

# THE LEGACY OF THE 1960'S "NEW ERA" AND SINGING MOTHERS TOUR ON LATTER-DAY SAINT GENDER ROLES AND THE FAMILY IN GREAT BRITAIN

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On February 27, 1961, two hundred British Singing Mothers, dressed in matching Utah-sewn white blouses and fashioning neat, short, curled hair, stood in tiers on the stage of London's most prominent music hall. From the Royal Box, President David O. McKay proudly watched as "the International Chorus of Singing Mothers won and warmed the hearts of the audience at the Royal Albert Hall."<sup>1</sup> The ensemble, made up of disparate British Relief Society members, had been selected to form a chorus combined with more than fifty American singers and professional musicians with the purpose of improving the Church's public image and promoting missionary success. Commencing a tour that would take the troupe throughout the British Isles and Northern Ireland, the amateur chorus was formed to help British society "[realize] the greatness of the Church with its Relief Society movement, which includes the Singing Mothers."<sup>2</sup>

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1. From a bulletin given to choir members, in possession of author. T. Bowring Woodbury, *New Era News: Mother Months*, Feb. 27, 1961.

2. Woodbury, *New Era News*, Feb. 27, 1961.

Adopted by the Church in 1934, the Singing Mothers program became an “important sideline” to the primary focus of charity and welfare work.<sup>3</sup> From “Britain to South Africa . . . Argentina to Australia. . . [Where in 1960,] 46,000 mothers performed in 3,126 separate choruses,” the Singing Mothers universally proliferated the Church’s theological and social framework of Mormon women’s identity, as defined within specific ecclesiastical and familial responsibilities.<sup>4</sup> Within current global research trends that focus on the variation of Mormon experience within different locations, this article utilizes the 1961 British Singing Mothers Tour as a demonstration of how American Mormon ideas on gender and family, such as the restriction of women to domestic work and men to breadwinning and the bulk of Church ministry, when disseminated, often adapt to local circumstances, varying in application and meaning in the lives of the members. Within a British setting, the tour not only placed women in a conspicuous, public, celebrated, and influential position, its realization demanded the collaboration, overlapping, and merging of traditional familial roles. As part of a broader developing British Mormon culture, the 1960s saw the formation of idiosyncratic British Mormon gender ideals and familial patterns that prioritized collaboration and personal agency over rigid definitions.

### Theoretical Framework

Over the last forty years, the history of Mormon women and the family have been particularly rich themes through which to observe the ebbs and flows of religious movement and organization. Existing on the fringes of conventional and official histories, women often reveal

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3. “Mormon Women Fight Adversity Through Relief Society Organization,” *Millennial Star*, Mar. 1961, p. 100.

4. “Mormon Singing Mothers: An International Sisterhood,” *Millennial Star*, Mar. 1961, p. 98.

alternative discourse of the experiences and reality of institutional, as well as lived, religion, often reflecting points at which the boundaries of religious orthodoxy are contested and adapted.<sup>5</sup> However, much of the work produced on Mormon women's history has aimed to calculate the measure of freedom women hold within the Church's patriarchy. In response, historians are evading the tendency to define and categorize female autonomy within patriarchal systems by exploring the multiplicity of ways women use their agency as a tool to shape their religious experience and culture.<sup>6</sup> Scholars are also discovering further multilayered insight in studying the religion within different contexts, such as sociological, political, and personal factors as well as influences based along intersectional axes of race, nationality, class, and so forth.<sup>7</sup> These creative new perspectives have contradicted the American consensus of the Mormon female as silent, passive "pawns of the patriarchy" to vigorous participants in the unfolding saga of their belief system.<sup>8</sup>

In line with these theories, this article promotes the study of British Mormonism as a relevant lens to examine the experiences, perspectives, and agency of Mormon women who lie along the intersectional axis of gender and nationality. It primarily looks at the programs of the 1960s to understand how British females understood their position

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5. Matthew Bowman and Kate Holbrook, eds., *Women and Mormonism: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2016), p. 4.

6. See Catherine Brekus, "Mormon Women and the Problem of Historical Agency," in *Women and Mormonism: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, edited by Kate Holbrook and Matthew Bowman (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2016).

7. See Amy Hoyt and Taylor G. Petrey, "Introduction," in *The Routledge Handbook of Mormonism and Gender*, edited by Amy Hoyt and Taylor G. Petrey (London: Routledge, 2020).

8. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, "Mormon Gender in the Age of Polygamy," in *The Routledge Handbook of Mormonism and Gender*, edited by Amy Hoyt and Taylor G. Petrey (London: Routledge, 2020), 87.

in the Church as essential contributors that corresponded with patriarchal prerogatives in the Church and home. This example is a clear demonstration that hierarchal structures are not the only influential systems; rather, overlapping formal and informal networks within the Latter-day Saint congregation create multiple opportunities for women to occupy a central network position and influence the larger Latter-day Saint community.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, as shown by the Singing Mothers Tour, Church service in Britain necessitated a male-female collaboration that blurred expectations of gender roles disseminating from the institutional center. To develop this argument, this article also examines several oral history interviews of female converts during the 1960s whose perspectives were shaped in this era. They demonstrate how women developed a profound sense of agency and self-importance that has since defined their roles within the Church and home.

Carine Decoo-Vanwelkenhuysen's research has similarly explored how the intersection of society, politics, and nationality have affected the nature of lived religion among European Mormon women. Interviews performed by Decoo-Vanwelkenhuysen revealed that societal values of gender equality have caused Belgian Mormon women to minimize the Church's edicts of patriarchal privilege. Their secular empowerment, and belief in both gender equality and women's contributions to the Church, place greater emphasis on male behavior than on authority.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, Belgian women minimize Mormon theological gender differences, seen as products of American conservative values, while expecting full participation in decision-making.

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9. Melissa Inouye, "Women and Religious Organization: A Microbiological Approach to Influence," in *The Routledge Handbook of Mormonism and Gender*, edited by Amy Hoyt and Taylor G. Petrey (London: Routledge, 2020), 313.

