

Context missing from discussion about women

Comments on various blogs over recent months about what Church leaders should or should not think and do about women's roles in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints prompt me to provide some context from an insider perspective that may be helpful.

Recently a woman posted this comment on a blog:

Please understand that not [all] women who wish to be seen in all their worth are seeking to be ordained to the priesthood.... What I am finding.... is that most of these women have been demeaned and marginalized by one (and usually many more) of the brothers of our faith. They have been told their ideas won't work. They have been told they are not important. They have been told they are lesser.

The point is a noteworthy one, namely that LDS women who describe themselves as feminists don't necessarily seek ordination, but rather to be genuinely valued and given a voice that is respected and welcomed.

There are three specific criticisms that have been raised on various blogs that will be addressed here:

Criticism 1: The Church doesn't want to hear from women about painful experiences, doesn't talk to them or only wants to hear from women who are "blindly obedient."

This is untrue. I can say with certainty that not one of the senior leaders of the Church would ever want any Latter-day Saint to feel demeaned or marginalized. Does it happen? Yes, of course. In 30,000 congregations led by lay leaders, it would be extraordinary if it didn't. Serving as a stake president or bishop is demanding and exhausting, and by and large they do a remarkable job of it. Likewise the countless men and women who serve at various levels in wards and branches. But we are all human, and occasionally we say things clumsily or we lack sufficient sensitivity or language skills or experience. The Church is a place where we make mistakes and then hopefully learn to do better. It is also a place where we allow others to make mistakes and improve.

What this argues for is better training of leaders and members, and more patience, more long-suffering, more sensitivity and Christlike behavior on the part of all of us. Bishops are extraordinarily busy, but like local leaders, should be particularly aware of how easy it is to come across as patronizing or dismissive when a woman wants more than anything to be listened to and feel as if she has truly been heard.

But this is quite a different conversation from one about ordaining women to every office, from bishop to apostle, thereby radically redefining how Jesus structured His Church. Those of the Twelve apostles whose responsibilities include leadership and training are acutely aware of these training challenges and expend much energy addressing them.

If there is one thing that my lifetime of working with Church leaders has taught me, it is that they care deeply about Church members and their feelings. In our remarkable system of Church governance, no man or woman can rise to high office without first serving for decades in responsibilities that bring them up-close-and-personal with a mind-boggling array of human problems. In the course of their lives, apostles have spent countless hours in such counseling situations, struggling and sharing tears and helping members work the miracle of the Atonement of Jesus Christ into their lives. While their work as apostles is largely accomplished through local leaders ministering to their congregations around the world, they remain crucially aware of issues that concern the members of the Church.

Many members do not understand this. Even as the Church has grown much larger, the First Presidency and the Twelve are widely read on current issues and continue to travel and engage with the body of the saints. Such assignments invariably bring them into contact with rank-and-file members of diverse thought and backgrounds, not just leadership. I have heard members of the First Presidency and the Twelve speak many times of those experiences, and what they learn from such engagements. When they return, those interactions are often shared and a formidable knowledge base develops over time, especially given the lifetime of experiences of the senior Brethren. The same is true for the women leaders of the Church, who meet one-on-one in the homes of members, hold focus groups and have countless conversations with women and men as they travel the world.

Neither are General Authorities immune from challenges that can arise in their own families, with children or grandchildren, nieces and nephews. One of the great blessings of the Church is that we have leaders who experience the same burdens as the rest of us. They are not aloof.

Additionally, various Church bodies such as the Missionary and Priesthood departments constantly channel information to Church leaders through more formal channels such as the councils on which the apostles sit. Some Church entities such as Public Affairs and the Church's Research and Information Division specifically seek out opinions from members.

An example: some years ago Public Affairs invited three groups of women, all active Latter-day Saints and including feminists, to come for several hours each to discuss concerns. I use the term "feminist" here not to imply political activism or campaigning, but simply as a term to describe those who want to further the interests of women in a variety of ways. The first two groups included single and

married women, working mothers and stay-at home moms. Several in the groups had earned PhDs. The third group consisted mostly of members of stake Relief Society and Young Women's presidencies, and we were particularly interested to learn if there were differences in perceptions between these groups.

In order to build an environment of trust, we do not disclose whom we meet with or what is discussed, although we do sometimes ask for permission to record the conversations so we don't miss anything important. We find that this creates a safe place for transparent conversation. For several hours, a woman staffer facilitated the conversations, and I sat in and mostly listened for a major part of the time. I assure you that these women were not wallflowers. We learned a lot, and those findings have long since been shared with members of the Twelve individually and in appropriate council settings. Those kinds of conversations are continuing under similar guidelines to promote honest discussions.

Criticism 2: There is nowhere for women who don't feel safe in their wards to have a conversation about some of their negative experiences that isn't seen as subversive.

This is a serious question and I think is the kind of discussion that the Brethren welcome as they seek to understand the concerns of the members. My advice is to be patient, and trust in those whom we sustain as apostles and prophets and the revelatory process.

