Let Us Reason Together: Female Voices in Religious Deliberation

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LET US REASON TOGETHER: FEMALE VOICES IN RELIGIOUS DELIBERATION

by
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ABSTRACT

LET US REASON TOGETHER: FEMALE VOICES IN RELIGIOUS DELIBERATION

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Bachelor of Arts

This thesis examines deliberation within ward councils of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. My findings suggest ward councils can fall short of the democratic ideals articulated by church leaders. This ideal is captured in Jane Mansbridge’s conception of unitary democracy, which emphasizes friendship, equality, and consensus in decision-making regarding common goals. Ward council members report feeling friendship and unity, but reserve authoritative executive power for the bishop alone. This hybrid dynamic creates potential challenges and tensions with the unitary ideal as participants seek to both express their unique perspectives and defer to one authority.

My interviews show that as in any unitary democracy, there are distinct preferences linked to gender and calling. Certain callings are considered more influential; some women expressed reluctance to share openly, press critical issues, or share negative experiences. Perceived authority and jurisdiction also made some women feel less relevant than men. Notions of respect for authority made women and men less comfortable voicing dissenting opinions or concerns. Finally, women’s advisory role meant that women were not required to assent to a ward council’s plan of action, leaving
some women feeling frustrated or powerless once a decision had been made. These factors may inhibit full expression from council members and impede united councils. It is my hope this paper can help men and women listen for and invite female participation in settings where men and women are called upon to “reason together” at church (Isaiah 1:18).
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Introduction

One of the fundamental doctrines of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is the significance and importance of gender. An official church statements reads that within the family, “gender is an essential characteristic of individual ...eternal identity and purpose” (The Family: A Proclamation to the World). Official church guidance states that in ward councils, while the bishop presides, “the viewpoint of women is sometimes different from that of men, and it adds essential perspective to understanding and responding to members’ needs” (Handbook 2). The handbook emphasizes that “both men and women should feel that their comments are valued as full participants.”

In many ways, the desired structure of ward council as described in Handbook 2 seems to most closely resemble the idea of unitary democracy, a theory articulated by Jane Mansbridge in her classic work on democratic decision-making (Mansbridge 1983). Unitary democracy is a form of decision-making based on equality, friendship, and investment in a common goal. Decisions are made by consensus. The institutions of unitary democracy are less focused on protecting distinct interests because they are united by common goals and purposes. This method contrasts with adversary democracy, a decision-making process which accepts conflict between competing groups. In adversary democracy, members of the group have competing interests that sometimes come into conflict with each other, and given those differing ends and interests, they abandon consensus and choose an action based on the will of the majority (Mansbridge 1983).

Unitary democracy is inherently difficult to achieve, in part because democracies often include differing interests and in part because inequalities across groups are
frequently present. There is abundant social science research in my field of political science, for example, that describes how women have unique challenges in deliberative settings which impede a full expression of deliberative equality and influence. In essence, men and women enter discussions on unequal footing. Women tend to “underrate their competence, qualifications, and achievements” (Karpowitz, Mendelberg, and Mattioli 2015; Beyer and Bowden 1997). Such negative perceptions of themselves lead to a reluctance to perform or assert themselves in group discussion (Karpowitz, Mendelberg, and Mattioli 2015; Beyer and Bowden 1997; Instone, Major, and Bunker 1983). While gender is a broad category and there are many differences within the category, women “more readily internalize others’ feedback” (Horvath, Beaudin, and Wright 1992; Roberts 1991) and are quick to assume their own incompetence based on negative feedback, affecting their willingness to contribute (Karpowitz, Mendelberg, and Mattioli 2015).

The language used in the handbook to describe ward council appears to articulate a vision of unitary democracy. Ward council meetings usually use consensus to make decisions rather than voting, and both men and women are encouraged to be full participants. This resembles unitary democracy, where common interests and equal respect are essential. In one sense, ward council is indeed unitary. Ward members are united in a common goal and purpose and share friendship. These common purposes are, as I will show, a source of gratitude and spiritual empowerment for many men and women. However, church governance at the ward level simultaneously embodies a potentially paradoxical combination of both unitary-style deliberation and executive decision making. Policy reserves executive power for one individual within the ward, the bishop. The handbook emphasizes the bishop’s authority with the repeated use of the
word *preside*, as follows: “as the presiding high priest of the ward, the bishop presides over the ward council” (Handbook 2). The handbook and church leadership call for full participation and input, yet ward councils have one executive leader who gets the final say. This dynamic within decision making creates tension with the unitary ideal and leaves the bishop and council members to work out together how they will navigate that tension.

Common barriers to the unitary democratic goal are conflicting interests, inequality of respect among members, and reluctance to make one’s true feelings known (Mansbridge 1983, 23). Ward council meetings grapple with these challenges as well. Even in the context of a religious community, men and women can still have distinct preferences, and differing interests may also be tied to their particular “callings” or responsibilities in the congregation; my interviews show that this indeed does occur. For example, according to my interviews, women in ward council tend to speak up about individual needs and welfare more than their male counterparts, who focus more on administrative items. In addition, my results show that certain callings are perceived as having more influence and relevance than others, calling into question whether there is equality of respect on an administrative level within ward council meetings. Finally, throughout the process I recorded experiences of women who were reluctant to press issues that mattered to them in ward council, or to share their negative anecdotes.

The matter of female participation in ward council is a nuanced and important matter to address as the Church strives to obtain “input from Relief Society, Young Women, and Primary leaders in all matters considered by the ward council” (Handbook 2). Whether at church or in government, empirical evidence suggests that we need
women in order to have balanced and peaceful government. In deliberative settings, women tend to have an effect of generosity on group preferences and to advocate for involvement in poverty alleviation, care for children, and care for the elderly (Clark 2012). When women are involved in government, they empathize with the disadvantaged more than their male counterparts and advocate for equal outcomes (Babcock 2009). While these priorities are often deemed feminine, they actually benefit groups as a whole in addition to aiding women.

If the dynamics of deliberation are such that women do not fully participate in governance, then women’s perspectives can hardly be considered expressed, which is one of the stated goals of ward council. To be fully heard, women must have “guaranteed ability to provide input into public deliberation” as well as “mechanisms of making and responding to claims;” the current structure or practices of ward council may unintentionally be impeding these guarantees and mechanisms (Morgan-Olsen 2010, 240). This thesis was written to explore how men and women are currently experiencing ward council. Through this research, I encourage understanding of how men and women feel about current female participation in ward council, as well as generate dialogue on the status of women as ward council participants. It is my hope this thesis will aid church members in their quest to include the essential perspectives and viewpoints of both women and men in deliberation.

