

# **Lexia: Undergraduate Journal in Writing, Rhetoric & Technical Communication**

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## **How the LDS Church Communicates with Women Regarding Gender Roles**

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The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints is a religion that focuses on the family. As such, the Church establishes the ideal family unit and defines the gender roles inherent within it. The role of women is particularly important, and is emphasized throughout a woman's life with a variety of consequences. Children, adolescent girls, and adult women are all addressed differently by and within the Church. The information these females are given and the lessons they are taught serve different purposes as women age. However, the communication tactics used for all three groups can have significant consequences on these recipients.

As a woman growing up in the Church, I experienced first hand the Church's teachings about the role of women. My divine role as a woman was explained to me countless times and in a variety of settings, but it was always clear that my role was very different from my brother's and the other boys that I grew up with. I loved singing the songs in Sunday school, hearing stories about what the Heavenly Father wanted from us, and being told that I was a special daughter of God. As I got older, the lessons I was taught grew more specific and serious, while clearly being tailored to my age group. When I was twelve, I began attending Sunday school with other girls my age, and learned what it really meant to be a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. I know what it is like to be on the receiving end of its teachings; as such, my experiences play a role in my analysis of these communications. In the end, my personal understanding of the Church's messages regarding women affected decisions I have made about my own role in the Church.



Me (8) in my baptism dress

### **About the Church: What is a Woman's Role, and How is It Explained?**

Members of the LDS Church, more frequently referred to as Mormons, believe that the power of God is not extinct on the Earth. They believe that there is a living Prophet today and that God speaks through him to address the issues that the Church faces, in a process known as revelation. Mormons believe in a hierarchical system in which men of different authority can also receive revelation about the people for whom they are responsible. For example, a bishop can receive revelation for his congregation. Only people within the Priesthood can receive this revelation and, thus, hold leadership positions in the Church.

The Priesthood, according to Mormon doctrine, is God's power on Earth. Men are "ordained," or given the basic level of the Priesthood when they are twelve, and are eventually given higher levels as they get older. Women, however, are not able to receive the Priesthood, and thus cannot take leadership roles in the Church apart from leading children or other women. This restriction has remained since the founding of the Church in 1830. Though women have attempted to change this limitation through movements such as Ordain Women, outspoken leaders of these groups have been excommunicated from the Church, and change does not appear to be imminent.

The Prophet is the head of the Church and runs it with the help of his two Counselors and Twelve Apostles, another leadership group. These leaders give occasional proclamations and speeches addressed to the entire church, most notably during a biannual General Conference. This is preceded by a short conference for men and a separate meeting called a "fireside" for women, where the audience is primarily adolescents to adults.

Children younger than twelve are taught all together in a Sunday school known as “primary.” Here, children spend half of the time in small groups learning lessons about the gospel and half of the time singing songs and doing more interactive activities as a larger group. At age twelve, they are separated into “young men” and “young women.” They begin to be taught separately about their future roles in a family and in society. Boys receive the Priesthood, the power to act in God’s name, while girls start to work on Personal Progress, an activities book designed to prepare them for their future roles. Even in adulthood, men and women continue to be taught separately regarding their purpose in the church and their gender-specific roles within the family.

### **Addressing Children Through Song: Establishing a Basic Understanding**

Children in the church, as in many other settings, are taught in a simple, lighthearted way. Thus, the most common medium used to teach school-aged children is song. One song that specifically addresses the role of women in the church is “The Family is of God,” which was written by Matthew Neeley in 2008. The song describes the roles that fathers, mothers, and children must fulfill. It also describes the purpose of family in God’s eternal plan.

In the song, the words are left intentionally simple and structured, so that children can more easily understand it. The first verse comforts children by telling them that they are all members of a celestial family and informs them that their Heavenly Father sent them here to “live and learn” with families on Earth (Neeley). The song then highlights distinct gender roles within the family; in the second verse, children learn that the purpose of fathers is to “provide,” “preside,” and “lead” (Neeley). The song also states that fathers are responsible for teaching their children the gospel of the Church.

The third verse explains the role of mothers: “A mother’s purpose is to care, prepare, / To nurture and to strengthen all her children./ She teaches children to obey, to pray, / To love and serve in the fam’ly” (Neeley). This provides a stark contrast to the dominant role of men explained in the second verse. In the fourth and final verse, the children sing about how they will remember what they learned in this song when they become parents. The chorus, sung after every verse, states that “God gave us families/ to help us become what he wants us to be” (Neeley). It explains that by creating the family, God has shown his love for everyone on Earth.

