

MORMON WOMEN IN THE MINISTRY

Edited by Emily Clyde Curtis

In our Church, we often see continual revelation and innovation. For years, we have watched men expand their roles in leadership callings. It comes as no surprise that there are LDS women who feel called by God to practice pastoral care in ways that go beyond what is currently defined and expected for women in our religion. Here we define pastoral care as a model of emotional and spiritual support; it is found in all cultures and traditions. In formal ways, we see women provide this type of care when they teach and lead in the auxiliaries, serve as ministering sisters, and serve missions. We also see this when a sister holds the hand of another during a difficult sacrament meeting or brings a casserole to a home where tragedy has struck. Women are well-trained to provide service as one of the ways to minister to their ward and stake community.

As these women show, ministry can be so much more. The path of ministry sometimes means going to divinity school, working as a lay minister, or even seeking ordination in a Christian tradition outside of the LDS Church where women can be ordained. We have asked the following women to share their stories about how they have expanded their ability to minister through theological education and their chosen pastoral vocations. As pioneers who are expanding the roles of ministry for Mormon women today, we also ask how the Church can enhance the traditional model of women's ways of ministering and how this can be shaped by future generations.

Katie Langston converted to orthodox Christianity after struggling with Mormonism's emphasis on worthiness. She is now a candidate for ordination in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and works at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota.

Brittany Mangelson is a full-time minister for Community of Christ. She has a master of arts in religion from Graceland University and works as a social media seeker ministry specialist.

Rachel Mumford is the middle school chaplain at the National Cathedral School, an Episcopal school for girls in Washington, DC. She is an active participant in both Episcopal and LDS communities of faith, reflecting her Mormon heritage as well as the resonance she finds in Episcopal tradition.

Jennifer Roach is a formerly ordained pastor in the Anglican tradition. She is a recent convert to the LDS Church and had to walk away from her ordination in order to be baptized. She works as a therapist in Seattle.

Nancy Ross is a professor and ordained elder and pastor for the Southern Utah Community of Christ congregation.

Fatimah Salleh began life as Muslim, converted to the LDS Church as a teenager, and was recently ordained a Baptist minister after attending Duke Divinity School. Her call to ministry is part of a colorful journey into finding a God for all and for the least.

How do you think members of the Church traditionally define the role of women as ministers?

BRITTANY: “Ministry” or “ministers” are not words I heard much growing up LDS. Traditionally in the Church, the work of women is largely confined to what they can do to serve the youth, children, and other women. Women do not lead men and are expected to serve as a helpmeet to offer support. Women in the LDS church take great pride in being part of the Relief Society and do a fabulous job of networking with other women in compassionate services and ministries to their local congregations. As we have seen, however, women’s voices and spiritual gifts have virtually no place in major decision-making conversations. Most members do not seem overly bothered by this.

RACHEL: I see this Church definition to be grounded in the idea of service to God through service to others. This draws from the meaning of

“minister” as an agent acting on behalf of a superior entity. Until recent direction from Church leadership, members didn’t refer to the idea of “ministry” often, at least in my generation. What I have heard in the last year has been focused on developing a personalized relationship with other members of the ward, particularly those assigned through the ministering program, through attention to their various needs. It’s essentially visiting and home teaching, but with a more flexible, open-ended approach to connecting with others.

KATIE: I’m not sure that “ministry” in general is a term that Mormons use very much; even the new home and visiting teaching programs are referred to as “ministering,” which connotes a particular action people take, as opposed to a “minister,” which confers a kind of identity. Having said that, my experience growing up in the 1980s and ‘90s was that women’s contributions to the community were expressed in terms of nurture and charitable service, with motherhood being extolled as the highest expression of this role.

How do you see your role as a minister? How is it different and how is it similar to the traditional Church model?