**Project Design**

In this project, I have studied deliberative settings where members of the church “reason together” and seek revelation from God, namely ward councils. I interviewed 11
women and 10 men, including 4 bishops, from stakes in Utah, Vermont, and New Hampshire. This was a convenience sample, leveraging relationships from my time spent living in New England and Utah in the past ten years. Aside from bishop, the callings represented were Primary President, Relief Society President (and a counselor), and Young Women’s President. The men were Elder’s Quorum Presidents, Young Men’s Presidents, and members of the Bishopric.

These personal interviews collected perceived experiences of members of deliberative bodies in the church. In these interviews, I asked participants to speak only to their own experience. I had a set of 36 questions I asked both men and women and took notes on their answers. Bishops had another set of questions modified slightly to fit their calling. Thus, the quotes I have included in this paper are based on those careful notes, and may not be an exact reproduction of what was originally said; I have done my best to reproduce exactly what the individual expressed. This method of data collection was qualitative and it is unclear whether these participants were representative of the church at large. After obtaining permission from stake presidents, I spoke to individuals who were willing to speak to me. A few individuals (three) declined to speak with me because of time constraints or other circumstances. However, most people I contacted were very excited about the project and very much wanted to participate.

In these interviews, my first set of questions (see Appendix) aimed to gather data on individuals’ backgrounds, such as how many callings individuals have had that required them to attend ward council, and I asked them to tell me about their most recent ward council meeting.
I then asked questions regarding how individuals felt in ward council. I inquired regarding their own participation in the meeting and their thoughts on ward council in general. I inquired what experiences have contributed to their current feelings on ward council. For many, these included experiences which had built their confidence as a member of ward council.

My next section of questions addressed decision-making. I inquired how the ward council decided on a course of action. This included the method of addressing disagreements in ward council, conflict resolution, and pushback. I asked whether they had ever disagreed with another member of ward council, and whether individuals ever pushed back once the Bishop gave an opinion.

I went on to ask participants questions about influence. I asked whether individuals felt their calling was a necessary part of ward council. I asked, directly, who is most and least influential in the body, who is most supportive, and who speaks the most and least. I asked for examples of when their comments (if ever) had changed the conversation, and whether they had ever tried to intervene in a conversation and how that was received. I questioned participants on whether they felt listened to, and whether individuals were interrupted in ward council, and whether people disagree with one another.

Finally I addressed gender. I raised the question of what women and men tended to talk about at ward council, and whether individuals felt women were comfortable and participating proportionally to men. My closing questions asked what could be done to make sure that everyone who wants to speak is fully heard, and what would help individuals feel like time spent at ward council was more worthwhile.
Findings and Results

Basics

When it came to decision-making, most councils enjoyed lively bishop-led discussions. Many bishops took a lot of time to ensure everyone’s voices were heard in the discussion (e.g. going nearly half an hour over). Some bishops would create the agenda ahead of time while others would go around the room and have each participant report. Some bishops started the discussion from scratch, others with their preferred course of action (e.g. “this is how I’m feeling, but we haven’t made a decision yet. We all need to counsel together.”). By and large, ward councils felt like collaborative efforts to their participants. After discussion, sometimes the Bishop let auxiliaries draw a conclusion or make assignments with his approval, other times, he made the assignments himself. In all ward councils I surveyed, the Bishop got the “last word” or chose the “ultimate plan of action.” In the words of one sister, “I have not totally agreed sometimes, but usually I feel pretty good about things.” Based on my interviews, generally there was not discord, tension, or strong disagreements. Bishops were generally willing to listen to other opinions and it seems in most cases, ward council was a positive experience.

Prior Ward Council Experience

However, my interviews with men and women did suggest that there are times in which ward council falls short of its stated idea of effectiveness, namely comprising councils which “invite full expression from council members and unify their efforts in responding to individual, family, and organizational needs” (Handbook 2). At times,
council members may not be fully heard, or falling short of their full capacity for unity. My interviews suggest that prior ward council experience is one factor which affects full expression from council members because it appears to impact how confident ward council members feel.

First, a note on prior ward council experience according to my research. I noticed that men and women differed slightly in their prior experiences in ward council. I did not ask Bishops how many callings they had had with a responsibility to attend ward council, but the Elders Quorum Presidents and Young Men’s Presidents I spoke to had more callings that included regular Ward council attendance than their female counterparts in Relief Society, Primary, and Young Women’s. I expect the number I loosely calculated here might only go up if the past years of experience of Bishops was included in the figure. This would make sense given the fact that there are typically more men in ward council, giving men on average more experience in that body over time. However, I did not count the number of years each individual spent in such callings and this is merely a preliminary result. This is certainly worth exploring using a more quantitative method, as I believe it could impact how confident individuals feel in attending ward council.

I am brought to this conclusion because some men expressed that their confidence in ward council is rooted in prior experience. While a few men felt confident because of their calling (two), another articulated that he felt confident in ward council because “I’ve done it for so much that I don’t feel intimidated.” Another man said, “for me, personally, I’ve had so many years on ward council I’m comfortable with the process.”

Fitting in with this pattern, many women expressed that at first they felt nervous or intimidated because they “didn’t know what to expect.” “At first,” one explained, “I
wouldn’t really participate hardly at all, unless there’s something only I knew the answer to. A specific sister or something.” Fortunately, she said that the Bishop’s encouragement changed this. Another sister articulated a similar thought: “When I first joined, as a young Primary President, I never felt like I wasn’t listened to. I just don’t know how much I spoke up.”

When first starting out as a member of ward council, some men also reported they had felt nervous or unsure of themselves. However, one man explained that his confidence grew with time. He said seeing “my suggestions come to fruition has helped my confidence.” He thought to himself, “Wow, maybe the comment I made was directed by the Spirit. When I have a thought, I should say it. Experiences like that, built up, have made me more confident.” Another man told me his prior calling of “executive secretary was fun because I had no real responsibility other than being there.” He related that it was fun to see how the Church operates without having the responsibility to participate, aside from taking notes and scheduling things. He said that it helped him build confidence in ward council because when he was expected to participate as a Young Men’s President, “I knew how it should operate and how it should happen.”

