

# Voices for Equality



# Voices for Equality

Ordain Women and  
Resurgent Mormon Feminism

Edited by  
Gordon Shepherd, Lavina Fielding Anderson,  
and Gary Shepherd

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## Preface

# **The Contemporary LDS Church at a Crossroads on Gender Issues in the Twenty-First Century**

*Lavina Fielding Anderson*

My daughter-in-law, Marina Capella, is a Stanford graduate and a board-certified pediatrician. In July 2014, she and my son moved to Carlsbad, California, where Marina was employed at a pediatric clinic. Shortly after they started attending their new ward (Carlsbad First), a new bishop was installed. In his opening address to the ward, he emotionally explained his lengthy history of callings in the Church and how earnestly he had anticipated his new calling.

Marina and Christian, in their first meeting with him, explained their own backgrounds, callings, and contributions, said that they had posted personal profiles on the Ordain Women website, and had flown up to Salt Lake City to participate in the first Ordain Women event in October 2013 when they and scores of other women and male allies asked, one by one, for admittance to the general priesthood section of conference, only to be refused. They asked the bishop directly if that was going to be a problem. He did not seem overly familiar with Ordain Women but assured them the stake presidency did not want it to be a problem. The second Ordain Women effort to again seek admittance to the priesthood session in April 2014 was again denied. Marina and Christian felt that the Church's decision to broadcast the priesthood sessions like all other sessions of conference and to declare the women's general meeting as the first session of general conference were steps in the right direction, but they found it disheartening when the Church took the extraordinary measure of closing Temple Square to the media. By then, co-founder Kate Kelly had been excommunicated on June 23, 2014, while threats against John Dehlin's membership resulted in his excommunication on February 8, 2015. Marina confronted her own feelings that her silence made her "complicit" in Church activities that she felt she could not support with integrity.

On Sunday March 1, Marina awoke early and felt impressed to write out a testimony that she wished to share with the ward later that day. Choosing to wait until she would be the last person to speak, she stood up. "I was terrified," she remembers. "My heart was racing, but I felt I had to do it." She introduced her testimony by saying that, as an act of personal authenticity, she had "considered resigning from the Church" but wanted to share some "deeply personal" beliefs that had brought her to this "painful prospect." At this point, speaking with tears in her eyes, she was taken aback when "a woman in the back of the chapel stood

up and loudly proclaimed, ‘You need to stop!’ Marina “turned to the bishop and asked him if I needed to stop.” He was startled, clearly paralyzed by this unexpected disruption. Marina says: “I decided I would probably stop to avoid further contention. I turned back to the audience, and the woman in the back again loudly proclaimed, ‘You need to stop!’” Still standing at the pulpit and with tears running down her cheeks, Marina replied, “‘We are called to mourn with those that mourn, and comfort those that stand in need of comfort. How dare you call yourself a Christian!’” She returned to her seat next to my son and wept while the bishop abruptly brought the meeting to a close and his counselor bore a quick but firm “the Church is true” testimony to end the meeting.

A host of people, including the bishop, came up to her afterwards, hugged her, and apologized for what had happened. Some even said they wanted to know what she had planned to say.

The core of her undelivered testimony (quoted below with her permission) was a clear exposition of the paradoxical feelings fostered by the Church’s gender policies and practices:

I don’t believe that the gendered segregation of leadership and priesthood responsibilities in this church is doctrine inspired by God. I think that gender, like race, is one of the MANY differences among us that conspire to divide us rather than unite us. In my professional life as a physician, I have been encouraged to use my talents to accomplish anything I desire to help advance human health. Yet, in this church, I see half of the members systematically excluded from opportunities for service based on their femaleness. I can help save lives in a hospital, but I cannot pass the bread of life to members in my ward. Young women can aspire to be CEOs of companies, but can’t aspire to be a counselor in the bishopric. I recall our very own bishop, when he was called to the position less than a year ago, bear his testimony of how much he had longed to serve as a bishop, how he had looked forward to it for years. Why is this desire righteous in a man but sinful in a woman? How much more could the sister missionaries accomplish if they could give blessings and baptize members? There are some places in the world where female members far outnumber male members, but a branch or ward cannot be formed without a certain number of priesthood-holding males. How tragic that women should be denied access to a community of Saints solely because of a lack of male peers.

. . . If these problems are irrelevant to you, then I ask for your charity: all of us will have doubts and struggles some day, and these are mine. I also think that it is inevitable that in a community of Christians who believe in the sanctifying power of service, there will inevitably be some women who want to serve the world in a way other than motherhood, and these women will either need a chance to talk about these feelings, or need to forever struggle with feelings of inauthenticity and isolation in our congregations. The latter is the space I have occupied for the past decade.

Marina had continued from that point by describing the reactions of family and friends who had been affronted by her participation in Ordain Women:

I have been told that if I don’t believe 100% of the Church’s teachings, I should just leave. I have been called an apostate. I have been accused of being power-hungry. I

have had the “motherhood-priesthood” argument explained to me in 100 different ways, none of which hold water in my view. . . . I tried fasting, praying, and studying scriptures and conference talks to try to understand how sexism can possibly be okay at church. I was in a state of spiritual agony for years trying to understand. It wasn’t until I accepted the nagging thought that it *wasn’t* okay that I felt at peace. Now, denying this fact would be going against what my mind, heart, and soul tell me to be true. Sadly, being true to myself in this way puts me in a very tentative place—one in which the threat of possible excommunication hovers constantly overhead.

Also left unspoken was Marina’s conclusion—her powerful affirmation of faith: “Despite my unorthodox beliefs, I have an unshakable testimony of Jesus Christ, of his teachings, and of the love God has for each of us. I will never abandon that.”<sup>1</sup>

An almost reflex reaction from those with whom she has shared this painful experience has been to ask about ecclesiastical reprisal. That same Sunday, she emailed the text of her testimony to the bishop. He responded ambiguously, assuring her that “it’s okay” to have doubts and questions, but also warning her that they should not be discussed publicly and that he would have been obligated to stop her himself. She and Christian have continued to attend church, and Marina feels less inclined to consider resignation since she feels that her public stance relieves her conscience of feeling tacitly complicit in actions she cannot support.

This experience captures the ambiguities and ironies of the current status of the conversation on gender issues in the Church. It was another woman, who felt “prompted” to disrupt the meeting and reject Marina’s sincere expression of belief and faith as invalid. The bishop sent a mixed message of acceptance but control. It is difficult to imagine a more vivid and precise message of the fears that haunt the possibility of discussion and—in fact—the absolute denial of Church meetings as a safe place in which respectful and thoughtful discussions of this issue can take place. It also underscores the lack of clarity in the Church’s message to members. Ally Isom, Public Affairs senior manager for the Church, when pinned down by Doug Fabrizio’s increasingly specific questions on NPR Radio West, was forced back from generalizations to specifics in claiming that such discussions are acceptable:

Fabrizio: But what if you believe—as some women do—that it’s time for the Church to give women the priesthood? Where do you express that?

Isom: There are many avenues to express that and discuss that.

Fabrizio: Where? In public?

Isom: No one’s questioning your ability to discuss it in a congregation, in a Sunday school class, in Relief Society class . . .

Fabrizio: In a congregation? In a congregation a woman can stand up and say that?

Isom: She can certainly have the conversation. In my Relief Society we can.<sup>2</sup>

1. Marina Capella, “Testimony,” March 1, 2015, copy in my possession, used by permission.

2. Ally Isom, interviewed by Doug Fabrizio, NPR Radio West (Salt Lake City), June 15, 2015, full transcription by Alison Moore Smith, July 18, 2014, <http://mormonmomma>.

In the past few years, general conference has expanded to allow addresses by two members of the women's auxiliaries, presidents per conference, at least one prayer per conference offered by members from this same group, and the official, though somewhat awkward, designation of the women's general meeting as a "session" of conference. General Authorities have expressed appreciation for the contributions of women to their families and to the Church with complimentary accolades that have sometimes lapsed into sentimental and unconsciously patronizing language. From the other side, General Authorities have pared away at the male-priesthood boundary with varying degrees of success, clarifying that "priesthood holder" is not the same as "priesthood" per se, and trying to differentiate between the "power," "authority," and "blessings" of the priesthood, and the differences between priesthood exercised in the family and in the institutional Church.

Other essays in this anthology explore these developments and their relative significance; but the excommunications of Kate Kelly and John Dehlin, at least in part for his support of women's ordination and gay rights, was an exercise in drawing a line that has left men and women scrambling on both sides to determine their own position relative to that line. "If the Church can excommunicate Kate and John, then it could come after me" is one position. Another is costly compromises with conscience that some members have made to retain their place in their family and community life as "faithful" Latter-day Saints. For still others, such actions are "last straw" communications that have made them abandon the effort to find a way to negotiate a healthy—or even tolerable—relationship with the institution.

Landmark events in this on-going dynamic would fill a volume in themselves. Personal landmarks for me were a Sunstone presentation by Paul M. Edwards in the 1970s. Edwards, Temple School director of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Days Saints (now Community of Christ), referred without emphasis to "a prophet . . . she . . ." I still remember the almost electric shock of hearing a prophet referred to with a feminine pronoun. This was a decade before that church's revelation, canonized in 1985 as Section 156 of the RLDS Doctrines and Covenants, extended priesthood ordination to women. Another unforgettable moment was worshipping with the local Community of Christ congregation in which a woman's voice, resonant and reverent, pronounced the blessings on the emblems of the sacrament. I pored over a photograph in its magazine of an ordinary baptism—but one in which the officiator was the grandmother of the child being baptized. Apostle Susan Skoor Oxley, now retired, and Robin Kincaid Linkhart, president of the Sixth Quorum of the Seventy, have been cherished guests in our home; and I have felt blessed by the courage and compassion they bring to their ministry. I see possibilities we, as Latter-day Saints, desperately need to learn from.

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[com/latter-day-saints-and-excommunication-kuer-radiowest-podcast-transcript/](http://www.com/latter-day-saints-and-excommunication-kuer-radiowest-podcast-transcript/) (accessed March 1, 2015). Fabrizio is the long-time host and producer of Radio West and an active Latter-day Saint.

Many of the chapters in this book are fierce competitors for my “Most Favored” prize, Robin Linkhart’s clear and courageous chronology about the long and difficult road that Community of Christ traveled to recognize the giftedness of all members by broadening opportunities to serve ranks very high on my list. One of her most important messages is the cultural inertia of patriarchal systems, predictable religious resistance, the necessary grassroots struggle for change, but also the ultimate priesthood possibilities for contemporary women in a prophetic faith tradition. Particularly inspiring is her description of the deep listening required to hear past the clamor of tradition, argument, and counter-argument to hear God’s call to live a purer gospel.

In larger Mormon society, I consider this book to be a third voice in an intensifying conversation. The first voice was that of Sheri Dew, president and CEO of Deseret Book, spelling out her position in *Women and the Priesthood*:

I am not a feminist. But I am pro-progression, meaning that I am in favor of opportunities and experiences that allow for the personal development and growth of men and women alike—especially when those experiences are sanctioned by the Lord. . . .

Although I can see ways in which the participation of LDS women in the Church could be further enhanced, if nothing changes in my lifetime in this regard, it won’t affect my testimony one whit. I’ve had far too many witnesses that the gospel is true and that the keys, power, and authority of the Savior’s kingdom have been restored to let organizational issues discourage me.<sup>3</sup>

Her book is a valuable doctrinal compendium of General Authority statements on the place of women and the role of priesthood, even though she is careful to clarify that she is not pronouncing on doctrinal questions. It draws deeply on quotations over time from General Authorities’ conference statements and writings on various aspects of this troubling issue. Still, it continually falls back to the position that true believers cannot give any political or social problem the same emphasis as the love and atoning sacrifice of Jesus. The result is a curious disconnect between the two positions, with the implication that troubled or dissatisfied women are lacking full faith.

