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The Power of Motherhood: Leah Widtsoe's Writings on
Women's Roles, Influence, and the Priesthood

Ashley Marie Laneri

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

The Power of Motherhood: Leah Widtsoe's Writings on Women's Roles, Influence, and the Priesthood

Ashley Marie Laneri
Religious Education, BYU
Master of Arts

This thesis analyzes Leah Widtsoe's writings in the 1930s. Her primary emphasis was on motherhood. Widtsoe encouraged women to realize the importance of their role as mothers and the positive results a good mother can have on generations to come. Each chapter examines how Widtsoe used motherhood to help women understand their role in the Church and their role in society.

The first chapter outlines Widtsoe's personal life and analyzes why motherhood was a central part of her writings. The second chapter focuses on how Widtsoe used motherhood as a construct, or in other words, a model, to motivate women and to help them understand their purpose in the Relief Society program in the Church and in the world. The third chapter focuses on the priesthood and motherhood model which Widtsoe helped originate. She used motherhood as a way to help women understand their relationship with priesthood power. Lastly, this thesis examines the contradictions, inconsistencies and patterns of Widtsoe's writings on motherhood.

This study finds that Widtsoe used motherhood as a model to empower women and help them understand their relationship with priesthood power and their role in the Church. Additionally, she taught that what women did in the home had a great impact on society.

Keywords: motherhood, priesthood, power, Leah Widtsoe

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I did not always see a master's program in my future. Despite doubts I had in my abilities, I had many people who lovingly encouraged me and who supported me along the way. Without incredible family and friends, I would not have made it to this point. Here, unfortunately, I can only name a few. My parents have always taught me to do my best and have set an example of the importance of education, I am grateful for their support and love. As far as editors go, they do not get much better than Sue Laneri. Her advice and expertise were life savers to me.

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I feel incredibly grateful for my husband, Scott, who has listened to countless rants and probably knows as much about Leah Widtsoe as I do now. He has been a rock of a support, my best cheerleader, and has motivated me throughout this process. I am grateful that God saw something I could achieve, even if I did not always see it myself. I know as you follow His promptings, you can end up accomplishing things you never thought possible. Leah Widtsoe was an instrument in God's hands and has made a lasting impression on me. I hope others can learn, from her example, that God has empowered women with the gift of motherhood and the priesthood to bless generations to come.

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Chapter 1

The Life of Leah Dunford Widtsoe

The early twentieth century was a progressive time for women of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and for women nationwide. For example, with the passing of the nineteenth amendment in 1920, American women were granted the right to vote, however this was a right that had been given to Utah women in the previous century because of encouragement from the Church.¹ Feminist author Rory Dicker referred to this time as the first feminist wave—a time where women enjoyed freedoms educationally, politically, and professionally that they had previously not experienced.² Although the wave was prominent during the early twentieth century, it declined greatly due to the economic depression of the 1930s.³ One author suggested that the scarcity of work and food for farmers in Utah in the 1920s and for the country in the 1930s contributed to the nation turning back “to the tried and true verities of family, hearth, and home” in the 1930s.⁴ Women began to use their energy in not just improving the nation but improving home life. Among those who upheld the importance of homemaking during this time was a woman named Leah Widtsoe.

During the 1930s Leah Widtsoe was one who encouraged women in home, family, and motherhood.⁵ She believed that motherhood had the greatest power to influence society.⁶ It was

¹ Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A House Full of Females* (New York: Vintage Books, 2018), xiii.

² Rory Dicker, *A History of U.S. Feminisms* (Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 2008), 6.

³ Nancy F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).

⁴ Jean E. Friedman, William G. Shade, Mary Jane Capozzoli, *Our American Sisters: Women in American Life and Thought* (Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath, 1987) 386–387.

⁵ Leah Widtsoe, “The Status of Women,” *Millennial Star*, April 3, 1930, 263–271.

⁶ Leah D. Widtsoe, “The World Needs Love,” *Millennial Star*, March 3, 1932, 139–141.

her opinion that through the role of mother, all women, whether they had biological children of their own or not, could better understand their responsibilities, their place in the Church, and their purpose in relation to men and the priesthood.

Widtsoe was an author of articles published in the Church and a public speaker who believed righteous mothers had the power to affect not just their children but the world. Of motherhood she wrote, “The mothers of the world can do more to do away with war than Disarmament Conferences or World Leagues.”⁷ In other words, Leah encouraged women to be the best mothers they could be because she reasoned that mothers have the ability to create change that will not just influence their own home but society as a whole. She encouraged women to realize the importance of their role as mothers and the positive results a good mother can have on generations to come.⁸

Childhood

One reason why Leah felt passionately about motherhood may have been because in her own childhood, her mother was absent. Leah’s childhood was a peculiar one for a Latter-day Saint woman born in the late nineteenth century because her parents divorced in her childhood, and Leah was raised by an alcoholic father.⁹ Leah’s mother, Susa Young, was an ambitious woman who contributed greatly to the Church. Alan Parrish, biographer of John Widtsoe, wrote

⁷ Leah D. Widtsoe, “The World Needs Love,” *Millennial Star*, March 3, 1932, 141. The Disarmament Conference was a conference that took place in Geneva, Switzerland from 1932–1934. In the 1930s there were many people who believed that the first World War took place because of an arms race among nations. The League of Nations and the United States met in the Geneva Conference to encourage disarmament but in 1934 their efforts failed. For more information on the Disarmament Conference see Carolyn Kitching *Britain and The Geneva Disarmament Conference* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

⁸ Leah D. Widtsoe, “Priesthood and Womanhood,” *Deseret News*, January 6, 1934, 6.

⁹ G. Homer Durham, “As we part—we remember,” *Millennial Star*, October 1933, 698–699; Mary Jane Woodger, “Leah Widtsoe: Pioneer in Healthy Lifestyle Family Education,” *Journal of Family and Consumer Sciences* 92, no. 1 (2000): 50–54,” 698–699.

that Susa was “probably the brightest, most devout, and most accomplished of prophet Brigham Young's fifty-six children.”¹⁰ Susa was an author, editor, mother of thirteen children, and was nicknamed the thirteenth apostle because of her close relationship with church leaders.¹¹ Leah said of her mother that she “was always studying and advancing; her idea was growth.”¹² Susa gave birth to Leah when Susa was only 17 years old. To Leah, the small age gap between her and her mother made them “more like sisters rather than mother and daughter.”¹³ Throughout their lives they worked together and wrote together. It was because of Leah’s encouragement and help that Susa was able to co-write a biography of her father, Brigham Young, with Leah.¹⁴ This close relationship did not, however, blossom until Leah became a grown woman.

Alma Dunford and Susa Young were married when Susa was 16 years old, and Susa gave birth to their daughter Leah just over a year later in 1874 at the age of 17. They divorced three years later in 1877 when Leah was just three years old.¹⁵ Just prior to the divorce Alma had been serving a mission to England and Susa had hopes that the time away might cure him of his drinking habit.¹⁶ Unfortunately, the mission did not cure him of his vice. Susa’s father, Brigham

¹⁰ Alan K. Parrish, *John A. Widtsoe: A Biography* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003) 97.

¹¹ Oral History Interview with Leah Eudora Widtsoe, February 11, 1965, 11, Leah D. Widtsoe Papers; L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT.

¹² Oral History Interview with Leah Eudora Widtsoe, February 11, 1965, 7, Leah D. Widtsoe Papers; L. Tom Perry Special Collections.

¹³ Oral History Interview with Leah Eudora Widtsoe, February 11, 1965, 11, Leah D. Widtsoe Papers, L. Tom Perry Special Collections.

¹⁴ Oral History Interview with Leah Eudora Widtsoe, February 11, 1965, 11–12, Leah D. Widtsoe Papers, L. Tom Perry Special Collections. The book they authored together was *The Life Story of Brigham Young*. In her oral history interview Leah described her role of compiling the notes and papers Susa had kept of her father and that she encouraged her mother to write this book although it intimidated Susa to do so.

¹⁵ Parrish, *John A. Widtsoe: A Biography*, 98.

¹⁶ Susa Young Gates letter to Zina Y. Card, May 18, 1878, Susa Young Gates Papers, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.

Young, died in August of 1877 and in December of 1877 Susa sent a letter to Alma asking for a divorce.¹⁷ In the United States during the late 1800s divorce was not common and was particularly rare among religious people. However, divorce rates in the late 1800s did increase and the subject of divorce was addressed by religious leaders throughout the nation. One scholar noted that despite the growth of divorce in the nation, several leaders of different religious groups in the late 1800s such as the Roman Catholics and Protestants all spoke out against the growth of divorce and even held a conference to deter their followers from voting in favor of the uniform divorce law.¹⁸ For Susa and Alma Dunford, being divorced individuals in a religion that taught the eternal nature of the marriage relationship would have been difficult and possibly ostracizing. Susa alluded to this in a letter she wrote:

Of course, you know the one thing I disliked was the use of Leah's maiden name, especially since I was mentioned as her mother. This sets people guessing and asking questions at once, which is not very agreeable to me. However, I suppose I must pay my own price always for my past mistakes, and it wasn't a mistake when it brought Leah to my arms and heart.¹⁹

With these words Susa acknowledged that other people, whether she was referring to members of the Church or not, would ask questions and possibly speculate about the details of her divorce. Susa kept the reasons for their divorce secret, but in a letter written by Susa to her sister Zina she revealed that a major reason for their divorce was what Alma referred to as being "tight" but was

¹⁷ Susa Young Gates letter to Zina Y. Card, May 18, 1878, Susa Young Gates Papers, Church History Library.

¹⁸ Glenda Riley, *Divorce: An American Tradition* (Lincoln: University Press, 1997), 114.

¹⁹ Susa Young Gates to Widtsoe, January 7, 1928, Widtsoe Family Collection, Utah State Historical Society.

really him being drunk. Susa recalled Alma consistently staying out till late in the night drinking often leaving her alone and scared.²⁰ A letter from Alma while he was on his mission in England, which Susa received in September of 1877, shortly after attending her father's funeral was the last straw. A portion of his letter was recited by Susa in a letter written to her half-sister Zina Y. Card. Alma wrote:

I never started out with the intention of getting drunk in my life. You say if I come home with that terrible appetite still clinging to me you are afraid I will find neither wife nor home . . . As long as the Lord blesses me with health and strength I can make money and enjoy myself, and I am not going to throw myself away for nobody; just write and let me know how you feel long about the time you think I will get released from my mission, cause if I can't find wife nor home, I shall stay in this country for a while for I can do very well in this country.²¹

When Susa replied to his letter informing him of her desire for a divorce, Alma never acknowledged it. At the beginning of the year in 1878, Alma returned and whatever the entirety of the reasons may have been, Susa and Alma divorced and went on to remarry and live separate lives.²²

The early divorce of her parents caused Leah to live away from her mother during her childhood. During the divorce proceedings, the court granted Alma custody of Leah. Without a father or brothers to come to her aid, Susa felt that the trial for the custody of the children, Leah

²⁰ Susa Young Gates letter to Zina Y. Card, May 18, 1878, Susa Young Gates Papers, Church History Library.

²¹ Susa Young Gates letter to Zina Y. Card, May 18, 1878, Susa Young Gates Papers, Church History Library.

²² Parrish, *John A. Widtsoe: A Biography*, 98.

and her brother Bailey, was unfair and that any evidence she brought forward to accuse Alma of his irresponsible behavior was unheard by the court.²³ Losing Leah was extremely difficult for Susa. She said, “I was almost crazed with the thought of losing my little girl. Every moment increased my agony and for hours, I could only remember that my child was about to be taken from me.”²⁴ After the divorce, and following the advice of church leader Joseph F. Smith, Susa visited the Sandwich Islands (Hawaii) where she became better acquainted with Jacob Gates; they were married in 1880.²⁵ Susa had eleven children with Jacob Gates and lived a busy life leaving little time for Leah in Leah’s childhood years.²⁶ One reason why Leah saw little of her mother was that for ten of those years Jacob and Susa lived in Hawaii on a mission.²⁷ Leah said that she only remembers seeing her mother a few times in her childhood.²⁸ It was not until Leah was fifteen that she really felt that she knew her mother.²⁹ Despite the distance that Susa and Leah experienced during Leah’s childhood, they grew close in Leah’s late teens and Leah felt that Susa was a “wonderful mother.”³⁰

²³ Susa Young Gates letter to Zina Y. Card, May 18, 1878, Susa Young Gates Papers, Church History Library.

²⁴ Susa Young Gates letter to Zina Y. Card, May 18, 1878, Susa Young Gates Papers, Church History Library.

²⁵ Parrish, *John A. Widtsoe: A Biography*, 98.

²⁶ Parrish, *John A. Widtsoe: A Biography*, 98.

²⁷ Kari Robinson, oral history, interview by Ashley Laneri, February 2, 2019, Salt Lake City, in author’s possession.

²⁸ Leah D. Widtsoe to Susa Young Gates, October 26, 1929, Widtsoe Family Collection, Utah State Historical Society.

²⁹ Oral History Interview with Leah Eudora Widtsoe, February 11, 1965, 34, Leah D. Widtsoe Papers, L. Tom Perry Special Collections.

³⁰ Parrish, *John A. Widtsoe: A Biography*, 99.

Leah's father, Alma Dunford, was one of the first dentists in Utah and developed a great reputation among his clients.³¹ Leah's relationship with her father was one of love; she knew that her father loved her, but Leah felt he drank too often.³² Despite his drinking, Alma Dunford taught his children to abstain from the same habit he had fallen into. Leah recalled her father making a deal with each of his children that if they would refrain from being addicted to tea, coffee, liquor, or tobacco when they turned twenty-one he would buy them an expensive watch. Every one of Alma Dunford's children earned a watch.³³

A letter written by Leah to her mother revealed that Leah disliked her childhood and that her feelings may not have stemmed from her relationship with her father or her mother but from her relationship with her step-mother, Lovinia Tracilla Clayton. She wrote:

In my childhood home I was worse than alone-for with no one could I unbosom my childish desires-except my family of dolls. I feared & dreaded my Step-mother. She did not love me, I sensed it & for her I always did the wrong thing; if I was reading it was wrong I should be doing the sweeping; if I was sweeping it was wrong I should have been doing the dishes. And I was always alone. . . . I never could approach my Stepmother-I was just a disagreeable child to her-& I must have been a great cross to her-who lived a hard life.³⁴

³¹ Oral History Interview with Leah Eudora Widtsøe, February 11, 1965, 1-2, Leah D. Widtsøe Papers, L. Tom Perry Special Collections.

³² Oral History Interview with Leah Eudora Widtsøe, February 11, 1965, 17, Leah D. Widtsøe Papers, L. Tom Perry Special Collections.

³³ Oral History Interview with Leah Eudora Widtsøe, February 11, 1965, 17, Leah D. Widtsøe Papers, L. Tom Perry Special Collections.

³⁴ Leah D Widtsøe to Susa Young Gates, 26 October 1929, 98-99, Widtsøe Family Collection, Utah State Historical Society.

The sadness and loneliness which Leah described in her letter is evident. These painful feelings, however, may have been a major reason why she took motherhood so seriously.³⁵ Her own mother had little time for Leah and her father loved her but “did not show it.”³⁶ Despite the respect Leah had for her parents, she knew that when she created a family of her own, she wanted her home to be the polar–opposite of the one she had grown up in, a “happy home where [children] should be loved & —understood which at times is better than love.”³⁷

Education

Attending college and meeting her partner in life were critical steps for Leah’s future. Her education propelled her to be an intelligent mother, and prepared her to teach women the special influence they could have as mothers. Leah once said, “If you stand still you’re lost, intellectually and physically.”³⁸ Examining her formal education alone, one can see that Leah considered this a life motto. Similar to many of the women of her generation, Leah valued higher education. In the late 1800s possibilities for women to receive a college education swelled.³⁹ A diploma from one school was not enough for Leah, she wanted as much education as she could obtain. In her young adult years Leah began her education at a private school and later attended

³⁵ Mary Jane Woodger, “Leah Widtsoe: Pioneer in Healthy Lifestyle Family Education,” *Journal of Family and Consumer Sciences*, no. 1 (2000): 50–54.

³⁶ Leah D Widstoe to Susa Young Gates, October 26, 1929, 98-99, Widtsoe Family Collection, Utah State Historical Society.

³⁷ Leah D. Widtsoe to Susa Young Gates, October 26, 1929, Widtsoe Family Collection, Utah State Historical Society.

³⁸ Oral History Interview with Leah Eudora Widtsoe, February 11, 1965, 19, Leah D. Widtsoe Papers, L. Tom Perry Special Collections.

³⁹ Ana M Martínez Alemán, Kristen A Renn, *Women in Higher Education: An Encyclopedia* (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, 2002), 251.

Salt Lake City's University of Deseret, and the Pratt Institute in New York City. She later was awarded an honorary doctorate in humanities from Brigham Young University.⁴⁰

Her desire to become educated came from her father and her mother and it was the connections of her mother that allowed her to pursue her degree from the Pratt Institute, the leading school in the United States in the area of home economics at the time.⁴¹ Leah had first pursued physical education, then nursing, but she said of these fields that they "didn't satisfy my inner longing for something higher and better with which to devote my time and any advanced training I may pursue."⁴² She found her passion for domestic science and after becoming an expert in her field, began teaching at Brigham Young Academy where she was able to start the home economics department.

In the late nineteenth century cooking in the home was elaborate and time consuming. In the last years of the 1800s, a new movement formed that is most commonly termed domestic science.⁴³ Domestic science combined scientific advancements with cooking in the home, making it easier and faster for women to perform labors that had previously consumed their time. The study of domestic science was a part of home economics which included cooking and homemaking. It was common for women in Leah's day to study home economics, one reason being that universities made home economics an easily accessible program for women, to the point where they would place women's classes in buildings where women would take their other

⁴⁰ Leah Eudora Dunford Widtsoe, Leah Widtsoe Papers, box 1, folder 1, 1, L. Tom Perry Special Collections.

⁴¹ Parrish, *John A. Widtsoe: A Biography*, 100.

⁴² Home Economics in B.Y.U. Leah D. Widtsoe, Leah Widtsoe Papers, box 1, folder 1, 1, L. Tom Perry Special Collections.

⁴³ Laura Shapiro, *Perfection Salad: Women and Cooking at the Turn of the Century*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009) 4-5.

classes so that women would come across this program. For example, some universities would make their home economics courses in the same buildings as women's dining halls, women's gyms, or living quarters.⁴⁴ Similar to the educated women of her day, Leah pursued home economics and in addition, helped it advance at Brigham Young Academy.

With the help of her mother, Leah secured the basement of a room in the education building to hold the university's first ever home economics courses. A group of students held a party as a fundraiser for the needed materials; the basic supplies were purchased. The department did begin in a humble fashion, only female students enrolled, but the number of girls enlisted in the courses grew quickly.⁴⁵ Leah taught courses in cooking, health, laundry, emergencies in the home, etc. from 1897–1898 at Brigham Young Academy.⁴⁶ While Leah loved her job, her time at Brigham Young Academy was short-lived due to a new interest she had found in a brilliant and persuasive young man.⁴⁷

John A. Widtsoe

John Widtsoe was born in Norway to a family who cared greatly about his education. John grew up loving books and after his mother's conversion to the Latter-day Saint faith, he and his family emigrated to the United States and joined other members of the Church in the West, ultimately settling in Logan, Utah.⁴⁸ Widtsoe worked hard and excelled educationally. Because

⁴⁴ Shapiro, *Perfection Salad: Women and Cooking at the Turn of the Century*, 177.

⁴⁵ Home Economics in B.Y.U. Leah D. Widtsoe, Leah Widtsoe Papers, box 1, folder 1, 3–5, L. Tom Perry Special Collections.

⁴⁶ Parrish, *John A. Widtsoe: A Biography*, 102–103.

⁴⁷ Leah Widtsoe to Homer Durham, possibly 1960. Found in Leah D. Widtsoe Papers, *Thoughts on Education*, Church History Library.

