

Trans-forming Mormonism: Transgender Perspectives on Gender and Priesthood Ordination

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The regulation of gender is central to the ecclesiastical and cultural structure of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS or Mormon Church).¹ The LDS Church has a long history of regulating the roles of women and men in, for example, the household, marriages,² Church leadership positions, the wider social world, and even the afterlife.³ As in other patriarchal cultures, gender definitions in Mormonism function as a means for assigning and maintaining different levels of status, power, and legitimacy. Because religious interpretations of gender, like all other socially constructed systems of meaning,⁴ are humanly defined distinctions that can change over time, Mormon leaders routinely reinforce and promote distinctions between women and men, one purpose of which is to socially mark who controls the Church and who does not. Given the pervasiveness of these gender beliefs⁵ and the emphasis on obedience in the LDS Church,⁶ it is likely that when Mormon women and men embrace these teachings they consequently feel more connected to God and their religious faith.

But what if one's gender identity does not fit neatly into the male/female distinctions taught and reinforced by most Christian denominations and in Mormonism in particular? One option would be for such individuals to conclude that the theological beliefs and institutional structure of their religion are irrelevant to their lives and leave the faith. Another option might be to change one's

1. J. Edward Sumerau and Ryan T. Cragun, "The Hallmarks of Righteous Women: Gendered Background Expectations in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints," *Sociology of Religion: A Quarterly Review* 75, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 49–71.

2. Tim B. Heaton, Kristen L. Goodman, and Thomas B. Holman, "In Search of a Peculiar People: Are Mormon Families Really Different?" in *Contemporary Mormonism: Social Science Perspectives*, edited by Marie Cornwall, Tim B. Heaton, and Lawrence A. Young, 2 vols. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 2:87–117.

3. Amy Hoyt, "Beyond the Victim/Empowerment Paradigm: The Gendered Cosmology of Mormon Women," *Feminist Theology* 16, no. 1 (2007): 89–100.

4. Patricia Yancey Martin, "Gender as a Social Institution," *Social Forces* 82 (June 2004): 1249–73.

5. Sumerau and Cragun, "The Hallmarks of Righteous Women."

6. Michael Nielsen and Daryl White, "Men's Grooming in the Latter-day Saints Church: A Qualitative Study of Norm Violation," *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 11 (2008): 807–25.

gender identity in order to fit LDS definitions of women and men. However, a third option poses even greater difficulties: What if some individuals decide that changing their gender identity is not an acceptable option while still wishing to remain members of the Church? Such individuals may find themselves constantly confronted by the fact that their identity is not recognized in the Mormon faith—that their Church condemns them as moral deviants in both this life and the life to come. While challenging the denial of one’s identity might help change some people’s perceptions, it could also lead to further isolation or dismissal from the Church. Under such conditions, how might we make sense of other gender conflicts in the Church, like the current movement to ordain women? This is exactly what transgender Mormons must figure out in their own gendered and religious experiences. By spotlighting the current religious and moral situation of transgender Mormons as a special case in point, we hope to shed greater light on larger issues involving the complex interplay between priesthood, ordination, and gender in contemporary Mormonism.

Complexities of Transgender Identity

Transgender is an umbrella term that refers to all people living within, between, and /or beyond existing conceptualizations of masculinities and femininities.⁷ Transgender people define and signify gender identities that may blend, reject, and/or reinvent notions of manhood and womanhood by subverting social commands to pick or maintain a gender category, and, instead, fashion their own identities as human beings with varied gender experiences, components, and tastes. While some simply refer to themselves as transgender, others adopt gender identities that speak specifically to certain locations between or beyond established gender role definitions. Some of the more common transgender labels include: *transman* (a person born female who transitions into a male); *transwoman* (a person born male who transitions into a female); genderqueer/gender fluid/gender variant/gender neutral (a person who rejects gender distinctions and lives as both woman and man or as neither); *bi-gender* (a person who lives as both man and woman, but shifts this identity in relation to different contexts and feelings throughout the life course); *intersex* (a person born with ambiguous genitalia); and agender (persons who identify themselves as having no gender). Despite the existence of different kinds of transgender people throughout history, these people are entirely absent from consideration in most religious traditions and emphatically so in LDS teachings about God and interpretations of His eternal plan.

The invisibility of transgender experience and recognition within current Mormon doctrine and practice reflects the Church’s essentially dualistic understanding of gender. According to conventional exposition of LDS teachings, all

7. J. Edward Sumerau, Douglas P. Schrock, and Teri Jo Reese, “Transsexuals’ Gendered Presentations,” in Charles Edgley, ed., *Life as Performance: A Dramaturgical Handbook* (Burlington, Va.: Ashgate, 2013), 145–60.

human beings are God's spirit children and are intrinsically differentiated as being either male or female prior to their mortal births. Subsequently, in their earthly existence, they have immutable masculine and feminine selves. The implication is that God approves of the existence of only two sexes and genders, women and men, who naturally assume different role responsibilities and perform different functions during their earthly existence. Moreover, the LDS Church strongly discourages members from adopting the behaviors of another sex or gender. LDS leaders have constructed arguments that frame gender fluidity (or the ability to signify and develop both masculine and feminine selves) as an assault upon the sanctity of marriage, family, and God's eternal plan.⁸ And finally, the *LDS Church Handbook of Instructions* specifies that *transsexual operations* are grounds for Church discipline,⁹ which has the theological potential of disqualifying transsexuals from reaching salvation in the next life.

