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FIG. 1. Saints gathering for general conference, April 6, 1906 (detail). Since the Saints' arrival in the Salt Lake Valley, crowds have gathered to Temple Square hoping to find a seat for general conference. Unfortunately, buildings and other meeting locations have never been large enough to accommodate all Saints who desired to attend.

Accommodating the Saints at General Conference

Paul H. Peterson

Our buildings are very commodious,” Elder Joseph W. McMurrin of the Quorum of Seventy told assembled Saints at an outdoor general conference meeting, “but entirely too small to accommodate the people who desire to hear the word of God. Even in this overflow meeting,” he added, “notwithstanding the chilliness of the weather this morning, the people are anxious to come and hearken to the counsels that may be imparted.”¹

Elder McMurrin was speaking to hundreds of Saints who, unable to find seating in the Tabernacle for a Sunday morning session of conference, had assembled in a tent adjacent to the Bureau of Information on Temple Square to hear speakers address gospel topics. The year was 1916, but Elder McMurrin’s remark would have struck a chord familiar to Church members in both previous and subsequent generations. Accommodating the many Latter-day Saints who faithfully assemble every April and October to receive counsel and direction from prophetic leaders has always been a formidable challenge (fig. 1).

Early Latter-day Saint General Conferences

The antecedents of general conference trace back to the inception of the Church. Between 1830 and 1837 the Prophet Joseph called general conferences as needed. By the Nauvoo period (1839–1846), the practice of holding regular general conference was in place.² It is hardly surprising that it took hold so quickly. Had Church leaders not instigated such meetings early on, Church members would probably have asked for them. They believed their leaders were invested with divine apostolic authority—it was only to be expected that Church members would want to take counsel from their leaders.

Understandably, in the earliest years of the Church it was not difficult to accommodate all who chose to convene for general conference meetings. Membership was small. At the first meeting that could be called a general conference session, the June 9, 1830, gathering at Peter Whitmer's home in Fayette, New York, about thirty members and a few nonmembers attended.³ But as missionaries circulated the good news of the Restoration, tens became hundreds, and hundreds soon became thousands.

By the Nauvoo era, the Brethren found it a worthy challenge to disseminate the gospel message to all faithful Saints who congregated for conference. Generally, in this "premeetinghouse era," Joseph and others would address the Saints in one of two or three groves. Obviously, reaching thousands of people, unaided by any amplification device and subject to capricious winds that would continually change direction, was no easy task. Speaking for an hour or even more in the open air could tax the most sonorous of voices.

Perhaps no Church leader was more cognizant of the challenges of outdoor speaking than the Prophet Joseph. In May 1843, Joseph told Nauvoo Saints, "My lungs are failing with continual preaching in the open air to large assemblies."⁴ Nearly a year later, on April 7, 1844, at general conference, the Prophet asked for "the Prayers & faith of the Saints that I may have the Holy Ghost that the testimony may carry conviction to your minds of the truth of what I shall say, & pray that the Lord may strengthen my lungs."⁵ The next day, Joseph told assembled Saints, "It is impossible to continue the subject that I spoke upon yesterday in consequence of the weakness of my lungs." Due to Joseph's condition, Elder G. J. Adams was appointed "to occupy the time during the fournoon [sic]."⁶

Following the deaths of Joseph and Hyrum, the extensive preparations for the westward migration and the epic journey itself interrupted the general conference routine. No formal general conference sessions were held in 1846, that incredibly difficult year when three waves of Latter-day Saints evacuated Nauvoo and walked (or waded) across Iowa on their way to the Rocky Mountains.⁷

General conference resumed in 1847, despite the scattered condition of the Saints (most were strewn in temporary or semipermanent encampments in Iowa and Nebraska). The two sessions of conference held that year, in April and December, met just a few miles apart. April conference, held at Winter Quarters, on the Nebraska side of the Missouri, was a one-day affair, largely given over to departure concerns.⁸ December conference of 1847, held in a log cabin at Council Bluffs, Iowa, included not only Iowa-Nebraska Saints who had resided in the area for months but also a triumphant group of pioneer men led by Brigham Young. These intrepid

souls had already established a presence in the Salt Lake Valley (in late July 1847) and had returned to Missouri River settlements to reunite with their families and help prepare them for the westward journey.⁹ December general conference was an especially historic one, for it was on this occasion that Brigham Young was sustained as the President of the Church.¹⁰

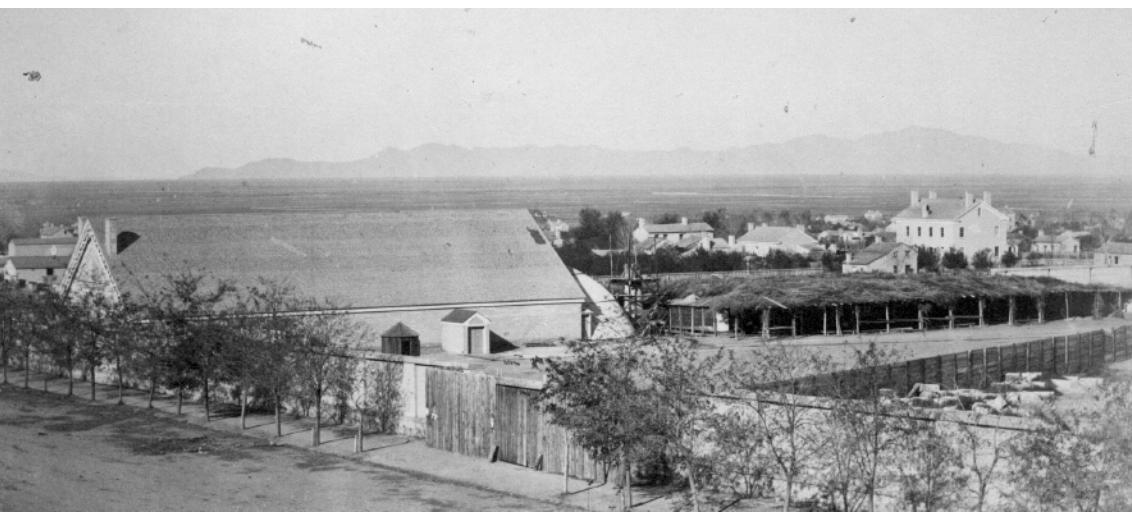
General Conference in Early Territorial Utah

The first general conference of the Church in Great Salt Lake City was held more than a year after the first company of pioneers arrived in the Valley. It was held in October 1848 at a bowery (a covered place made from boughs of trees) that had been erected in July 1847 by recently released members of a detachment from the Mormon Battalion.¹¹ The first bowery was a small one, only 40 feet by 28 feet.¹²

This small bowery in the southeast corner of Temple Square was soon replaced by a larger, more substantial one in the southwest corner. It was built on 104 posts, approximately 100 feet by 60 feet, with “boards and planks for seats” and a “large stage with curtains” at one end. It was completed by at least 1849.¹³ This structure, able to accommodate around three thousand, was utilized for general conference through 1851.¹⁴

But all the while the Saints were holding meetings, general conference and otherwise, in open-sided boweries on Temple Square, Church leaders planned to construct more practical and fitting meetinghouses. On May 21, 1851, construction began on a permanent tabernacle. Approximately 120 feet long by 60 feet wide, this new edifice (fig. 2) on Temple Square featured the standard adobe walls and a gable roof of white pine shingles.¹⁵ The ceiling was arched without a pillar.¹⁶ “The Tabernacle on the inside is built quite in the form of a Theatre,” wrote one traveler, “benches rising one behind another until the outer row is a great way from the pulpit. The building is executed on the inside so that it is one story under ground and in entering its steps descend.”¹⁷ Heber C. Kimball said it reminded him of the cock-fighting pit in Preston, England.¹⁸

Until the construction of a new tabernacle in the late 1860s, this tabernacle remained the most imposing building on Temple Square. When its doors first swung open on April 6, 1852, it was an obviously pleased Brigham Young who greeted the Saints. “At the last conference I was sick & not able to be with you[,] not able to be up,” he observed. “I meditated upon the state of the Church. I see some going to the right[,] some to the left[,] some after gold and the riches of this life. I said I would go to work & build a Tabernacle & worship the Lord so that we would not be driven home by a storm.”¹⁹



Courtesy Church Archives

FIG. 2. The Old Tabernacle (*left*) and large Bowery (*right*) on Temple Square, ca. 1863 (detail). Built in 1851, the Old Tabernacle could seat over 2,200 people, but even then it proved too small to seat all Saints wishing to attend general conference. The large Bowery, used for the first time in April 1855, could hold more people than the Old Tabernacle and was often used if the crowds were large and the weather fair. This arrangement was used for general conference until 1867.

