

A Swelling Tide: Nineteen-Year-Old Sister Missionaries in the Twenty-First Century

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“It was not a self-consistent ideology but a movement—a tremor in the earth, a lift in the wind, a swelling tide . . . an exhilarating sense of discovery, a utopian hope that women might change the world.”

—Laurel Thatcher Ulrich¹

With the recent momentous reduction of the minimum age for female missionaries, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints may very well be at a crossroads the likes of which it has not seen since the renunciation of polygamy in 1890 or the extension of the priesthood to black male members in 1978. Senior Church leaders have called this “the most remarkable era in the history of the Church,” favorably comparing the modern missionary effort to “the great events that have happened in past history, like the First Vision, like the gift of the Book of Mormon, like the Restoration of the Gospel.”² The executive director of the Church’s Missionary Department, Elder David Evans, has often characterized the age reduction as “an invitation . . . to this entire generation.” He also stated that “the scriptures make it clear, and I think the First Presidency and the [Quorum of the Twelve Apostles] have made it clear . . . that we are all equal before God.”³ This is significant language from a church that has sometimes been criticized for its patriarchal, hierarchical nature.

But is the invitation truly extended equally to women? The age reduction and the creation of new leadership positions for

women will go a long way toward making sister missionaries feel more welcome, but continued emphasis on missionary service being a priesthood duty, explicit statements about optional versus expected service, and subtle verbal and visual cues may indicate otherwise. Furthermore, the large numbers of returning sisters may be “welcomed back from their missions and expected to be exactly the same as they were before they left.”⁴ Of course, this is impossible. Not only will these young women mature and grow in the same ways that their male counterparts do, but because of the essential fact that tens of thousands of them responded, they are now part of something that is bigger and more influential than any individual experience. Intentional or not, the swelling tide of sister missionaries constitutes a movement which ensures that these young women and their church will never be the same.

Announcement and Response

On Saturday, October 6, 2012, President Thomas S. Monson of 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.⁵ 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, a stunning 471 percent increase.⁶ Since the initial surge, the Church has continued to receive an average of 1,400 applications per week.⁷ Within six months of the announcement, the number of missionaries in the field rose eleven percent to reach 65,634 (at that point, the highest number in Church history) and swelled to over 85,000 by early 2014.⁸ Most noteworthy, however, is that within that time, slightly more than half of the new applicants, and a full thirty-six percent of the missionaries called to serve since the age change, were young women.⁹ Prior to the announcement, sister missionaries constituted only fifteen percent of the total.¹⁰

If comments made by Elder Jeffrey R. Holland of the Church's Quorum of the Twelve are any indication, the deluge of applications was largely unexpected. A few hours after President Monson's announcement, Elder Holland indicated that the Church was uncertain how this change would impact the number of full-time missionaries, stating, "Right now we don't know how big this is going to be."¹¹ To accommodate the massive influx of new missionaries, the Church quickly created fifty-eight new missions around the world (in areas already served by missionaries), shortened the missionary training course by one-third, expanded its facilities in Utah to house and train additional missionaries, and converted a Church-owned boarding school in Mexico into a new Missionary Training Center (MTC).

In addition to these logistical changes, the Church has also modified the structure of the mission leadership. Before these changes, zone leader councils consisted of the male mission president, male assistants to the president, and male zone leaders. These have been replaced by the Mission Leadership Council, which includes all of the above positions as well as the mission presidents' wives and the newly created leadership position of sister training leaders.¹²

Given the unprecedented number of sisters now serving or training for missions and the creation of new leadership positions for women in the mission field, it is not difficult to view this moment as the genesis of a change with far-reaching implications for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Relationships and Leadership

The two-year shift in age makes the decision to serve a mission significantly easier for young women in a number of ways. At age nineteen, those in college have likely completed only one or two years, so they can avoid interrupting their major coursework and/or the process of interviewing for post-graduation jobs; some may even take a "gap year" after high school in order to raise funds for their mission and delay beginning college until their return. Women who opt to work rather than go to college may also find it easier to serve missions since the time invested in a job or career is lessened to only one or two years.

More important is the fact that the lower minimum age allows young women to make the decision outside the context of romantic relationships and marriage, which is often a deciding factor for women considering a mission. It has long been, and continues to be, the stance of LDS Church leaders, as stated by then-Apostle Monson in 1977, that they “do not wish to create a program that would prevent [women] from finding . . . a proper companion in marriage, because that is their foremost responsibility if such is able to happen.”¹³ Numerous statements from past and current Church leaders have focused on recommending sister missionaries only if “those young women . . . do not have reasonable marriage prospects.”¹⁴ These statements not only explicitly encourage young women to choose marriage rather than serve a mission, but they also help perpetuate the stereotype that “no matter what the age of the woman deciding on going on missions, they [are] . . . old maids.”¹⁵ This stereotype will undoubtedly abate as more women become sister missionaries at an earlier age, thus returning before reaching “prime” marrying age. It will also likely alleviate the uncertainty felt by young women who were inclined to serve at age twenty-one but worried that their boyfriends, who are sometimes just getting home from their own missions as the young women are leaving, would not wait for them to return.

