merely a kindergarten version of religious truth and not necessarily the essence or the whole of that truth. Thus, they are inclined to dismiss religion as a bundle of myths and legends which only the superstitious can believe. They may not learn that religion also can be stated and understood in terms which are not only intellectually respectable but are in every respect equivalent to the sophisticated terminology and conceptualization of, say, advanced physics and econometrics. Even those students who maintain an active interest in their faith have questions which they are unable to answer without help from those whose training and experience enable them to suggest the views and attitudes of a mature faith.⁷



It should be the prime task of the Institutes, thought the Sessions, to help Latter-day Saint youth attain a deeper understanding of their faith and church, and to help them with intellectual and other problems which arise at the university. To this end the Sessions developed a religious program that would be consistent with and equivalent to the university program. A lot was acquired on one of the main student thoroughfares just off the campus (at the corner of Deacon Street and University Avenue!), and a three-story building was constructed with a quality and style which would reflect credit on the Church and its members who went there.

⁷ Compare Bennion, *Mormonism and Education*, pp. 230-231 and George T. Boyd, "Mormonism and Secular Education," *passim*, mimeograph copy in library of the L.D.S. Institute adjacent to the University of Southern California.

In all of this activity the Sessions were encouraged and assisted by non-Church members of the faculty who were sympathetic with the objectives of the Church. These included, especially, Dr. C. W. Chenoweth, head of the Department of Philosophy; Dr. Jay G. Eldridge, Professor of German Language and Literature and long-time Dean of the Faculty; and the University President, Dr. Alfred H. Upham. According to Brother Sessions, Dr. Eldridge is the person who suggested the name of the Institutes. When the building was almost completed, Dean Eldridge asked: "What is this institution to be called?" And then, without waiting for a reply, he suggested that it ought to be named "The Latter-day Saints Institute of Religion." This name was forwarded to Elder Joseph F. Merrill, Apostle and Superintendent of Church Schools, who soon dispatched a letter addressed "To the Director of the Latter-day Saints Institute of Religion at Moscow, Idaho," stating that the name was officially approved.

With the help of Dr. Chenoweth and others, Brother Sessions devised a curriculum which would meet the academic standards of the University. The arrangement finally worked out with the University Scholarship Committee, the President, and the State Board of Education has considerable historical significance because it set a pattern which was used in arranging for the establishment of Institutes on other campuses. This agreement or memorandum of understanding may be summarized as follows:

1. The Church assumed full responsibility for the selection of directors and instructors and the maintenance of an adequate physical plant.
2. University elective credit of as much as eight semester credits (12 quarter credits) would be granted for courses which conformed to the provision in the Idaho Constitution: "No instruction either sectarian in religion or partisan in politics shall ever be allowed in any department of the University."
3. Students desiring credit for approved courses must secure the consent of the dean of their college at the time of registration so that the total number of credits taken will conform to University standards.
4. All Institute instructors must have a Master's degree or its equivalent and must possess such maturity of scholarship as is required for appointment to the position of full professor at the University.
5. The courses must conform to University standards in library requirements and in method and rigor of their conduct. They must also conform to the University Calendar and to University standards as to length of period.⁸

Under this arrangement the first classes were given by Elder Sessions in the Fall of 1927, when fifty-seven Idaho collegians were enrolled. A year later, on September 25, 1928, the Institute building was dedicated by President Nibley, with Apostle Merrill and other prominent Church officials in attendance.

In addition to class instruction, the Institute immediately became a focus for many extracurricular activities; Sister Sessions, herself a teacher and candidate for a Master's degree in counseling, devised a varied program of cultural

⁸ J. Wyley Sessions, "The Latter-day Saint Institutes," *The Improvement Era*, XXXVIII (July, 1935), 412-413.

and social activities. The scattered L.D.S. students living in University dormitories and in off-campus residences were thus brought together in a fellowship program which enriched their lives. The Moscow Institute also is credited with another innovation; it provided dormitory facilities for twenty-two male students. Students at the L.D.S. House — first on a state university campus — won the University scholarship cup so often that they were finally excluded from competition.