⁴⁸ Parrish, *John A. Widtsoe: A Biography*, 20.

of a language barrier he was first placed in the second grade, but quickly advanced to the seventh grade after just one week.⁴⁹ Widtsoe later attended Brigham Young College in Logan, Utah where he thrived in chemistry and furthered his education at Harvard University.⁵⁰

At Harvard, Widtsoe met Susa Young Gates. Susa was studying English at Harvard for the summer and there she became acquainted with John.⁵¹ Susa became fond of John and thinking of her 18-year-old daughter Leah in Utah, a match was quickly made in Susa's mind.⁵² John, however, did not want to be distracted by a romantic relationship. Biographer Alan Parrish elucidated that John had dreams and ambitions of completing his schooling and then saving up enough money for a family.⁵³ At first pictures were exchanged, but then a year went by and John said he had not thought much about Leah until one day a group of young girls from Salt Lake City came to visit Harvard as prospective summer students.⁵⁴ Little did John know that someone was about to steal his heart and change his future plans.

Leah was not convinced, at first, that her mother's idea of matchmaking would be fruitful. Her first response to Susa telling her about John was, "Mother forget it. For goodness sake, if you like him, I know I wouldn't so forget it."⁵⁵ Upon first meeting John, she was still not

⁴⁹ Parrish, *John A. Widtsoe: A Biography*, 45.

⁵⁰ Parrish, *John A. Widtsoe: A Biography*, 52, 56.

⁵¹ John A. Widtsoe, *In a Sunlit Land: The Autobiography of John A. Widtsoe* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1953) 38.

⁵² Parrish, *John A. Widtsoe: A Biography*, 67.

⁵³ Widtsoe, *In a Sunlit Land: The Autobiography of John A. Widtsoe*, 229.

⁵⁴ Widtsoe, *In a Sunlit Land: The Autobiography of John A. Widtsoe*, 228.

⁵⁵ Oral History Interview with Leah Eudora Widtsoe, February 11, 1965, 24–28, Leah D. Widtsoe Papers, L. Tom Perry Special Collections.

convinced this would be a good match. It was not until she heard him pray out loud over a meal that she said, “that prayer went straight to my heart. I said there’s the man. That was the beginning.”⁵⁶ As they spent more time together both John and Leah were smitten. John described Leah as follows:

She has a good intelligence, more cultivated than most young ladies of her age and station in life... What she says in a sober mood, generally, not always, has a point to it. In lighter vein she is often brilliant. . . . It is hard to go around her acute intellect. Her native intelligence, and native wit more than measure up with the wisdom gained from my alma mater.⁵⁷

Shortly after this entry in John’s diary, he confessed, “I begin to love, not like, Leah.”⁵⁸

According to their eldest great granddaughter, John and Leah’s was an “amazing love story” that even in old age, Leah “would hear John’s key turn in the lock and she’d get butterflies.”⁵⁹

Despite John’s worries, early in life, about his future education and money, he began to realize that he could be with Leah and still pursue his education. He and Leah were married June 1, 1898 in the Salt Lake Temple.⁶⁰ The couple traveled to Europe where John studied in Germany from 1898–1900 while John received his PhD in biochemistry.⁶¹ Leah followed John

⁵⁶ Oral History Interview with Leah Eudora Widtsoe, February 11, 1965, 24–28, Leah D. Widtsoe Papers, L. Tom Perry Special Collections.

⁵⁷ Widtsoe, *In a Sunlit Land: The Autobiography of John A. Widtsoe*, 20.

⁵⁸ Widtsoe, *In a Sunlit Land: The Autobiography of John A. Widtsoe*, 20.

⁵⁹ Kira Robinson, oral history, interview by Ashley Laneri, February 2, 2019, Salt Lake City, in author’s possession.

⁶⁰ Widtsoe, *In a Sunlit Land: The Autobiography of John A. Widtsoe*, 20.

⁶¹ Leah Widtsoe to Homer Durham, possibly 1960. Found in Leah D. Widtsoe Papers, *Thoughts on Education*, Church History Library.

wherever education and career took him. John served as director of the Agricultural Experiment Station at Utah State University from 1900–1905, taught at Brigham Young University from 1905–1907 in the department of agriculture, served as president of Utah State University from 1907–1916 and president of the University of Utah in 1916 until his call into the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles in 1921.⁶² John’s various assignments kept him busy and Leah as well.

Leah’s Contributions to Society

Leah and John worked together and wrote together. Throughout their marriage, Leah became a leader in the community, and in her family which prepared her and put her in a position where she could teach others about the role of women as mothers. John and Leah were true equals in their marriage.⁶³ One friend of Leah’s commented that John was one who understood the importance of women and women’s work which resulted in a marriage where they worked “alongside” each other rather than one being subservient to the other.⁶⁴ While John had a busy career, so did Leah. Being the wife of a president of a university was demanding. John said of Leah’s responsibilities:

There were numerous social engagements. Many of them were, of course, given in our own home—dinner after dinner and luncheon after luncheon! In this responsible part of the work, my wife as usual led out with consummate skill. She was the perfect hostess.⁶⁵

A large duty that Leah had as wife of the president of a university was to host numerous individuals, which included prominent officials and guests. The difficulty in this was that Leah

⁶² Widtsoe, *In a Sunlit Land: The Autobiography of John A. Widtsoe*, 92, 99–100, 127.

⁶³ Parrish, *John A. Widtsoe: A Biography*, 103.

⁶⁴ Amy Brown Lyman to Leah D. Widtsoe, April 20, 1929, Widtsoe Family Papers, box 8, folder 8, Utah State Historical Society.

⁶⁵ Widtsoe, *In a Sunlit Land: The Autobiography of John A. Widtsoe*, 154.

and John did not have lavish amounts of money. Their first few years of marriage had been spent traveling around Europe and when they returned to the United States they had little savings.

Leah used what they had and hosted guests in their home anyway. One individual paid tribute to Leah with these words:

While Dr. Widtsoe was in educational work Mrs. Widtsoe gave a home to three of her sisters and two of her brothers while they were attending college. Since then she has given a home to countless young women so that they may have the opportunity of attending the University. They were all made to feel part of her family. These home duties have been her greatest love and have always received her first consideration. She is a firm believer that wom[en]s' greatest career is as wife, mother and home-maker. Also that while the children are small her place is in the home with her family, unless in stern necessity she should not leave her home to become a money-earner.⁶⁶

Money was not a requirement for Leah to be hospitable and generous to hosting many guests.

Another illustration of Leah's willingness to sacrifice temporal matters was illustrated when John was called to be an Apostle. As an Apostle of the Church, John experienced a greatly reduced income by receiving a living allowance from the Church of one-third of what he had been earning as president of the University of Utah. Soon after his call to the Apostleship, he and Leah celebrated their silver anniversary. The only problem was that they did not have any extra money for expensive gifts. John asked Leah what they should do to celebrate with what little money they had. Leah's response was that she wanted John to stay with her for three whole days without any other obligations or meetings. He made the arrangements and they planned

⁶⁶ Sketch of Leah Eudora Dunford Widtsoe, Leah D. Widtsoe Papers, box 1, folder 1, 4, L. Tom Perry Special Collections.

inexpensive activities around town and at home just the two of them.⁶⁷ Having wealth was not a priority for Leah in order to have happiness and she was willing to make sacrifices her whole life because of John's occupation and callings.

Material things were not the only sacrifice Leah had to make as the wife of an academic. John often traveled and spoke at various events keeping their lives extremely busy.⁶⁸ Leah also had church callings. She served as a theology teacher in her ward for twelve years, gave tours of her grandfather's home, the Lion House, in the summers, was Mutual Improvement Association (M.I.A.) president in her ward, served as stake counselor for the M.I.A. and was also a temple worker.⁶⁹ Serving in these various capacities most likely prepared Leah for her future callings in the Church.

In addition to her church service, Leah provided public service in her community. She served for two terms as president of the Salt Lake Council of Women, was on the Utah Women's Legislative Council, helped establish the Utah Women's League of Voters, and was a member of the Salt Lake Branch of National League of American Pen Women.⁷⁰ Leah showed through her actions that women can benefit others by serving at church as well as in their communities.

Leah was first approached to be on the National League of Women Voters by a woman named Mrs. Carrie Chapman Catt. Mrs. Catt was one of the premier women's leaders of her day. Leah knew Mrs. Catt and had worked with her on the National Council of Women. In the 1920s,

⁶⁷ Widtsoe, *In a Sunlit Land: The Autobiography of John A. Widtsoe*, 162.

⁶⁸ Widtsoe, *In a Sunlit Land: The Autobiography of John A. Widtsoe*, 127.

⁶⁹ Leah Eudora Dunford Widtsoe, Leah D. Widtsoe Papers, box 1, folder 1, 4, L. Tom Perry Special Collections; Widtsoe, *In a Sunlit Land: The Autobiography of John A. Widtsoe*, 125.

⁷⁰ Leah Eudora Dunford Widtsoe, Leah D. Widtsoe Papers, box 1, folder 1, 3–4, L. Tom Perry Special Collections.

Mrs. Catt was trying to get a female representative from each state to meet in Connecticut to discuss an amendment that, if passed, would give all women the ability to vote nationwide. Growing up in Utah, Leah had never been without this privilege; her great-grandmother had enjoyed this right. While Wyoming was the first state to grant women the right to vote, Utah had not been far behind. What one author has called “remarkable, and so unexpected, that even today it is often dismissed as an anomaly,” Utah women were among the first to enjoy the freedom to vote.⁷¹ Because Leah had grown up in a generation where voting for women was something one was accustomed to, she initially turned down the invitation from Mrs. Catt.

Mrs. Catt on the other hand, saw Leah’s perspective as a necessary viewpoint. She told Leah:

You'll be a good representative for the very reason that you will refute the accusation that suffrage will make all women lose much of their femininity and womanliness. They will see that it hasn't done that for you, why should it do the same for other women.⁷²

With Mrs. Catt’s swaying words Leah joined the organization and served for two terms. The nineteenth amendment granting suffrage to women did not pass right away, but with the help of the National League of Women Voters, it was successfully passed a few years later.

Leah not only participated in national affairs, but she was dedicated to helping women in her community in Utah. While John served as Director of the Agricultural Experiment Station at Utah State University, Leah accompanied her husband as he toured rural areas and spoke with farmers. During this time, it occurred to the Widtsoes that the farmers were not the only ones

⁷¹ Ulrich, *A House Full of Females*, xiii.

⁷² Sketch of Leah Eudora Dunford Widtssoe, Leah D. Widtssoe Papers, box 1, folder 1, 4-5, L. Tom Perry Special Collections.

who would benefit from being educated about new advancements. Up to this time, the position of a farmer's wife had been neglected in the field of education.⁷³ Author Colleen McDannell observed that the lack of education for women in healthy farm practices was harmful to rural life in that women found farm life challenging and had begun moving to cities. Educating women on new advancements that would make farm life easier would, therefore, keep more women living in rural areas and marrying farmers.⁷⁴

The Widtsoes did what they could to help women in their area understand more about the advancements in farming that could make farm life easier and healthier. While John forcefully encouraged the Relief Society in Logan to teach home economics in their meetings, Leah took action by utilizing her family connections.⁷⁵ Utah Senator Reed Smoot was a family friend of the Widtsoes and Leah took advantage of this relationship by writing to him telling him of the need for home well-being and farmer health education in the state of Utah. Senator Smoot introduced her ideas to the Senate in 1913 and as a result the Parnell Act was created in several years later. This act provided funds to improve the quality of home and farm life.⁷⁶ Additionally, Leah wrote a booklet which helped inform women of better uses of food and improved their health education on the farm. The booklet provided information for proper health practices on the farm. Additionally, Leah created the first Agricultural College Women's Institute in Utah which also

⁷³ Widtsoe, *In a Sunlit Land: The Autobiography of John A. Widtsoe*, 116.

⁷⁴ Colleen McDannell, *Sister Saints: Mormon Women Since the End of Polygamy*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019) 46.

⁷⁵ McDannell, *Sister Saints: Mormon Women Since the End of Polygamy*, 46.

⁷⁶ Widtsoe, *In a Sunlit Land: The Autobiography of John A. Widtsoe*, 116–117.

furthered health education for women.⁷⁷ Leah was assertive in her efforts to improve women's health education and her impact was felt in the community.

Leah was motherly to those in her community as she taught them about healthy habits. Her interests in health stemmed from an earlier interest in nursing. She wanted to care for people and help them be healthy to prevent their ever becoming sick in the first place. She attributed her own healthy long life to her adherence to the Church's law of health known as the Word of Wisdom.⁷⁸ While serving her mission in Europe from 1927–1933, she noticed that the people there had poor health. Some struggled with life-long illnesses or maladies like their teeth falling out. Leah felt she knew the cure for these. Leah created lessons plans and articles written on the subject of the Word of Wisdom and they were published in the Church's European newspaper the *Millennial Star*.⁷⁹ According to her husband, John, the results were significant. He said that people wrote in and told incredible stories of how they had followed what was said and that their health conditions improved dramatically. Some reported that they had been "cured" of health problems that they had endured for years.⁸⁰ Leah had changed the lives of many by educating them on the habits of a healthy life style.

A Family of Her Own

Leah once said, "there was nothing on earth I wanted so much as a big family. I never wanted to be a public woman like my mother, interested in politics or literature, or genealogy or

⁷⁷ Leah Eudora Dunford Widtsoe, Leah D. Widtsoe Papers, box 1, folder 1, 3, L. Tom Perry Special Collections.

⁷⁸ Home Economics in B.Y.U. Leah D. Widtsoe, Leah Widtsoe Papers, box 1, folder 1, 2, L. Tom Perry Special Collections.

⁷⁹ Widtsoe, *In a Sunlit Land: The Autobiography of John A. Widtsoe*, 197.

⁸⁰ Widtsoe, *In a Sunlit Land: The Autobiography of John A. Widtsoe*, 198.

anything else. I wanted a big family.”⁸¹ Unfortunately for the Widtsoes, they were not blessed with a large family. Of the seven children that Leah gave birth to, only three lived to adulthood. One of their sons, John A., died at the age of one, and two of their other children died shortly after they were born.⁸² For one who had had such a strong desire to be a mother, the loss of her children was difficult and heartbreaking. Even in her old age, Leah felt the pain of losing her children. At the age of 91, she expressed in an interview how she wished that they had known at a young age the medical advancements they knew in the mid twentieth century because it could have kept her children alive.⁸³ Knowing that her children could have lived, had they known more, was something that stayed with Leah for her entire life. The loss Leah experienced as a mother may have been a significant factor in why she wrote so much about motherhood and why she wanted women to not take for granted the gift of motherhood.

Loss continued to follow the Widtsoes throughout their lives. While the couple did have three children (Anna, Marsel, and Eudora) who lived into their adult years, their only surviving son, Marsel, died of pneumonia at the age of 24.⁸⁴ Marsel was a returned missionary and was engaged to be married only a few months before his passing.⁸⁵ The Widtsoes left for a mission to Europe only a few months after the passing of their son.⁸⁶ John remarked that he and Leah were

⁸¹ Oral History Interview with Leah Eudora Widtsoe, February 11, 1965, 33-34, Leah D. Widtsoe Papers, L. Tom Perry Special Collections.

⁸² Widtsoe, *In a Sunlit Land: The Autobiography of John A. Widtsoe*, 235.

⁸³ Oral History Interview with Leah Eudora Widtsoe, February 11, 1965, 34, Leah D. Widtsoe Papers, L. Tom Perry Special Collections.

⁸⁴ Widtsoe, *In a Sunlit Land: The Autobiography of John A. Widtsoe*, 235.

⁸⁵ Sketch of Leah Eudora Dunford Widtsoe, Leah D. Widtsoe Papers, box 1, folder 1, L. Tom Perry Special Collections.

⁸⁶ Widtsoe, *In a Sunlit Land: The Autobiography of John A. Widtsoe*, 189.

called to serve in the British and European missions in 1927 after Marsel's passing partially to remove them from the pain and reminding surroundings of the loss of their son.

The Widtsoe's brought their fifteen year-old daughter, Eudora, with them on their mission and they quickly grew to love the place they would call home for the next six years. In the spring of 1933, and toward the end of their service in the British and European missions, Leah received news that her mother had passed away. Heartbroken that she had been distanced physically from her mother for the last few years of Susa's life, Leah wrote a consoling letter to her family at home in America. She opened the letter with, "Yesterday was one of the greatest and saddest days of my life. Oh, dear I can hardly write!"⁸⁷ Leah confided in the letter that she had hoped to work with her mother more and be with her. The loss of Marsel and her mother both in the month of May led her to end her letter with the words, "May has become a very sad month for me!"⁸⁸ The only ray of hope in her letter was the belief that she had that her mother was now in heaven with her son Marsel and the other children that she had lost.

Mission to Europe

As Leah experienced these great losses, she learned that motherhood was not something that pertained to ones' own biological children. Leah found ways to be a mother outside of her home while living abroad. In 1921, John was called to serve as an Apostle for the Church. This would mean that he would need to quit his job as president of the University of Utah and devote full-time service to the Church.⁸⁹ As part of his assignment as a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, in 1927 he was called to preside over the British and European Missions of the

⁸⁷ Leah Widtsoe to family, Widtsoe Family Papers, box 8, folder 6, Utah state Historical Society.

⁸⁸ Leah Widtsoe to family, Widtsoe Family Papers, box 8, folder 6, Utah state Historical Society.

⁸⁹ Widtsoe, *In a Sunlit Land: The Autobiography of John A. Widtsoe*, 162.

Church. John and Leah lived in Europe and served there from 1927–1933. One of the challenging tasks Leah had to face while serving was the job of hosting various missionaries. The missionaries referred to Leah lovingly as the “Mission Mother” a title that was common for mission presidents wives to receive at the time and which showed their respect for her.⁹⁰ She was in charge of overseeing the workings of the mission home which included cooking and cleaning for a large home full of missionaries.⁹¹ In this task she did not have the help hired aid to clean or cook in the mission home. John described the care Leah took in her home keeping, “The duties of the household were never forgotten. She abhorred dirt and disorder. Life in her home was clean, simple, unaffected, and genuine.”⁹² Homemaking was a job which Leah worked hard at, especially on their mission.

Leah said of their mission that it was the greatest joy and work of her life apart from being a mother.⁹³ She cared for 700 missionaries in the British and European Missions⁹⁴. Her goal was that each missionary would feel that even though they were far from home, that they had “proxy” parents in John and Leah. She wanted them to feel loved and that Leah and John cared about them. She felt that in this way, although she had lost four children of her own, that

⁹⁰ “To Our Mission Mother,” August 20, 1929, Widtsoe Family Papers, box 8, folder 8, Utah state Historical Society.

⁹¹ Widtsoe, *In a Sunlit Land: The Autobiography of John A. Widtsoe*, 190.

⁹² Widtsoe, *In a Sunlit Land: The Autobiography of John A. Widtsoe*, 235.

⁹³ Letter to Ethel Smith wife of Joseph Fielding Smith, June 10, 1931, Widtsoe Family Papers, box 8, folder 9, Utah State Historical Society.

⁹⁴ Elder Widtsoe presided over the European mission from 1927–1932, additionally he presided over the British Mission from 1927–1928.

she had gained 700 children to whom she could be a mother.⁹⁵ She gave them emotional support and watched over their health and moral well-being which she admitted was not an easy task.⁹⁶

In the mission, welcoming and providing for missionaries in her home was not the only job she had. As was custom in the Church in that day, the mission president's wife served as Relief Society president of the mission. Therefore, for a time, Leah not only ran the mission home but had responsibilities to oversee all of the women's organizations in the British and European missions. Membership in the Relief Society was voluntary at the time and in 1931, Leah reported that there were 17,450 female members in the British and European missions but only 4,100 were enrolled in Relief Society.⁹⁷ She saw it as her mission to help encourage these women to participate in the Relief Society as much as they could. Eventually, other local sisters were called to make up the area Relief Society presidency leaving Leah to supervise their work.⁹⁸ Leah served with her heart in a capacity that would have been extremely time consuming.

In 1931, the First Presidency acknowledged the important role that Leah played in the mission. They wrote a letter expressing their appreciation for Leah and complimenting the work she had done in Europe. "We realize that the wife of the Mission President is a very important factor toward the success of the mission; that she can encourage and assist or hinder the progress

⁹⁵ Letter from Leah to the First Presidency, September 16, 1933, Widtsoe Family Papers, box 8, folder 10, Utah State Historical Society.