The LDS Church’s strong pro-marriage stance will certainly persist—marriage and family are fundamental to salvation and exaltation for Mormons, after all—but the pressure for women to choose between a mission and marriage will be greatly lessened. Interestingly, it has long been the Church’s view that a woman’s missionary experience will help her in many ways once she is ready to marry. According to a 1978 *New Era* article, a returned sister missionary will “become a better wife, a better mother, a better Relief Society president.”¹⁶ Additionally, as one Missionary Area Presidency counselor stated more recently, “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.”¹⁷ A study of LDS returned missionaries by Richard

McClendon and Bruce Chadwick states, “The divorce rate among returned missionary women is much lower than the national rate. . . . Nearly all returned missionaries who were married had a spouse who is a member of the Church, and ninety-six percent either had married in the temple or had been sealed later.”¹⁸ Another recent national study shows that people who marry later in life are more likely to stay married.¹⁹ When the evidence is aggregated, it is possible to conclude that lowering the missionary age for women will actually lead to more, and stronger, Mormon marriages and families.

In a church led primarily by men, the creation of additional leadership positions for women is also noteworthy. With the Church leadership determining that both men and women will participate in Mission Leadership Councils—specifically that “full expression from all participants is invited in council settings, unifying the efforts of both male and female council members”—women have been given a seat at the table.²⁰ Of course, mission leadership councils are not autonomous, as they serve under a male mission president, and all missionaries, male and female, will continue to report to male district and zone leaders. Nevertheless, the creation of these councils is a significant step toward equality in the mission field, which could open the door to more opportunities for women outside the mission organizations by giving sister missionaries important opportunities for increased experience, confidence, and informal cultural and spiritual authority. It is interesting to note that while there is some precedent for women holding leadership positions in the mission structure, particularly in foreign countries, these assignments were always due to necessity, tailored to a specific situation or considered experimental, rather than an institutionalized standard.²¹

The Church has also created the position of Sister Training Leader to instruct and support incoming sister missionaries. As a full member of the Mission Leadership Council and directly reporting to the mission president, this position is important for a number of reasons, not least of which is giving a voice to the young women serving in the mission fields. It also creates a corresponding office to the highly coveted, male-only Assistant to the President position, and allows the women who hold these

jobs to take on increased responsibilities and develop leadership skills. Additionally, male missionaries will observe and interact with women in positions of ecclesiastical authority, perhaps for the first time outside their families. Simply seeing women exercise formal Church leadership outside the home may help actualize a shift toward greater gender egalitarianism in young men that they will then carry forward into their lives both inside and outside of the mission experience. When one considers, as Margaret Merrill Toscano points out, that “the fact that women’s roles and input in the Church are entirely dependent on the way male leaders allow them to participate, [and that] whether male leaders solicit women’s input or not, either on a local or Church-wide level, is *entirely* in the discretionary power of men,” the consequences of young men working, even indirectly, with women in these leadership capacities could be profound.²²

Finally, sister training leaders may be able to influence the content of mission- and zone-wide conferences, which one sister missionary, Allison Stimmler, described as “unfulfilling [because] the rhetoric we heard was male-oriented and appealed to a masculine sense of competitiveness to encourage and inspire us. . . . [It was] the rhetoric of numbers, the rhetoric of sports, and the rhetoric of war.”²³ The difference between what generally motivates young men and young women is important, as are the outcomes of that division: women more often internalize an issue and assume there is something wrong with them, rather than externalize the problem and assume there is a fault in the system.²⁴ As Stimmler states, “The conclusion I always came to was that I didn’t have enough faith.”²⁵ She finally came to realize “that depression and serious feelings of discouragement were common among the sisters even though we rarely talked about them publicly. Nothing we heard in our regular conferences addressed these issues,” yet they *were* addressed in her annual sisters’ conferences.²⁶ Some of the feelings of “isolation, estrangement, alienation, [and] fragmentation,” as described by Kathleen Flake, will surely dissipate as more sister missionaries enter the field and become a more “natural part of the mission rather than an exception to it,” but young women will likely respond better to motivational messages that use more

gender-neutral themes.²⁷ It will be important for co-ed conferences to galvanize missionaries of both genders, and the involvement of sister training leaders will encourage messages that include and help *all* attendees.