Such gender distinctions place transgender Mormons in an interesting position within the institutional and theological structure of the LDS Church. They are simultaneously "outside" of the religious reality assumed by orthodox members of the faith, while actively participating "within" a reality that doesn't recognize the legitimacy of their existence.¹⁰ Accordingly, like other transgender people,¹¹ they often develop keen insights into the socially constructed nature of gender as a result of their daily struggles to understand and locate a space for themselves not provided by institutional authorities. In a complementary fashion, their lived experience generates a different perspective from that shared by binary male and female Mormons—a perspective that could be utilized by researchers, Church officials, or activist groups to ascertain opportunities for making the LDS Church more inclusive for all genders. Despite the potential suggested by these observations, transgender perspectives have thus far escaped notice in scholarly, activist, and official LDS debates about gender in the Mormon Church.

In this chapter, we introduce transgender interpretations of Mormonism in the hope of articulating something of value learned from this hitherto ignored

8. Sumerau and Cragun, "The Hallmarks of Righteous Women."

9. According to the *Church Handbook of Instructions*, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2010), 1:57: "Church leaders counsel against elective transsexual operations. If a member is contemplating such an operation, a presiding officer informs him of this counsel and advises him that the operation may be cause for formal Church discipline. Bishops refer questions on specific cases to the stake president. The stake president may direct questions to the Office of the First Presidency if necessary." Note that the pronoun used in this passage is masculine (i.e., "him"), suggesting that the primary concern is with transwomen or men who become women and not vice versa. A further restriction on transgendered individuals is this policy: "A member who has undergone an elective transsexual operation may not receive a temple recommend" (p. 13).

10. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Hyman, 1990).

11. Sumerau, Schrock, and Reese, "Transsexuals' Gendered Presentations."

Table 1
Self-Identification of Transgender Mormons to the Mormon Gender Issues Survey

<i>Gender Identification</i>	<i>Number of Respondents</i>
Transgender (no details)	19
Gender queer	20
Gender fluid	18
Male to female transgender	15
Agender	10
Female to male transgender	8
Nonbinary	8
Bigender	7
Gender neutral	7
Intersex	2
Total sample	114

community. Specifically, we draw upon 114 quantitative and qualitative responses from transgender Mormons (see Table 1 for the different gender identities revealed by our sample) gathered as part of a larger, mixed methodological study of attitudes towards women's ordination in the Mormon Church. (Chapters 14, 15, and 16 also report methodology and findings from the 2013 Mormon Gender Issues Survey for summaries of the methodology used in our study).¹² In this chapter, we first examine responses from this subset of cases from the larger Gender Issues Survey to ascertain what transgender Mormons think should be changed within the Mormon Church. Next, we identify some difficult issues for LDS doctrine posed by the emergence of a growing group of transgender Mormons. Finally, we suggest some ways the Ordain Women movement might bolster its ranks and reform efforts by broadening its focus from women's equality in particular to full gender equality for all Mormons.

Transgender Attitudes Concerning Gender Reform in the LDS Church: A Quantitative Portrait

In order to ascertain the attitudes of transgender Mormons concerning gender in the LDS Church, we begin with quantitative responses to questions about contemporary gender arrangements within the Church and potential reforms that could be undertaken in the coming years. Importantly, our findings suggest that the majority of transgender Mormons in our sample (some of whom have left the Church) see the need for a number of gender policy changes in the Church. Thus, at least 50% of the survey respondents supported every proposed change specified by our questionnaire and, as elaborated in the next section,

12. The individuals whose responses we include in this chapter chose "other" to the question we asked about gender and then entered their gender identity.

Table 2
 Demographic Characteristics of Transgender Mormon Respondents
 N = 114

	<i>Percentage</i>
<i>Religious Identity</i>	
on rolls, considers self LDS	37.7
on rolls, does not consider self LDS	43.0
not on rolls, was LDS	19.3
<i>Age</i>	
18-25	30.7
26-30	21.9
31-40	26.3
41-50	7.0
51-60	6.1
61-70	4.4
71+	0.9
prefer not to respond	2.6
<i>Race</i>	
White, non-Hispanic	75.4
Hispanic	7.0
Asian	0.9
Native American	3.5
Other	8.8
prefer not to respond	4.4
<i>Education</i>	
did not finish high school	0.9
high school	2.6
some college	29.8
college graduate	43.0
master's degree	11.4
PhD	6.1
JD/MD	1.8
prefer not to respond	4.4
<i>Income</i>	
less than \$10,000	18.4
\$10,001 to \$25,000	14.9
\$25,001 to \$50,000	16.7
\$50,000 to \$75,000	15.8
\$75,001 to \$100,000	7.0
\$100,001 to \$250,000	8.8
\$250,001 +	3.5
don't know	5.3
prefer not to respond	9.6
<i>Political views</i>	
very conservative	1.8
conservative	2.6
moderate, but lean conservative	9.6
moderate	5.3
moderate, but lean liberal	19.3
liberal	18.4
very liberal	20.2
other	18.4
don't know	1.8
prefer not to respond	2.6

