

“Not Invited, But Welcome”: The History and Impact of Church Policy on Sister Missionaries

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INTRODUCTION¹

Women in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have engaged in missionary work since the year of the religion’s founding. But sociological research on the experience of these missionaries is still young and stands as a field white and ready to harvest.² To lay the groundwork for broader research, we focus here specifically on church policy for sister missionaries. We argue that women’s low numbers relative to men in the mission field are the results of an amazingly effective and self-regulating church policy which discourages women from choos-

1. The authors thank many who contributed to this article, most notably Julie Lauper-Cook for willingly sharing her sister missionary interview transcripts, Rebecca Chandler as shepherdess and cheerleader, Jessie Embry and Maxine Hanks as generous reviewers, and our German Professor husbands, Rob McFarland and John Lyon, for the article’s title, thoughtful editing, and for frequently rescuing us from the clutches of our children to give us writing time.

2. Some notable exceptions include a handful of historical pieces about missionary wives in the Pacific islands, Calvin Kunz’s Master’s thesis on the history of sister missionaries in the 19th century (1976), Vella Neil Evans’s dissertation on women in official church discourse (1985), Maxine Hanks’s analysis of sister missionaries and authority (1992), Jessie Embry’s work with oral histories (1997, 1998), and Shauna Sweet’s gender analysis of the missionary experience (2003)—all cited below. We also thank Jessie Embry for noting that although official church discourse and personal histories about full-time missionary work focus overwhelmingly on men’s experiences, there is little literature taking a social science

ing a mission while simultaneously welcoming those who do and allowing for no desiring missionary to be turned away.

The sister missionary experience is as varied as the number of missions, mission presidents, and missionaries who serve, making it a daunting subject for study. A thorough treatment of the subject would include the history and doctrine behind missionary work, messages to women about supporting male missionaries, the stereotypes surrounding sister missionaries, women's individual decisions to serve (or not to serve), the long-term consequences of their decisions, the perception of members and non-members toward sister missionaries, sisters' performance compared to elders, gendered issues in missionary work, gender-neutral issues in missionary work, sisters and leadership in the mission field, and sister missionaries in non-proselyting roles, to name a few facets of this rich subject matter.

This article will explore one small piece of this mosaic: the evolution of official church policy on single women missionaries and its impact on the mission field and on perceptions of sister missionaries. We believe this piece of the picture is a dominant motif that shapes all the other issues. To trace the evolution of policy, we rely heavily on Jessie Embry's work with letters from the First Presidency to mission and stake leaders about calling and managing missionaries. We add to this a content analysis of official church publications and addresses at general conferences and other official church gatherings, such as women's and youth conferences.³ These statements, made to the church populace at large rather than circulated privately, help to track changes as well as tenacious continuities in the roles of sister missionaries and to probe how these public statements may have formed popular opinions about sister missionaries.

First, we trace the evolution of publicly known policy on sister mis-

perspective on the subject. A few rare exceptions include Thomas Madison and Thomas Marion, "LDS Missionaries' Experience: Observations on Stress," *Association of Mormon Counselors and Psychotherapists (AMCAP) Journal* 15 (2 1990), Gordon and Gary Shepherd, *Mormon Passage: A Missionary Chronicle* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1998) and Levi Peterson, "Resolving Problems for Missionaries Who Return Early," *Sunstone* 127 (May 2003).

3. Data was culled from electronic searches for the root phrases "sister missionaries," "lady missionaries" and "elders and sisters" in the past 30 years of church periodicals as available on the official church website <www.lds.org>, and on the CD-ROMs "New Mormon Studies" and "LDS Collectors' Library" released by Smith Research Associates in 1998. These CD-ROMs include church documents and publications as well as secondary sources dating from the 1820s to 1997. We also conducted a similar search of the church magazine *The Improvement Era* from 1897 to 1955 on the "Gospelink" CD-ROM released in 1998 by Deseret Books. Unfortunately the magazine is apparently not yet electronically available for the years 1956-1971 after which it was replaced by the *Ensign* and the *New Era*, which are both searchable on the official LDS website.

sionaries and discuss the explicit and implicit messages sent to men and women about women's role in missionary work. We then discuss the impact this church policy has on women themselves and on general perceptions of women missionaries. Finally, we explore some possible reasons for a church policy designed to keep numbers of women missionaries low. Our analysis of this policy yields insights into how the church manages and portrays gender roles.

