

Mormon women seeking middle ground to greater equality

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SALT LAKE CITY (RNS)—Some Mormon feminists see only one goal on the road to gender equality— ordination to the all-male priesthood.

After all, every worthy male in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—starting at age 12—is ordained in this priesthood. It is seen as a holy power, described as the authority to act in God's name, yet given exclusively to men.



Neylan McBaine, founder of the Mormon Women Project, says LDS women experience a "tremendous amount of pain" over what they can and cannot do in the church. (RNS Photo: Scott Lunt/Salt Lake Tribune)

At the same time, lots of Mormon women are perfectly comfortable with the roles they believe God assigned to them, including motherhood and nurturing. They would not want, they say, to "hold the priesthood."

Now comes a third and, some suggest, growing group of Mormon women somewhere between these two poles.

They are not pushing for ordination, but they crave a more engaged and visible role for women in the Mormon church. It is a role, they believe, their Mormon foremothers played—and one that easily could fit into the institutional structure without distorting or dismantling doctrine.

These women—some of whom consider themselves feminists, while others avoid that label—point to little changes that would pay big dividends—treating a president of the local Relief Society (the church's main women's group) like her male counterpart and assigning her to be a regular speaker at conferences and in worship services; quoting more women in sermons and Sunday school lessons; and selecting more women to speak and pray at churchwide general conferences.

Many agree no meeting should take place in which decisions about women are made without a woman being present. Talk about such changes is buzzing around the Mormon blogosphere and was discussed at a recent gathering of FAIR—the [Foundation for Apologetic Information and Research](#). It has spawned websites such as Mormon Women Project and a blog called [Young Mormon Feminists](#) by a Brigham Young University student.

"There is a tremendous amount of pain among our women regarding how they can or cannot contribute to the governance of our ecclesiastical organization," Neylan McBaine, founder of the [Mormon Women Project](#), said at the FAIR conference. "We need to pay attention to that pain. ... The pain is real."

These Mormon women, McBaine said, are not trying to "eradicate the divine differences between men and women," but want to be "used, engaged, recognized and appreciated ... in the broadest context of the

Lord's kingdom."

If Mormonism's first generation of strong and charismatic female leaders had seen this era, the modern women wonder, what would they think has happened to their legacy?

In the 19th century, many Mormon women had a strong sense of partnership within the priesthood. They were outspoken leaders of female organizations who oversaw their own finances, programs and publishing. They gave healing blessings to other women and their offspring. They spoke openly of women's spiritual powers and being the offspring of heavenly parents—one of them God the Mother.

Mormon women were early suffragettes, forming alliances with national leaders such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony. They were the first in the nation to vote and among the trailblazers to pursue professional careers in medicine, business and law.

"I see articulate, spiritually aware, productive, loving and amazingly resilient women in my ward (congregation). Every Sunday I hear their voices, listen to their talks, learn from their lessons, mix with them in meetings and in the foyer, and see them doing amazing things," said [Laurel Thatcher Ulrich](#), who teaches history at Harvard University. "But, for some reason, we get only token acknowledgment of women beyond the ward."

This "strange, new phenomenon" of the disappearing women "is so at odds with my early experience in the church, my understanding of the gospel, and of what looks to me like simple common sense that I am simply stunned that it persists," Ulrich said. "The sad thing is, many young women in the church have never experienced anything else."

Kristine Haglund, editor of [Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought](#), also worries about the impact on younger LDS women.

"We must articulate a Mormonism that is less about lifestyle choice and more about spiritual power and a personal relationship with God that can enlighten all the facets of the lives young women choose for themselves," she said.

Despite the lack of contemporary role models, Mormonism teaches that women have access to all the same revelatory and healing powers as men—just with their own faith, not priesthood authority.

"Spiritual gifts, which have been a hallmark of this church from its very inception, are given equally to men and women," said Bonnie Atkinson, a Mormon writer and blogger in Springville, Utah. "That's the more crucial equality, the eternal equality that supersedes any secular definition of equality."

Atkinson argues LDS women are not taking advantage of powers they already possess.

Mormon women need to "step forward and embrace these gifts of the spirit, acknowledge the value of what they are already doing, and ask more of themselves," Atkinson said. Then the outside world "will take notice of their articulateness, skills and worth. It won't be because a policy or a program changed to bestow that power on them."

Is female ordination, then, an unreasonable hope?

"My own view is that ordination to priesthood office is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition," Haglund said, "for making the kinds of changes that would allow women to participate fully in the life of the church."

Other Mormon women see no possibility of equality without ordination.

Hannah Wheelwright, a BYU sophomore majoring in political science who launched the Young Mormon Feminists blog, said that with no significant

Mormon female spiritual leaders, "I fail to see how women are equal.
Female ordination is the only ultimate signal of equality."