In addition to previous callings in ward council, prior life experiences prove influential. A brother explained “I’m older than a lot of people, and I feel comfortable with the process. The atmosphere is open to discussion.” A Relief Society president echoed this, saying, “I’ve lived in the ward almost 30 years. On ward council we’re very good friends, very comfortable around each other. Just because I have known most of these people for that long, I feel very comfortable.” However, this principle was reflected
more negatively in the experience of a younger Primary President. She explained that she genuinely felt she often had nothing to add to the discussion because:

“[we meet] in the bishop’s office, [there are] a lot of people in a small room….he’s a smart, wise guy. [If I speak] I might sound silly, I might not have anything really meaningful. That’s sometimes a dynamic that I feel. Maybe if I was a little more relaxed then I would share more freely. It’s not intentional, but that’s how I feel. I feel hesitant. It’s so quiet, people in ward council are really well-respected, spiritual, etc. I feel less-than because the other people in ward council are way more experienced, way more spiritual than I am. Maybe I don’t have anything quite as spiritual to say as someone else. No one is projecting that on me, but that’s my stuff. He’s a surgeon, there are professors, etc. I’m intimidated by that. That’s just me.”

In essence, this woman felt hesitant because she felt less experienced or knowledgable compared to the others in the room. She felt “silly,” “hesitant,” “intimidated,” and “less-than” because other council members were experienced in both their worldly professions and in their callings. I believe feeling intimidated or silly would be a significant factor in this woman’s ability to participate in ward council as a fully expressive member. While this is a preliminary study, there are likely other younger members of ward council who feel this way.

When I asked her what would build her confidence, she answered: “people that are more like me….I’m the only young, mother in there. I’m the only one in the stage of life I’m in. Everyone else is a lot older. I’d feel less intimidated if there were more people my age or in my circumstances.” When I asked if having more women in the room would be helpful, she said, “I for sure think having other women in there makes you feel more comfortable. That’s important.” While it is difficult to manage prior experience (after all, it seems contrary to the goals of ward council to only include members who have comparable church and professional backgrounds), there may be an avenue for
improvement in ensuring there are more women present in the room. Fortunately, research in my field of Political Science shows that when deliberative bodies and rules are structured properly, “inequalities in skill and status” will not affect equality of influence (Siu 2017).

**Gender Balance**

Indeed, the number of women in the room appears to matter. There are typically three women in attendance: the Relief Society President, the Young Women’s President, and the Primary President. All women that I interviewed reported there being more men than women in the room at ward council. Even though those men were described as generally welcoming, there still exists a power dynamic that may be invisible to men and felt by women as I will describe below.

When asked to comment on speaking up in ward council, a Relief Society president commented on what it feels like to speak up in an environment that is mostly male. She told me, “I do think that at least two of the three women are completely comfortable participating even though they are very much outnumbered by men.” It was interesting to me that she used the words “even though;” this seems to imply that being outnumbered by men could be an intimidating factor for some women. She explains that “the fact that it has not given me pause probably isn’t a good indicator of how most women feel. I work [at a job] that is mostly male so I may not be very representative of most females on ward councils.” She reiterates that having a high ratio of men to women is significant, saying, “that [ratio] alone could intimidate some women.”
Another woman attributed feelings of defeat to low levels of female representation. She described how “there have been meetings, like stake leadership, where I leave feeling kinda defeated.” She described one stake meeting where “they put us in groups, a woman in each group, but just one woman [per group]. Several women talked after and we left feeling kinda discouraged about the situation because we didn’t have an ally. As women, you’ll be supported by other women.” Fortunately in her ward council “there are several other women. I don’t know why but that makes me feel like I can speak up.” The interviews I conducted for this project reflect established social science research which asserts that low numbers of women in deliberative bodies stunts female participation relative to men. When there are more men than women in a deliberative body, female participation is “far short” of equality (Karpowitz, Mendelberg, and Mattioli 2015).

The number of women in the room can have a direct impact on the results of deliberation. Insufficient female input can lead to a functional breakdown. One sister related a situation where the stake had made a decision which affected many elderly people and Primary. When the Primary President pointed the issue out, the Elder’s Quorum President joked and said, “we've got something brewing, these women are trying to get the stake to [change their plans].” While spoken in jest, it was a troubling criticism or mockery of her advocacy for her concern. This sister was not offended; in her words, the remark “did not feel contentious,” and did not matter to her, but she was concerned that 1) the problem was never fixed and 2) that her concerns were not understood. It is well documented that under majority-rule type decisions, “majorities have fewer incentives to include the interests of preference minorities” (Karpowitz, Mendelberg, and
Mattioli 2015; Gastil 2010; Moscovici 1980, 1985). Whether intentional or not, the lack of female voice seems to have a negative impact on the pronouncement of female preferences.

*Deliberative Rules*

Fortunately, if an imbalanced gender ratio is a real barrier to truly equal deliberation, then there are certainly solutions. First, there are ways to have more women in the room by bringing more women into ward council. For example, inviting more auxiliary counselors and secretaries to attend. Second, there could be a new focus on having unanimity in ward council meetings rather than majority consensus. As it stands, it the ward council seems adhere more to a majority rule than unanimous agreement. When describing the deliberative process, no one said that votes were taken in ward council, but rather that decision-making was discussion-based. Selecting a course of action could be complex. One ward council has “a hard time rounding it down to actual action;” another, “if people don’t agree right away, we tend not to complete the discussion. It just kinda drops.” In one instance an Elder's Quorum President and Relief Society President disagreed. The Elder's Quorum President said no, so the Relief Society President “just let that slide.” In her words “a lot of times in that situation, someone backs down before a resolution comes about that both people are happy with.”

However, social science literature indicates that when women are the minority in a deliberative setting, unanimous rule can promote and encourage the shifting of viewpoints, expressions of agreement, and the sharing of information (Karpowitz, Mendelberg, and Mattioli 2015; Hastie, Penrod, and Pennington 1983; Mathis 2011;
Nemeth 1977). While the bishop will still remain the ultimate authority, group members are more likely to value each voice under a unanimous deliberative style; indeed, this method of decision-making tends to be preferred by minorities (Karpowitz, Mendelberg, and Mattioli 2015; Kerr et al. 1976). In sum, encouraging more female attendance and changing the method of deliberation could both serve to promote equal sharing among men and women in ward council.

Impact of Relationships

Nearly all the women felt they were an important part of ward council and that they participated at the average level. Some even felt they participated more than the average member of ward council (“I have a big mouth;” “I am vocal”), again reflecting established social science research which claims that women are wary of dominating social settings or engaging in assertive verbal behavior (Karpowitz, Mendelberg, and Mattioli 2015; Babcock and Laschever 2003; Eagly and Carli 2007; Kathlene 1994; Mattei 1998). In general, the men and women I interviewed asserted that talking time largely depends on the personalities of each ward council member and that women and men speak about the same amount on an individual level, but that women as a group speak less. However, my interviews showed that this perception may be a result of the kinds of relationships that exist on ward council.