The second voice followed a year later with the appearance of Neylan McBaine’s *Women at Church: Magnifying Women’s Local Impact* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2014). I consider her book to occupy a middle ground—the first half acknowledging the sources of genuine pain and confusion that gender issues have caused many Mormon women. McBaine usefully differentiates between policy and tradition, and comments several times on difficult policies: “This does not mean the alternate model our leaders are advocating is wrong. It means it is hard to understand and implement.” In the second half of the book, she reports on encouraging examples of local creativity and accommodations that

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3. Sheri Dew, *Women and the Priesthood* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2014), 2, 9.

open the door of priesthood leaders and women alike to explore avenues of expanded participation.<sup>4</sup>

Both Dew and McBaine are respectful, thoughtful, and moderate in tone. Certainly few readers will agree with everything that either writer says, but I think it is fair to say that nearly all readers can find material for reflection, careful consideration, and responsible dialogue through their conversations.

This book, *Voices for Equality: Ordain Women and Resurgent Mormon Feminism*, is the third book in as many years to explore this disquieting, yet immensely significant topic. Broader in scope than either Dew or McBaine's works, it is data driven, using a combination of sociological and historical analysis, political and theological explorations, and sometimes wrenching personal experiences. The results are a thoughtful examination how change occurs, and is resisted or even repelled, in a faith-based organization whose doctrinal foundations combine both intensely conservative traditions and a commitment to progressive change in an environment that assigns different and sometimes clashing roles to lay members and priesthood leaders. A professional lifetime of dealing with sociological examinations of religious movements on the part of Gordon and Gary Shepherd and other chapter scholars have moved this work beyond knee-jerk reactions or inflammatory rhetoric. Gender equality is an important discussion, and this book is a very significant voice in that conversation.

The book is organized in four sections. The first lays out the issues of gender and equality given the Church's conservative parameters, documents the rise of Ordain Women, and seriously examines gender theology from both an institutional and a feminist perspective. It also looks at the principles at work in couples striving for egalitarian marriages and explores the dilemma of the largely excluded demographic of transgender members of the Church. Part 2, after laying a solid historical foundation of gender issues in the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, then devotes thoughtful attention to the turbulent and confusing status of current attempts to find ecclesiastical equality, with a steadying hand from Community of Christ officer Robin Linkhart, who has lived through and has helped shape that transition in her own faith community.

Part 3 gives earnest attention to the Church's ability and processes of change, then deals with the painful crossroads at which personal conscience and perceived institutional needs result in the Church's implementation of its most extreme measure of control—excommunication. Against this sobering background, Part 4 provides a data-rich analysis of contemporary issues—what the possible effects of more sister missionaries and expanded integration might prove, the controversial and enlightening survey on Mormon gender issues conducted in 2013, the impact of social media, and the activities of Ordain Women as both a response to and an agent in contemporary feminist activism.

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4. Neylan McBaine, *Women at Church: Magnifying Women's Local Impact* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2014), see, among others, 58.

The trend of this often bumpy history of gender relations in the Church is irresistibly but slowly moving toward equality. Perhaps one of the most encouraging signs is that the publisher, Greg Kofford Books, has positioned itself as a responsible, honest, and thoughtful platform—deliberately avoiding polarization and sensationalism. It provides a place in which Neylan McBaine’s *Women at Church* and *Voices for Equality*, along with Sheri Dew’s *Women and the Priesthood*, can engage this issue respectfully and insightfully—not as the last word, but as the next voice in this ongoing conversation.



## The Great Lever: Women and Changing Mission Culture in Contemporary Mormonism

*Courtney L. Rabada and Kristine L. Haglund*

This great social upheaval, this woman's movement that is making itself heard and felt, means something more than that certain women are ambitious to vote and hold office. I regard it as one of the great levers by which the Almighty is lifting up this fallen world, lifting it nearer to the throne of its Creator. —Orson F. Whitney<sup>1</sup>

On Saturday, October 6, 2012, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints made the historic announcement “that able, worthy young women who have the desire to serve may be recommended for missionary service beginning at age nineteen, instead of age twenty-one,” while young men could now serve one year earlier at age eighteen.<sup>2</sup> To say that the response has been overwhelming is an understatement. Within two weeks of the announcement, missionary applications jumped from an average of 700 per week to 4,000, with at least half of those new applications coming from women.<sup>3</sup> According to the most recent Church statistics, there are now over 85,000 full-time Mormon missionaries around the world, and in the two-and-a-half years since the announcement, the percentage of sister missionaries in the field has almost doubled from 15 to 28 percent, going from fewer than 9,000 women in the field in 2012 to nearly 30,000 today.<sup>4</sup>

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*Note:* Limited portions of this chapter were previously published in *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*: Courtney Rabada, “A Swelling Tide: Nineteen-Year-Old Sister Missionaries in the Twenty-First Century,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 47, no. 4 (Winter 2014): 19–45.

1. Orson F. Whitney, “Elections and Suffrage,” speech, Proceedings and Debates of the Convention Assembled to Adopt a Constitution for the State of Utah, March 30, 1895, transcript, <http://le.utah.gov/documents/conconv/27.htm> (accessed May 25, 2015).

2. President Thomas Monson, “Welcome to Conference,” general conference, October 6, 2012, transcript, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2012/10/welcome-to-conference> (accessed May 25, 2015).

3. Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: Newsroom, “Response to Mormon Missionary Age Announcement Remains Enthusiastic and Unprecedented,” March 27, 2013, <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/mormon-missionary-age-announcement-response> (accessed May 25, 2015).

4. LDS Church Growth Blog, “Statistical Reports,” April 10, 2015, <http://ldschurchgrowth.blogspot.com/search/label/Statistical%20Report> (accessed May 25, 2015); Tad Walch, “LDS Missionary Numbers to Peak at 88,000; More to Use and Pay for Digital Devices,” *Deseret News*, Thursday, July 3, 2014, <http://www.deseretnews.com/article/865606271/LDS->

Not enough time has passed to know whether the numbers of sister missionaries will continue to grow after the initial novelty of the age-change wears off. But even if fewer women serve in the coming years, the structure of missions around the world and the overall mission culture has been forever changed. Women are now official and active members of mission leadership councils. Women who want to serve missions are immediately accepted and encouraged by their communities, rather than being questioned and considered unusual. Sister missionaries are no longer viewed as “old maids” who chose mission service only because they had no prospects for marriage. Additionally, the sisters’ experiences may have significant implications for Mormon marriages as a whole. From marrying later to the experience of working in companionships to newfound confidence in their place in the Church, these women will presumably bring different expectations to their relationships. Future generations of sister missionaries are more likely to have older sisters and/or mothers who served missions. And perhaps most significantly, all indications point toward the idea that these women feel they are living through history in the making. They believe the age-change was a pivotal moment for their Church and for Mormon women, and that their participation has made them a part of a movement that is larger than their individual experiences.

We can usefully compare this “swelling tide” with the process of other significant policy changes within the Church, and particularly with another movement for change among Mormon women that began around the same time. In this article, we will consider the missionary age as a case study of incremental and organic change, in contrast to the more dramatic change sought by the Ordain Women organization. We will examine doctrinal and historical warrants for change, enumerate changes that have occurred and are occurring as a result of the age change, and speculate about possibilities for future developments as the effects of this policy ripple outward.

### **The Past: Doctrinal and Historical Precedents**

The history of women’s proselytizing efforts in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints reveals a willingness to adduce diverse theological and scriptural resources in support of pragmatic responses to institutional concerns. Frequent changes in the rules governing sister missionaries suggest that the most contested issues with regard to women’s roles in Church work have less to do with the substance of the activity, and more to do with the process by which change is achieved and who controls that process.

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missionary-numbers-to-peak-at-88000-more-to-use-and-pay-for-digital-devices.html?pg=all (accessed May 25, 2015). The number of male missionaries has also increased significantly, which is why the percentage has doubled, but the number of female missionaries has more than tripled.

More than 200 married women served as missionaries in various assignments before the first single full-time female missionaries were called in 1898.<sup>5</sup> Tania Rands Lyon and Mary Ann Shumway McFarland note that, over the course of almost seven decades of informal, self-motivated missionary work, women “served with and without their husbands, official calls, having been called or set apart, and they served for a variety of reasons.”<sup>6</sup>

Since then, policies about length of service, age requirements, and the number of sisters in the field have changed in response to circumstances, seemingly quite pragmatically, without expressed concern about a need to provide doctrinal warrant. This may be, of course, because a requirement for scriptural warrant would almost certainly exclude women from proselytizing efforts—the scanty record of women’s lives in scripture offers no precedent for female missionaries. Nonetheless, Mormonism’s open canon and commitment to ongoing revelation could in theory provide canonical support or at least doctrinal justification for women’s involvement in proselytizing work. The fact that these warrants have not been perceived to be necessary may tell us something important about the possibilities for an expansion of women’s roles in the Church: in some significant areas like missionary work, increasing women’s participation is more a matter of pragmatic policy change than revising doctrine. Resistance to change is largely located in questions about process, rather than about the *content* of contemplated changes. That is, women are not seen as incapable of performing certain ecclesial functions, but merely (and perhaps temporarily) enjoined from participation.

The lack of articulated doctrinal reasons for changes in policy may obscure the potentially radical implications of this most recent change for female missionaries. As Lyon and McFarland point out, throughout the twentieth century, policies with regard to sister missionaries seemed designed with the implicit goal of keeping the number of sisters small relative to the number of elders. President Gordon B. Hinckley explicitly acknowledged this intention in his address to the priesthood session of the October 1997 general conference: “We do not ask the young women to consider a mission an essential part of their life’s program. Over a period of many years, we have held the age level higher for them in an effort to keep the number going relatively small.”<sup>7</sup> While President Hinckley’s statement was the most explicit, other leaders have hinted at the concern for limiting the number of female missionaries for decades. Maintaining a gendered division of

5. Tania Rand Lyon and Mary Ann Shumway McFarland, “‘Not Invited, But Welcome’: The History and Impact of Church Policy on Sister Missionaries,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 36, no. 3 (Fall 2003): 73; Calvin S. Kunz, “I Have a Question,” *Ensign*, January 1981, <https://www.lds.org/ensign/1981/01/i-have-a-question/i-have-a-question> (accessed May 25, 2015).

6. Lyon and McFarland, “‘Not Invited, But Welcome,’” 73.

7. Gordon B. Hinckley, “Some Thoughts on Temples, Retention of Converts, and Missionary Work,” *Ensign*, November 1997, <https://www.lds.org/ensign/1997/11/some-thoughts-on-temples-retention-of-converts-and-missionary-service> (accessed May 25, 2015).

missionary labor, and giving primacy to young men, was an overriding goal of policies about sister missionaries, even though no clear reason for this goal was officially articulated.<sup>8</sup> The recent change in policy and apparent willingness to welcome sisters as a dramatically larger fraction of the missionary force represents a seismic shift in attitudes about women's relationships to a major element of the Church's purpose. The fact that the particulars of this attitudinal and policy change are not explicitly grounded in doctrinal pronouncements should not blind us to the radical implications of the announcement.