Table 3
 Attitudes of Transgender Mormon Respondents to Selected Issues
 N = 114

	<i>Percentage</i>
Some teachings of the LDS Church are hard for me to accept	81.6
I believe wholeheartedly in all of the teachings of the LDS Church	7.0
A good Latter-day Saint should obey the counsel of priesthood leaders without necessarily knowing why	14.4
A good Latter-day Saint should first seek his or her own personal revelation as the motivation to obey.	85.6
Worthy women should be ordained (yes)	56.1
Concerned about different gender roles (yes)	81.3

also identified additional gender reforms for the Church to consider. Broadly speaking, our transgender respondents overwhelmingly agreed with the leaders of Ordain Women that existing gender policies and practices in the LDS Church are in serious need of reform.

Before assessing their views on these issues, however, it is important to note the demographic characteristics of our sample. (See Table 2.) In terms of religious identity, 38% of transgender respondents said they were on LDS rolls and identified as LDS, 43% thought their names remained on the rolls although they themselves no longer identified as LDS, and 19% said they were no longer members of record. Further, 85% of transgender respondents had been Mormon since birth and had been reared in Mormon households, whereas 13% converted to Mormonism in later life (not shown in Table 2). In terms of race, class, education, political views, and age, our sample of transgender Mormons was overwhelmingly white (75%), well educated (92% had at least some college), not particularly affluent (66% had incomes below \$75,000), fairly liberal (58% self-identified as liberal or as “leaning” toward liberal), and relatively young (78% were 40 years old or younger).

Keeping these demographics in mind, a high percentage (82%) of transgender Mormons have difficulty accepting LDS teachings and 86% also tend to focus on personal revelation rather than obedience to Church authority in their religious lives. (See Table 3.) A majority of respondents (56%) were supportive of ordaining women but an even larger percentage (81%), were concerned about existing gender roles in the Church, despite the fact that some of them (33%) believed God established these roles. (See Table 4.) A substantial majority (61%), however, disagreed with the idea that God decreed that only men could hold the priesthood, and even more (76%) disagreed with assertions that women who feel unequal simply misunderstand Church doctrine. Further, a high percentage (73%) of transgender Mormons in the survey believed that feminism and Mormonism were compatible ideologies and that the treatment of women in the current Church was a problem (74%). Many (72%), in fact, believed the Church

Table 4
Percent of Agreement of Transgender Mormon Respondents with Selected Issues

	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>
God has established different roles for men and women.	44.4	13.9	6.5	21.3	13.9
God has revealed that only men should hold the priesthood.	43.9	16.8	13.1	14	12.1
It's not fair that 12-year-old boys can pass the sacrament, but 12-year-old girls cannot.	12.8	15.6	12.8	14.7	44
Women who feel unequal to men at Church don't understand the gospel.	63.4	12.5	2.7	11.6	9.8
Feminism is incompatible with the restored gospel of Jesus Christ.	61.1	12	7.4	11.1	8.3
The way women are treated in the Church is a problem.	7.3	9.2	9.2	19.3	55
If women were given more leadership responsibilities, it would strengthen the Church.	3.8	3.8	20	18.1	54.3

would be stronger if more women occupied powerful positions. Tables 3 and 4 make it evident that transgender Mormons find existing gender role practices in the Church troublesome and believe strongly that reforms should be undertaken to rectify women's status within the LDS faith tradition.

We asked transgender respondents to our survey whether they supported implementation of a designated set of reforms in the coming years. As summarized in Table 5, a majority of them supported all of the listed reforms. Rather than simply focusing on women's ordination, transgender Mormons advocated a wide range of reforms—from language practices at the ward level of Church-sponsored activities to organizational changes throughout the ecclesiastical hierarchy of the Church as a whole. Despite their support for these proposals, however, a sizable percentage (39%) of transgender Mormons indicated that they thought changes in LDS doctrine resulted from conversations between God and Church authorities, while smaller percentages (not shown in our tables) attributed doctrinal changes to internal advocacy (19%) or external pressures (15%). Consequently, it appears that transgender Mormons desire significant changes in doctrine and Church policy, but many of them also believe that these changes can occur only through divine revelation to Church leaders and not as a result of pressure from advocacy groups.

Overall, it appears that transgender Mormons have much in common with groups like Ordain Women that seek change in how gender is enacted and lived in the LDS Church. While many ultimately believe that God will decide these matters, they typically agree with the positions of Mormon women's rights activists about what should be done to improve LDS gender politics. At the same time,

Table 5
 Percentage of Support of Transgender Mormon Respondents
 for Selected LDS Policy Changes