ESTABLISHING POLICY

From 1830, married women seem to have served missions in every possible way: they served with and without their husbands, official calls, having been ordained or set apart, and they served for a variety of reasons.⁴ The first single, full-time, certified female missionaries were called in 1898 as the result of a confluence of requests from two Mission Presidents and a Stake President to the First Presidency asking for sisters.⁵ This followed over half a century of proselyting by more than 200 married female predecessors.⁶

It is likely that church members were aware of "lady missionaries" in other Christian faiths. By 1882 Protestant societies had sent out 694 single women missionaries and hundreds of them served in Utah in the decades leading up to the turn of the century, mostly as schoolteachers opening schools to influence Mormon children.⁷ Indeed, Joseph W. McMurrin, mission president of the European Mission in 1904, mentioned that LDS sister missionaries were not conspicuous because "all the churches have women engaged in a similar way."⁸

Polygamy was prominent at the time as a primary and distinguishing characteristic of the saints, and non-Mormons were understandably curious about the women of the LDS church. George Q. Cannon in an

4. Maxine Hanks, "Sister Missionaries and Authority" in *Women and Authority* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), 317-323.

5. Calvin S. Kunz, "A History of Female Missionary Activity in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, 1830-1898" (M.A. thesis, Brigham Young University, 1976): 35-36.

6. For a more complete history of women who served missions prior to 1898, refer to Kunz, "History of Female Missionary Activity"; Jessie Embry, "LDS Sister Missionaries: An Oral History Response, 1910-70," *Journal of Mormon History* 23 (Spring 1997): 100-139; and Hanks, "Sister Missionaries and Authority."

7. Vella Neil Evans, "Women's Image in Authoritative Mormon Discourse: A Rhetorical Analysis," (Dissertation, University of Utah, 1985) and Jana K. Riess, "'Heathen in Our Fair Land': Presbyterian Women Missionaries in Utah, 1870-1890," *Journal of Mormon History* (Spring 2000): 165-195.

8. Joseph W. McMurrin, "Lady Missionaries," *Young Woman's Journal* 15 (December 1904): 540.

1898 conference address related the story of a General Authority and his wife visiting a small branch in the East. They found that many non-members felt: "'Well, we have seen the Mormon Elders, but we have not seen the Mormon women; we would like to see. . . what kind of people they are.'" When the elder's wife sought out one of the more vocal complainers, "the lady was so pleased at meeting one of our sisters, an intelligent woman, and a woman that did not look as though she was a poor, down-trodden slave that she entered the Church."⁹ The mere physical presence of Mormon women in the mission field spoke volumes about the church and its treatment of and relationship to women. As Joseph W. McMurrin said of sister missionaries: "I was always impressed with the feeling that those who heard them could never afterwards be made to believe the terrible stories that are so freely circulated in some places to the injury of the Lord's people."¹⁰

Despite this potential for improving the image of the church, the First Presidency seemed reticent to call sister missionaries until increasing pressure to do so finally persuaded them. President George Q. Cannon and Apostle John W. Taylor prepared the church for single women missionaries in the April 1898 general conference with very cautious and guarded language. After citing numerous requests for women to serve missions, President Cannon explained:

We do not want unwise women sent any more than unwise men, because they could do more injury than they could do good. But if they can get a recommend from their Bishops as wise, suitable women, we will set them apart. . . . It seems as though the Lord is preparing the way for the women of this Church to do some good in this direction. To some lands and under some circumstances suitable women might go. . . .¹¹

This wary change in policy was influenced by increasing petitions for women to join their husbands on missions and a growing interest among mission presidents in tapping women to go "where the elders could scarcely gain a hearing."¹² Given that hundreds of LDS women had already willingly and successfully served as missionaries in varying capacities and circumstances, it seemed more and more illogical to restrict missionary work to men.