Not Invited, But Welcome?²⁸

The points discussed so far indicate that LDS authorities are taking steps to remedy the gender inequalities within the Church, and are setting the stage for a far more inclusive future. One prominent Mormon scholar, Armand Mauss, agrees: “There is a sincere effort by this group of new and emerging male church leaders, from apostles on down, to do everything possible and feasible . . . to show how much they value the contributions of women in the church short of actually giving them the priesthood.”²⁹ However, as mentioned above, the LDS Church is historically and doctrinally patriarchal, and it continues to send mixed messages regarding the place of sister missionaries within the Church’s wider theology and institution.

For a prime example of the conflicting information dispensed by the Church, one need look no further than the remainder of President Monson’s speech in which he made the announcement of the age reduction:

We affirm that missionary work is a priesthood duty—and we encourage all young men who are worthy and who are physically able and mentally capable to respond to the call to serve. Many young women also serve, but they are not under the same mandate to serve as are the young men. We assure the young sisters of the Church, however, that they make a valuable contribution as missionaries, and we welcome their service.³⁰

This is an idea expressed often by both past and current leaders of the Church. With one hand they have welcomed and praised sister missionaries—“Almost without exception, the women [missionaries] have proven to be not only equal but superior to the men”³¹—while with the other hand they have pushed women away from missionary service toward marriage

and motherhood—“The finest mission a young woman can perform is to marry a good young man in the Lord’s house and stand as the mother of a good family.”³²

An examination of LDS periodicals and online materials also reveals mixed messages, making it difficult to determine the precise stance of the Church regarding sister missionaries. A 2003 study by Tania Rands Lyon and Mary Ann Shumway McFarland found significant gender bias in the Church rhetoric, printed materials, and visuals, but today the language on the LDS.org websites and in conference speeches is usually either gender neutral or inclusive.³³ For example, an LDS Newsroom Missionary Program infographic features a conspicuous alteration to the following quote from Elder Russell M. Nelson: “For 18 to 24 months [young men and women of the Church] put it all on hold because of their deep desire to serve the Lord.”³⁴ The original quote read “they.”

However, verbal and visual cues within two of the official Church publications, the *New Era* and the *Ensign* (for young adult and adult members, respectively), point to a continued bias against sister missionaries.³⁵ In the November 2012 issue of the *New Era*, published immediately after the age-change announcement, the very first article quotes President Monson’s affirmation “that missionary work is a priesthood duty,” but the full story regarding the new minimum ages for male and female missionaries is not reported until five pages later.³⁶ Another example can be drawn from the *New Era*’s recurring feature entitled “From the Mission Field.” Since the age-reduction announcement was made, the magazine has published the column eleven times. Ten of the missionaries featured are male and only one is female. When human figures are shown in the artwork accompanying these articles, male missionaries are depicted seven times and women once.³⁷ In the October 2013 issue of the *New Era*, which is largely devoted to mission preparation, thirty-one of the photos or graphics regarding missionary service depict males, while only eleven show females.³⁸ Additionally, on three separate occasions in this issue, references are made to missionary service being a priesthood duty while women are not under the same mandate; one of these instances literally puts the message in parentheses that women are

welcome to serve as missionaries.³⁹ When viewed individually or read over an extended period of time, these examples may seem inconsequential, but when aggregated they point to the LDS Church's systematic preference of male over female missionaries, even after Church leaders have explicitly stated that young women are equally welcome in the mission field.

Additional examples from both magazines are more pointed in their exclusion of sister missionaries. The October 2013 issue of the *Ensign* includes an article entitled "My Teachers Quorum Is an MTC." Though it mentions changes to the missionary training program due to the influx of missionaries, as the title indicates, it focuses solely on the male-only teachers quorum as a venue for preparing missionaries. Given that the article primarily discusses how the new youth curriculum manual, *Come, Follow Me*, helps young people begin preparing for missionary service much earlier, and the fact that this manual is used by both young men and women, it is certainly possible that the same information could have been presented in a way that did not exclude prospective sister missionaries.⁴⁰ In the same issue, "Our Great Missionary Heritage" highlights missionaries from the Old Testament's Jonah to the 1851 Mormon missionaries to the Sandwich Islands, and encourages readers to "draw courage and inspiration from these examples."⁴¹ The article is heavy on photos and artwork and includes one painting of two generic female "member missionaries" (rather than full-time missionaries) from the Church in Taiwan, but all other artwork—including that of actual missionaries from the Church's history—depicts men. Historic sister missionaries such as Harriet Maria Horsepool Nye, wife of the California mission president and the first woman called as an official missionary in March 1898, or Inez Knight and Lucy Jane Brimhall, who were set apart in April 1898 as "the first single, official proselyting lady missionaries," are absent, even though incorporating any of these three women would at least implicitly include today's young women as part of the Church's great missionary legacy and help them feel as if they were truly invited to serve.⁴² Two stories from the *New Era* are also noteworthy for their exclusion of sister missionaries. The

