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Lived Leadership

Kate Holbrook

SEASONED HISTORIANS AND RELIGIOUS STUDIES SCHOLARS know we must regularly reexamine our theses for accuracy and accountability to change over time. The lived religion approach can also help to keep us honest, because as we begin to imagine coherent trends and grand narratives, it forces us to take into account the messiness of actual experience. Two techniques employed by scholars of lived religion—attention to meaning and attention to practice—can enlarge our understanding of the leadership structure of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

The term *hierarchy* is both underexamined and frequently employed to describe the church's leadership structure. Wielding that term, people can make broad and useless generalizations, such as “both the Mormon and the Catholic churches are hierarchical.” Such expressions leave the impression that hierarchy is somehow monolithic and easy to comprehend. But the bishops, priests, and deacons of Catholicism are not the bishops, priests, and deacons of Mormonism. A terse description of Latter-day Saint government as “hierarchical” disguises the truth of that government as members experience it. Applying lived religion's emphasis on meaning and practice to personal accounts of encounters with leadership promotes a richer understanding of the religious ways in which Latter-day Saints experience leadership and the ways in which those interactions do and do not relate to a tiered leadership structure. Lay members of the church take turns acting in leadership positions.

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Both leading and being led summon members to religious practices such as forgiveness, repentance, and selflessness, and approaches to leadership often subvert the top-down systems that the term *hierarchy* implies.

There is an irony here that I should make explicit, particularly because that irony is intentional. The lived religion methodology grew out of the popular history approach, which focused on regular people.¹ I am writing here about using lived religion to better understand hierarchy, a term that usually connotes the elite. However, the lived religion approach shows us that the leadership structure of an institution impacts all members, whether they hold a leadership position or are affected by the decisions of those who do.

Moreover, the typically dichotomous categories of leader and laity are relatively fluid in the LDS Church. While the church has developed a structure of carefully defined and organized leadership since early in its history, theoretically all members are regular people, differentiated only through (mostly) temporary leadership assignments. This dynamic should inform our lived understanding of church leadership. Even more than in the recursive theological formation described among the Puritans by David Hall,² a process of mutual lay-leader influence happens in the LDS context, where church members' experience includes both time at the pulpit and time in the pew.³

Latter-day Saints love to recount over the pulpit how a former bishop or high councilor happily accepted a calling to serve in the children's nursery upon his release from the more prominent position. Such stories are meant to teach that members should not value one church

1. David Hall states in his introduction to the method's seminal work that participants in the *Lived Religion in America* book set out to study regular people. David D. Hall, ed., *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), vii–xiii.

2. David D. Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (New York: Knopf, 1989).

3. These pulpits and pews are found in the Relief Society, Young Women, Sunday School, priesthood, and Primary meeting spaces, as well as in the chapel.

position over another.⁴ But they also demonstrate the fluid subjectivity of laity leadership among church members. Because many members have the opportunity to hold some kind of leadership role at some point in their lives, they each bring that experience of leading to their experience of being led, and vice versa. Therefore, the categories of leadership and laity overlap, and people's identification with one category or the other changes over time. This dynamic forces former leaders to grapple with their own leadership experience and whether they will support their current leaders when doing so may conflict with their own opinions. Leadership experience can also cause former leaders to empathize because they have firsthand knowledge of what it is like to be in the current leader's shoes. Thus, in navigating their respective positions within the church's hierarchy, individuals make a choice with religious ramifications. Will they persist past potential conflicts to empathize with and support a current leader, or will they focus on a difference of opinion that can subtly or extensively alienate them from other church members? Latter-day Saints promise to support their current leaders, and the wages of not doing so can, for some, outweigh the discomfort of setting aside their own opinions.