10. Carine Decoo-Vanwelkenhuysen, "Mormon Women in Europe: A Look at Gender Norms," in *Women and Mormonism: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, edited by Kate Holbrook and Matthew Bowman (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2016), 219–222.

Despite the connections of Euro-American pioneer heritage, these women demonstrate the differences produced by a shift of time and space.

Yet the difficulty with proposing British Mormonism as a locus of intersectionality is that it seems to be indistinguishable from its American counterpart. Claiming a legacy that places their early converts as essential to the survival of the nineteenth-century Church, British Mormons are intrinsically connected to pioneers and polygamy. Furthermore, being overwhelmingly white and relatively privileged, British Mormonism does not seem the obvious choice in comparison to other locations with more apparent variables. However, Alison Halford's sociological work on English Mormon women offers it as a useful alternative paradigm to study the religion. She argues that these women resist a perceived Utah gender culture to the extent that they frame themselves as the antithesis of American Mormon womanhood. Halford continues to argue that rejection of the Utah "Molly Mormon" as the female archetype is a demonstration of their sensitivity to and resistance of American exceptionalism. In response, English Mormon women use the domestic sphere as a third space that supports Mormon gender practices by combining them with secularized gender discourses, allowing them to claim authority, rather than permitting the structural Church to dictate gender roles.<sup>11</sup>

This article responds to Halford's work on British Mormon women by incorporating historical methods. Rather than focusing on what women think now, it looks at the historical context and influences of those positions. The oral histories used for this article were conducted in 2023. I have known each woman personally for many years, at varying stages of my life. This allowed for a high degree of familiarity and ability to ask specific questions. However, as their children are my

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11. Alison Halford, "Women's Gender Roles and Mormonism in England," in *The Routledge Handbook of Mormonism and Gender*, edited by Amy Hoyt and Taylor G. Petrey (London: Routledge, 2020), 393–395.

peers, none of the women talked in detail of their marriages. Intentionally, I chose women who were teenagers or young adults at varying locations in England and Scotland during the 1960s. Their perspectives, therefore, reflect decades of Church participation and the ability to critically analyze the past in connection to their current positionality. For example, although each woman expressed feelings of equality with men in the past, they are glad women have increasing visibility within the Church. Still, their experiences are useful as reflections of a specific time and location that is pertinent to the purposes of this article, meaning future research conducted with the next generation of British women would likely produce different summaries.

### The New Era

British Mormon women framed their role within the Church in the 1960s around internal and external social, cultural, and ecclesiastical developments. Despite maintaining a continual presence since 1837, the Church had persisted within a society that had, for decades, maligned the “Mormon Menace” and its system of “white slavery,” namely, plural marriage.<sup>12</sup> Even with rooted British traditions of nonconformism and religious freedom, baptism into the Church was highly counter-cultural, with members risking loss of relationships, community, and employment. Facing immense opposition from her mother and priest, combined with insults and abuse from neighbors, Catholic schoolgirl Carol persisted, often in secret, to defy familial and social expectations by congregating with the Mormons.<sup>13</sup> In 1961, fourteen-year-old Alice was warned of a Mormon tunnel smuggling girls to America and faced

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12. See Malcolm Thorpe, “‘The Mormon Peril,’ The Crusade Against the Saints in Britain, 1910–1914,” *Journal of Mormon History* 2 (1975): 69–88.

13. Interview of “Carol,” conducted via Zoom by Elizabeth Mawlam, Mar. 15, 2023. I use pseudonyms for all women I interviewed for this article.

severing connections with her grandmother if she joined the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.<sup>14</sup> Both girls converted anyway.

Despite these preexisting pressures, the general increase of social freedoms meant young single women responded to the Mormon message in droves.<sup>15</sup> Sophie explained how by the 1960s, the need for young women to contribute to family support had decreased with each generation, allowing herself access to unprecedented options of leisure, employment, and education.<sup>16</sup> According to the *Millennial Star* annual summary, in 1961 approximately half of baptisms were female, while 84 percent of these were not obviously affiliated with a man. Although the interviewees were aware of the novelty of young American male missionaries, a factor that probably influenced some women's decision to be baptized, they each asserted their conversion stemmed from an independent religious conviction. At seventeen, Sophie traveled alone across her town to inquire about the beliefs of a small Mormon congregation nearby. Similarly, Ruth contradicted her family's antireligion stance by investigating the Church. Warned of becoming a "religious fanatic" by her father, her decision to be baptized reveals the level of independence she exerted even at home.<sup>17</sup> After a period of scrutinizing Mormon dogma, Sophie and Ruth began a lifelong commitment to Mormonism, placing individual agency at the experiential and theological core of their practice.

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14. Interview of "Alice," conducted via Zoom by Elizabeth Mawlam, Mar. 11, 2023.

15. Membership increased to 66,371 in 1965 from 16,623 in 1960, an increase of 299 percent in five years. See Ben Bloxham, James R. Moss, and Larry C. Porter, eds., *Truth Will Prevail: The Rise of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the British Isles 1837–1987*, (Solihull, England: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1987), 442.

16. Interview of "Sophie," conducted via Zoom by Elizabeth Mawlam, Mar. 13, 2023.

17. Interview of "Ruth," conducted via Zoom by Elizabeth Mawlam, Mar. 14, 2023.

The social circumstances of conversion are central to understanding the mindset of British Mormon women converts of the 1960s. The autonomy these young women demonstrated would be maintained as the hallmark of their religious practice and belief, rather than a surrendering of will and control to an autocratic, patriarchal religious system. These perspectives were cultivated further by the character and objectives of the British Church at the time. In 1958, the first Mormon temple in the British Isles was dedicated, the second in Europe after the Bern, Switzerland, temple was dedicated in 1955, essentially ending the persistent trickle of immigrants looking to America for prosperity and acceptance.<sup>18</sup> After decades of slow missionary activity, the Church began a thoroughly organized promotional program coined “the New Era.” Conceived by Church headquarters, Britain would undergo a huge missionary and building construction campaign with the aim to expand membership and improve public image. The Church set goals for thousands of baptisms, plus the formidable task of erecting fifty chapels within five years.<sup>19</sup> Significantly, although organized and influenced by American leaders and businessmen turned mission presidents, the task was mandated to all the British members. In May 1960, at the creation of Britain’s first stake in Manchester, Elder Harold B. Lee proclaimed, “Here, within the righteous heart of every member of the Church might be said to be the seed-corn of the growth of the Church. The pure in heart is the beginning of the growth of Zion.”<sup>20</sup> Every Saint was expected to completely dedicate themselves to the effort of building Zion in Britain.

