

The Making of the Presidents of the Church, Part 2

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In Part 1 of this (now) 3-part series, I described the ways in which the last four people have been named to the office of Prophet-President of Community of Christ (or the RLDS Church as the case may be). Without repeating all the details, I covered the selection processes for:

- **Stassi D. Cramm** (Prophet-President-Designate; scheduled to be confirmed in the office at the upcoming World Conference in May/June 2025)
- **Stephen M. Veazey** (Prophet-President, 2005 to 2025)
- **W. Grant McMurray** (Prophet-President, 1996 to 2004), and,
- **Wallace B. Smith** (Prophet-President, 1978 to 1996)

In this Part 2 I will continue our “backwards” journey through our denominational leaders and describe how the following people came to the Prophet-President of our church:

- **W. Wallace Smith** (Prophet-President, 1958 to 1978)
- **Israel A. Smith** (Prophet-President, 1946 to 1958)

I will deal with the following three persons in Part 3 in 3 weeks’ time:

- **Frederick M. Smith** (Prophet-President, 1914 to 1946)
- **Joseph Smith III** (Prophet-President, 1860 to 1914)
- **Joseph Smith, Jr.** (Prophet-President, 1830 to 1844)

Let me begin by correcting my sins of inadequate attribution of credit for information that I alluded to at the end of Part 1. I need to be very clear that my only source of information for this series has been former Church Historian Mark A. Scherer’s history of the church titled *The Journey of a People*. It has been published in three volumes, each sub-titled as follows: Vol. 1: *The Era of Restoration, 1820 to 1844* (published 2013); Vol. 2: *The Era of Reorganization, 1844 to 1946* (published 2013); and, Vol. 3: *The Era of Worldwide Community, 1946 to 2015* (published 2016). All volumes are published by Community of Christ Seminary Press, 1001 W. Walnut, Independence, Missouri. The books are available from Herald House online here: [Herald House History Books](#) (scroll to the bottom row of books).

You can certainly order the books from Herald House. They are expensive (prices quoted are in U.S. dollars, and significant shipping charges will be applied – they’re heavy!). Alternatively, you might check your congregation’s bookshelves for copies you could borrow. Or, if you know a person who is a church history buff, ask if you can borrow their copies – one volume at a time, of course!

I cannot recommend this series enough. Mark writes in an engaging and entertaining manner. He deals very forthrightly with some of the controversial bits of church history. And he manages to

make the few (very few) “drier” bits of church history a little less dry. He truly tells the story of the church as a journey – of many miles, many years, and many people.

Okay – back to the history of identifying our church’s Prophet-Presidents.

W. Wallace Smith (Prophet-President, 1958 to 1978): W. Wallace Smith was the Pastor of Portland, Oregon’s, First Street Church when he was ordained as an Apostle at the 1947 General Conference.¹ His call came through his older brother, President Israel A. Smith. In April of 1950 he was ordained into the First Presidency as a Counselor to his brother.² There is a significant and interesting backstory to his call into church leadership. Time and space constraints do not permit sharing that here.

Israel A. experienced some significant health challenges in 1947 and 1948. He was to undergo surgery that could prove to be risky. He was aware of the confusion caused when his brother, and his predecessor as Prophet-President, Frederick M. Smith, died suddenly in 1946 without clearly and intentionally identifying his successor. Before he underwent his surgery, he drafted a letter identifying W. Wallace as his successor in the event of his death. The letter was witnessed and authenticated by the President of the Council of Twelve and the Church Secretary and was left in the hands of the Secretary to be brought forward in the event it was needed. It was not needed at that time.³

In 1952, Israel A. set off on a tour to the mission fields of Europe and Great Britain. Again, he was concerned about the possibility of an untimely death during his travels (note: he was 76 years of age), and he revised his letter. This time he had it authenticated by one of his Counselors and the Presiding Bishop and left it with his Counselor (President F. Henry Edwards) to bring forward if it was needed. He travelled safely on this tour and returned home without incident.⁴

However, on Saturday, June 14, 1958, the direction provided in the letter was finally, and sadly, required.