In spite of these cautious beginnings, only two years later a 1900 *Young Woman's Journal* (an early forerunner of *The New Era*) published a series of essays about women in the mission field, noting that the LDS

9. President George Q. Cannon, *Conference Report* (April 1898): 7.

10. McMurrin, 540.

11. George Q. Cannon, 7.

12. Diane Mangum, "The First Sister Missionaries," *Ensign* 10 (July 1980): 62-65.

College offered a course for women to prepare for missions.¹³ Other church leaders also expressed some enthusiasm. In 1901 Apostle Francis M. Lyman returned from the European Mission and was reported to proclaim "that the lady missionary is no longer an experiment, but an unqualified success."¹⁴ This acclamation was documented in the Relief Society periodical *Woman's Exponent*, but was not shared from a general conference pulpit. Official messages in conferences about sister missionaries usually remained muted and included caveats qualifying the circumstances under which sisters should serve.

For church leaders, the success of women in the mission field seemed to depend on keeping their numbers small. President James G. Duffin of the Central States Mission was quoted in a 1904 issue of the *Young Woman's Journal*:

In the selection of lady missionaries much discretion should be exercised. They will probably never be sent out in considerable numbers. The few who do go out into the world will be to the world an index of the character of our mothers, our wives and our daughters. Let the reflection be that of the noblest womanhood on earth.¹⁵

While President Duffin's statement appears prophetic (or prescriptive), he does not explain why women would never be sent out in comparable numbers to the men. Nor does he expand on the discretion necessary in choosing women for proselyting. Insinuated in his statement is that greater discretion is needed in selecting women than in selecting men for missions. Duffin's statement raises a question of causality: are women to be sent out in low numbers because only a select few can represent "noblest womanhood," or do women need to be exemplary because there are so few of them and many eyes will be watching them as representatives of their whole sex? We are reminded of the common observations that in male-dominated spheres, women must outperform men in order to find acceptance from their peers and supervisors.¹⁶

In 1907 the same Francis M. Lyman, who six years earlier had reportedly declared sister missionaries an "unqualified success," made a markedly more reserved and bounded statement in the formal setting of a general conference address.

13. Evans 148-89.

14. Evans 149, quoting *Woman's Exponent* (Aug 1, 1901): 22. Unfortunately the setting in which this proclamation was made is not known.

15. McMurrin, 539.

16. Rosabeth Moss Kanter, *Men and Women of the Corporation* (New York: BasicBooks, 1977).

The ministry in this Church is not confined to the male members; for our sisters are also teachers, and advocates, and expounders of the faith. They have a work in the ministry, besides taking care of their homes and families; but of course they are almost entirely home missionaries. A few of our sisters have gone into the world to preach the Gospel, and I suppose there is no sister in the Church but what would go as readily as the brethren if she were called. And that is the difference in Church membership between the brethren and the sisters. . . . The Elders are called and designated by the voice of the Lord . . . to hold the Priesthood, to officiate in the foreign ministry, and to preside in the affairs of the Church generally. The brethren are supposed to be in the work from the time they are ordained.¹⁷

Lyman did not question women's willingness to do full-time missionary work, but described missionary labors as an auxiliary to their domestic responsibilities. Men, however, by virtue of their priesthood ordination, were required to do mission work. The prevalence of this theme would remain consistent for the next century. The policy was simple: some women were certainly capable, willing and welcome, but on the whole their first responsibility lay with home and family while men's ordination to the priesthood was an automatic call to missionary work. It was powerful rhetoric that would keep the ratio of women to men low without ever turning away a woman's mission application. Church leaders emphasize the desirability of this ratio repeatedly, but the official record, as we discuss later, offers only a few hints about the reasons behind such a policy.