July 2013 cover story, “Prepare, Covenant and Serve,” about a camp for Aaronic priesthood holders (young men ages twelve to seventeen), emphasizes how the camp and activities serve as mission preparation, and highlights that “worthy Aaronic priesthood holders of today are the mighty missionaries of tomorrow.” However, the article makes no mention of similar preparation opportunities for young women, and sister missionaries are not mentioned anywhere in the rest of the magazine.⁴³ In the October 2013 issue, the article “Missionary Preparation and Duty to God” explores a booklet entitled *Fulfilling My Duty to God*, which is written specifically for, and given only to, Aaronic priesthood holders.⁴⁴ Though not explicitly a preparation tool for full-time missionary service, the article exhorts [male] readers to use it for that purpose. Similarly, the July article states that the young men at the Aaronic priesthood camp “realized that the principles taught in [*Fulfilling My*] *Duty to God* are the same as those of a missionary.”⁴⁵ Interestingly, both articles are written with a tone that assumes young men will serve full-time missions.

Three articles written specifically for, or prominently featuring, young women present a very different message, and are indicative of the continuing gender bias surrounding sister missionaries. The *Ensign*’s January 2013 article, “Young Women and the Mission Decision,” begins with President Monson’s statement from General Conference that young women do not have the same mandate to serve as male members of the Church.⁴⁶ It then continues to tell five women’s stories of how they “were guided by the Spirit in deciding what path was right for them.” In one, Cassie relates how she received her call, but “ten days before I was to leave, my friend proposed. I postponed my mission to give myself time to think. When I decided to get engaged, the Spirit confirmed to my fiancé and me that it was right. . . . My mission [is to be] a wife and mother.”⁴⁷ Cassie’s story reminds Mormon women of the Church’s view that their primary calling is marriage and motherhood, and the use of the phrase “my mission” in describing her decision is conspicuous. In another story, Amy states, “The desire never came; I never felt I needed to serve.” Though hardly remarkable on its surface, it is striking for the simple fact that a

comparable article about male missionaries would almost certainly never include a profile of a young man who simply did not feel the need to serve. An article from the October 2013 issue of the *New Era*, “For Young Women: Making the Mission Decision,” presents similar themes. Female readers are advised that they “shouldn’t worry about deciding now whether to serve a full-time mission in the future,” but should wait until they turn nineteen to consider a full-time mission, since “a lot can change . . . to influence your choice, including opportunities for marriage and motherhood.”⁴⁸ They are encouraged to consider their motivations for serving and ponder the question, “Would I even make a good missionary?”⁴⁹ A sidebar highlights the various answers a young woman might receive when praying for guidance on whether or not to serve a mission, ranging from being called to serve immediately, to maybe serving later, to “No, you don’t want to serve a full-time mission, and you don’t need to.”⁵⁰ One section of the article asks “Do I Need to Serve a Mission?” and the answer is an unequivocal “no.” It states, “There is no requirement for young women to serve a mission, so you don’t need to feel guilty for choosing not to be a full-time missionary.”⁵¹

Again, this is a starkly different answer than the one given to young men, and other articles in the same issue indicate strongly that young men should not only consider missionary service a duty—one even states, “It wasn’t a question of *if* I would go—it was only a question of *when*”—but that they should begin preparing years in advance.⁵² In the July 2013 the *New Era* article “A Sincere Heart and Real Intent,” Elder James Martino, who converted as a teenager, describes how he began to consider serving a full-time mission while at college. Martino does not contemplate his motivations or wonder if he’ll be a good missionary (in the article, at least). He prays and receives his answer: “You already know you’re supposed to go.”⁵³ The expectation to serve a full-time mission is again assumed and definitive.

The only article in the missionary-focused October 2013 issue of the *Ensign* to depict female missionaries, “How Can I Be a Successful Missionary?” by Lauren Bangerter Wilde, recounts her difficulties in the mission field.⁵⁴ Wilde describes her “sour

attitude,” her realization that her “faith was lacking” and had been weakened by her feelings of discouragement, and her jealousy at the success of other missionaries. The article is not all negative; Wilde goes on to describe how she was able to turn things around, gain a better perspective, and avoid disappointment. It is almost certain that all missionaries experience similar difficulties and feelings in the field, yet the article is written in the first person by a female author, and only women are depicted in the photos that accompany the article. It is also noteworthy that this type of article was not written by (or for) returned male missionaries in either publication in the fourteen months of issues reviewed for this article, which insinuates that the issues described in Wilde’s article are limited to female missionaries. Though subtle, these types of conflicting messages, exclusions, and omissions strongly reinforce the message that the Church not only has very different expectations for its young men and women, but that it actually favors male over female missionaries.