As we have said, most bishops, stake presidents and local leaders do a remarkable job. Sometimes, men and women in wards take offense when counsel is given. And, yes, sometimes we don't handle things well.

First, local leaders should always be given a chance to listen. If approached prayerfully and sincerely, most will.

Second, every member, whether man or woman, should initiate such an interview with a willingness to take counsel as well as deliver a message.

Third, every ward also has a Relief Society presidency. While matters of personal worthiness must remain a matter between the member and the bishop who is a "common judge," other matters of personal concern to a woman can be voiced privately to faithful Relief Society Presidency members and other local leaders. Without becoming an advocate, such a confidante could not only offer counsel but could be invited to accompany a sister to see a bishop or a stake president in some circumstances.

Criticism 3: By not engaging with the more extreme groups, the Church – and Public Affairs in particular – is not acting as Christ would.

First, it's important to understand that the Public Affairs Department of the Church does not freelance. For Public Affairs to initiate or take a position inconsistent with the views of those who preside over the Church is simply unthinkable, as anyone who has ever worked for the Church will attest.

As managing director of the Public Affairs Department, I work under the direct supervision of two members of the Twelve apostles, two members of the Presidency of the Seventy and the Presiding Bishop, and alongside a remarkable and devoted staff of men and women.

This group of senior General Authorities often refers matters of particular importance to other councils of men and women leaders, to the full Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and to the First Presidency for further discussion or decision.

The dedicated men and women who work for Public Affairs reflect diverse backgrounds and experiences. Some are native Utahns. Others grew up elsewhere in the United States and some, like me, were born in other countries or are converts to the Church. Young and older, single and married, they have worked through their own challenging life experiences and learned and grown from them, as we all do.

Occasionally, as we have seen in recent weeks on some feminist blogs, those who are spokespeople for the Church and therefore are required to put their names out in the public square find themselves in the cross-hairs of critics. Sometimes those critics are highly cynical and make things personal. In recent weeks, I have seen some of our staff ridiculed by some feminist commentators, called disingenuous or, worse, accused of lying.

Our people are professionals and they have borne this with charity, good grace and without the slightest complaint. I don't believe for a minute that these strident voices represent a significant proportion of LDS women, or even of those Church members who describe themselves as feminists.

Certainly all the staff understand that public relations is best understood as a bridging activity to build relationships, not a set of messaging activities designed to buffer an organization from others. Readiness to meet with many different groups is therefore basic to public affairs work for the Church, and we do it all the time.

Yet there are a few people with whom Public Affairs and General Authorities do not engage, such as individuals or groups who make non-negotiable demands for doctrinal changes that the Church can't possibly accept. No matter what the intent, such demands come across as divisive and suggestive of apostasy rather than encouraging conversation through love and inclusion. Ultimately, those kinds of actions can only result in disappointment and heartache for those involved.

We might wonder what the Savior's reaction would have been had the many prominent women in his life taken such a course. If Mary Magdalene, or Mary, his mother, or Mary and Martha, the sisters of Lazarus, had demanded ordination to the Twelve, had spoken publicly about their insistence and made demands such as we hear today, how would Jesus have felt, who loved them every bit as much as he loved the Twelve? Some of these women were closest to him in life and in death. One was the first mortal to witness a resurrected Being. There was nothing "lesser" about these women in his eyes.

I suppose we do not know all the reasons why Christ did not ordain women as apostles, either in the New Testament or the Book of Mormon, or when the Church was restored in modern times. We only know that he did not, that his leaders today regard this as a doctrinal issue that cannot be compromised, and that agitation from a few Church members is hindering the broader and more productive conversation about the voice, value and visibility of women in the Church that has been going on for years and will certainly continue (the lowering of the age requirement for female missionary service was consistent with this conversation).

Few can doubt that the Internet has transformed our society for the better in many ways, notably in providing a voice for everyone with a keyboard or mobile device. The problem with the Internet, as we all know, is that it has also become a place for angry venting, cynical put-downs and the circulating of misinformation. What we read there is often anonymous and unverifiable. People are now apt to quote any blog as a legitimate source, no matter how extreme or cynical or how few people it represents, especially if it happens to comport with their personal view. There is an old quote, attributed to Mark Twain, suggesting that a lie can travel half way around the world while the truth is putting on its shoes. Never has that been truer than today, and it can make civil gospel conversations on some topics difficult.

Inevitably, some will respond to a lengthy post like this with animosity or will attempt to parse words or misinterpret what I have said, "straining at a gnat and swallowing a camel." Nevertheless, I hope that we will see less cynicism and criticism, more respectful dialogue, more kindness and civility and more generosity of spirit as those members who are prone to use the Internet engage with each other. As Sister Bonnie L. Oscarson said recently: "May we realize just how much we need each other, and may we all love one another better," no matter which chair we're sitting in.

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