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18. See Anne S. Perry, “The Contemporary Church,” in *Truth Will Prevail: The Rise of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints in the British Isles 1837–1987*, edited by Ben Bloxham, James R. Moss, and Larry C. Porter (Solihull, England: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1987), 424–441.

19. Michael Lyman Rasmussen, *Mormonism and the Making of a British Zion* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2016), 197.

20. *The Latter-Day Saints’ Millennial Star*, May 1960, p. 190.



How these female converts perceived their roles within a patriarchal church was informed by the belief that the New Era was a collective responsibility, one that identified itself as a community of cooperation as much as a gendered hierarchy. Claudia Bushman has explained, "Administration of the congregation is in the hands of the members. They are like shareholders in a large corporation with a stake in the company. They own it."<sup>21</sup> Although the program was designed and disseminated by a clear patriarchal pyramid, its application on the ground level was less structural than collaborative. One woman explained, "It is great to associate with so many fine capable saints and to call them brother and sister. As a team we can build chapels, wards, stakes, branches, auxiliaries, quorums, etc. We can help bring peace back to the earth and prepare for the coming of our Lord and Saviour."<sup>22</sup>

The emphasis on mutual effort meant that women felt the burden of Church growth was not gender specific, that, as Elder Duane Thomas wrote in the *Millennial Star*, "each saint must do his part and take a full share of the load."<sup>23</sup> Females were called to dedicate leisure time to proselytizing, following a long tradition since the First World War of the homegrown British "lady missionary."<sup>24</sup> One woman explained how she was caught up in the communal invitation to contribute to the missionary effort: "When the district missionary system was first introduced here into the British Mission, many people were going forward to do the work. But I held back because I felt so inadequate, and I felt that I had enough to do. Well, I know that this is very wrong, but I just sat back all the same. Then about nine months ago I had a very strong

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21. Inouye, "Women and Religious Organization," 312.

22. *Millennial Star*, Feb. 1961, p. 62.

23. Duane Thomas, "The New Era," *Millennial Star*, Oct. 1960, p. 429.

24. As American missionaries left Britain during World War I, they were not replenished. Accordingly, more than four hundred British lady missionaries carried on the majority of missionary activity, actually increasing the annual baptism rates.

desire come within me to become a missionary. It was such a strong desire that I could not help but notice it. Now how grateful I am that I accepted the call.”<sup>25</sup>

Although the bulk of foreign and home missionaries were indeed male, women were expected to contribute to the pressing targets of congregational growth and expansion. This assessment also applied to the building program. While many males were called as full-time labor missionaries, each member anticipated contributing time to the literal construction of the chapels, such as Sophie, who helped lay the chapel patio, and the Relief Society group, which scrubbed and painted walls.<sup>26</sup> Even when contribution was superficial, the principle was collective effort, as Alice recalls: “[Over] eighteen months we were all round about building the chapel. Every Saturday I went up, and well, all of us did. We always say we helped build the chapel.”<sup>27</sup> Construction aside, to achieve the chapel quota, the British Saints were expected to raise approximately 20 percent of the total cost of each building.<sup>28</sup> Fundraising consumed congregations as they painstakingly deposited pennies toward the project, the burden occasionally compelling families to leave the Church.<sup>29</sup> Both men and women accepted the responsibility, organizing bazaars and concerts and performing other paid construction and manual labor. Salvation appeared to rest on an individual’s contribution to the endeavor, as one woman explained: “Perhaps the greatest responsibility we have toward our Church is that of serving. Our Church not only permits but demands the participation of its people. Everyone who will participate is given the opportunity, and

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25. *Millennial Star*, Aug. 1960, p. 363.

26. “Sophie” interview.

27. “Alice” interview.

28. James Perry, “Church Builder Program,” <https://uk.churchofjesuschrist.org/church-builder-intro>.

29. Rasmussen, *Mormonism*, 180.

everyone is encouraged to participate. The degree to which we take part in these spiritual, intellectual, physical, and social exercises will determine the degree to which we are eventually saved.<sup>30</sup> To be a British Mormon meant contributing to programs that were frequently not gender specific, or, due to the high numbers of young single members, not necessarily family oriented, placing missionary work and ward strengthening as the imperative and definition of membership.

The New Era program directly affected how women perceived their function and status in the Church, namely a powerful influence within a benevolent patriarchal structure. In the minds of these women, this relationship inferred equality through cooperation and interdependence, rather than male dominion. However, this claim does not mean that women did not also uphold traditional gender roles typical of the 1960s. Each woman interviewed expressed their expectation of marriage and motherhood. Similarly, having mostly transferred from other Christian denominations, they assumed men would take the lead of priesthood jurisdiction and duties. However, these arrangements were viewed as natural and were not seen as prohibitive to other expressions of autonomy and influence. Furthermore, the British cooperative model of the 1960s blurred the boundaries of these expected Mormon gender roles, such as the confinement of women to service within the home and Church auxiliaries. To achieve the aims of the New Era, the British Church required an extensive use of imagination, skills, and labor, necessitating a fluidity between boundaries of all members and priesthood rank. For the 1960 Valentine Dance in the York and Scunthorpe Branches, Sister Anne Sneyd was master of ceremonies, while a Brother Cook took charge of the refreshments.<sup>31</sup> Another anecdote recorded in the April 1963 edition of the *Millennial Star* demonstrated this reality: “The Branch President of the Lowestoft Branch was forced

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30. *Millennial Star*, Aug. 1962, p. 187.