	<i>Fully Support</i>	<i>Generally Support</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Generally Oppose</i>	<i>Completely Oppose</i>
Eliminate language suggesting that husbands preside over wives.	64.0	14.4	5.4	9.0	7.2
Provide equivalent budgets for the Young Women and Young Men organizations.	83.8	9.9	0.9	1.8	3.6
Balance the stories and images of males in Church publications, talks, and other media with stories and images of females.	69.6	16.1	8.9	0.9	4.5
Appoint women to serve with the stake high council.	63.1	15.3	10.8	2.7	8.1
Include the local Relief Society presidency in all bishopric meetings.	64.5	16.4	11.8	2.7	4.5
Make a greater effort to hire women to fill leadership positions at Church universities.	73.2	14.3	6.3	1.8	4.5
Hire women at equivalent rates as men in LDS Seminaries and Institutes of Religion.	70.6	17.4	7.3	0.9	3.7
Rotate the planning of sacrament services among the Relief Society presidency and members of the bishopric.	58.3	17.6	12.0	7.4	4.6
Allow women and men to serve missions of equal length at the same age.	69.6	14.3	8.9	1.8	5.4
Allow women to participate in the blessing of their children (for example, by holding their children in the circle).	66.4	16.8	7.1	5.3	4.4
Change temple marriage policies so that men and women have an equal opportunity to be sealed to their second spouses after they are widowed or divorced.	70.8	11.5	8.0	4.4	5.3
Restore the former practice of women giving certain types of blessings	70.0	10.9	10.9	2.7	5.5

transgender Mormons represent a category of Latter-day Saints who experience parallel gender inequalities with Mormon women while also representing a potential source of support and collaboration for Mormon groups seeking reform.

Transgender Recommendations for Reforming Gender in the LDS Church: A Qualitative Assessment

Building upon information gained from their quantitative responses to the Gender Issues Survey, we sought to ascertain what lessons Mormon leaders, lay people, and activists could derive about gender reform from transgender Mormons. To this end, we collected and analyzed transgender responses to open-ended questions concerning gender in the Mormon Church. (Table 6 itemizes these questions.) We found two dominant themes in the responses. First, transgender Mormons identified problematic gender beliefs in the LDS Church that they believed should be doctrinally annulled and no longer formally or in-

Table 6
Open-ended Survey Questions

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- (1) Men and women are treated differently in the Church. Some of these differences are considered cultural, others doctrinal. Please describe these differences and why you feel they are beneficial or not beneficial.
- (2) If women were to serve in more administrative and leadership roles in the LDS Church, how would that affect your religious/spiritual life? Please comment in as much detail as possible.
- (3) What changes related to women, if any, do you hope the Church will implement over the next ten or twenty years? Describe these changes in as much detail as possible. Why do you believe these changes are important?
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formally endorsed in Mormon culture. Second, our respondents concomitantly issued specific recommendations for facilitating a more egalitarian and inclusive faith community by actual revision of Church teachings about gender. While, for the sake of clarity, we discuss these related thematic concerns separately, transgender Mormons generally tied problematic beliefs and change recommendations together in their responses, suggesting that both undertakings would be necessary to accomplish true gender reform. Furthermore, despite numerous cases of each of these kinds of responses in our data, we limit ourselves to selected examples to illustrate the general patterns we discerned in the sample.

Problematic Gender Beliefs

A prominent theme in the comments we obtained from transgender respondents focused on gender beliefs commonly shared by Church leaders and lay members that helped to facilitate the subordination of women and other gender minorities. As we have noted in a previous study,¹³ LDS authorities teach Church members that traditional gender distinctions are expected and should be conformed to in all aspects of life, thereby instituting a power differential that elevates men in the eyes of both God and the Church. Traditional gender beliefs that elevate men's authority and status over women also nullify the moral standing of people who do not conform to either manly or womanly norms of behavior, dress, activity, and/or self-presentation.

Echoing the experience of other transgender people in various social contexts,¹⁴ transgender Mormons in our survey often noted painful childhood experiences of confusion and shame—not stopping short of sexual abuse and exploitation—when they were taught that they were less valued in the eyes of God and the Church. The following story from a genderqueer Mormon represents a typical case from our sample:

Since I was a child I was taught that I was less than [males] simply because of my female body. I was taught that since I have a female body, I am a woman and therefore inherently subservient to each and every man. I was taught that I could not be as close to Jesus or do any of the things all of my friends that were boys did because

13. Sumerau and Cragun, “The Hallmarks of Righteous Women.”

14. Sumerau, Schrock, and Reese, “Transsexuals’ Gendered Presentations.”

I was not strong or smart enough. I was taught that I should allow men to touch me and use me as they pleased. I was taught that I had to dress like a girl and not a boy, even though I was more comfortable in boys' clothing. I was taught that I should not play sports, especially with other boys. I was taught that I should not speak up and voice my opinion since I was supposed to be training to be a vessel for a man's seed and make a baby because that was my only purpose in life as a woman.¹⁵

While this story illustrates the demeaning challenges that transgender Mormons face growing up in the Church, it also reveals some of the constraints that many females who grow up as girls, then as women, in the Church must also face. In both cases, the Church latently teaches over half its members¹⁶ that they are valued less than straight men and enforces these beliefs by establishing "acceptable" behavior standards that appear to be based on possession of specified anatomical characteristics.

At other times, transgender respondents noted the problematic way LDS teachings imply a black/white, either/or interpretation of reality that doesn't align with empirical evidence and can be highly damaging to peoples' sense of moral worth. As a gender fluid male noted: "Mormon culture tends to make things black and white. I think the gospel and the world are more gray. There is room for personal revelation and application of gospel principles in the individual lives of members and families. It is okay for women to work, it is okay for men to be 'stay-at-home-dads.' The gospel allows us to do things that best fit our needs."

