

All Are Alike Unto God

As Mormon women, we call upon the First Presidency, Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, and Relief Society General Presidency of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to thoughtfully consider and earnestly pray about the full integration of women into the decision-making structure of the Church and the question of women's ordination.

In the interim, we join many others in suggesting some simple changes in institutional policy that will foster a more equitable religious community:

- Encourage partnership in marriage, and eliminate the idea that husbands preside over their wives.
- Create parity in the Young Women and Young Men organizations through equivalent budgets, educational programs (leadership, career, and spiritual training,) and activities (sports, service, and outdoor events).
- Balance the stories and images of boys and men in church publications, talks, and other media with stories and images of girls and women.
- Invite women in Church leadership positions to speak and pray during General Conference in numbers equal to the participation of men.
- Encourage leaders to use gender-inclusive language whenever possible.
- Recognize that girls and boys, women and men are equally responsible for appropriate sexual behavior, and avoid reducing morality to sexuality, and modesty to a preoccupation with women's and girls' clothing.
- Instruct bishops to refrain from asking Church members probing questions about sexual practices and experiences.
- Call women to perform pastoral counseling, particularly for women and girls who have been sexually abused.
- Choose a General Relief Society Presidency and General Board that reflect the diversity of viewpoint and circumstance in the Church, and establish frequent meetings between the First Presidency and the General Relief Society Presidency.
- Include the Stake Relief Society President in Stake Presidency meetings, and appoint women to meet with the High Council.
- Delegate more expansive supervisory authority to the Stake and Ward Relief Society, Young Women, and Primary presidencies, including approval of personnel, programs, and activities.

- Include women among stake and ward leaders who hear evidence and offer judgment in Church disciplinary councils.
- Include the local Relief Society president in all bishopric meetings, and rotate the planning of Sacrament services among the Relief Society president and members of the bishopric.
- Examine all Church positions to determine whether they can be filled without regard to gender.
- Appoint women as presidents of Church universities and heads of administrative departments.
- Expand hiring practices in the Seminaries and Institutes of Religion and within the religion departments at Church universities to provide women the same placement, advancement, and tenure opportunities as men.
- Call young women as well as young men to serve missions at age 19, and afford women the same opportunity as men to function as district leaders, zone leaders, and assistants to the president.
- Lift the prohibition on women's participation in the blessing of their children.
- Change temple marriage policies so that men and women have equal opportunity to be sealed to their second spouses after they are widowed or divorced.
- Consider further wording changes to temple ceremonies and ordinances such that both men and women make the same covenants and enjoy the same promises.
- Recognize women as witnesses for baptisms and marriage sealings.
- Restore the former institutionally-accepted practice of women giving blessings of healing and comfort.

Frequently Asked Questions

Who are you?

We are women who regularly discuss religion and its impact on women's lives. We differ in age, income, race/ethnicity, and marital status. Many of us are mothers, grandmothers and great-grandmothers. Others of us—for reasons of biology, opportunity, or choice—do not have children. Many of us are active in the LDS Church. Others no longer are. Still, we share decades of Church service among us, and we care very much about our children and grandchildren, our sisters and brothers, and our friends and neighbors who call Mormonism their home.

What is your agenda?

We join countless others in calling for a more expansive vision of women's experience and roles within the LDS Church. We acknowledge the pain many Mormon women feel when they cannot contribute more substantially to the governance of the Church. Our goal is to foster a religious community that speaks to that pain and better reflects the depth, breadth and inclusiveness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ as we understand it. We share the sentiment in this statement recently released by the LDS Church: "The Book of Mormon states, 'black and white, bond and free, male and female; ... all are alike unto God' (2 Nephi 26:33). This is the Church's official teaching."

For more on this topic, see <http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/62083/All-are-alike-unto-God.html>; "To Do the Business of the Church: A Cooperative Paradigm for Examining Gendered Participation within Church Organizational Structure," <http://www.fairlds.org/fair-conferences/2012-fair-conference/2012-to-do-the-business-of-the-church-a-cooperative-paradigm>

Are you suggesting that women don't have equal status with men in the Church?

It's not a suggestion but an observation about the organizational structure of the LDS Church.

Nowhere is the Church's institutional inequity more starkly articulated than in Bruce Hafen's keynote address at the 1985 Brigham Young University Women's Conference entitled "Women, Feminism and the Blessings of the Priesthood." Hafen, a former Dean of the J. Reuben Clark Law School and member emeritus of the First Quorum of the Seventy, lists several blessings that are available to both men and women in the Church. He then adds, "The one category of blessing in which the role of women is not the same as that of men holding the priesthood is that of administering the gospel and governing all things."

While women speak, teach and pray in Church meetings, they are not ordained to the lay priesthood available to all men and boys age 12 and older. Because priesthood is believed to be an endowment of God's power, all men in the Church have a spiritual and practical authority that women do not. This means that women are denied the institutional power available to their sons, husbands, fathers, and

brothers and are excluded from nearly every position of clerical, fiscal, ritual, and ultimate decision-making authority. As many Mormon women have observed, their 12-year-old sons have more ritual authority than they do. Even their significant work within the Church's women's auxiliaries, such as the Relief Society and Young Women's organizations, is under the direction of male Church leaders.

This pattern of inequality persists in Mormon homes. Despite encouraging full partnership between husbands and wives, the Church's Proclamation on the Family still declares that men preside. When one partner presides, equal partnership dissolves. Unequal gender language, though modified somewhat over the years, also remains part of Mormon temple worship and projects a pattern of male authority into the eternities.