31. *Millennial Star*, May 1960, p. 222.

to vacate his office recently, *the branch members had decided* that it was the best room in their Chapel house to convert into a grocery shop. This was the first major venture of this kind by the Lowestoft Branch, although they had previously run a sweet kiosk in one of the school-rooms. . . . The shop has been such a success, in fact, that the profits keep five labour missionaries in food and clothing and no further call is made on the branch members.”<sup>32</sup>

Of course, there are many possible factors that influenced people’s decisions to join the Church in the 1960s. This article does not consider the role of economics, class, or what attracted young males to join. Still, it elucidates the historical context of why and how women perceived their gender roles within the Church as fulfilling. The circumstances surrounding conversion and the intense scale of the New Era program granted women with a sense of purpose and responsibility within a linked community of Saints that emphasized cooperation as imperative as hierarchical status. The 1961 Singing Mothers Tour is a valuable example of how Britons crossed traditional Mormon gender roles to fulfill to the Church’s aims.

### The Singing Mothers

As a prominent feature of the New Era strategy, the Singing Mothers Tour directly affected British members’ comprehension of women’s ecclesiastical role and how families functioned. The sisters selected for the grand choir had been given a holy appointment, elevating their level of significance and contribution. One commented, “It was as though the sisters had been transformed from ordinary wives and mothers and given the voices of angels.”<sup>33</sup> In a religious culture that revered busyness, being selected to join the tour increased the women’s self-perception of utility and value within the Church. One local choir director’s comment

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32. *Millennial Star*, Apr. 1963, p. 118 (emphasis added).

33. *Millennial Star*, Apr. 1961, p. 148.

reveals the exceptionalism that was associated with adding the choir to one's list of service: "All the sisters held more than one position in the Church, some holding eight and nine; most of them were district missionaries; five out of the 18 were Relief Society presidents; most were visiting teachers, Sunday School teachers, MIA presidents, genealogical chairmen and secretaries. As usual, those with the most to do were prepared to do more."<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, many of the women could not read music, meaning participation in the choir was an unparalleled opportunity to develop musical ability and gain a highly visible, powerful skill for church service. Respected across the Church, the women viewed themselves as central players with an exceptional command of influence within the British Church.

Although it would seem the Singing Mothers program would confine the roles of Mormon women to musical and familial responsibilities, it was in fact celebrated as the epitome of female power, authority, and responsibility. The project directly shaped the perception of gender equality among Mormon women of the 1960s by giving them prominence and status, suggesting that "gender tensions in Mormonism are [not] due to inequality in the religion, but due to invisibility of that equality."<sup>35</sup> For Britons, the tour was not just an ancillary program within the Church, but a God-inspired mission, central to the New Era initiative, through which women represented and promoted the whole Church within British society. One writer claimed the choir superseded similar efforts made by the American Church, that "J. Walter Thompson, Ltd., the advertising company working for the church, has estimated that the Singing Mothers alone received four times the public

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34. *Millennial Star*, Jan. 1961, p. 33.

35. Neylan McBaine, "To Do the Business of the Church: A Cooperative Paradigm for Examining Gendered Participation Within Church Organizational Structure," in *Mormon Feminism: Essential Writings*, edited by Joanna Brooks, Rachel Hunt Steenblik, and Hannah Wheelwright (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 262.

comment that the Tabernacle Choir did when it was in Britain six years ago.”<sup>36</sup> Endowed with purpose and evangelical authority, one woman asserted, “The song of the Singing Mothers will never end, for they will touch the souls of many who have never before opened their hearts to the message of truth. They will open the way for another New Era in the history of Great Britain.”<sup>37</sup>

Given its effect on perceptions of female influence within the Church, the Singing Mothers program likewise helped form the idiosyncratic nature of British Mormon familial ideals and patterns. It demonstrated how even though the women relished the traditional roles of wife and mother, they felt that in a church setting, the demands of membership required an overlapping and merging of gender roles in church and family. At the heart of this understanding was a belief that the interdependence of men and women was necessary for the tour to succeed, that both exert influence within complex organizations at grassroot levels.<sup>38</sup> Instead of upholding delineated gender expectations, the Singing Mothers Tour was celebrated by the women because it disrupted traditional gender roles, relying on the cooperation women had come to assume was at the heart of church organization. Therefore, their idea of equality was not primarily based on what women were permitted to do, but what men and women could achieve together. One woman even framed cooperation as a theological mandate: “It is not the Lord’s plan that she should do this all on her own, and she will be far more willing to help you go out on your Church duties if you will help her.”<sup>39</sup>

The Singing Mothers Tour disrupted traditional gender roles out of necessity because it required enormous sacrifice of time, money, and

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36. *Millennial Star*, May 1961, p. 170.

37. *Millennial Star*, Feb. 1961, p. 79C.

38. Inouye, “Women and Religious Organization,” 313.

39. *Millennial Star*, Jan. 1963, p. 17.

domestic labor, demanding the collaboration and assistance of male members. Compared to the stereotypical Utah congregation, British Mormonism was highly distributed and sparse, meaning many members did not easily have the local support network of other Mormon women to ease their load. One woman explained the difficult logistics that were common among the singers: "It has not been an easy task. . . . Many have travelled by train or bus a distance of 50 miles or more on cold, foggy days, leaving their families until 11 or 12 p.m. Many are taking private voice lessons weekly, some twice a week, to condition their voices in mastering these difficult numbers. A few sisters have sought part-time jobs to help pay the expenses entailed from travelling long distances once or twice a week for district rehearsals."<sup>40</sup> Another described the level of organization needed for her to attend an impromptu rehearsal:

It seemed a physical impossibility for me to go. My husband could not get time off that day, and we have no near relatives. . . . Our dear Relief Society president . . . called a special meeting of all the sisters to see what could be done. . . . Eventually four different brothers and sisters became involved in taking the child[ren]. So complex were the arrangements . . . Peter, aged one year, was taken to Sister Ashmole on Monday night, then promptly at 7.30 a.m. the following morning Brother Malyon arrived with his minibus to convey Simon, aged two, and Kay, aged four, to Sister Humphries' house. . . . Sister Sands, looked after Timothy, aged six, until school time. . . . He was again looked after in the evening by Sister Sands until my husband came home from work at night. . . . My heart is full of gratitude when I think of my wonderful husband at home who has sacrificed two weeks of his three weeks' summer holiday to completely run the home and care for the children.<sup>41</sup>

Many men stepped in to fill childcare and domestic duties while women fulfilled their musical calling. Male support of the Singing

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40. *Millennial Star*, Feb. 1961, p. 77.