A final example from the April 2013 General Conference is perhaps the most telling. President Monson gave a speech about preparing to serve as full-time missionaries in which he delivered his four-part formula for success: “First, search the scriptures with diligence; second, plan your life with purpose . . . ; third, teach the truth with testimony; and fourth, serve the Lord with love.”⁵⁵ This is good advice for anyone looking forward to his or her call to serve—but he was speaking exclusively to men. President Monson’s advice, in a talk entitled “Come, All Ye *Sons* of God” (emphasis mine), came in the priesthood session, which is closed to female members of the Church (though women are now welcome to watch or read the talks online). One cannot help but conclude that if sister missionaries were genuinely “invited” instead of just “welcome” to serve full-time missions, President Monson would have given his speech to an audience that included both men and women, and, consequently, all potential missionaries. It is also interesting to note that no comparable speech, nor any speech specific to full-time missionary service, was given at the annual Young Women’s Conference held in March 2013.

The Problem of Separate but Equal

The continued preference, subtle or overt, of male over female missionaries is a symptom of a larger matter of gender (in)equality within Mormonism, which is an extraordinarily complex issue that inevitably leads to questions about priesthood authority and conventional gender roles as espoused by the LDS Church. (Though these points are certainly relevant to the current discourse, they are, for the most part, beyond the purview of this article and will be discussed only briefly.) However, it is an issue that will only grow more pressing as the Church navigates the new landscape created by the tremendous influx—and later, the return—of sister missionaries. For now, this issue can be at least partially explained by the vastly different ways in which young men and women experience their missionary service inside the larger context of their ongoing status within the Church.

Sister missionaries' experiences in the field are "their moment of greatest authority in the Church. While these women do not claim to have functioned as priesthood holders in the Church, they do claim to have been enlightened."⁵⁶ Women often feel liberated by the work, and it allows them to find more equal footing with male members of the Church, both during and after their mission service.⁵⁷ On the other hand, young men usually experience mission service as a rite of passage into adulthood. While it is obviously a very important milestone in their lives, it is typically not their "moment of greatest authority," as most go on to hold various priesthood leadership callings. A male's missionary service is viewed as the beginning of, and "the 'turning point' . . . in[,] the development of their religious careers," in a church that believes "the Mormon ideal is for all members . . . to pursue careers of lay religious involvement, resulting in time in an extensive repertoire of church assignments and advancements," as characterized by Gordon Shepherd and Gary Shepherd.⁵⁸ While a small number of women can and do hold positions of responsibility at the ward, stake, and general level, their ability to advance is necessarily restricted by the Church's requirement of priesthood authority in all of its highest call-

ings, so there is “no equivalent experience for a [woman] . . . to progress through a visible course of greater responsibility.”⁵⁹ This is particularly problematic because, as Shepherd and Shepherd explain, “within Mormon society the successful lay career is taken as an indicator of the individual’s enduring moral character.”⁶⁰ This emphasis on continued Church assignments, the institutional and moral authority they imbue, and the exclusion of women from these callings perpetuates gender inequality throughout the LDS Church.

The issue is compounded by the fact that continued service for all returning missionaries is believed to be crucial to the well-being of members and the Church overall, as indicated in a statement by former President Gordon B. Hinckley: “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 process of faithfulness.”⁶¹ McClendon and Chadwick’s study found evidence to support this idea. They asked how the Church could best help missionaries adjust when they returned from the field, and the most frequent response, from both male and female missionaries, was to “receive a call to a responsible position as soon as possible.”⁶² It is clear that returning women are just as eager to continue serving their church as their male counterparts, but their opportunities to do so are limited. In theory, it appears that the Church leaders and LDS women are on the same page about women’s continued and growing involvement, but there are significant discrepancies in practice. So where is the disconnect?

Ultimately, the answer lies in the distinction between giving a woman “meaningful responsibility” and involving her in “decision-making” within the LDS Church at both the local and institutional level. Though a woman may be given responsibilities within her ward, many decisions that affect her ability to complete them are out of her hands and are often made without her input. One might consider this in terms of typical organizational hierarchy, but as mentioned above, the issue is significantly more complex when

religious ideology and theology play a part, and key to Mormon theology is the understanding of priesthood.

Like many religious traditions, the LDS Church is not just institutionally patriarchal, but is also theologically so. Grounded in their four books of scripture and formal proclamations, Mormons believe that God is corporeal and male, that gender is eternal, and that the priesthood—generally defined as “the authority to act in God’s name”—is exclusive to male members of the Church.⁶³ Included in this prerogative is the administration of the Church at its highest levels. As such, the Church’s institutional structure “promotes the assumption that gender disqualifies women from most Church leadership and management roles,” Toscano states.⁶⁴ Subsequently, the Church “den[ies] women full agency to participate in defining and authorizing doctrines and policies that shape cultural and personal identity and practice. Because most decisions about Church management and the direction of spiritual affairs are made by priesthood council, women do not have a full voice or ‘vote’ in the Church.”⁶⁵ Sometimes these decisions are small-scale and local, but the greater institutional LDS Church has, on more than one occasion, made major decisions that significantly impacted its female members without involving them in the process.⁶⁶