For more on this topic, see "Are Boys More Important than Girls: The Continuing Conflict of Gender Difference and Equality in Mormonism," <https://www.sunstonemagazine.com/wp-content/uploads/sbi/issues/146.pdf> ; "My Issues with Priesthood," <http://mollymormonseviltwin.blogspot.com/2010/09/my-issues-with-priesthood-cue-head.html>

While it is true that men have priesthood, women have motherhood. Aren't these separate roles complementary and, therefore, equal?

First, "separate, but equal" isn't equal. The tortured logic that pairs motherhood with priesthood and the countless assurances from male LDS Church leaders that women are just as important as men sound patronizing rather than laudatory and display a recognition that something is amiss. Not unique to Mormons, rhetoric that exalts motherhood has been used throughout history to circumscribe women's lives and deny them access to the voting booth, political office, education, employment and spiritual empowerment. Let's be clear. We are not denigrating motherhood. We are questioning the way it is paired with priesthood and used to justify limitations on women's authority in the LDS Church.

Second, fatherhood is the appropriate parallel to motherhood. Full partnership is the appropriate pattern for marriage. Anything less detracts from the important role fathers play in their children's lives and the mutuality necessary for successful relationships. Sharing pastoral and decision-making responsibilities regardless of gender will strengthen families and allow both men and women, single and married, more opportunities for growth and service in our wards, stakes, and decision-making councils.

For more on this topic, see: "Mormonism's Odd Couple: The Motherhood-Priesthood Connection," <http://signaturebookslibrary.org/?p=975>; "The Trouble with Chicken Patriarchy," <http://zelphehadsdaughters.com/2007/11/30/the-trouble-with-chicken-patriarchy/>

But I'm a Mormon woman, and I'm happy with my role in the Church. Why should I care about these issues?

We acknowledge the varied experiences of LDS women. We are glad when women's voices are included in the decisions that affect their congregations. However, because men who are priesthood leaders always have final authority over the auxiliaries of the Church, there are many LDS women who have experienced the frustration of having budgets created or adjusted without being consulted, requests for callings in their organizations refused, decisions about speakers or lessons overturned, or Church activities planned in meetings where no women are present. While many thoughtful men in priesthood leadership positions make decisions that include input from women, the structure of the Church is such that women's voices are easily left out, overlooked, or discounted.

In addition, there are many inner-city and international congregations that lack a sufficient number of men to staff priesthood positions. In a lay church, it is a shame to under-utilize half our membership. Drawing on the talents and abilities of every adult Church member regardless of gender benefits us all.

We know women who long to give blessings of healing and comfort, as did our Mormon foremothers in the 19th and early 20th centuries. We know women who have pastoral abilities that remain unrecognized. We know women who feel called to serve in ways that would be enhanced by priesthood authority. We each have different gifts. Yet often the opportunity to use those gifts has less to do with individual talent, temperament, and ability than with institutional access. We want Mormon women to have equal opportunity to use their gifts within our faith community. We want our daughters and our granddaughters to have every opportunity to "fulfill the measure of their creation" regardless of gender, age, childbearing ability, or marital status. If we fail to provide a more expansive range of opportunities for women, a sizable number of LDS women—particularly young women and single women—will leave the Church to seek opportunity elsewhere. Many already have.

For more on this topic, see "It Matters," <http://www.the-exponent.com/it-matters/>; "The Historical Relationship of Mormon Women and Priesthood," <http://signaturebookslibrary.org/?p=1262>

Women give countless hours to Church service. Wouldn't having more authority and responsibility in the Church be overly burdensome?

Mormon women already have plenty of delegated responsibilities in the Church. What they lack is the ability to define and oversee their responsibilities.

For more on this topic, see "Let Women No Longer Keep Silent in Our Churches: Women's Voices in Mormonism," <http://signaturebookslibrary.org/?p=1330>; "Power Hungry," <http://www.sunstonemagazine.com/wp-content/uploads/sbi/articles/135-60-61.pdf>

Male priesthood ordination is one of the reasons given for men's high rate of participation in the LDS Church. Would men leave the Church if the priesthood were available to all?

We have more faith in men--and Mormonism--than that.

If you're not happy with the Church as it is, why don't you just leave?

For many of us, Mormonism is our spiritual home. Those of us still fully active in the Church stay because we have strong testimonies of the restored Church and the divinity of Christ. We are all connected to it—some by conviction, others by family ties and cultural identity.

One of the strengths of Mormonism is the belief that the heavens are yet open. As we obtain more light and knowledge, we expect Church policies to reflect that increased wisdom. For example, the denial of priesthood ordination to black men—and temple blessings to both black men and women—changed in 1978. We wholeheartedly support such changes and believe Church members play a part in this process. We hope our efforts will lead to an even more inclusive Mormonism.

Inequality affects us all. We are grateful to our Muslim sisters who are working for a more equitable Islam. So, too, we support our Roman Catholic sisters who feel called to an expanded ministry in their spiritual community. Because of the significant social and political influence of these religious traditions, their work, when successful, will dramatically impact our world for the better. Mormonism is our tradition, and we, likewise, take responsibility for how its doctrines, policies and practices influence the wider society.

For more on this topic, see “We Are Responsible for Asking the Questions,”

<http://feminismandreligion.com/2012/07/03/we-are-responsible-for-asking-the-questions-by-caroline-kline/>

Isn't publicly questioning Church policies frowned upon?

Yes, by some. But in a church that began with a 14-year-old boy's question, we wonder how and when sincere inquiry became suspect. Too, lacking institutional authority, how else will we be heard?