The following day, Brigham extolled the virtues of the new building. “I will say I never saw No one room as Convenient as this,” he told the Saints. “It will seat 2,200 persons & their is 2,500 persons [present?] to-day.” Projecting into the future, Brigham said, “The Tabernacle which we expect to build on this Block will seat fifteen Thousand people.” But even a building that size, President Young realized, would never ultimately suffice. “If we was to [Erect?] this whole 10 Acre Block so that it would Hold 200,000 people By the time we got it done their would be enough to fill it. . . . The more we are humble & labour & prepare for the gathering of Israel the faster they will gather” (bracketed information in original). Brigham concluded his remarks by reminding the Saints that “the Esstablishment [sic] of this Tabernacle was the result of my meditations while upon a sick bed.”²⁰

But as pleased as the Saints were with their new house of worship, this first Tabernacle was clearly too small. On its very inaugural, the opening day of general conference in April 1852, Wilford Woodruff recorded that “the Tabernacle was filled to overflowing in a hour after the doors were open & hundreds could not get into the house.”²¹ Two years later the

Deseret News noted that crowds were so large that “President Young invited all to the north side of the building, where seats had been prepared for about 7,000, and the seats and alleys were soon filled.”²² On this occasion in April 1854, Brigham noted the challenges Church leaders confronted relative to accommodating the Saints at general conference:

If it should continue weather[wise] to oblige us to occupy the Tabernacle, we shall not be able to accommodate as many of the people as we should like but if the weather should be warm and pleasant, the people will continue to gather in from the country settlements, and many will come to conference from the city that otherwise would not; in this case, we are prepared to accommodate the whole congregation on the north side of the Tabernacle. . . . When the assembly swells so large that not one half of it can get into this hall, we will then retire to the outside, if the weather will permit, that whatever business is transacted, may be done before all the people. You will recollect that we have had meetings both outside and inside of this house, on conference occasions, which caused more or less confusion.²³

President Young’s observation capsulized the inherent challenges of trying to accommodate the thousands who desired to attend general conference during the pioneer period. Note the following. First, temporary outside seating arrangements—benches, planks, and so on—with a significantly greater seating capacity than the Tabernacle had been created just north of the Tabernacle. When the weather was suitable and the crowds were large, the Brethren opted to meet outside. Second, weather continued to play a key role in conference attendance. Saints that lived out of town, for instance, were less likely to attend conference if it was stormy. Besides having to trudge over muddy roads, they realized conference would likely be held inside the Tabernacle, and therefore they would have difficulty finding seating. And finally, according to Brigham Young, this ongoing guessing game, trying to gauge conference attendance and provide adequate seating according to capricious weather patterns, sometimes resulted in confusion.

Clearly, a larger worship structure was needed, especially at general conference time. And the already utilized meeting area north of the Tabernacle seemed the logical location. As Brigham Young noted in 1854 on another overflow occasion, the twenty-fourth of July celebration, “Our Tabernacle does not afford room for seating the people, I wish the Bishops to hearken to a request I will make of them—Enable brother Hyde . . . to build a Bowery, on the north of this Tabernacle, that will convene about twelve thousand people; and let it be done before another Celebration comes off, or even before another Conference.”²⁴

This large Bowery (see fig. 2) was ready for occupancy by April conference 1855.²⁵ Built especially to accommodate the large throngs that attended general conference, it was 156 feet long and 138 feet wide. Seating capacity was estimated at anywhere from seven to ten thousand.²⁶

But even this newest and largest of boweries yet built by the Latter-day Saints on Temple Square was sometimes insufficiently small. On the first day of general conference in April 1855, the affable Elder George A. Smith lamented that meetinghouses would never be sufficiently large to seat everyone at conference time. But then, as if to console both himself and others, Elder Smith said it was all a matter of prophetic fulfillment. After all, he noted, the Prophet Joseph early on had indicated “that we may build as many houses as we would, and we should never get one big enough to hold the Saints.”²⁷

Elder Smith had two main concerns as he addressed Latter-day Saints that windy day in April 1855. The least important of the two had to do with his losing his hairpiece. He indicated to the congregation that President Heber C. Kimball had warned him “to be careful that my hair does not blow off.” Smith told the audience that while “I shall exercise as much care and caution as possible on the subject,” it was not a major worry—everyone knew “how my head looks perfectly bare,” and if the hairpiece blew off, so be it.²⁸

More than losing his hairpiece, Elder Smith was concerned with reaching “so vast an assembly.” He reflected back on his missionary days in London when his efforts to be heard by scattered assemblies caused “my lungs to bleed,” which condition remained an “effectual check to my course in life, requiring me to keep within a certain limit.” In spite of this physical weakness, Elder Smith was confident the faith of the Saints would enable everyone to hear him, “though it requires a great effort for even a man with sound lungs to make ten thousand persons hear him speak distinctly.”²⁹

For the next twelve years, from 1855 until 1867, the Saints held general conference in either the Tabernacle or the Bowery. The advantages of the Tabernacle were obvious. Although unheated, it was warmer and provided more shelter from the elements. And, while reaching all listeners was no easy task for any speaker, it was certainly easier than reaching many more thousands in an open-sided bowery.

But the large Bowery could hold thousands more people than could the Tabernacle. At conference time, especially, that was an obvious advantage. As Brigham Young expressed on several occasions, it was always nice when “none of the Saints [were] under the necessity of coming here an hour or two before the meeting commences, in order to obtain a seat here, nor of going away because there is not room.”³⁰

Indeed, on a good day, with moderate temperatures and little or no wind or moisture, the Bowery had its own kind of charm and was a semi-idyllic place to convene. “We . . . have the pleasure of sitting out of doors, and of listening to the counsel . . . of the servants of God without being crowded, from the fact that we have Father’s big kitchen to meet in,” observed George A. Smith on a nonconference occasion in 1855.³¹ So, generally, the Saints met for general conference in the large Bowery, especially on Sunday, when crowds were largest, or if winds, dust storms, thunder-showers (thatched roofs provided decent shade but were hardly leak proof), or blizzards stayed their course.

Speakers had to make a Herculean effort to reach thousands of people in an outdoor theater. Few of us today comprehend the challenges inherent in speaking to audiences in open-air theaters without the aid of microphones. They were considerable. “We wish the entire attention of the congregation; the assembly being so vast, it will almost be impossible for the speaker to be heard unless there is great order and strict attention,” Elder Parley P. Pratt plaintively told assembled Saints in the Bowery during October conference of 1855.³² The following April conference of 1856, Elder George A. Smith confessed, “It certainly is enough to try the nerves of the strongest man and the lungs of a giant, to rise and address such an immense assemblage as is here this morning, especially with the reflection that they are expecting to listen to and be edified with what I may be able to say.”³³

Speaking to the Saints in April conference of 1863, President Heber C. Kimball noted that “the wind is blowing so very strong that it will be very difficult for the loudest speakers to make you all hear, and therefore I shall have to depend upon the stillness of the congregation.” Elder Kimball then stressed that all in attendance unite their faith that “we shall obtain what we desire. Jesus says, ‘Ask what ye will and it shall be given unto you.’ My prayer is that the winds may cease for a little while, that I may be able to speak so that you can all hear.”³⁴

Plans for a New Tabernacle

Given the difficulties, then, of speakers being heard in the open air and the whimsicality of Utah weather in both April and October, the large Bowery was never regarded as anything more than a temporary center of worship. Besides, the Saints had historically emphasized the construction of permanent, imposing (but hardly ornate) houses of worship in head-quarter cities. They had built temples in Kirtland and Nauvoo, constructed a sturdy tabernacle in Salt Lake City, and were involved in an ongoing

temple project just northeast of the Old Tabernacle. It was to be expected that they would ultimately construct a major worship-convention center in Zion.

In April conference 1863, Church leaders publicly unveiled the plans for a new Tabernacle. On April 6, Daniel H. Wells, Second Counselor to President Young, wasted little time getting into the matter at hand. Speaking at the Bowery, President Wells began his sermon by declaring that “right here we want to build a Tabernacle, to accommodate the Saints at our General Conferences and religious worship, that will comfortably seat some ten thousand people; and over there we want to build a Temple. These two items I wish to call your attention to to-day.”³⁵ During the same conference, an optimistic President Heber C. Kimball lent additional emphasis to the undertaking:

If you will take hold with us [follow our instructions] we design that you shall have the privilege of meeting in it next winter. According to the plan which is already designed, it will be larger than this concern which is polled over our heads here, and when completed it will have the advantage of both comfort and convenience for a large congregation, neither of which are afforded by this Bowery in stormy weather.³⁶

President Young selected Church architect William H. Folsom to prepare the first plans for the new Tabernacle. According to an unverified account, President Young took a boiled egg to a meeting, cracked it lengthwise but slightly off-center, placed a hollowed-out portion on a table, and uttered, “I want the building shaped like that.”³⁷ Historian-architect Paul Anderson’s observation that “Folsom prepared the first plans under President Young’s direction” is probably a more accurate approximation of the interaction between the two men.³⁸

In the meantime, the Saints continued to hold general conference in either the Bowery or the Old Tabernacle, depending on the weather and the size of the congregation. Crowds were generally larger on weekends than weekdays, and Brigham Young would adjust accordingly. For example, it was reported that on Sunday, October 8, 1865, “an immense assemblage was present in the Bowery, and the concourse was so great that hundreds were unable to get near enough to hear.” Yet the following day, Monday, it was noted that in the morning session the Old Tabernacle “was comfortably filled,” while in the afternoon it was “densely crowded.”³⁹

Sometimes, President Young would make seating adjustments on the spot. On conference morning of April 8, 1867, the Saints assembled first in the Old Tabernacle. Wilford Woodruff noted that “it was Crouded [crowded] full.” Then President Young “came in & said they would remove to the Bowery and their [sic] was a terrible rush to get out” in order to obtain the best seats possible in the Bowery.⁴⁰

As construction moved ahead, Church leaders understandably looked forward to the completion of the new worship center. At the same time, despite previous statements to the contrary, they realized the new Tabernacle would not be able to accommodate all Latter-day Saints on given occasions, especially Sunday sessions of general conference. In truth, Brigham Young had recognized this reality years before. “When we have overcome the enemy to righteousness and have a thousand years to work unmolested,” he told the Saints in April conference 1861, “I think that we then can build a room that will contain as many people as can hear the speaker’s voice.”⁴¹

Six years later, at April general conference 1867, President Young gave final “countdown” building instructions and happily predicted that come next October in the newly completed Tabernacle, the Saints would still be shy of room:

You men owning saw mills bring on the lumber to finish the tabernacle, and you carpenters and joiners come and help to use it up. We are going to plaster the main body of this building here immediately; take down the scaffold at the west end from the body of the building while the east end is being put up. And we are going to lay a platform for the organ, and then make a plan for the seats. And we calculate by next October, when the brethren and sisters come together, to have room for all; and if there is not room under the roof, the doors are placed in such a way that the people can stand in the openings and hear just as well as inside. I expect, however, that by the time our building is finished we shall find that we shall want a little more room. “Mormonism” is growing, spreading abroad, swelling and increasing, and I expect it is likely that our building will not be quite large enough, but we have it so arranged, standing on piers, that we can open all the doors and preach to people outside.⁴²

The Completion of the New Tabernacle

It was an especially eager congregation of Saints that awaited general conference in October 1867. The Tabernacle (fig. 3), although without galleries and permanent seating, was sufficiently far along in its construction to hold meetings. Thousands of Saints within traveling distance, anxious to capture the poignancy of the moment, gathered to Temple Square for the occasion.