ACCEPTING THE POLICY

Advocates of women missionaries clearly encountered resistance to this role change. A 1915 article in the church magazine *The Improvement Era* (a forerunner to *The Ensign*) titled "Do You Believe in Sister Missionaries?" began with the statement: "[Q]uite a division of opinion prevails among the people on this question." The essay, written by a sister missionary serving in Philadelphia, went on to argue passionately in favor of women, given their innate ability to do "those small things that only women can do."¹⁸ That same year, however, there were also signs that sister missionaries were indeed gaining acceptance in the church: A report from the Eastern States Mission published in *The Improvement Era* stated:

17. Francis M. Lyman, of the Quorum of the Twelve, *Conference Report* (April 1907).

18. Anonymous, "Do You Believe in Lady Missionaries?" *Improvement Era* 18 (October 1915).

The idea of having lady missionaries is new in this mission, but is no longer an experiment. The faithful labors of these sisters have gone far in making the mission what it is today. Neither their devotion can be questioned, nor their industry criticized. . . . So splendid has this feature of the missionary work been, that the time is looked for when two or more lady missionaries will be placed in each of the twelve conferences of this mission.¹⁹

Adding credence to this sentiment, then Apostle David O. McKay published an article titled "Our Lady Missionaries" for a 1921 *Young Woman's Journal*, in which he related his own "conversion" to the value of women in the mission field. He had met two exceptional young women serving in the Scottish mission 22 years earlier but had wondered if they were not the exception to the norm and continued to doubt that the mission field was a seemly place for "young girls." He went on to say:

Well the experience of the intervening years has changed me; for many an instance has driven home the fact of the sweetness, potency, and permanency of the work of our lady missionaries. But the full realization of the good they are accomplishing even more, did not come to me until. . . I entered upon this tour of the missions. Almost without exception, the women whom we have met in their "fields of labor" have proved to be not only equal but superior to the men in ability, keen insight and energetic service.²⁰

It seems that through hard work and success early sister missionaries graduated from an unofficial probationary status to full-fledged legitimacy, if not pedestal-hood, in the mission field. A few other enthusiastic appraisals of women missionaries came in general conference addresses. In the first half of the 20th century, current and recently released mission presidents often reported on their missions in general conferences. Women who served with their missionary or mission president husbands were occasionally mentioned by name and praised for their contributions to the work. Presidents often reassured parents that their "missionary sons and daughters" were healthy and happily working together.²¹ Another mission president extended a rare open-armed welcome to women in the October 1928 conference:

I can't speak too highly for the young ladies of our mission, young ladies who have come into the world to preach the gospel. They can get into the

19. Anonymous, "Messages from the Missions," *The Improvement Era* 18 (March 1915).

20. David O. McKay, "Our Lady Missionaries," *Young Woman's Journal* XXXII (1921): 503.

21. For examples, see Elder Elias S. Woodruff, President of the Western States Mission, *Conference Report* (October 1928): 56, and Elder Miles L. Jones, President of the East Central States Mission, *Conference Report* (April 1929): 39.

homes of the people and find an opportunity for explaining the gospel where the elder cannot go. Send us more lady missionaries. We have had no trouble with a single lady missionary in our field. I was not wholly in favor of lady missionaries when I first went out, because I thought they would cause so much trouble; but now I am always glad to see them come, because my experience has taught me that they can do a great work.²²

Yet in spite of these selected words of appreciation and welcome, as sisters became an established feature of many missions, missionary policy remained highly gendered. The rules for men and women entering the field held tenaciously to a two-track system based on sex.

CODIFYING POLICY

In the forties, fifties and sixties, official church statements about sister missionaries reveal a settling of previously fluid policies such as age, length of service, and relationship to leadership. It remains unclear from available sources exactly when age guidelines and length of service became codified. The first two single sister missionaries were 22 and 23, and the initial minimum age of 23 for a woman seems to have settled in place at least by the 1930s.²³ There is very little mention of women missionaries in the 1910s and 1920s. A handful of appeals went out from the First Presidency for more elders, but not for sisters.²⁴ When requests for sisters did come, as in 1915 and 1922, they contained stipulations for women who were "not too young" with "a good education" or with specific office skills like stenography.²⁵ Church leaders were evidently concerned about age and maturity. Women were also requested to fill very specific niches—either to perform as office workers or as support for newly organized auxiliaries—rather than to directly boost proselyting work.