Echoing this sentiment, an agender Mormon noted:

Now there is science PROVING that it is harmful for men and women to conform to gender norms, let alone the gender binary. Guys are ridiculed for being like girls, while girls can just never measure up. Here's an example in Church: girls are constantly pressured about marriage as if it's the only goal they should aspire to, while stay-at-home dads are ridiculed by other Church members for not "manning up" and getting a job. It doesn't matter if his wife makes more than enough for their family, or that they are both consenting adults and have agreed upon this on their own accord.

Rather than the freedom and personal responsibility that LDS leaders often emphasize in general conference talks,¹⁷ many transgender Mormons are painfully aware of ways that LDS gender teachings restrict individual agency and limit people's ability to pursue God in whatever ways might mean the most for them.

While LDS leaders often posit religious devotion, faith, and even moral character as the ultimate signs of a godly life, transgender Mormons point out

15. We have standardized punctuation and capitalization in quotations from our respondents.

16. Rick Phillips, Ryan T. Cragun, Barry A. Kosmin, and Ariela Keysar, *Mormons in the United States 1990–2008: Socio Demographic Trends and Regional Differences* (Hartford, Ct.: Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture, 2011), 4–5.

17. J. Edward Sumerau and Ryan T. Cragun, "'Avoid That Pornographic Playground': Teaching Pornographic Abstinence in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints," *Critical Research on Religion*, <http://crr.sagepub.com/content/early/2015/02/05/2050303214567669.abstract> (forthcoming in (2015)).

that, in practice, a person's assigned or presumed sexual status often plays a more powerful role than these ideals within Mormon lay culture. As an agender female observed: "Women are also the only ones who are called to serve as Primary leaders, reason being that they are women and therefore, must inherently know how to teach children. Men should also be called as Primary leaders, since having the ability to teach children doesn't have a gender boundary."¹⁸

Considering that LDS doctrine suggests children need fathers in their lives,¹⁹ it seems odd that the Church would promote childhood education as primarily the role of mothers rather than fathers. This emphasis makes sense, however, when, as another agender member noted, the central place of gender in Mormonism is recognized: "The strict gender roles in the Church mean that oftentimes, when a person is being considered for a calling, the first thing that is looked at is their sex. Men are given leadership and administrative positions, while women are given care-based positions, regardless of their natural gifts, the skills they've worked hard to develop, or personality. This is ultimately to the detriment of everyone in the Church." Rather than focusing on the abilities of people to work for and with God, as their sermons and marketing materials often emphasize, one might conclude that LDS leaders operationalize judgments about people's suitability for a particular job based on their possession of a penis or vagina.

Although ward leaders may never conceptualize their identification of persons appropriate for callings in such explicitly physical terms, it seems highly unlikely that they don't sort candidates for positions by the understanding of their presentation of gender. Transgender Mormons, in contrast, who are much more keenly aware of the fluidity and element of choice in gender have no difficulty identifying points at which spiritual worth and religious qualifications in the LDS Church depend have apparently more to do with genitalia than particular skills, talents, religious devotion, or other virtues God's children might possess. Since, for a variety of reasons, some men don't have penises,²⁰ one might ask if Church leaders would/should rescind their priesthood? What about people whom society labels as male but who never had penises in the first place?²¹ Are they allowed to hold the priesthood? Or, in such ambiguous cases, could having the priesthood simply depend on claiming maleness, thus implying possession of

18. According to the *Handbook 2: Administering the Church, 2010* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints), 88, 94, the bishop "calls and sets apart a sister" as the Primary president, but "men may serve as teachers, music leaders, pianists, activity days leaders, and Scout leaders. They may also assist in the nursery." Obviously, as this respondent's observation shows, traditional practices differ widely from ward to ward.

19. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, "The Family: A Proclamation to the World," September 1995, <http://perma.cc/S9TC-B58N> (accessed April 7, 2015).

20. Katrina Karkazis, *Fixing Sex: Intersex, Medical Authority, and Lived Experience* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2008).

21. Katrina Roen, "But We Have to Do Something": Surgical Correction of Atypical Genitalia," *Body & Society* 14, no. 1 (2008): 47–66.

a penis? If this were true, could not women who identify themselves as male also receive the priesthood? Pushed to a ludicrous extreme, one might imagine the possibility that Church officials, like Olympic track and field officials monitoring male and female events, demanding evidence of a penis before conferring the priesthood on a candidate. Would this become a new ritual? What would such a ritual consist of (and how would the Church avoid lawsuits if it implemented such a ritual)? These questions seem farfetched, but we raise them to demonstrate the problematic nature of defining religious potential and spiritual roles operationalized on the presumed possession of sexual anatomical characteristics. We concur with transgender Mormons who argue that categorizing and dividing people based on such biological criteria limits the Church's ability to fulfill its proclaimed global mission to bring the restored gospel to all religious seekers.