“On Sunday morning (Oct. 6), long before the hour named for the opening of the gates . . . the people began to assemble, and by nine o’clock there was such a dense crowd around these entrances, that there was no passage along the side-walks,” reported the *Salt Lake Telegraph*.

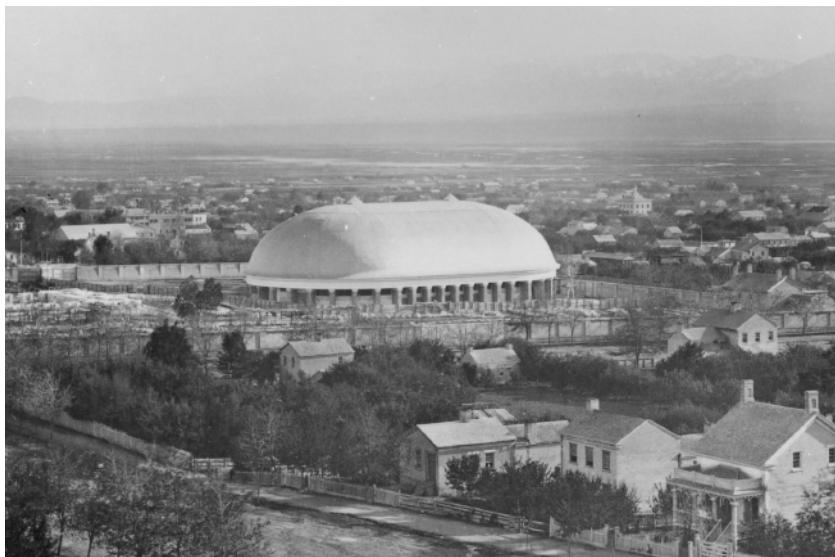


FIG. 3. The Salt Lake Tabernacle, 1873, viewed from the northeast (detail). With a seating capacity of six to seven thousand, the Tabernacle would prove too small to hold all those who desired to attend general conference. On Sunday, October 6, 1867, during one of the first sessions held in the Tabernacle, an estimated six to ten thousand conference-goers filled the Tabernacle seats, passageways, and entrances.

The *Telegraph* further indicated that before the designated 10 A.M. opening, “the seats of the great Tabernacle were filled, and the passage ways, the entrances on the north, south, and east, were also fully occupied with those eager to be present at the opening.” The overflow congregation was, for many, a prophetic witness to “what had been so often said—‘no building could be constructed large enough to hold the Saints.’” The largeness of the gathering (actual seating capacity was probably around six to seven thousand) was particularly impressive, the *Telegraph* noted, “when it is considered that a large number of the young folks are kept at home, in order to give place for their elders.”⁴³

It was with gratitude and reverential awe that speakers addressed the Saints on this historic occasion. President Young “called the meeting to order & offered up the first Prayer in a public Capacity that was Ever offered up in that Tabernacle,” and then thanked, on behalf of the First Presidency and Twelve, all who had labored on the building.⁴⁴ Second-day speaker Wilford Woodruff told the Saints, “When I Entered this Tabernacle yesterday morning & gazed upon the vast sea of fases [faces] for a few

moments I Could hardly tell whether I was in a vision or whether it was a reality what I saw. But I was soon convinced, that I stood in the Great Tabernacle of our God.”⁴⁵ Elder Woodruff’s descriptive title “Great Tabernacle” (the *Salt Lake Telegraph* also referred to the “great Tabernacle”⁴⁶) gained some currency in common usage among the Saints. For many it was and would always be the “Great Tabernacle.”

But this splendid monument to pioneer devotion and resourcefulness did not solve all conference accommodation problems. Among other things, speakers continued to be concerned about reaching all members of the vast congregation. Yes, the acoustics were impressive, but the building was so very large. Most Saints exhibited a spirit of cautious optimism that through modest adjustments on the part of the speakers and building-related “tinkering,” Church members would be able to hear their leaders. On the second day of conference, October 7, the Tabernacle was “not more than three parts occupied,” a direct result of a driving rain storm the night before. “The noticeable portions of the absent were the very young,” reported the *Deseret News*, “and the quiet of the audience was much improved.” Their best and most hopeful prognosis was that “when the audience is as still as it always should be, it will require very little, if any change, to make it a very easy place to speak in, especially after speakers . . . become familiar with the building, and the government of their voices to the situation of the audience.”⁴⁷

Clearly, it was a new experience for the Brethren to address the Saints in so vast an edifice. “Never having had the opportunity of speaking to so large a congregation as the present, or at least in so large a house as the one in which we are now assembled,” Orson Pratt humbly informed the Saints, “I do not know whether I shall be able to adapt my voice so as to make the congregation hear me.”⁴⁸

A second challenge, hardly a new one, had to do with seating capacity. It would seem that forever-elusive goal of providing seating for all Saints had once again escaped them. Describing general conference of April 1869, the *Deseret News* reported it was assumed that “the execrable condition of the roads and the pressure of spring work” would have kept many of the outlying Saints at home. But alas, “the new Tabernacle, ample and roomy as it is, was inadequate to furnish the people seats, and, during several of the meetings, hundreds were disappointed about finding room in the building.” It was a paradox, the *News* contended—“the new Tabernacle, an immense building, can hardly be called completed yet, and there is a pressing necessity for more room!”⁴⁹

A partial solution (there could never be a complete one) was provided when galleries were added. The Saints commenced building galleries some-

time in 1869. Extending some five-eighths of the way around the building, the galleries would provide seating for another few thousand.⁵⁰ April conference of 1870 was postponed a month until the galleries could be completed. On April 6, the Saints met at 10 A.M. to commence conference and, following that morning session, adjourned until May 5, when “it is believed that the new gallery will be so far finished as to be ready for use by the public, and twelve thousand persons may then be comfortably seated within the walls of the spacious building.” With the additional seating it was “presumed that Conference may be held in comfort, and that none who desire to attend will be under the necessity of staying away, for the lack of comfortable accommodation, as has been the case on many occasions in the past.”⁵¹

On Thursday, May 5, right on schedule, the Saints reconvened for conference. Elder George A. Smith expressed contentment at seeing “the people so comfortably seated.” Speaking on a weekday when crowds were generally smaller, he predicted that before conference adjourned (on the following Sunday) some would cry out that additional room was needed, but he was grateful that at least on this occasion “we need not ask any of our brethren who reside in this city, as we have had to do, to stay at home to make room for those who may be in from a distance.”⁵²

Elder Smith also observed that the “acoustic properties of the Tabernacle are evidently improved by the erection of the gallery, and if all who attend Conference will leave their coughing at home, sit still while here and omit shuffling their feet, they may have an opportunity of hearing pretty much everything that may be said.”⁵³

At that same conference session, President Brigham Young candidly addressed the congregational challenge of perfect stillness:

One thing which strikes me here this morning, and which is a source of considerable annoyance to the congregation . . . is bringing children here who are not capable of understanding the preaching. If we were to set them on the Stand, where they could hear every word, it would convey to them no knowledge or instruction, and would not be the least benefit to them. . . . I cannot understand the utility of bringing children into such a congregation as we shall have here through the Conference, just for the sake of pleasing mothers, when the noise made by them disturbs all around them. I therefore request that the sisters will leave their babies at home in the care of good nurses. And when you come here, sisters and brethren, sit still and make no noise by shuffling your feet or whispering. Wait till meeting is dismissed, then you go out and talk and walk as much as you please; but while you are in this house it is necessary to keep perfectly still.⁵⁴

For the most part, the *Deseret News* gauged this first conference an unstinted success. On Sunday afternoon, “the number of those present was

estimated at thirteen thousand—an immense assemblage to be made to hear by the human voice. . . . Every seat was full, and hundreds were compelled to stand.” In view of this seating shortage, yet another indication that the Church would never “build a house large enough to hold all the Latter-day Saints who wished to meet together,” the *News* recommended the construction of a second gallery.⁵⁵

Regarding that ongoing challenge of being able to hear the Brethren, the *News* noted that “speakers were heard better at this Conference than at any previous one held in the New Tabernacle.” Indeed, there were “but few places in the building where the lowest voiced of those who addressed the people could not have been plainly heard, if proper quiet had been maintained.”⁵⁶