The L.D.S. program at Moscow won high respect, not only from University of Idaho officials and professors but from other colleges and universities in the Northwest. President Ernest O. Holland of Washington State College in Pullman visited the Institute several times and told various gatherings of educators that the Mormon Institute had come nearer to a solution of the problem of religious education for college students than had any other with which he was acquainted.

In the meantime, Institutes were being established at other colleges and universities where large numbers of L.D.S. students attended. The second Institute, and ultimately the largest in number of full-time students served, was established in 1928 at Logan, adjacent to the campus of Utah State Agricultural College (now Utah State University). An Institute was founded at the University of Idaho Southern Branch at Pocatello (now Idaho State University) in 1929, and five years later, in 1934, at the University of Utah. The first group to complete a formally-outlined four-year course of religious instruction and thus graduate from the Institutes received their diplomas from the Logan Institute in 1935. The occasion was regarded with such significance by President Heber J. Grant that he personally attended and addressed the graduation ceremony.

After four years in Moscow, Director and Sister Sessions were assigned to the Pocatello Institute. They were succeeded at Moscow by Dr. Sidney B. Sperry, a recognized scholar in the Bible and modern scriptures. Dr. Sperry was succeeded, in turn, by George S. Tanner, graduate of the University of Chicago, who for the next twenty-nine years (1931-1960) directed the Moscow Institute and maintained high standards of intellectuality, sociality, and scholarship.

Logan, Utah



The first Institute to be established outside the intermountain area was at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles; it was founded under the direction of Dr. John A. Widtsoe in 1935.⁹ Other Institutes founded before World War II were situated at four locations in Utah, one in Wyoming, and three in Arizona. They were located at the Branch Agricultural College of Utah (now College of Southern Utah), Cedar City; Snow College, Ephraim; Dixie College, St. George; and Weber Junior College (now Weber State College), in Ogden, Utah. Others were at the University of Wyoming, Laramie; University of Arizona, Tucson; Arizona State Teachers College, Flagstaff; and East Arizona Junior College, Thatcher.¹⁰

There are now sixteen full-time and thirty-nine part-time L.D.S. Institutes of Religion in Southern California alone. All told, there are sixty-five full-time programs and 135 part-time programs serving L.D.S. (and other) students in colleges and universities throughout the United States and Canada.¹¹ These Institutes are now administered as a division of the Church Schools under the direction of William E. Berrett, Administrator, and the following Assistant Administrators: Alma Burton, Dale Tingey, Wendell Rich, and Marvin Higbee. There are approximately 150 full-time Institute professors and directors.¹²

The present Church-sponsored program serves the more than 35,000 students in four main areas:

1. Religious instruction on the college level, with courses in the Bible and other Standard Works, comparative religion, theology, history of religion, L.D.S. Church administration, and courtship and marriage. Non-denominational courses are often accepted for credit at related universities.
2. Social activities, featuring dances, breakfasts, theme parties, athletic activities, and service projects (all of which are now coordinated through the new L.D.S. Student Association in a pilot program being tested at four of the larger Institutes).
3. Student counseling by trained L.D.S. educators, which includes help with personal problems, religious questions, and spiritual guidance.
4. Worship experiences through student wards and stakes, with devotionals, firesides, sunrise meetings, discussion groups, and inspirational music, in addition to the "standard" Church program.

⁹ In 1935 Dr. Rufus von Kleinschmid, Vice President of the University of Southern California, invited Dr. Widtsoe to give a University-sponsored class in religion. Similar persons of eminence were invited for the same purpose from the Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish faiths. While Dr. Widtsoe met often with L.D.S. students, a formal Institute program designed primarily for L.D.S. students was not inaugurated at USC for some time.

¹⁰ Albert L. Zobell, Jr., "Progress in Church Institutes of Religion," *Improvement Era*, LIII (November, 1950), 882 ff.