In spite of public praise for sister missionaries from church leaders in the 1910s and 1920s, calls for more women missionaries from the First Presidency were the exception, not the rule in church policy. Even during World War II, when far fewer men were available to serve missions, the church leadership under President Heber J. Grant made it clear that women were not to be sought after as substitutes for men called into military service. In a 1943 message from the first presidency to all church leaders, the policy "heretofore announced [in 1941] not to call sisters into

22. Elder John G. Allred, President of the North-Central States Mission, *Conference Report* (October 1928): 59.

23. Embry, 112.

24. *Ibid.*, 108-9.

25. Evans, 150 and Embry, 109.

the mission field during the emergency and in the absence from the missions of brethren of the Priesthood to take the lead in missionary service" was reinforced. The letter went on to allow three possible exceptions: skilled female stenographers would be called as needed to assist in mission offices; professional school teachers "being personally fitted and having acquired through experience and training in the Church the ability creditably to represent the Church in the proclamation of the Gospel" could volunteer to spend their vacation time on full-time mini-missions; and the wives of men beyond the draft age could be recommended to accompany their husbands into the field.²⁶ These exceptions again emphasized maturity and office skills rather than calling for a general influx of women to help replace the men going into military service.

Unlike secular wartime employment policies, which prioritized production over gender roles and brought significant numbers of women into traditionally male spheres, the church wartime policy prioritized gender roles over the imperative of preaching the gospel. It seems that *how and by whom* full-time missionary work is accomplished is at least as important as *that* it be performed. This war-time policy is powerful evidence that the church missionary program is profoundly gendered. It is not enough that the gospel be preached to all the world—the preaching must be led by priesthood authority. In spite of the injunction against relying or drawing on more women, it has been estimated that during World War II the number of women in the field relative to men rose to an all-time high of 40%.²⁷

The Korean War produced another flurry of adjustments in male missionary policy with no significant changes for women. As in the previous world wars, the number of available men for missions dropped: the church was careful to support the government by not sending young men eligible for active duty on missions. The First Presidency also clarified that men should be 20 years old to receive a mission call.²⁸ As in the

26. Circular Letter, 20 November 1943, Missionary Instructions to Presidents of Stakes and Bishops during World War II, 6:114, 204-5; as quoted in Embry, 112.

27. Hanks, 319. Because the church missionary department does not publicly release missionary data by gender, the true numbers and percentage of women in the mission field is very difficult to estimate. In an heroic act of investigative research, historian Jessie Embry searched through the microfilmed missionary lists of LDS Church archives from 1930-1961 and counted the number of female names for a given month (usually January). After 1961, the church published the missionary lists by year instead of by month, and the time involved in name-counting became prohibitive (Embry, 115). Vella Neil Evans estimated numbers of women missionaries by counting skirts in archived mission photos (Evans, 151-2).

28. This minimum age could be waived if a young man had completed two years of college or had served in the military (Embry, 112).

1940s, however, the church did not ask for more women to help replenish a diminished missionary force. Its concession to "requests from missions for more experienced help" was to temporarily lower the minimum age for women from 23 to 21 for less than a year starting in 1950 and again for six months in 1953.²⁹

In 1960, missions again requested more missionaries. In reply, the First Presidency adjusted the minimum age for all men to 19, but the minimum age of 23 for women remained in place. In 1964 the First Presidency dropped the missionary service age for all women to 21 but reaffirmed the church's belief in appropriate gender roles: "It is hoped that normal social opportunities leading to proper marriage will not be interrupted nor disturbed by such recommendations. Those young women who do not have reasonable marriage prospects but who are personable, qualified and worthy may be recommended."³⁰ This admonishment reminded women that although a lower age limit would make serving a mission an easier prospect for many, they were to serve only as a secondary life choice.

We do not know why the church lowered the minimum age for women at this time and left it there. The draft for the Vietnam War did not start until six months later, and the number of total missionaries in the field was relatively stable in the early 1960s.³¹ Perhaps the established success of other women missionaries and the lowering of the minimum age for men several years earlier paved the way.