Proposed Revisions in Teaching about Gender

Considering the implicit devaluation of women and other gender minorities embedded within contemporary Mormon teachings, transgender Mormons in our survey also proposed (or intimated) ways that these teachings could be revised to facilitate greater equity in Mormonism. In so doing, they often drew upon their own Church experiences in suggesting what leaders and lay members could do to make the LDS Church more gender-inclusive. Further, their proposals indicate ways through which activists for gender equality in both Mormonism and other religions might refocus their attention more broadly in order to promote more egalitarian religious traditions.

One of the more prominent suggestions offered by transgender Mormons is for LDS leaders and other members to reflect on their fundamental concepts of God. While the LDS theology of God radically departs from orthodox Christian conceptions,²² it is probably fair to say that popular conceptions of God among Mormon laity approximate the views shared by most Christians, which emphasize God's absolute qualities, transcendent being, *His* (sic) gendered role as a loving father, the personal relationship one can have with God,²³ the unconditioned and immutable perfection of the created universe, and the predetermined ends of human existence. With the possible exception of a gendered God as a father figure, to the extent that these ideas concerning God and God's will dominate popular consciousness, it seems paradoxical to conclude that transgender persons and transgender experience are not part of the creation or are somehow excluded from God's plans. A transgender Mormon's comments illustrate this perplexity:

I personally believe that nature makes no mistakes and that individuals who may not fit a specific gender mold should be given the liberty to experiment and decide who

22. Sterling M. McMurrin, *Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1965), esp. Part 2, "The Concept of God."

23. It is important to note here that the Mormon belief in a plurality of distinct gods means that the personal relationship is not with Jesus, which is the more common Christian perspective on this relationship, but rather with Heavenly Father or God the Father.

they want to be, or how they want to be identified. Still, how would such a person know which bathroom or locker-room to go into? Or whether or not to be ordained a deacon? The real question comes when deciding at what point an individual is educated enough or qualified to make such a decision. I suppose it would be a case by case basis, in which more information and research (and/or fasting and prayer) would be needed.

According to the way this respondent and other transgender persons who answered the survey formulated the problem, God (and by extension nature) doesn't make mistakes. They resist what they keenly perceive to be a cruel theological contradiction—that they, like other human beings, are God's spirit children, yet their human and transgender experiences typically are repudiated as deviant mistakes by ecclesiastical leaders and the Mormon lay community.

Even when Mormons and other Christians argue that transgender people are not created that way by God, as they often do with regard to sexual minorities,²⁴ they must still acknowledge the creation and presence of intersex people. Since intersex people have always existed in human societies,²⁵ those who promote the idea that there are only two sexes or genders must either deny the existence of intersex people, deny the perfection of God's creation, or deny that the existence of intersex people undermines their religious belief in the immutability of two sexes created by God. While we cannot predict how apologists will wrestle with these issues or how Mormon theology might consequently be modified, based on our research of transgender Mormons, we can say that their personal religious concerns have become important issues for the LDS community to address.

Highlighting the ambiguities in Mormon doctrine discussed above, transgender Mormons advocate for the freedom of all Mormons, independent of their designated gender categories, to pursue their own spiritual passions and personal potential. As one respondent stated:

The gender roles taught in the Family Proclamation²⁶ and perpetrated through our manuals and general conference talks tell us who God says we should be. I think God wants us to discover who we should be and what our roles are in life based on the spiritual gifts that He has given us. I don't think that His plan was ever to have us try to fit into a mold instead of create our own beautiful life. I think that roles within the home should be a private matter between a husband and a wife because they know each other and can have that relationship with God. I think the gender roles that have been taught to us are age-old cultural traditions. I think men in the Church have been closed off by their own beliefs to see that.

24. J. Edward Sumerau and Ryan T. Cragun, "Why Would Our Heavenly Father Do That to Anyone?: Oppressive Othering through Sexual Classification Schemes in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints," *Symbolic Interaction* 37, no. 3 (2014): 331–52.

25. Karkazis, *Fixing Sex*.

26. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, "The Family: A Proclamation to the World," 1995.

In statements like this, transgender Mormons express concerns that LDS leaders have lost touch with God by uncritically absorbing and sacralizing a subset of cultural norms. Further, as the following statement from a gender-fluid Mormon suggests, our respondents intimate that LDS leaders should seek fresh revelations concerning their concerns—revelations that are free from the heterocentric assumptions and sexist language of existing scriptural texts: “There is definitely a lot of inequality and sexist language in both the Book of Mormon and the Bible. However, Mormonism subscribes to the idea of modern revelation, and the General Authorities use quite a bit of heterocentric, sexist language, which pushes men and women of the Church into prescribed roles.” Mormons proudly maintain that, through modern revelation, the LDS Church is a “living church” that makes divinely directed policy adjustments and institutional change when worldly conditions warrant. Transgender Mormons who take seriously the potential for change inherent in the concept of modern revelation call upon Church leaders to take their concerns to God and ask for a new understanding of gender norms that matches existing earthly realities. Some also imply that theological failure to reinterpret gender identities express the human prejudices of Church authorities rather than representing a manifestation of God’s will.