Furthermore, for Latter-day Saints, leadership is a religious practice, informed by oft-cited scriptures that include an injunction to selflessness and leading through love. "No power or influence can or ought to be maintained by virtue of the priesthood, only by persuasion, by long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned; by kindness, and pure knowledge, which shall greatly enlarge the soul without hypocrisy, and without guile" (D&C 121:41–42). Scripture is only relevant to a lived religion analysis if members reference and think about it; these scriptures meet those qualifications.⁵ They make leading

4. However, church members often continue to refer to a man as "Bishop" or (stake) "President" long after he is released as bishop or president.

5. Doctrine and Covenants 121:41–42 has been quoted at least 84 times in general conferences, with both the verses used either together or separately a total of 135 times. Stephen W. Liddle and Richard C. Galbraith, *LDS Scripture Citation Index*, accessed July 22, 2015, <http://scriptures.byu.edu/#::c12e79>.

into a religious practice of sublimating the self in service of others. They also reinforce familiar New Testament teachings such as “The servant is not greater than his lord; neither he that is sent greater than he that sent him” (John 13:16).

When leadership does not follow this model, members sometimes feel betrayed. One Primary president prayed to discover whom to invite to be a new teacher and made a recommendation to leaders accordingly. Two weeks later, she sat in sacrament meeting and heard, to her surprise, a different person announced instead. The Primary president thought that if her choice was not approved, a member of the bishopric would return to her for another suggestion. She felt she shared stewardship for the appointment. The mismatch in expectations bid them both to religious practice (repentance, forgiveness) and to find religious meaning in that practice.⁶

Latter-day Saint approaches to leadership through councils further challenge overly simplistic notions about hierarchy. Church government happens through councils, in which Latter-day Saints who hold various leadership positions work together to make decisions and plan action. As Doctrine and Covenants 107:27, 30–31 instructs, those councils seek consensus.⁷ Apostle M. Russell Ballard explained that when the Quorum of Twelve Apostles entertains a topic on which they cannot reach consensus, they set it aside for a time. “Decisions that lack unanimity are always held over for further thought, prayer, and discussion. . . . We seek consensus in all that we do.”⁸ Ardeth Kapp, a longtime women’s leader at both general and local levels, similarly described seeking consensus through the practice of prayer when she worked on a church correlation committee. The committee and the Young Women general

6. Personal communication, May 26, 2015.

7. For example, M. Russell Ballard, who has written and spoken extensively on councils, said, “May God bless you, brothers and sisters, to find inspired consensus and unity as you counsel together in your service one to another. Only in so doing can the Church and our families begin to approach their full potential for doing good among the children of God on earth.” “Strength in Counsel,” *Ensign*, November 1993, 76–78.

8. “LDS President Gordon B. Hinckley Dies at Age 97,” *Deseret News*, January 28, 2008.

presidency disagreed about the state of a project. J. Thomas Fyans, an assistant to the Presiding Bishopric, met with the group and for twenty minutes encouraged them to seek inspiration.⁹ The group prayed after he spoke and reported feeling God's Spirit with them in the meeting. "You just could feel that we were united, one in purpose, one in intent," she recalled. Fyans told them that if any of them felt that spirit dim at any point during the meeting, they were to speak up and share that feeling so that everyone could stop and say another prayer together.¹⁰ Kapp's record shows how a process of decision making became for participants a religious communion with God's Spirit and with one another.

Councils seeking consensus practice prayer. Latter-day Saints also find religious meaning in the council system, as it bids them to listen when they want to speak and to speak when they would rather keep silent. At a 2011 worldwide leadership training, Relief Society general president Julie B. Beck acknowledged it can be hard for leaders to put themselves aside and ask for everyone else's opinion first, before expressing their own. She said if a president makes a decision before listening to and considering the advice of her counselors, she loses something valuable.¹¹ Just because the council system can subvert hierarchy does not mean that it does, however. Some female church members report that when they do speak up, they feel their opinions are discounted in favor of male perspectives.¹² Or sometimes they are consulted only after the fact. Chieko Okazaki recalled that the Relief Society general presidency, of which she was a member, would like to

9. J. Thomas Fyans (1918–2008) was managing director of the Internal Communications Division at the time. He became a General Authority in April 1974. "J. Thomas Fyans," *Deseret News*, May 20, 2008. "Elder J. Thomas Fyans, Assistant to the Council of the Twelve," *Ensign*, May 1974.

