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*Picking a Prophet*  
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Following the death two weeks ago of 97-year-old Gordon B. Hinckley, the president of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (more commonly known as the LDS or Mormon Church), the Church had to elect a new president, someone who would guide the Church as an administrator and as a prophet.

Many people initially were reminded of the recent election of a new pope in the Catholic Church, following the death of Pope John Paul II in 2005. Certainly, Gordon B. Hinckley and John Paul II occupied similar positions in their respective churches. Both led flocks that spanned the globe, and members of each church saw their respective leader as God's spokesman on earth. However, the prolonged uncertainty that preceded the election of Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger as the new Pope was completely absent from the aftermath of President Hinckley's death.

The highest levels of leadership in the LDS Church are called the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. The First Presidency consists of three men: the president of the LDS Church and two counselors. The president serves until he dies; then the First Presidency is automatically dissolved and the two counselors are absorbed into the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles (which then has 14 members). This group of 14 men governs the Church until a new president is chosen by unanimous vote in a process that Mormons believe is divinely guided.

By tradition, the man who has served in the Quorum of the Twelve the longest is selected as the new president. For this reason, Mormons and non-Mormons alike knew years ago that, barring some unforeseen circumstance, Thomas S. Monson would be the next president of the LDS Church.

Nevertheless, until it was made official on Monday, both the LDS Church and lay Mormons used language that made it clear that Monson's election was not a done deal -- since Mormons believe that God selects the president of the Church, they wanted to leave open the possibility that God might call someone else to that office. While the utter predictability of this process might make it seem more mechanical than divinely guided to non-Mormons, the LDS Church pointed out in an official press release that the process "happens in an orderly way that -- remarkably in today's world -- avoids any trace of internal lobbying for position or rank. It is devoid of electioneering whether behind the scenes or in public."

In contrast, the conclave that resulted in the election of Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger as pope brought together Roman Catholic officials from around the globe. Many of these men

had never met each other, and, although it took place behind closed doors, campaigning was virtually required for the group to come to a decision.

Monson, the 16th president, prophet, and seer of the LDS Church, will have enormous shoes to fill. Hinckley was president for about 13 years, but his service to the Church spanned several decades. After serving as a missionary, he worked in the Church's newly-created Public Affairs office, and helped both to standardize Church materials such as Sunday School curricula and to improve the Church's public image.

As president, Hinckley continued this effort, taking the Church from the margins to the mainstream in American society. He also presided over a rapidly internationalizing Church. At his death, the LDS Church claimed more than 13 million members worldwide, more than half of whom lived outside the United States. In part to make the rituals of the LDS Church more accessible to members in other countries, Hinckley initiated an ambitious temple-building plan that more than doubled the number of LDS temples worldwide. By building smaller, less expensive temples under Hinckley's direction, the Church made temple rituals such as sealings (the rituals that Mormons believe bind families together for eternity) available to more of its members.

What will a Monson presidency mean for the Church? While Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger's election as pope heralded a shift toward a more conservative Roman Catholic Church, President Monson probably will continue to lead the LDS Church on the course that his predecessor charted.

Given Monson's extensive business experience, including work with the Deseret News, we can expect continued attention to the Church's public image. Monson has also been active in the internationalization of the Church, particularly in the former East Germany and the former Soviet Union. We are likely to see the Church under his leadership continue its efforts to evangelize around the world, perhaps with a greater emphasis in areas such as Eastern Europe and regions that have previously been closed to LDS missionaries.