⁹⁶ Letter from Leah to Phyllis Nibley, April 28, 1930, Widtsoe Family Papers, box 8, folder 9, Utah State Historical Society.

⁹⁷ Letter from Leah to the First Presidency, June 9, 1931, Widtsoe Family Papers, box 8, folder 9, Utah State Historical Society.

⁹⁸ Widtsoe, *In a Sunlit Land: The Autobiography of John A. Widtsoe*, 196.

of the work.”⁹⁹ Leah’s service was meaningful to the mission and she had a unique opportunity to lead and teach women in Europe as well as women in the United States. It was during her service on her mission that the theme of motherhood blossomed in her writings.

During her mission John and Leah came home to Utah for a few months for the general conference of the Church. During their time in Utah Leah reported at the general Relief Society conference of the Church.¹⁰⁰ This leadership opportunity allowed her to speak to the entire body of women of the Church and was published in the *Relief Society Magazine*. In her talk at the April 1931 conference, Leah remarked on the positive benefits participating in Relief Society can have for women. She said:

We find that when our women understand the meaning of Relief Society work, that they are more interested in studying the lessons, and in progressing, and becoming stronger and better and more noble women and mothers and teachers in the world.¹⁰¹

Leah’s efforts to help more women participate in Relief Society in Europe is a reflection of the positive consequences she felt women could have if they would participate in the program.

In addition to the opportunities Leah had to speak to the women of the Church through her service in the Relief Society presidency in Europe, she also wrote material for the sisters as well. At that time, the Church wanted to make the lessons in Europe more uniform with the lessons provided in the United States, with only minor adjustments made for European circumstances. Leah wrote lesson material for the Mutual Improvement Association and the

⁹⁹ Letter from the First Presidency to Leah Widtsoe, September 13, 1933, Widtsoe Family Papers, box 8, folder 10, Utah State Historical Society.

¹⁰⁰ Leah Widtsoe, “Relief Society President of European Mission,” *Relief Society Magazine*, April 1931, 340–343.

¹⁰¹ Leah Widtsoe, “Relief Society President of European Mission,” *Relief Society Magazine*, April 1931, 343.

Relief Society organization.¹⁰² Not only did she help publish manuals and lesson materials, but she also wrote frequently in the *Millennial Star*, the Church's magazine in Europe.

John said of Leah, "Shyness was not in her nature. She was not forward, but neither afraid of people. Public questions intrigued her. She fought if necessary for her views."¹⁰³ On her mission she displayed the attributes John described. While on their mission, a man named George Bernard Shaw, a famous British play write and intellectual, had made negative public remarks in a talk about Leah's grandfather, President Brigham Young. His comments were so rude that Leah felt a desire to send him a letter. John said that he told her to not even bother writing the letter because he believed Mr. Shaw would disregard it.¹⁰⁴ Leah ignored John's caution and wrote to Shaw anyway. A week later, Shaw paid Leah a visit. After talking with her for two hours, Shaw asked Leah and her husband over for dinner at his home. Leah accepted the invitation and came to his home with a copy of a book that she and her mother had co-authored, *The Life Story of Brigham Young*. John attributed the success and spread of this book in Europe to this single interaction Leah had had with Shaw.¹⁰⁵ As John had observed, Leah was not shy and was confident in her approach to correct inaccuracies.

Conclusion

Leah's early childhood was a unique one for a Latter-day Saint girl in the late nineteenth century. She had good parents who loved her, but because of their divorce Leah felt lonely growing up. Her educational pursuits show her hunger for knowledge and her desire to help

¹⁰² Widtsoe, *In a Sunlit Land: The Autobiography of John A. Widtsoe*, 192.

¹⁰³ Widtsoe, *In a Sunlit Land: The Autobiography of John A. Widtsoe*, 233.

¹⁰⁴ Widtsoe, *In a Sunlit Land: The Autobiography of John A. Widtsoe*, 200.

¹⁰⁵ Widtsoe, *In a Sunlit Land: The Autobiography of John A. Widtsoe*, 200–201.

others. Her husband was a bright man but a busy man. His career at several universities took their family through several moves, some across continents. Leah's life was full of opportunity and challenges alike. For example, John's busy schedule must have been difficult for Leah but it also gave her occasion to speak in ways that she may not have otherwise. The loss of her children must have been heartbreaking but that also helped her open her heart and be a mother-figure to hundreds of missionaries in Europe.

It was in her years of service in Europe that the theme of motherhood began to be an emphasis in Leah's writings. In the 1930s motherhood was a construct that Leah turned to repeatedly in her works. One way she used motherhood as a construct was that she used motherhood as a solution to world problems. She also used motherhood as a construct by using motherhood as a way of empowering women in the Church, giving them purpose even though they did not hold a priesthood office. Motherhood was the lens by which Leah saw purpose and responsibility that was God-given for women.

Leah may have used motherhood as a solution to problems in the world and as a construct that gave women purpose in the Church for a number of reasons. From 1927–1933 Leah served as a missionary mother to missionaries in Europe. She felt it was her responsibility to see that those Elders and Sisters had a mother-figure to rely on.¹⁰⁶ Another reason that motherhood was on her mind may have been because her own mother passed away in 1933.¹⁰⁷ Losing a son in 1927 and her mother six years later, Leah knew what it was to experience loss as a mother and as a daughter.

¹⁰⁶ Letter from Leah to the First Presidency, September 16, 1933, Widtsoe Family Papers, box 8, folder 10, Utah State Historical Society.

¹⁰⁷ Letter from Leah Widtsoe to her family, May 31, 1933, Widtsoe Family Papers, box 8, folder 6, Utah State Historical Society.

For these and assumedly other reasons, motherhood was a recurrent theme in Leah's writings in the 1930s. No matter the topic she addressed, whether it was the Word of Wisdom, visiting teaching, or the priesthood, Leah found a way to use motherhood as a construct to motivate women to act and understand the significance of the responsibilities associated with womanhood.¹⁰⁸

Throughout Leah's life she was one who took initiative. She did not desire the limelight but wanted to improve the church culture and society at large. Motherhood was the way that Leah perceived that she and other women could do the most good and create the biggest change in the world. From her unhappy childhood days, to her service with her husband in the Church, and in her home, the theme of motherhood was one that Leah consistently turned to as a construct that motivated her own actions and writing.

¹⁰⁸ See Leah Widtsoe, "Teachers' Visit to An Indifferent Member," *Relief Society Magazine*, October 1937, 641–643. See also Leah Widtsoe, "Our Father Knows Some more thoughts addressed to the Mothers of Israel," *Relief Society Magazine*, June 1938, 400–404. As well as Leah D. Widtsoe, "Priesthood and Womanhood," *Deseret News*, January 1934, 6.

Chapter 2

Motherhood

In the early twentieth century, Leah Widtsoe used motherhood as a way to help women have a voice and create change in the world around them. Motherhood became a construct by which Leah encouraged women to participate fully in rearing and teaching children positive habits that could improve society. One reason Leah saw the need of promoting motherhood may have been because of the socio-economic state of the United States in the early twentieth century. A gallop poll taken in the 1930s surveyed women asking if they believed that women who had employed husbands should work outside of the home. Eighty-two percent of women answered “no,” meaning that they did not feel the need to work outside the home when their husbands were employed.¹ Prior to this century, women had experienced momentum in their freedoms politically with the ability to vote and socially with more white middle-class women working outside of their homes. Lorraine Pruette, a twentieth century feminist and author explained what this time in the United States history was like for women:

More women going to work, more women in superior positions, discriminations against women collapsing on all sides, the discovery that some women were able to combine marriage, a family and a career—these aspects of what appeared to be a new world for women were able to combine marriage, a family and a career—these aspects of what appeared to be a new world for women have been sufficiently celebrated.²

¹ Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, Jill Mulvay Derr, and Janath Russell Cannon, *Women of Covenant: The Story of Relief Society* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 253.

² Lorraine Pruette, *Women Workers Through the Depression*, (New York City: The Macmillan Company, 1934), 4–5.

This progress for women socially, however, came to a halt around the same time that the economic depression hit the nation in the 1930s.

As people had less money to spend, bank failures rose, the stock market crashed, and businesses shut down, the early 1930s became a time of unemployment for numerous men in Utah.³ At the lowest point of the Depression, nearly 36 percent of those who had worked in Utah were unemployed.⁴ One local leader in the Church living in the 1930s, Bishop John Wells, described the situation in Salt Lake City:

Business here is poor. Thousands of Latter-day Saints are out of work, and I am looking forward with some dread to the problems we will have to meet this coming winter in caring for the poor. The crops have all practically dried up. The fruit crops are very poor. Some of the regular mountain streams have ceased to flow. We have not had any rain for two months.⁵

This bishop was not alone in his observations. By 1936 more than half of the men living in Salt Lake City were unemployed.⁶ With joblessness sky-rocketing, families struggled to meet their economic needs. One person who was serving in the Relief Society Social Service Department, a program designed to help the needs of families who were struggling economically, started with a caseload of seventy-eight financially needy families in 1929 and had seven hundred by 1934.⁷

³ Beecher, Derr, and Cannon, *Women of Covenant: The Story of Relief Society*, 249.

⁴ Beecher, Derr, and Cannon, *Women of Covenant: The Story of Relief Society*, 250.

⁵ Letter from John Wells to Leah D. Widtsoe, July 23, 1931, Widtsoe Family Papers, Utah State Historical Society.

⁶ Beecher, Derr, and Cannon, *Women of Covenant: The Story of Relief Society*, 250.

⁷ Beecher, Derr, and Cannon, *Women of Covenant: The Story of Relief Society*, 251.

The Great Depression not only affected the men who had lost their jobs but also left families with their basic needs unmet.

In 1936, women of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints saw the needs of the women in the country and began to participate in a Church Security Plan: a plan that was put in place to help alleviate the temporal needs of members of the Church, and allow members of the Church to be more self-reliant and avoid living off of the government.⁸ This program began in individual stakes and grew to become the Welfare Program of the Church.⁹ Many women of the Relief Society volunteered for government and charitable organizations in which they could offer financial and emotional aid to those struggling financially.¹⁰ While these efforts were extremely beneficial in alleviating the struggles numerous people were experiencing during the economic depression, in the 1930s Leah Widtsoe suggested another way to combat the issues of the nation in addition to what the Church was already encouraging with the Church Security Plan. She argued that the greatest difference women could make was in their own homes. The home is the place where one learns work ethic and habits that will affect how one responds to struggles in life such as the economic depression. In Leah's opinion, women could make the most significant difference worldwide through work in the home because she believed that the home is where one can prevent potential problems, that motherhood fulfilled the work of the Relief Society, and that through motherhood one could participate in the work of God.

⁸ Beecher, Derr, and Cannon, *Women of Covenant: The Story of Relief Society*, 256.

⁹ James B. Allen and Glen M. Leonard *The Story of the Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 523.

¹⁰ Beecher, Derr, and Cannon, *Women of Covenant: The Story of Relief Society*, 255.

Prevention Through Motherhood

Leah felt that mothers were primarily responsible for rearing sensible citizens and adults. In 1933 the *Relief Society Magazine* announced that there would be more courses available at Brigham Young University for women on family relationships. The editorial announcement included a quote from Effie Warnick, a female professor of home economics, who explained why the University was going to offer more courses for women on the family. She said, “Families of the future will be judged less on elaborate meals and stiffly starched curtains than on the type of young men and women they produce.”¹¹ Like this educated woman of Leah’s day, Leah believed that producing conscientious, trustworthy, and principled children was a fundamental part of motherhood. Further, Leah concluded that if a mother were to rear responsible children, that this would prevent potential social and economic problems, including war and conflict in the world.¹²

The concept that motherhood could prevent world problems may have begun in the early days of Leah’s education. Leah began her pursuit of an education in nursing, but the more she considered a degree in helping to heal people of their sicknesses, she thought, “Why should people be sick anyway? Why can't they learn to take care of their bodies and be well?”¹³ Leah made up her mind that it would be more beneficial if she prevented sickness by teaching others healthy habits.¹⁴ Similarly to other women of her day, Leah asserted that these healthy habits

¹¹ Editorial, “Family Relationships,” *Relief Society Magazine*, June 1933, 383.

¹² Widtsoe, “The World Needs Love,” 141.

¹³ Home Economics in B.Y.U. Leah D. Widtsoe, Leah Widtsoe Papers, box 1, folder 1, 2, L. Tom Perry Special Collections.

¹⁴ Sketch of Leah Eudora Dunford Widtsoe, Leah D. Widtsoe Papers, box 1, folder 1, 7-8, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT.

should be first taught in the home. Author and professor of religious studies, Colleen McDannell, commented that during the first half of the twentieth century, “while male leaders romanticized motherhood in their conference talks, women taught mothers how to use science to make their homes efficient and healthy.”¹⁵ Like this woman, Leah taught women how they could incorporate domestic science into their homemaking.

Leah had a passion for the field of home economics and the positive healthy impact that studying domestic science could have on a home. In her older age, she said of this field of study:

My heart goes out in gratitude that so much has been accomplished from such a humble beginning and my prayers are continually with the greatest undertaking on earth!--that of making better homes and more intelligent, better educated, more dedicated parents and home-makers, that the children of tomorrow may be healthier and better prepared to meet life with its joys and problems than they have ever been before.¹⁶

In the margin of page 8 of this document, in Leah’s handwriting it says, “Mrs. Widtsoe’s life philosophy has always centered on the convictions that prevention of evil is a thousand times better than cures.”¹⁷ Leah viewed homemaking as a profession that helped to prevent sickness, and which prepared children for what they would experience in their adulthood. Teaching healthy habits was a priority to Leah because living in the times of the Great Depression when people were struggling to take care of their basic needs, she viewed healthy habits as a way to

¹⁵ McDannell, *Sister Saints: Mormon Women Since the End of Polygamy*, 46.

¹⁶ Home Economics in B.Y.U. Leah D. Widtsoe, Leah Widtsoe Papers, box 1, folder 1, 9, L. Tom Perry Special Collections. Hyphens and underlining are true to the original text.

¹⁷ Home Economics in B.Y.U. Leah D. Widtsoe, Leah Widtsoe Papers, box 1, folder 1, 8, L. Tom Perry Special Collections.

help alleviate health problems for the future. Her emphasis on teaching healthy practices appeared amply in her writings in the 1930s.

After returning from her mission in Europe, Leah continued to write, and a few of her articles were published in the *Relief Society Magazine*. In 1935, she wrote an article which paid tribute to Joseph Wilford, a mission president who had died abroad. Toward the end of the article, Leah took the opportunity to impart her ideas, teaching the mothers of future missionaries, ending her article with the following words:

If a young man is healthy when he leaves home, if he will care for himself hygienically and live on simple foods, as do the native peoples—which is but living the Word of Wisdom in its positive as well as in its negative aspects—he will be as safe in this as in any other mission on earth. However, here obedience to this wise law of health is imperative.¹⁸

Having been responsible for six years for the health and well-being of hundreds of missionaries, Widtsoe used her platform to remind women that healthy life styles are taught in the home. With those words, Leah was attributing the health and safety of missionaries to the habits that their mothers taught them.

Widtsoe's article was published in June 1935 and toward the end of that year the *Relief Society Magazine* began to publish healthy tips for the home from the months of October through December. Some of the tips included the proper caring of one's teeth,¹⁹ teaching missionaries

¹⁸ Leah Widtsoe, "Our Shrines in the Holy Land," *Relief Society Magazine*, June 1935, 356.

¹⁹ Lesson Department, "Health Lessons 1935-36, Lesson VII, Care of Teeth," *Relief Society Magazine*, November 1935, 728–730.

about constipation,²⁰ and the sterilization of home utensils.²¹ Leah's writings encouraged practicing healthy living in the home, specifically the Word of Wisdom in the 1930s. In 1938 Leah wrote again for the *Relief Society Magazine*, this time publishing an article on the Word of Wisdom. Her title is intriguing because it does not imply that she is addressing healthy lifestyle, but rather the duty of motherhood. It was entitled, "Some Thoughts Addressed to the Mothers of Israel." Her title alone showed that she attributed the responsibility of teaching the Word of Wisdom to mothers.

Widtsoe began her article by explaining that General Authorities were strongly advising members to live the Word of Wisdom. The Word of Wisdom was revealed first to the Prophet Joseph Smith, emphasized by his successor Brigham Young, and prior to the twentieth century proclaimed by President Wilford Woodruff to be a commandment.²² Despite this, some of the general church leadership disagreed about what constituted living the Word of Wisdom completely. By the 1920s, most members of the Church supported prohibition.²³ Leaders like Joseph F. Smith and Heber J. Grant spoke out against the use of alcohol, tobacco, coffee and tea and encouraged the saints to abstain from these substances.²⁴ By 1933, five years prior to the publication of Widtsoe's article and contrary to the teachings of Church leaders, Utah had passed the twenty-first Amendment which revoked prohibition.²⁵

²⁰ Lesson Department, "Mission Lessons, Health Lessons, 1935–36, Lesson VI. Constipation," *Relief Society Magazine*, October 1935, 662–663.

²¹ Lesson Department, "Health Lessons 1935-36, Lesson VIII, Sterilization of Home Utensils, *Relief Society Magazine*, December 1935, 789–790.

²² Thomas G. Alexander, *Mormonism in Transition*, (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2012), 274–275.

²³ Alexander, *Mormonism in Transition*, 276.

²⁴ Alexander, *Mormonism in Transition*, 275–277.

The General Relief Society President, Louise Robison, spoke in a Relief Society conference in 1936 encouraging the women of the Church to be involved in speaking out against the use of alcohol and tobacco. In her talk she quoted former President of the United States, Herbert Hoover, who said that the country needed “to make a conscious effort to... build a healthier future of the race. They must not only be physically strong and mentally balanced, but they must have spiritual health.”²⁶ President Robison then placed the responsibility of children learning healthy practices on the shoulders of the mothers of the Church. “I believe if the mothers of our communities were to ask that Alcohol Education be taught in the schools, it would be done.”²⁷

In her article, Widtsoe showed that she agreed with General Authorities of the Church. She made a bold argument that “the mother’s influence and the home environment truly shape the habits as well as the characters of the family.”²⁸ Leah’s opinion was that the mother was the individual in the home that had the largest effect on behaviors of children. Leah ended her article to the mothers of the Church with a call to action:

Shall we not dedicate ourselves to live every day as Mothers and providers of the home—
morale so that we and our children may not be victims of any enslaving habit, that
thereby we may help our children and others to understand the Joy of Being Free!²⁹

²⁵ Beecher, Derr, and Cannon, *Women of Covenant: The Story of Relief Society*, 264. Allen and Leonard, *The Story of the Latter-Day Saints*, 526.

²⁶ Louise Y. Robison, “Relief Society Conference,” *Relief Society Magazine*, May 23, 1936, 331.

²⁷ Robison, “Relief Society Conference,” 332.

²⁸ Leah Widtsoe, “Some Thoughts Addressed to the Mothers of Israel,” *Relief Society Magazine*, May 1938, 305.

²⁹ Widtsoe, “Some Thoughts Addressed to the Mothers of Israel,” 308.

Leah's reasoning for placing the burden of teaching healthy habits to children upon the mother of the home was that a mother could teach healthy practices early in a child's life. If children learned these habits early, then Leah believed that they would continue to practice healthy patterns in their adult life.

She was not alone in this logic. Amy Brown Lyman, First Counselor in the General Relief Society Presidency, believed in the positive impact social work could have on a society. One reason for this was that she felt that "prevention was better than cure," and that social work could help provide that for a society.³⁰ Similarly, others said of Leah that her life motto was that "prevention of evil is a thousand times better than cures."³¹ Though Lyman and Widtsoe both agreed that preventing illness was important to family and society, Lyman took a different approach than Widtsoe in the way that she taught healthy practices. Lyman encouraged and "introduced paid, professional women in to the church bureaucracy," or social system of the Church.³² Some women, like Annie Cannon, a Relief Society Board member, and Leah's own mother, Susa Young Gates, disagreed with Lyman's approach of applying relief through the government and other agencies. They felt that Lyman was too forceful and not respectful of Priesthood holders because she wanted to incorporate impersonal programs with the government rather than being content with using Church resources such as traditional ministering.³³ In contrast to Lyman's approach, Leah asserted that the best way to increase prevention of sickness and spiritual dangers was by women teaching healthy spiritual and temporal habits in the home.