These words are meant to inform children about their parents’ roles, rather than explain their own. These children have not yet raised their own questions about their purpose in life, so the verses of the song simply aim to introduce children to the idea of differing gender roles in the family. Because the song only addresses the purpose of mothers and fathers, children do not have the opportunity to question whether or not their parents are complying fully with the rules described in the song. With this song, the Church leaves children with a message that there is a “best” way for a family to function, leaving little room for children to question these roles. They are merely left with a message of the importance of structured family life.

One way the Church indoctrinates children with its teachings about gender roles in the family is that it teaches children in a way that makes learning about the gospel fun. The song is presented in a cheery, light-hearted manner, with an upbeat melody. The nature of this song suggests to children that learning about and following the gospel is fun and positive. Even if the children do not understand the meaning of the song, they can see that they are singing something good and cheerful. Children between the ages of

five and eleven might understand the lyrics on different levels, but will all learn that loving their family and its prescriptive structure is the ideal.

The song is highly accessible and easy for children to memorize. Parents are encouraged to show their children pictures while singing the phrases repeatedly to allow for easy memorization and recitation later on. The goal is for children to memorize the lyrics of the song so that they become familiar with their future roles when they transition into young adults.

### **Convincing Adolescents: Curbing Vanity and Immodest Behavior**

As children transition into adolescence, they begin to have feelings and desires that the Church must address. In October of 2005, Jeffrey R. Holland, a member of the Twelve Apostles, gave a speech titled “To Young Women”. This speech was given during General Conference, though, as the title indicates, it was targeted towards the “young women” in the Church, which refers to girls between the ages of twelve and eighteen. Approximately sixteen minutes in length, the speech primarily addressed vanity and

problems facing adolescent girls regarding physical appearance and dress.



Elder Holland at the 2005 October General Conference

Understanding that teenagers are particularly susceptible to social pressures, Holland emphasizes the spiritual benefits of dressing the way that God would want a young woman to dress. He suggests that a young woman’s role in society is to set an example of modesty among her peers (Holland). His goal is

both to reassure teenage girls that they are important and to urge them to remember the teachings of the Church.

As an older man, Holland recognizes that he would have difficulty relating to teenage girls in such a way that would take him seriously. To combat this, Holland begins by addressing his age and establishing credibility with his audience by speaking about his granddaughter, who recently reached adolescence. He cites this change as the reason why he chose to speak about the dangers that young women face today: “Because this precious eldest grandchild...is a young woman, I am going to address my remarks to the young women of the Church” (Holland). Holland, by referring to his granddaughter, is able to speak from personal experience and thus becomes more credible to his audience.

Having established that he knows what they are going through, Holland points out that womanhood is something to be proud of, citing the gospel truth that young women are “spirit daughter[s] of heavenly parents with a divine nature and an eternal destiny” (Holland). Though he acknowledges that “moral and physical danger exists almost everywhere” and “temptations... present themselves daily,” he praises most of them for “striv[ing] to do what is right” (Holland). He lists reasons why women are important and states, “Be a woman of Christ. Cherish your esteemed place in the sight of God. He needs you. This Church needs you. The world needs you” (Holland). Holland uses these phrases to tell his audience what the Heavenly Father has designed them to be. Holland describes what God wants them to become and explains that in order to reach that ideal, they must “stay true to the standards of the gospel of Jesus Christ and not slavishly follow the whims of fads and fashions” (Holland). He explains that by following these standards, they will be especially loved by God, and He will not be

disappointed in their failing to comply with His plan for them. Holland plays on teens' lack of confidence by building up their self-worth before becoming more critical.

After illustrating why standards exist, Holland is free to describe them and to be critical of girls who fail to conform to the behavior promoted by the Church and by God. He uses similes in order to better explain his points by stating that modesty in appearance is “always in fashion [in the gospel of Jesus Christ]” (Holland). Holland also encourages teenage girls to “choose [their] clothing the way [they] would choose [their] friends” and to, “in both cases, choose that which improves [themselves] and would give [them] confidence standing in the presence of God” (Holland). He tells women not to worry about what others think of their appearance, and to wear what makes them confident: “Be more accepting of yourselves, including your body shape and style, with a little less longing to look like someone else” (Holland). Despite this advice, he proceeds to state what they should wear and why, while that any vanity or “physical fixation” is “spiritually destructive” (Holland). This seemingly contradictory message conveys to girls that they should ignore their peers' judgements and seek only praise from their Heavenly Father.