It is also important to note the ways in which this shift came about in the context of other notable changes in LDS practice. A combination of factors may have been involved: concern about the slowing growth in membership, conflicts in some countries with national service requirements that made it impossible for young men to leave school for mission service at age nineteen, and concern about rising inactivity rates of young people after high school graduation.<sup>9</sup> Importantly, though, we can only speculate about the decision-making process because it is almost entirely opaque to the general membership of the Church. This is in keeping with established conventions of revelatory policy change in the Church—decisions as momentous as the lifting of the priesthood and temple ban for black members of the Church and as mundane as the change to a three-hour block of meetings on Sunday are announced *ex cathedra*, with little or no public discussion of the process by which decisions are reached. This official silence about deliberations among Church authorities has the effect of sacralizing all policy pronouncements and allowing members to impute revelatory significance to all innovations. (This is not at all to say that revelation is not involved in the process, only that the occurrence of revelation is often left implicit, and that the mechanism of revelation is described in only the vaguest terms.)

### **The Present: Immediate Changes in Missionary and Church Culture**

If the patterns of the past are any guide, more information (and probably some misinformation) about the factors General Authorities considered while changing the policies about missionary age will become available over time, in

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8. Lyon and McFarland, “Not Invited, But Welcome,” 88–92. Lyon and McFarland make an important point about the “inherent contradictions” of the policy that may shed some light on why the Church has never fully articulated the reasoning behind the age gap: “[Hinckley] intimates with his choice of [the word ‘confession’] . . . that having sister missionaries in his own family was a secret to be confessed rather than an accomplishment to be proud of” (89). It is likely that the women who have reacted so enthusiastically to the age-change are responding not only the opportunity to serve, but also to the Church's (perhaps unintended) shift towards more openly celebrating sister missionaries.

9. Peggy Fletcher Stack and Kristen Moulton, “Some Mormon Men Can Go on Missions at Age 18,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, August 25, 2011, <http://www.sltrib.com/sltrib/blogsfaithblog/52458313-180/mormon-mission-age-academy.html.csp> (accessed May 25, 2015).

remarks and reminiscences by participants in the process, allowing future historians to construct a more robust and less speculative record of this moment in Mormon history.

However, there is little debate that this moment is critically important for Mormon women and for the LDS Church as a whole. Elder David F. Evans, executive director of the Missionary Department, stated, “Because of President Monson’s announcement, the Church has fundamentally changed, and as far as we can see, there will always be more missionaries than there were before the age change.”<sup>10</sup> As such, it is essential to consider the immediate effects of the policy in the few years since its implementation.<sup>11</sup>

### *Convenience, Perceptions, and Mormon Marriages*

There is little doubt that the age-change makes serving a mission significantly easier for women in the Church. It is ultimately a much more convenient time for young women to disengage from school or work, and their romantic relationships are likely to be more casual at age nineteen. There is no longer a sense of having to wait to serve, which was always at least implicitly part of the dynamic when men could leave for their missions two years before women.

The lag between the time men and women could serve before the age-change also fostered a perception of sister missionaries as “old maids,” who only chose to serve a mission because they had no prospects for marriage. This attitude changed instantaneously upon the announcement. This is not to say that marriage and relationships no longer factor into a woman’s decision to serve a mission, nor that the Church’s strong pro-marriage stance has changed. In fact, no fewer than six talks directly addressed the importance of marriage during the April 2015 general conference, including one in which an apostle explicitly told returned missionaries, “You single adults need to date and marry! Please stop delaying!”<sup>12</sup> However,

10. David F. Evans, untitled speech, 2014 mission presidents’ seminar, June 22, 2014, qtd. in Gerry Avant, “Missionary Work Broader Than Ever; Includes before and after Baptism,” *LDS Church News*, June 25, 2014, <https://www.lds.org/church/news/missionary-work-broader-than-ever-includes-before-and-after-baptism?lang=eng> (accessed May 25, 2015).

11. The theories and conclusions within this chapter are based on a series of one-on-one interviews with returned sister missionaries by Courtney Rabada, as well as ongoing and less formal conversations with other Mormon women by both authors. Formal interviews were conducted November 2014–March 2015 in Claremont, California, and Provo, Utah. While this sample cannot be considered as representative of the full female missionary force, their experiences and recollections provide enough similarities that trends in current missionary culture can be identified and theories about the Church’s future can be generated.

12. M. Russell Ballard, “The Greatest Generation of Young Adults,” general conference, April 4, 2015, transcript, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2015/04/the-greatest-generation-of-young-adults?lang=eng> (accessed May 25, 2015).

women are no longer faced with a stark either/or decision between serving a mission and getting married, and instead see both as equally viable options.

The age-change will likely also have long term implications for Mormon marriages. With the majority of missionaries returning from missions at age twenty-one (give or take a year) and with a few years of college to complete, it is possible that the average age at which Mormon couples marry will increase slightly. There may also be a shift toward returned missionaries preferring partners who also served missions, as well as an even stronger inclination to marry only fellow Mormons. In the past, many Mormon women viewed men who had served missions as more desirable mates than those who did not serve—it was not unusual to hear women say, “I only want to marry a returned missionary”—and this has not changed. Many young women have now experienced the benefits and hardships of living with a constant companion. They see a direct correlation with how they will approach their marriage partnerships and highly value that same experience and outlook from their potential spouses. The shared experience and the strengthening of one’s testimony while serving a mission are also factors that may lead to more dual-returned missionary couples in the future. There are also some indications that men are beginning to feel the same way about returned sister missionaries. While this is certainly not an inherently bad thing, it will be interesting to see the long-term implications for and trends within Mormon marriages, and particularly whether there are any negative effects for women who choose not to serve missions.<sup>13</sup>

#### *Sister Missionaries as the New Norm*

One notable effect of the revelatory significance members assign to such policy changes is the possibility of dramatic and immediate changes in attitudes and discourse at the grass roots. As soon as the age-change was announced, there was a major shift in attitudes throughout the Church about female missionaries. Women who decided to serve were no longer viewed as exceptions to the rule, and they were no longer questioned, second-guessed, or put in the position of having to defend their decision to a Church membership that generally viewed a mission as a last resort—or at the very least, an abnormality—for women.

Church authorities continue to stress that women are not required, nor expected, to serve missions. President Monson explicitly said as much when he

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13. It is also possible that the larger number of sister missionaries, paired with the smaller age gap between female and male missionaries, will lead to more on-mission romances. However, such developments are strictly frowned upon by Church leaders and can be cause to send missionaries home early. Some mission presidents have instituted stricter fraternization rules, such as restricting interactions between sisters and elders on Preparation Days and limited contact outside the ward meetinghouses. It is possible these concerns were part of the reason for the larger discrepancy in minimum serving ages before the change was made. See Gary Shepherd and Gordon Shepherd, *Mormon Passage: A Missionary Chronicle* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 31.

made the original announcement, and the official rhetoric has not changed. However, there seems to be a subtle shift among members of the Church toward the expectation that women will serve missions. Some women have spoken of feeling peer pressure to go on a mission since the announcement, though this could very well dissipate as time passes and the initial enthusiasm generated by the age-change dies down. Personal accounts indicate that women who chose not to serve missions may feel defensive about their decision. Women have been heard saying things like “I know I didn’t serve a mission but that wasn’t part of God’s plan for me,” or prefacing their statements with a kind of apology for not serving, which clearly indicates they do feel at least some cultural pressure regarding missionary service.

One thing that has not changed yet is the comparison of males and female missionaries, often used as a tactic to motivate them (and elders in particular). There has long been a general impression among the Church leaders and members that women are more successful missionaries, as demonstrated by David O. McKay’s 1921 statement: “Almost without exception, the women [missionaries] have proved to be not only equal but superior to the men.”<sup>14</sup> Sisters are characterized as harder working, more mature, and more likely to be able to gain an audience with potential investigators. The larger numbers of female missionaries seems to have only increased this rhetoric. Sisters continue to be held up as the shining examples of hard work and obedience, while elders are chided for not working hard enough. There has been some friction caused by these gender-based comparisons, but it does not seem to impact interpersonal relationships between sisters and elders as much as one might expect. It is possible that comparisons will lessen as time passes, though the differing minimum ages and maturity levels of women and men may foster a continued rhetoric of sisters excelling and elders needing to work harder. On the other hand, an increased focus on not just “finding, [but] retaining, reactivating, and enduring” members, and away from numbers and statistics as success indicators, may also lead to fewer comparisons and less competition among sisters and elders.<sup>15</sup>

### *An Opportunity to Lead*

Shortly after the age-change announcement, the Church created the role of sister training leader (STL) to instruct, lead, and support the growing number of sister missionaries. STLs are part of the mission leadership council (MLC) and are included in all district, zone, and council meetings. It was a much-needed addition

14. David O. McKay, “Our Lady Missionaries,” *Young Woman’s Journal* 32 (1921): 503, quoted in Lyon and McFarland, “Not Invited, But Welcome,” 82. Lyon and McFarland also quote Elder John G. Allred, who stated, “I can’t speak too highly for the young ladies of our mission. . . . They can get into the homes of people and find an opportunity for explaining the gospel where the elder cannot go. Send us more lady missionaries” (77–78).

15. Evans, untitled speech, 2014 mission presidents’ seminar, quoted in Avant, “Missionary Work Broader Than Ever”; and interviews conducted by Courtney Rabada.

to the mission structure given the massive influx of sister missionaries, and is generally considered by sisters and Church members as an extremely positive change.

While the exact role and responsibilities of STLs have not been completely codified yet, and they receive no formal training for the position, officially their primary duty is to act as a liaison between the mission leadership and the female missionaries—as a kind of “eyes and ears” of the mission president—through their participation in the MLC meetings and interactions with sisters during monthly exchanges. Ultimately, they are tasked with discerning and conveying the needs and concerns of the sisters in their areas, and sharing news and information regarding decisions made and information disseminated in MLC meetings with the women in the field. In a more unofficial capacity, the STLs main purpose is to provide emotional support to their fellow sisters. Exchanges and ongoing communication via phone calls and texting give the women under their care an opportunity to unload some of their troubles, get advice, take a break from their companions, and simply enjoy themselves outside the normal confines of their mission routine. Given the stressful nature of missionary work, sisters have reported fairly high levels of depression and anxiety, and keeping a watchful eye on their mental states is another aspect of being a STL.<sup>16</sup>

It is likely that the exact role and responsibilities of STLs will continue to evolve over the next few years, but will also be solidified and systematized at some point given the LDS Church’s penchant for worldwide standards and correlation. These changes may include a more widespread use of sister training coordinators, particularly in missions with a large number of female missionaries. Sister training coordinators oversee and organize the efforts of STLs, go on exchanges with them, and also participate fully in the mission leadership councils. Though currently not a broadly implemented change, if the position is expanded to more missions, the effects of the additional leadership options for women and their increased presence in the councils will be an important aspect of missionary culture to follow.

As mentioned above, sister training leaders are also members of the mission leadership council, which meets on a regular basis to discuss the needs of the overall mission, the sisters and elders, and their investigators. Councils are made up of the mission president, the mission president’s wife, assistants to the president (male only), zone and district leaders (male only), sister training leaders, and sister training coordinators (where applicable). It is only since the age-change announcement that women have officially been a part of this council, with the addition of STLs and mission presidents’ wives.

The STLs participation in the MLC also provides an important opportunity for women to be on equal footing with men in the Church and to see other women participating in councils in an official capacity, perhaps for the first time.<sup>17</sup> Of

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16. Interviews conducted by Courtney Rabada.

17. Gender equality in the Mormon Church is an obviously complicated topic, made more so by the fact that in surveys of LDS women, a majority report feeling equal

course, even in the position of STL, women are not technically equal with their male “counterparts” who hold the positions of district and zone leaders. These two positions have authority over both male and female missionaries, and the STLs officially answer to them, while women have no jurisdiction or authority over any of the men with whom they work, regardless of how long they have been in the field or in the STL position.