³⁰ Beecher, Derr, and Cannon, *Women of Covenant: the Story of Relief Society*, 252.

³¹ Sketch of Leah Eudora Dunford Widtsoe, Leah D. Widtsoe Papers, box 1, folder 1, 8, L. Tom Perry Special Collections.

³² McDannell, *Sister Saints: Mormon Women Since the End of Polygamy*, 48.

³³ McDannell, *Sister Saints: Mormon Women Since the End of Polygamy*, 49.

An example of why Leah saw motherhood as a preventative construct is evident in an article she wrote in 1932 as a tribute to a “Sister Ivins.” Anthony Ivins was serving as First Counselor to the First Presidency at the time and was celebrating his eightieth birthday. John Widtsoe wrote an accolade for President Ivins and Leah wrote one for Elizabeth Ivins, his wife; their articles were published together in the *Millennial Star*. Elder Widtsoe focused his article on how President Ivins inspired those around him and how beloved he was for his service in the Church. Leah, however, focused on Elizabeth Ivins’ accomplishments as mother and wife. The opening line of her article read:

The influence of a mother on the character and life of her child is acknowledged by all. Most great men admit that their mothers have been largely responsible for any success that they may have achieved in life; but few realize how much responsibility lies at the door of the wife who is to “carry on” for greatness or weakness the work begun by the mother in the home. For truly may a wife make or mar the future usefulness of the man she marries.³⁴

This introduction of Elizabeth Ivins served as a broader statement of what Widtsoe considered the responsibility of mother and wife. Leah attributed the success of a man to his mother; what one was taught in the home affected the success or lack thereof later on in life. What is fascinating about Widtsoe’s argument is that what a mother does or does not teach a child in her home, she claims, is left for a wife to either fix or continue. Thus, Leah contended that the roles of wife and mother carried the responsibility of molding character and potential success for an individual.

³⁴ Leah D. Widtsoe, “Sister Ivins—A Real Help Meet,” *Millennial Star*, September 15, 1932, 593.

The responsibility of shaping children was a heavy duty for a wife and mother to carry out. Yet, Leah saw this as a duty women should undertake. In the remainder of the article, Widtsoe stated that no one could ask to do more than to raise a family full of good citizens, that motherhood was the greatest addition that a woman could make to the world.³⁵ Every good accomplishment Elizabeth Ivins had made, Leah tied back to her role as wife and mother. She claimed that the title of mother was the “dearest name in any language,”³⁶ and that one could see the success of Elizabeth Ivins through her family. To Leah, a woman measured their success through the home that they created and the children that they helped to shape.

Author and professor Jean Matthews observed that not all women in Leah’s day used motherhood as a motivation to stay home. Matthews concluded that women used motherhood as a construct that “made women's activity in the public sphere necessary, and indeed a duty, to protect not only their own children but all children.”³⁷ An example of this is the formation of the National Congress of Mothers organized in 1897. This organization was originally formed as a way for women to campaign for legal rights for their children meaning custody in case of divorce. Motherhood was the very thing that motivated these women to speak out in public, thus taking them away from time with their children but ultimately allowing them to help mothers and children of the world.³⁸

A fictional story told in the June edition of the 1936 *Relief Society Magazine* told of how members of the Church viewed the important role a mother could have on a home. The story entitled *The Mother* features three grown children who have underappreciated their now elderly

³⁵ Widtsoe, “Sister Ivins—A Real Help Meet,” 594.

³⁶ Widtsoe, “Sister Ivins—A Real Help Meet,” 594.

³⁷ Jean V. Matthews, *The Rise of the New Woman*, (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2003), 55–56.

³⁸ Matthews, *The Rise of the New Woman*, 54–55.

mother. The eldest had become a successful seamstress, the second a professional horticulturist, and the youngest a poet. The story contains a conversation they each have of their successes and how they each believed that their mother had never done anything noteworthy herself. At one point they find their mother's diary and read entries that surprise them. They learn that their mother had had passions for clothes, poetry, and plants but rather than become self-indulgent, she had helped her children become successful in these areas. They discover that their success in life was solely because of their mother's sacrifices.³⁹

This persuasive story was perhaps meant as a comfort for women, that all their sacrifices and attention to detail in their home would one day be recognized. Perhaps the author was trying to show the women of the Church the difference a selfless mother can make to their children even if they may feel underappreciated for their hard work. All of the smaller sacrifices the mother of the story had made led to the success of her children which was the measure of success for the mother. Helping children to become successful in their professions and home life was what Leah and others used to measure the success of a mother.

In the case of Elizabeth Ivins, Leah used the roles of wife and mother as constructs to explain Ivins' successes. In other words, in a day when women wanted a voice, Leah used motherhood as a means by which women could contribute to society and make a difference. She also used motherhood as a construct to explain the negative and life-threatening circumstances the world was experiencing in her day. Having lived through World War I and the years just prior to World War II, Leah believed that how children were being treated in the home was a major cause of war in the world. She explained in an article published in the *Millennial Star* in 1932 that the reasons why nations go to war are that the human race has not understood what it

³⁹ Ivy Williams Stone, "The Mother," *Relief Society Magazine*, June 1936, 342–347.

means to love their neighbor especially when their neighbor has differing views. To love others in spite of their differences was a teaching that Leah felt should be taught in the home. She stated:

Thus, the offender of the past, as the hope of the future, is the individual *Home*; and the keynote of home is the mother who leads the little child to love or to fear his fellows, to understand God and His precious Gospel truths or become the skeptic and outcast. Too much emphasis cannot be placed upon the need of love, of understanding, of encouragement, in her family circle of every individual home. . . . Love begets love; respect breeds respect; and parents must lead the way.”⁴⁰

From this article it can be deduced that Leah viewed the lack of fundamental truths like love and respect being taught in the home as the cause of previous wars and of future wars. This was a bold claim that brought to light a pattern that she observed in society. She saw the home as the consistent variable that determined peace or war in the world.

Other women in Leah’s day also felt that society at large was affected by the way one treated their family and home. One activist, Rheta Dorr, believed that once every woman in the United States had the right to vote that the country would be, “like a great, well ordered, comfortable sanitary household. . . . Everyone, as in a family, will have enough to eat. . . . All the family will be taken care of.”⁴¹ This association of the nation being like a home was a common comparison for early twentieth century mothers to make according to Matthews.⁴² In the United States, women including Leah Widtsoe were using their sphere of home-life to help teach the

⁴⁰ Widtsoe, “The World Needs Love,” 140.

⁴¹ Matthews, *The Rise of the New Woman*, 55.

⁴² Matthews, *The Rise of the New Woman*, 55.

nation of the positive consequences of a healthy home on a nation. These women used the home as a construct or idea that enabled them to have a voice in the public sphere.

Because Widtsoe saw motherhood as such an important factor in society, she encouraged women to create homes of peace. However, fathers were not exempt from her censure. She explained that mothers and fathers can together “make home heaven or hell.”⁴³ This may have been something that she spoke about from experience. Growing up in a divorced household and having a rocky relationship with her step-mother allowed Widtsoe to witness firsthand how important a father and mother are in a home. One might observe her home life and contend that it was what Leah’s home lacked that helped spark the motivation within her to become a responsible and loving parent. Widtsoe’s argument was the contrary. Her own poor experiences did push her to become a responsible and loving wife and mother, but according to Leah, her situation was unique. Widtsoe said that usually “what the child learns to do in the home, he practices after life.”⁴⁴ Thus Leah’s opinion was that it was important to set a proper example and create an environment of love. Her call to women of the world was that if they could create homes where “love is the keynote of every home, war will be impossible!”⁴⁵ To Widtsoe, mothers who taught their children good principles and who filled their homes with love could create huge and lasting effects on society as a whole.

Motherhood and the Relief Society

Another reason why Widtsoe felt that motherhood could have a profound effect on society was because she associated the work of motherhood with the work of Relief Society. The

⁴³ Widtsoe, “The World Needs Love,” 141.

⁴⁴ Widtsoe, “The World Needs Love,” 141.

⁴⁵ Widtsoe, “The World Needs Love,” 141.

two were intertwined in purpose and practice in Leah's opinion. Women of Leah's day felt likewise. In the early twentieth century, Relief Society membership was voluntary and women leaders encouraged mothers to be the chief recruiters of their daughters to the Relief Society program. For example, Jennie B. Knight, First Counselor in the general Relief Society Presidency in 1936, said that mothers should help their daughters become interested in the Relief Society, "so that later they will be anxious to join our ranks."⁴⁶ Similarly, Leah encouraged women in her day to attend Relief Society and that by so doing they would fulfill their role as mothers.⁴⁷

While serving as Relief Society president of the European mission, Widtsoe wrote to the women of the Church explaining the purpose of the Relief Society program. In 1932, she told the women that God had created the Relief Society to help women "improve their own minds and souls, and become better Mothers and Home-makers as well as more useful Church members."⁴⁸ She emphasized that if women would participate in Relief Society they would become "better parents, better neighbo[u]rs, truer friends and more loyal citizens."⁴⁹ Thus, Leah viewed one major purpose of the Relief Society as teaching women the role of motherhood and that by so doing they would learn to become a positive influence on society.

Throughout their service in Europe, the Widtsoe's came home to Utah to participate in General Conferences and trainings for a few months. During this time, Leah addressed the general women's audience of the Church in the Relief Society conference held in April 1931. In

⁴⁶ Editorial, "Daughter's Day," *Relief Society Magazine*, April 1937, 246.

⁴⁷ Leah Widtsoe, "Teachers' Visit to An Indifferent Member," *Relief Society Magazine*, October 1937, 641-643.

⁴⁸ Leah D. Widtsoe, "Our Anniversary," *Millennial Star*, March 3, 1932, 137.

⁴⁹ Leah D. Widtsoe, "Our Anniversary," *Millennial Star*, March 3, 1932, 137.

this address, she reported on her mission and explained the significance of the work the sisters perform in the Relief Society program of the Church. She first explained that the Relief Society is not just about providing relief:

Because of reluctance to study, we find that it is necessary to impress on the minds of our sisters that the Relief Society was founded for a different purpose than the name implies—merely the giving of relief. We have societies that want to do nothing but sew, but we stress the lessons for two reasons, that their minds shall be busy, and that they may understand the full meaning of Relief Society work. It is the greatest work for women in the world today, and we make them feel it is built on a four-fold foundation. The Relief Society is not only for helping the poor, it is built on four corner stones, and is as strong as the rock of ages.⁵⁰

It is interesting to note that Widtsoe said that the Relief Society is the “greatest work for women” and that at other times she referred to *motherhood* as the “greatest addition [women] could make for the benefit of the world.”⁵¹ Leah saw both motherhood and the work of the Relief Society as ways that women could contribute and make a significant difference in the world.

As Widtsoe stated in the opening of her talk, her opinion was that the Relief Society was not just about giving to the poor, but that it had four cornerstones. These were 1) self-improvement 2) assisting others to grow 3) giving relief and 4) working in harmony with husbands and church leaders.⁵² The first cornerstone was a focus on self. Leah felt that women needed to improve themselves before they could focus on the needs of others. She said if women

⁵⁰ Leah Widtsoe, “Mission Report,” *Relief Society Magazine*, April 3, 1931, 342.

⁵¹ Widtsoe, “Sister Ivins—A Real Help Meet,” 594.

⁵² Widtsoe, “Mission Report,” *Relief Society Magazine*, 342–343.

would center their church attendance on becoming, on growing, and learning in the gospel of Jesus Christ, that they could be a contributor in their ward, in their neighborhoods, and in their families. Leah's assertion was that if they slackened in their responsibility to continually improve in the gospel then they would not become "worthy mothers and worthy teachers of others."⁵³ This shows that Leah saw improved mothering skills as a result that one achieves as one participates fully in the Relief Society program. She ended her talk by saying:

We find that when our women understand the meaning of Relief Society work, that they are more interested in studying the lessons, and in progressing, and becoming stronger and better and more noble women and mothers and teachers in the world.⁵⁴

Leah's conclusion was that if women would fully participate in the work of Relief Society, meaning improving oneself and helping others, that they would become improved mothers and teachers. Not only did Leah see improved motherhood as a result of participation in the Relief Society program, she also used motherhood as a motivation for sisters to have the desire to participate in the Relief Society.

A few years after returning home from her mission in Europe, Widtsoe continued to publish articles in the *Relief Society Magazine*. One article in 1937 featured a non-fiction play written by Leah, and possibly meant to be acted out in local Relief Society meetings, about two visiting teaching companions who helped another sister in their Relief Society understand the importance of attending Relief Society meetings. In this play, Mrs. Christianson and Mrs. Burton are Relief Society visiting teachers to a very busy Mrs. MacDonald whom they have not seen at Relief Society meetings as of late. As the two women visit with Mrs. MacDonald, they explain

⁵³Widtsoe, "Mission Report," *Relief Society Magazine*, 343.

⁵⁴ Widtsoe, "Mission Report," *Relief Society Magazine*, 343.

that Relief Society is not just about spiritual matters but intellectual matters and being in the service of one's neighbors. Throughout the course of their conversation Mrs. Christianson and Mrs. Burton are able to convince Mrs. MacDonald that she should attend the next Relief Society meeting. The last words of persuasion they have for Mrs. MacDonald are that if Mrs. MacDonald attends her Relief Society meetings, she will become a better mother. As they leave a now convinced Sister Macdonald states, "I really would like to do my duty in the Church and set the proper example to my children. I am very desirous that my son should fill a good mission." Sister Burton then replies, "Thank you, Sister MacDonald; you'll never regret this decision. And some day I'm sure your son will be proud to say as President Grant does today, 'My Mother was always a faithful Relief Society worker and I honor her for it.'"⁵⁵ In this story, Leah used her literary talents to subtly help women of the Church understand that if they want to become good examples to their children, and be successful mothers, then attending Relief Society should be a priority to them.

Widtsoe once summed up how she saw motherhood and Relief Society as intertwining concepts in an article in the *Millennial Star*. She proposed:

If every mother and home-maker in this Church would learn how to exert a positive influence for righteous endeav[ou]r in her home and instill it into every member of her family. . . then indeed could we speedily become Saints in deed as well as in name. . . .

The home is our field of action; the Relief Society is our school for learning the methods and practicing the means of reaching the much desired goal.⁵⁶

⁵⁵Widtsoe, "Teachers' Visit to An Indifferent Member," 643.

⁵⁶ Leah Widtsoe, "A Prophet's Instruction to Modern Women," *Millennial Star*, March 6, 1930, 154.

Leah saw the home as a place where women could put into practice all that they learned in the Relief Society program. Her encouragement for women to embrace the Relief Society program of the Church was motivated by the effect she saw that it could have on a mother's role in the home. Like the women of her day Widtsoe saw the work of motherhood as the work of the Relief Society.

Motherhood as a Divine Role

Leah saw motherhood as not just a construct that could prevent future problems in a child's life, nor just a sub-heading of the work of the Relief Society. To Leah, motherhood was a part of something much bigger. In 1936 there was a lesson featured in the *Relief Society Magazine* entitled "Child Guidance." The lesson explored how to help children grow spiritually. One line from the lesson explained a greater purpose to motherhood. It said, "to Latter-day Saints who understand God's Plan 'to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man,' motherhood and fatherhood become not a duty but a privilege."⁵⁷ This lesson reveals that in the Church, it was taught that motherhood was a part of God's plan and a divine role. Leah, similarly, believed that motherhood was an honor and that through motherhood, a woman fulfilled her divine responsibility.

Leah's mother, Susa Young Gates, similarly adhered to the divine role a mother had and framed motherhood in the following terms:

When the roll of honor is called in heavenly courts, the women whose names will lead all the rest will be those who have crowned wifehood and motherhood with the jewels fashioned out of the glowing sacrifices of their own hopes, ambitions, gifts and love. . . And if life or opportunity have deprived the childless, husbandless woman of her God-

⁵⁷ Lesson Department, "Child Guidance", *Relief Society Magazine*, August 1936, 530.

ordained destiny, she too, if she has risen to her full womanly stature, whether her feet have trod the highways of fame or the byways of absorption in other related lives and interest, if she has preserved and developed her mother instincts and qualities—she, too, will be named among those chosen ones when He makes up His jewels.⁵⁸

Gates viewed motherhood as the purpose of a woman's life; the summation of woman's work in God's kingdom. In the early twentieth century it was believed that all women, whether they had children or not had the innate qualities of nurturing implying that single women could be motherly.⁵⁹ Gates similarly believed that whether one was blessed with the ability to have children in this life or not, a woman had the skills and attributes of a mother and that developing those innate qualities would allow one to acquire the greatest blessings God had in store for women. This view was passed on to Leah who viewed the role of motherhood with equal importance.

Widtsoe once said that “parenthood [is] the ideal of every member of the restored Church of Christ; for in that responsible work do they most nearly approach their Heavenly Father.”⁶⁰ Leah perceived parenthood as work that helped one to become like God. In an article written in the *Millennial Star*, Widtsoe wrote that in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, women experienced freedom and purpose. She further explained this by illuminating the purposes of God. She said there are countless children who are waiting in Heaven to come to the earth and receive a physical body, but that they cannot come to the earth to receive a body without a man and a woman choosing to become parents in this life. By making the choice to

⁵⁸ Susa Young Gates, “Sketches of Representative Women of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,” *Relief Society Magazine*, May 1931, 247.

⁵⁹ Matthews, *The Rise of the New Woman*, 56.

⁶⁰ Leah D. Widtsoe, “The Status of Woman,” *Millennial Star*, April 3, 1930, 267.

become a parent, one is helping God's children progress in His plan. The privilege of becoming a parent was something that, in Leah's opinion, every girl should want.

Similarly, Elder David O. McKay taught the Church members that through parenthood, one becomes like God. He said to the women of the Church:

Girls of Zion, particularly I would have you repeat this thought, and have it in your minds always, that the noblest calling in the world is motherhood. True mother is the most beautiful of all arts, the greatest of all professions. She who can paint a masterpiece, or who can write a book that will influence millions, deserves the admiration and laudits of mankind; but she who rears successfully a family of healthy, beautiful sons and daughters, whose immortal souls will exert an influence, throughout.⁶¹

Leah was a product of her day and as such she taught what General Authorities were teaching, that when a woman participates in the work of motherhood, she was participating in the eternal work of God.

Leah felt that while it was appropriate, in some circumstances, for women to hold civic offices that, "women office-holders are the exception, for 'Mormon' women prefer the duties of wife and mother, and feel that an intelligent vote best expresses their civic responsibility. They are content to foster a high morale of civic duty."⁶² The reason she gave for why women would desire to be a mother above serving in civic matters was that they understand that becoming a parent was "an act of partnership with the Lord."⁶³ This meant that becoming a mother was not

⁶¹ David O. McKay, "Home Building as an Art", *Relief Society Magazine*, January, 1936, 10.

⁶² Widtsoe, "The Status of Woman," 269.

⁶³ Widtsoe, "The Status of Woman," 265.

just a role one fulfilled in this life, but it was a role that helped women to participate in God's work.

Leah once wrote that “every natural little girl's earliest and greatest desire from dawning consciousness to maturity is the craving to be a good mother to the darling dream babies which will in some happy future become realities in her arms.”⁶⁴ Leah made the assumption that every young girl grew up with a desire to become a mother. While this may not have been true of all women, it does reveal what the culture of the Church was in the early twentieth century. There was great emphasis in the Church that was placed on mothers in the Church to be righteous examples. President Heber J. Grant who served as president of the Church from 1918–1945 said that “without the devotion and absolute testimony of the living God in the hearts of our mothers, this Church would die.”⁶⁵ The general Relief Society president even attributed the responsibility of Sacrament meeting attendance to the mothers of the Church.⁶⁶ Leah and leaders of the Church felt that women should not want man's work but should be trained at an early age to become mothers.⁶⁷

Homemaking

For Widtsoe, training of girls to become mothers meant teaching young women to learn how to run a household. Homemaking was something Leah took careful effort in herself and it

⁶⁴ Leah D. Widtsoe, “The Mothers of Men,” *Millennial Star*, April 3, 1930, 282.