41. *Millennial Star*, Mar. 1961, p. 167.

Mothers was often crucial, as evidenced in the case of one woman, who could not find anyone “to take care of her children after only a few days and . . . was forced to return home.”<sup>42</sup> One woman described the marital cooperation that was essential and common among the participants:

I was so thrilled when I was chosen to join the Singing Mothers. . . . I am afraid that I had not given a thought as to what would happen to my family if I did go. But my husband said not to worry about that and to just get down to the business of learning the songs. Twice a week I made the journey, which took me an hour and a half each way. . . . My husband and I seemed to pass each other on the stairs, but we both felt that this calling was important.<sup>43</sup>

Another article described the reality for the men as they supported the program, stating, “[The] president of the Leicester Stake, had his own problems to cope with whilst his wife was away. He had taken two weeks of his holiday so that he could look after their six children, but one day he had to go to the office to attend to some urgent business. The older children were at school, but what could be done with the youngest? There was only one solution, and that was to take him to the office, and two-year-old Jonathan thoroughly enjoyed his day at work.”<sup>44</sup>

Despite the interference of family life caused by the tour, members relished the novel spotlight it created, with one family featuring in a *Nottingham Post* article titled “Dad Runs Family While Mum Sings.”<sup>45</sup> Rather than hiding the struggles, families were commended for facing them, justified by the belief “that the Lord would bless their families and watch over them until their return.”<sup>46</sup> Validated by divine sanction,

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42. *Millennial Star*, Mar. 1961, p. 159.

43. *Millennial Star*, Apr. 1961, pp. 201–202.

44. *Millennial Star*, Mar. 1961, p. 161.

45. *Millennial Star*, May 1961, p. 248.

46. *Millennial Star*, Mar. 1961, p. 163.



the tour fit neatly within the framework of the New Era, an assignment given to women yet made achievable by the culture of cooperation within local congregations.

The 1961 Singing Mothers Tour achieved its purpose, with many local newspapers praising the quality and artistry of the performance. Yet it also demonstrated how American Mormon ideas, when disseminated, must adapt to local circumstances, varying in application and meaning in the lives of the members and their families, often creating unintended outcomes. Translated in the lives of the British members, the tour was a formidable task. It placed untrained, inexperienced women in a position that did not automatically match their abilities, while requiring them to dramatically reorganize their lives and families so they could fulfill the calling. Yet it also instilled an exceptionalism within British Mormon women that influenced their perception of gender and family throughout the following years.

### The Ideal and the Real

The hype surrounding the Singing Mothers Tour inspired women to assert that “no other Church would afford such an opportunity to its members.”<sup>47</sup> However, the novelty of leaving families in the care of the husband for a few weeks does not mean gender roles were completely dissolved—far from it. Despite the high level of cooperation and shared responsibilities, British Church units reflected the traditional Mormon gender divisions of female-led Relief Society, Young Women’s, and Primary organizations, leaving the all-male priesthood the bulk of religious ministry, preaching, and bureaucracy. Motherhood, marriage, and support of the priesthood were revered and promoted as central components of Mormon theology and female responsibility. However, as demonstrated by the Singing Mothers Tour, British women believed the pressures of membership on individuals and the family

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47. *Millennial Star*, Mar. 1961, p. 165.

were significantly greater in Britain than in America. Consequently, American Mormon definitions of womanhood were viewed as unrealistic cultural exports of perfectionism, causing women to prioritize their agency over Church teachings when making crucial decisions. Women also expected collaboration over deference to gender roles.

British Mormon women of the 1960s valued their lives as wives, mothers, and teachers. Gender divisions were compounded by social and Church assumptions that a woman would marry young and enjoy caring for her husband and children. Many women happily embraced these roles, such as Carol, who described family life fulfilling her dreams: “[It was] marvelous, absolutely wonderful. I can remember before getting married the things that I really wanted to do. I wanted us to be able to have family prayer. I want us to have a store cupboard. I wanted us to be able to go to church . . . and it was just bliss, absolute bliss.”<sup>48</sup> Sophie similarly reflected, “I can remember standing doing the washing up, looking out into the garden in our first little home, and there was a robin on the coal bunker and . . . my heart was just full.”<sup>49</sup>

For its British readership, the *Millennial Star* idealized the female roles of wife, mother, ward chorister, and teacher, encouraging women to happily accept being the invisible supporter of male duties. One article noted, “It is not easy for a young woman to be left alone taking care of the children, night after night, while the husband is out doing church work, but I do not think that this life was intended to be easy. It is such a short time in eternity and yet so much depends on our meeting its test. So much is at stake.”<sup>50</sup> Other stories described women who learned to

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48. “Carol” interview, 2023.

49. “Sophie” interview, 2023.