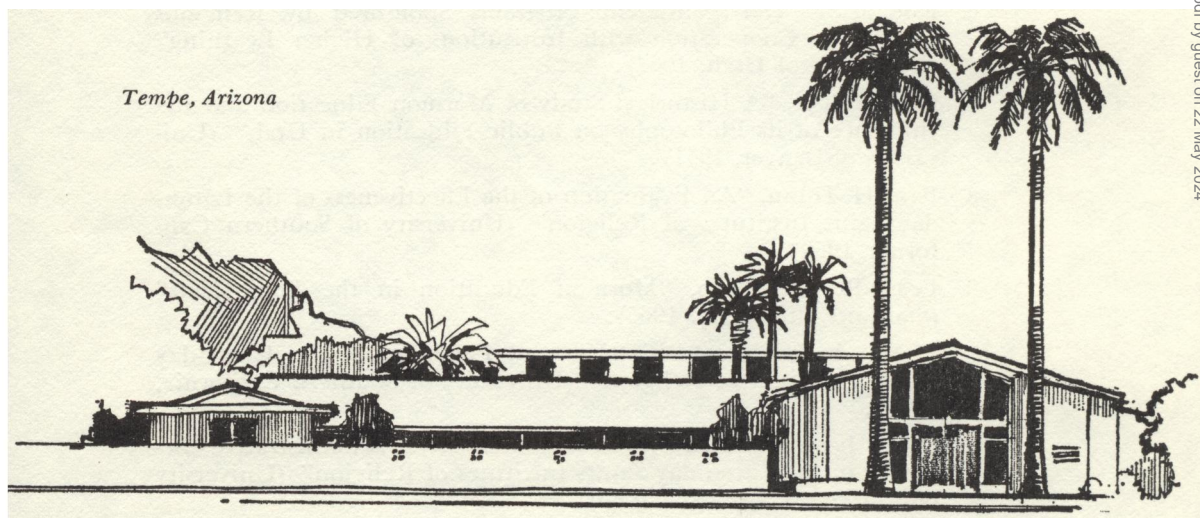
¹¹ Part-time Institutes are those associated with colleges where there are not enough L.D.S. students to have a full-time Institute program. The programs at those Institutes usually consist of one or two classes a week, an occasional social activity, and limited counseling and are usually conducted by a teacher from one of the full-time Institutes.

¹² The Church Schools, as the system is now called, includes Ricks College, Rexburg, Idaho; the Church College of Hawaii, Laie, Oahu, Hawaii; L.D.S. Business College, Salt Lake City; and elementary and secondary schools in Mexico, Chile, Tahiti, Western Samoa, Tonga, American Samoa, and New Zealand; and the Seminaries and Institutes of Religion.

The first L.D.S. Student Stake on a state university campus was organized at Utah State University in April, 1958. Beginning with four wards, that stake now has seventeen wards. The Stake Presidency, High Council, and Bishops are drawn from the local community and include many Latter-day Saint professors and university administrators. Virtually all other ward and stake positions are held by students and student wives. Since a large proportion of L.D.S. students marry before leaving the university, Utah State University Stake has six wards for married students and eleven wards for single students. President of the stake from the time of its formation has been Reed Bullen, who is a vice chairman of the Board of Trustees of Utah State University, president of the Utah State Senate, and a prominent Logan businessman.

In addition to Utah State University, student stakes now exist at Brigham Young University (six stakes), University of Utah, Ricks College, and the College of Southern Utah. The creation of others is now undergoing study. There are a considerable number of student wards and branches at California universities and at other colleges elsewhere in the United States and Canada. Study is now being given to the establishment of analogous institutions in Europe.

In the forty years since the first Institute classes were offered at Moscow, the system has become the most important factor in the Church's educational endeavor. The spread of the Gospel and the continued dispersion of Latter-day Saints throughout the world assures continued growth and recognition. For many years, and no doubt for a wise purpose, there was a "gathering" of L.D.S. students to Brigham Young University. The momentum of this build-up has already begun to slacken as that institution approaches its intended size. The Church's impact on the education of its members will emanate increasingly from the Institutes of Religion, located at institutions of higher education wherever there are L.D.S. students. The Church Department of Education estimates that by 1970 there will be 65,000 L.D.S. students enrolled in Institutes of Religion — almost twice the present number.