NANCY: A few months ago, I became the pastor of my congregation. I have had a lot of mentorship leading up to this and support now that it is my role. Being a pastor is very different from being a bishop, whose job it is to give counsel. My job as a pastor is mostly to listen and affirm that people are loved by God—that they are whole and worthy regardless of whatever brokenness they feel. I organize meetings and events, but I do so with the help of everyone in my congregation.

FATIMAH: I view my role as a minister as being more expansive and deeper than the role in the LDS tradition. I am ordained to be present in hard circumstances, and I have to learn the skill set of presence work:

how to show up at hospitals, prisons, at places of pain, and be emotionally and spiritually prepared to help others carry their pain.

In the hospital where a mother was saying goodbye to her son, who was killed in a drunk driving accident, I was called to the bedside, and I was called to walk with this mother in deep rage and grief. I wasn't there to defend God but to hold grief and deep sadness with a mother. My job is not to fix or defend God and not to try to make hard situations okay.

RACHEL: I carry the person-to-person ministering role in my LDS Church community, seeking to care for others in a way that feels genuine on both sides, to know one another and care for each other on the long journey of life. In addition, I also have a specific role in the spiritual leadership of my Episcopal school community. This is being a "minister" in the other sense, as a member of the clergy with a calling and responsibility to serve in an official capacity in the community. While I do not officiate in some aspects of the Episcopal liturgy that necessitate an ordained priest, I do work hand in hand—and heart in heart—with my fellow chaplains to plan and lead our services and offer pastoral care to our community.

BRITTANY: Along with three other women, I lead the entire congregation in worship, fellowship activities, community outreach, and education and development of our congregants. My ordination and status as a minister are pivotal to this work. I see my role as a pastoral presence in moments of crisis and in the midst of debilitating faith transitions. My job as a minister is a promise I have made to my church, to God, and to the people I serve that I am committed to peacemaking and reconciliation. I will be there to listen, to walk with, and to hold out an invitation to know a God who loves unconditionally.

KATIE: I'm very Lutheran in the sense that I believe strongly in the priesthood of all believers and that all baptized Christians are called to

ministry. My particular call as a public leader in the church makes me no more or less a minister than the nurse, teacher, entrepreneur, service worker, or garbage collector in the pews. The call of public leadership is to preach the gospel of grace, to administer the sacraments of baptism and communion to the people, to speak to contemporary matters of justice and morality, and to be present at the threshold moments of people's lives: birth, death, and transitions of all kinds.

What are your spiritual gifts?

BRITTANY: I think my spiritual gifts are the ability to be fully present in the moment, to have true empathy, and to find a point of connection with almost anyone I meet. I am able to make people comfortable almost immediately, and that is simply an aspect of my personality. In many ways, I feel that our spiritual gifts are simply an extension of who we are. I use them constantly, not simply at church or when I'm engaged in church work. Developing them has benefited me in just about every aspect of my life.

FATIMAH: One of my spiritual gifts is a love of the scriptures. I work with both other pastors and congregants to understand the scriptures in a way that shows them God and helps them hear God's voice. In these works, I can see how social justice is carved out in the word of God.

RACHEL: I have a seeking, hopeful heart. I find joy in asking questions about the nature of life, humanity, and divinity, and I marvel at the many ways that people have explored these questions over time and place. I can find existential wonder in the contour of a line, the dialogue of an ancient story, or the burst of sound. I can listen and I can love. I feel with others the range of joy through sorrow. I love the craft of words, I find spiritual expression in writing, and I revel in the spiritual tension and expanse of scripture, poetry, and story.

I feel most alive spiritually when I am teaching, writing, planning worship with others, or in one-on-one conversation. My work as a school chaplain feels truly like a vocation, being called through experience to the work where I can give with a whole heart. When I was applying to divinity school, I heard the quote from Frederick Buechner that “the place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”¹ I have felt this as I have learned the work of a school chaplain, where I can celebrate the diverse gifts of my students and colleagues and affirm the creative work of making worship authentic. Mary Oliver wrote, “My work is loving the world.”² I feel this work deeply in my calling to sit with colleagues, parents, and young people, to listen, to hold with them what needs to be held, to laugh, to grieve, and to embrace life.