10. Ardeth Kapp, interview by Gordon Irving, 1978, Church History Library, 56–57.

11. "Working with the Ward Council," Worldwide Leadership Training Meeting, February 2011, <https://www.lds.org/broadcasts/archive/worldwide-leadership-training/2011/02>.

12. Neylan McBaine, *Women at Church: Magnifying LDS Women's Local Impact* (Draper, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2014), 93–95.

have been advised during the drafting of “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” a statement of the church’s doctrine that is regarded as semicanonical.¹³ On the other hand, some bishops worry that many of the women on their councils are too quiet.¹⁴ Richard G. Scott, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, said, “I have observed—particularly in international areas, although it often occurs domestically—that sisters do not participate openly in ward council meetings. This is most unfortunate, because they have perspectives and experiences that are of immense value.”¹⁵ In such cases, he instructed male leaders to ask women council members by name for their input until they began to speak up on their own. In their study of women’s participation in non-religious meetings, Christopher Karpowitz and Tali Mendelberg found that women in the United States are more likely to speak up in groups when women are, by a large margin, the majority in a room.¹⁶ This dynamic may put many church councils at a disadvantage since women in ward councils are generally outnumbered by men. But Karpowitz and Mendelberg also found that women are more likely to speak up when the group atmosphere is noncompetitive and tasked to reach consensus, or unanimous rule—norms the church promotes.¹⁷ Thus the nature of church councils can inhibit women’s participation when gender ratios put women in the minority, but it can also foster women’s voices when leaders take seriously the commission to listen to every council member and to achieve consensus.

The techniques of studying lived religion—looking to first-hand reports for source material and attending to practice and to

13. “The Family: A Proclamation to the World” can be accessed at <https://www.lds.org/topics/family-proclamation?lang=eng>. Gregory A. Prince, “‘There Is Always a Struggle’: An Interview with Chieko N. Okazaki,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 45/1 (Spring 2012): 136.

14. McBaine, *Women at Church*, 107–10.

15. Richard G. Scott, “Sisters in Councils,” <https://www.lds.org/broadcasts/article/worldwide-leadership-training/2011/02/sisters-in-councils?lang=eng>.

16. Christopher F. Karpowitz and Tali Mendelberg, *The Silent Sex: Gender, Deliberation, and Institutions* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 51–52.

17. Karpowitz and Mendelberg, *The Silent Sex*, 62–65, 90, 342.

meaning—can move us from a facile conception of church leadership as hierarchy to a broader interpretation that provides a more complete understanding of the religious experience inherent to leading and being led. This approach expands a conception of church leadership as dictums passed down from on high to a more fluid and shifting picture of leaders and laity who inhabit both categories at different times and who sometimes choose to experience leadership (leading or being led) as a religious practice fraught with religious meaning. Because this is lived religion, it is messy. Real-life occurrences run the gamut from the sanctifying spiritual communion Ardeh Kapp experienced (a communion achieved at the cost of compromise) to the Primary president who felt her decision-making authority was usurped. The second experience was less satisfying and acquired religious meaning when the actor chose to forgive and moved closer to God because she forgave, not because her leader rose to the occasion in a noble way. Filling in the gap between casual use of the term *hierarchy* and members' actual experience of the leadership structure results in a more complete and also a more compelling analysis that recognizes the religious meaning and practice that participants bring to the church's leadership structure.

Kate Holbrook is a specialist in women's history at the LDS Church History Department. She is coeditor of two forthcoming books: *The First Fifty Years of Relief Society: Key Documents in Latter-day Saint Women's History* (Church Historian's Press, 2016) and *Women and Mormonism: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (University of Utah Press, 2016).