CEMENTING POLICY

In September of 1970, *The Improvement Era* quoted from a mission president training session. It included a strikingly positive statement about women missionaries: "The Brethren are encouraging the calling of more lady missionaries. Missions could not get along without them."³² We don't know *how* the Brethren were encouraging more women to serve at this time, but nine months later, the First Presidency sent another signal when the church announced that women's (and couples') missionary service would be reduced from 24 months to 18 months.³³ Was this an effort to increase the numbers of women in the field by reducing the length of com-

29. Embry, 113.

30. Embry, 114-5.

31. The total number of full-time missionaries set apart during the five years leading up to this policy change are as follows: 1960, 4706; 1961, 5793; 1962, 5630; 1963, 5781; 1964, 5886 (*2001-2002 Church Almanac*).

32. This statement was attributed to Elder Franklin D. Richards, Assistant to the Council of the Twelve. See Jay M. Todd, "The Spirit of Missionary Work," *The Improvement Era* 73 (September 1970):14.

33. "Programs and Policies Newsletter," *Ensign* 1 (June 1971): 124.

mitment? Or was it a policy aimed at minimizing any time spent outside the marriage market for women—a way of reinforcing the message that marriage takes priority over all? Did it mean women were more effective and more wanted in the field, or the opposite? The church made an effort to explain the policy shift by publishing a steady cycle of articles on the subject in the newly established *New Era* (the church magazine for youth).

In July 1971, the *New Era* interviewed Paul H. Dunn the month he was released as President of the New England States Mission. In response to the question, “Should girls go on missions? Is this encouraged by the Church, and are they as effective as the elders?” he replied:

I think lady missionaries make a great contribution. I’m particularly impressed after having supervised this mission for the past three years. The Church doesn’t openly encourage girls to go on missions to the extent that it does young men. Their first and primary calling is marriage, and that’s been stated by a number of presidents of the Church. But should a young lady desire to go on a mission, we do everything to see to it that she is sent. That philosophy is the reason that elders are called at nineteen and sisters at twenty-one.

Lady missionaries are as effective as elders. I don’t think I’d ever be able to say that the elders outdo the sisters or that the sisters outdo the elders. There are certain times when one is more effective than the other. For example, lady missionaries can often get into a home where elders never could; and in fact, they do get into homes far more often than an elder on door-to-door contacting. Perhaps people look on them a little differently.

Lady missionaries have one or two disadvantages; since they do not hold the priesthood, they sometimes have to depend on elders to do some of their work.

Lady missionaries seem to be more tolerant and understanding than the elders. A lady missionary also seems to have far less of a challenge in getting motivated and putting in hours that are dedicated to the Lord.

This is a masterful and diplomatic response: women are not openly encouraged to serve, but are welcomed and assisted if they choose to anyway. They are not better than the elders, but neither are they worse. They have certain advantages and can fill important gaps left by elders; their only stated disadvantage is that they must turn certain [ordinance] work over to priesthood holders. The difference in minimum ages for men and women is to promote young women’s opportunities for marriage.

Eight months later, the *New Era* again broached the issue in its “Questions and Answers” section when it published the question: “Should girls go on missions?”³⁴ Arthur S. Anderson, a former mission president, responded.

34. Arthur S. Anderson, “Q&A: Questions and Answers,” *New Era* 2 (March 1972): 30.

This involves two questions: Would the mission be good for the girl, and would the girl be good for the mission?

The answer to the first question is almost universally yes. Nearly any girl with a positive attitude and a desire to serve will benefit greatly from mission service. She can build her testimony, firm up her direction in life, develop a spirit of tolerance and love, build self-confidence and a positive attitude, come to an appreciation of home, parents, and family, and see more clearly the importance of choosing a husband who will go with her not only to the temple but also to the celestial kingdom. She will feel the joy and satisfaction that comes from unselfish, full-time service to others.