NANCY: I am still trying to figure this out. I give a lot of blessings, both in writing and in person. I can also organize stuff and get things done. This is really useful in church work. A few years ago, I had the idea that I wanted to create an interfaith service for Pride in my city. The main organizer for Pride was initially hesitant about a religious service, but he attended our event and had a good experience. Since that first event, I have been asked to coordinate a similar event for Pride every year. My get-stuff-done gifts have allowed me to build relationships of trust in the community. My congregation looks forward to demonstrating support for our local LGBTQ+ community each year. Pride has become an essential outreach event for our group.

KATIE: I think I have spiritual gifts of communication and teaching. I have always been interested in writing and gravitated naturally toward

1. Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 119.

2. Mary Oliver, “The Messenger,” *Thirst* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006).

a career in marketing and communications after college, where I've worked for about the last fifteen years. To a large extent, my current position in communications and innovation at Luther Seminary is a very meaningful expression of my ministry because I have a chance to help leaders develop more life-giving practices of forming Christian community and faith. I feel called to help reshape the public conversation around Christianity so that we can repent of what often amounts to petty and destructive tribalism in order to live into the liberating and world-expanding gospel of Jesus.

JENNIFER: I think gifts change over the course of one's life, and the kinds of gifts I previously needed, I don't have much interest in anymore. These days I see my gifts in three areas. First, I know how to be with people in their grief. I will mourn with those who mourn. Second, I can help people escape from shame. Shame always destroys. Somehow, I see people's shame and know how to help them out of it. I think Jesus did this a lot—helped people to see the God-given goodness in them. Third, I am on the lookout for the ones who are alone, lonely, left out, and sad. I find ways to include them and let them know the joy of feeling part of a group that accepts them.

What has most surprised you about finding your ministry?

BRITTANY: I'm continually surprised at how inadequate I feel, and yet when I show up prepared and open to God's Spirit, things seem to work out exactly how they need to be. Sometimes, I feel like I need to have all the answers or to have all my "stuff" figured out, but the work I do wrestles with and sits in the uncertainty. God always shows up in those gray areas and I'm not sure that will ever stop surprising me.

FATIMAH: I am a minister at a local Baptist church. When I first began this work, local pastors from many different Christian traditions would

ask me to come preach to their congregations. At first, I was concerned as I tried to explain to a kind Pentecostal pastor that I was Baptist and couldn't preach to his congregation because we weren't from the same denomination. He looked at me like I had two heads. It was then that I realized pastoral vetting is very different outside of hierarchical churches like the LDS Church or the Roman Catholic Church. Most Christian pastors want to know a couple things: "Is this pastor engaging and thoughtful?" and "Do they know the word of God?" The religious tradition one belongs to doesn't really matter to them.

KATIE: I've been surprised at how hard it is. People are difficult everywhere you go, and church people are no exception. Ministry—and, ultimately, faith itself—is about wading through human brokenness and hoping against hope that God is somehow present in the midst of it, and that God's promises of grace, forgiveness, and bringing life from death are real, even when it seems as if there's only chaos and despair.

If you are ordained, how did you decide to take that step? Do you see that as a break or an enhancement of your religious life as a Latter-day Saint?

FATIMAH: I attended divinity school because I didn't know what to do with the call that was rumbling inside of me. I attended divinity school to wrestle with God. So, I went, and I wasn't on ordination track. I considered myself a religious refugee. Then, I found a place through my internships as part of my program where I shadowed two pastors, one Methodist and one Baptist. Both of those pastors would inculcate me with a vision of ordination. I cannot thank those two men enough for seeing ordination in me and speaking life of ordination into me.