In an attempt to convince women that the secular world is making false claims, Holland reiterates that following the world's standards will only lead to unhappiness. He describes the secular “preoccupation with self and a fixation on the physical” as a “social insanity” that “accounts for much of the unhappiness that women... face in the modern world” (Holland). He points out that no matter how hard women try, they will “never be glamorous enough” (Holland). Holland does, however, offer an alternative to the enticements of the world and describes the “loveliest” of women as one with “a glow of health, a warm personality, a love of learning, stability of character, and integrity” who



carries the “sweet and gentle Spirit of the Lord” (Holland). The only solution to finding happiness, Holland asserts, is found within the church.

Holland concludes by using his authority to reiterate the points that he had made. He expresses his sincere belief in the Church, repeating words such as “in reality” and “true” to emphasize his fervent belief in Mormon teachings (Holland). He dedicates his testimony of belief to his granddaughter and “every other young person in this Church” in order to reiterate his personal connection to the issues which he addressed in the beginning of his speech (Holland). He concludes by asserting that everything he has said was all “in the name of Jesus Christ” (Holland). By stating that Jesus Himself approves of what Holland has said, he is able to use the authority of a higher power to legitimize the entirety of his speech. The audience is left with the assurance that, as a leader in the Church who is ordained with the Priesthood, Holland has spoken the truth.

Holland recognizes that as girls grow older, the Church must become more specific about expectations in order to quell doubts and concerns that may have arisen in their minds. As emphasized in his speech, girls are expected to act and dress according to the standards of the Church, standards which are set in order to ease young women into the idea of sexual purity, modesty, and obedience. Doubts are said to be normal and are treated as easily rectifiable problems, but are typically overlooked as legitimate questions or concerns. Teenagers are taught that leaders speak from direct revelation from God, and thus questioning Church leadership is the same as questioning God Himself. To avoid allowing teenagers to succumb to “worldly” pressures and doubts about the Church, adolescents are taught to avoid contrasting opinions. Some leaders, such as Holland, end up encouraging teenagers to look down upon girls who do not follow the same standards that they do, and to avoid spending time with people who

cause dissonance. Thus, a fear of rejection is instilled in teens who would otherwise question the expectations set by the Church.

### **Adult Women: Explaining Their Role in the Family and Society**

In adulthood, women are expected to have moved beyond the temptations of adolescence and now struggle with problems such as raising a family; due to their maturity, they are addressed in a much more straightforward and serious way. By this age, it is assumed that women have a strong understanding of the Gospel and merely need to be reminded of their roles as mothers and wives. In 1979, President Spencer W. Kimball, the prophet of the Church at the time, addressed the women of the Church with a speech entitled “The Role of Righteous Women” (Kimball). Kimball wrote the speech, but it was actually given by his wife, Camilla Kimball, as he was unable to present his address due to illness. The speech is around fifteen minutes long and defines the role of women in the church, in society, and in the home.

While this speech was given over thirty years ago, the teachings of President Kimball remain unrefuted by Church leadership and are still quoted to this day. Several more recent speeches given at General Conference reiterate President Kimball’s views. Notably, Elder Quentin L. Cook of the Twelve Apostles gave an address entitled “LDS Women are Incredible!” at the April 2011 Conference (Cook), and Elder D. Todd Christopherson gave a speech in the October 2013 Conference entitled “The Moral Force of Women” (Christopherson). These speeches reflect the same views that the leadership of the Church has held towards women since at least 1979, with even more emphasis on the strict gender roles of women in the family and in society. All claim that these roles and differences are God’s will and are, in fact, beneficial to both families and individuals. The values of the Church remain unchanged today.

Kimball speaks specifically to adult women about their roles as compared to men. In this way, his speech is similar to the song “The Family Is of God”; however, the way in which the material is presented and the detail used for explanation differ dramatically. Where the song is cheerful and light-hearted, Kimball’s speech is serious and addresses questions which, by this point in their lives, women are seeking answers to. Kimball’s purpose in giving this speech is to ensure that women are following their God-given gender roles, and to chastise those who stray from their pre-determined path.