⁶⁵ Heber J. Grant, *Gospel Standards*, comp. G. Homer Durham (1941), 151.

⁶⁶ Louise Y. Robison, “Official Instructions,” *Relief Society Magazine*, April 2, 1936, 308.

⁶⁷ Leah D. Widtsoe, “The Mothers of Men,” *Millennial Star*, April 3, 1930, 282–283. Also see Amy Brown Lyman, “How Can We Strengthen Our Homes,” *Relief Society Magazine*, March 1936, 141. Amy Lyman was a counselor in the Relief Society presidency and in this article, she quotes someone who was educated in the subject of family life, “much of the family trouble today resulting in divorce and desertion is due to the fact that boys are not trained to work and make a living, and girls are not trained to be home-makers and mothers.”

was an integral part of her role as mother in her own home.⁶⁸ In the 1930s housework was considered women's work.⁶⁹ Cleaning the house, and preparing meals were not the only requirement for adequate homemaking. In the *Relief Society Magazine* one article described homemaking as an "art," where decoration and fine dining were an important part of a woman's job in the home.⁷⁰

In the September 1935 issue of the *Relief Society Magazine* an ad from Utah Power and Lighting Company portrayed a smiling woman wearing an apron, with the following caption:

Mrs. Housewife Always Smiles. She doesn't carry ashes or coal. She doesn't scrub pots and pans. Her kitchen keeps cool and neat as a pin. Friend husband says the meals taste better. And there's more time to spare.⁷¹

The purpose of this ad was most likely to entice women to pay for an electric stove and the company was persuading women by explaining the ease of cooking with electricity. What this ad reveals about the 1930s woman is that she was concerned with keeping a clean house and with making appetizing meals, but that she was also a busy individual who could not devote all of her time to mechanical tasks.

Not all women embraced women's work with enthusiasm. Culinary author Laura Shapiro observed that the term "homemaking" was originally considered as "housekeeping." Homemaking is a term that is used to describe women's work in the home post World War I. One major difference between the two terms was that in homemaking, women felt free to

⁶⁸ Widtsoe, *In a Sunlit Land: The Autobiography of John A. Widtsoe*, 235.

⁶⁹ Shapiro, *Perfection Salad: Women and Cooking at the Turn of the Century*, 210.

⁷⁰ Rose H. Widtsoe, "Hospitality," *Relief Society Magazine*, April, 1938, 255.

⁷¹ "Mrs. Housewife Always Smiles," *Relief Society Magazine*, September 1935, 533.

complain about their work. Shapiro states, “women were free to acknowledge that drudgery was drudgery” whereas in housekeeping women had to endure the tedious tasks of cleaning a house but did not have the voice to express the drudgery.⁷² Shapiro used the example of a banner that appeared on a full page ad in *Bon Ami* magazine in 1938 that said, “I don’t like housework!”⁷³ Advancements with indoor plumbing and electricity prior to The Great Depression helped alleviate a consuming schedule for women to plan meals, cook, and clean all day long.⁷⁴ Women no longer saw housework as a “mission” or a “science” but rather, “an unalterable element of woman’s fate.”⁷⁵ Because homemaking was seen in this way, women did express negative comments about their work in the home, yet their participation in homemaking continued and advancements in electricity and appliances helped alleviate a lot of complaints.⁷⁶

In the Church, the 1930s were a time filled with enthusiasm for women’s work. Etiquette writer Emily Post was an influential in the early twentieth century for standard for home dining and décor and it was encouraged in the *Relief Society Magazine* for women to use her as an example.⁷⁷ Mrs. Post was not the only one who taught the art of homemaking. At the turn of the twentieth century, Widtsoe also wrote several articles in the *Young Women Journal* teaching women about cooking and decorating in the home.⁷⁸ Her series of articles on cooking and

⁷² Shapiro, *Perfection Salad: Women and Cooking at the Turn of the Century*, 212.

⁷³ Shapiro, *Perfection Salad: Women and Cooking at the Turn of the Century*, 212.

⁷⁴ Shapiro, *Perfection Salad: Women and Cooking at the Turn of the Century*, 210.

⁷⁵ Shapiro, *Perfection Salad: Women and Cooking at the Turn of the Century*, 213.

⁷⁶ Shapiro, *Perfection Salad: Women and Cooking at the Turn of the Century*, 210.

⁷⁷ Rose H. Widtsoe, “Hospitality,” *Relief Society Magazine*, April, 1938, 255.

⁷⁸ Leah Dunford Widtsoe, “Lessons in Cookery,” *Young Woman’s Journal*, January 1901, 33–36, 42–43. Leah Dunford Widtsoe, “Furnishing the Home,” *Young Woman’s Journal*, January 1902, 25–29.

furnishing one's home were published each month in the journal and each series began with her pointing out that homemaking was not just about keeping a clean home or cooking, it was about taking care of God's children.

In her cooking articles, Leah began by teaching her audience that “the human body is the most perfect thing that God ever made on earth”⁷⁹ and that it is ones' responsibility to take care of it. Each article she wrote that year contained information on eating and preparing healthy foods.⁸⁰ Amy Brown Lyman, a counselor in the general Relief Society presidency, also encouraged her contemporaries to have clean homes with healthy meals. This she said, helps to foster an environment where children can have good “physical and mental health.”⁸¹ Therefore, taking good care of the body contributes to an environment where children can be raised to maintain healthy habits and life styles. The passion that Leah had for healthy practices inspired Leah and John Widtsoe to write a book in 1937 about the Church's law of health, the Word of Wisdom. Their book clarified the revelation the prophet Joseph Smith had received on substances that members of the Church should partake of and abstain from. Their book became very influential on members at a time when the Word of Wisdom became a part of the identity of members of the church.⁸²

For Leah, living a healthy life style was an important part of homemaking, but so were all of the other details of homemaking like decorating, and cleaning a home. In 1902 Leah wrote a series of articles about decorating a home. Leah began in a humble fashion, explaining to her

⁷⁹ Leah Dunford Widtsoe, “Lessons in Cookery,” *Young Woman's Journal*, January 1901, 33.

⁸⁰ Leah Dunford Widtsoe, “Lessons in Cookery,” *Young Woman's Journal*, February 1901, 82–86.

⁸¹ Amy Brown Lyman, “How Can We Strengthen Our Homes?” *Relief Society Magazine*, March 1936, 142.

⁸² McDannell, *Sister Saints: Mormon Women Since the End of Polygamy*, 81.

audience that she knew about homemaking through books and personal observations.⁸³ She then helped her readers understand why decorating and furnishing a home was so important:

Sociologists, and men of science everywhere, admit that one of the most potent factors in the rise of a great and mighty nation is the existence of the home in which is enshrined all the pure, noble traits of human nature; a home in which the boys are trained to be strong, pure men and fathers; and the girls healthy, wise and prudent mothers. Every great people can trace its downfall to the degradation of woman and the home. No nation has ever risen to its highest possibilities without the influence which comes from sanctified and protected homes.⁸⁴

This article's title of "Furnishing the Home," appears to be light, but from Leah's above statement, it is apparent that she saw homemaking as anything but a trivial subject. For Leah, having a clean and beautified home was a part of being an effective mother. Homemaking was a "God-given task" and was a part of motherhood.⁸⁵

What Leah considered proper homemaking was informative about her view on the purposes of the divine role of a mother. Leah encouraged attention to details within the home. Even in a recipe on potato salad, she was particular in how the boiled potatoes should be cut, instructing readers to make sure not to stir the salad because each potato slice needed to be perfect.⁸⁶ To Leah, proper decoration was a woman's responsibility, one that began in the literal building of a home and carried on into the choices of fixtures.⁸⁷ Leah felt that the kind of

⁸³ Leah Dunford Widtsoe, "Furnishing the Home," *Young Woman's Journal*, January 1902, 25.

⁸⁴ Widtsoe, "Furnishing the Home," 26.

⁸⁵ Leah D. Widtsoe, "A Prophets Instruction to Modern Women" *Millennial Star*, March 6, 1930, 154.

⁸⁶ Leah D. Widtsoe, "Lessons in Cookery," *Young Woman's Journal*, October 1901, 471.

atmosphere that a child grew up in helped determine a child's character and that having good taste in one's furnishings enhanced a good environment for a child.⁸⁸ One could develop a refined taste, according to Widtsoe, and they could do that through educating themselves through books.⁸⁹ Cleanliness and order were a high priority for suitable housekeeping but not to the point of becoming "over worked."⁹⁰ Proper homemaking, therefore was about attention to detail in the physical building of a home, decorating of a home, and meal preparation. By giving attention to these details, one could provide a home where children could be raised in an ideal setting that would help shape who they become.

For Widtsoe, the art of homemaking was not just about keeping a clean home, or having good taste so that one could impress company, keeping a suitable home was an expression of the family living in it.⁹¹ Leah once said that "the community" was a "greatly enlarged and multiplied home."⁹² Therefore if the home was a reflection of a family, then the community was a reflection of the homes in it. Leah saw motherhood as a significant role within a community because the mother was the core of the home. Leah did acknowledge that fathers played an important part in shaping children as well but then she made the conclusion that, "some woman trained father."⁹³ This she said meaning that men at some point are influenced heavily by women so that men can

⁸⁷ Leah D. Widtsoe, "Furnishing the Home," *Young Woman's Journal*, January 1902, 27.

⁸⁸ Widtsoe, "Furnishing the Home," 27.

⁸⁹ Widtsoe, "Furnishing the Home," 28.

⁹⁰ Widtsoe, "Furnishing the Home," 29.

⁹¹ Widtsoe, "Furnishing the Home," 86.

⁹² Widtsoe, "The Mothers of Men," 283.

⁹³ Leah D. Widtsoe, "Priesthood and Womanhood," *Deseret News*, January 27, 1934, 3.

be influential fathers. Leah's conclusion was that as a woman took care of their home by participating fully in woman's work, one could help not just a family, but a community to thrive.

Conclusion

Motherhood was a construct that Leah viewed as being at the heart of society. A woman who embraced her role as mother could help mold and shape children to become responsible citizens. As she helped herself to improve spiritually, she then could help her children to progress and thereby fulfill the work of the Relief Society. A mother who thoughtfully took care of her children and her home was a part of something larger than any organization on the earth. To Leah, proper motherhood and homemaking were works that women should embrace gladly because they helped them be a part of God's work.

Chapter 3

Priesthood and Womanhood

At the beginning of the twentieth century, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints underwent a transition in both policy and practice. Church policies and programs during this period fluctuated in structure and development. Some of these changes included making obedience to the Word of Wisdom a requirement to receive a temple recommend, an emphasis on tithing in monetary form, and changes in age requirements for priesthood quorums.¹ Each change proved to have an influence on the conceptual understanding members of the Church had about doctrines and principles of the Church. One concept which impacted women as well as men and became a topic of discussion well into the 1930s was priesthood power and authority.

Leah Widtsoe described the priesthood as “delegated authority to act for God.”² She discovered first-hand on her mission in Europe that changes in the Church pertaining to the priesthood had prompted questions women had concerning their role and place in the Church.³ Author Kathryn Shirts noted that it was Widtsoe’s responsiveness to questions that non-members of the Church were asking that led Leah to write about women and the priesthood.⁴ Questions from women in Europe about the relationships between women and the priesthood sparked a literary flame in Leah. While she had written about women and the priesthood prior to this time, the 1930s are a rich time of Leah’s works published in the *Millennial Star* which spread to the United States with republications of her articles in the *Deseret News*. In her articles on women

¹ Alexander, *Mormonism in Transition*, 95; William G. Hartley, “The Priesthood Reform Movement, 1908–1922,” *BYU Studies* 19, no. 2 (1973): 15.

² Leah Widtsoe, “Priesthood as it Affects Women,” *Millennial Star*, April 20, 1933, 263.

³ Leah Widtsoe, “Priesthood and Womanhood,” *Deseret News*, January 1934, 6.

⁴ Kathryn H. Shirts, “The Role of Susa Young Gates and Leah Dunford Widtsoe in the Historical Development of the Priesthood/Motherhood Model,” *Journal of Mormon History* 44, no. 2 (April 2018): 124.

and the priesthood, Widtsoe used motherhood to help women understand three important ideas. First that women are equal to men, second that they understand their purpose as mothers on earth, and third that women should recognize the power they can have as they fulfill the role of mother.

Changes in Priesthood Policy in the Church

In the early years of the Church, the prophet Joseph Smith taught that it was appropriate for women to take part in administering blessings of healing to those who were sick. President Joseph Smith made the comment that “there could be no more sin in any female laying hands on and praying for the sick, than in wetting the face with water.”⁵ This practice persisted into the early decades of the Church. Brigham Young’s encouragement of women participating in healing rituals heartened men and women to participate together in these rituals.⁶ When Joseph F. Smith served as president, he described occasions when he felt it was appropriate for women to provide a blessing of healing. He said, “It is just as much the right of the mother as of the father [to heal], although he, holding the priesthood, can do it by virtue of this as well as in the name of the Lord.”⁷ The First Presidency continued to support and encourage the practice of women assisting in the anointing of oil to the sick in the early twentieth century.⁸

In 1922, however, the Church made a clear distinction that women should not be set apart to anoint the sick, but rather that a woman’s participation in healing the sick was an act of

⁵ Davidson, Karen Lynn, David J. Whittaker, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Richard L. Jensen, eds., *Histories, Volume 1: 1838–1856*, vol. 1C-1 Addenda of the Histories series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman. (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2012), 38.

⁶ Jonathan A. Stapley and Kristine Wright, “Female Ritual Healing in Mormonism”, *Journal of Mormon History* 37, no. 1 (Winter 2011): 9–10.

⁷ Joseph F. Smith, “The Relief Society Jubilee,” *Deseret Weekly*, March 26, 1892, 435.

⁸ Alexander, *Mormonism in Transition*, 308.

prayer.⁹ The First Presidency's influence was not the only factor that contributed to the discontinuance of women laying hands on the head of the sick. Biographer David Hall made the connection that in the early 1920s the rising generation of women found the practice of anointing the sick outdated and old fashioned.¹⁰

By the 1930s women were beginning to play less of a role in healing the sick while men continued it as a practice of priesthood duty. Historian and author William Hartley described why this change impacted women. "Priesthood is something the recipient has. It is a permanent and lifelong possession which exists even when the bearer lives where there are no wards or other Church units. Women do not 'have' or 'hold' the Relief Society."¹¹ Hartley pointed out that while men possessed the priesthood, because women did not similarly "hold" the authority of the priesthood, they may have felt confused about their role in the Church. Leah Widstoe recognized that the women of her day did not know their role or responsibility in the Church. Young men and adult men had the priesthood to clearly help identify their responsibilities because they held the priesthood constantly. As will be explored in this chapter, Widstoe helped women clearly identify what their position was in the Church and the importance of their role.

Another significant change in priesthood policy had to do with the age of ordination for a young man. Under the direction of Brigham Young, young men at the age of twelve were to be ordained to the Aaronic Priesthood.¹² This policy, however, was not followed perfectly in the

⁹ Alexander, *Mormonism in Transition*, 308.

¹⁰ Dave Hall, *A Faded Legacy: Amy Brown Lyman and Mormon Women's Activism, 1872–1959*, (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press., 2015), 66–67.

¹¹ William G. Hartley, "From Men to Boys: LDS Aaronic Priesthood Offices, 1829–1996," *Journal of Mormon History* 22, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 82.

¹² Alexander, *Mormonism in Transition*, 116.

nineteenth century. Worthy men well beyond the age of twelve were ordained past the age which they could have been ordained, and younger men, in one case a three year old, were ordained to the priesthood.¹³ It was not until 1903 that the leadership of the Church began to make ordination to the Aaronic Priesthood at the age of twelve a seriously enforced policy.¹⁴ In the years shortly following the age change of ordination, young men were taught that each office in the priesthood held specific duties. The Church leaders outlined the office responsibilities and gave young men assignments and opportunities to serve in the Church.¹⁵ The emphasis that young men were receiving concerning their priesthood calling may have contributed to questions that women had in Widtsoe's day about their role in the Church. Further, the emphasis placed on priesthood and its increased association with men created less of a space for women to understand their role in the priesthood.¹⁶

While the ordination and responsibilities of the offices of the priesthood were being refined for young men also, programs of instruction for the young women of the Church were being developed. Young women were taught moral conduct and educated in what was known as the Young Ladies Mutual Improvement Association or the YLMIA.¹⁷ By the late 1930s, the YLMIA had become an organization that primarily focused on recreation including a camping program.¹⁸ This became a successful organization, but while the young women had one

¹³ Alexander, *Mormonism in Transition*, 116.

¹⁴ Alexander, *Mormonism in Transition*, 116–117.

¹⁵ Allen and Leonard, *The Story of the Latter-Day Saints*, 481.

¹⁶ Hall, *A Faded Legacy: Amy Brown Lyman and Mormon Women's Activism, 1872–1959*, 66.

¹⁷ Alexander, *Mormonism in Transition*, 147.

¹⁸ Allen and Leonard, *The Story of the Latter-Day Saints*, 481.

organization, the young men had their own Young Men’s Mutual Improvement Association (YMMIA) plus the responsibilities of their priesthood quorums. With the increase in tasks within the priesthood, activities in the YMMIA program for the young men, and the decline in women’s roles in providing blessings of healing, the early twentieth century proved to be a time of questions for members of the Church regarding women’s role in the priesthood.

In May 1929 Widtsoe was in Leipzig, Germany, on a mission in Europe with her husband, celebrating the 100th anniversary of the restoration of the Aaronic Priesthood. While at the festivities, she was asked by a woman how she would define the priesthood and what it meant to church members. Widtsoe responded that the priesthood “was the delegated authority of our Father in Heaven” and “that men may act in His name in any official Church capacity.”¹⁹ When the woman then asked Widtsoe if women could hold the priesthood, Leah responded that, “women do not directly hold that power nor exercise its authority but that through father or husband they share in its blessings and gifts.”²⁰ From this conversation two things should be noted. One is that Leah defined the priesthood as not man’s authority, but God’s. The second is that like others in her day, it was Widtsoe’s opinion, and a common belief in her day, that women could obtain blessings of the priesthood through marriage or if they were single, through their father.²¹

¹⁹ Leah D. Widtsoe, “Priesthood and Womanhood,” *Millennial Star*, November 2, 1933, 705.

²⁰Widtsoe, “Priesthood and Womanhood,” 705.

²¹ Eliza R. Snow, General Relief Society President, taught that if one was single and did not have a father who was ordained to the priesthood, that through honoring ones’ covenants in the temple endowment, that woman would have authority in the priesthood to perform blessings of healing. Jonathan A. Stapley and Kristine Wright, “Female Ritual Healing in Mormonism”, *Journal of Mormon History* 37, no. 1(Winter 2011): 37. Even though Leah did not mention women who were single and who had a father that was not worthy of the priesthood, she did teach that through temple ordinances, which are available to all women, women can have all the blessings of the priesthood.

Historian Thomas Alexander observed that during the early twentieth century “whether women who had been endowed had received the priesthood with their husbands or whether they received only the blessings of their husband’s priesthood,” was a question on the minds of the members of the Church.²² In his book *The Holy Temple*, Elder James E. Talmage wrote:

It is the precept of the Church that women of the Church share the authority of the Priesthood with their husbands, actual or prospective; and therefore women, whether taking the endowment for themselves or for the dead, are not ordained to specific rank in the Priesthood.²³

Elder Talmage explained that a common belief at the time was that even though women were not ordained to the priesthood, they shared in the authority of the priesthood through their husbands. Leah’s husband Elder John Widtsoe also adhered to this belief. He wrote, “Women enjoy all the endowments and blessings of the Priesthood in connection with their husbands.”²⁴

Even though the priesthood was only formally given to men, Leah did not view the priesthood as a ranking system for men and women. In an article published in the *Deseret News* in 1934, Leah emphasized that while men are ordained to the priesthood, the priesthood was for “the welfare of the entire human family, not for one class or sex.”²⁵ She felt that women could be seen as equals to their husbands despite their not being ordained to an office in the priesthood because the blessings of the priesthood were for men and women equally. Further, it was her

²² Alexander, *Mormonism in Transition*, 309.

²³ James E Talmage, *The House of the Lord*, (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1912), 83.