JENNIFER: I was previously ordained and gave it up when I joined the LDS Church. I am a recent convert (baptized six months ago) and of

all the things I had to give up, my ordination was probably one of the easiest because of what I believe the nature of ordination actually is. For me, ordination is a community's way of naming the gifts that already exist in a person. I had been displaying the gifts of a pastor for many years before my ordination. My community simply decided to make it official. Walking away from my ordination doesn't take those gifts away from me. I am still every bit the minister that I was before, it just looks different in the cultural context of the LDS world.

I had to seriously re-contemplate this about a month after my baptism when a new LDS friend told me, rather angrily, that I had made a mistake in giving up ordination, "You walked away from what we are all fighting so hard to obtain! What have you done?!" But as I sought to discern what this could mean for me, I knew that all the gifts I have been given are still intact: compassion, a non-judgmental approach, and the ability to diffuse someone else's shame. Those are gifts God gave me, not a church system, so no church system can take them away.

BRITTANY: I would not consider myself a Latter-day Saint any longer and see my ordination as a complete break from my former religious life. Ordination in Community of Christ comes as a response to the needs of the community, the giftedness of the person, and the needs of the community they will be serving. Calls are initiated by church leadership, and to be honest, I have struggled deeply with my call. I had twenty-six years of baggage, damage, and insecurities I was working through when my call came, and it came unexpectedly. I had to work through a new understanding of what ordination meant and decide if it was a responsibility I wanted to take on. Being ordained in Community of Christ in Utah means working with people who are seeking spiritual refuge. It's difficult to completely break away from the culture here, and by being ordained, I was saying I was willing to stand in those moments of faith deconstruction with the hope of being a help and support in the reconstruction. Although I no longer consider myself a Latter-day

Saint, I very much consider myself to be a disciple and follower of Jesus. My ordination has enhanced my understanding of Jesus' message of good news to the poor and downtrodden. My ordination has taken me down a path of learning to set my own ego aside and be fully present in the moment for others. It's given me more empathy and patience and has expanded my understanding of the importance of intention and finding a holy rhythm in life. I am more holistic and self-aware than I was before, and I try a lot harder to hold myself accountable to protect the rights and voices of the most marginalized. These things were important to me before, but through ordination, the purpose of Jesus' mission has come alive.

KATIE: It's not possible to simply un-Mormon myself, so I'm sure my Mormon-ness will always be an important part of my pastoral identity. There are times I'm shocked at the ways in which white mainline Protestants struggle to speak about their faith even within their own families. In meetings with colleagues I'm always saying things like, "This must be my inner Mormon coming out again, but *seriously?*" Mormons do such a powerful job of instilling identity. And while not all of the tactics they employ to do so are healthy, there's something very admirable about that, and I want to bring that commitment to identity and community forward into my ministry. I think that's a gift of my Mormonism that I can share with the broader church.

How has your faith and/or spiritual practice deepened as a result of your chosen vocation?

FATIMAH: I had to endure my own faith shattering. As I result, I have learned to hold my faith very tenderly; I allow it to fall apart, to grow, and to morph in ways that are unexpected because I have learned that I don't want to hold it so tight that I can't grow it with God. A faith that never undergoes shattering and wounding, I don't know if that's really

faith. It's that process that helps you to know that God is still in the midst and with you.

JENNIFER: Ordination can be a real trap when it functions as a belief-limiting scenario. While I was ordained there was no freedom to explore belief beyond what was already prescribed. There were black-and-white limits to what I was allowed to believe. Ordination can be a blessing, but it also can be a straitjacket. You sign on the dotted line and must believe these things and never change. But I like to change and grow. I know how to recognize God's leading in my life, and the day came when following truth was more important than clinging onto my ordination.

NANCY: As an LDS woman, I prayed, fasted, and read the scriptures almost obsessively. I felt that my connection to God was limited to those activities. I now engage in a lot of different spiritual practices and recognize that spiritual practice is more about intention and connection to God and self rather than any particular action. I think that this allows me to see that many activities can have a spiritual dimension. All of this has made my spiritual life richer and more fulfilling to me.