Kimball begins the speech by reassuring women that they are important to the Church and that they are equal to men in the sight of God. Using the truth that God is “perfect in His love,” he points out that although other “imperfect people” may cause pain due to “insensitivity and thoughtless[ness],” God, in His love for us, will always have the final say (Kimball). Kimball emphasizes that women should not be swayed by the “world,” but should instead listen to what they know to be true (Kimball). He issues a prediction that “the ways of the world will not prevail, for the ways of God will triumph” (Kimball). This functions to convince the women of the Church that they are on the winning side of a social war, which enables them to feel confident in what God’s Prophet on Earth is telling them.

To further convince women of their importance in the Church, Kimball asserts that God sees men and women as equals, just with different roles. Many women in the church question their roles, especially since they cannot be ordained to the Priesthood; this speech is an attempt to assuage these concerns. Kimball uses the claim that women and men are incomplete without each other because their responsibilities differ. He reminds his audience that this equal segregation of responsibility began before birth, when “faithful women were given certain assignments while faithful men were

foreordained to certain priesthood tasks” (Kimball). Kimball states that, “the place of [the] woman in the Church is to walk beside the man, not in front of him nor behind him,” because women are equal to men in the sight of God (Kimball). He describes a woman’s responsibilities as “motherhood and sisterhood,” while a man’s are “fatherhood and the priesthood” (Kimball). This approach is similar to Elder Holland’s strategy: establish importance and worth, and then explain how to achieve the best results.

Kimball continues by addressing these distinct roles and how women should develop themselves to reach their potential. He indicates that in order to fulfill their role, women have a “deep need” to “study the scriptures” (Kimball). Kimball claims that by doing so, women will become “more and more effective in keeping the second great commandment: to love your neighbor as yourself” (Kimball). He asserts that the greatest thing a woman can accomplish is to experience “true sisterhood, wifehood, and motherhood, or other tasks which influence lives for good”—a statement that is meant to empower the group of women to whom the speech is addressed (Kimball). The only way to comfort yourself from worldly anguish, Kimball states, is to “drink in deeply the gospel truths about the eternal nature of your individual identity” (Kimball). He also claims that, by being a member of the Church, women will receive blessings that are “far, far greater than any other blessings you could possibly receive,” suggesting that non-member women can never achieve the same status as Mormon women (Kimball).

To engage his whole audience and to ensure that every woman, regardless of marital status, lives up to the Church’s standards, Kimball suggests courses of action for women who do not have a husband or who have lost their husbands. By way of encouragement, he tells these women that they will be “sealed to a worthy man” in

heaven, and he advises that the only way to ensure this is to “seek excellence” in religious matters and be an active member of the Church (Kimball). Addressing women, who, “because of circumstances beyond their control, must work,” he assures them that God understands, but cautions them not to take “secondary tasks” more seriously than giving birth to and raising children (Kimball). Because of the unpredictable circumstances that some women face, Kimball encourages women to pursue an education in subjects such as homemaking and to develop other skills that will increase their “effectiveness in the home, in the Church, or in the community,” so that they can become “better mothers and wives” (Kimball). He sums up by stating, “let others selfishly pursue false values, but God has given to you the tremendous tasks of *nurturing* families, friends, and neighbors, just as men are to *provide*” (Kimball). This statement makes it clear to women that their primary focus should be to follow the Gospel in its entirety, regardless of circumstance. He asserts that women who do not follow this teaching are “selfish” and are “pursuing false values,” employing fear tactics to convince women not to pursue uncondoned behavior (Kimball).

Adults are meant to utilize what they have been taught and apply it to their daily lives. Women are expected to get married to worthy Priesthood holders and have children. If women question why they cannot have the Priesthood themselves, they are told that they are equal to men in the sight of God and that, by being married, they can still reap the full benefits of the Priesthood. They are told that to be a wife and mother is their primary purpose. This one-size-fits-all approach can be detrimental, particularly when women are unprepared to face life without their promised companion. Women who cannot find a husband or cannot have children are left purposeless; the Church places such heavy emphasis on the traits of a wife and mother that those who are unable

to comply may feel hopeless and useless in the eyes of God. These women are instructed to do everything they can to gain relief in the next life in the form of a worthy husband.

This approach also leads to family units that do not comply with Church standards being depicted as sinful, or not being acknowledged as families at all. Working mothers who do not work out of necessity are seen as unrighteous and selfish for apparently failing to make their children a priority. Same-sex couples are viewed not only as sinful, but also as faulty family units whose children must denounce their parents to join the church. Single mothers are instructed to find a husband so that their children can be raised in a God-approved family unit. This approach can be detrimental not only to the adults but also to the children of these families.