There is little doubt that the women who take part in the MLC strongly appreciate being part of the decision-making process, having an opportunity to voice their opinions, and interacting with the mission leadership on a regular basis. These experiences lead to increased feelings of confidence in both their interpersonal and leadership skills, as well as having more assurance in their own spiritual inspiration. While it would be easy to assume that most women will eventually develop this type of confidence and learn similar skills as they mature, there is at least some sense among sisters that being able to freely share one’s thoughts comes with an official title. Not only does this point to an almost automatic sense of empowerment felt when a woman is given an official calling, but it also hints at how she may feel before being called: uncomfortable speaking her mind, unable to relate to those in leadership positions, and inadequate because of the lack of a calling.

On a similar note, both those women called to the job and their fellow missionaries (female and male) tend to view the STL position as prestigious and authoritative. STLs’ involvement in councils and their personal relationships with the mission presidents are viewed as privileges, which set them apart from—and above—the other sisters. While the female missionaries look up to STLs as leaders and examples, what is perhaps more interesting is that male missionaries also tend to treat women called as STLs with a noticeably higher level of respect. Multiple returned sister missionaries have mentioned that their treatment “changed overnight when I became sister training leader. . . . Leaders never told me what to do or corrected me. . . . I was above reproach all of a sudden.”<sup>18</sup>

Ultimately, the recognition, confidence, and authority that come with an official title should not be underestimated, and these factors are important to remember when discussing the discrepancy between the number of official leadership positions available to men versus women within the Mormon Church at all levels. It also informs the Church’s ongoing discussion of priesthood authority. In a society that often treats authority and power as identical, it can be difficult to divorce priesthood callings, and the influence they bring, from concepts of power, particularly for young men and women who are just beginning to truly understand and experience priesthood power. LDS rhetoric includes regular references

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with Mormon men. However, given that all worthy Mormon men are ordained to the priesthood at the age of twelve, and women cannot hold the priesthood regardless of worthiness or age, to be called to sit on the MLC with their peers may very well technically be the first time these young women have been given an equal seat at a leadership table.

18. Interviews conducted by Courtney Rabada.

to the idea that priesthood offices do not confer status or prestige, but among members there is a clear cultural hierarchy of perceived rank.<sup>19</sup> It is particularly evident among competitive young male missionaries, for whom being called as a district or zone leader or assistant to the mission president is treated as an indicator of achievement or even of greater righteousness.<sup>20</sup> It remains to be seen whether female missionaries will be fully assimilated into this subtly competitive culture, but the changes sisters experience in how they are treated once being called to a leadership position would indicate that it is not a gender-specific phenomenon and, as such, ought to be included in future observation and analysis.

Both the creation of the STL position and women's inclusion in the mission leadership councils are positive and important steps for the LDS Church in making sure sister missionaries are fully incorporated in the new mission landscape. They not only create opportunities for women to gain leadership skills but also ensure that the needs and concerns of the sisters are directly heard by the mission leadership (rather than passed from sister to district leader to mission president, for example). Though it is unlikely that STLs' membership in the leadership council will change, it will be interesting to follow the council dynamics as time progresses. When large numbers of sister missionaries become the norm, rather than a relatively recent occurrence, will mission presidents continue make overt efforts to hear their voices? Will sisters take on additional responsibilities in some way? Will the position of STL grow in stature and become more highly competitive and coveted, or will it be sidelined into a primarily support position? And perhaps most important, how will the Church nurture these women's newly acquired skills when they return home from their missions?

One obvious way to continue creating and fostering female leaders is through embracing the Church's increased emphasis on the use of governing councils at the ward and stake level throughout the Church. Beginning with Elder M. Russell Ballard's conference address in April 1994, a recurrent theme has been the instruction and encouragement of bishops and other priesthood leaders to in-

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19. This is a regular theme in Sunday services. Additionally, numerous general conference talks on the topic of hierarchy, priesthood authority, and how they should be understood outside the context of Church governance indicate that there is a misunderstanding that Church leaders are attempting to correct. See Elder Dallin H. Oaks, "Priesthood Authority in the Family and the Church," general conference, October 1, 2005, transcript, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2005/10/priesthood-authority-in-the-family-and-the-church?lang=eng> (accessed May 25, 2015); Elder Dallin H. Oaks, "The Keys and Authority of the Priesthood," general conference, April 5, 2014, transcript, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2014/04/the-keys-and-authority-of-the-priesthood?lang=eng> (accessed May 25, 2015); and Elder Boyd K. Packer, "Called to Serve," general conference, October 4, 1997, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/1997/10/called-to-serve> (accessed May 25, 2015).

20. Personal accounts shared with both authors support this claim and indicate that it remains a current issue, but it has been an ongoing facet of missionary life for many years. See Shepherd and Shepherd, *Mormon Passage*, 233–40.

clude women in decision-making meetings and to be solicitous of women's opinions.<sup>21</sup> The most recent iteration of the *Church Handbook of Instructions* (2010) that governs Church bureaucracy elevated the ward council (in which several women participate) to a much more significant role in the governance of local congregations than it had previously occupied. As Rosalynde Welch pointed out in a perceptive blog post after the publication of the new guidelines, "One of the practical effects of this change is that, for the first time, women have full access to a venue in which they participate in an executive (rather than merely advisory or auxiliary) capacity at the highest ward level. . . . Any member of the council, male or female . . . can receive inspiration for the entire ward in the context of that body's deliberations."<sup>22</sup> She further noted the possibility of this change extending from the ward level to the stake and even general level of Church government: "Without having to touch on the vexed topic of female ordination, the same mechanism that has extended authority to women at the local level through the ward council could bring women into executive councils at the stake and area levels. The framework—and indeed the doctrinal justification—for a larger scale integration is already in place in the new handbook."<sup>23</sup>

The increased participation of sisters in councils on their missions will prepare them to be full participants in ward councils upon their return. Young men who have been encouraged to listen to the voices of sister missionaries and who have seen their mission presidents modeling such attentiveness will be more prepared to truly collaborate with women in their future Church service. While such change is not as measurable and in some ways not as satisfying as the structural change that would occur if women were ordained to the priesthood, it is nonetheless a necessary element of cultural change that ordination alone would not inevitably enact.

### *Feelings of Isolation*

The Church's ability to incorporate returned missionaries back into their wards and to use their skills and talents has long been deemed an important aspect of missionary service. Almost twenty years ago, President Gordon B. Hinckley stated, "I am satisfied that if every returning missionary had a meaningful responsibility the day he or she came home, we'd have fewer of them grow cold in their faith. I wish that [the bishops] would make an effort to see that every returned missionary receives a meaningful assignment. Activity is the nurturing

21. M. Russell Ballard, "Counseling with Our Councils," general conference, April 2, 1994, transcript, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/1994/04/counseling-with-our-councils> (accessed May 25, 2015).

22. Rosalynde Welch, "Handbook and Help Meet," Patheos.com: Salt and Seed, November 23, 2010, <http://www.patheos.com/Resources/Additional-Resources/Handbook-and-Help-Meet> (accessed May 25, 2015).

23. Ibid.

process of faithfulness.”<sup>24</sup> And yet the returned missionaries’ frustrated desire for purpose remains a problem today, and may only grow more troublesome now that a significantly larger portion of the Mormon population is dealing with the difficult shift back home from the mission field.<sup>25</sup>

Though not a new nor gender-specific phenomenon, painful transitions are certainly widespread among returned sister missionaries.<sup>26</sup> They have reported feeling depressed, isolated, lonely, purposeless, selfish, guilty, worthless, and alienated from God and the Spirit—no trivial list of issues.<sup>27</sup> These troubles may only be exacerbated by the high levels of depression and anxiety many women experience while serving their missions. The sisters’ reactions should give Mormon leaders pause, since these are likely some of the important factors behind the reasons many returned missionaries drift away from the Church. Additionally, the relative paucity of Church callings available to women due to priesthood requirements might contribute to attrition as young women feel unneeded. But beyond retention, it seems that the Church owes it to these women and men, who have just dedicated years of their lives to serving their faith, to do as much as possible to help them feel whole, valued, and celebrated.

### *A New Identity*

Missionaries do not only set aside their day-to-day lives in order to serve; they also set aside their identities. It is not unusual to hear a sister speak of letting go of “Jane” in order to become “Sister Smith.” While some of these changes are part of shifting the focus away from themselves and toward the work of a missionary and to serving the Church and the people they meet, this change has additional dimensions. The sisters experience their mission as a life-changing event that shapes them into an altogether new person; when they return, they are not interested in going back to how things were before. The difficulty in letting go of their “old selves” while struggling to define their “new selves” is certainly one of the factors that makes the transition home so hard.

It is true that men also return from their missions greatly changed, and as mentioned above, they also face internal hardships in making the transition. But it is likely that the experience is different for women in one very important way: In a Church that assumes young men will serve a mission and begins preparing them for that role from a very young age, Mormon men are fulfilling an expecta-

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24. Gordon B. Hinckley, “Latter-day Counsel: Selections from Addresses by President Gordon B. Hinckley,” *Ensign*, March 2001, 65, quoted in Richard J. McClendon and Bruce A. Chadwick, “Latter-day Saint Returned Missionaries in the United States: A Survey on Religious Activity and Postmission Adjustment,” *BYU Studies* 43, no. 2 (2004): 131.

25. Interviews conducted by Courtney Rabada; also discussed in depth in McClendon and Chadwick, “Latter-day Saint Returned Missionaries in the United States.”

26. This theme is also explored in McClendon and Chadwick, “Latter-day Saint Returned Missionaries in the United States.”

27. Interviews conducted by Courtney Rabada.

tion, while women are challenging traditional expectations in choosing to serve. Male returned missionaries have completed a familiar rite of passage; women are breaking new ground and may therefore have a more difficult time reconciling their new post-mission identities.

Consequently, the Church's ability to recognize and embrace the new identities of these women could have a significant impact on their relationship with the Church in the future. Sister missionaries have been empowered, educated, and enlightened. They have assumed larger roles in Church service, and cannot be expected to return home and revert to being the same people they were before they left.

### **The Future:**

#### **The Long-Term Impacts of the Age-Change Announcement**

In addition to changing the lives of the sisters, the massive influx of missionaries could very well have a significant impact on the growth of the overall Church. Though current statistics show only a small increase in the number of convert baptisms since the age change, the numbers do suggest increases in convert retention and member activity rates. While more data would be necessary to draw definite inferences, it is possible that this growth is due to the missionaries' expanded focus on continued interaction with new and current members, and renewed efforts to bring lapsed members back to the Church.<sup>28</sup>

However, it is almost certain that the current surge of sister missionaries will have a lasting and powerful impact on future generations of Mormon women. Young women today will grow up in a Church in which serving a mission is not only more convenient but is culturally accepted. Most will have interacted with, and been taught and led by, returned sister missionaries who will not only have broken through barriers in their wards, but will also be able to serve as role models. Women serving missions will be a part of conversations and lessons in a way that they simply were not before the age-change announcement. Of course, this influence will also extend to the children of returned missionaries, more of whom will grow up in households in which their mothers and older sisters served missions.

As mentioned above, the age change could have a long-term impact on Mormon marriages in general. As one counselor stated, "Missionary service typically leads to temple marriage and the establishment of loving eternal family relationships. Couples sealed in the temple place greater importance on eternal families. They tend to have more children, and those children are more likely to become faithful adult members in the Church."<sup>29</sup> The lessons learned through

28. LDS Church Growth Blog, "Statistical Reports": "Convert Baptisms: 296,803 (increase of 13,858 from 2013; a 4.90% annual increase) . . . . The average number of converts baptized per missionary inched upward from 3.4 converts baptized per missionary in 2013 to 3.5 converts baptized per missionary in 2014."