Elaborating these concerns, many transgender Mormons in our study surmised that existing gender roles in the Church are due primarily to the acceptance of cultural stereotypes by both the leaders and ordinary members of the faith. Many, like the following genderqueer respondent, concluded that the widespread currency of such stereotypes in the Church limits their freedom to develop the gifts God gave them:

The gender stereotypes in the Church are simple: the man is the one who earns money for the family and is in charge of it, and the woman takes care of the kids, is amazing at all homemaking skills, and is lower than the man. In recent years, gender stereotypes have been changing a lot. I am biologically female, but I associate more with the male gender stereotype. I hate homemaking skills and taking care of young children. But I would love to work and earn money. Nowadays, I think that it is perfectly fine for couples to switch their gender roles, and even mix them up. The LDS Church seems to still be caught up in the eras before feminism. I think that it would be much more beneficial to the LDS Church if the leaders rewrote “The Family: A Proclamation to the World” to remove all of the parts that describe gender stereotypes.

In statements like this, transgender Mormons identify the limitations that LDS gender teachings impose and call for doctrinal revisions.

Moreover, as the following comments from a transwoman suggest, many of our respondents believe that reliance on cultural stereotypes ultimately undermines God’s equal treatment of His children by providing the foundations for inequality in the Church: “Women are treated as second class-citizens. Their time, opinions, and talents are not valued as a man’s. Additionally, the burden of maintaining the pure thoughts of men by dressing ‘modestly’ maintains a rape

culture and victim shaming. Not conforming leads to self-hatred, depression, suicide, [and] family estrangement.” Thus, in addition to limiting the opportunities of women and other gender minorities, transgender Mormons often are led to the conclusion that existing gender teachings in the Mormon Church also facilitate the subordination, marginalization, and abuse of many Church members.

Transgender Mormons not only critique existing gender teachings in the Church, but also implicitly advocate moving Mormonism past a gender focus that is operationally reduced to anatomical sexual differences to a focus on equal regard and treatment of all people regardless of gender. Since Mormon gender teachings do not currently align with empirical realities concerning the existence of many sexes and genders, contradicting common assumptions that God’s plans don’t include mistakes, transgender Mormons would like LDS authorities and lay members to recast their gender beliefs and teachings in ways they believe are more compatible with the idea of God’s creation. In so doing, they argue that the institutional Church would ultimately be strengthened without the demeaning and exclusionary consequences of consigning people to traditional gender role categories.

Transgender Implications for Mormon Theology: A Theoretical Discussion

As discussed above, the existence of transgender people (or at the very least the existence of intersex people) as part of God’s creation and as members of the LDS Church, raises some interesting questions about current Mormon teachings and practice. It appears, for example, that LDS doctrine leaves no room for the existence of transgender people in God’s creation, yet these people have existed throughout history²⁷ and are capable of developing close relationships with God.²⁸ Furthermore, Mormon transgender individuals’ responses to our survey demonstrate their acute sensitivity to the gender implications of LDS teachings and conceptions of God for their personal and religious lives. As more and more transgender people live openly in our society, making it harder and harder to ignore their presence in the world, it is important to consider the implications of transgender experience for the LDS Church in the twenty-first century.

Echoing the concerns raised by *Ordain Women*, a realistic place to start such a discussion is with conceptions of the LDS priesthood. To begin with, while personal moral worthiness is obviously an important criterion, possession of a penis (i.e., being physically male) also seems to be a requirement for priesthood ordination status. Casting the requirement in blunt terms reflects the current reality. How do LDS leaders make sense of transgender Mormons? Would a male-bodied child who became a female-bodied adult keep the priesthood, or would

27. Karkazis, *Fixing Sex*.

28. Melissa M. Wilcox, *Queer Women and Religious Individualism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).

that priesthood be rescinded as a result of such a transition? Alternatively, would a female-bodied child who became a male-bodied adult become eligible for the priesthood upon transition? If sex largely determines who is qualified to speak for God, how does the removal or addition of sex organs change one's eligibility to hold the priesthood or serve in different positions in the religion? And if such a removal or addition does shift priesthood eligibility, would this mean, *reductio ad absurdum*, that the priesthood is somehow embodied in the penis?

Building on the complications that sex transitions raise for Mormon policy and practice, another question of transgender individuals is whether priesthood is tied to biological sex or to gender presentation or performance. For example, what if a male-bodied person engages in cross-dressing or develops a gender-fluid identity that includes living at least part time as a woman? Would that male remain a priesthood holder capable of giving priesthood blessings? Can a male-bodied person utilize the priesthood while wearing a dress or other clothing traditionally considered to be feminine? Stated another way, does a male who dresses and acts as a "woman" remain a priesthood holder as a result of his biological credentials, or does the transition in gender performance render his biological credentials obsolete in the eyes of Church authorities? Inversely, what about female-bodied people who present mostly masculine selves? Would such people be eligible for the priesthood because they live as men, or would they be denied access on the basis of biological characteristics? These questions raise important issues when considering the priesthood in relation to gender variance, as such variance can involve both biological transformation or varied symbolic cues (e.g., dress, behavior, speech) associated with gender.

