

To the Saints,

September 16, 1986

Recent events in Wichita, Kansas, especially at the Webb Road branch of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, have been the subject of much discussion, and the cause of many rumors. These developments ought to be understood clearly because of their importance in the work of the gospel and the Reorganized Church. They are presented here for your prayerful consideration. The story which is described below is not an isolated event in the church today. Every member of the Church of Christ must seek the Lord's mind in response to these events.

The Webb Road branch was formed when the English Street branch decided to build a new building. This was in the late 1970's. A 10 acre plot of land was purchased and the old building was sold. For several months the congregation met in schools while the new building was being prepared. About 1979 the new Webb Road branch was worshipping in its new building. The members and priesthood of the branch tried to build an evangelistic congregation, strongly grounded in the Restoration scriptures. New members were brought in and many soon became active in the branch's life and leadership. A bus program was established to reach into the neighborhood. The Saint's Herald carried two articles describing the growing ministry of the branch.

The Webb Road branch was successful in a number of ways. There was a very active priesthood ministry. The home visiting program was well supported and provided much needed help to many families. Church school classes were taught by men and women who were highly motivated. In these and in many other ways the Webb Road branch was providing a solid, well balanced ministry. These activities were supported and blessed by the Spirit of Christ.

The Restoration scriptures provided the direction of the congregation. As the branch enjoyed some success, trust in the scriptures grew. People were finding spiritual blessings in their study. Lives were changed by the messages and examples provided by the scriptures.

Unfortunately, the growth of Webb Road was not viewed with joy by many persons. This was especially noted in the leadership in the district, region and World Church. Why would a strong congregation be viewed with disdain by church leaders? It could be that as the branch grew and experienced some success in its work, the whole group matured. With this maturity came a greater ability to labor without constant assistance from the district or the World Church. This created a kind of independence that was viewed as dangerous. In addition, the branch's dependence on the Restored scripture for guidance was viewed as old-fashioned and too traditional or "fundamental". This became more evident as the World Conference of 1984 came and went and the more liberal theology began to have an ever increasing sway in the church.

Section 156 of the Doctrine and Covenants quickly became the focal point of controversy. It was only symbolic of the real problem. It was really a difference between a scripture-based theology and a more liberal theology.

The priesthood of Webb Road recognized that the questions involved were highly volatile. In an effort to keep peace and to allow people to decide for themselves how they would respond to Section 156, it was agreed that no pulpit time would be given to this question. We agreed on this decision despite the fact that most of the members and the priesthood could not accept the new section. However, the expression of

personal opinion was not suppressed and the bent of the congregation became widely known. There were a few families that felt they could not worship there because of the difficulty of the majority in accepting the new section. Many of these families transferred to other branches.

The planned evangelistic series of Easter 1985 turned into a lecture by the guest ministers to the congregation about the need to get in line with the church and accept the new instruction. This only served to cause unrest, where a kind of peace had come to the congregation.

In July of 1985 a Saturday was devoted to an open discussion of both sides of 156 in an effort to heal wounds caused in April by the guest ministers. In August the District President told us we couldn't have public discussions or preach the negative view from the pulpit. Although he later denied saying it, about 15-20 priesthood members heard him say that he would force the issue of women's ordination on the branch. Despite our efforts at providing room for divergent beliefs in our branch, the church was allowing less and less room for us.

After the World Conference of 1986, the congregation and the district was faced with the question approving the calls of 5 women to priesthood from the Central branch of Wichita. With the question deeply on our minds and hearts the priesthood, after seeking the Lord's direction through prayer and fasting, met as usual, at 8:00am on April 27, 1986 to worship and determine the direction of the day's 11:00 worship. Eight men were present, each of them bore testimony that the Spirit had impressed on them the need for making clear the direction of the Lord concerning our response to the doctrine of ordaining women to His priesthood. As pastor I felt that I should be the spokesman to the congregation.

It was my impression that the sermon was ministry needed by our congregation. While the principle of the truths spoken that day are widely acceptable, that particular message was for our local body. Especially for those still seeking the Lord's will on the correct response to women's ordination.