29. Kevin W. Pearson, "The Value of a Returned Missionary," *The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: Area Presidency Messages*, August 2012, <http://www.lds.org/pages/areapresidency/2012/aug> (accessed May 25, 2015).

eighteen months of working with a constant companion will almost certainly have consequences for how wives and husbands interact and communicate with one another, and both Church authorities and members have long said that a returned sister missionary will “become a better wife, a better mother, a better Relief Society president.”<sup>30</sup> Finally, the 2015 Pew Research Center study on the American religious landscape confirms that out of all Christian faiths, Mormons are the most likely to be married and “also tend to have larger families than [those] in other religious groups.”<sup>31</sup>

Whether they are serving as a Relief Society president or in another calling, returned sister missionaries have also learned invaluable leadership skills. Mission service gives women confidence to deal with difficult situations, enlarges their scriptural and doctrinal knowledge, and empowers them to lead and assist other women. It also gives them a taste of what it will be like to serve in the Church through various callings or participation in ward councils, and there is some anecdotal evidence that a woman’s missionary service has become a factor when leaders consider candidates for ward callings. Sisters report that their mission presidents speak to them explicitly about their futures as leaders of the Church, and they feel they have been given opportunities as sister training leaders and senior companions to hone these skills.<sup>32</sup>

These feelings of confidence and empowerment may also lead to women feeling more comfortable advocating for change within their wards. Whether it is pushing to be included in ward councils and other meetings, speaking up about discrepancies in the budgets or activities for the Young Women and Young Men organizations, or questioning the practice of calling only men to positions which do not specifically require priesthood authority (such as ward mission leader), returned sister missionaries will have the tools to instigate real and major changes within their Church.

However, it is very likely that most of these efforts for change will remain focused at the local or ward level. While returning sisters are uninterested in returning to the status quo on a personal level, there does not seem to be a strong

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30. Franklin D. Richards, “Have a Dream,” *New Era* 8 (January 1978): 4; quoted in Lyon and McFarland, “Not Invited, But Welcome,” 84. This idea is also mentioned in Jodi Kantor and Laurie Goodstein, “Missions Signal a Growing Role for Mormon Women,” *New York Times*, March 1, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/02/us/a-growing-role-for-mormon-women.html> (accessed May 25, 2015); and Associated Press, “More Women Expected to Serve Mormon Missions,” *USA Today*, January 18, 2013, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2013/01/18/mormon-women-missionaries/1844423/> (accessed May 25, 2015).

31. Pew Research Center, “Marital Status and Family Size of Religious Groups,” *Religious Landscape Study*, May 12, 2015, <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/chapter-3-demographic-profiles-of-religious-groups/> (accessed May 25, 2015).

32. Interviews conducted by Courtney Rabada.

interest in pushing for change in the Church hierarchy.<sup>33</sup> This response could be influenced by myriad factors: their relative youth, their focus on finishing school, marrying, and starting families, their recently strengthened testimonies which in turn reinforces their faith in the relative infallibility of the leaders of the Church, or the “distance” between their day-to-day experiences and the concerns of the larger institutional Church. Moreover, the post-correlation structure of the Church’s organization does not provide mechanisms for women to interact with women or men above them in the hierarchy.<sup>34</sup> Women’s opportunities to offer new ideas and perspectives are confined to the ward councils, with no analogous councils at the stake or general level.

Somewhat surprisingly, the Ordain Women movement may also have an impact on this generation of sister missionaries’ interest in effecting change within their Church. First, the movement has spurred the Church leaders to focus on the topic of priesthood in a new, more gender-inclusive way, most notably in Elder Dallin H. Oaks’s April 2014 general conference talk: “Priesthood keys direct women as well as men, and priesthood ordinances and priesthood authority pertain to women as well as men.”<sup>35</sup> By changing the conversation about priesthood and emphasizing that it is available to women (though in explicitly limited forms), the imbalances have, in some ways, been neutralized. This message is strongly reinforced to the women and men serving missions during widespread conversations about priesthood power; and as such, it is not unusual to hear sister missionaries disclaim their desire for, or a woman’s need to hold, the priesthood.<sup>36</sup> This conservative attitude regarding women’s priesthood ordination is indicative of most LDS women’s general reluctance to promote institutional-level changes. Second, the Church’s handling and negative rhetoric surrounding the Ordain Women movement and its public actions, including requesting admission to the priesthood sessions at general conferences, have emphasized the otherness and minority status of Mormon feminists (and opened the door to making “feminism”

33. Interviews conducted by Courtney Rabada.

34. Until the mid-1960s, ward-level leaders of women’s and children’s organizations reported to their counterparts in the stake auxiliary presidencies, who in turn reported to the general presidencies and boards of those organizations in Salt Lake City, creating a female hierarchy that functioned with a great deal of independent control over curriculum, budgets, etc. The movement to streamline Church governance functions which came to be called “correlation” eroded the power of those auxiliary presidencies and changed the organizational structure of the Church so that ward auxiliary presidencies reported to bishops and stake auxiliary presidencies reported to stake presidents, thus severing lines of official communication and influence that had previously been the prerogative of the female leaders. See Matthew Bowman, *The Mormon People: The Making of an American Faith* (New York: Random House, 2012), 192–95.

35. Dallin H. Oaks, “The Keys and the Authority of the Priesthood,” general conference, April 5, 2014, transcript, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2014/04/the-keys-and-authority-of-the-priesthood?lang=eng> (accessed May 25, 2015).

36. Interviews conducted by Courtney Rabada.

a dirty word again), thus rendering suspect and even threatening almost any suggestion for change that can be construed or understood as gender-motivated.<sup>37</sup>

However, there is at least some informal evidence that the patriarchal nature of the Church is less acceptable to younger generations of women. Taunalyn Ford Rutherford relates the following example given by one oral history subject: “The priesthood is the ruling power. . . . Even though you’ve got a Relief Society president it is still under the authority of priesthood. It doesn’t bother me in the least. My eldest daughter is horrified at that sort of thing. But I’m not.”<sup>38</sup> It is possible that many returning sister missionaries will begin to feel the weight of their Church’s institutional patriarchy more heavily as time passes. Rather than feeling comfortable in inhabiting the Church’s strictly defined gender roles, these young women could begin to experience a sense of disquiet and dissatisfaction, and a yearning for more opportunities, much like the “feminine mystique” that initiated second-wave feminism.<sup>39</sup>

The mere fact that tens of thousands of Mormon women have joined the missionary force points toward major changes for the LDS Church. They may take the shape as the influence returned sister missionaries will have on their children’s decisions to serve missions. Perhaps there will be a shift toward the expectation for women to serve, with a focus on duty rather than just a desire. The Church could devote more resources to awareness and treatment of mental health issues

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37. Interviews conducted by Courtney Rabada. After the April 2014 general conference, Church spokesperson Cody Craynor stated, “Despite polite and respectful requests from church leaders not to make Temple Square a place of protest, a mixed group of men and women ignored that request and staged a demonstration outside the Tabernacle on General Conference weekend, refusing to accept ushers’ directions and refusing to leave when asked. . . . While not all the protesters were members of the church, such divisive actions are not the kind of behavior that is expected from Latter-day Saints and will be as disappointing to our members as it is to church leaders.” Qtd. in Kristin Moulton, “Mormon Women Again Turned Away from Priesthood Meeting,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, April 11, 2014 (<http://www.sltrib.com/sltrib/news/57778960-78/women-church-square-ordain.html.csp> (accessed May 25, 2015)).

A similar sentiment was expressed by another Church spokesperson, Ruth Todd, in 2013: “Millions of women in the church do not share the views of this small group who organized today’s protest, and most church members would see such efforts as divisive.” Qtd. in Whitney Evans, “Women Hear Priesthood Session, but not in Conference Center,” *Deseret News*, October 5, 2013, <http://www.deseretnews.com/article/865587795/Women-hear-LDS-Priesthood-meeting-but-not-at-conference-center.html?pg=all> (accessed May 25, 2015).

38. Taunalyn Ford Rutherford, “Relief Society,” in *Mormon Women Have Their Say: Essays from the Claremont Oral History Project*, edited by Claudia L. Bushman and Caroline Kline (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2013), 243.

39. Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, edited by Kirsten Fermaglich and Lisa M. Fine, Norton Critical Editions New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2013), 12–13. First published in 1963.

in order to combat the anxiety and depression experienced by so many Mormon women, both in the mission field and elsewhere.<sup>40</sup> It is possible that women will begin to be called to those leadership positions that have traditionally been held by men but that do not require priesthood authority; at least one returned sister missionary has been called to the position of co-ward mission leader, though her official title is “sister training leader.”<sup>41</sup> Perhaps the Church’s future bishops, stake presidents, and apostles will bring their experiences in serving side-by-side with sister missionaries to their callings and will create more opportunities for women to participate in the decision-making process at all levels. But it seems most likely that Mormon women will speak out, both more clearly and more frequently, about their needs and concerns, and will push for the changes they want to see in their Church. These are all possibilities.

But what is certain is that the current generation of Mormon women has been empowered. They have been heard, they have deepened their testimonies, and they have experienced significant hardships and blessings. They are imbued with a wonderful sense of optimism about their futures, and the future of their Church. They believe, as one sister beautifully stated:

The age change was intentional on God’s part in progressing equality in the Church. This will have a huge impact on women feeling more empowered, and in seeing women feel equal with men. . . . It will promote women feeling entitled to have a voice in the Church. It will affect the way men see women in the Church. Women aren’t apologizing anymore. They are confident in their knowledge and skill set and their ability to contribute. They won’t be pushed aside or let someone look down on them. More women with this attitude will help push the Church in the direction of equality, and open-mindedness to the female perspective.<sup>42</sup>

In other words, they just might be unstoppable.

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40. Ben Lockhart, “UVU Professor’s Study Puts Focus on LDS Women and Depression,” *Deseret News*, January 31, 2013, <http://www.deseretnews.com/article/865571984/UVU-professors-study-puts-focus-on-LDS-women-and-depression.html?pg=all> (accessed May 25, 2015); and James Thalman, “Utah Leads the Nation in Rates of Depression,” *Deseret News*, November 29, 2007, <http://www.deseretnews.com/article/695231614/Utah-leads-the-nation-in-rates-of-depression.html?pg=all> (accessed May 25, 2015).

41. Interviews conducted by Courtney Rabada.

42. Caroline (pseud.), interviewed by Courtney Rabada, March 6, 2015, Brigham Young University, Provo Utah.



## Chapter 16

# Finding the Middle Ground: Negotiating Mormonism and Gender

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The open-ended response questions on the Mormon Gender Issues Survey (see Chapters 13, 14, and 15 for more explanatory information about this survey) were designed to gather information about how Mormons view gender, to identify any changes that members would like to see with regard to gender, to ask them to envision increased leadership roles for women, and then to respond to that idea. We expected to find a majority of survey participants reiterating statements made in general conference and LDS Church curricular materials. Certainly, many responses reflected the language that the Church uses to talk about gender, but we were surprised to find that progressive and conservative Mormons tend to think about gender in different terms. A major finding of the data used in this chapter shows LDS Church members trying to reconcile Church teachings with lived experiences.

The data tell a story that is not reflected in the polarized discussions you might hear in Sunday meetings in the American West. That story is not reflected in conservative or progressive Mormon blog posts on the internet. It is not echoed in general conference talks. Instead, the data analysis reveals a substantial and previously unrecognized middle ground on the subject of gender.