The nature of the relationships of members of ward council seems both a blessing and a curse. On the positive side, quality relationships with ward council help women to feel more comfortable and appear to represent unitary democracy’s ideal of friendship. Sisters describe ward council meetings as good because “everybody is very friendly, no
hostility, just a lot of camaraderie and good sense of humor.” One sister described how she felt she really knew the members of ward council and felt confident because they are “all concerned about the same things, wanting the best for ward members.” Some sisters appreciated the 5-10 minutes of visiting at the start of ward council where there is laughing and joking. This made the rest of the meeting “lighthearted and wonderful” and made her feel like “a vital part of that meeting.” One sister ascribed her confidence in ward council simply to “positive experience in the church.” In general, good relationships with ward council members means that sisters “feel comfortable enough with the people that it doesn't bother me to speak up or speak out.” This is perhaps why it mattered so much to the aforementioned Primary President that there be people like her in ward council; this could help create strong relationships which would make her feel part of ward council and encouraged as a member of that body.

Women described positive feelings as coming from security in their expertise due to their relationships. This was particularly true for Relief Society presidents, who feel they are “in the know.” One Relief Society president explained, “I have a lot of responsibility. I’m maybe sometimes too much in the know. I know what’s going on; they depend on me for a lot of info. Most of the time I kinda know what I’m talking about. So I do participate a lot...I feel awesome about it.” Another woman explained, “because we spend most of the time talking about the needs of the ward” she could “comment on people I knew in the ward and things I was aware of.” In summary, I perceive relationships as being a source of confidence for women.
However, on the negative end, friendly relationships perhaps obscure the fact that there are power dynamics at play when it is time to hold ward council. When asked about equal participation along gendered lines, one bishop said,

“[the question is] hard to answer because I’m not really paying attention to whether people are getting equal time. I’m not thinking in those terms. Everyone speaks pretty freely. I’ve never felt like anybody in ward council is staying quiet.”

When asked if women feel comfortable in ward council, Bishops said that in their experience, women do feel comfortable. The friendships which exist between ward council members may be one reason why talking time is not monitored and why it is supposed that men and women are equally represented. It is perhaps assumed that because all the members of the council are friends, there is no power dynamic which leads to fewer comments or less assertive participation from women. It may be helpful to institute some ground rules, such as unanimity in decision-making, to ensure that women speak up and are heard.

Authority in Callings

However, just changing deliberative rules may be complicated. This is because the clout each of the callings in ward council holds may be unequal. Many women described that they participated in ward council and felt like what they had to say mattered, but for one woman this was despite the fact that she sometimes felt like her calling wasn’t as important as the Relief Society President or Bishop. Another woman explained that it was not the people who made her feel that way, but rather that when it comes to ward council, “it’s important for me to be there, but I just feel like I don’t have
a lot to contribute or say because I don’t know what’s going on in Relief Society or Elder’s Quorum because I’m specifically with the youth.”

It is not clear that ward council is equally relevant to men and women when individuals feel they ought to speak only to their auxiliaries. When it comes to discussing individuals, one Primary President pointed out: “These are not always relevant to everyone on the council. A lot of time is spent between Young Men and Young Women. But they'll talk a lot about what's being planned. It’s pretty indirect for me.” Even when it comes to Relief Society, she explained, “that's not something I need input over. It’s not really relevant to me.”

A Young Women leader added, “I feel fine [about my level of participation]. I feel like the Relief Society President and Elder’s Quorum President contribute more, because we deal with them frequently, and mine is more the Youth. Ward council doesn’t involve me quite as much….We don’t really talk about the youth that much, more about how the ward is doing as a whole. I contribute and give my opinion, and don’t feel like I’m the most important person.”

Given these sorts of reactions, it is worth considering whether overall, more men feel that the topics of ward council are germane to their callings. Women’s callings typically do not pertain to the ward as a whole. Women perceived women as generally talking about the situation of people in their auxiliaries. One woman said that it’s “the children, the YW, the more tender side, the more of the family side of things. When we’re talking about children, the young girls, that’s typically what we bring up, more those types of things.” Other women echoed her statement. One Relief Society president made the interesting remark that “Primary and I..we’re kinda not as connected. We don’t
really have a lot if not youth or primary specific.” In general, women articulated that “women are more about people’s needs than administrative things. Welfare needs and how to meet those needs.” Another woman stated that women address “mostly the young people they’re shepherding. If it's not an activity, they're talking about the needs of someone.” Yet another said women tend to discuss “others, like one on one ministering, people who need help. Relief Society on sick, surgery, meals. Those kinds of things.”

Meanwhile, men reported themselves and each other as talking about things related to their auxiliaries and issues with ministering assignments or the ward mission plan. Men report themselves as talking about fathers’ perspectives and Young Men’s, but that men’s topics are not necessarily different from those of women. One man laughed and said men talk about “smoking meat,” referencing ward picnic assignments. He elaborated: “It’s all about the needs of people, how to help them ... the needs of everyone, but they’re going to know the needs of men in the ward more than the needs of [the women]… in your specific calling, that’s what you’re focused on. That’s who you’ll be more aware of.”

Men perceived women as “helping us understand the perspective of women in the ward.” This includes one-on-one experiences, perspective of moms or YW that men do not have. They say that women articulate the needs of the sisters who are struggling. Meanwhile, some bishops said women and men are not too different, although one said that “the Relief Society has better grasp on members of the ward and their needs. When women are talking, they’re talking about the specific needs of the members, individuals. They focus on the micro. The other auxiliaries (Elder’s Quorum, Sunday School) focus
on the macro.” Other bishops highlighted how women tend to discuss things specific to their auxiliaries or provide parent perspectives.

Some men say women feel comfortable speaking up whenever it’s necessary, and that “women feel more comfortable speaking up than the men do when it’s not related to their calling/organizations,” but others claim that women mostly speak up when the topic is directly related to the woman’s responsibility, or that women “occasionally speak up when they feel strongly about something.” If the latter is true, this tendency to speak up less may be due to the fact that women may feel less relevant as a group than men do. Female roles of authority extend to helping women, or women and children, but this is ultimately under the Bishop’s aegis. Meanwhile, three men (the Bishop and his counselors) are presiding over everyone or advising the bishop directly in a smaller setting. Outside of the Bishopric, even the Sunday School President oversees both men and women and has a calling that is more relevant to more people.