The patriarchal nature of the Church and the influence of the priesthood also extend into family structures, as outlined in the official Church document, “The Family: A Proclamation to the World.” The document states that men are called to preside over, provide for, and protect their families; women are responsible for childrearing; and “fathers and mothers are obligated to help one another as equal partners.”⁶⁷ Mormon women interpret the Proclamation in diverse ways, but according to Toscano, most understand the language to mean that “while the genders may not be equal in condition, they are equally valued and fairly treated.”⁶⁸

Though there are probably as many interpretations as there are Mormon women, generally most make a relatively strong distinction among gender roles, patriarchy, and priesthood within the home and within the institutional Church. It is not uncommon to hear Mormon women state, “I can’t do much to make the Church

organization and structure more inclusive, but what I can do is take control of my marriage and my life here in my house.”⁶⁹ The line between the Church and home is clearly drawn, and according to Caroline Kline, women tend to understand and interact with these roles in four ways. First, while they may affirm the priesthood, many women “have little problem asserting women as equals [within the home], since they have either defanged the concept of presiding to mean little more than service, involvement, and guidance, or they see priesthood as raising men up to be equals with women.”⁷⁰ Second, some downplay gender distinctions, “and focus on ideas of fundamental equality that the gospel teaches.”⁷¹ Third, women may dismiss problematic teachings of the institutional Church: “These women who occasionally disagree with Church policy, teachings, or male leaders reconcile their disagreement by attributing [them] to human leaders who are doing their best, working according to their understanding, but falling short.”⁷² Fourth, women may retreat spiritually and emotionally. Kline states, “This seemed to happen most often when the Church was grappling with serious social issues of the day, and in the minds of some, coming up short.” Women who reacted by retreating often “believed the Church to be violating its own core teachings about equality, compassion, or agency.”⁷³ An earlier study by Lori Beaman found similarly varied responses among Mormon women on the topics of male headship, the priesthood, and the institutional Church. Some accepted the Church’s rhetoric and views regarding male headship and priesthood, some interpreted doctrine as a vehicle for equality, and others rejected it outright or separated Church authorities from its teachings.⁷⁴ Most, however, “interpret[ed] the teachings of the church in a manner that maximiz[ed] their agency while remaining within the boundaries of church doctrine.”⁷⁵

Both Kline’s and Beaman’s work show that Mormon women are quite comfortable applying their own personal lenses to the issues of gender and priesthood authority, and that their various interpretations do not necessarily indicate dissatisfaction with the Church or its leaders. A 2007 study showed that up to seventy percent of LDS women were content with their role in the Church.⁷⁶ The Pew Research Center’s 2011 “Mormons

in America” report found similar satisfaction among Mormon women regarding gender roles: fifty-six percent believe that a marriage in which the husband provides for the family while the wife stays home is more satisfying than if both spouses work, and only eight percent believed Mormon women should be ordained to the priesthood.⁷⁷

On the other hand, “the Church’s own studies have shown that not simply a handful, but a majority of women in the Church desires to be more involved in the decision-making councils of the church at all levels.”⁷⁸ Given that these two seemingly contradictory responses—the desire for more authority, but not for the priesthood that gives men their authority—are both coming from Mormon women, they seem to point toward a middle ground where it would somehow be possible to grant women a more authoritative position in their own church without necessarily giving them the priesthood. This solution could certainly simplify the matter of equality between Mormon men and women by sidelining a potentially difficult theological barrier. However, it could also further complicate any resolution, because even with a more pervasive official presence women still would not possess the priestly authority “to act in God’s name”—they would simply have greater institutional authority.⁷⁹ Though this middle ground would be a strong step toward equality, the Church would still have to contend with what Toscano calls “a gender-based policy of ‘separate but equal,’” and whether separate can actually be equal is a matter of great debate.⁸⁰

What Will the Future Bring?

When the average number of sister missionaries was a relatively small fifteen percent, the lack of continued empowerment and growth opportunities for women within the Church could be viewed as a minority issue and given little attention, if discussed at all. As the number of young women going on and returning from missionary service grows exponentially, the questions of gender inequity that are manifest in the missionary program will likely receive increased notice. And though only time will tell the

true effects of the age reduction and the subsequent influx of sister missionaries, it is possible to anticipate some of the potential consequences for the Mormon Church.

First, it is conceivable that the Church will continue mostly unchanged. As mentioned above, many Mormon women are content with the Church's current positions on gender roles and its differing expectations for male and female members. Many returning sister missionaries will likely expect to marry and start families within a few years of their return, and will happily fulfill their prescribed responsibility of nurturing as wives and mothers. Without impetus to change, Church policies regarding women's roles will remain unmodified and the continuation of the status quo is a distinct possibility.