### Data Analysis Concerns

It was not feasible to carefully examine the open-ended response questions for all 61,066 respondents, which amounted to more than 3 million words. Instead, the Mormon Gender Issues Survey team randomly selected 500 responses, and this study analyses that subset of the data. Our review identified one duplicated response, thus changing the N to 499. Not all 499 randomly selected respondents answered all of the qualitative questions, and the total number of respondents for each question will be noted below and in the discussion.

Coding the responses proved to be a challenging task. Participants in this survey tended to write long and complex answers to the questions, which is not typical for most surveys. Initially, the responses were coded for straightforward binary answers (yes/no, agree/disagree, etc.) to the survey questions. In reviewing the data, we found that the coding did not reflect the mixed nature of many responses, so we then recoded the data to account for greater complexity.

Surveys on gender and religion tend to focus on a single demographic, like conservative women. This survey is unusual in that it is broader in its demo-

graphic focus. This survey targeted Mormons who use the internet and gathered data from LDS Church members from a variety of backgrounds, nationalities, genders, incomes, political persuasions, and Church activity levels.

Findings from this chapter are based on data obtained from three open-ended questions at the end of the Mormon Gender Issues Survey. The three questions were as follows:

1. Men and women are treated differently in the Church. Some of these differences are considered cultural, other doctrinal. Please describe these differences and why you feel they are beneficial or not beneficial. (N = 446)
2. If women were to serve in more administrative and leadership roles in the LDS Church, how would that affect your religious/spiritual life? Please comment in as much detail as possible. (N = 475)
3. What changes related to women, if any, do you hope the Church will implement over the next ten or twenty years? Describe these changes in as much detail as possible. Why do you believe these changes are important? (N = 448)

We performed content analysis through the use of open coding.<sup>1</sup> In doing this, we were looking to highlight the diversity of responses to understand both the range of responses and their complexity. This method revealed natural categories and themes, and the structure of this chapter follows these.<sup>2</sup>

The scholarly literature on gender and religion tends to revolve around the idea of agency (or personal choice) and the effect that religious belief, practice, and community have on an individual's ability to act.<sup>3</sup> Early agency research was based on feminist assumptions about individuals who participate in patriarchal religion.<sup>4</sup> More recent agency research has worked to dispel the common stereotypes used to describe religious women, including domesticity, submissiveness, and lack of self-determination.<sup>5</sup>

Recent agency literature, and especially the work of Orit Avishai, shaped our initial and follow-up coding procedures. Because feminist scholars have a tendency to make value judgements about the statements of their more conservative

1. Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1998).

2. Ibid., M. Q. Patton, *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods* (3rd ed.). London: Sage Publications, 2002).

3. Orit Avishai, "'Doing Religion' in a Secular World: Women in Conservative Religions and the Question of Agency," *Gender and Society* 22 (2007): 409–33; Kelsy C. Burke, "Women's Agency in Gender-Traditional Religions," *Sociology Compass* 6, no. 2 (2012): 122–133; Saba Mahmood, *The Politics of Piety: The Islamic and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004).

4. Burke, "Women's Agency in Gender-Traditional Religions."

5. Avishai, "'Doing Religion' in a Secular World"; Jeanette S. Jouili and Schirin Amir-Moazami, "Knowledge, Empowerment and Religious Authority among Pious Muslim Women in France and Germany," *The Muslim World* 96, no. 4 (2006): 617–42.

research subjects, they sometimes end up categorizing and judging people instead of analyzing actions. Orit Avishai, Lynne Gerber, and Jennifer Randles insisted that researchers have to look past their own academic, political, and feminist bias in studying women in gender-traditional religions.<sup>6</sup> In working on this project, we took this advice to heart.

When we tried to understand the survey responses in terms of agency, however, we ran into some problems. Existing literature on agency is limited to the ways in which people perform their religion.<sup>7</sup> Researchers tend to focus on binary measures of orthopraxy, placing individuals into pre-existing categories.<sup>8</sup> When we started to look at the agency literature more broadly, we realized that researchers resisted asking subjects about their thoughts and instead focused on action. Agency framework did not work with our survey because our three questions asked about thoughts and not actions. Nor did the responses, once coded, fit neatly into pre-existing categories. Simply put, literature that explains the complexity of how religious people view gender does not currently exist and there is no established framework to understand this topic.

### **Negotiating the Meaning of Religious Teachings with Personal Experience**

We propose that the appropriate theoretical underpinning of the data presented here is one of *negotiation*. We define negotiation as the process through which individuals integrate religious teachings and lived experiences. Negotiation can be an internal thought-based process and/or an external process that involves interacting with other individuals. Although these two categories of negotiation are complementary in actual experience, the questions in this survey dealt primarily with internal negotiation. By using the concept of negotiation, we avoided categorizing people according to presumptive binaries while still coding and analyzing the diversity of an individual's thoughts and behaviors. This new framework assists in understanding the complexity of thought that an individual holds about a particular issue, like gender and religion.

Negotiation theory helps us to better understand that, while many Mormons hold conservative views on gender, these are not their only views on gender. The

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6. Orit Avishai, Lynne Gerber, and Jennifer Randles, "The Feminist Ethnographer's Dilemma: Reconciling Progressive Research Agendas with Fieldwork Realities," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 20, no. 10 (2012): 1–33; Lori G. Beaman, "Molly Mormons, Mormon Feminists and Moderates: Religious Diversity and the Latter Day Saints [sic] Church," *Sociology of Religion* 62, no. 1 (2001): 65–86; Sirma Bilge, "Beyond Subordination vs. Resistance: An Intersectional Approach to the Agency of Veiled Muslim Women," *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 31, no 1 (2010): 9–28; Amy Hoyt, "Beyond the Victim/Empowerment Paradigm: The Gendered Cosmology of Mormon Women," *Feminist Theology* 16 (2007): 89–100.; Mahmood, "Politics of Piety."

7. Avishai, "Doing Religion' in a Secular World."

8. Beaman, "Molly Mormons, Mormon Feminists, and Moderates."

data from this survey show that the story of Mormons and gender is one of tangled views. These findings seem to run counter to other kinds of research on Mormons.<sup>9</sup>

Campbell, Green, and Monson demonstrated that Mormons are among the most conservative religious groups in America.<sup>10</sup> Their research suggests the hypothesis that our survey respondents would also express acute gender binary paradigms. Visible political involvement in such issues as the ERA, Proposition 8, and recent so-called “religious freedom” legislation has clearly demonstrated that the LDS Church has formed conservative alliances concerning gender issues in American society.

While gender and religion in the United States have not always been seen as a political issue, Mark Chaves argued that gender has become the benchmark political issue within religious communities.<sup>11</sup> He set forth the idea that a religious organization’s views on gender are a proxy for the larger issues of modernization and secularization. In doing charitable and political work, religious organizations form alliances with other organizations that share their views on gender. If a church changes its stance on gender, it risks losing those inter-denominational relationships. In this way, gender issues have helped defined the American religious landscape and have contributed to political polarization both within and between American churches.

This process of gender-issue alignment among American religious groups has helped to facilitate black-and-white thinking about the roles and religious responsibilities of men and women. This is generally reflected in the official language and teachings of these churches. The result is that if you ask conservative American Christians (Mormons included) straightforward questions about gender, you are likely to get straightforward conservative responses. However, if you ask more complex questions whose answers are not easily quantified, you will get more mixed results.

This is the case with the open-ended questions we used in our survey. The quantitative data from the survey (see Chapter 15) points to a strong alignment with traditional ideas about gender, because participants had to choose categorical positions. The qualitative data is much messier and many individual responses articulate a range of ideas, as will be discussed later. This is the benefit of qualitative analysis, as it allows for a much deeper examination of the negotiation process.

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9. The Pew Research Center produced a report in 2012 titled *Mormons in America*. Its results showed that most Mormons in the U.S. hold traditional beliefs about gender roles. Fifty-eight percent of Mormons thought that marriage was more satisfying if the husband provided while the wife stayed home. Eighty-seven percent thought that women should not be ordained to the priesthood.

10. David E. Campbell, John C. Green, and J. Quin Monson, *Seeking the Promised Land: Mormons and American Politics* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

11. Mark Chaves, *Ordaining Women: Culture and Conflict in Religious Organizations* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999).

To address the challenging intersection of gender, religion, political alliances, and the need to capture its complexity, we turned to the work of Jonathan Haidt, which highlights the difficulties inherent in creating dialogue between conservative and liberal individuals and groups.<sup>12</sup> Haidt has illustrated how individuals negotiate moral and ethical issues. His work showed that religion complicates the negotiation process because religion is often about in-group/out-group dynamics and researchers do not always take this into account. Conservatives, in particular, tend to be drawn to absolutes and may resist negotiation. He suggested that it may not be possible for individuals from either side to agree, but that the goal should be to create balance and space for each position.

We agree with Haidt that Mormonism needs to develop more space for respectful and constructive discussion about gender issues from a range of viewpoints. Unfortunately, the range of perspectives is quite limited in LDS Church discourse. The conservative and liberal spaces of online Mormonism are also relatively polarized. There are, however, a few attempts on both sides to find this elusive balance: the work of Terryl and Fiona Givens, the work of Neylan McBaine, the new Gospel Topics essays from the Church History Department, the work of Richard and Claudia Bushman, Sunstone's "Why I Stay" annual panel of speakers, and a recent blog post by Paul Malan on the problems of the Mormon monoculture<sup>13</sup>—all of which are good examples of recent Mormon efforts to seek greater balance in the contemporary debate over gender issues in the Church.

### Survey Demographics

Before discussing the survey responses, it is helpful to know some demographic information about the respondents. Seventy-two percent were women, and 27 percent were men.<sup>14</sup> One percent responded "Other" or preferred not to respond. The responses skewed young, with 41 percent of respondents ages eighteen through thirty and 33 percent aged thirty-one through forty. Ninety-six percent lived in America at the time of the survey, and 36 percent lived in Utah specifically. The overwhelming majority of respondents identified their race/ethnicity as white (91 percent) and the second-largest group was Pacific Islanders (3 percent).

Forty-six percent were college graduates and a further 26 percent had graduate degrees. When asked to identify their political beliefs on a scale from "very conservative" to "very liberal," the largest group (26 percent) identified as "mod-

12. Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Vintage, 2012).

13. Paul Malan, February 15, 2015, "Wetlands: The Future of Mormonism," <https://medium.com/@ungewissen/wetlands-the-future-of-mormonism-f1c1b3b62256>.

14. These percentages are very closely aligned with the gender demographics obtained from a content analysis of individuals who have submitted profiles to the Ordain Women website in which 70.4 percent of profilers were women and 29.6 percent were men. For this and other related demographic statistics to those obtained in our Gender Issues Survey, see Chapter 18.

erate, but lean conservative.” The second-largest group (19 percent) identified as “conservative,” and the third-largest group (14 percent) as “moderate, but lean liberal.” Eighty-six percent told us that they are LDS and currently identify as LDS while a further 11 percent think that their names are still on Church records but do not identify as LDS. Most of the remainder reported that they used to be LDS but that their names are no longer on Church records.

### **Different Treatment: Doctrine or Culture?**

The first open-ended question asked respondents to consider whether differences in the way that men and women are treated in the Church stem from LDS doctrine or Mormon culture, with a follow-up question asking if these differences in treatment are beneficial or not. Of the 500 randomly selected respondents, 446 answered this question. Seventeen percent of respondents reported that different treatment of men and women by the Church stemmed from doctrine and 23 percent reported that it stemmed from culture. The largest group of respondents, 47 percent, believed that different treatment of men and women in the Church was rooted in both doctrine and culture. Thirteen percent did not address the doctrine/culture divide on the issue of gendered treatment in the Church.