Over and over again, men and women expressed that they did not think gendered dynamics were at play in determining talking time or topics. I usually heard from ward council members that the determining factor in ward council dynamics was personality, not calling or gender, and yet I noticed vivid patterns of influence associated with callings like Relief Society and Elders Quorum (influential), or Primary President and Sunday School President (not so much). I am intrigued as to the implications of the intersections of gender, calling, and personality, and whether there are certain personalities which are more typically invited to accept certain callings (or if one’s calling matters more than gender). If, for example, Primary presidents are typically young mothers, Elder’s Quorum presidents are generally older and experienced in many
callings, and Relief Society presidents are usually outspoken and similarly experienced, then Primary presidents may be at a consistent disadvantage (if they feel uncomfortable or intimidated as the only young mother in the room). While Primary may be valued as a voice equal to that of any other in the room aside from the bishop, a tradition of calling certain types of men and women to each role in ward council can unintentionally create an imbalance.

Voicing Concerns in Debate

This theme of the impact of being in an advisory role rather than executive one was brought up repeatedly. Lack of decision-making ability sometimes affects sisters who air opinions or concerns which are disregarded. A few women described to me times when they tried to intervene, but no one else was listening or people weren’t responsive. Regarding a Christmastime celebration, a woman said:

“I shared my opinion, but it was ultimately…it just was kinda disregarded. People were like “oh I understand that point of view,” but there were more people on the other side. The Relief Society President was validating, and the Primary President as well. The Bishop was kinda “thank you, but let’s move forward like this...”

In essence, while her comment was not completely ignored, this sister’s contribution was not received in a way that made her feel satisfied. It appears her proposition did not receive the attention or discussion that she thought it deserved, although she did feel validated by the Relief Society President and the Primary President. Another example of a sister feeling disappointed in ward council discussions is below:

“There have been times I’ve asked other organizations, or even bishopric, for things that are a need for the Relief Society, that just don’t happen. For example, in ward council we needed help with a sister who needs her wheelchair carried up some stairs to certain appointments. That hasn’t happened. Things like that. Maybe I just need to be more persistent on my part. But it would be nice when
someone agrees to do something, says they’ll do it, that you can count on that happening.”

This woman’s comments appear to suggest some level of disempowerment for her. She is trying to raise important items for the Relief Society but feels that she is not being sufficiently supported or responded to by the ward council. In addition, her comment “things like that” implies that this is not the only instance of feeling as though the ward council is not realizing a Relief Society need.

Her comment “maybe I just need to be more persistent” is also intriguing. Over the course of these interviews, I noticed a tendency for women to discount their experiences with dysfunction in ward council by internalizing the problem. At times women assume that the problem likely exists only within themselves, claiming that their reluctance to speak is just “my stuff,” or “that’s just me.” By discounting or qualifying negative experiences on ward council, women find one way of coping with being a minority on ward council.

Positive Reception of Comments

However, there are ways that women feel valued in ward council discussions. Reception of comments was brought up repeatedly as an important factor in a positive ward council experience. Women felt their participation was welcomed when “I'm often asked my opinion and thoughts. Everybody in there has an opportunity to speak without feeling like they're marginalized or diminished.” Sisters told me, “I know people are respectful because I don't ever feel talked over. I don't feel there's deference to male voice over female voice.”
A sister explained, “when I did comment, my comments were treated with respect, and had real weight.” Positive and respectful reception could include reiteration from the Bishop, or him or other council members adding their take. It also included being told directly that the contribution was important. One sister explained that such validation made her feel “I had the ability to receive revelation of how the ward could benefit through [my calling].”

In addition, respect can be shown by “[acknowledging] the things that me and my counselors or the Relief Society in general are doing ...that does make you have a bit more confidence, ok we’re doing good, we’re doing a good job.” A young Primary President liked when the Bishop told her, after assigning something that required specific Primary follow-through, that he knew she’d do that task well, she “felt great trust and faith in my ability to manage and fulfill as directed by the Spirit.”

Sisters really appreciated signs of mutual respect. “I’m asked questions, and when I’m asked, they’re also validated and listened to.” Feedback, body language, direct follow-up questions, and questions directed specifically to the sister or to women in the room are all valued. A woman told me, “I feel my ideas and thoughts and responses are always welcomed; I feel those ideas are often discussed further, and whether the decision is made based on my own ideas or others, I feel like I contributed.” This demonstrates that many women are not simply looking for acknowledgement, but rather are encouraged by feeling engaged and included in ward council discussions. One woman explained, “it makes you feel comfortable when people respond and give you feedback [that generates a conversation].” Two women explained that when they got an assignment
to give the spiritual thought in the next ward council meeting, each felt like a full participant or part of a team.

Many sisters appreciated specific questions from the Bishop, such as “what are specific issues in ministering?” or “help me remember what we’ve talked about,” or being asked by the bishop to ponder on a topic, and then share their ideas. In such situations, one sister said, “I feel valued.” A woman described how in the two most recent callings she’s had, she felt her bishops were “interested to know what the women think, not just me.” She appreciated this effort.

In summary, it appears that what women crave in ward council is engagement and feedback. This includes not just being listened to or acknowledged, but opportunities to share, and more importantly, chances to shape the conversation and be part of a wider discussion that includes a dialogue.

**Opportunities for Influence**

Indeed, many women described feeling positively about ward council because they could “make a difference” and “shape the way the ward felt.” Also, because they liked “[seeing] firsthand the work that goes into making [ward council] function.” This resonates with what one Young Men’s President said previously regarding the encouraging nature of seeing one’s ideas brought to fruition and success over time.

The leadership of the bishop also came up time and again. Good bishops were described as inviting and organized. One Primary President explained, “he will pick up on the fact you have something to add. He always waits, and will say, “is there anyone else that wants to add?” He wants everyone to share freely. I have the opportunity to
contribute.” Others said their Bishops were really great about encouraging each individual to make their voice heard, called Relief Society Presidents “President,” and singling her out asking, “what do you have to add?” or “do you sisters have any thoughts you want to share?” or looking at someone and saying “what are your thoughts?” These bishops gave sisters the opportunity to open new discussions that had not been brought up, or contribute to ongoing discussions by asking “is everyone in agreement?”

One Relief Society President said she liked seeing responsibilities move from the Bishopric to the Elders Quorum and Relief Society. A Relief Society President appreciated how in the past two Mother’s Days, the Bishop had come to her and said, “sisters, we need your input. This is a difficult day for us to put together. Can you make sure the day is well done?” He asked about what kinds of speakers they should have and how to make it a special day. The Relief Society President told me, “that’s exactly how it should be.” The Bishop asking for this necessary feedback “shows great leadership” that, in her mind, need not only occur on Mothers’ Day.