### **What It Means: Intended and Unintended Consequences**

While children, young women, and adult women are all addressed differently, common themes are evident in the way the LDS Church communicates with each. These teachings can have drastic effects on how women view themselves and their purpose. By utilizing fear tactics and defining specific gender roles early on in a woman's life, the Church does not create an environment that is conducive to critical thinking or individuality.

Women are, from an early age, taught that they are meant to achieve three goals: to be a wife, a mother, and an active member of the Church. Without thinking about it, girls internalize these values and incorporate them into their identities; if, later, they question their beliefs, they are questioning their entire identity. Individuals who doubt the leadership of the Church are risking their eternal happiness. Individuality is difficult to encourage when a group mentality has been established since childhood, especially when fear is instilled in those who do not fit the mold.

Fear tactics are used heavily in the Church, though members and leaders alike claim they are not. The Church teaches its members that the only path to happiness is through the Church, and that anyone who follows secular ideology will only appear to be happier temporarily. In particular, women are taught that to follow a course contrary to the Church's doctrine is selfish and against God's express commands. Mormons are told that the greatest crime they could commit is to be an active member of the Church and then to deny its truthfulness. Furthermore, they are taught that by leaving the Church, they will never find true happiness, and will be punished after their death.

Though Mormon women are taught to love even those who disagree with their traditional positions, the language used by the Church suggests that women who choose not to live their lives in accordance with Mormon doctrine are selfish. Labeling these women as such demonizes their lifestyle and encourages Mormon women to ignore what they have to say for fear of being exposed to anti-Mormon preaching, effectively resulting in a form of shunning. Women who have tried to speak their mind and make feminist ideas more prominent in the Church have been excommunicated and have therefore been denied the blessings therein. In 1993, six Mormon scholars were excommunicated for publicly writing and speaking about feminist issues in the Church, and another woman was expelled in 2000 (Ross). More recently, in 2014, the founder of the Ordain Women movement, Kate Kelly, was also excommunicated by LDS leadership (Kristy). These fear tactics are heavily utilized in order to keep members in line, though the leadership argues that these strategies are for the women's own good, and are done out of love for them and for the people that they influence. This strategy is, I believe, one of the most effective tools used by Church members to persuade others about gender roles.

By isolating dissenting members such as those in the Ordain Women movement, the Church defines an “us” and a “them.” Mormons frequently use the term “the world” when speaking of liberal secular society, and refer to themselves as “living in the world but not of the world,” encouraging members to avoid the “pursuits of the world—especially when they are contrary to gospel standards” (Cook, “Being in the World”). Women in the Church are led to believe that they are waging a social war against those who threaten their family values simply by living a life that does not follow Church standards. By excommunicating or shaming women who seek more power in the Church, leaders teach those with doubts that they must adhere to their God-given roles or risk losing their friends, family, and even eternal happiness.

### **My Story: It’s My Life**

As a member of the Church in an area where Mormons were few and far between, I was often exposed to differing ideas about women’s rights and a woman’s role in the home. Until I reached late adolescence, however, I was never bothered by the fact that the only people deemed “worthy” enough to hold significant leadership positions in the Church were men. I could never buy into the separate-but-equal mentality that many members seemed to have about gender roles. I began to read more about feminist activism, and the idea that women should hold leadership positions just like men made much more sense to me than what I was being taught in Church.

What perturbed me most, however, were the lessons in Sunday school regarding education. In school and at home I was taught that school was my priority and that education was a valuable and powerful asset, but at Church, the Young Women leaders consistently told us that, for girls, education was merely valuable if our future husband lost his job and we were left to fend for ourselves—a message that was often repeated



during General Conference. Marriage was always touted as a woman's top priority. While the young men were taught how to lead, and the details of their "Priesthood power," we were writing lists about the qualities our future husbands would have. Encouraging a continued education was never as valued as making sure we understood the expectations of the Church regarding our roles as women.

This limiting view of my own role in the world led me to question Church leadership; this questioning eventually led to my decision to leave the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. I did not feel as though telling women the "right" way to live their lives was a beneficial way to look at family life. While I believe many women are happy living within these roles, women who are not should not be made to feel like they are any lesser. Women should be treated as equals to men, just as the Church claims them to be. By observing my non-Mormon friends' families, it became increasingly clear to me that families can take many different forms, and women can play any role they want to. As a woman, I was unable to reconcile my freedoms in the twenty-first century with the Church's limited view of family and a woman's role within it and in the rest of society.

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