Since the 1960s, anthropologists Clifford Geertz and Victor Turner have emphasized ritual as a cultural performance that employs symbolic actions and images to dramatize a certain worldview. Such a ritual performance took place after the recent death of Gordon B. Hinckley, the president of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), who died on January 27, 2008, at age 97. His passing initiated a series of symbolic actions that resulted in a transition to new church leadership through a divinely appointed prophet.

In cultural terms, LDS members view the church as a “house of order” under the Melchizedek priesthood, with the president as their “prophet, seer, and revelator,” and the family as the basic social unit of the church. Both aspects—the priesthood hierarchy and the multigenerational family—were fully evident during this ritual transition.

The First Presidency is the highest leadership quorum in the church and included the president and his two counselors—Thomas S. Monson and Henry B. Eyring. Upon the death of president Hinckley, this First Presidency automatically dissolved and the interregnum began. The two counselors reverted to their places of seniority in the second highest leadership quorum—the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles—as determined by the date of their ordination as quorum members. Now numbering 14 members, the Quorum of the Twelve assumed temporary church leadership, led by the senior apostle, Thomas S. Monson. This reflected the church as a house of order.

On Saturday, February 2, 2008, president Hinckley’s funeral service took place in a manner similar to any family ceremony within the church, albeit with two exceptions—it was held in the 21,000-seat LDS Conference Center rather than a local ward meeting house and the Mormon Tabernacle Choir provided the music. Family members and friends took the primary roles, though they asked senior apostle Monson to preside. One daughter opened the service with a family prayer. Hinckley’s youngest son then offered the invocation. Next, another daughter was the first speaker, followed by two friends who were senior church officials, then three members of the Quorum of the Twelve. The choir then sang a hymn written by president Hinckley whose opening line is “What is This Thing Called Death” and whose last verse begins “There is no Death, but only Change.” This was a direct reflection of the worldview of the Latter-day Saints in which the spirit of a person lives on even as the body is buried. Hinckley’s third daughter then gave the benediction, and his eldest son dedicated the grave at Salt Lake City cemetery. President Hinckley had five children, 25 grandchildren, and 62 great-grandchildren, emphasizing the family as a cross-generational social unit of the church.

During the interregnum, the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles assembled to consider whether the First Presidency should be reorganized, or whether the church should proceed under the presiding authority of the Quorum. On February 4, the Quorum passed a motion to reorganize the First Presidency, unanimously selecting Thomas S. Monson as the new president and prophet. He then chose Henry B. Eyring and Dieter F. Echtdorf as his two counselors thereby establishing the three of them as the new First Presidency. This followed the tradition that the senior apostle is named and sustained by his fellow apostles as president of the church. Boyd K. Packer is now next in line as the senior member and president of the Twelve, who, in turn, chose D. Todd Christofferson to fill the vacancy in that Quorum.

The final step in this ritual of transition to new leadership occurred in early April 2008 when a solemn assembly formed part of the LDS General Conference proceedings. There, all of the quorums and members of the church sustained the new First Presidency by raising their hand in a collective gesture of affirmation. Through this orderly cultural script and social drama, Thomas S. Monson became the sixteenth president since the Prophet Joseph Smith organized the church in 1830. He now leads a church of international dimensions, number-
ing more than 13 million members, of which more than half reside outside of the United States.

The rituals marking and confirming the transition in leadership among the Latter-day Saints gave symbolic expression to the hierarchical authority of the church’s Melchizedek priesthood and to the church’s multigenerational family culture. Victor Turner would certainly note the liminal quality of this transition and Clifford Geertz would see it as one important feature of the church’s public culture. For the Latter-day Saints the renewal of the First Presidency and its prophetic leadership again brings order to both the church and the world.

**Melvyn Hammarberg,** Associate Professor of Anthropology and a Consulting Curator in the Museum, was a media guest for president Hinckley’s funeral.

**For Further Reading**