50. *Millennial Star*, Jan. 1963, p. 17.

reconcile the strains, often through a process of self-effacement. One related,

Gradually through prayer, determination, and discussions with other sisters in the same position she began to adjust her attitude and help Brother Storer with his studies, his talks, waiting up if he was late with a hot meal and a soothing word. When he had a problem, she would fast with him. He progressed through various positions in the branch and then became Branch President and later District President of the former Nottingham District. Looking back . . . Sister Storer says that what troubled her most was being left alone; and her neighbours didn't help by their remarks about his absences. [But] she was quick to reply, 'At least I know where he is and what he is doing.' When they were silent, she realised what a great blessing this was, for some of them did not know where their husbands were. From then on, she resolved that she would help him all she could.<sup>51</sup>

Although members understood and supported the Church's teachings on ecclesiastical and familial gender roles, their perceptions evolved with circumstances. Being a British Mormon in the later twentieth century was often characterized by a tremendous sacrifice of resources and time required to sustain small church units. Women frequently endured lonely evenings while their husbands visited other families and attended endless meetings. Carol described the situation that was common among families: "At one point, [my husband] was the stake's Young Men's president. He was the stake seminary and institute coordinator. He taught in Sunday school, and he had two other callings. He had five callings altogether, as well as having a family, and as well as having a full-time job."<sup>52</sup> Rebecca recalled feeling abandoned when her twenty-three-year-old husband was called as bishop, leaving her every evening to manage their small children.<sup>53</sup> Sophie similarly

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51. *Millennial Star*, Sept. 1963, p. 281.

52. "Carol" interview, 2023.

53. "Rebecca" interview, 2023.

recalled, “There was a point where it became really overwhelming, . . . the demands of the callings we had, which we faithfully accepted, and much of the time, I’m sure, didn’t do justice to, because we were spreading ourselves very thinly with multiple callings. . . . And we just sucked it up, which is we did it without stopping to say, how is this really impacting our family?”<sup>54</sup>

Tensions appeared when families felt the strain of performing Church callings they felt were unsustainable within smaller, weaker church units compared to Utah congregations. Carol recalled, “Millions of meetings, millions of meetings. . . . Busy, busy, busy, busy, too demanding, I would say, too demanding I wouldn’t stand for it now. . . . I wonder how much of it was a reflection of the Utah Church. . . . How on earth did we put up with it? . . . To me it was just priesthood leaders, feeling that they had to staff their unit . . . and as long as they had a full staff, well then . . . the people could go hang.”<sup>55</sup> Sophie similarly asserted, “I think there was a bit of simmering resentment, which I didn’t really recognize, but felt nonetheless . . . in fact, on one or two occasions I can remember sort of just asserting, but we’re British! We don’t have to think like that, you know. . . . I felt somehow . . . that the Church was transplanting cultural expectations on us which were neither needed nor necessary. So, I did push back against that.”<sup>56</sup>

Despite the common resentment felt by women being left at home while their husbands fulfilled Church callings, their discontent was not based on feelings of gender inequality or female invisibility. Rather, the dissonance between the ideal and the real was caused by attempting to replicate the Utah Church model in locations with fewer members and resources. British women responded to the situation by reconfiguring their expectations of what Mormon women should look like and how

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54. “Sophie” interview, 2023.

55. “Carol” interview, 2023.

56. “Sophie” interview, 2023.

families should function. They used their agency as the ultimate guide of navigating their relationships at church and home.

### Collaboration and Agency as the Expected Standard

Reacting to the perceived performative demands that emanated from the central Church, British Mormon women viewed teachings of gender roles as an ideal that reflected traditional conservative American Mormonism, one that was suited to more affluent families carrying less demands of Church service. For these women, the incongruency of American Mormon policies and ideals in the lives of British members meant agency developed as the central component of navigating Church membership and family life. They claimed absolute orthodoxy by asserting their agency to decipher what general, gendered, and familial Church edicts were relevant to their situation. Learning over time to “pick and choose” between relevant expectations was fundamental to their religious stability, especially when such edicts directly impacted the family.

The women interviewed for this essay projected a self-assurance that has clearly developed over time. Alice described how she first exercised her agency to set aside Church teachings concerning birth control:

It was like this big burden on your back that you were disobeying the prophet, you just had to let the children come, and it was awful! . . . And I thought, I can't, I can't have another baby so soon. . . . [Well] I remember once I was hanging clothes on the line and I prayed, Heavenly Father . . . I can't remember the answer, but it was something along the line that it's acceptable, what you're doing. I don't care what anybody says, I feel Heavenly Father understands me. He loves me. He knows I'm trying to do my best, and I'll just plow on and just ignore all the rest.<sup>57</sup>

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57. “Alice” interview, 2023.

She also described how she came to dismiss prophetic counsel to garden. Relating to Spencer W. Kimball's instruction to grow vegetables, she said,

People would say, you've got this huge back garden for growing vegetables! Well, we did have a go at it, and it cost us a fortune in time and in money, and you could buy carrots around the corner for pennies. And I'm thinking this isn't sensible. . . . But a lot of it was coming down from President Kimball, you must plant a garden! . . . You did feel the guilt. . . . I think that was when [my husband] was bishop. . . . Four children to look after while [he] was devoted to the youth in the ward. We didn't have time to do a garden. And I'm thinking, we're doing so much Heavenly Father, do we have to have this garden that's costing us a fortune? You know, it just wasn't sensible.<sup>58</sup>

The autonomy these women developed also extended to how they interacted with priesthood leadership. When asked to be Primary president in her ward while simultaneously holding multiple positions, Carol resisted. Apprehensive of how this call would affect her young family, she responded, "No, I can't do it. Sorry." She explained, "There was an expectation, and to me it was it was wrong. . . . They were quite shocked. I may have been a diminutive five feet, but I was so forceful. I really feel that with some families there was some suffering because of it, and to me it was just [wrong]."<sup>59</sup> As these women negotiated the realistic application of Mormon ideals, they continued to expect a high level of male-female cooperation as crucial in the Church's operation. Instances of male domination were seen as byproducts of personality and male weakness, rather than the status quo. Each woman recalled "a couple of times" when they were surprised by male attitudes that contradicted the assumed model of respect and collaboration. Sophie recounted, "I'd asked what I thought was [a] perfectly valid suggestion. . . . And I was cut short, we didn't even have a discussion. . . . I felt it was like

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58. "Alice" interview, 2023.

