

SISTERS OF THE SOCIETY, SHALL THERE BE STRIFE AMONG YOU? I WILL NOT HAVE IT.

Joseph Smith

A SURVEY OF WOMEN GENERAL BOARD MEMBERS

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In February, 1971, the questionnaire found on the opposite page was mailed to the 175 women who were then serving on the Relief Society, Primary and YWMIA General Boards of the Church. The following explanation accompanied the questionnaire:

I am researching and writing a profile of women in L.D.S. leadership positions, largely General Board members, and I am therefore soliciting your response to the enclosed questionnaire. As you already know, there are many kinds of women in leadership positions in the Church today — some married, some single, some grandmothers, some new mothers, some with large families, others with small families, some with professional careers, others with heavy community involvements outside the home, others almost completely immersed in family responsibilities, etc. I would think that what these women share in common is a testimony which sustains their Church service rather than a unanimity of life style or personality. I am convinced that Church members across the country can benefit by seeing the range of women in top Church posts and by viewing them as individuals and not stereotypes.

My article is being prepared . . . for a forthcoming issue of *Dialogue* which is to be devoted to exploring feminine, Mormon responses to some contemporary concerns regarding the role of women. . . . Women today (men too) are interested in the patterns evolved by other women, especially those in leadership positions. The mass media already make available many kinds of female "models" to emulate (some good, some less so). I believe it would be healthy to share with an audience such as *Dialogue's* both the diversities and similarities of interest and feeling which exist among some of our admired Church women.

Forty-five Board members responded. Of these, 39 (or 23%) sent completed questionnaires, a respectable though not a dramatically gratifying return.¹ Since the numbers involved are small, and since those who answered

¹The Relief Society rate of return was highest. Eighteen questionnaires were received from the 48 Relief Society Board members (37.5%), seven from the 61 Primary Board members (11.5%) and 14 from the 66 YWMIA Board members (21%). Of the six women who declined to fill out the questionnaire, yet still responded, two explained that the timing was inconvenient. One simply returned the postage stamp from the self-addressed envelope which had been enclosed with the questionnaire. Two acquaintances explained that they had been discouraged from giving out information for publicity purposes. A last, and candid woman stated:

I have delayed sending the information you requested for the article in *Dialogue*

may not represent a random cross-section of Board members in some respects,² this article is cautious in generalizing about the make-up of the Boards as a whole. Instead it concentrates on introducing readers to 39 Board members — both as a group and as individuals — giving information about the life styles of at least a portion of our women leaders.

A composite “typical” respondent is an urban Utahn from the east benches of Salt Lake County. Middle-aged (45) at the time of her appointment to the Board, she has served seven years to date. She is married with four children. Her interests are those traditionally associated with women and focus on musical, artistic and literary pursuits, along with home and family. She has served on a Stake Board. Her community involvements are peripheral. She is college-educated, has had some past work experience (usually as a teacher or secretary) and is as likely to be working now as not. She averages ten to twenty hours a week on Church work, receives great satisfaction therefrom, and in the future would like to pursue family and Church activities before all others.

The composite is misleading, however. It represents, no single respondent accurately. All deviate from it in some respect, some in many respects. And the deviations are as interesting as the mean. They remind one that, although a group can be categorized in certain ways and can be seen to possess a personality of its own, no one individual therein is likely to be explained or defined satisfactorily in those same group terms. As will become more apparent later on in the article, the individuality of Board members must make the Board meetings livelier and the Board leadership more tolerant of differing views than one might assume from public pronouncements of consensus or from the above composite.

The following sections summarize the most important questionnaire findings, both highlighting the individual differences and elaborating on the uniformity already cited.

VITAL STATISTICS

Information from respondents on geographic background, age, marital status, family size and educational level reveals a fairly even age distribution overall but considerable uniformity in the other areas. Respondents

because I am not in agreement with the intellectual liberalism that is projected through that publication. I would not like to have any information concerning myself used to further a cause that is not in complete agreement with the words of our prophets or other Church doctrine. The information requested on the form could well be used in this way. . . . Sincerely, I hope that you understand.