It would be another half-century or so, of course, before technology solved the dilemma of hearing speakers in a huge building. Understandably, before amplification capability came about, the Brethren, especially those with weaker voices or those with colds or raspy throats, would from time to time remind the congregation of the difficulty of the task at hand and urge the Saints to maintain quiet in order that they more adequately complete what must have seemed like an impossible task. And paradoxically, as President Joseph F. Smith remarked in April conference of 1899, the very acoustical powers of the structure could work against the speaker if the audience were not perfectly quiet:

I regret that all the congregation did not hear the most excellent discourse of President Franklin D. Richards this morning; I remarked to him when he sat down that I thought I never heard him speak better, but I was sure that half the congregation had not heard what he had said. It is a difficult thing to make so vast an assembly hear, and especially is this the case when there is a feeling of uneasiness among the people and more or less moving about. . . . It is the wonderful acoustic properties of this house that actually makes it so difficult, in one respect, to make the people hear when there are so many together as are here today, because every little sound tends to confuse the voice of the speaker.⁵⁷

The Beginning of Concurrent Conference Sessions

While inadequate space had been a challenge since the Tabernacle was built, by the 1880s, Latter-day Saints were being turned away in droves from Sunday sessions (generally the most crowded sessions) of general conference. In April 1888, the *Deseret News* reported:

The General Conference which closed yesterday was probably the most numerously attended . . . of any similar gathering since the organization of the Church. Yesterday (Sunday) afternoon it was estimated that not less than five thousand people were unable to gain admittance to the

large Tabernacle, which was crowded in every part. Even the standing space was densely packed. Probably 12,000 were in the building.⁵⁸

Clearly, there was a problem that cried for a solution. More and more often, devoted Saints came to conference, hoping to be spiritually rejuvenated by listening to the sermons of Church leaders, and more and more they were going away empty, unable to get in or near the Tabernacle. There was but one solution, a *Deseret News* reporter remarked, after noting the overflowing crowds at the April 1888 conference:

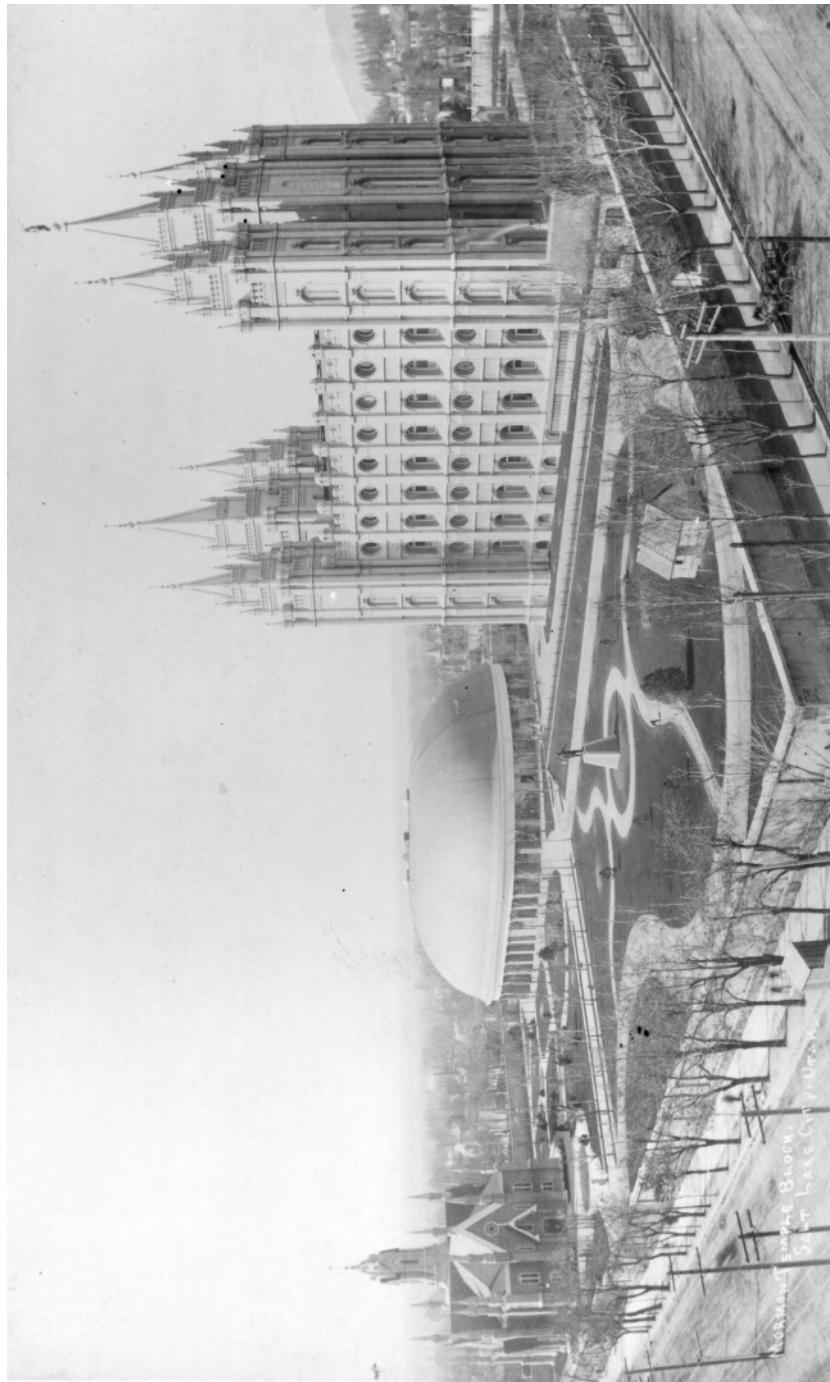
The scene of yesterday suggested the necessity at some time, not far in the future, of providing ampler means for the people as a whole to obtain the benefits of these great gatherings, when Israel assembles semi-annually for worship and instruction. It appears almost inevitable that a division of the congregations must some time ensue in order to enable the worshippers to attain the object they have in view in leaving their ordinary employment and traveling, large numbers of them, long distances to listen to the words of the servants of God, that they may, after such seasons, enter upon the usual duties of life and discharge their obligations to the Almighty with renewed zeal, faith and vigor.⁵⁹

This “divide and provide” philosophy was used, perhaps for the first time, for the Sunday afternoon session during general conference in April 1889. On that occasion, “the Assembly Hall was thrown open to accommodate the throngs who could not gain admission into the Tabernacle.”⁶⁰ There they heard their own slate of speakers as assigned by President Woodruff.

The Assembly Hall (fig. 4) was the latest addition on Temple Square. In 1877, the Old Tabernacle had been razed to make room for this splendid new edifice. Approximately 120 feet by 68 feet with walls of granite, the building was, according to John Taylor, the brainchild of President Brigham Young. Intended as a stake hall for the large Salt Lake Stake as well as for public use, the Assembly Hall was dedicated in 1882.⁶¹

From 1889 on, the Assembly Hall was regularly used as needed to accommodate overflow crowds at the Tabernacle. Almost always, the need was most acute on Sunday sessions of general conference and especially for the Sunday afternoon session.

But by the early 1890s, it was apparent the Assembly Hall could not begin to hold all of the Saints who could not gain admission to the Tabernacle. “So great was the multitude in the [Sunday] afternoon,” reported a *Deseret News* writer of April conference in 1891, “that it was found necessary to hold an overflow meeting in the Assembly Hall. That structure was also crowded to its utmost capacity, while many people were compelled to remain on the outside, unable to gain ingress to either building.”⁶²



Courtesy Church Archives

FIG. 4. Assembly Hall, Tabernacle, and Salt Lake Temple, ca. 1896. Inside the south gate of Temple Square (was built in 1902, overflow sessions were also held on the grounds around the Bureau. The area that would become the Bureau of Information grounds is in the forefront of this picture.

The Extension of Concurrent Conference Sessions

While hardly a perfect solution, multiple sessions of conference appeared to be the route to follow. “The time will come,” observed Apostle Marriner W. Merrill, “when we shall have at our Conferences, not only one overflow meeting, but many of them in different buildings. Perhaps we shall have some in the Temple.”⁶³

Elder Merrill voiced that prediction in the Assembly Hall on Sunday afternoon session of general conference on April 6, 1890, at perhaps only the second general conference overflow meeting ever held. Sixteen years later, Elder B. H. Roberts of the Quorum of Seventy, having attended more than a few overflow conference sessions in the intervening years, talked to April conference goers of 1906 in a similar vein:

I expect the time will come . . . that we shall find it necessary to hold overflow meetings, not only upon the Sabbath day, but upon other days, until we will hold our general conference in sections.

We will find ourselves in the same condition that the Nephites were in during the time that the Savior ministered among them. They gathered together in such multitudes that it became necessary to divide them into groups, and to send members of the council of the Apostles to these different groups to hold meetings with the people and dispense the word of God.⁶⁴

As Elder Roberts indicated, by the early 1900s, simultaneous Sunday general conference overflow sessions had become commonplace. Up to this time, conference crowds did not warrant overflow meetings on non-Sunday days except on rare occasions.⁶⁵

As mentioned, the first self-contained overflow conference sessions were held in the Assembly Hall, which soon proved inadequate to deal with increasing conference crowds. Fortunately, in the first decade of the twentieth century, two new buildings were constructed on or near Temple Square. In 1902 the Bureau of Information was completed, located just fifty feet inside the south gate into the square (fig. 5). That same year, Barratt Hall (fig. 6), just north of Temple Square across Main Street (60 North Main), was built, the result of a generous donation from Matilda Barratt, as a memorial to her son, Samuel, who died shortly after fulfilling an honorable mission to England.⁶⁶

The Bureau of Information, or more accurately the grounds adjacent to the Bureau, and Barratt Hall became (and remained for the next twenty years) general conference overflow stations number two and number three. Essentially, the prioritizing went as follows. The Assembly Hall was almost always the first option. The second overflow session, with one exception, was held *either* on the grounds of the Bureau of Information (weather

permitting) or inside Barratt Hall—sessions of conference were rarely held simultaneously in these two locations.⁶⁷ The Bureau of Information grounds were first used for a conference overflow during October conference of 1902. Barratt Hall was first used for an overflow meeting in October conference of 1907.⁶⁸ Sometimes over a thousand people would congregate on the grounds adjacent to the Bureau, and Barratt Hall could hold an additional thousand or so.