59. "Carol" interview, 2023.

well, unrighteous dominion.”<sup>60</sup> Rebecca similarly recalled, “I was stake young women’s president and I felt they were running over me . . . and that I had received revelation, and they were ignoring me. . . . I was so frustrated, it was dreadful. My immediate leader . . . he just ran over everything I said. I was so, so upset about it. About six months later, we discovered he got excommunicated. He’d been having an affair with a woman, and the first thing I said was, it *was* me getting revelation, and he didn’t get it!”<sup>61</sup> In both instances, the women blamed male spiritual weakness for disrupting their expectations of cooperation rather than an imbalance of positional power.

As they navigated discrepancies, British Mormon women identities became centered on a direct connection with God and a belief of female autonomy, one endowed with the agency to classify their orthodoxy. Their understanding of faithfulness has evolved, now believing extensive hours of Church involvement is unsustainable for families and even damaging to their children. Ruth explained how her son left the Church because he felt he “couldn’t give [the church] what they wanted.”<sup>62</sup> Sophie related that as a new convert “when the Church said ‘Jump!’, We’d say, ‘How high?!’” Now she feels she is allowed to decide her level of participation in programs other than Sunday attendance.<sup>63</sup> They further explained how they have not imposed traditional Mormon gender expectations on their daughters but have promoted higher education as an equal priority to motherhood. They also expressed relief that the Church has become more relaxed, as Alice explained, “Church leaders now seem a lot more understanding. There’s less what I’d called hardliners in the Church now, and there’s more emphasis on just do your best.”<sup>64</sup>

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60. “Sophie” interview, 2023.

61. “Rebecca” interview, 2023.

62. “Ruth” interview, 2023.

63. “Sophie” interview, 2023.

64. “Alice” interview, 2023.

## Conclusion

As British Mormonism entered its “New Era” phase in 1959, existing and new members joined a visionary collaboration that focused on communal growth and strength. Men, women, and families shared the burden of progress, claiming a self-importance that superseded leadership hierarchies. On their tour, the Singing Mothers elevated their position as the most prominent and valuable missionaries of the time. Consequently, British Mormon women originating from the 1960s believe patriarchy in the home and Church does not equate to gender inequality. This understanding has been perpetuated by years of asserted independence, initially through conversion and continued by an assumed culture of cooperation. When the expectations placed on families have been overwhelming, rather than condemning unequal structures of power, they have considered the associated problems as the effects of unrealistic American demands. The women have constructed a Mormon identity rooted in a perception of self-sacrifice and exceptionalism, one they see as equally, or arguably, more valid than American standards. They feel free to contest local and general patriarchal authority because they ground religiosity in personal revelation, justified by a lifetime of personal sacrifice.

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## THE SHAPE OF MY FAMILY

Tammy Grounell

A family is a thing with edges. The edges can grow, shrink, smooth off, and get spikey and sharp. The changes that happen can be full of joy, sadness, loss, trauma, comfort, or strength. None of those are mutually exclusive.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has a salvific core based entirely around eternally binding family links. While in recent years the less-than-ideal family circumstances are acknowledged, and even embraced, depending on the character of the ward or branch you are in, the 1980s and 1990s were a time that being married in the temple and having children were perceived as success, which meant that, of course, circumstances other than that were then understood to be failure. The only possible consequence of living within this paradigm was that shame and secrecy would shadow all mistakes, and repentance would be perceived as a herculean task to be embarked upon alone.

In my twenties, I found myself single and pregnant. My biggest thought was that I would need to tell my parents—they were good people, but they would be hurt. I wished that I could have contemplated abortion but at the same time knew that I could not do that, even though I longed to be able to not have to think about the situation. Marriage, or even partnership, was out of the question. I could be a parent but did not understand how I would financially support myself and another person. I was filled with feelings of terror and failure in equal quantities. Humiliation haunted me as I threw up, fainted, and wept my way through my early pregnancy.

Due to a move, my ward changed. I was five months pregnant and showing. After a couple of weeks, my new bishop called me in for a chat. He was gentle but straight-talking and wanted to know what my plans

were. The conversation emphasised the spiritual advantages and protection that being sealed to a family would give my child and pointed out that I was not in a position to provide that. The impression that I was left with was that deciding to keep my baby would be a selfish choice, as it would leave the child more vulnerable and exposed. I left with a leaflet about adoption.

My experience up to this point was that either marriage or adoption were the righteous choices if you were to find yourself in this situation. Single parenthood was seen as not a sensible decision, and I did not see young single parents at church. They seemed to vanish from view once their pregnancy was public knowledge. One girl was very rapidly married and, even more rapidly it seemed, moved to Canada. Abortion was not even discussed; it felt as though the discussion had already been made and that there was no need for further thoughts. The sacrifice of adoption and putting the child's eternal needs ahead of my own grief were perceived as the only real way to put right what I had done wrong. Sexual sin was still being taught as being second only to murder, and, as practically a murderer, I probably needed to be focussed on working on my own spiritual salvation rather than raising a child. And a child would be safer spiritually if they had parents they were sealed to. No mention was made of the child's possible feelings of rejection, self-worth, and confusion or how it might affect their mental and spiritual health. I do wonder whether those things were talked about with the adoptive family.

It took some time to feel resolved on a course of action. I lived alone in the house that my grandparents had lived in when they were alive. I was a distance away from family and friends, and I sank thankfully into the solitude that created. I knew that whatever decision I made, it was important for me to know that I had made the decision without their influence. I wrote lists of pros and cons, prayed, walked, rewrote, prayed, walked, scribbled out, prayed, and of course, cried. It is difficult to explain how I came to the decision that I did, but I do know that I worked hard to get there. One night, while I was praying, I just realised that I knew that this baby was not really mine. It seems counterintuitive,

but it was from that moment I developed a strong sense of the baby being with me. I felt certain he was a boy and felt his companionship and a sense of being together. When I first held him and looked into his face I felt, “So that’s what you look like!” rather than “Hello!”