²It was possible to determine that the sample is representative in terms of geographic distribution and marital status, because it parallels information on the Board mailing lists. Conversely, the high percentage of returns from working women on the M.I.A. Board does not parallel the percentage of M.I.A. Board members listing business phones on the mailing list, suggesting the sample over-represents working women on that Board. The other two Board mailing lists do not have a separate category for business phones, but if the M.I.A. responses over-represent working women for some reason, the Primary and Relief Society samples may also. As working women tended to have more schooling, were a little younger and expressed somewhat different interests than non-working women, the sample may be unrepresentative in the areas of educational level, age and avocational interests also. In most other areas, there is not enough evidence to suggest whether the sample is representative or not.

appear to have a common cultural background: Utahn, middle class, urban-suburban and educated.

Overwhelmingly, respondents were raised in urban areas of Utah; a mere handful list rural areas in Utah or bordering states. However, for at least part of their youth, seven were raised in non-Mormon urban areas on the east and west coasts or outside the continental United States.

Currently, 27 of 39 respondents live in Salt Lake County. Ten others live elsewhere on the urbanized Wasatch Front. Two who were raised in Utah now live out of the state. This corresponds to the geographic information found on the Board mailing lists.³ For a world-wide Church, such uniformity on the part of its female Boards may appear paradoxical. Responsiveness to the needs and interests of sisters around the globe must depend to a considerable extent on the travels of Board members to the various stakes and on the sensitivity and cosmopolitanism of the Boards' urban Utahns, rather than on the actual diversity of Board representation. This naturally places a heavy burden on Board members, and Church members can cite examples of the communication problems which often ensue when a visitor from Salt Lake travels to outlying stakes. In partial explanation, one can assume that under present organizational requirements of weekly meetings and frequent sub-committee meetings, geographic access to Salt Lake City remains of considerable importance. Interestingly, however, the Relief Society mailing list reveals that the four Board members who live outside Utah are drawn from such widely distant points as Mexico, Missouri, Arizona and Washington, D.C.⁴ One can speculate that perhaps its organizational structure is modifying somewhat to accommodate more geographic diversity.

The present ages of respondents range from 28 to 72; they were appointed at ages ranging from 28 to 62. They have served anywhere from three months to 33 years. Near 60 on the average, Relief Society respondents are the oldest; at 45, MIA respondents are the youngest group. However, it appears that there is a trend toward younger appointments for all three Boards.⁵

Eighty-five percent of the respondents are married, a figure comparable to the percentage on the Boards as a whole.⁶ That there is any diversity at all in marital status is largely attributable to the MIA Board respondents,

³Forty-four of the 48 Relief Society Board members live along Utah's Wasatch Front. Of the 35 from Salt Lake County, only two live west of 7th East. (For those unfamiliar with Salt Lake County, it divides east and west at approximately 7th East along socio-economic lines, east representing the higher socio-economic level.) The YWMIA pattern is similar. Sixty-four of 66 Board members live on the Wasatch Front; of the 50 who live in Salt Lake County, one lives on the west side. Exhibiting an even narrower geographic range, none of the 61 Primary Board members lives off the Wasatch Front. Of the 42 who live in Salt Lake County, three live on the west side of the Valley.

⁴Since the questionnaires were mailed, a fifth non-Utah resident has been added to the Board: a Japanese woman living in Hawaii. (What, if any, additions have been made to the other Boards is not known to the author.)

⁵The median appointment age is 42 years for those who have served five years or fewer, compared to 51 for those who have served longer.

⁶The mailing lists reveal that the figure is 12.5% for Board members overall. Sixteen of the 66 M.I.A. Board members, one of the 48 Relief Society Board members, and five of 61 Primary Board members are single.

five out of 14 of whom are single. There was one unmarried respondent from the other Boards.

In family size there is amazing uniformity — respondents from each Board average slightly over four children, whose births were spaced over an eleven-year period (or between three and four years apart). Sixty percent of the respondents have four or five children. There are few mothers with less than three⁷ or more than six. Only one had as many as seven. More than half the mothers did not have their first child until the age of 25 or over. Nearly seventy percent were still producing at age 35 or over; however, eighty percent had quit before the age of 38. There was no evident shift in family size by generation, i.e. the older sons did not have bigger families or vice versa. The average age of the youngest child at the time of the mother's appointment is nine years for the Primary and MIA, 16 for the Relief Society, reflecting the older appointment age of Relief Society respondents. Five Primary and MIA respondents actually had pre-schoolers when they were appointed.