Eleven days later I was silenced. The Elder who was in charge of the service that day was also silenced. This was on May 10, 1986. The next day was Sunday, Mother's Day. It was a black day for us as well as the church. The Regional Administrator stated that because of "long standing" difficulties the branch was being placed in the direction of the District President. There was no chance for discussion or vote by the branch membership.

The entire membership was shocked and offended at the action. The branch had been taken away from the people. To our understanding it was a gross violation of the rights of the people and of the principle of common consent.

A few remain at Webb Road, in an effort to revive the work there. Many of them are disgusted with the actions of the leadership. A few are not attending anywhere and may be lost to the work forever. Most of the members of the branch, want to worship together. However, we are not able to worship in an "official" branch because of our beliefs. For the first few weeks we met where we could. Our first prayer service was in the home of a member on May 14, 1986. We met in a rented auditorium at Wichita State University for the first Sunday. Wednesday meetings were held in the WSU chapel. We rented the Valley Center Community building for several weeks until we signed a contract to use the library of the Pleasant Valley Elementary School. We are meeting there for all of our meetings.

It probably seems that our decision to publicly speak out against Section 156 was our downfall. However, just a few weeks ago the Regional Administrator was in my home discussing my silence and appeal. He made a few remarks which shed additional light on the events of May 11, 1986. He told me that even before April 27, he had been given authority from the apostle to disorganize Webb Road. The reason for this was, as he put it, the leadership of the branch was not teaching the people to follow the First Presidency. He also said that my duty as an Elder was to represent the Presidency first, even if I had instruction of the Lord which was different from the Presidency's instruction. Priesthood, he said, especially the Eldership, are to represent the First Presidency first and then Christ.

We want our intentions to be well understood. First, let it be clearly understood that we are not mad at anyone. We are not retaliating against the actions of the RLDS leadership. It is a terrible tragedy that the church of Jesus Christ must be torn apart like this. We feel led by God to continue to teach and preach the gospel as it was revealed to the prophet Joseph Smith, Jr. and reiterated in the Reorganization under Joseph Smith III. This puts us at odds, in practice and theology to the RLDS leadership. This is unfortunate, but necessary for our faith. We meet separately in order to preach this gospel without oppression. Almost daily we hear of Saints who are discouraged and dropping out of any association with the Restoration. This only extends the tragedy of the current situation. We hope to be able to continue the work of the gospel as best we can until the Lord brings order out of the current disorder.

We have formed an independent Restoration branch called Zion's Outpost. We are holding regular services on Sunday morning and evening and Wednesday prayer services. Our average attendance is about 60 people on Sunday mornings and the Lord has blessed us with his Spirit.

We are not forming a new church, nor do we support this kind of activity. As an independent branch, we join many other similar groups, in an effort to continue the ministry the Lord has called us to do. We simply hope to preach the original gospel, strengthen and encourage the Saints, and bring people to know Jesus Christ through the power and wonder of the Restoration gospel. Our battle is not against the church or any person. We do labor against the author of sin and he who blinds men's eyes and covers their hearts that they are led into destruction and death. Jesus Christ our Lord calls to wage war only against Satan and his agents.

The final chapter of our story remains to be told. In the past the Lord has used these times to refine and strengthen his people. We can be sure he is doing that now. No longer can we be "part-time" servants of the Lord. Through it all we must seek the Lord's voice and follow it with faith and diligence.

In place of despair, put faith in the promises and prophecies of God. Zion will be established. Jesus Christ our Lord is coming again. All that God has said will come to pass. Trust him and rely on his grace to give strength sufficient to endure in obedience.

Encourage one another in study, prayer and worship. Carry your brothers and sisters to the Lord. Build up your families. This is a day of preparation, final preparation for the Lord's return. Do not allow yourselves to be eaten up and destroyed by despair or hatred. Purge the spirit of warring from you. Separate yourselves far from sin that will ruin you. Above all seek charity from the Lord Jesus that we may be like him in all things.

May God bless you in your service to him and encourage you with his Spirit to follow, trust and obey him. If we can be of assistance, please contact us.

In Christ Jesus,

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