²⁴ John A. Widtsoe, *Rational Theology: As Taught by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1915), 97.

²⁵ Leah Widtsoe, “Priesthood and Womanhood,” *Deseret News*, January 6, 1934, 8.

opinion that men and women shared an equal load, though their responsibilities in the Church were different.

Equality

Widtsoe once wrote, “There is nothing more essential to the girlhood of to-day [sic] than a proper conception of the priesthood of God as existing upon the earth, and an understanding of her relation and responsibility thereto.”²⁶ Her articles in the *Millennial Star* and in the *Deseret News* helped women understand what Widtsoe termed as a ‘proper’ understanding of the priesthood. Arguably, one of Leah’s principal themes in her writings on women and the priesthood was equality, that despite the different roles men and women had in the Church they were still considered as equal workers within the Church.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints does not have a paid clergy. One does not receive wages for holding an office in the priesthood. Despite this, women in Widtsoe’s day may have seen ordination to the priesthood as a status symbol. Author Jean Matthews asserted that finding a variety of employment was difficult for women in the early twentieth century. Matthews wrote that the hardest area of work for women to be accepted was religious employment. “Unitarians and Congregationalists ordained the occasional woman, but the Catholic church, Episcopalians, Methodists, and Baptists...all remained adamant against the ordination of women, as did Judaism,” Matthews noted.²⁷ Thus, the increase in educated women pursuing work outside of the home did not necessarily transfer to certain areas of the workforce, especially religion. Like the religions previously mentioned, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints may have been seen by others as one that did not fully incorporate women in

²⁶ Leah Widtsoe, “Priesthood as it Affects Women,” *Millennial Star*, April 20, 1933, 263.

²⁷ Jean V. Matthews, *The Rise of the New Woman*, (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2003), 42.

religion because they did not ordain women to the priesthood. This could explain why the subject of ordination to the priesthood would have been on the minds of women in Widtsoe's day. They may have been concerned that not being ordained to the priesthood made women lesser than men because it did not allow women space to take part in leadership in a religious environment.

However, Widtsoe never seems to have felt "unequal" when it came to the priesthood. She reasoned that women did not hold an office in the priesthood in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints for organizational purposes meaning that for every organization there needs to be leadership and men who hold an office in the priesthood provide that leadership with the help of women.²⁸ Other contemporary women agreed with her. Janet Thompson, who would later serve as a counselor in the General Primary Presidency from 1940–1942, wrote that the priesthood "could not carry on the auxiliary organizations without the help of the women."²⁹ Thompson, like Widtsoe, agreed that although women were not ordained to the priesthood, they were still necessary in the functions and building of the Church. Further, Widtsoe did not view the ordination of women as the act that would make women equal to men. To her, the differences in the roles of men and women showed that each gender was equal in responsibilities given to them.

John Widtsoe's perspective on this subject was noteworthy because of the similarity of thought he shared with his wife. Elder Widtsoe wrote that "the Priesthood belongs to all."³⁰ He felt that women were equal to men in the Church and that "the place of woman in the church is to

²⁸ Leah Widtsoe, "Priesthood and Womanhood." *Deseret News*, January 6, 1934, 8.

²⁹ Janet M. Thompson, "The Contributions of Women and Women's Organizations to the Priesthood Quorums," *Relief Society Magazine*, July 1936, 431–432.

³⁰ Widtsoe, *Rational Theology: As Taught by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 97.

walk beside the man, not in front of him nor behind him.”³¹ In 1939, Elder Widtsoe compiled a book on the priesthood. In this book, he chose to quote from several different prophets and general authorities of the Church. As author Kathryn Shirts observed, in the chapter entitled “Priesthood and the Home,” John also chose to quote his wife, Leah, from her articles on *Priesthood and Womanhood* in over half of his references.³² One of the multiple quotations he included had to do with both men and women receiving all of the blessings of the priesthood equally. He quoted Leah as follows:

In all of our study of this most interesting subject it must be well understood that the Priesthood is operative for the welfare of the entire human family, not for one class or sex. Men and women share alike in its blessings and resultant joy; but for the sake of order and wise government our Heavenly Father delegated the power of the presidency in this order to His sons. Therefore, man holds the Priesthood and stands before His Maker as the one who is responsible for all official acts in the Church capacity for human welfare.³³

Earlier in 1915, Elder Widtsoe had written a book that expressed a similar statement. He said that the reason that women did not hold the priesthood was because there needed to be order and God had appointed man to be the “spokesman and presiding authority.”³⁴ Similar to those of their

³¹ John A. Widtsoe, *Evidences and Reconciliations* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft Company, 1943), 305.

³² Kathryn H. Shirts, “The Role of Susa Young Gates and Leah Dunford Widtsoe in the Historical Development of the Priesthood/Motherhood Model,” *Journal of Mormon History* 22, no. 2 (April 2018): 133.

³³ John A. Widtsoe, *Priesthood and Church Government in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1939), 81-82.

³⁴ Widtsoe, *Rational Theology: As Taught by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 97.

day, both Leah and John concluded that there needed to be order in the Church and in the home and that this is how God had chosen to have organization on the earth.³⁵

Leah Widtsoe wanted women and men to understand that organization was important to the function of the Church, but also that women should be seen as equals despite their not being ordained to a priesthood office. In her articles in the *Deseret News* published in 1934, Leah addressed questions such as, “Are not women as a class just as intelligent and good as men as a class?” and “Does not the fact that women cannot hold the Priesthood tend to give them an ‘inferiority complex’ and therefore, make their inner lives less serene and normal?”³⁶ Both of these questions imply that women in Leah’s day were considering ordination to the priesthood as a hierarchical system. Widtsoe’s response was that performing a priesthood function did not affect one’s status or power.³⁷ She was keen to make it clear that though women were not ordained to the priesthood, their equality in the Church was not affected.

Leah Widtsoe further addressed a concern she noticed that some women felt they were the inferior sex. This is evident in the questions that she chose to answer in her publications; additionally, it was a concern that contemporary women explained in their writings. For example, one Latter-day Saint woman wrote in 1905 that perhaps the reason why women were not incorporating the Doctrine and Covenants in their home was because they thought that women of the Church still believed the traditional thought that “the book is only for the wise heads and those holding the Priesthood, being too strong food for women or the young.”³⁸ This woman reveals that there was a misunderstanding in the Church culture at the time about

³⁶ Leah Widtsoe, “Priesthood and Womanhood,” *Deseret News*, January 1934, 6.

³⁷ Leah Widtsoe, “Priesthood as it Affects Women,” *Millennial Star*, April 20, 1933, 265.

³⁸ Edith Ivins Lamoreaux, “The Doctrine and Covenants: a plea for it in the home,” *Women’s Exponent*, January 1905, vol. 33 no.7.

women: some members of the Church associated the ordination of the priesthood with gospel knowledge. Widtsoe continually challenged traditional beliefs such as this.

One way that Widtsoe did this was by showing how women had been treated unjustly throughout history. In the past, Widtsoe observed, women had been treated as man's property.³⁹ She related how in medieval times "women were held in virtual thral[l]dom by their fathers or husbands."⁴⁰ Another example she gave was that in the history of religion women had not been allowed to go past the outer court of the temple.⁴¹ She reiterated how women have been limited in their freedoms such as rights to their children, freedom to own property, and the right to vote.⁴² These examples were used to help readers contrast historical mistreatments of women with liberties women in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints were experiencing in her day, making her point that women in the Church are not inferior to men.

Widtsoe contrasted the oppressions and injustices women experienced throughout history with the way men of the Church treated women in her day. She attributed the privilege and right to vote, or in her words, women's "religious and civic independence," to the men of the Church.⁴³ In Widtsoe's day women did vote in Church general conferences, held meetings in their homes, and worshipped freely with their husbands.⁴⁴ Other women in Leah's day felt that they enjoyed greater freedoms and equality because they were members of the Church. In 1936,

³⁹ Leah D. Widtsoe, *Women and Marriage Among the "Mormons"* (Independence, Jackson County, Missouri: Press of Zion's Printing and Publishing Company, 1935)

⁴⁰ Leah Widtsoe, "Priesthood and Womanhood," *Deseret News*, January 20, 1934, 3.

⁴¹ Leah Widtsoe, "Priesthood and Womanhood," *Deseret News*, February 17, 1934, 3.

⁴² Leah Widtsoe, "Priesthood and Womanhood," *Deseret News*, January 20, 1934, 3.

⁴³ Leah Widtsoe, "Priesthood and Womanhood," *Deseret News*, January 27, 1934, 6.

⁴⁴ "Joseph Smith's Teachings about Priesthood," <https://www.lds.org/topics/joseph-smiths-teachings-about-priesthood-temple-and-women?lang=eng>.

Ruth May Fox, General President of the Young Women, explained how the Prophet Joseph Smith treated women as equals. She argued, “When the church was organized, women voted independently as did the men.”⁴⁵ Further, Fox explained that although women do not hold the priesthood, that “a woman is privileged to be the companion of a man who does, and is entitled to the blessings of this holy order.”⁴⁶ Women viewed both working side by side with their husbands and receiving callings in the Church as privileges.

It was Widtsoe’s argument that the responsibilities and freedom to have a voice in the Church showed how women had been treated as equals since the restoration of the Church. “In all life pursuits,” especially in the Church, Widtsoe claimed, women are “given [their] entire independence.”⁴⁷ She quoted prophets to prove her point that men in the Church do not view women as inferior. She cited former president of the Church Joseph F. Smith who stated, “There are people fond of saying that women are the weaker vessels. I don’t believe it. Physically, they may be; but spiritually, morally, religiously and in faith, what man can match a woman who is really convinced?”⁴⁸ Religion, Widtsoe believed, was a place where women could experience freedom to make their own choices and not be treated like property or inferior to the male gender.

Widtsoe did acknowledge that while society has progressed greatly in the area of treating women with kindness and respect, there were some men in her day who may have been

⁴⁵ Ruth May Fox, “What Did the Prophet Joseph Smith Do For Women?” *Relief Society Magazine*, December 1936, 751.

⁴⁶ Fox, “What Did the Prophet Joseph Smith Do For Women?” 751.

⁴⁷ Leah Widtsoe, “Priesthood and Womanhood,” *Deseret News*, February 17, 1934, 3.

⁴⁸ Leah Widtsoe, “Priesthood and Womanhood,” *Deseret News*, February 1934, 3.

“arrogant” because they felt that they were the superior sex. However, Widtsoe also argued that anyone who truly understood the priesthood would not exercise it with a superiority complex.⁴⁹ Her justification for this argument was scripturally based. She cited scripture revealed to the prophet Joseph Smith that states:

That the rights of the Priesthood are inseparably connected with the powers of heaven, and that the powers of heaven cannot be controlled nor handled only upon the principles of righteousness.

That they may be conferred upon us, it is true; but when we undertake to cover our sins, or to gratify our pride, our vain ambition, or to exercise control or dominion or compulsion upon the souls of the children of men in any degree of unrighteousness, behold, the heavens withdraw themselves; the Spirit of the Lord is grieved; and when it is withdrawn, Amen to the priesthood or the authority of that man. (Doctrine and Covenants 121:36-37)

The priesthood, as taught in this scripture and reiterated by Widtsoe, was not a power that one can utilize by force or unkindness but can only be exercised with qualities of charity and worthiness. Similarly, in 1932 the *Relief Society Magazine* featured a lesson on priesthood authority that taught that men should be worthy and live the truths of the Gospel if they were to exercise priesthood power.⁵⁰ Widtsoe, like the Church she supported, believed that bearers of the priesthood should act with righteousness and be worthy of the priesthood they hold. Further, Widtsoe argued that when a man exercised the powers of the priesthood in this way, there would be love and respect for women as equal partners.

⁴⁹ Leah Widtsoe, “Priesthood and Womanhood,” *Deseret News*, January 27, 1934, 3.

⁵⁰ Lesson Department, “Authority to Act in the Name of God,” *Relief Society Magazine*, December 1832, 741.

Though Widtsoe described a man's and a woman's responsibilities in the Church and in the home as equal, like other women of her day, she still subscribed to the idea that men should be the leaders in the home. This was apparent in a two-part article Widtsoe wrote which was published in the *Improvement Era* in 1938. The first article was written as if Widtsoe were the mother of a young woman who was about to be married, and the second was to a young man. Both articles were filled with advice about marriage and counsel on how each individual should treat the other in a marriage relationship. Her counsel to her figurative daughter is revealing of what Leah's views were on marriage and the priesthood in marriage. She counseled:

Remember that as you love and respect your husband as your file-leader, you may expect love and consideration in return. In homes where the man honors his Priesthood and performs fully his Church duties I have always found the greatest happiness. You help him and in turn he will help you to do your duty.⁵¹

Widtsoe expected that when one is ordained to the priesthood, that implies he will act with kindness and love. She also taught that men are the leaders in the home and that women should look to them and follow them.

For Widtsoe, the idea that a man would lead in the home was not a sign of inequality. She argued, "Every normal woman desires to 'look up' to her husband, to feel that he is stronger than she is and that she can truly honor him as her real guide throughout life."⁵² Like Widtsoe, Augusta Winters Grant, wife of President Heber J. Grant, encouraged women to look to their husbands as the leader in their home. She said:

⁵¹ Leah Widtsoe, "For Time and All Eternity," *Improvement Era*, April 1938, 221.

⁵² Leah Widtsoe, "For Time and All Eternity," *Improvement Era*, May 1938, 269.

It is my firm conviction that if the women of our Church would rely unfalteringly upon the inspiration of their husbands, in all important matters concerning their family affairs, they would find that their husbands would grow in the power of discernment and decision through the exercise of their priesthood.⁵³

Grant drew the conclusion that by women treating their husbands as the spiritual leaders in the home, they would be helping their husbands become better heads of the home.

Widtsoe further reasoned that in any organization leadership is necessary, including in a marriage.⁵⁴ This idea of women needing to “look up” to their husbands may not appear to imply equality. Yet, another publication clarified how Leah saw the two ideas coinciding. Widtsoe claimed that when men were “worthy leaders” that women would “look up to them,” but that they would do this “traveling side by side with them while sharing equally the load.”⁵⁵ Thus, it was Widtsoe’s argument that while a husband may take on the leadership role in the marriage, that in the home, a woman’s job was just as important and she should be treated as an equally important figure in the home.

Widtsoe further clarified the equality of man and woman by explaining that each needed the other to fulfill their role. A mother could not become a mother without a man and a man could not experience the greatest blessings in the temple without a woman.⁵⁶ Each person in the marriage relationship needed the other in order to do their part. For Widtsoe this interdependence

⁵³ Augusta Winters Grant, “My Husband,” *Relief Society Magazine*, November, 1936, 768.

⁵⁴ Leah Widtsoe, “Priesthood and Womanhood,” *Millennial Star*, November 2, 1933, 709.

⁵⁵ Leah Widtsoe, “Priesthood and Womanhood,” *Deseret News*, February 17, 1934, 3.

⁵⁶ Leah Widtsoe, “Priesthood and Womanhood,” *Millennial Star*, November 2, 1933, 709.

on one another in the Church and in marriage showed that man and women were equally necessary in the work of the Lord.

Additionally, Widtsoe encouraged men that that they should share the financial matters in the home with their wife. Her claim was that a woman worked as hard as a man did in his job and that she did so with longer hours and because of that the wife “earns [the husband’s] salary as much as [the man] do[es].”⁵⁷ Widtsoe did not want men to feel insecure about women being treated as equal partners in the home. She proclaimed, “The man who fears the dominance of woman . . . admits his own inferiority.”⁵⁸ Widtsoe best expressed her feelings of what an equal marriage relationship should look like with these words, “Marriage is successful only when both partners understand their mutual obligations as well as their privileges and use wisdom and intelligence in making their united lives a bit of heaven on earth.”⁵⁹ Widtsoe saw marriage under priesthood authority as a united effort with each partner carrying an equal responsibility.

Motherhood and the Priesthood

Leah Widtsoe wanted to help women understand their place and role in the Church and in the home. She did this by comparing the role men are charged with as priesthood holders with the role that women occupy as mothers. Widtsoe’s assertion was that motherhood was a gift that was equal to the calling and responsibility given to a man on earth.⁶⁰ Thus, while men were given the priesthood as a duty and gift from God, women received the equal but different responsibility of rearing children from God as well. Further, she concluded that “the gift and

⁵⁷ Leah Widtsoe, “For Time and All Eternity,” *Improvement Era*, May 1938, 269.

⁵⁸ Leah Widtsoe, “Priesthood and Womanhood,” *Millennial Star*, November 2, 1933, 715.

⁵⁹ Leah Widtsoe, “For Time and All Eternity,” *Improvement Era*, May 1938, 317.

⁶⁰ Leah Widtsoe, “Priesthood and Womanhood,” *Deseret News*, January 13, 1934, 3.

responsibilities of motherhood make it desirable that women should be freed from the obligations of active service in the Priesthood.”⁶¹ With this statement, she implied that one reason women were not ordained to the priesthood was because they were needed as mothers.

Words like equality, power, and responsibility are used frequently in Widtsoe’s articles. What is interesting about her use of these terms is that when using these words, she was often referring to motherhood. Leah felt that women had a great responsibility to give life and to raise faithful children. To Widtsoe, the charge to women to become mothers showed the profound trust God had in His daughters.⁶² Boldly, Widtsoe explained, “The women inside the Church or out, who feel that they must have more than their womanhood demands, are but short-sighted and do not recognize the full scope of their God-given powers.”⁶³ She indicated repeatedly that women have more than enough to do in magnifying their call as mothers to even worry about or want more responsibility than they already have.

In her 1933 article in the *Millennial Star*, Widtsoe addressed a question that revealed how she saw the role of mother and priesthood holder as equal roles in the Church. The question she wrote about had to do with fear in the home of brothers thinking that they were better than their sisters because they received the priesthood at the early age of twelve.⁶⁴ Widtsoe began by giving a scenario of a brother and sister sharing with each other their dreams of what they would grow up to become. The boy says he wants to be an engineer and his sister says she wants to be a musician. The conversation then becomes a game of trying to one-up each other in their life

⁶¹ Widtsoe, *Rational Theology: As Taught by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 84.

⁶² Leah Widtsoe, “Priesthood and Womanhood,” *Deseret News*, January 1934.

⁶³ Leah Widtsoe, “Priesthood and Womanhood,” *Deseret News*, January 13, 1934, 7.

⁶⁴ Leah Widtsoe, “Priesthood and Womanhood,” *Millennial Star*, November 2, 1933, 706.

pursuits. The boy says he wants to become president of the United States and his sister becomes quiet because she does not know what could be greater than that. After pondering, the girl declares she can be a mother. With that declaration her brother becomes silent and then proclaims that he can hold the priesthood.⁶⁵ Widtsoe resolved the issue of a brother and sister feeling like they were better than one another by having both come to the conclusion that a girl could have motherhood and a boy could have the priesthood and that neither was superior to the other; they were just different. In this article, Widtsoe placed the role of a mother and the role of the priesthood on equal playing fields. If a young man and a young woman understood their roles, then they would be satisfied and content with the role assigned to their gender and there would be no need for argument about whose role was better.

In another pamphlet written by Widtsoe in 1935 and published by the Church's press in Independence, Leah emphasized that motherhood was a blessing and a privilege.⁶⁶ She compared the responsibility and pleasure a man has of bearing the priesthood to the charge and joy that women have in being mothers. Her argument was that if a woman would like to have the greatest happiness in life, they should understand that the ultimate happiness is only achieved through motherhood.⁶⁷ She described women's and men's roles as ones that complement one another as equals.⁶⁸ Teamwork is the way Leah described the relationship man and woman have as husband and wife.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Widtsoe, "Priesthood and Womanhood," 708–709.

⁶⁶ Leah D. Widtsoe, *Women and Marriage Among the "Mormons"* (Independence, Jackson County, Missouri: Press of Zion's Printing and Publishing Company, 1935)

⁶⁷ Leah D. Widtsoe, *Women and Marriage Among the "Mormons"* (Independence, Jackson County, Missouri: Press of Zion's Printing and Publishing Company, 1935), 1–4.

⁶⁸ Widtsoe, *Women and Marriage Among the "Mormons"* 1–4.