Consistent with the predictions of Elders Merrill and Roberts, the number of overflow conference meetings increased during President Joseph F. Smith's administration (1901–1918).

By 1916 it became standard

procedure to hold as many as four overflow sessions at a given general conference, a practice that extended throughout the remainder of the presidency of Joseph F. Smith and into the first five years of President Heber J. Grant's administration. Seating space was almost always at a premium on Sundays, and therefore it became the norm to hold overflow sessions on Sundays. Two concurrent overflow sessions were held on Sunday mornings and two more on Sunday afternoons. Again, the Assembly Hall was always option number one, and either the grounds adjacent to the Bureau of Information (most of the time) or Barratt Hall (some of the time) was option number two.

In an age when there were relatively few missions and stakes in the Church, both President Smith and President Grant opted to utilize leaders of both mission and stake Church units as speakers in general conference, especially in the overflow sessions. It was a reciprocal arrangement that had obvious advantages. Not only did Church leaders (and the Saints) enjoy hearing from these leaders, but the mission and stake presidents filled a



Courtesy Church Archives

FIG. 5. Bureau of Information (detail). On June 4, 1902, President Joseph F. Smith gave instructions to build the Bureau of Information "at once" to serve the needs of visitors to Temple Square. It was completed shortly thereafter at a cost slightly exceeding \$500. The Bureau would be a "center from which shall flow official information concerning Utah . . . and the beliefs and practices of the Latter-day Saints generally" (Edward H. Anderson, "The Bureau of Information," *Improvement Era* 25 [December 1921]: 137). The Bureau became a place where Saints could gather to hear the word of God at conference time.



Courtesy Church Archives

FIG. 6. Detail of Barratt Hall (with a gathering of Latter-day Saints University students), ca. 1908. Completed in 1902 and first utilized as an overflow structure for the October conference of 1907, Barratt Hall could hold around one thousand conference goers. The hall's completion was made possible by the financial donations of British immigrant Matilda M. Barratt, a member of the first general Primary presidency from 1880 to 1888 who made generous contributions to education and immigration causes.

practical need. With as many as four overflow sessions on a given conference Sunday, it could hardly be expected that twenty-six General Authorities could fill all the speaking slots.⁶⁹

Oftentimes the overflow sessions had their own choirs and conductors. This was almost always the case in the Assembly Hall. Various local, stake, and ward choirs (and sometimes university student choirs) regularly provided choral music. Congregational singing was more likely to occur on the outside grounds of the Bureau of Information.

Understandably, most Saints hoped to get a Tabernacle seat. The First Presidency and most (but not all) of the Twelve spoke in the Tabernacle. Aware that most Saints preferred hearing the First Presidency and the Twelve, on occasion some of the Brethren speaking in the overflow sessions would remind the Saints in overflow congregations that they too were entitled to a generous portion of the Lord's spirit. "I realize that it is somewhat of a disappointment to our brethren and sisters not to be able to find places in the large Tabernacle this morning," observed Apostle George F. Richards as he greeted Saints at an overflow session in 1914. But quickly

Elder Richards noted that if Saints had come to worship in the proper spirit, they would be blessed accordingly.⁷⁰ In 1924 assistant Church historian Andrew Jenson remarked that “the Saints gathered in this Assembly Hall are entitled to the blessings of the Lord as much as those congregated in the Tabernacle.”⁷¹

One blessing that continued to elude everyone was the opportunity for all congregating Saints to actually hear the speakers. This was true of all conference locations but perhaps most of all for the grounds adjacent to the Bureau of Information. Not surprisingly, as larger and larger groups of Saints gathered at the grounds outside the Bureau, it became a considerable chore for speakers to reach Saints on the perimeter. “I sincerely trust . . . that my voice will carry sufficiently far so that all of you may hear,” observed Rey L. Pratt, president of the Mexican Mission, in October 1922 general conference, “but I think never before have I seen so many people who were not able to enter the great buildings, the Tabernacle and the Assembly Hall, and who because of their desire to hear the word of the Lord have congregated themselves upon these grounds.”⁷²

And, of course, a half-century after the Great Tabernacle had opened, some General Authorities, especially those not blessed with a strong voice, continued to express concerns about reaching the far-flung congregation. “I wondered as I sat in the stand yesterday, where President John M. Knight got his stentorian voice,” observed Quorum of the Twelve President Rudger Clawson in April conference of 1922. “If I knew where such voices were manufactured, I think I should go and get one,” Elder Clawson added. “As he stood there and spoke to the congregation, he roared like a lion, and the building trembled. I cannot roar. Nevertheless, I may possibly be able to make you hear, if I speak straight ahead.”⁷³

The Advent of Amplification, Microphones, and Radio

Fortunately for Elder Clawson, for other general conference speakers, and for Latter-day Saints everywhere, advancing technology provided a solution for the nearly century-old challenge of being heard by a large gathering. For many of the Brethren, it must have seemed long overdue. By the early 1920s, thousands of Saints who made the effort to gather at Temple Square were unable to hear Sunday general conference live—at either the Tabernacle, the Assembly Hall, the Bureau of Information grounds, or Barratt Hall. There were simply too many people and too few seats.

But relief was on its way. In April 1923, the Church used amplifiers in a general conference for the first time. It was a historic occasion. On the opening day of conference, Friday, April 6, President Grant announced that amplifiers had been placed in the Tabernacle and that the proceedings were

being piped into the Assembly Hall. Speaking at the Friday session, scientist and Apostle John A. Widtsoe spoke of the amplification system as a “tremendous advance, a tremendous rebuke to those of my day, unbelievers in God, who have said to me: ‘What is the use of praying? God cannot hear. Your voice merely stirs waves in the air, and God is so far away that the waves disappear and cannot reach Divinity. You are wasting your time.’”⁷⁴

The *Deseret News* pronounced the amplification experiment an unqualified success:

For the first time in the history of the Mormon church Conference, a mechanical device is being used to facilitate and increase audition on its part of the persons in attendance. An amplifier of the most modern type, with two receivers and transmitters that project in three directions, has been installed in the tabernacle. . . .

Officials of the presiding bishopric of the church, under whose orders the amplifier was installed, pronounced it a success and conference attendants who sat at the very extreme east end of the building and under the gallery, said they heard distinctly all of the speakers.⁷⁵

Despite the glowing assessment, however, there was at least one kink in the system. Sunday sessions were piped to some four thousand assembled on the grounds adjacent to the Bureau of Information.⁷⁶ Yet Elder George Albert Smith, sent outside by President Grant to report on the quality of the sound, indicated that there was plenty of volume but that it was difficult to make out the words of speaker President Anthony W. Ivins.⁷⁷

Eighteen months later, another technological advance dramatically changed the way the Saints participated in general conference. “Radio broadcasting of the general conference sessions became a reality in October 1924, when KFPT, now KSL, ran a direct wire to the main pulpit.”⁷⁸ In his opening address, President Grant announced that proceedings were to be broadcast over the radio and that around one million people would be able to hear conference. “The radio is one of the most marvelous inventions man knows anything about,” President Grant observed. “To have the voice carried for thousands of miles seems almost beyond comprehension.”⁷⁹ To the end of his life, President Grant retained an almost childlike awe of the power of radio to disseminate the gospel message (fig. 7).

One especially poignant event occurred in that first radio broadcast of general conference in 1924. One of the great missionary-scholars in Church history, Charles W. Penrose, at the time serving as First Counselor in the First Presidency, was ill and confined to his home. A radio and radio operator were made available for his use. When President Grant began to speak, President Penrose uttered reverently from his sick bed, “It is the President’s voice.”⁸⁰ Later in the conference, President Grant read a message from the

radio operator. “President Penrose heard all of the proceedings this morning, most of it as perfectly as if he were here on the stand,” the prophet reported. President Grant added that when the male chorus sang one verse of “School Thy Feelings, O My Brother,” a Penrose-authored hymn, “tears of gratitude” filled the venerable counselor’s eyes. President Penrose later thanked the KFPT operator for “one of the most thrilling experiences of my life.”⁸¹

With the advent of radio, all local Latter-day Saints were able to participate directly in general conference. Thousands could mill around Temple Square and hear the proceedings, and tens of thousands more, at least in the immediate area, could listen on radio. But interestingly, President Grant continued to hold self-contained overflow

sessions of general conference in the Assembly Hall until 1928.