In the modern university, students are expected to enlarge their capacities to deal with the complexities of modern life. Latter-day Saint students may also enlarge their spiritual resources, thus giving added meaning and direction to their occupational endeavors. For their efforts devoted to the development of the whole man, the Institutes deserve the support of the wise student and the encouragement of the wise university administration.

NOTE ON L.D.S. INSTITUTE LITERATURE

The growing body of professional educators occupying teaching and administrative positions with the Institutes of Religion has led to a creditable number of doctoral dissertations on subjects dealing with the educational program of the Church. A large number of these were written in connection with Ed.D. programs. While the following list is not complete, it is at least suggestive of those which have treated the L.D.S. Institute System. [See also the review and listing of the most recent dissertations in *Among the Mormons*. Ed.]

1. M. Lynn Bennion, "The Origin, Growth, and Extension of the Educational Program of the Mormon Church in Utah" (California: Berkeley, 1935).
2. Walter D. Bowen, "An Evaluation of the In-Service Program of the Department of Education of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints" (Brigham Young University, 1965).
3. George T. Boyd, "Mormonism and Secular Education" (University of Southern California, 1957). A directed readings report.
4. Frank M. Bradshaw, "The Administrative Organization of the Latter-day Saints Institutes of Religion" (University of Southern California, 1966).
5. James R. Clark, "Church and State Relations in Education in Utah, 1847-1957" (Utah State University, 1958).
6. Ronald T. Daly, "Student Programs Sponsored by Religious Groups in Cooperation with Institutions of Higher Learning" (University of Utah, 1964).
7. Ray DeBoer, "A Historical Study of Mormon Education and the Influence of its Philosophy on Public Education in Utah" (University of Denver, 1951).
8. Paul H. Dunn, "An Evaluation of the Effectiveness of the Latter-day Saint Institutes of Religion" (University of Southern California, 1959).
9. Lean R. Hartshorn, "Mormon Education in the Bold Years" (Stanford University, 1965).
10. J. Marvin Higbee, "Objectives and Functions of the Latter-day Saints Institutes of Religion" (University of Southern California, 1966).
11. Dean Jarman, "Requirements of Effective Administrative Behavior in the Latter-day Saints Institutes of Religion" (University of Southern California, 1966).

12. LeRoy J. Jorgenson, "A Study of Student Reaction to the Curriculum in Institutes of Religion of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints" (Brigham Young University, 1965).
13. Don W. McBride, "The Development of Higher Education in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints" (Michigan State, 1952).
14. Royal Ruel Meservy, "A Historical Study of Changes in Policy of Higher Education in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints" (California: Los Angeles, 1966).
15. Wendell O. Rich, "Certain Basic Concepts in the Educational Philosophy of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1830-1930" (Utah State University, 1952).
16. Wilford W. Richards, "A Study of the Contributions in Personal Guidance Made by the Logan Latter-day Saints Institute of Religion to the Students of the Utah State Agricultural College" (Stanford, 1943).
17. A. Theodore Tuttle, "Released Time Religious Education Program of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints" (Stanford, 1949). A master's thesis.

Director A. Gary Anderson, of the Institute of Religion at St. George, Utah, is in process of writing a "History of the Institutes of Religion in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1926-1966" which is expected to be submitted to Brigham Young University in the Fall of 1967 in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Ed.D. degree.

This letter has been received concerning an important new source of financial aid to potential Institute teachers. [Ed.]

Dear Sirs:

Leonard Arrington, in his essay on the L.D.S. Institutes of Religion in the current issue of *Dialogue*, suggests the need for Masters and Doctors degrees by the related faculty. Financial aid is planned for Institute staff members and other qualified candidates by way of the "J. Wyley Sessions Fund, L.D.S. Institute Foundation."

About 200 contributions have already been received by degree candidates, one with a company-matching feature. Grants are expected to be awarded this fall as soon as final arrangements for the Fund have been completed.

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