Widtsoe did not see motherhood as a lesser of the two jobs nor did she see it as superior to the priesthood. She explained her view on motherhood in these words:

No woman could safely carry the triple burden of wifhood and motherhood, and at the same time function in priestly orders. Yet her creative home labo[u]r ranks side by side, in earthly and heavenly importance, with her husband's Priesthood responsibilities.⁷⁰

Widtsoe reiterated why she believed that women were not ordained to an office. She also explained that women have as much to do as mothers as men, and that as they perform their duty as a mother they are working as a team with their husband.

Motherhood was something Widtsoe consistently desired and her enthusiasm for the work of motherhood is evidenced in her writings. While on her mission in Europe, she wrote to her mother telling her that motherhood was “the only thing that’s ever registered in [her] life.”⁷¹ In other words, motherhood gave Leah a great sense of purpose. Widtsoe wanted the women of the Church to feel empowered by motherhood and gain their own sense of purpose from their call to be a mother.

Her encouragement to the sisters of the Church was that “motherhood should take precedence in [woman’s] entire scheme of life.”⁷² What about those who did not have children of their own? Widtsoe was careful to include women who could not have children of their own for whatever reason. She claimed that “every woman is a potential mother and should use her gifts for the progress of others’ children even though she may have none of her own.”⁷³ She believed

⁶⁹ Leah Widtsoe, “Priesthood and Womanhood,” *Deseret News*, February 17, 1934, 3.

⁷⁰ Leah Widtsoe, “Priesthood as it Affects Women,” *Millennial Star*, April 20, 1933, 263.

⁷¹ Leah D. Widtsoe to Susa Young Gates, October 26, 1929, Widtsoe Family Collection, Utah State Historical Society.

⁷² Leah Widtsoe “Priesthood and Womanhood,” *Millennial Star*, November 2, 1933, 708.

that all women were called as mothers and as such should have a desire to mother the children of the world.

One author observed that in the early twentieth century, “Victorian attitudes had magnified women’s domestic role and romanticized the ideal of motherhood by emphasizing both the powerful influence of mothers and their loving self-sacrifice.”⁷⁴ Widtsoe’s writings clearly demonstrate that she had adopted this same attitude. She claimed that “the desire for motherhood is inherent in the breast of every normal girl and woman and nothing should be allowed to eradicate it.”⁷⁵ Even though Widtsoe felt that every girl dreamt of becoming a mother, she acknowledged that in her life time there were distractions that had led women to not always work toward this goal.

Widtsoe reasoned that during World War I women began to work in areas that had once been man’s labor.⁷⁶ In her opinion, entering the workforce excited women, and they began to love the freedom that came with new responsibility. This emphasis and appreciation for what women could do, Widtsoe affirmed, was a positive difference compared to how women had been treated in the past. Once seen as lesser, the times of war had made women equals in the work force outside of the home, proving their strength to perform a man’s job. However, this presented a problem. If women did not understand how their strength and ability could bless their home, then the power that women had would be reduced. One of Widtsoe’s strongest points was that

⁷³ Leah Widtsoe, “Priesthood and Womanhood,” *Deseret News*, February 3, 1934, 3.

⁷⁴ Kathryn H. Shirts, “The Role of Susa Young Gates and Leah Dunford Widtsoe in the Historical Development of the Priesthood/Motherhood Model,” *Journal of Mormon History* 22, no. 2 (April 2018): 128.

⁷⁵ Leah Widtsoe, “Priesthood and Womanhood,” *Deseret News*, January 13, 1934, 7.

⁷⁶ Leah Widtsoe, “Priesthood and Womanhood,” *Deseret News*, February 10, 1934, 3.

real power for women was exercised in their homes as mothers.⁷⁷ To enhance this argument, she quoted her grandfather, President Brigham Young who said:

The Mothers are the moving instruments in the hands of Providence to guide the destinies of nations. Let the mother of any nation teach their children not to make war, the children would grow up and never enter into it. Let the mothers teach their children, ‘War, war upon your enemies, yes, war to the hilt!’ and they will be filled with this spirit.

Consequently, you see at once what I wish to impress upon your mind is, that the mothers are the machinery that give zest to the whole man, and guide the destinies and lives of men upon the earth.⁷⁸

Widtsoe believed, like her prophet grandfather, that women exercised their greatest power and “obligation to world progress” as they performed the role of a mother.⁷⁹

Widtsoe made the comparison that men have the priesthood and women have motherhood as their primary responsibility; yet, some may argue that men have both fatherhood and the priesthood while women have just motherhood. In 1934, Leah addressed this concern in the last article in her series on womanhood and the priesthood featured in the *Deseret News*. Her conclusion was that women and men may not share in an office of the priesthood but, women do have the blessings of the priesthood. She asserted, “The women of this church are equally honored for they share with father or husband all the resultant privileges and blessings of Priesthood.”⁸⁰ Thus, while women were not ordained to an office in the priesthood, they did have

⁷⁷ Leah Widtsoe, “Priesthood and Womanhood,” *Deseret News*, February 1934, 3.

⁷⁸ Brigham Young and John Andreas Widtsoe, *Discourses of Brigham Young, Second President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints* (Whitefish, Mont: Kessinger, 2004) 199–200.

⁷⁹ Leah Widtsoe, “Priesthood and Womanhood,” *Deseret News*, February 1934, 3.

⁸⁰ Leah Widtsoe, “Priesthood and Womanhood,” *Deseret News*, February 24, 1934, 3.

all of the blessings of the priesthood in addition to their responsibilities as mother. Additionally, Relief Society General President Louise Y. Robinson pointed out in a general conference in 1935 that women are given callings in the Church by one who holds priesthood authority, which made the work women do in the Church more than just “club work.”⁸¹ Therefore, men had fatherhood and the priesthood ordination and women had motherhood and callings from the priesthood; together men and women could have all of the blessings of the priesthood.

Widtsoe’s idea was not that women should be “home bound,” limited to only serving in the home, but rather that woman’s *primary* focus should be in the home. Although she did describe motherhood as woman’s “birthright,” her hope was that because women were so capable that they would choose motherhood above any other profession.⁸² She encouraged women to prioritize motherhood:

Where women choose to magnify their motherhood, either direct or vicarious, progress and happiness is the sure result. Indeed, a woman who would sacrifice the greatest of all earth professions, that of motherhood, which is hers by right of sex, for the silly reason of proving that she can do a man’s work as well as any man, or for any other reason, is something less than a true woman, and is to be pitied as well as condemned.⁸³

This sharp rebuke from Widtsoe shows how seriously she viewed the role of a mother. She saw motherhood as a role that was equal in responsibility and importance to that of a priesthood holder and essential to both a woman’s happiness and eternal progression.

⁸¹ Louise Y. Robinson, “Officers Meeting,” *Relief Society Magazine*, April 3, 1935, 275.

⁸² Leah Widtsoe, “Priesthood and Womanhood,” *Millennial Star*, November 2, 1933, 708.

⁸³ Leah Widtsoe, “Priesthood and Womanhood,” *Deseret News*, February 17, 1934, 3.

Power as a Mother

To “magnify” one’s motherhood was to exercise power in Widtsoe’s opinion. Motherhood as a source of power for women was one of Leah’s key themes in her writings. The power Leah referred to in association with motherhood was a spiritual power. Using the example of scriptural women, Widtsoe heightened her argument that motherhood was an act of trust from God where God bestows power to his daughters. She used the example of Eve who was given the power to be the mother of the earth, and Mary who was chosen by God to raise the Son of God.⁸⁴ The examples of Eve and Mary showed the trust that God had in his daughters. Widtsoe, therefore, saw the power one experienced in motherhood as a God-given power.⁸⁵ For Leah, this made the power one exercised through the role of motherhood “priceless.”⁸⁶

Widtsoe also taught that power as a woman was available in the Church and in the temple as women participated in ordinances of the priesthood. Thus, “women officially appointed to any office or calling in the Church do exercise on their own behalf a measure of that delegated power or Priesthood.”⁸⁷ Outside of the temple, Widtsoe taught that “women officially appointed to any office or calling in the church do exercise on their own behalf a measure of that delegated power or Priesthood; but it is done always under the authority of those who directly hold the Priesthood.”⁸⁸ Widtsoe’s writings continually focused on what women could do rather than what they lacked.

⁸⁴ Leah Widtsoe, “Priesthood and Womanhood,” *Deseret News*, January 13, 1934, 7.

⁸⁵ Leah Widtsoe, “Priesthood and Womanhood,” *Millennial Star*, November 2, 1933, 708.

⁸⁶ Leah Widtsoe, “Priesthood and Womanhood,” *Deseret News*, January 13, 1934, 7.

⁸⁷ Leah Widtsoe, “Priesthood and Womanhood,” *Deseret News*, February 3, 1934, 3.

⁸⁸ Leah Widtsoe, “Priesthood and Womanhood,” *Deseret News*, February 3, 1934, 3.

A woman's power as a mother, Widtsoe claimed, also came from her relationship with her husband. She pointed out that it was only in the temple that men and women received the greatest promises and blessings from God. This they do side-by-side.⁸⁹ Widtsoe used the temple as an example of how women obtained the blessings of the priesthood through their marriage. She wrote, "The highest, sacred ceremonies in the Temple, or the House of the Lord, are participated in by man and woman side by side, and may not be taken by either one alone."⁹⁰ If a woman appreciated the relationship she had with her husband and the blessings that that relationship permitted her to obtain such as the blessing of becoming a mother, then, Widtsoe concluded, her "power" would increase.⁹¹ Here, Widtsoe again referred to a spiritual power to obtain blessings from God.

A woman's power also came from her influence. A woman has the innate ability to teach her children and husband to respect God's power of the priesthood. To Widtsoe, a woman was a "superior counselor" in the home, one who could encourage, lift and influence the people around her, and especially her children, in profound ways. She wrote of woman, "There is no way of computing the power of the influence of woman on family and community life."⁹² As evidence of the inherent power a woman has as a mother, Widtsoe used psychology. Her premise was that psychologists have found that the children are impressionable during the first years of their life. Mothers, Widtsoe stated, have the greatest influence and power on a child's mind and well-being during those years. Widtsoe concluded, "Surely no right-thinking woman could crave more

⁸⁹ Leah Widtsoe, "Priesthood and Womanhood," *Deseret News*, February 17, 1934, 3.

⁹⁰ Leah D. Widtsoe, "Priesthood and Womanhood," *Millennial Star*, November 2, 1933, 705.

⁹¹ Leah Widtsoe, "Priesthood and Womanhood," *Deseret News*, February 17, 1934, 3.

⁹² Leah Widtsoe, "Priesthood and Womanhood," *Deseret News*, February 24, 1934, 3.

responsibility nor greater proof of innate powers than that!”⁹³ The power Widtsoe was referring to here was something she believed women were born with.

This power to influence God’s children on the earth was so great, Widtsoe asserted, that if women would understand the magnitude of their role, they would not want anything else. In Widtsoe’s words, “When woman understands her full and complete power for building righteousness on earth she will sense that the gift of motherhood, direct or vicarious, is the greatest of all gifts and will be forced to exclaim, ‘My cup is full; I cannot ask for more!’”⁹⁴

Widtsoe wanted women to feel satisfied with their station in life, not jealous or arrogant, but content. Understanding the power that one could have as a mother was not something Widtsoe believed should make a woman feel superior to men. She saw power in motherhood as something that, if fully understood, would humble women. Widtsoe asserted that women could use God’s power as they exercised their righteous influence on the children of God and as they participated in priesthood ordinances.

Conclusion

One may wonder why Leah Widtsoe wrote so much on women and the priesthood. What did she feel would come of women having a more complete understanding of the priesthood and their role as mothers? Widtsoe explained:

The homes of to-day, as of the past, in which the Priesthood is held and exercised by the fathers and sons and hono[u]red by the mothers and daughters are the ones where, almost

⁹³ Leah Widtsoe, “Priesthood and Womanhood,” *Millennial Star*, November 2, 1933, 708.

⁹⁴ Leah Widtsoe, “Priesthood and Womanhood,” *Deseret News*, February 24, 1934, 3.

without exception, peace and mutual understanding make life a continuous round of progressive accomplishment and joy for all.⁹⁵

Leah saw motherhood and the priesthood as two roles that worked in harmony within the home. As mothers fulfilled their role, and as fathers fulfilled theirs, the home would function smoothly and be a place of happiness. Leah also used the term “progressive” in relation to her ideas of women embracing motherhood as a role in the home. She may have believed that her ideas were progressive because of the change women could have in society and in the Church if they would embrace their role as mother and recognize the power and authority they can have in the priesthood.

From the days of the Prophet Joseph Smith, when women helped participate in the healing of the sick, to the regulation in the twentieth century that established roles and specific ages for ordination for young men, the topic of women and the priesthood has been an ongoing conversation within The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. These changes in policy stirred conversation even in the early twentieth century about women understanding their responsibility in the home and in the Church. Through her writings, Leah Widtsoe helped women understand their purpose and place in the Church and in the home by teaching them that they are equals to their husbands, that the role of mother is a sacred trust from God, and that as they fulfill this role, they will have spiritual power to influence God’s children on the earth.

⁹⁵ Leah Widtsoe, “Priesthood and Womanhood,” *Millennial Star*, November 2, 1933, 710.

Chapter 4

Analyzing Widtsoe's Writings

Leah Widtsoe led a prominent and highly visible life as the wife of an Apostle, an author, and a speaker on her mission to Europe and in her other callings in the Church. Despite her visible role in the Church however, Leah Widtsoe did not aspire to be in the public light.¹ She considered her greatest accomplishment being a support to her husband. She said:

I've never been anybody . . . When I was a little girl I was known as Brigham Young's granddaughter. When I grew older and my mother became famous, I became known as the daughter of Susie Young Gates. Then when my sister, Lucy, came home from Europe as a great concert singer, I was known as the sister of Emma Lucy Gates. And when I married, I became known as the wife of John A. Widtsoe. And now I'm the widow of John A. Widtsoe, I'm just nobody. I spent the biggest part of my life, my mature life, boosting my hubby and living with him and for him and helping him; it was a joy for me.²

However, Widtsoe may have underestimated the role she played in history. There is a contradiction in her words. She believed that she did not accomplish anything of great significance, yet she was a mother, a role which, according to her own words, was the “greatest of all earth professions.”³ Widtsoe also may have underestimated the influence her writings had on women of the Church.

¹ Oral History Interview with Leah Eudora Widtsoe, February 11, 1965, 33–34, Leah D. Widtsoe Papers, L. Tom Perry Special Collections.

² Oral History Interview with Leah Eudora Widtsoe, February 11, 1965, 17, Leah D. Widtsoe Papers, L. Tom Perry Special Collections.

³ Leah Widtsoe, “Priesthood and Womanhood,” *Deseret News*, February 17, 1934, 3.

Leah Widtsoe used motherhood as a means by which she could motivate women to participate in the work of the home and thus empower women to positively impact society. She also taught women that it was through motherhood that women could find a place in the Church and better understand the divine responsibility God had entrusted with them. This chapter will analyze the contradictions, implications, and consistencies of Widtsoe's writings in three areas: her writings on married women of the Church, single or childless women of the Church, and her personal life as wife and mother.

Married Women

Leah's use of motherhood as a construct to motivate women to participate in the home may have given women a platform to help create change in society. This was contrary to what some of the women in her day were teaching. For example, in February 1935 the *Relief Society Magazine* published a speech given by a woman's right activist named Lena Madesin Phillips. Phillips was serving as President of the National Council of Women of the United States and had given this address at the International Council of Women in Paris the previous year. Phillips gave a stirring speech on women's right to work and receive equal pay.⁴ Widtsoe served on this same council with Phillips; but interestingly, the way they thought about women's freedoms differed in some important ways.

One of the points Phillips made in her speech was about the need for women to be seen as equals in the workforce. She argued that with the development of machines "the output of energy per person will grow less and less" leaving fewer jobs to go around. But removing "women from gainful employment [would] not solve the problem."⁵ According to Phillips, women had the

⁴ Lena Madesin Phillips, "The Underlying Principles of Women's Right to Work," *Relief Society Magazine*, February 1935, 85–89.

same innate right to be in the workforce as men. In her address, she listed the history of women working just as long and just as hard as men whether in the home or in the field. Phillips was concerned that if women did not get equal pay it would affect their emotional and mental well-being, ultimately affecting a woman's mothering. She advanced her argument by saying:

Since women must continue to have human nature's urge towards self-expression and fulfillment, their normal uninhibited psychological expression is vital to the power and permanence of the State. Because to block this is to frustrate woman's strongest emotions, and that frustration projects its irritation upon the children, thus limiting and distorting their natural powers. It manifests itself in many ways, such as constant fault-finding or the mother's attempt to relive her life through the child's life.⁶

Further, she concluded that when a woman does not receive equal pay, they become "frustrated" and "unhappy" as a mother. She proposed, "A male child, the offspring of a free father and a psychologically enslaved mother, will be part free and part slave."⁷ Here, Phillips made the case that women who were not treated equally in society and not given equal pay would suffer psychologically and eventually the feeling of being trapped would take a toll on a woman's ability to mother and rear children who become responsible citizens.

While Widtsoe also supported equality for women in the workforce, her writings revealed that her primary concern for women's emotional and physical well-being was how women were treated in the home, not in the workforce. Though Widtsoe did encourage progress in society, her principal concern was for women to embrace their role within the home.⁸ Phillips made a point

⁵ Phillips, "The Underlying Principles of Women's Right to Work," 89.

⁶ Phillips, "The Underlying Principles of Women's Right to Work," 87.

⁷ Phillips, "The Underlying Principles of Women's Right to Work," 89.

⁸ Leah D. Widtsoe, "The Status of Woman," *Millennial Star*, April 3, 1930, 267.

that women were psychologically affected in their role as mothers if they did not feel free to work in society. The contrast between Phillips and Widtsoe was that while women of Widtsoe's day encouraged progress in society, Widtsoe also pushed for progress in home life and for women to appreciate their role as mothers within the home.

Seeing motherhood as a motivation for women to embrace their role in the home could have been inspiring for women who felt homemaking was drudgery. In response, Leah placed the work of motherhood and of homemaking on the same level as scriptural heroines like Eve and Mary the mother of Jesus, thus using rhetorical strategy that would be meaningful to the women of the Church. For example she used Eve, who was given the power to be the mother of the earth, and Mary, who was chosen by God to raise the Son of God, and explained that their roles as mothers played an essential part to human history.⁹ Other women expressed that being compared to scriptural women ennobled their work as mothers. For instance, in 1939 one author in the *Relief Society Magazine*, Maude Beeley Jacob, compared the work of righteous mothers in her day to the work of women like Hannah in the Old Testament, or Mary the mother of Jesus. She said:

When the roll of honor is called of the 'Mothers of Mormonism,' the mothers of the prophetic leaders of the Church will lead the list by royal right of the glorious sons they bore, God's chosen servants in the Dispensation of the Fullness of Times of the everlasting Gospel.¹⁰

Jacob, like Widtsoe, compared women of her day to scriptural examples of mothers, thus elevating the everyday work of a mother. She placed women at the head of a "royal" line in

⁹ Leah Widtsoe, "Priesthood and Womanhood," *Deseret News*, January 13, 1934, 7.

¹⁰ Maude Beeley Jacob, "Woman as an Interpreter of the Faith," *Relief Society Magazine*, July 1939, 437.

heaven. Similarly, Widtsoe used scriptural women to teach that motherhood was a trust from God.¹¹ For women who may have seen their day-to-day work in the home as menial and repetitive, this comparison could have been motivating and uplifting for mothers.

However, not every woman in the Church would raise a future prophet as did Mary, Hannah, or Eve. Widtsoe's comparison may have placed high demands on mothers and could have increased pressure on women. An example of this was used in Widtsoe's recipe for potato salad. Even down to the slicing of potatoes Widtsoe was particular in having each slice perfect.¹² There is a contradiction in Leah's words. She taught that homemaking did not need to be toil and that it could be an art and that a woman should take pride in each detail of homemaking. Yet if a woman was focused on the minute details of slicing of potatoes, would that woman become so focused on perfection in details that she would miss the bigger picture of what her role as mother could do for the Church and for society? Widtsoe's words had the power to encourage women but might also have been discouraging to them if they did not feel that they measured up to the ideal image of a mother as found in the scriptures or in Church publications.