Respondents are an educated group. Two-thirds have a bachelor's degree; more than half have undertaken graduate work as well. Primary and MIA respondents have the most schooling, but they are also younger than the Relief Society respondents, and the two facts relate.⁸ Four-fifths of those with graduate work are married.

<i>Highest Educational Level Attained</i>	<i>No. of Respondents</i>
High School graduate	1
1-3 years college	9
Bachelor's degree	12
Other post high-school degree (business, etc.)	3
Some graduate work	6
Master's degree	6
Doctor's degree	2

PAST AND PRESENT PURSUITS AND FUTURE HOPES

Within the framework established by their uniform cultural background, the respondents have developed different interests and talents, ranging from water skiing to publishing poetry and from public speaking to composing music. Cited interests fall into the following categories:

Music, fine arts and dance	45% of respondents
Writing and literature	40% of respondents
Home Economics (sewing, cooking, decorating, etc.)	30% of respondents
Speech and Drama	20% of respondents
Working with People	20% of respondents
Teaching and administrative affairs	20% of respondents
Family	15% of respondents
Sports	10% of respondents
Other	5% of respondents

⁷Those with less than three children all have passed child-rearing years, however, and will not be adding to their families by natural increase.

⁸Respondents with graduate work are nine years younger (age 47) on the average than those without it. Those who completed college are six years younger (age 51) on the average than those with less schooling.

It is worth noting that some respondents were unwilling to have their professional or family pursuits taken for granted as important interests and instead listed them specifically in the interest and talent category.

The questionnaire reveals that General Board members have participated in such community activities as P.T.A., fund drives, political and civic causes, health and welfare organizations, educational boards, professional societies, and art, music and dramatic groups. One third of the respondents have held responsible positions in these organizations. Board work may have limited such activities, since half of the respondents list no current community service. Some state specifically that Board service consumes time which in the past was spent in community service. Less than one-fifth of the respondents now cite current positions of responsibility in community organizations.

Perhaps the biggest surprises in the responses were in current occupational status. Half the respondents have a professional career which they are pursuing on a full or part-time basis. Ten come from the M.I.A. Board (70% of its respondents), five from the Relief Society (28% of its respondents) and four from the Primary Board (57% of its respondents). It seems unlikely that these high percentages of working women would hold for the Boards as a whole. (See footnote 2)

In contrast to the previous work experience of those who are now full-time homemakers, the occupations of those who are currently employed are not limited to those which have been traditionally associated with women, such as teaching and secretarial work. Eight of the 19 have secured positions on university faculties or in male-dominated business fields. The occupational breakdown follows:

University teaching and administration	6 respondents
Elementary-secondary teaching and administration	5 respondents
Business jobs	3 respondents ^a
Secretarial or Office Work	3 respondents ^a
Music Teaching	2 respondents
Homemaker	20 respondents

Of the 19 working women, 13 are married. They have as many children as do the full-time homemakers, and at least ten of these women have worked while their children were growing up. Of the eight who still have children at home, four are part-time and four full-time teachers, i.e. pursuing careers which probably are among the simpler ones to combine with homemaking.

The working women are more highly educated than respondents as a whole. Seventeen have college degrees and 12 of these have done some graduate work. That means that only two of the 14 respondents who have undertaken graduate work are not working, whereas of the 12 with only college degrees, 7 are not working, and of the 13 with less schooling, 11 are not working. Apparently, the more schooling a woman has, the more likely she is to be working, which may mean that the encouragement within Mormon culture for acquiring as much education as possible actually helps direct women toward multiple roles similar to men's.

^aTwo of the six in these combined categories work for the Church. One other who gives the Church 40 hours a week in service listed her occupation as housewife.

Respondents were asked to check activities which they would *most* like to pursue in the future. Nearly everyone checked family and Church, but it was interesting to note that half checked four or all five options: family, Church, career, community and private pursuits. Those doing so apparently felt they could handle a number of roles simultaneously and balance the competing demands. Characteristic of those replies were the following:

I have a thousand interests and have to continually set priorities and organize my time and activities. I honestly am involved in improving my contribution and participation in *each* of the above areas. However . . . community service at this time must take a backseat to my family and church obligations.