For example, during the April 1923 conference, when amplifiers were first used, as Sunday conference proceedings were being piped to some four thousand Saints congregated around the Bureau of Information, separate overflow sessions were held in the Assembly Hall. Elder Joseph Fielding Smith of the Quorum of the Twelve presided at the morning overflow session, and the music and singing were furnished by the Jordan Stake choir.⁸²

There were probably at least two reasons why President Grant opted to provide separate self-contained sessions of conference, even as amplification and radio capacity made it possible for all to follow along with Tabernacle proceedings. First, it appears that President Grant and other leaders favored direct speaker contact whenever possible. In reporting on general



Courtesy Church Archives

FIG. 7. President Heber J. Grant and others at the inauguration of radio station KZN, May 6, 1922 (detail). When general conference was broadcast over the radio for the first time in October 1924, an estimated one million people were able to hear conference. The radio was the first of many technological advances that have allowed Saints around the world to listen to general conference.

conference in October 1926, the *Deseret News* affirmed that while the radio was remarkable, “it does not provide the personal contact so necessary to give one a full appreciation of the importance and significance of conference proceedings, hence the great desire of the assembled hosts to crowd together . . . to receive first hand . . . the inspirational addresses of those who speak.”⁸³

The second reason, perhaps a more compelling one, for continuing the separate self-contained sessions of conference some five years into the amplification era was President Grant’s desire to give non-General Authorities an opportunity to speak in general conference. More particularly, President Grant, as President Joseph F. Smith before him, was committed to giving mission and stake presidents at least one opportunity (and oftentimes multiple opportunities) to speak in general conference. The separate sessions provided such a venue.

But despite President Grant’s desire to hear from mission and stake leaders, the clear-cut organizational advantages (it was much easier to run but one slate of meetings) and, most especially, the realization that most Church members wanted to be in the company of the First Presidency and the Twelve soon resulted in a discontinuance of separate self-contained overflow sessions. More and more, Church members preferred to attend the Tabernacle proceedings. “We have learned that the majority of the people prefer to hear the sermons that are preached in this building on Sundays, rather than attend overflow meetings,” President Grant announced in April conference of 1928. “For that reason we have discontinued the meetings in the Assembly Hall.”⁸⁴

The era of the self-contained general conference overflow sessions had come to an end. Though few Latter-day Saints today are even aware of this once important general conference organizational dynamic, separate simultaneous overflow sessions were held at least as early as 1889, were regularly held throughout Joseph F. Smith’s entire administration, and continued to be held ten years into President Grant’s tenure. Over this period, around a hundred overflow sessions were attended by thousands of Saints.

The Tabernacle—General Conference Headquarters

Amplification and radio were but the beginning of the technological improvements that through the years enabled Church leaders to accommodate the general conference needs of most Church members. October general conference in 1949 ushered in yet another technological era. “I am . . . pleased to announce that for the first time in the history of the church,” declared President George Albert Smith, “sessions of this conference will

be broadcast upon the air by television over the Salt Lake area and certain areas adjacent thereto.”⁸⁵

Technological advances would soon allow Saints throughout the world access to general conference. “By 1962, short wave radio transmissions beamed General Conference to” growing numbers of Saints in “Europe, South America, South Africa, and Mexico.” Satellite transmission to interested television and cable stations was initiated in 1975, and in 1980 conference sessions were first carried by satellite to church centers outside of Utah. Sessions were first translated simultaneously into other languages in 1962, and by 1990 they were being translated into twenty-nine languages. Thus the translation room became an integral part of the Tabernacle.⁸⁶

All of these television broadcasts and satellite transmissions have, of course, emanated from the Tabernacle on Temple Square. Since 1867, this historic building has served as the hub of general conference, a vital conduit for leaders to convey truth and direction to Church members. Home to the world famous Mormon Tabernacle Choir and organ, this uniquely shaped, sacred edifice is surely a well-known and well-recognizable structure belonging to the Church.

Through the years, five generations of Church leaders have affectionately, respectfully, and even reverentially addressed the historic importance of the Tabernacle. The sacred nature of the gathering of dedicated Saints and the prophetic words spoken has made general conference a hallowed experience.

In October conference of 1929, Elder George Albert Smith told assembled Saints he remembered the days “when this building was first erected and as a child I helped to decorate the roof with festoons of paper flowers,—at least I helped make the flowers.” Elder Smith remembered the “old gas jets around the gallery that were used to illuminate this building,” and contrasted that primitive lighting system with the “perfection of lighting” that currently existed.⁸⁷ Ten years later, Elder Levi Edgar Young of the Seventy commented on the Tabernacle as a “realized dream, . . . wrought out by hard labor and sublime faith.” The building “has a spiritual quality,” Elder Young surmised, “that puts us all in a proper frame of mind to receive the word of God.”⁸⁸

Perhaps the most successful attempt to give meaning to this edifice in terms of sacred history was made by President Stephen L. Richards in April conference of 1952:

I stand today in a pulpit sanctified by its history. When I recall the noble servants of our Heavenly Father who have stood here and given inspired counsel to the people, and borne testimony with such power and conviction and spirit as to electrify every soul who heard; when I

contemplate the operation of the still, small voice, which has come from simple and lowly words given here, which have touched the hearts and sympathies of the people; when I think of the vast volume of precious truth which has been proclaimed from this stand, I feel very small and weak within it. . . .

Ponder for a moment, my brethren and sisters, and all who listen, the glorious and vital truths which have been proclaimed in this building—the nature and composition of the Godhead, the organization of the universe, the history and placement of man in the earth, his purpose in living, and the divine destiny set for him, the laws governing his conduct and his eligibility for exaltation in the celestial presence, the true concept of family life in the eternal progression of the race, the truth about liberty and the place of governments in the earth, the correct concept of property, its acquisition and distribution, the sure foundations for peace, brotherhood, and universal justice. All these elemental things, and many others incident thereto, have been the burden of the message of truth which has come from this building through the generations.⁸⁹

From the era of pioneer wagon trains to our day of satellites and the Internet, from President Brigham Young to President Gordon B. Hinckley, the Tabernacle has stood firm and strong, a viable symbol of the vibrancy of the Mormon faith. And according to President Gordon B. Hinckley, the Tabernacle will endure many more years. ““This is such a wonderful old building with structure, design and organ,”” President Hinckley recounted at a regional conference in January 1992. ““Certainly, we could tear it down and build a brand new, modern auditorium with air conditioning, padded benches and modern amplification. But why would we? Why would we want to get rid of this wonderful old building?””⁹⁰

The New Conference Center

While the historic Tabernacle will continue to serve important functions (among other things, weekly Tabernacle Choir broadcasts), and while this sacred edifice will indeed likely outlive us, for some decades Church leaders harbored the idea of constructing a larger edifice. Such an edifice would serve as a major conference and civic center and would accommodate thousands of additional Saints for April and October general conferences.

Church leaders, however, never entertained the notion of accommodating everyone who wanted to attend conference. After all, Church membership has soared over the eleven million mark—buildings simply don’t come that size. But, for at least two reasons, the construction of a newer, larger building made sense. First, Tabernacle seating was increasingly limited. While the hand-hewn benches that were skillfully constructed by pioneer craftsmen were still around, the necessity of adding additional seats to

the choir loft and rostrum seating resulted in the removal of eight benches. At the same time, the gradually expanding physical dimensions of successive generations of Saints (while we hope to emulate the faith of our forebears, we clearly exceed them in height and girth) required spacing the benches further apart. Seating capacity had been reduced to somewhere between five and six thousand.⁹¹

More importantly, there was always the desire to make it possible for more Latter-day Saints to experience conference firsthand. The Brethren were especially solicitous that many out-of-towners have that opportunity. Many traveled “from far corners of the earth without a realistic expectation of being able to worship together and be in the presence of the . . . General Authorities of the Church,” observed President James E. Faust. “Many of these have been young people and it is upon their shoulders that the future of this Church will rest.”⁹²

In truth, as early as President Grant’s administration, some Church leaders considered or envisioned the construction of a larger edifice. In April 2000 general conference, President Hinckley read a recently discovered 1924 excerpt from Elder James E. Talmage’s journal that mentioned “the possible erection of a great pavilion on the north side of the Tabernacle, seating perhaps twenty thousand people or even double that number.”⁹³ Even with the advent of “wonderful radio,” President Grant also occasionally longed for a larger building. Impressed by the teeming throng at October 1937 conference, President Grant said, “I am living in hopes that some day we will have a bigger building so that everybody can get a seat.”⁹⁴ Twelve years later, President Grant’s successor as Church President, President George Albert Smith, observed at April 1949 conference, “I wish that many more of our people could be present on an occasion of this kind.” Added President Smith: “Our house is not large enough. Even now we have to begin to think of a larger place for our general conferences.”⁹⁵ And, in April conference of 1953, President David O. McKay noted that “one pressing need of our Church is a larger building. We need a Coliseum that will seat fifteen or twenty thousand people.”⁹⁶

President Hinckley pointed out both at groundbreaking ceremony in July 1997 and at April conference of 2000 that the notion of constructing a larger structure was “discussed in the highest councils of the Church as early as 1940.” An architect actually drew up a plan of a building that would seat nineteen thousand and would stand where the new Conference Center now stands. But apparently the opinion prevailed, said President Hinckley, “that it would be better to pursue electronic means to reach the members of the Church.”⁹⁷



Courtesy Visual Resource Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

FIG. 8. Interior of Conference Center, 2000. With a seating capacity of over twenty thousand, the Conference Center can accommodate twice as many Saints as the Tabernacle. The various levels of seating can be easily seen in this view. On the right side is the stand for the General Authorities and the Mormon Tabernacle Choir.