Furthermore, while Widtsoe said that motherhood should "take precedence," she allowed room for women to participate in other work or activities.¹³ She exemplified this by serving on a number of boards and committees which is a potential contradiction.¹⁴ Her example may have set an expectation that women, in addition to having all of the pressures of being a mother and

¹¹ Leah Widtsoe, "Priesthood and Womanhood," *Millennial Star*, November 2, 1933, 708.

¹² Leah D. Widtsoe, "Lessons in Cookery," *Young Woman's Journal*, October 1901, 471.

¹³ Leah D. Widtsoe, "Priesthood and Womanhood," *Millennial Star*, November 2, 1933, 707–708.

¹⁴ Leah Eudora Dunford Widtsoe, Leah D. Widtsoe Papers, box 1, folder 1, 3–4, L. Tom Perry Special Collections.

raising righteous children, also had the responsibility to community participation. Women may have felt it a burden to be involved in home life and other activities outside of the home.

In 1932, Annie Wells Cannon, a woman's suffragist and daughter of Relief Society General President Emmeline B. Wells, echoed this idea. She praised one mother, a Mrs. Rinehart who proved "that a smart woman can successfully combine a career and motherhood."¹⁵ Wells made this assumption based on the "beautiful home life" Mrs. Rinehart had while having a busy social life and career.¹⁶ If Widtsoe and women like Wells believed that a woman could have a picturesque home, keep up on all of their social engagements, and serve outside of the home then this standard could have been discouraging to some women who felt that they simply could not do it all.

These points being made, Widtsoe was not forceful in her writings about what women could or should become. Her point was that when women understood their potential influence and ability to create change in a society through motherhood, they would instinctively choose to prioritize the role of mother. As mentioned previously, Widtsoe once said, "When woman understands her full and complete power for building righteousness on earth she will sense that the gift of motherhood, direct or vicarious, is the greatest of all gifts and will be forced to exclaim, 'My cup is full; I cannot ask for more!'"¹⁷ Widtsoe encouraged, reasoned, and explained the importance of motherhood but gave allowance for women to make their own choices. Her strong encouragement for women to embrace their role does beg the question of why women in her day were needing strong encouragement to embrace motherhood.

¹⁵ Annie Wells Cannon, "Happenings," *Relief Society Magazine*, January 1932, 43.

¹⁶ Cannon, "Happenings," 43.

¹⁷ Leah Widtsoe, "Priesthood and Womanhood," *Deseret News*, February 24, 1934, 3.

One benefit of encouraging women to embrace their roles as mother in Widtsoe's day, was the positive impact it had on woman's mental health. In 1939, the Director of the Institute of Family Relations in Los Angeles, California, Paul Popenoe, published an article in the *Relief Society Magazine* expressing a concern he had about women growing up in what he termed as a "Man's World." He illustrated that women's good mental health was beneficial to their role as mothers. He remarked, "Studies show that the great majority of educated women have at one time or another wished they had been born boys."¹⁸ He concluded that this was not beneficial to a woman's mental health. He further proposed that teaching women from an early age that they could be married and become mothers would be setting them up for success.¹⁹ Widtsoe's similar encouragement for women to embrace their role as mothers may have been, as Popenoe said, helping women to see themselves as succeeding. Widtsoe focused on how women could successfully contribute to society through motherhood. She helped women see the impact their choices as mothers could have by teaching that mothers had the power to change society and even prevent war.²⁰ She tried to motivate women by helping them understand the power and ability they could have as mothers. Her writings were positive and uplifting and may have helped shaped women's confidence and self-worth, contributing to a positive mental and emotional state.

Single and Childless Women

While Widtsoe's writings may have been encouraging to those who were or could become mothers, her emphasis on motherhood may have been difficult for those who were single

¹⁸ Paul Popenoe, "Education for Family Life," *Relief Society Magazine*, February 1939, 139.

¹⁹ Popenoe, "Education for Family Life," 139.

²⁰ Widtsoe, "The World Needs Love," 141.

or could not have children of their own. During the 1930s, there were not abundant resources in Church magazines for single members of the Church. One lesson found in the *Relief Society Magazine* in 1939 gave the advice that mothers should not “make the child feel that they will be an old maid,” implying that being single one’s whole life was something looked down upon.²¹

The potentially negative view members of the Church had of single individuals appeared in the 1936 edition of the *Relief Society Magazine*. A one act play featured a couple Jimmy and Norma. At one-point Jimmy unexpectedly proposed to Norma and gave the reasoning for his sudden proposal. He said, “Think it over for a minute. And don’t think I’ve gone looney. A married man has a lot better chance to get work than a single man. An unmarried man is considered a tramp and treated like one.”²² From the description this character gave of an unmarried man, it is apparent that single individuals were not looked at in a positive light in the workplace or in social settings. One may wonder how a single person would have read Widtsoe’s enthusiastic comments such as motherhood being the “greatest addition [a woman] could make for the benefit of the world.”²³ The inconsistency in Widtsoe’s writings lies in that single women may have felt discouraged thinking that their single state was a hinderment to what Widtsoe termed “the greatest undertaking on earth.”²⁴

In a time when publications in Church magazines about single individuals in a positive light were scarce, Widtsoe found a way to be inclusive in her message on motherhood. She did

²¹ Social Service Lesson 8, “On Being a Good Mother-in-law,” *Relief Society Magazine*, February 1939, 138.

²² Rosannah C. Irvine, “Earth and Stars,” *Relief Society Magazine*, February 1936, 85.

²³ Leah D. Widtsoe, “Sister Ivins—A Real Help Meet,” *Millennial Star*, September 15, 1932, 594.

²⁴ Leah D. Widtsoe, “Home Economics in B.Y.U.,” Leah Widtsoe Papers, box 1, folder 1, 9, L. Tom Perry Special Collections.

this by stating that the role of motherhood could be exercised “vicariously.”²⁵ This meant that whether one had a child of her own or not that she could act as a mother figure for children in their families or communities. This was not necessarily an innovative idea on Widtsoe’s part. Impacting the children of others in a motherly way was accepted and taught in the Church in Widtsoe’s day. For example, one story related by Ida R. Alldredge in the 1932 *Relief Society Magazine* illustrated this concept. The story told of an “Aunty Brent” who did not have children of her own. Mother’s Day was about to be celebrated and Aunty Brent was dreading the day because it caused her to feel the sadness of not having children of her own. However, this Mother’s Day was different. To her surprise, Aunty Brent’s nephew honored her at a public event with these words:

God gave to the world many wonderful mothers whose children will live to call them blessed. . . . But no less great is that childless mother whose very soul cries out for that blessing which is denied her, yet in her mother love reaches out to those who are neglected. May God bless Aunty Brent whose love was all I knew. To her I owe all that I am.²⁶

This story demonstrated how single women or infertile women could still show “mother love” to children around them and make a difference in their lives. Widtsoe, like others of her day, adhered to this idea. Although she was not the creator of this thought, it was the way she used this idea in her writings about motherhood that may have uplifted and encouraged single and childless women of her day. Widtsoe wrote of such women:

²⁵ Leah D. Widtsoe, “Priesthood and Womanhood,” *Millennial Star*, November 2, 1933, 708.

²⁶ Ida R. Alldredge, “Mother love,” *Relief Society Magazine*, May, 1932, 267.

Because a woman has been denied children of her very own is no reason why her God-given power and gift may not be exercised for the countless neglected children in every community whose mothers are unfit or have been taken from earth. All intelligent worthwhile work for social betterment in private life or in organized activity is but an enlarged motherhood acting for the uplift of mankind.²⁷

Widtsoe's words were all-encompassing and could have positively impacted women who were unable to have children of their own. Her reassurances may not have satisfied childless women but addressing and including women in this way was a keen way to embrace the numerous women of her day to whom this applied.

Widtsoe may have been extra mindful of childless women because having children of her own was not easy for her. Having four of her own children die, three in the first years of life, seeing other women of her day experience similar circumstances, and understanding the dangers of childbirth may have made Widtsoe sensitive to the need of including all women in the role of mother.

On December 10, 1924 the Cottonwood Stake opened a maternity hospital for women in Utah. When someone asked Amanda N. Bagley, the first Relief Society president of the Cottonwood Stake, why the sisters had helped build a maternity hospital in that area she explained, "Having had two mothers in my neighborhood die during childbirth from conditions which could have been prevented had they received proper care, seeing children left motherless, I longed to do something for mothers to make motherhood safer."²⁸ Childbirth was a real danger

²⁷ Leah D. Widtsoe, "Priesthood and Womanhood," *Millennial Star*, November 2, 1933, 708.

²⁸ Julia A.F. Lund, "Notes from the Field," *Relief Society Magazine*, July, 1939, 478–479.

in Widtsoe's day and she knew that not just the risk of the mother was involved but the risk of losing the child as well.

Two of Widtsoe's own children could have been saved had medical advancements been developed by the time Widtsoe was in her old age.²⁹ This personal loss and her own understanding that for many women motherhood was out of their control may have been contributing factors to why Widtsoe was inclusive of all women. Her words were not just for women who could have their own biological children, but also for single and childless women. She was confident that all women, regardless of their circumstances, could use their God-given abilities and talents to bless the children of the world.³⁰

Widtsoe as a Mother

Widtsoe always had a desire for a large family but only three of her children survived to adulthood.³¹ Family was a priority for Widtsoe, and her husband John described Leah as a devoted mother.³² Her writings are full of the ideal mother and the model home, but her high expectations for women leaves one to wonder whether Widtsoe felt that she lived up to her own standards. Her marriage was loving, and she and John worked together as equals.³³ The loss of

²⁹ Oral History Interview with Leah Eudora Widtsoe, 11 February 1965, 34, Leah D. Widtsoe Papers, L. Tom Perry Special Collections.

³⁰ Leah D. Widtsoe, "Priesthood and Womanhood," *Millennial Star*, November 2, 1933, 708.

³¹ Oral History Interview with Leah Eudora Widtsoe, Leah D. Widtsoe Papers, February 11, 1965, 33–34, L. Tom Perry Special Collections. Leah and John's children from eldest to youngest: Anna Gaarden Widtsoe Wallace (called Anne) (1899-1990), John Andreas Widtsoe Jr. (1901-1902), Karl Marsel Widtsoe (1902–1927), Mark Adriel Widtsoe (1904-1906), Helen Widtsoe (1907-1907), Mary Widtsoe (1909-1909), Eudora Widtsoe Durham (1912-1995).

³² Widtsoe, *In a Sunlit Land: The Autobiography of John A. Widtsoe*, 235.

³³ Parrish, *John A. Widtsoe: A Biography*, 103.

five of her children and watching especially the hardships of her daughter Anne, must have been difficult for Leah.

The eldest of her children, Anne, experienced challenging circumstances throughout her life. By the time Anne was ten, four of her siblings had died.³⁴ Anne and one of her brothers, Marsel, were very close, but Marsel died at the age of twenty-four. This was likely a challenging time for Anne. John, Leah, and their youngest daughter, Eudora, left for their mission to Europe a few months after Marsel's death, leaving new mother, Anne, in Utah without any immediate family.³⁵ The separation was likely challenging for both Anne and her parents.

This was a crucial time in Anne's life for her to be separated from her family. In 1928 Anne wrote to her parents telling them that her marriage with Lew Wallace was in danger of divorce. She revealed:

We have prayerfully and sincerely talked over the whole matter and have come to the conclusions that it can't be and that the soonest broken-the soonest wounded. And, it is my fault. I cannot reciprocate with love and without that-what's the use?³⁶

Anne acknowledged that love is a key ingredient to a successful marriage, something she could have she learned from watching her own parent's loving marriage. Having come from a broken home, Leah Widtsoe must have desired for Anne and her other children not to have to go through a similar experience.

³⁴ Kari Robinson, oral history, interview by Ashley Laneri, March 7, 2019, Salt Lake City, in author's possession.

³⁵ Robinson, interview.

³⁶ Anne Widtsoe Wallace letter to John and Leah Widtsoe, March 11, 1928, Widtsoe Family Papers, Church History Library, Box 31, Fd. 22.

In 1931, Leah wrote to Augusta Winters Grant, wife of President Heber J. Grant, explaining why Anne's marriage had failed. Describing a visit to Utah made in the middle of their mission, she reported finding Anne in a terrible state. "[Anne] made a brave effort to 'make a go' of her life. She made the mistake of marrying a man whom she admired and respected but did not love--hoping that love would come with life association. Unfortunately, the opposite took place with its dismal results."³⁷ According to Anne's granddaughter, Leah and John loved Lewis, with Leah especially pushing for Anne to marry him.³⁸ Leah may have felt guilt and disappointment for her daughter's divorce. She had spent her life writing about the ideal home and how men and women should work together in a marriage; but ultimately, she could not save her daughter's marriage.

The two surviving Widtsoe daughters, Anne and Eudora, loved their parents.³⁹ Both were especially close to their mother in her older years and took care of her after their father passed away.⁴⁰ Leah's great-granddaughter and Anne's oldest granddaughter, Kari Robinson, who visited Leah weekly in the last thirteen years of Leah's life, spoke of the respect the family had for Leah. She recollected:

It was very matriarchal, as I remember growing up. . . . It was all very focused on pleasing Leah . . . making sure that our lives were worthy, in a sense. . . . It was always in

³⁷ Leah Widtsoe letter to Aunt Gusta, October 29, 1931, Widtsoe Family Papers, Box 8, Folder 9, Utah State Historical Society.

³⁸ Kari Robinson, oral history, interview by Ashley Laneri, 7 March 2019, Salt Lake City, in author's possession.

³⁹ Eudora Widtsoe letter to John and Leah Widtsoe, May 25, 1936, Widtsoe Family Papers, Church History Library, Box 33, Fd. 5.

⁴⁰ Robinson, interview.

the background, like we always had to be good for her. . . . As in behave, as in good Latter-day Saints, good people, healthy eaters.⁴¹

Robinson has great respect and love for her great-grandmother and still feels the effect that her positive influence had on her early years of life.⁴² Widtsoe's life was a contradiction in that she wanted to be a mother and strongly encouraged women to embrace their role as mother, but she could not have all of the children she wanted. Leah may not have been a perfect mother or had the ideal family situation with the loss of her children and her daughter's divorce, but her love and high expectations for her family continue to motivate her posterity today.

Conclusion

Leah Widtsoe used motherhood as a construct, a role that could motivate and empower women to make a change in their society and recognize the significance of their role in the Church. She highly valued the role of mother and wanted nothing more than to be a mother. Her growing up years were difficult, and she was distanced from her own mother until she was fifteen.⁴³ Perhaps her trying childhood motivated her to one day have her own home where she could be close to her children in their younger years. Despite her great desire to have a large family, she struggled with the loss of four children in their youth and a fifth in adulthood. Even in her old age, she felt the sorrow of those losses.⁴⁴ Though her own family faced difficult

⁴¹ Kari Robinson, oral history, interview by Ashley Laneri, March 7, 2019, Salt Lake City, in author's possession.

⁴² Robinson, interview.

⁴³ Oral History Interview with Leah Eudora Widtsoe, February 11, 1965, 34, Leah D. Widtsoe Papers, L. Tom Perry Special Collections.

⁴⁴ Oral History Interview with Leah Eudora Widtsoe, February 11, 1965, 34, Leah D. Widtsoe Papers, L. Tom Perry Special Collections.

challenges, she still aspired to and encouraged women around her to embrace the divine role of mother.

The manner in which Widtsoe used motherhood as a motivation for women to participate fully in society and in the Church is similarly used today by general authorities of the Church. President Dallin H. Oaks has said, “Latter-day Saint women understand that being a mother is their highest priority, their ultimate joy.”⁴⁵ Additionally, President Gordon B. Hinckley stated:

Women for the most part see their greatest fulfillment, their greatest happiness in home and family. God planted within women something divine that expresses itself in quiet strength, in refinement, in peace, in goodness, in virtue, in truth, in love. And all of these remarkable qualities find their truest and most satisfying expression in motherhood.⁴⁶

Widtsoe similarly taught that motherhood was a divine role and that she believed that every woman yearned to be a mother.⁴⁷

In 2018, President Russell M. Nelson used motherhood as a way to help women understand their importance in the work of gathering scattered Israel. He said:

Please note that anytime I use the word *mother*, I am not talking only about women who have given birth or adopted children in this life. I am speaking about *all* of our Heavenly Parents’ adult daughters. *Every* woman is a mother by virtue of her eternal divine destiny.... No one can do what a righteous woman can do. No one can duplicate the influence of a mother.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Dallin H. Oaks, “Parents and Children,” *Ensign*, November 2018, 66.

⁴⁶ Gordon B. Hinckley, *Teachings of Gordon B. Hinckley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1997) 387.

⁴⁷ Leah D. Widtsoe, “The Status of Woman,” *Millennial Star*, April 3, 1930, 267.

⁴⁸ Russell M. Nelson, “Sisters Participation in the Gathering of Israel,” *Ensign*, November 2018, 68.

A few elements of President Nelson’s statement are quite similar to Widtsoe’s arguments nearly a century earlier. Widtsoe also believed that the title “mother” was not just for women who had biological children of their own, and she too felt that the role of mother was a God-given power. Former counselor in the Relief Society Presidency, Sheri Dew, similarly said, “Motherhood is more than bearing children, . . . It is the essence of who we are as women. It defines our very identity, our divine stature and nature, and the unique traits our Father gave us.”⁴⁹ Sister Dew, President Nelson and Leah Widtsoe used motherhood as a construct, a means to motivate women to participate more fully in the gospel of Jesus Christ. The Prophet used motherhood to help women understand the Church’s reliance on them to help gather Israel, while Widtsoe used motherhood to help women participate in the work of Relief Society, work with priesthood leaders, and create change in the world.

Widtsoe may not fully have understood how relevant her message could be today. She wanted women to understand that the world needed strong, righteous mothers, who understood the importance of their role. Former General Young Women President Margaret Nadauld similarly declared at the turn of the twenty-first century, “The world has enough women who are tough; we need women who are tender. There are enough women who are coarse; we need women who are kind. There are enough women who are rude; we need women who are refined. We have enough women of fame and fortune; we need more women of faith.”⁵⁰ Widtsoe understood this. She wrote to help women understand how righteous mothers were needed in her day. What she may not have understood was how timely her message would be for women today who feel that they should make motherhood a priority but are receiving mixed messages from

⁴⁹ Sheri Dew, “Are We Not All Mothers?” *Ensign*, October 2001, 96.

⁵⁰ Margaret D. Nadauld, “The Joy of Womanhood,” *Ensign*, November 2000, 15.

media telling them that one should put off having children, or that other worldly pursuits are more important. Widtsoe's unapologetic attitude toward motherhood can help women today feel that their role as a mother is valued and important to society and to God.

Widtsoe further helped establish that women have an important part in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. She helped women understand that they too can have power in the priesthood. She taught that men and women should be seen as equals in the home because being a bearer of the priesthood was not a status symbol to Widtsoe.⁵¹ Widtsoe's words concerning women and the priesthood may have been given nearly a century ago but her writings can speak to women today. Women who have felt that they are not equal in the Church, or women who have not understood why they are not ordained to an office in the priesthood can learn from Widtsoe to appreciate all that God has given women. Widtsoe taught that God has given women the power to influence generations, God has given them the noble role of being a mother, and that in God's eyes women are seen as equals. These were the teachings Widtsoe emphasized to help women understand their role in the Church.

Widtsoe felt that she was a "nobody," that she did not stand out, that she just supported others in their achievements.⁵² While she was correct about many observations, her own humble self-reflection was short-sighted. As demonstrated in this study of Leah Widtsoe, her writings do stand out, and she was an influential author on her own merit. She sought to enable women and help them feel that their work as mothers mattered in society, in the Church, and to God. Leah Widtsoe's writings demonstrate that she was a woman of courage, of understanding, and of faith.

⁵¹ Leah Widtsoe, "Priesthood and Womanhood," *Deseret News*, February 17, 1934, 3.

⁵² Oral History Interview with Leah Eudora Widtsoe, February 11, 1965, Leah D. Widtsoe Papers, 17, L. Tom Perry Special Collections.

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