On that date he was driving from Independence to a ministerial commitment in Lamoni, Iowa. Just south of the Town of Pattonsburg, Missouri, on Highway 69, he was involved in a head-on collision. Although he survived the crash, he was fatally injured and died in hospital shortly after.⁵

From that point on, all the intended processes to identify and approve the next Prophet-President of the church kicked into gear. There was a meeting of the Council of Twelve Apostles on Monday morning – presumably to go over all that would happen in the next few months. The funeral for Israel A. Smith was held on Tuesday. On Wednesday a meeting of the “formal council of church officers” was held including the remaining members of the First Presidency, nine members of the Council of Twelve, the Presiding Bishopric, the presiding evangelist, the senior

¹ Mark A. Scherer, *The Journey of a People, Vol. 3: The Era of Worldwide Community, 1946 to 2015* (Independence, Mo.: Community of Christ Seminary Press, 2016), p. 86

² Scherer, *Journey, Vol. 3*, p. 88

³ Scherer, *Journey, Vol. 3*, p. 85

⁴ Scherer, *Journey, Vol. 3*, pp. 90-92

⁵ Scherer, *Journey, Vol. 3*, pp. 107-109

president of seventy, and the President of the Quorum of High Priests. The letter drafted by Israel A. in 1952 designating W. Wallace to succeed him was read. They agreed to present the letter and W. Wallace Smith's nomination to the General Conference scheduled for October of that year. F. Henry Edwards and W. Wallace Smith were sustained as the Presidency to preside over the church until that conference. Finally, a formal letter to officially inform the church of the death of Israel A. and the processes to follow was drafted, signed by Edwards and Smith, and sent to all Pastors of the church.⁶

On Monday, October 6, 1958, the General Conference was convened. Following the ceremonial opening processes and the initial call-to-order requirements of the business meeting, the announcement of the recommendation to approve W. Wallace Smith as "President of the High Priesthood and of the Church," was read. Votes were taken (first, of delegates, then of all persons present) and they were deemed unanimously in favour. Then Israel A. Smith's letter from 1952 was read. It was then approved to be added to the Book of Doctrine and Covenants as section 144. The business meeting was adjourned, and the ordination service was held that evening.⁷

And that is how W. Wallace Smith became the fifth Prophet-President of the church.

This is already a MUCH longer column than I intended, but I want to deal with one more selection process and I will leave the remaining three church presidents for a third installment. Please bear with me!

Israel A. Smith (Prophet-President 1946 to 1958): Born in 1876, Israel Alexander Smith had a more-or-less lifelong involvement with the church and church leadership. He trained as a lawyer. He supported his brother, Frederick Madison Smith, as Prophet-President of the church - until he didn't. He had a significant falling out with his brother over the "supreme directional control" controversy in 1925 (no time or space to deal with this explosive chapter in church history here) and resigned from his position as a counselor to the Presiding Bishop in protest. Following an apparent reconciliation five years later, he came back into church employment as General Church secretary.⁸

Fred M., in an oversight from which Israel A. effectively learned, did not leave any written designation of who should be his successor. Upon his death following an illness in early 1946, some members of the church felt there were two likely candidates for the next Prophet-President: Presiding Patriarch (Evangelist) Elbert A. Smith (also a grandson of Joseph Smith, Jr.) and Israel A. Smith, brother of Fred M., son of Joseph Smith III, and also a grandson of Joseph Smith, Jr.⁹

The only indication of Fred M.'s preference for Israel A. was an apparent "all-but-passing" comment made in a Joint Council meeting in October 1938 that was recorded by the meeting secretary: "Israel would be in line for the office of the president, and that he would have the advantage of the additional experience this appointment (to be a counselor to the President?) would provide."¹⁰

⁶ Scherer, *Journey*, Vol. 3, pp.109-112

⁷ Scherer, *Journey*, Vol. 3, pp. 138-144

⁸ Scherer, *Journey*, Vol. 3, pp. 16-18

⁹ Scherer, *Journey*, Vol. 3, p. 12

¹⁰ Ibid

Recognizing that this was not a very solid direction on which to completely rely, the Council of Twelve asked the Presiding Patriarch, yes - Elbert A. Smith, "to seek divine guidance to be shared at the coming General Conference." This he did. And his message re-iterated the call of Israel A. to the Presidency. This was particularly convincing to the conference because, as stated above, Elbert A. was the other likely candidate. For him to confirm the call of Israel A. was powerful. The Chair of the meeting asked that Elbert A.'s statement be read again so that there was no question that all persons present understood what was being presented.¹¹

The motion to approve Israel A. Smith "to preside over the High Priesthood and the church" was made and approved by the conference.¹²

The next morning, Sunday, April 7, Israel Alexander Smith, at the age of 70, was ordained as president, prophet, seer, and revelator to the church.¹³

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¹¹ Scherer, *Journey*, Vol. 3, pp. 10-12

¹² Scherer, *Journey*, Vol. 3, p. 13

¹³ Scherer, *Journey*, Vol.3, p. 15