Roles or Missions?

Carolyn J. Rasmus
I preface my remarks by sharing with you my initial response to the title, “Women’s Roles in Relationship to the Church.” It was negative. I believe the idea of roles suggests defining what a woman should be or do in a predetermined, preconceived way. When I hear language about how women should think or act, I sense restriction and confinement. Talk of “roles” suggests to me neat little boxes, and I don’t care...
much for that.

A dictionary definition of role notes "the proper functioning of a person in a socially accepted or expected behavior or pattern." That suggests the idea of a role as a means rather than an end; we often prescribe roles or expectations, or suggest what people ought to be like. Such categorizing takes choices away from people and is antithetical to everything I understand about the restored gospel.

The principle of free agency seems central to the restored gospel and may, in fact, be one of its distinguishing characteristics. I struggle to understand completely what that means for me and also what it suggests about my interaction with others. I am convinced, however, that the process of struggling with those understandings determines what we'll find out about who we are and what we are about in an ultimate sense.

If I suggest that we not talk about roles, though, I believe I need to suggest an alternative. How might we talk about women in the context of the restored gospel or in relationship to the Church? My own experience has led me to conclude that mortality was not meant to be simple. The scriptures tell us plainly that there must be opposition in all things (2 Nephi 2:11). The Doctrine and Covenants adds that we must be tried in all things (D&C 136:31).

But what language might be appropriate as we talk of women and the restored gospel? I'd like to propose that we talk about women's mission or missions, suggesting neither an assigned nor a self-imposed duty or task. I also find myself thinking of responsibilities. What are our responsibilities as women? I think it not insignificant that when our prophet, Spencer W. Kimball, spoke for the first time to the women of the Church in 1978 the title of his talk was, "The Privileges and Responsibilities of Sisters." He did not address roles. He talked about privileges and responsibilities.

The theme for this conference is a beautiful one: "And the work of righteousness shall be peace and the effect of righteousness quietness and assurance forever. And my people shall dwell in a peaceable habitation and quiet resting places." (Isaiah 32:17-19) We all know that this world is not a peaceful place. It is complex, confusing, sometimes frustrating, often difficult; but I believe that what we are about—and particularly what you are about as a helping profession—is to find ways in which we help men and women live and cope and, indeed, find peace, happiness, and satisfaction within a gospel context. I believe that is possible.

Part of my personal concern about the idea of roles is that it connotes a static state, and we live in a changing, global society. We are indeed a worldwide Church. Cultures vary; our society is being transformed. My parents, who are still living, were born when there was no electricity, no automobiles, and no airplanes. They have experienced many changes. Obviously, we are all affected by change. There are some indicators of changes that impact on women tremendously and affect the ways in which women and men relate to each other. Within the last 20 years, the divorce rate has almost quadrupled. Church divorce statistics parallel the national figures, though at a lower rate. Between 1954 and 1969 the number of women heads of families increased by 40 percent. That number grew another 22 percent between 1970 and 1976. In 1920 the typical working woman was single, under thirty, and from the working class. Fifty years later in 1970, most all women in the working force were married, over two-thirds had children, and more than half were over forty.

There are many other changes. The point is that the world, and our Mormon culture, are changing. We are an extremely diverse people. At the same time, however, we are united. That unity comes from our beliefs about the restored gospel and its doctrines. The fundamental doctrine of free agency means that our history is filled with people who have made diverse choices and stood firm on those choices. Let me
call to your memory Thomas More and Martin Luther. I love Luther’s statement, “I cannot and I will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. I cannot do otherwise.” In 1984, Barbara McClintock received the Nobel Prize for her pioneering work in genetics. At the age of 80, referring to her experiences of more than 30 years ago, she noted, “They said I was crazy, absolutely mad, but when you know you are right you don’t care.” Deeply meaningful to me is the statement of the Prophet Joseph Smith who, like Paul before King Agrippa, testified of his vision. “He had seen a vision, he knew he had, and all the persecution under heaven could not make it otherwise; and though they should persecute him unto death, yet he knew, and would know to his latest breath, that he had both seen a light and heard a voice speaking unto him, and all the world could not make him think or believe otherwise. So it was with me” (Joseph Smith History 1:24-25). I share these examples simply because they show us people who were not trying to fit themselves into a predetermined role. These people did not say, “If I act this way, it will be socially acceptable.” In fact, in the illustrations I have given, their behavior was not socially acceptable. To Thomas More and Joseph Smith, their stands ultimately brought death. They were people of conscience. They knew not only who they were but what they were about.

My personal experience suggests that very hard struggles surround us. Roles are easy...just tell me what to do or to be. “This is the way you ought to be,” it says, “and if you do XYZ, everything will work out just wonderfully for you.” Accepting a predetermined role can be a way of not dealing with the hard questions. In contrast, having a sense of mission means accepting struggles and coming to understand our responsibility as Latter-day Saints and then having the moral courage to make our actions consistent with our knowledge of right and wrong. For me, that process—that struggle of getting to that point—is what life is all about. It has nothing to do with roles and everything to do with responsibilities. We did, in fact, accept mortality and discipleship as our earthly mission. We did commit to stand as a witness of Him. For me, our responsibility is to be about finding ways to contribute to and build and defend this Latter-day kingdom. Then this work of righteousness shall indeed be peace.

Carolyn Rasmus is serving as the Executive Assistant to the Young Women General President of the Church while on leave from her position at BYU as Executive Assistant to the President.