

Monson poised, prepared as new Mormon leader: Predecessor has died at age 97

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Thomas S. Monson, tapped to succeed Gordon B. Hinckley as president of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, has spent his entire career in the service of the LDS church. He has worked in Salt Lake City alongside every Mormon president since 1963, when, at age 36, he was named to the LDS church's council of 12 apostles. Monson was a counselor to Hinckley, who died January 27 at the age of 97.

Hinckley's death came at a time of unprecedented exposure for the Mormon faith, with former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney competing for the Republican nomination for president. "Like all people who knew him, we were deeply touched by his humility, his sense of humor and by the way he inspired so many people around the world," Romney said of Hinckley.

A world traveler and a publicity-minded LDS president, Hinckley spoke in 1998 to the NAACP, a first for a Mormon president. He described Mormonism as the most demanding religion in America. "That's one of the things that attracts people to this church," Hinckley told *60 Minutes* reporter Mike Wallace in April 1996. When Hinckley became president in 1995, the church had 47 temples. By 2008, it had 124, with another 12 planned or under construction.

The 80-year-old Monson is a folksy orator known for his compassion and willingness to enlist non-Mormons in humanitarian causes. He repeatedly talks of being spiritually prompted to help the disadvantaged and outcast, a lesson he learned during the waning years of the Great Depression.

"I remember that time and time again those who were riding the rails came to our home. I think they had it marked," Monson once said. "I can see [a hobo] now, holding his cap in his hand. He asks, 'Is there something I can do to earn a

sandwich?' My mother would say, 'You come right in and sit down; wash your hands over there in the sink.' And then she'd make a sandwich."

Monson rose fast in the LDS ranks. In 1963, he was called to fill a vacancy in the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, becoming one of the youngest men in the 20th century on the church's highest body.

He also was a church envoy, dealing with governments that were wary of the Mormons' presence in their nations and the legal issues involved. His two decades of quiet efforts in Eastern Europe culminated in the announcement that a Mormon temple would be built in Freiberg, Germany, behind the Iron Curtain.

In November 1985, Monson joined the church's governing First Presidency as second counselor to then-president Ezra Taft Benson. In 1995, Hinckley named Monson his first counselor, essentially the No. 2 position in the LDS church.

In that capacity, Monson took on ecumenical and welfare issues. Under Monson's direction, the LDS church joined with mainstream Christian, Jewish and Muslim groups in supporting homeless shelters, food banks, nursing homes and disaster relief efforts in the United States and abroad. "We don't ever meet on doctrinal ecumenism; it's strictly on the social side of the fabric of the community," Monson said. *-Religion News Service*