As part of my interviews, I asked whether individuals felt their calling was a necessary part of ward council. I asked, directly, who is most and least influential in the body, who is most supportive, and who speaks the most and least. I asked for examples of when their comments (if ever) had changed the conversation, and whether they had ever tried to intervene in a conversation and how that was received. I questioned participants on whether they felt listened to, and whether individuals were interrupted in ward council, and whether people disagree with one another.

All sisters but one (who reported all members of her ward council being equal) said the Bishop was the most influential in ward council. Among the men the answers
were the same. After the Bishop, the most common answers were the Bishop’s counselors, followed by the Relief Society President and the Elder's Quorum President. When it comes to who is most supportive, it is the Bishop. The person who speaks most is also the Bishop. The Sunday School President and Primary President were seen as being least influential, and speaking the least (in addition to the Ward Mission Leader).

Advisory Status to the Bishop

One tension in this quest for dialogue and conversation is that ultimately, the bishop determines the pathway forward and the extent to which debate begins and ends. He is the clear executive. The Bishop is the true head of the Relief Society or any other organization in the Ward; regardless of how inclusive or seeking he is of female input, auxiliary organizations are dependent on his approval. Women’s comments may be stymied by the fact that women are not essential to the actual decision, and there may be a certain lack of investment in ward council deliberation because of lack of control over the outcome.

In other words, female input may be invited by an inclusive bishop, but if the bishop wishes to press on with his own idea, that is his prerogative. Additionally, my interviews show that there are times that working towards common interests results in the discovery of conflicting interests between men and women on ward council. As I will discuss in this section, ward councils may struggle to know how to fully represent those other competing interests without silencing genuine differences.

The interviews conducted for this project show that bishops sometimes act unilaterally, and that this is commonly understood and accepted. One sister explained
“The bishop decides and has the final say, but takes advice from what was said.” Another sister summed it up by saying the Bishop is “the captain of the ship, and we do what we can.”

This is not always to the disadvantage of female voices on ward council. The bishop at times champions women’s comments. In one instance the Relief Society hoped to hold an activity for which they would do the bulk of the work, and the Elders Quorum opposed the activity. The sister explained: “then Bishop said, we're doing this.” The activity happened.

However, this system can sometimes be frustrating for women. A sister described a disagreement over Mother’s Day where the “Bishopric just kinda listened ...the Bishop asked for opinions, but ultimately [it was] him.” Still another sister shared a time when “my suggestion was disregarded…the bishop was asking for a way to promote more unity in the ward. Our ward is very transient ...I raised my hand and [shared my idea and] explained the benefits. There was a simple thank you, and nothing else. It was dropped and never brought up again. Which was weird.” This sister was not deeply troubled by this interaction, but perhaps mildly frustrated or left feeling confused by the lack of feedback. In such instances, there is not a lot of recourse available.

A Relief Society President with generally positive feelings towards her ward council and bishop shared an instance when she felt slightly constrained.

“Our Bishop is quite clear about what he sees as his authority and purview and while he invites others’ perspectives, he is not hesitant to make the decision. So, for example, I requested that a sister in the Relief Society [receive a certain calling]. Having been her Visiting Teacher for years, I was well aware of the fact that she and the Bishop had had a rather stinging falling out over some of her lessons while serving in [a calling]. She has since fallen into casual attendance and I felt that having her serve in a capacity that calls on her strengths without
giving her a forum to challenge LDS doctrine would be a win-win. When I proposed her name, he immediately shut the conversation down saying he would not allow it. I did not challenge it.”

She explained that sometimes if there is disagreement, the “Bishop will take it away and talk to the counselors about it.” This has not always yielded accord. As the Relief Society President, she once told the Bishop that many women in the Ward were opposed to or had concerns about a new policy in the ward. She “texted the Bishop and said we needed a larger conversation, some people are uncomfortable with that.” The following week she did not attend ward council, and “he top-downed it. He just said, this is how it's going to be.” She was not sure if things would have been different if she had been in attendance, but given what the bishop had chosen to do, she just had to live with the bishop’s decision. She said,

“I don’t know what would've happened if I was there [in ward council that day]. I mean, it is within his authority. It wasn't outside the scope. It's just that I had some mothers that took umbrage. I repackaged it, and sent out the notice to [the women].”

When I asked her how she felt, she admitted:

“I felt dismissed. I did. I felt that my opinion was dismissed. But I get it too. If you're a person who is over something and you see it failing…I don't blame anyone for putting [responsibility] with Relief Society because we get things done. But he never responded to my question about having a conversation. That conversation never took place. I would've appreciated it, but I'm not thin skinned, I'm not petty, and I get it. I'm the boss in my other life, and sometimes [at work] I just have to make a decision.”

This was a particularly interesting anecdote to me for a few reasons. First, because of her remark about “being a boss in my other life” highlighted the stark contrast between how some women experience church organizations and secular ones. Her
comment revealed how women do not see themselves as holding real sway or authority in church callings, even the Relief Society President, and rightly so. Members of ward council are advisory members without executive function. Interestingly, one woman explained that because of this, some members prefer to deal with matters with individual members of ward council outside of the meeting of that body in order to accomplish things faster. This is a disturbing trend if ward council is supposed to be a viable and integral resource for ward leadership.

Second, this highlights the fact that while female voices are often invited in ward council, they are not required beyond what is typically extended by civility. In some ways, women’s voices are subject to the luck of the draw; women just have to hope that their male leaders will listen, as women can only propose or advise in any situation.

Fortunately, many bishops are open-minded and all the bishops (four) I spoke to expressed an eagerness to hear from women. However, bishops do fulfill a role of presiding, or being in a position of authority. The bishop will open up discussion, but in the councils I interviewed, it seems universally agreed upon that the bishop decides and has the final say. Bishops readily explain that they ultimately are only taking advice from what is said, even if the ward council comes to a consensus.

A Bishop touched on this when he explained, “Sometimes I come off as authoritarian because I favor simplicity. Other times I need more information so I need more input.” As one Relief Society President said,

“quite often Bishop says “I'll talk to my counselors about this and let you know.” He's reserved unto himself the executive function. He approaches it as a council, without executive power, but proposing power. He and his counselors determine the course of action after getting input.”
To this sister, it is very clear that her role is not to make final decisions, but to provide advisement as the bishop sees fit.

One Bishop told me, “I’m not really a facilitator ...once we discuss something and a decision needs to be made, I usually make that decision. It’s rare we disagree, but if there ever was, I’d have to make that call.” Even if “generally speaking, we ...come to a consensus,” the principle is the same: ultimate authority rests with the Bishop, and that power dynamic shapes the conversation.