The splendid new Conference Center was first unveiled for general conference in April 2000. At the beginning of his welcoming address, President Hinckley paid tribute to the historic Tabernacle “which has served us so very well for more than 130 years” and which “will go on serving long into the unforeseeable future.” Shifting his focus to the new Conference Center, President Hinckley briefly summarized its short history. The plans to construct such a building were first conveyed to Church members in April 1996 general conference. A year later, groundbreaking ceremonies were conducted on a milestone date in Latter-day Saint history—July 24, 1997, 150 years after the first group of intrepid pioneers arrived in the Valley. After considering several architectural schemes, one plan providing for twenty-one thousand seats and no interior pillars was selected (fig. 8). The Conference Center was built with granite from the same quarry that, nearly a century and a half earlier, had furnished stone for the Salt Lake Temple.⁹⁸

Although, as President Hinckley remarked at the groundbreaking ceremony, the Conference Center “can accommodate far more [people] than we’re . . . able to accommodate [in the Tabernacle],”⁹⁹ the large auditorium cannot accommodate every Saint who wishes to attend general conference. In an effort to be impartial and fair, the Church in recent years has distributed conference tickets by allotment through stakes and wards. Essentially, all Church members desiring tickets must make arrangements through their priesthood leader.

For those that are unable to obtain seats in the Conference Center, there are other limited opportunities to be an actual part of conference. Saints can observe conference on a large screen in the Tabernacle. Spanish speaking Saints can observe and hear conference simultaneously translated in their native tongue in the Assembly Hall, and a limited number of people can hear sessions piped in on the grounds of Temple Square. Occasionally, the Conference Center theater is available for conference goers.¹⁰⁰

But actual participation in general conference in or near the Conference Center must of necessity remain a privilege for but a small percentage of Church members. Fortunately, technological developments have stayed abreast of Church growth. The expansion of satellite dishes and cable companies and, most especially, the development of the Internet makes it possible for millions of Saints throughout the world to participate in live conference.

In truth, accommodation is considerably less a challenge today than it was in former times. More Saints than ever before can receive pertinent instructions, and especially, inspiring testimonies of Church leaders, as they are given.

President Gordon B. Hinckley made an implied reference to the ongoing importance of such testimonies in the conclusion of his opening

address in the new Conference Center in April 2002. In that address, President Hinckley referred to the handsome pulpit that graced the podium area. It was taken from a tree that for years had stood serenely in President Hinckley's backyard. President Hinckley said, "it is an emotional thing for me," having a small bit of himself in this grand new Conference Center.¹⁰¹ Probably few, perhaps no one, in the vast listening audience recalled that at a general conference forty-eight years previous, President Stephen L. Richards had talked of the Tabernacle pulpit as one "sanctified by its history." President Richards was referencing the continual stream of inspired utterances that had been made by prophets and apostles, testifying to the reality of God's plan of salvation and the redeeming mission of his Son, Jesus Christ.¹⁰²

And now, nearly a half century later, speaking to a Church membership some ten times greater than in 1952, President Hinckley talked of a new pulpit "in this great hall where the voices of prophets will go out to all the world in testimony of the Redeemer of mankind."¹⁰³

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9. Richard E. Bennett, *Mormons at the Missouri, 1846–1852: "And Should We Die . . ."* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), 199, 212–13; Richard E. Bennett, *We'll Find the Place: The Mormon Exodus, 1846–1848* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997), 290–92.
10. *History of the Church*, 7:621.

11. “Official Session First Held in S. L. in Fall of 1848,” *Journal History of the Church*, April 5, 1934, Church Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, microfilm copy in Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, citing *Deseret News* of same date. I have assumed the bowery they used was that first one built by Mormon Battalion returnees from Pueblo. According to longtime assistant Church historian Andrew Jenson, the first bowery built by Saints in Salt Lake City was a small one in the southeast corner of Temple Square in July 1847. Later that same year, the Saints built a second bowery in the Old Fort. Andrew Jenson, *Encyclopedic History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1941), 82–83, 860. Ronald W. Walker states, “Boweries became a staple of Salt Lake and outlying community worship—in some communities they were not replaced with tabernacles for several decades” (“Pioneer Life and Worship,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 3:1085).

A firing of a cannon on October 6, 1848, signaled the opening of that first general conference in the Valley, “but after the opening exercises the conference was adjourned to the following Sunday (October 8th) in order to give the brethren of the Mormon Battalion [an early sick detachment who traveled northward from Pueblo to Salt Lake City] an opportunity of celebrating the return home of the Mormon battalion brethren [members of the main body from California who just arrived in the valley].” *Journal History of the Church*, October 6, 1848. In actuality October 6, 1848, was a unique date in Church history as Church general conferences were begun in two separate locations. Besides the group convening in Salt Lake City in the bowery, President Ezra T. Benson of the Quorum of the Twelve conducted a general conference at Mosquito Creek in Pottawattamie lands in Iowa. *Journal History of the Church*, October 6, 1848; Kenneth W. Godfrey, “150 Years of General Conference,” *Ensign* 11 (February 1981): 72.

12. Carter E. Grant, “Zion’s Ten Acres,” *Improvement Era* 73 (June 1970): 16.

13. Grant, “Zion’s Ten Acres,” 17; Roberts, *Comprehensive History of the Church*, 3:493. Grant indicates this bowery was built in spring 1848. Jenson, *Encyclopedic History*, 82–83, suggests it was constructed in the first half of 1849. On at least one occasion, more particularly the second anniversary of the arrival of pioneers, canopies were extended about 100 feet from each side of the bowery to accommodate the overflow crowds. Roberts, *Comprehensive History of the Church*, 3:493.

14. Sarah Jane Weaver, “Park Workers Erect Pioneer-Style Bowery,” *Church News*, published by *Deseret News*, September 30, 1995, 11.

15. Grant, “Zion’s Ten Acres,” 17. Estimates of the size of the Old Tabernacle vary. Grant indicates it was 100 feet by 62 feet. Jenson, *Encyclopedic History*, 860, suggested it was 126 feet in length and 64 feet in width. James E. Talmage, *House of the Lord* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1962), 202, apparently accepts Jenson’s measurements of 126' x 64'. Ronald W. Walker, “Pioneer Life and Worship,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 3:1086, says it measured 120' x 60'.

16. Talmage, *House of the Lord*, 202–3.

17. Walker, “Pioneer Life and Worship,” 3:1086, citing Reminiscence of Addison Moses Crane, Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

18. Woodruff, *Journal*, 4:122, April 8, 1852.

19. Woodruff, *Journal*, 4:105, April 6, 1852.

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23. “Minutes of General Conference,” Journal History of the Church, April 6, 1854, citing *Deseret News*, April 13, 1854.
24. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1855–86), 2:17, July 24, 1854.
25. Grant, “Zion’s Ten Acres,” 18; George A. Smith, in *Journal of Discourses*, 3:23, August 12, 1855.
26. Roberts, *Comprehensive History of the Church*, 4:15. Roberts indicates the large Bowery could hold 8,000. Junius Wells remembered it holding 7,000 and on “opening day,” George A. Smith estimated that 10,000 were in attendance. Junius F. Wells, in *Ninety-Fourth Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1924), 117; George A. Smith, in *Journal of Discourses*, 2:360, April 8, 1855. The larger figures probably reflect the added numbers of late-arriving Saints and/or young children who would sometimes stand or mill around the edges of the open-sided edifice.
27. George A. Smith, in *Journal of Discourses*, 2:360, April 8, 1855.
28. George A. Smith, in *Journal of Discourses*, 2:360, April 8, 1855.
29. George A. Smith, in *Journal of Discourses*, 2:360, April 8, 1855.
30. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 4:295, March 29, 1857. That is not to say the Bowery always had ample seating. Occasionally, especially on general conference Sunday sessions, it too was inadequate.
31. George A. Smith, in *Journal of Discourses*, 3:23, August 12, 1855.
32. George D. Watt, “Discourse [of Parley P. Pratt],” Journal History of the Church, October 7, 1855, citing *Deseret News* of same date.
33. George D. Watt, “Discourse [of George A. Smith],” Journal History of the Church, April 6, 1856, citing *Deseret News* of same date.
34. J. V. Long, “Discourse by President Heber C. Kimball,” Journal History of the Church, April 6, 1863, citing *Deseret News* of same date. More so than most of the Brethren, Elder Kimball was inclined to call the Saints to repentance if there was any unnecessary chatter. In October 1856, after calling the conference to order, Kimball said:

I want to say a word to the Congregation and to all the House of Israel. If you expect to be blessed & have the word of God come through his servants let there be peace and silence. . . . For men to Come hundreds of miles & then to sit & talk & chatter & do their business here at this meeting it is not proper. . . . If you do not believe this, get the spirit of God & come on this stand & attempt to talk to this people. (Woodruff, *Journal*, 4:465–66, October 7, 1856)

35. Daniel H. Wells, in *Journal of Discourses*, 10:139, April 6, 1863.
36. Heber C. Kimball, in *Journal of Discourses*, 10:166, April 6, 1863.
37. R. Scott Lloyd, “The Great Tabernacle: 125-Year-Old Monument to Resourcefulness,” *Church News*, October 3, 1992, 8.
38. Paul L. Anderson, “Tabernacle, Salt Lake City,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 4:1433; Lloyd, “The Great Tabernacle,” 8.
39. Journal History of the Church, October 9, 1865, citing *Millennial Star* of same date.