We were together for three days. The nurses were kind to me and did most of the changing and feeding; one reminded me that legally I still had three months to make a decision and that I could change my mind and take him home. But I didn’t feel like a mother—the mother, a nurturer, the nurturer—I felt that I had done my bit. That is not to say my heart did not break. Oh, it broke. It still does each time I picture us sitting on the edge of the hospital bed, me in a too-thin National Health Service issue dressing gown and him tightly swaddled as I had learned he liked to be. I came to the point that I realised that the pleasant, inconsequential chatter of the LDS Family Services social worker was no longer necessary and that it was time to hand him over. I gazed at him, and he became still. I scoured his eyes for judgment, or accusation, or hate but saw wisdom, patience, and an eagerness for things to begin. We read each other in those moments, and I imprinted him onto my soul. I wanted to be sure that I would know him if I bumped into him in the street. Then I gave him to the social worker and got into bed. She left. I was still bleeding.

My mum took me back to my grandparents’ house, stayed a few days, and then went home. I didn’t manage well at first, but she and a couple of good friends checked on me by phone. Between them all, I got through those first grief-maddened weeks. I don’t remember those days individually, but I know that time passed and eventually I could put his photograph into a pocket, rather than need to keep it in my hand. My social worker from LDS Family Services helped me understand how to move on in little steps without having to leave him behind.

There were moments when I felt comforted and held by each of my grandparents, and I was glad that I was in their house, with some of their things that had been part of my childhood. It felt like a safe haven. One day, I walked to the cemetery to say hello. It was a bright

early spring morning, one of the first of the year that had tempted me out, and the gardener had hung his coat on my grandad's headstone. He was embarrassed when he realised that it was Cyril I was there to see. He apologised and said that he had thought that Cyril wouldn't have minded. I agreed and asked him to keep his coat there. My grandad hadn't met and married Nana until my mother was sixteen and had left home, but he enjoyed the surprising number of grandchildren—by birth and through fostering—she supplied. He was a quiet man, full of acceptance and love and his friend, the gardener, summed him up. Nana was trickier when alive, but I felt her strength when I needed her that winter. A couple of years later, it suddenly felt urgent to go to her grave to say thank you. A kind friend asked no questions and drove me a hundred miles so that I could do that. It felt good to acknowledge the part she had played—her house, her village, her friends, and herself.

Since 2014, LDS Family Services has evolved into a largely counselling service and is no longer run as an adoption agency. Its focus is helping those who need help whatever the circumstances. This feels like a move away from deeming people and their families as successes or failures, and that can only be a good thing. It needs to be made clear that my local leaders were full of love and that I do not feel that I was forced, coerced, or manipulated by them into handing over my beautiful baby boy to the LDS Family Services, though I still cannot believe that I did it. I can play the last moments that I had with him over in my mind, and it feels as though we are both there, in the moment. That would be heaven.

But that cannot be. Eighteen years later, he killed himself. Overdose. It is not known whether it was accidental or not, but he had been struggling with his mental health. A telephone conversation he had with his adoptive mum a few days before suggests that possibly something had been a last straw for him.

When it happened, I was living overseas with my family—my married-in-the-temple husband and born-under-the-covenant children. A week before we were due to return home, the phone rang. My

daughter had messaged a few minutes before the call to ask if I could take some books to school that she had forgotten to put into her bag that morning, and as I was walking past the landline gathering her things, it rang. My baby's mother introduced herself, and I told her that I needed to finish what I was doing and would call her back. Not daring to think, I drove to school, dropped off the books, drove back, and called her. She said that a couple of days earlier our son had been found on the floor of his university accommodation and that it had been too late for anyone to help him. We cried together and talked. I missed him all over again. I was also blindsided and angry. Angry that I had to grieve twice, angry that I had to comfort his mother, angry that she wanted a copy of the photograph I had from those too few days at the hospital, angry that I had been so sure that I had made a decision guided by the Spirit and that this was the result. I was angry with my husband for being so kind and sad with me. I was suddenly angry that my baby's family knew him as a baby, boy, and man, and I only knew his newness. I was angry that his newness was gone when that was all I had of him.

Not many years later in the run up to that anniversary, there was a message from my youngest brother telling us all that he had done a DNA test and found that we had another brother! The new half-brother is older than me (I was the eldest up until this point), and he had been adopted. He had also done a DNA test at around the same time, and my brothers found each other. As siblings we rallied around our dad. We knew that he needed to know that he was loved by us, and so we hugged him and told him how excited we were to meet our new brother. My dad aged visibly and could barely meet our eyes. It has taken him more than two years to feel anything other than shame. What a shame! For I have found the new formation of our family life-affirming. After a while our new brother came to meet us, and it was wonderful. He looked like us and laughed at the same things as us, and our family has changed shape making room for him, his wife, and daughters. One of them is getting married this summer, and our shape will change again.

We are becoming more supple, leaning out and pulling in, rather than haughtily peering over defensive crenellations at intruders.

I am now friends with my baby's mother and his sister. His sister has children, more than half of whom are adopted. His mother is married for the second time. My youngest brother and sister-in-law adopted their youngest child, and I held him during their sealing.

My family is bendy and that has been our salvation. Our soft edges are our strength. I do not understand why the family is the sacred thing that it is, and I do not fully understand the essential nature of the sealing power of temple covenants. I do know that a sealing does have both the power to save and to destroy, depending on how we use it. If we embrace with love the changes that we and others choose to make, either wisely or not, as well as those that are imposed upon us and our families, it is then that it has the power to save. It is sharp, unyielding edges that create tension and discord, feelings of rejection, and confusion about belonging. My family is not even distinctly shaped enough to be the square peg trying to fit into the round hole of the traditional nuclear family, but as we grow in all sorts of directions, and are willing to share family space with all, I find we have the possibility of a life abounding in love. To misquote Wendy Cope and her lovely poem "The Orange":

I love you. I'm glad we exist.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Wendy Cope, "The Orange" in *The Orange and Other Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, 2023).

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