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I have a firm conviction that my most important task is to teach my children the Gospel. I have found that my General Board work and the limited professional involvement I have had in the past few years have helped me to be a better gospel teacher in my home. My children are very young but they are learning to assume responsibility and to be independent because their help is genuinely needed if Mother is to accomplish her tasks. I am able to do most of my work at home, however. I feel this is important with a family like ours.

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The world is an exciting, stimulating place. Working in many areas makes it more so.

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I would like to marry, yet I believe all should continue to learn all possible. Life would not be worth living without Church service. Travel and hobbies needed.

One woman who chose community service above all else explained.

Most L.D.S. members need to be more involved in community — training we receive in Church positions is invaluable in community.

Characteristic of those checking three or fewer areas were the following:

The Church and my family and home have been my life. They always will be.

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Interested in all types of handcrafts and anything to improve home and surroundings. Child care and development. Would like to be a theologian.

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Home seems most desirable after many years of community service. [This response was characteristic of a number of older Relief Society respondents, who cited their desire to spend time with grandchildren, traveling, etc.]

CHURCH ASSIGNMENTS

As might be expected, three-fourths (30) of the respondents have served at some point in all three Church auxiliaries in both administrative and teaching positions. One fourth have served in the Church music programs. One fourth have mission experience (either Stake, full-time or as wife of a Mission President). Four-fifths list Stake Board service; one third have

been president of a Stake auxiliary. Several cited service on a general board other than the one on which they were currently serving.

In terms of the amount of time respondents spend on Church work per week, approximately a sixth average over 20 hours, half average 10-20 hours, and a fourth average 5-10 hours. For most of them, obviously, Board work consumes as much time as would a part-time job. From other tabulations hints emerge of flexibility and pragmatism in Board demands. For instance, the M.I.A. Board respondents, who together have the most young children, average less hours per week on Church work than do the other respondents. Conversely, of the seven respondents who listed 20-40 hours or more per week, six have grown children.

Two-thirds of the respondents described their child-care solutions while performing Church assignments. The other third either declined to do so or cited no need for sitters while performing Church work. The most popular sitters were relatives (apparently still plentiful and accessible in Utah, in contrast to the situation confronting most Mormon emigrés from Utah) and immediate family (husbands, older children), but half of those responding still found some need for paid sitters. Three cited trading with friends, and four cited live-in help.

CHURCH INFLUENCES

Respondents were asked to describe ways in which the Church had most helped them to grow and develop as women. Approximately a third said the Church had made them better wives, mothers and homemakers. The rest of the responses mentioned ways the Church helped respondents in their role as human beings rather than as females, e.g. by providing opportunities for leadership growth, talent development, Gospel knowledge, goal setting and pursuit of individual identity and self-worth. The following is a sample of the responses to this question:

[It] developed leadership qualities, good grooming habits. Helped me to be a lady.

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My husband's example and activity in Church assignments have encouraged similar effort on my part. The greatest single blessing has been his honoring and magnifying his priesthood so that its influence permeated our home and lives, and encouraged us to grow and develop similarly.

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I rather balk at the phrase "as a woman." My experience in the Church has affected my development and role as an individual, as a human being.

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Its broad outlook for the eternal development of a person; its emphasis on continuing education and achievement, its stress on group relationships . . . , its in-depth understanding of love, compassion, tolerance.

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The Church has given me confidence in my ability and talents. It has helped me in homemaking, in giving talks, in meeting people and conversing with them.

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The Church is responsible for giving me the proper understanding of woman's role and the responsibility of being a wife and mother.

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As a person, the Church has given me leadership experience which is invaluable. But as a woman, I don't really see that the Church has made a great contribution to my life.

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The teaching auxiliaries of the Church . . . have been a constant stimulus for growth.

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I believe that when you have a strong testimony and are called to do something you have never done before, you reach and struggle. In that reaching, you grow and develop. The Church challenges its women.

The last question on the questionnaire asked if there were Church programs and attitudes of Church members which Board members would like to modify in order to better promote their growth and development as women. This question proved troublesome. Nine respondents left it blank, four gave unqualified "No's," and seven gave elaborated "No's," some of which follow:

I am totally committed to the church program. I like being a woman, have no negative feelings about male authority. I think women are given tremendous opportunities to promote growth and development.