Another fascinating question arises in the case of intersex individuals.²⁹ Since intersex people are born neither biologically male nor biologically female, are they eligible for the priesthood? Or is this situation akin to racial "one-drop" rules suggesting that any female "pollution" of someone's "maleness" results in priesthood ineligibility? Another complication involves sex assignment for intersex individuals. Conventional practice in America still involves the selection of sex (i.e., placing intersex people into female or male categories and/or adjusting their natural or "God-given" bodies to fit such categories) for these people without their consent (e.g., this is usually done within their early years based on the wishes of parents and doctors). When this is done, are some of these individuals robbed of the priesthood God wanted them to have by assigning them to be female? Or are some of them granted the priesthood God didn't want them to have (and thus potentially denying God's authority) by assigning them to be male? Just as the LDS Church eventually had to address issues involving race and so-called "racial purity" in bestowing priesthood authority,³⁰ we anticipate that

29. Karkazis, *Fixing Sex*.

30. Armand L. Mauss, *All Abraham's Children: Changing Mormon Conceptions of Race and Lineage* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 231–44.

growing awareness of the fluid and non-binary nature of both sex and gender will eventually lead Mormon authorities to address these concerns.³¹

While we could extend this discussion further into the many ways that gender—and especially the inaccurate conceptualization of gender as composed of only two categories—is embedded within the Mormon tradition, we nevertheless hope that this chapter prompts practicing Mormons and scholars to turn their attention to these issues. Our preliminary questions reveal some ways in which the existence of transgender populations can and will continue to create significant problems for existing Mormon doctrine. For instance, the current lack of recognition of a place for transgender individuals within Mormonism allows for those outside the tradition to repudiate Mormon legitimacy. Nonbelievers can point to these questions as evidence that Mormonism is a religious tradition made up by people without adequate knowledge of the world they live in. The continued lack of a place for transgender individuals in the LDS faith supports a conclusion that Mormonism is a cultural product of a particular time and place—a time and place historically where transgender individuals existed, but were considered deviant and were so oppressed that their legitimate existence was denied. Believing Latter-day Saints need to consider how to respond to these critical questions—and to the ambiguities in Mormon doctrine they reveal—if they want to construct a more inclusive and compelling sacred canopy that is inviting to all seekers of religious truth.

To this end, we suggest that LDS leaders and members may want to consider insights the Ordain Women movement has to offer, beginning with a revision of existing LDS ecclesiastical structures and traditions in relation to the empirical realities and complexities of gender and sex. If the leaders of the LDS Church restructured the religion as an inviting place for transgender individuals, Latter-day Saints would be at the forefront of the movement toward both a more equitable world in terms of gender and a conceptualization of God that does not imply that God suffers from the same inadequacies, ignorance, and prejudice as human beings. We also suggest that women's rights movements, like Ordain Women, should consider pursuing gender equality for all people instead of limiting their advocacy to one category of a fictitious binary. Doing so would arguably build a larger base of supporters, advocates, and resources for their ongoing efforts. Finally, we encourage scholars of Mormonism as well as Mormon scholars, ordinary lay members, and activists to begin grappling with these important gender questions. If the LDS Church fails to recognize the existence of transgender individuals and find a place for them within the religion, it is possible that the growing cultural awareness of the complexity and socially constructed nature

31. Peggy Fletcher Stack, "Transgender Mormons Struggle to Feel at Home in Their Bodies and Their Religion," *Salt Lake Tribune*, March 31, 2015 (accessed April 7, 2015), General Conference Special Section, E2, E8–10; <http://perma.cc/J26H-JBZ9>.

of gender will eventually pay negative dividends for the growth and vitality of contemporary Mormonism.

Conclusion

In many ways, LDS doctrines and rituals are predicated on the theological and institutional construction of gender, making it difficult for believers to entertain alternative points of view concerning the established practices of their religion. The identity concerns and experiences of transgender Mormons, however, represent an intriguing opportunity for LDS leaders, members, scholars, and activists to gain an expanded understanding of gender problems within the Church. While charged with the task of preserving the integrity of Church doctrines and policies, Mormon ecclesiastical authorities are far from immune to widespread, lasting changes in public opinion based on new knowledge and scientific information. Consequently, expansion of empirical knowledge and altered understandings concerning the complexity and socially constructed nature of gender are likely to increase pressure on Church leaders for reformulating Church doctrine and policy on a number of gender-related issues in the years to come.

For scholars, the current religious struggles experienced by transgender Mormons may be considered as a strategic case study for understanding the ways that established religious traditions are challenged to adapt and change over time in order to preserve their relevance to people's lives and ultimate concerns.³² To maintain their legitimacy over time, religious traditions must stay close to mainstream thought and understanding, as the latter evolve and change, while simultaneously preserving enough doctrinal distinctiveness to appeal to their core constituencies. To this end, the LDS Church will have to continue wrestling with shifting gender politics among its women and transgender constituencies. Arguably, the Church could simultaneously increase its membership appeal and reduce the future waves of younger members³³ who are abandoning the faith by taking steps now to become a more egalitarian religious community for all genders and sexes.

32. Ryan T. Cragun and Michael Nielsen, "Fighting over Mormon: Media Coverage of the FLDS and LDS," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 43, no. 4 (2009): 65–104.

33. Rick Phillips and Ryan T. Cragun, "Mormon Religiosity and the Legacy of 'Gathering,'" *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 16, no. 3 (2013): 77–94.