When I inquired in my interviews whether members of ward council would push back once the Bishop gave an opinion, I got mixed answers. One Bishop made an insightful observation: “I noticed early on, when I gave an opinion, people would defer. Sometimes I feel inspired, and sometimes it’s just a personal opinion.” In order to avoid influencing the conversation too much, he “learned early on that unless I was receiving absolute clear this is what should be, I would withhold my thoughts and opinions.” This is an example of a bishop who really recognized the power and influence that he has, and the steps he has taken to try to generate honest feedback are commendable. But what of bishops who have not come to this realization?

At times women described their experiences at church meetings negatively, saying things like they occasionally felt “defeated”, or “in a hurry to get out of there,” or “uptight.” Women sometimes felt negatively when meetings got bogged down or the council spent too much time discussing things that might have been better suited to smaller settings. A shared system of authority through unanimous deliberation could mitigate these problems by giving women more avenues of action rather than passivity or hopeful waiting.
While seeking input is an important goal, it falls short of declaring women essential in coming to a decision. At the end of the day, it is still the Bishop’s choice what can be done, and that decision can often come from behind closed doors when the bishop and his counselors meet. For these reasons, there exists here a tension between the stated goal of “full expression” and the current deliberative practices, as some women feel unsure of how vital or effective their contributions are (Handbook 2).

Definitions of Respect

The Handbook states, “the bishop seeks input from Relief Society, Young Women, and Primary leaders in all matters considered by the ward council. The viewpoint of women is sometimes different from that of men, and it adds essential perspective to understanding and responding to members’ needs. After open discussion, the bishop may make a decision, or he may wait to discuss the matter further with his counselors.” My findings relevant to how ward members define respect for authority present a challenge to achieving this goal through honest feedback.

In a church that heavily emphasizes the importance of respecting priesthood authority, challenging the opinions or decisions of those above oneself in ecclesiastical rank or jurisdiction can seem impudent and inappropriate. One sister said there was little pushback under the current Bishop because he “is very respected,” implying that perhaps pushback is seen as disrespectful or questioning of his authority. Her comment implies that to respect the bishop, or others in the room, there ought not to be pushback. Worse, there may be a perception that to push back or disagree means one is also petty. One woman stated that she would have “appreciated” being able to have further dialogue with
the bishop on an issue on which they disagreed. However, when he moved ahead without accepting her invitation for further discussion, she chose to be understanding about the bishop’s override because “I'm not thin skinned, I'm not petty.”

This sense that pressing an issue is inappropriate was echoed by one woman who articulated how when she suspects others are not listening to her concerns, “I just realize, this isn't my time to try to intervene. I just let that one go.” She told me, “if I have a real problem, I talk with the bishop one-on-one. I meet with him once a month. Or I’ll email him.” These comments have led me to wonder whether there is true feedback occurring in ward council circles or whether there is pressure to conform to what the bishopric is saying in meetings, pressure that bishopric members may not want. If that is the case, then that may explain the experience of one Bishopric counselor, who told me, “I feel really good about [my participation in ward council because] people really seem to agree. Pretty frequently, I feel that in ward council.”

In a unitary democracy, all members of the council are free to share their opinions, and a decision is made through consensus (Mansbridge 1983). However, In some ways, the idea of agreement appears to get in the way of fully airing everybody’s perspectives. Both women and men are resistant to the idea of pushback. In the interviews, I would often hear from individuals that the idea of pushback was negative. As a result, men and especially women do not always say what they think for fear of offending that agreement, which is fairly problematic from the perspective of deliberation.

This does not seem to be the desired dynamic of most bishops. Indeed, most of them, when asked if others would feel free to disagree with them, laughed and said, “I
hope so!” In some ways it seems unfair to require bishops to try to tease out the real thoughts and feelings of their ward council members. Perhaps if more women held callings which shared jurisdiction over the ward at large, if there were more women present, or if unanimous decisions were made, then bishops would not be taxed with this additional labor. An atmosphere of honest discussion would not require so much careful engineering and would be helpful to whomever is leading ward council.

Interestingly, one Bishop noticed that when he gave an opinion, “the people who push back the most are my counselors, which is what they’re supposed to do….” This comment made me wonder whether having jurisdiction over the entire ward, or a more direct counseling role with the executive, plays a role in one’s level of comfort engaging in pushback. Once again, the authority or relevance associated with each calling seems to be an influential factor.

Reporting Negative Experiences

Beyond this, I repeatedly noticed that when I asked questions about negative experiences, women would often start by saying “no,” and would then go on to tell a story about a negative experience. For example, one Primary President, when commenting on her low participation in ward council, said that she had never felt like it was hard for her to share. She said “I genuinely don’t have anything else to say.” However, she then went on to explain how ward council “can be kind of intimidating” and how she feared sounding silly in ward council. Another woman insisted her ward council was highly equitable and gave rather terse answers until the end of the conversation, when I asked if she had any further thoughts. She then related a consistent
problem in her ward council, an issue she has raised repeatedly but people do not respond to. This all means that at first blush, women that I interviewed appeared not to have concerns about ward council, but once allowed to speak for a while, brought up substantive concerns. As a result, I am convinced that truly understanding the dynamics of ward council requires more than a simple check-in. Understanding women’s experiences requires in-depth conversations, time and investment in creating an avenue for discourse.

**Conclusion**

Men and women alike seem to appreciate being on ward council. As one man, a recent convert, related, “I love being on it. It lets you know what’s going on, otherwise all I’d be hearing everything from the announcements. Now I know what’s going on in the ward.” Fortunately, when I asked women as a group how they generally felt in ward council, they expressed an enormous amount of positive emotions along with some of their more negative experiences. Women used words like “wonderful,” “relaxed,” and “comfortable” to describe their experiences. They said they felt valued and that everyone was respectful. While this finding should be tempered by the result that most women will begin positively, even if they have negative comments, these results are still inspiring by highlighting what has been working.

However, my exploratory study here has highlighted some aspects of ward councils that prove complex. The interviews I conducted for this project show that prior experiences create power dynamics that leave some individuals, including women, feeling hesitant. The personal relationships that exist outside of ward council can mask
the power dynamics that exist within that body. The vastly varying amounts of authority and jurisdiction between members of the council also serve to separately categorize women. Male-majority responses to minority-female concerns in debate can drown out the voices of women. Perceptions of respect for authority can also make it difficult for women to feel comfortable voicing dissenting opinions or feminine concerns; men and women are trying to be respectful of each other and priesthood leadership, but this has the simultaneous effect of muting full expression of perspectives. Finally, women’s permanent advisory status means that women are not necessarily required to assent to a ward council’s plan of action, leaving some women feeling frustrated or powerless to effect change once a decision has been made.