However, there is at least some anecdotal 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."⁸¹ It is possible that many returning sister missionaries will feel the weight of their church's institutional patriarchy more heavily, especially if they have felt empowered by and during their mission service. Rather than comfortably inhabiting the Church's definitive gender roles, these young women could begin to experience a sense of disquiet or dissatisfaction and a yearning for more opportunities, much like the "feminine mystique" described at the beginning of second-wave feminism. These feelings could be magnified if sister missionaries begin to see themselves as part of a movement that deserves a special place in—or at least overt recognition by—the Church.

And there are indications that they do, as shown by one young woman quoted in the *Deseret News*, who states, "Years from now I'm going to be able to say I was a part of this huge army of missionaries who are responding to a call from our prophet."⁸² One can easily imagine these young women becoming more involved

and vocal about the changes they would like to see within the Church, which could lead to higher levels of inclusion at the local level, and perhaps even trickle up to the institutional level. However, if ignored, or without institutional changes that address the lack of continued empowerment, this may lead to ongoing (and possibly widespread) dissatisfaction with the Church, and perhaps even cause some returned sister missionaries to become inactive or to leave the Church altogether.⁸³

A third possibility is that the Church grants women the priesthood, opening all positions of authority equally to men and women. The recent excommunication of Kate Kelly, founder of Ordain Women, makes it clear that Mormon priesthood for women is a virtual impossibility at the moment, but given the Church's belief in a living prophet and continuing revelation, it cannot be dismissed altogether.⁸⁴ Grassroots efforts to extend priesthood continue to gain momentum: 175 new supporters posted profiles on the Ordain Women website in the two weeks following Kelly's excommunication, and only five members asked to have their materials removed from the site.⁸⁵ The question is not going away. Support for women's ordination could increase exponentially if a large number of sister missionaries feel displaced, neglected, and/or disaffected after they return.

A thorough consideration of the implications of Mormon women holding the priesthood is beyond the scope of this article. It is important to note, however, that even if women were given the priesthood tomorrow, there is no guarantee that they would be called to positions of greater authority by current male leadership. As Anne Clifford points out, "Access to ordination [in the Episcopal Church] has not necessarily resulted in women gaining equal access to positions of authority in their churches. Ordained women tend to engage in more specialized ministries, rather than become pastors, rectors, or vicars of parishes. They are likely to serve as assistants or associates."⁸⁶ Though the lay priesthood of the LDS Church differentiates it from other denominations, there is little reason to think access to positions for Mormon women would be significantly different, at least initially. It would also take many years for women to move up through the institutional

hierarchy to positions among the Church's General Authorities, who dictate official Church-wide policy and doctrine.

It is perhaps most likely that the seeds that have been planted with the creation of female leadership positions within the missionary leadership councils will bear fruit that enhances women's roles within their church. Neylan McBaine, founder of The Mormon Women Project, has suggested honoring girls in front of their congregations at key ages, involving women in baby blessings, and quoting female sources in Church materials.⁸⁷ These seeds could also lead to greater autonomy within the Relief Society. Though it is improbable that an organization with leadership as streamlined and invested in correlation as the LDS Church would substantially divest itself of the running of its women's organization, a shift toward more involvement and greater responsibility for women is easily imagined. If successful, this transition could lead to a higher level of inclusion of women within the decision-making processes of the General Authorities and perhaps even to the growth of a parallel authority structure made up of women. As discussed above, this may simply be a band-aid that perpetuates the Church's stance of "separate but equal," but it would also satisfy that majority of Mormon women who desire to be involved in decision-making at both the local and institutional levels. It would not only allow women's voices to be heard and their perspectives to be included, but it would allow them to directly influence the Church's positions and its future.

By virtue of their participation and experiences in the mission field, sister missionaries are already shaping the Church's future. They will almost certainly view their church through a lens colored by their service; the greater responsibility, higher level of inclusion, and sense of equality—not to mention stronger knowledge of scripture and doctrine—will begin to shape their interactions and decisions regarding their faith and their lives as they return home. Giving them the room to grow and opportunities for continued, equal participation will only benefit the Church in the long run. As Lawrence Foster points out:

If the [organization] is to work well, women, as well as other elements in the church, need to be actively and effectively involved in every issue that directly affects them. Otherwise, blunders and policy mistakes are almost inevitable. . . . Not to involve half the church in creating the policies that affect them is not only ethically questionable but organizationally dysfunctional as well.⁸⁸

While this may seem like common sense, it is uncharted territory for the LDS Church and its leadership. If the Church's new policy on sister missionaries and its (mostly) graceful reaction to the enthusiastic response on the part of young women are any indication, the men at the highest levels of the Mormon institution are now seriously considering issues of gender equality in the Church. The prospect for real strides toward equality seems greater now than ever before, because one outcome is certain: a new generation of experienced, independent, empowered, twenty-first century women will be coming home after eighteen months of service transformed and eager to continue serving their faith and their church.