BRITTANY: I am much more mindful of how God moves in and through the everyday. I am not worried about being found worthy of God's love or presence, I now understand that it is all around me and others with whom I come into contact. My ministry has become part of me. I do not stop being a minister once my workday is over. It has also shown me just how little I actually know about life and how much I rely on God and my community for support.

KATIE: Leaving Mormonism and discerning a call to ministry was a decade-long series of existential crises. There were times I couldn't bring myself to open a Bible or pray because it hurt so much. There were times that all I could do was fall on my face and cry out to God because it

hurt so much. There were moments of revelation, moments of struggle, moments of anger, moments of healing. “What the hell are you doing with me?!” were words I shouted to God more than once. Through it all, God has drawn me closer, even when I wanted nothing to do with God and resisted the pull. God is faithful—even when it drives me crazy and I wish God wouldn’t be *quite so* faithful, God is faithful.

What do you hope to see in future generations of LDS women when they feel called to ministry?

BRITTANY: I hope women feel empowered to answer the call in whatever way feels best and most natural to them. Listen and trust the voice inside of you, even if it scares you. Whether that is staying in the LDS Church or finding opportunities to serve outside of the Church. I hope the LDS Church opens up more doors of ministry, but my hope is that women do not let closed doors stop them from answering God’s call.

FATIMAH: My hope is that more and more women are able to live out their calls in the Church, and that the Church will grow to hold women’s calls with greater depth, expansiveness, and inclusivity. I believe in a God who can part the Red Sea and who sits with people in their greatest pain with love. I believe in a God who is a promise keeper.

RACHEL: Allow yourself to feel and follow that call. Feel confident that as you are seeking God, and seeking good, that you will find comfort and joy in that journey. In the Gospel of Luke, when Mary unexpectedly found herself closest to the divine, she heard the words, “Fear not.”³ I hope that LDS women will feel free to be as creative as they want to be, and that they will share their gifts of a passionate mind, open spirit, and loving heart. Be the voice you want to hear. God is with you.

3. Luke 1:30.

KATIE LANGSTON {langston.katie@gmail.com} converted to orthodox Christianity after struggling with Mormonism's emphasis on worthiness. She is now a candidate for ordination in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and works at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota.

BRITTANY MANGELSON {brittanymangelson@gmail.com} is a full-time minister for Community of Christ. She has a master of arts in religion from Graceland University and works as a social media seeker ministry specialist.

RACHEL MUMFORD {rachel.mumford@gmail.com} is the Middle School Chaplain at the National Cathedral School, an Episcopal school for girls in Washington, DC. She is an active participant in both Episcopal and LDS communities of faith, reflecting her Mormon heritage as well as the resonance she finds in Episcopal tradition.

JENNIFER ROACH {jenroach@comcast.net} is a formerly ordained pastor in the Anglican tradition. She is a recent convert to the LDS Church and had to walk away from her ordination in order to be baptized. She works as a therapist in Seattle.

NANCY ROSS {nancyross@gmail.com} is a faculty member in the Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences department at Dixie State University, where she has been teaching for thirteen years. Her degrees are in art history, but she moonlights as a sociologist of religion. She recently co-edited a book with Sara K. S. Hanks titled *Where We Must Stand: Ten Years of Feminist Mormon Housewives* and has just co-edited *Shades of Becoming: Poems of Transition* with Kristen R. Shill. She is an ordained elder and pastor in Community of Christ.

FATIMAH S. SALLEH {fsalleh@gmail.com} was born in Brooklyn, NY to a Puerto Rican and Malaysian mother and an African American father. She is the eldest of seven. Dr. Salleh received her PhD in mass communication from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She also earned a master's degree from Syracuse University in public communication and a second master's in divinity from Duke University. She is the co-author of *The Book of Mormon for the Least of These*, released in January 2020. She is married to Eric Sorensen, and they have four children.