This phenomenon, that of deliberative bodies struggling to incorporate female input, is not unique to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. There is ample social science literature detailing the discrepancies between male and female participation in deliberative settings in government and elsewhere. Across the board, women speak less, for shorter amounts of time, and are interrupted more frequently when they do speak (Karpowitz, Mendelberg, and Mattioli 2015). Women are particularly less likely to speak up when discussions “deal with topics that can be characterised as masculine,” and in a church where final decision-making rests with male authority, many topics can be interpreted as such (Back and Debus 2018).

An idea central to my thesis is the comparison of unitary and adversary democracy. I believe that ward councils can enjoy unitary democracy, decision-making based in friendship, where all participants are equals and are invested in a common goal. While members of the group may have competing interests, a consensus-based decision-
making process that requires unanimity will serve ward councils well in meeting their goal of hearing from all its members and acting unitedly. At the same time, the unitary ideal is not the only aspect of ward council, and all councils will have to grapple in some way with the potential tensions between the twin goals of unitary decision-making and the role of the bishop’s authority. All of the council members I interviewed expressed their desire to respect and value the bishop’s role. Speaking openly about how to navigate these twin goals it is both a faithful response to the church’s stated aims for the ward council and a needed element of ensuring that women’s voices are heard fully.

There could be many ways of ensuring female voices are heard more. When there is a bishop who serves as executive leader, there is tension between that idea and having a council in which everyone fully participates. Changes to representation and processes might give women more of a voice and help ward councils counsel together unitedly, preventing further straying from the unitary democracy ideal. The ideas are myriad, but here are a few: bishops could invite more female callings to ward council, such as the counselors and secretaries of auxiliaries, to ensure that more women’s perspectives are present and to create a more even gender balance in the room. Bishops could make consensus a more central aspect of their decision-making, choosing not to move forward with a decision until all are in agreement. Special care could be taken to ensure there are comparable amounts of talking time between men and women, in hopes that both will be voicing valuable concerns and insights. Men and women can both make an effort to engage with the ideas brought forth by women, and bishoprics could explore having smaller meetings with female leaders in order to coordinate more closely in a more gender-balanced setting.
I believe more research on this topic would be both fascinating and important. A scientific study of a representative sample of ward councils would provide more reliable data. Collecting information on demographics and prior callings of each person in ward council would yield interesting insights regarding the intersection of experience, gender, and calling. Holding in-person interviews where possible could build more rapport with women, bearing in mind the female tendency to say something positive, then hedge with additional information, stories, and experiences. I think more interviews with bishops would also be useful in understanding how bishops view their own role, and interview questions with all members of ward council regarding attitudes toward authority could yield some rich insights into the dynamics of deliberation on ward council.

One Relief Society President I interviewed said it well: “It has to be a team effort.” My hope is that the research I have conducted for this thesis will encourage individuals in the Church to consider the ways that female voices could be heard more equally in church governance, providing valuable information and inspiration for ward councils around the world.
Works Cited


Appendix

Interview Questions:

*Ward council member*

1. What is your role in ward council?
2. How many callings have you had that have come with a responsibility to attend WC?
3. Tell me about your most recent ward council meeting. Was that a typical meeting? What was unusual about it? How did you feel about your participation in the meeting?
4. Generally speaking, how do you feel in WC?
5. How did you feel today?
6. What experiences made you feel that way?
7. What built your confidence?
8. How typical is that?

9. How does your ward council decide on a course of action?
10. Are there disagreements in ward council? Can you describe one instance/what it was like and how it was resolved?
11. Once the Bishop gives an opinion, does anyone ever push back?
12. Have you ever disagreed with another member of ward council? What happened?

13. What are the biggest issues that come up in WC?

14. Do you feel you/your calling is a necessary part of ward council?
15. Who is most influential in ward council?
16. Who is most influential after the bishop?
17. Who is the most supportive?
18. Who speaks the most at ward council?
19. Who is the least influential? If you had to choose?
20. Who speaks the least?
21. Have you ever had an experience when the council changed its decision based on something you said, or the conversation took a helpful turn?

22. Was there ever a time you tried to intervene, but no one else was listening or people weren’t responsive?
23. Have you ever felt like people don't listen?
24. Has anyone ever interrupted you in the middle of your statement?
25. Do people ever interrupt each other? What about you?
26. If someone disagreed with you, would they say so?
27. If you disagreed with someone, would you say so?

28. How do you feel about your participation in ward council? Do you participate a lot, or not so much? Where would you rate your participation relative to others?
29. What do you tend to talk about or bring up at ward council?
30. What do women tend to talk about or bring up at ward council?
31. What do men tend to talk about or bring up at ward council?
32. When do you notice women speaking up?
33. Does it feel like as much as men? More than men?
34. Do women ever get in a back and forth with male leaders? Do they express agreement? Disagreement?

35. What could be done to make sure that everyone who wants to speak is fully heard?
36. What would help you feel like time spent at ward council was more worthwhile?

Bishop Questions
1. How do you view your role in ward council?
2. Tell me about your most recent ward council meeting. Was that a typical meeting? What was unusual about it? What kind of participation did you have in the meeting?

3. How does the ward council decide on a course of action?
4. Are there disagreements in ward council? Can you describe one instance/what it was like and how it was resolved?
5. Once you give an opinion, does anyone ever push back?
6. Has another member of ward council ever disagreed with you? What happened?

7. Who is most influential in ward council, after yourself?
8. Who is the most supportive?
9. Who speaks the most at ward council?
10. Who is the least influential?
11. If you had to choose?
12. Who speaks the least?
13. Have you ever had an experience when the council changed its decision based on something someone else said, or the conversation took a helpful turn?

14. Have you ever felt like people don't listen to each other in ward council?
15. Has anyone ever interrupted you in the middle of your statement?
16. Do people ever interrupt each other?

17. How do you feel about your participation in ward council? Do you participate a lot, or not so much?
18. What do you tend to talk about or bring up at ward council?
19. What do women tend to talk about or bring up at ward council?
20. What do men tend to talk about or bring up at ward council?
21. When do women speak up?
22. Does it feel like as much as men? More than men?
23. Do women ever get in a back and forth with male leaders? Do they express agreement? Disagreement?
24. Do you feel women are comfortable and participate proportionally to men?
25. What could be done to make sure that everyone who wants to speak is fully heard?
26. What would help you feel like time spent at ward council was more worthwhile?