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If women took advantage of the opportunities now provided, they would have ample growth and development.

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I wouldn't modify the programs, only modify me to more nearly conform — then I'd guarantee my happiness, success and salvation.

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I feel women at *all* times should respect the Priesthood.

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No, I don't feel there are any particular items — maybe the feelings concerning pants suits?

One respondent, who left the question blank, expressed the following concern:

The Church has faced considerable criticism and negative attitudes throughout its history, and it is only natural, I suppose, that orthodox members should have a defensive attitude. Even though we realize that truth can weather any storm, half-truths can do much to undermine faith and even prevent an acceptance of truth. Even *Dialogue*, which I am sure intends to be fair through its articles, has at times done the Church disservice through innuendos or half-truths. . . . Many of the Board members may not reply to your questionnaire . . . not knowing what interpretation you might put upon the information.

The wording of the last question seemed the most serious flaw in the questionnaire, since it did not communicate its complete intent. It was meant

to elicit two kinds of comments (besides "No"): 1) attitudes which Board members felt we all (or some of us) needed to work on, and 2) plans or efforts to improve various women's (or girls') programs within their scope of responsibility. In general, the "Yes" responses considered only the part of the question dealing with attitudes. Perhaps if the question had asked if there were programs which Board members would like to modify or were already modifying, it would have looked less like an invitation to publicly criticize programs outside their jurisdiction. Nonetheless the question generated the expression of desirable attitude changes from 19 respondents, a representative sampling of which follows:

Families have a need to be able to spend more time together.

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Not condemn working mothers so heavily. They really can keep close to their children and not let them just run loose when they are tending to other responsibilities. However, a supportive and loving husband and family surely makes things easier when pressures arise. . . . My husband has his own Church callings that are demanding, . . . but we work towards a unity in our home and . . . treasure our Family Home Evenings and other times together, alone and with the family.

* * * * *

In every way the Church is trying to bring about the very thing I would like to bring to action — and that is to create less prejudice among the Saints. I see a feeling among the membership of the Church of looking down on other members of the Church from other parts of the world. I feel it is wrong not to love everyone the same. [Five others commented on the need for more understanding of those not like "us," less prejudice, less self-righteousness.]

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. . . Not emphasize size of family but quality of family.

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I honor and respect the Priesthood, but it occasionally gripes me when in meetings or other gatherings members of the Priesthood are singled out for assignments that can just as capably be handled by a woman. Even in such a minor thing as calling on someone to pray, if there are 20 women and two men present, one of the men will be asked. . . . Where both YW and YMMIA have *equal* authority, it seems to me the deference toward the Priesthood is *unequal*.

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[I wish there were] less stratification of the Church by age levels and gender.

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The undesirable attitudes are usually personal. . . . I would prefer having the Relief Society program more flexible. Some of the lessons are too much dominated by religious motivation.

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Personally, I wish the membership could handle or accept the place of the single person in the Church. Not all of us who are single are sorrowing over our status. Many of us have found useful ways of knowing we matter to society, nor do we envy the married ladies whose lives center around home, church, and grocery store.

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I believe our philosophy "of the world, but not a part of it" is worthy in a specific sense but can lull us into an indifference or complacency that in many cases is undesirable.

CONCLUSION

Despite a common background, these Board members do not move through their days in the same fashion. Some work as housewives; others work outside the home. Some actively serve the community; others do not. Some pursue cultural interests; others pursue home-centered activities. What they share, however, is their dedication to the Church, confirmed by their Board service, with its time and talent demands, often continuing year in and year out. It is also confirmed by their personal testimonies "of the beauty and practicality of the Gospel," "of deep, abiding faith in God," which again and again were inclined in their questionnaire responses. Yet their attitudes about the Church's role in their growth also remind one that, though dedicated, they are different people with their own distinct perspectives. Their own words show that each brings her own spirit, her own need, her own background to the Church; and in turn each receives her own kinds of rewards and her own testimony of the value of her relationship with that Church. The life styles and thought processes of these women suggest that the Gospel not only can accommodate but may actually inspire and sustain their role divergence.