Notes

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3. "Response to Mormon Missionary Age Announcement Remains Enthusiastic and Unprecedented," <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/mormon-missionary-age-announcement-response> (accessed October 23, 2014).

4. Tania Rands 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), 92.

5. President Thomas Monson, "Welcome to Conference," <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2012/10/welcome-to-conference> (accessed September 9, 2014).

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17. Elder Kevin W. Pearson, "The Value of a Returned Missionary," <http://www.lds.org/pages/areapresidency/2012/aug?lang=eng&country=nz> (accessed October 23, 2014).

18. 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), 137.

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22. Margaret Merrill Toscano, "'Are Boys More Important than Girls?' The Continuing Conflict of Gender Difference and Equality in Mormonism," *Sunstone* 146 (June 2007): 24 (emphasis in original).

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28. Much of the discourse in this section is inspired by, and in response to, Lyon and McFarland's article "Not Invited, but Welcome" (see n4 herein for full citation).

29. Brady McCombs/Associated Press, "More Women Expected to Serve Mormon Missions," *USA Today*, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2013/01/18/mormon-women-missionaries/1844423/> (accessed October 23, 2014).

30. *Ibid.*

31. David O. McKay, "Our Lady Missionaries," *Young Women's Journal* XXXII (1921): 503, quoted in Lyon and McFarland, "Not Invited, but Welcome," 82.

32. Brian Kelly, "A Visit with Elder Gordon B. Hinckley about Missionary Work," *New Era* 3 (June 1973): 29, quoted in Lyon and McFarland, "Not Invited, but Welcome," 82–83.

33. Lyon and McFarland, "Not Invited, but Welcome," 71–101.

34. "Missionary Program: Infographic," <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/topic/missionary-program> (accessed October 23, 2014).

35. *New Era* and *Ensign* magazines. Issues examined include November 2012 through September 2014.

36. President Thomas S. Monson, "General Conference Is for You: Missionary Announcement," *New Era*, November 2012, 2.

37. It is likely that the November 2012–November 2014 issues of *New Era* were already in production before the October announcement. November does not include the "From the Mission Field" column, December's column is gender neutral, and January 2013 features male missionaries in both the article and artwork. If these examples were to be excluded from the totals, the magazine's overall emphasis on male missionaries is still apparent.

38. It is interesting to note that the article entitled "Why and What Do I Need to Confess to My Bishop?" prominently features two photos of a young woman, and none of young men, which could be understood to imply that young women are more in need of confession than their priesthood-holding counterparts.

39. "Who Will Bring the Gospel to Them?" *New Era*, October 2013, 7.

40. For an in-depth look at gender biases in the Young Women and Aaronic Priesthood manuals, see Laura Compton, "New Lessons, Old Language: What's a Teacher to Do?" *Exponent II* 32, no. 4 (Spring 2013): 22–25, http://www.exponentii.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/Exponent-II-Magazine_Spring-2013-Edition_web.pdf (accessed October 23, 2014).

41. Linda Dekker Lopez, "Our Great Missionary Heritage," *Ensign*, October 2013, 40.

42. Diane L. Mangum, "The First Sister Missionaries," <http://www.lds.org/ensign/1980/07/the-first-sister-missionaries> (accessed October 23, 2014).

43. Matthew Garrett, "Prepare, Covenant, and Serve," *New Era*, July 2013, 30–32.

44. Michael Madsen, "Missionary Preparation and Duty to God," *New Era*, October 2013, 8–10.

45. Garrett, "Prepare, Covenant, and Serve," 31.

46. "Young Women and the Mission Decision," *Ensign*, January 2013, 17.
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48. Brittan Beattie, "For Young Women: Making the Mission Decision," *New Era*, October 2013, 12.
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53. James B. Martino, "A Sincere and Real Intent," *New Era*, July 2013, 42.
54. Lauren Bangerter Wilde, "How Can I Be a Successful Missionary?" *Ensign*, October 2013, 32–35.
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57. Claudia Bushman, *Contemporary Mormonism: Latter-day Saints in Modern America* (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008), 67; Hanks, "Sister Missionaries and Authority," 328.
58. Gordon Shepherd and Gary Shepherd, "Sustaining a Lay Religion in Modern Society: The Mormon Missionary Experience," in *Contemporary Mormonism: Social Science Perspectives*, edited by Marie Cornwall, Tim B. Heaton, and Lawrence Young (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 162, 171.
59. Lynn Matthews Anderson, "Issues in Contemporary Mormon Feminism," in *Mormon Identities in Transition*, edited by Douglas J. Davies (London: Cassell, 1996), 164.
60. Shepherd and Shepherd, "Sustaining a Lay Religion in Modern Society," 162.
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