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Expressing regret for 1857 massacre

Elder Eyring reads Church
statement at Mountain
Meadows memorial

By Greg Hill, Church News
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MOUNTAIN MEADOW, Utah — A statement expressing regret for events of the Mountain Meadows Massacre was read by Elder Henry B. Eyring of the Quorum of the Twelve during a memorial service at the site in southwestern Utah. An audience of several hundred gathered at the Church-owned property about 300 miles southwest of Salt Lake City on Tuesday, Sept. 11, the 150th anniversary of the tragedy.

The succinct statement from the Church, prepared by Elder Marlin K. Jensen of the Seventy and authorized by the First Presidency, was in contrast to other presentations. Descendants of the victims in the wagon train from Arkansas living in a modern era of instant communication, extensive record keeping and historical scholarship still struggle with the interpretation of events that occurred on the frontier of America in the mid-19th century.

At least 120 members of the Arkansas wagon train were killed during a siege that culminated on Sept. 11, 1857.

Elder Eyring told the gathering he was attending by assignment on behalf of the First Presidency.

The statement he read referred to a book being written on the massacre by Church historians Ronald W. Walker, Richard E. Turley Jr. — who attended the memorial service with Elder Eyring — and Glen M. Leonard that reaches two significant conclusions: "That the message conveying the will and intent of Brigham Young not to interfere with the immigrants arrived too late, and that the responsibility for the massacre lies with local leaders of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the regions near Mountain Meadows who also held civic and military positions and with members of the Church acting under their direction."

The statement said: "What was done here long ago by members of our Church represents a terrible and inexcusable departure from Christian teaching and conduct. We cannot change what happened, but we can remember and honor those who were killed here.

"We express profound regret for the massacre carried out in this valley 150 years ago today and for the undue and untold suffering experienced by the victims then and by their relatives to the present time.

"A separate expression of regret is owed to the Paiute people who have unjustly borne for too long the principal blame for what occurred during the massacre. Although the extent of their involvement is disputed, it is believed they would not have participated without the direction and stimulus provided by local Church leaders and members."

About the perpetrators of the massacre, the statement said: "No doubt Divine Justice will impose appropriate punishment upon those responsible for the massacre. Nevertheless, our continued prayer for their relatives is that knowledge of a God who is both just and merciful will bring a measure of peace to their souls."

It concluded: "Having reflected and commented on both the past and future of this hallowed meadow, we conclude by expressing our love and desire for reconciliation to all who have in any way been affected by what occurred at Mountain Meadows 150 years ago today. May the God of Heaven, whose sons and daughters we all are, bless us to honor those who died here by extending to one another the pure love and spirit of forgiveness which His Only Begotten Son personified."

Due to illness, Elder Jensen, who also serves as Church historian, was not able to travel to Mountain Meadow to read the Church statement.

Participants in the two-hour memorial service included members of Mountain Meadows Massacre Descendants, Mountain Meadows Massacre Foundation and Mountain Meadows Monument Foundation, as well as Lora Tom, chairwoman of the Utah Paiute tribe. Patty Norris, president of Mountain Meadows Massacre Descendants, said she knew of people who traveled from both coasts and many states in between to participate in the memorial. People from the local area also attended.

Brother Turley said, "We came here today not only to express regret, but also to listen. What we heard here today was very significant to us. We hope that this was one step on the continued path of discussion and progress with the descendants' organizations."

The Church provided facilities — including a shelter, chairs, sound system, lunch and rest rooms — for the late-morning event on a grassy field adjacent to the Mountain Meadows Massacre monument.

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