40. Woodruff, *Journal*, 6:335, April 8, 1867.
41. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 9:1, April 6, 1861.
42. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 12:29, April 7, 1867.
43. "The Thirty-Seventh Semi-Annual Conference," *Journal History of the Church*, October 6, 1867, citing *Salt Lake Telegraph* of same date.
44. Woodruff, *Journal*, 6:367, October 6, 1857.
45. Woodruff, *Journal*, 6:369, October 7, 1867.
46. "Thirty-Seventh Semi-Annual Conference," *Journal History of the Church*, October 6, 1867.
47. *Journal History of the Church*, October 7, 1867, citing *Deseret News* of same date.
48. David W. Evans, "Discourse [of Orson Pratt]," *Journal History of the Church*, October 7, 1867, citing *Deseret News* of same date.
49. "The Late Conference," *Journal History of the Church*, April 9, 1869, citing *Deseret News* of same date.
50. Roberts, *Comprehensive History of the Church*, 5:135.
51. "The Late Conference," *Journal History of the Church*, April 5 and 6, 1870, citing *Deseret News* of same date. The *News* on April 6 provided a rationale for the postponement:

According to the adjournment of the Conference held on Oct. 6th, 1869, the Saints met in a Conference capacity, this morning at 10 o'clock. The meeting was merely of a preliminary nature; as the Saints had been notified that, in consequence of the absence of Presidents Brigham Young and Geo.[rge] A. Smith, and also owing to the present unfinished condition of the gallery in the New Tabernacle, Conference would be re-adjourned until May 5th. The attendance was as large as might have been expected under the circumstances.

52. David W. Evans, "Remarks [of George A. Smith]," *Journal History of the Church*, May 5, 1870, citing *Deseret News*, May 21, 1870.
53. Evans, "Remarks [of George A. Smith]," *Journal History of the Church*, May 5, 1870.
54. David W. Evans, "Remarks [of Brigham Young]," *Journal History of the Church*, May 5, 1870, citing *Deseret News*, May 28, 1870.
55. "The Conference," *Journal History of the Church*, May 8, 1870, citing *Deseret News*, May 9, 1870.
56. "The Conference," *Journal History of the Church*, May 8, 1870.
57. Joseph F. Smith, *Journal History of the Church*, April 9, 1899, citing *Deseret News* of same date. Not surprisingly, larger-than-capacity congregations added to the difficulty. As the *Deseret News* observed after general conference in April 1888:

The splendid acoustic properties of the Tabernacle are insufficient to over come this difficulty [Saints hearing the speakers] when the building is overcrowded, there being, necessarily, when such is the case, more or less noise in the body of the great hall. This inability of the people to hear all that was said during the later sessions of the Conference which ended

yesterday, was probably the only feature that marred the pleasure and profit of the occasion. ("The Late Conference," *Journal History of the Church*, April 8, 1888, citing *Deseret News* of April 9, 1888)

58. "The Late Conference," *Journal History of the Church*, April 8, 1888.

59. "The Late Conference," *Journal History of the Church*, April 8, 1888.

60. "The General Conference," *Journal History of the Church*, April 9, 1889, citing *Deseret News* of same date. Even the additional two thousand-plus seats in the Assembly Hall did not afford seating space for everyone. Six months later the *Deseret News* reported that "the two commodious edifices were insufficient for the immense host and therefore crowds remained in the grounds or retired from the Temple Block altogether." "The October Conference," *Journal History of the Church*, October 8, 1889, citing *Deseret News* of same date.

61. John Taylor, in *Journal of Discourses*, 19:128–29, October 7, 1877. Speaking of the projected Assembly Hall, Elder Taylor observed:

We are engaged in this place in building a Tabernacle, in which we can meet during the Winter season. We do not call upon you outside brethren to assist us in this undertaking, because it is local and belongs to this Stake. This is a matter that was designed by President Young before his death; and we have been desirous, . . . to carry out the views of our venerated President, as far as we can. We have commenced to build this house, we want to put it up without delay. In this, as in every other matter, we do not wish anybody to contribute his means or labor towards it, unless he feels free to do it; for there are plenty that will do it willingly, and it will be built; and we shall have a nice, comfortable place to worship in through the Winter, and it will serve the Priesthood for all necessary purposes, as well as the public. The building will be 116 x 64 feet inside, with gallery all around. It will be a little larger than was at first contemplated; and we have also departed a little from the original intention respecting the kind of building material. Instead of adobe, we have concluded to use rock.

62. "The Late General Conference," *Journal History of the Church*, April 7, 1891, citing *Deseret News* of same date.

63. Marriner W. Merrill, in *Collected Discourses, Delivered by President Wilford Woodruff, His Two Counselors, the Twelve Apostles, and Others*, comp. Brian H. Stuy, 5 vols., (Burbank, Calif.: By the compiler, 1987–92), 2:62.

64. Brigham H. Roberts, in *Seventy-Sixth Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1906), 63.

65. One such occasion was in April 1892 when the capstone of the Salt Lake Temple was put in place. To accommodate the thousands who desired to participate in capstone events, an overflow session was held on Sunday, April 3, and again on Tuesday, April 5. *Journal History of the Church*, April 7, 1892, citing *Deseret News* of same date. Church member Jesse W. Crosby recorded that the Tuesday session was the "first overflow meeting on a week day that ever occurred in the history of the Church." Richard Neitzel Holzapfel, *Every Stone a Sermon* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1992), 42, citing Jesse W. Crosby, *Diaries, 1884–1914*, April 5, 1892, Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

66. Grant, "Zion's Ten Acres," 18; Jenson, *Encyclopedic History*, 416.

67. These conclusions are based on a close reading of the *Annual* and *Semi-Annual Conference* reports during the Joseph F. Smith and Heber J. Grant administrations.

68. *Seventy-Third Semi-Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1902), 37; *Seventy-Eighth Semi-Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1907), 99.

69. Twenty-six General Authorities included three members of the First Presidency, twelve members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, the Presiding Patriarch, seven members of the First Quorum of Seventy, and three members of the Presiding Bishopric.

70. George F. Richards, in *Eighty-Fifth Semi-Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1914), 15.

71. Andrew Jenson, in *Ninety-Fourth Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1924), 129.

72. Rey L. Pratt, in *Ninety-Third Semi-Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1922), 139.

73. Rudger Clawson, in *Ninety-Second Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1922), 45.

74. John A. Widtsoe, in *Ninety-Third Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1923), 48.

75. "Sound Amplifiers Aid Conference Speakers," *Journal History of the Church*, April 6, 1923, citing *Deseret News*, April 7, 1923. The previous day, the *Deseret News* noted:

A feature never heretofore known at a general conference in the Tabernacle was the installation on the two upper pulpits of radio amplification, designed to throw the voices of the speakers more vividly to the farthest part of the auditorium than even the well known acoustic properties of the great structure have done in the past.

As seen from the floor of the tabernacle below the pulpit the amplifier is enclosed in a wooden frame about the size of the top of a writing desk. It is tilted from the cushion top of the pulpit at an angle that brings it probably one foot, at its highest point, higher than the pulpit itself and nearly as far in front, making the pulpit that much higher behind which the speaker stands and is seen by the audience. Thus directly in front of the speaker and just below his face the amplifier is designed to catch the voice of the speaker and by the mechanism controlling the sound waves to throw it with added force out over the congregation.

At the opening session of conference, after a number of speakers had stood before the congregation, President Heber J. Grant inquired if those

in the rear of the auditorium could hear the speakers any better owing to the amplifiers. A response came back that the voices of the speakers were more audible without so much effort at speaking loud. (“Amplifiers Used in Tabernacle,” *Journal History of the Church*, April 6, 1923)

76. *Ninety-Third Annual Conference*, 102.
77. Heber J. Grant, in *Ninety-Third Annual Conference*, 93.
78. Albert L. Zobell Jr., “Radio and the Gospel Message,” *Improvement Era* 50 (April 1947): 254.
79. Heber J. Grant, in *Ninety-Fifth Semi-Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1924), 2.
80. Zobell, “Radio and the Gospel Message,” 254; Heber J. Grant, in *Ninety-Fifth Semi-Annual Conference*, 137.
81. Zobell, “Radio and the Gospel Message,” 254; Heber J. Grant, in *Ninety-Fifth Semi-Annual Conference*, 137.
82. *Ninety-Third Annual Conference*, 102.
83. “An Inspiring Occasion,” *Journal History of the Church*, April 7, 1926, citing *Deseret News*.
84. Heber J. Grant, in *Ninety-Ninth Semi-Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1928), 91.
85. George Albert Smith, in *One Hundred Twentieth Semi-Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1949), 3.
86. Burnett, “General Conference,” 1:308; Kenneth W. Godfrey, “150 Years of General Conference,” *Ensign* 11 (February 1981): 71.
87. George Albert Smith, in *One Hundredth Semi-Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1929), 22.
88. Levi Edgar Young, in *One Hundred Ninth Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1939), 74. See also Elder Young’s comments on the Tabernacle, in *Ninety-Third Semi-Annual Conference*, 110–111.
89. Stephen L. Richards, in *One Hundred Twenty-Second Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1952), 45–46.
90. Lloyd, “The Great Tabernacle,” 10.
91. Lloyd, “The Great Tabernacle,” 8, 10.
92. Hill, “Ground Broken,” 4.
93. Gordon B. Hinckley, “To All the World in Testimony,” *Ensign* 30 (May 2000): 5–6.
94. *Journal History of the Church*, October 3, 1937, citing *Deseret News*, October 4, 1937.
95. George Albert Smith, in *One Hundred Nineteenth Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1949), 7.
96. David O. McKay, in *One Hundred Twenty-Third Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1953), 24.

97. Hill, “Ground Broken,” 3–4; Hinckley, “To All the World in Testimony,” 5–6.
98. Hinckley, “To All the World in Testimony,” 4–6.
99. Greg Hill, “Ground Broken for Assembly Building,” *Church News*, August 2, 1997, 4.
100. Conversation with Lynne Bexell, July 22, 2002. Sister Bexell serves as ticket office manager in the Conference Center.
101. Hinckley, “To All the World in Testimony,” 6.
102. Stephen L. Richards, in *One Hundred Twenty-Second Annual Conference*, 45–46.
103. Hinckley, “To All the World in Testimony,” 6.