In asking whether gendered treatment by the Church was beneficial or not, 32 percent felt that different treatment was beneficial. Twenty-eight percent thought it was not beneficial. Thirty-one percent expressed mixed feelings, and 9 percent did not comment on this part of the question. In looking at both doctrine/culture and beneficial/not beneficial questions, 24 percent of respondents had mixed feelings about both parts of the question, which was the single biggest category.

Researchers anticipated that a majority of respondents would clearly identify doctrine as the root of gendered treatment in the LDS Church and express an opinion that it was beneficial. This did not happen. Mormons who participated in this survey demonstrated a thoughtful process of negotiation that integrated official Church teachings with lived experiences. This process of negotiation is a compelling example of how Mormons do not actually perceive their lives in terms of either/or binaries but use their lived experiences to draw lines between those teachings that are seen as central to the Church (doctrine) and those that are not (culture).

The following response demonstrates this process of negotiation and, while very long, represents many of the mixed doctrine/culture responses.

First is the difference regarding the Priesthood. Men hold it. Women do not. This is a very doctrinal difference, and it's important to note that women don't need to hold it in order to access it. So long as they are faithful, they can have all the benefits of the priesthood despite not holding it. The reason men hold the priesthood ties into the next difference in treatment: in the home. Men preside over the home. They hold the priesthood keys and they have that responsibility. This is a good thing. However, this does not mean that every decision in the home is made by the man. On the contrary, decisions need to be made by both the husband and the wife. The

wife is an equal to her husband in this regard. It's her life too. The wife's duty is to raise the children, should there be children, with the help of her husband. There are really a million differences I could list, but ultimately, I think most of them boil down to being beneficial. To a certain point. And in their purest form. The problem is that they can easily get taken out of context or twisted by extremists of either direction. Just because a wife should raise the children doesn't mean that the husband shouldn't be bothered with that. It also doesn't mean that she can't get a job. Or get a higher education. Or that the roles can't be reversed between husband and wife. These are all ultimately decisions that should be tackled by the husband and wife together, for their household and it's not for anyone else to dispute. I think a lot of people forget that last part. And that's when the differences can seem not beneficial. And this can go for virtually any difference. There a good side, and bad side. The good side is the doctrinal side, and the bad side is how people who have no right to take part in the decision of an individual or their opinion of the difference spin it and condemn the person/people involved.

This respondent started off by reiterating Church teachings on gender with regard to the priesthood and men presiding in the home, both of which were described as beneficial. The respondent then went on to identify specific situations in which gendered treatment was not beneficial. This was a pattern that many of the mixed doctrine/culture responses followed. This person finished the response by stating that good outcomes are related to doctrine and bad outcomes are related to culture. Throughout the survey, gendered treatment stemming from doctrine correlated with feelings that this treatment was beneficial, while gendered treatment stemming from culture correlated with feelings that this treatment was harmful.

The survey responses did not form a consensus on what constituted doctrine or culture, with some expressing certainty about their attributions and others not. Representing the doctrine-only set, one respondent wrote: "I believe that God has set up his Church the way He has for a reason. The differences in the Church aren't meant to degrade or undermine the men or women. We each have our roles that are of equal importance. I believe the roles men and women play in the Church are purely doctrinal." This individual identifies as doctrine all of the ways men and women are treated differently and does so with confidence. However, respondents also made the opposite claim with equal confidence. One culture-only respondent wrote: "Gender roles are a social construct and they hurt both men and women (though they hurt women more). For instance, men staying at home and women working outside the home are both stigmatized."

This second respondent is direct in stating that gender roles are a product of society and not of doctrine. While neither the first nor the second quotation is typical of those in the survey, they demonstrate the range of opinions on the doctrine/culture issue.

Instead of expressing certainty in separating doctrine and culture, a few respondents addressed this difficulty directly: "I have always lived in Utah and so it is very difficult for me to separate what is cultural and what is doctrinal because seminary teachers, institute teachers, bishops, etc. also have a hard time

separating the two.” This respondent acknowledges that she does not know how to interpret Church teachings as received from her leaders over time, because she is sure that they did not understand these differences. Another respondent wrote: “The Church, like every other religion in the world, suffers from a distinct divide between official doctrine as taught by the church and doctrine as believed by members.” This response speaks to the difficulty of teaching and learning. The LDS Church works hard to teach its members about LDS values and priorities, but it cannot control how members receive and understand that information, which seems to be a very individualized outcome.

While respondents did not come to a consensus on what was doctrinal or cultural about gendered treatment in the church, 28 percent of respondents referenced priesthood as a key concern. The responses referred to and viewed priesthood in a variety of ways. These selections do not represent full responses, but snippets of what people had to say about priesthood:

Women are given nurturing authority while men are given priesthood authority.

If for some reason the church decided to give the priesthood to women I really wouldn't mind. It doesn't change the principles by which I try to live my life one bit.

The Relief Society has become pros at recognizing those in need and providing care while the Priesthood is used to spiritually bless the members and receive revelation for a larger group.

Women [are] categorically excluded from various positions within Church leadership—even those that do not require the priesthood.

I have been taught that the priesthood trumps womanhood. I should have equal opportunity to preside, and decide in my home at the very least.

I am not threatened by men holding the priesthood and women not. Statistically women tend to be more religious and righteous and men have a harder time haha, therefore I feel it is in God's wisdom to have men “in charge” to keep them valiant and true. I feel more valued as a woman in the gospel than if I were a man.

As stated, having held a Stake Calling and having participated in Stake Council, I honestly would not want to have to deal with the issues the Presiding Priesthood Leaders need to deal with on a daily and weekly basis. Such a calling would take me away from my family and my family is my #1 priority.

The only real difference that I see is the difference in priesthood and some callings. Otherwise it's equal. Women can't hold the priesthood.

In these responses, priesthood is positioned opposite womanhood and then characterized in positive, neutral, and negative ways. Of the 28 percent who referenced priesthood, many of them agreed that men holding the priesthood was a doctrinal principle and not a cultural practice.

Of the participants who referenced priesthood, some specifically discussed how priesthood impacted women:

“If two of us are the same, one of us is not necessary” (unknown source). Different roles are needed, even necessary. Women not holding the priesthood is a doctrinal

difference. The differences allow for organization as well as personal growth. I personally just don't see the big deal at all. The priesthood is not designed to be self-serving in any manner, so why the craving to have it? One can serve others in myriad ways without it. One can be plenty busy within the church without it. Why the craving to be in positions that are more visible or prominent?

This response argues that women perform a role in the Church that is entirely separate from priesthood. This individual also highlights the tension between the institutional view that only men hold the priesthood and those who want women to be ordained to the priesthood.

Another respondent observed that priesthood is used to exclude women from participation in Church ordinances and to encourage women to stay at home with children:

It is atrocious that women are excluded from baby blessings. There is no doctrinal reason behind this. Many men in the circle are not even "worthy" members. Boys are elevated to priesthood "power" at age 12 and given budget, attention, activities, that girls aren't. Girls are taught to marry young, have children and be a stay at home mom—a recipe for disaster in many circumstances. Girls should be taught to have careers that enable them to support themselves and their families and then they have choices.

A third participant negotiates women and the priesthood differently than the previous two, stating her belief that men and women do not need the same responsibilities while showing how priesthood is often used in ways she feels are inappropriate to exclude women from particular callings:

I do not think women need to have all the same responsibilities and roles in order to be treated equally, but I do feel like women's opinions and abilities are not equally utilized or respected in the church, currently. I think there are spectra in callings at this time that are only open to one gender or the other that are only that way due to cultural expectations and not doctrinal necessity. I think women would make fantastic ward clerks, Sunday school presidents and ward mission leaders, locally and on a stake level it makes no sense to me that the stake technology specialist must be a Melchizedek Priesthood holder. I also think a man could make an excellent primary president or a compassionate service leader. I don't understand why PEC meetings take place regularly and discuss needs in the ward without consulting the RS President. Other than Bishopric meetings, I think all ward planning meetings should include female leaders along with the men.

A fourth respondent expressed a different understanding of the priesthood, seeing it as being used to include women and not being gendered in the same way that the first three women described:

Being an adult convert, I have seen very little difference as far as men and women are treated. Women have the same priesthood authority as men, as all priesthood authority comes from Heavenly Father. Any calling a person gets, whether male or female, comes from the same priesthood authority. As the president of an auxiliary of the church, I am involved in leadership meetings, teach the gospel, and administer to others the same as our bishop or any other "man" in our ward. Women have a more nurturing role and men more administrative role, but each are equal in the doctrine of the church.

The issue of how Church members view women's relationship to the priesthood is a difficult one to parse. Many associate priesthood with the ability to lead and perform a wide variety of ordinance-based and administrative roles, but like the last woman quoted, believe that both men and women act with priesthood authority in their different capacities.

### **Effect on Spiritual/Religious Lives**

In the second open-ended question, respondents considered how an expansion of administrative and leadership roles for women would affect their religious and spiritual lives. We anticipated that a majority of responses would be either negative or positive, in keeping with our understanding of the scholarly literature and the tendency for the LDS Church to represent belief in terms of binary distinctions. When the responses were coded, the largest group (31 percent)<sup>15</sup> was those who supported increased leadership roles for women and/or felt that an increased role would have positive results. One woman wrote: "I would feel more comfortable sharing my concerns with female leaders. I would be more comfortable with my daughters having interviews. I feel like I would be taken more seriously as a disciple and follower of Christ." Her response lists three ways that she will benefit from increased women's leadership: receiving spiritual guidance from women, greater security in having women interview her daughter, and a sense that women will be taken more seriously in the Church. This respondent supports increased leadership roles for women and expressed her reasons without hesitation.

Within this first group, we also included those who would support changes if Church leaders announced a new policy. These individuals do not necessarily see a need for change but endorsed Church leadership and affirmed their decisions. These respondents, like the one below, engaged in a thought experiment and negotiated their own feelings with potential future direction by Church leaders: "If that revelation came from Heavenly Father, I would accept and follow it. I believe women add a rich diverseness and great value to the Church. I personally have felt that my opinion was very valued and often implemented when I served as a Young Women's president."

Surprisingly, the second-largest group (27 percent) felt that increased leadership roles for women would have no effect on their spiritual or religious life. One woman wrote: "I do not feel it would affect my spirituality in any way. It would only affect how I serve the church with my spirituality. My views about the church, my belief in the doctrine, my testimony, and my willingness to work for God would be exactly the same as it ever was." This type of comment, which appeared frequently in the responses, is outside the anticipated binary of for/against responses. Another respondent indicated that her spiritual life would not be impacted because, "My spiritual life is my own responsibility. The Church can help me have spiritual experiences, but men and women are equally able

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15. Eight percent of respondents gave answers that did not address the question.

to facilitate my spiritual experiences. Having women serve in more leadership callings wouldn't affect me more than having men, because we are equal." Both respondents see themselves as spiritually independent—an independence that remains unaffected by Church policies.

Those who expressed mixed feelings about increased leadership roles comprised the third-largest group (21 percent). Many of these responses reveal the process of negotiation as participants tried to think through the effects of increased leadership roles for women. In these cases, the respondents separated priesthood from administrative/leadership positions in a way that mirrored the discourse on the separation between doctrine and culture. Respondents again identified the priesthood as a doctrinal and administrative change as cultural. One individual wrote:

I view the priesthood and administration of the church as separate things generally. For example, I believe that the role of the bishop is more of a spiritual role than an administrative role. I wouldn't have a problem with women organizing/conducting meetings, setting budgets, giving trainings, handling tithing, and other administrative functions. Without a revelation from God through his prophet, I am opposed to women trying to take on spiritual roles of the priesthood, such as the bishop responsibilities of being a judge, sacrament ordinances, blessings, etc. That being said, if the prophet did have a revelation that would grant women the priesthood, I would accept it as a commandment and it wouldn't affect my spirituality.

This respondent described a belief in a separation between administrative and spiritual leadership; she agreed with others who felt that expanding administrative leadership roles to women would not require a revelation, but that expanding women's roles to include calling them as bishops would require a specific revelation. Other respondents affirmed:

It would depend on what roles you are asking about. Serving as a Sunday School President would be a good thing, serving as a bishop—unless directed by revelation, would put the Church at odds with God and doom the Church to the fate that other men/women lead [sic] Church's are facing.

As far as it doesn't pertain to the ordination of the priesthood, it wouldn't affect my spiritual life and testimony at all. Women should take a more active role in leadership, but they shouldn't try to force obtaining callings that require the priesthood. Because that's not going to happen. Ever.

These two respondents agreed that such changes without revelation would place the Church at odds with God. The very firmness of their support for the status quo, unless changed by revelation, suggests that they found such a revelation unlikely. Ironically, their expressed faith in a revelation-only change is a factor that would apparently keep them from seeking or asking for such a revelation.

Other respondents weighed the benefits and drawbacks of increased women's roles and how such an expansion would impact women, men, and boys. One participant wrote:

If women were called to be ward clerks and executive secretaries it would not affect my spiritual life. If the bishop's wife were asked to call speakers on Sunday that would not change my faith. My grandma recently told me that the daughter of a friend of hers "who was made a trainer at 2 months on her mission, is now in some supervisory position equivalent to zone leader or such. . . . [T]hat is a step toward equality, priesthood not required, position added to sister's opportunity." I think there is room for women to serve in leadership and administrative roles in the church—to be Sunday School presidents and to fulfill other roles that don't require the priesthood. There are many callings traditionally given to men that don't necessarily need to be restricted to men. At the same time, I believe that many men, especially younger men, need church responsibilities and callings to keep them on a straight path. I think a balance could be struck, especially under the guidance of an inspired leader.

This respondent outlines the ways in which more equality would be beneficial yet negotiated the potential social cost for men and boys without leadership calling.

Another common concern in the internal negotiation process was related to the time women would be required to spend away from home and family responsibilities and the possible confusion of roles. Some noted that the time commitment required by the lay leadership structure can be intense. Many respondents expressed that such callings would take them out of the home. Two respondents found the prospect dismaying:

I personally know that I would be called to higher positions and that is not something I seek after or even desire at all. My main calling and concern is that of my family and children and to be called away, more than I already am, would be very hard for me. I would do any calling I am asked, but do I want to, no.

I guess that would give me and my daughters more opportunities to serve others. Or it would probably just mean more meetings! It might help me be a bit more consistent religiously, but I really don't see it doing much but adding more responsibility/time away from my family. Mormon leaders have stated that no failure in the home can compensate for success elsewhere (find quote).

Respondents also indicated that women holding certain positions could cause confusion regarding the order of the Church and issues related to priesthood keys. One male respondent described his personal roadblocks to successfully negotiating seeing women in leadership positions:

For women to hold these positions would require a doctrinal paradigm shift. The current doctrine is very much entrenched in the history and plays a significant part in our understanding of what the eternities will be like. A change in this doctrine will require a lot of explaining to members if the Church doesn't want to alienate its members. For me personally, I admit I'd find it hard to accept simply because I have a preconceived vision of what life will be like after this life, and women holding the priesthood isn't currently part of that vision. I'd hate to say that my vision is so rigid that it couldn't adapt to a more greater understanding of the gospel if that's really what God had intended from the beginning.

Those who stated that expanded priesthood ordination would be positive often concluded that their daughters would have more opportunities to serve, develop more spiritual gifts, and represent a broader spectrum of ideas and perspectives. Two respondents stated:

Female leaders would understand my circumstances, needs, and feelings much better. They would “speak my language.” As a result, I would feel greater support. Female leaders would bring more visibility to women, which would provide more role models for girls and women. More positive role models would give women more confidence and more ideas about how to serve others in and out of the church. Women would feel more valued for their efforts and ideas. When we are invisible to church leaders, it is easy to project those feelings onto God. Women would have more opportunity to feel God’s guidance more strongly and frequently. I believe this is the case because of the many stories I hear men telling about their experiences in calling and counseling church members under their stewardship.

It would show me that God and his leaders understand the importance of the female voice in the church. It would show that there is compassion for the women that don’t necessarily have a connection with a man, but still require assistance and support in a way men don’t understand.

The smallest substantive group included those who had negative feelings about expanded leadership roles for women (13 percent). Many women objected to this possibility because they felt that women already had enough responsibility in the Church. One woman expressed this view succinctly, “I feel women are given enough responsibilities within the church and without. I think it would be too much on my plate personally.” Another woman expressed concern that increased Church responsibilities would take time away from her family:

In my opinion, women already have administrative and leadership roles. We are Primary, Young Women, and Relief Society Presidents. These roles are administrative leadership roles. We administer to the members of each of these organizations. We are part of Ward Councils which allows us to report on our organizations. We work together with all other organizations to minister to members in our congregations. We have counselors and secretaries to assist in these roles. We oversee a large number of members. Many of us also have the responsibility of raising our families. Some of us, myself included, are single parents. To say that women should have more administrative and leadership roles is going against the laws of Heavenly Father. Women have many more roles than just in church and I am happy giving our brethren the roles that oversee our congregations. Personally, I am grateful for the organization of the gospel. I do feel that my religious/spiritual life would not be as rich if women were to have more administrative and leadership roles. It would lead to being burnt out and eventually I would feel I have to make a choice about the importance of church or family. Given the direction of society today, we need a balance of home/family and religion/spirituality. We need less feminist perspective!

### Anticipating Change in the Next Two Decades

The third qualitative question in our survey asked respondents to propose desirable changes that would positively affect women in the LDS Church in the next ten to twenty years. It should be noted that approximately a quarter of respondents indicated that they were happy with the way the Church currently treats women. Of that quarter, roughly half of the respondents indicated that they were not interested in change and generalized from their experiences. One respondent stated: “I am perfectly happy as a female member of the church so I do not really think about or want any particular change.” Another individual said: “I don’t want any changes! I am happy the way things are.” A third respondent highlighted how she identified her own equality and the importance of women in the Church in relation to men:

I don’t need any changes. I have never felt less important than my husband in the church. If anything I have constantly felt the opposite. I feel like if women would stop picking it apart and look around . . . I haven’t met one bishop or presidency member that thinks they could do what they do without their wife by their side. I feel like a lot of women need to be in those roles to feel important. It’s a self worth thing. In reality they are already more important then they will apparently ever know. If they married a good man with a good heart he knows that the wom[a]n standing beside him keep him standing. So the only thing I think that needs to be fixed is women realizing they don’t need those roles to be just as important if not more important than the men holding them.

This woman has harmonized Church teachings and her own experiences, a negotiation that has led her to a conservative position on the roles of men and women in Church leadership. Not all internal negotiation ends in a middle-ground position.

The other half of this group indicated that they would not like to see changes in the Church but, during the process of negotiating this position, incorporated the experiences of others without generalizing from their own experience. Some of these answers negotiated again between culture and doctrine. One respondent highlighted this tension between culture and doctrine and her own personal experiences of feeling valued. She wrote:

I don’t have specific requests or goals for women in the Church. I trust God to know what men and women need, and I hope the Church leaders will be open to any changes God wants us to make, and to constantly seek His will. I think those changes will mostly happen gradually. I’ve already seen small steps in the right direction (as mentioned in a previous question). I feel that many members are ready for radical change, but the Church as a whole may not be ready right now. I trust God to know when changes need to happen, and our leaders to facilitate it when it’s appropriate.

The majority of respondents in this group qualified their responses with the desire to follow the prophet and expressed a belief in continuing revelation, thus indicating a degree of flexibility in their positions.

In addition to the group who did not want any change, approximately an additional 10 percent indicated that they did not want policy changes but that they did want the Church's current position to be better articulated by Church leaders and curriculum materials. They were distinguished from the previous group because they listed and expressed concrete changes they would like to see enacted within the Church but stopped short of suggesting cultural, policy, or doctrinal changes. One respondent expressed her desire for changes in training:

I hope that Church leadership training will improve with regards to engaging everyone, men and women, in the process of their own salvation. That personal responsibility for applying the doctrine is increasingly taught. I hope that the men are taught that holding the priesthood doesn't give them all the answers, revelation is a process, and answers come from many sources, and that when a woman approaches you with a concern, listen. They need to understand that the phrase "God is no respecter of persons" (Acts 10:34) means that the role of men is no more important than that of women, and he has given women important stewardship, too. These responsibilities are different, but no less important, and because women have different responsibilities it is only by working together that God's purposes are achieved. Equality is not the same as being identical.

The respondents in this group expanded upon the need for better instruction from the top leadership to the local level, often indicating their faith that the General Authorities operated from doctrine, while local leaders often were influenced by culture. One respondent wrote:

I think it would be good if bishops were encouraged to trust the personal revelation of women, especially those in leadership roles. I've known a few bishops who felt the need to "check" the revelation of the Young Women President about who she wanted as advisors, rather than just trusting that she knew who was right for the job. Little things like that could be changed if the Church leadership spoke more about the value of women in Church leadership. But for myself, I don't feel undervalued and don't feel the need for any major changes.

Over half of the respondents to this question listed specific aspects of either Church culture (defined as unrelated to the priesthood) and doctrine (especially priesthood and temple work) that they would like to see clarified. Two-thirds of this group suggested culture-related changes including: equal budgets for the Young Men and Young Women's programs, expanded administrative callings for women, expanded autonomy for the Relief Society, and changes in gendered teaching concerning modesty, chastity, and roles. One-third of this group indicated that they would like to see changes in doctrine, including ordination for women, changes in temple ceremonies, and revised and more flexible gender roles.

### Conclusion

If this chapter were a newspaper article, the headline would be something like "Mormons More Moderate Than Previously Thought." In negotiating gender and religion, the respondents for this survey combined both official Church

teachings and personal experience to understand issues of gender. We feel that this process of internal negotiation creates a fertile middle ground for understanding gender in a variety of different ways. In tackling gender, it is clear that Mormons understand Church teachings as reflecting both essential truths (doctrine) and cultural practices, but that both forces are understood and delineated on an individual level without universal guidelines, highlighting the relative absence of a systematic theology of gender.

Much of the official Church discourse on gender emphasizes the differences between men and women while drawing on gender essentialism and complementarianism.<sup>16</sup> Mormons have internalized some of these ideas, but there is clearly more space for a larger discussion of men's and women's roles in family life and in Church organization. Many members are ready for increased women's leadership and desire specific changes in Church policy so that men and women will have more positive interactions with the institutional Church organization. In thinking and discussing gender at church, many members are ready for a more nuanced discussion of gender—one that moves away from absolutes. The Church may benefit from listening to and understanding the different ways that members negotiate gender and could use that new understanding to inform Church policy.

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16. According to Margot Badran, "Feminism and Conversion: Comparing British, Dutch, and South African Life Stories," in Karin van Nieuwkerk, ed., *Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009), gender complementarianism is the idea that men and women have separate but complementary roles in public and private life. Gender essentialism is the idea that men and women are fundamentally different and that those differences stem from biology. Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature, and Difference* (New York: Routledge, 2013).