Would the girl be good for the mission? This question cannot be answered in a general way. It's an individual matter. Today's typical lady missionary is an energetic, young (usually just turned twenty-one), enthusiastic girl who will, traditionally, participate in about twice as many conversions as will the average elder. She is usually in the mission field because she has a desire to serve, not because she is compelled by social pressure. . . . A girl who enters the mission field to find a solution to her personal problems is likely to feel very out of place in such company. The vigorous schedule of the mission field affords little time or place for eccentric behavior or personal problem solving.

President Anderson states that a mission is almost "universally" good for girls. This is a particularly striking assertion since girls are not universally encouraged to serve. The laundry list of benefits girls can expect to derive from serving a mission (faith, self-confidence, joy, satisfaction, and a firmer conviction to marry for eternity) is tempered only by Anderson's assurance that it takes a certain kind of girl to be a missionary. His emphasis on the high expectations and rigors of mission life discourages some women from serving while at the same time glorifying and lionizing the women who do serve. The concluding statement, which warns against eccentric behavior and personal problems, suggests that girls may be vulnerable to these problems. Was this a reflection of personal experience or cultural stereotype? Future examination of concurrent messages to young men about missions would help put these admonishments into gendered perspective.

A year later in 1973, the *New Era* published a conversation with then Apostle Gordon B. Hinckley on missionary work. Again the question was posed "Do you think girls should plan on filling missions?" He replied:

Those young ladies who go perform a tremendous service. They are effective missionaries. But I heard President David O. McKay say on several occasions, "Missionary work is primarily a priesthood responsibility, and as such it devolves primarily upon holders of the priesthood." "The finest mission a young woman can perform is to marry a good young man in the Lord's

house and stand as the mother of a good family." But I repeat, we need some lady missionaries. They do a tremendous work.³⁵

Women are needed in the field, but not too many. A mission is good, women do tremendous work, but temple marriage and motherhood are even better. This ambiguity leaves the decision to serve squarely in the hands of individual young women and stands in stark contrast to the clarity offered to young men by the oft-quoted pronouncement of President Spencer W. Kimball in 1974: "The question is frequently asked: Should every young man fill a mission? And the answer has been given by the Lord. It is 'Yes.' Every young man should fill a mission."³⁶ No such answer from the Lord was handed in blanket form to young women.

The apparent confusion of young women over these ambiguous messages was again reflected in 1975 in the "I have a Question" section of the *Ensign*: "I am a 21-year-old girl. The present call for missionaries interests me, but I am confused about the Church's desire for sister missionaries. What is the real position and desire of the Church concerning girls going on missions?" Once again Elder Paul H. Dunn, now a general authority, responded. After echoing Gordon B. Hinckley's earlier statement with the phrases "missionary work is primarily a priesthood responsibility," "the finest mission a young woman can perform is in the role of wife and mother," and "there is a need for a limited number of sisters," he went on to say:

If a sister is (1) at least 21 years of age, (2) has good physical health, (3) is emotionally stable and secure, (4) has no immediate prospects for marriage, and (5) meets the other requirements for missionary service, she may be recommended for a mission. Bishops should be certain that each of these five prerequisites has been met before submitting recommendations for sisters to serve fulltime missions.

We are happy to accept sisters who meet these qualifications and afford them the opportunity to serve in the marvelous missionary cause. However, this is not their prime calling, and we don't send out an appeal to young women generally to prepare for and serve fulltime missions.³⁷

This reply is more formal and less enthusiastic than his response as a freshly returned mission president four years earlier. Once again the pol-

35. Brian Kelly, "A Visit with Elder Gordon B. Hinckley about Missionary Work," *New Era* 3 (June 1973): 29.

36. Spencer W. Kimball, "When the World Will Be Converted," *Ensign* 4 (Oct. 1974): 3.

37. William O. Nelson, "I Have a Question," *Ensign* 5 (April 1975): 19.

icy is reinforced that women are welcome in small numbers under certain specified conditions, but a mission is implied to be a tangent to their true purpose in life (“this is not their prime calling”) and therefore on some level deviant from the norm.

These repeated responses to the same basic questions in church magazines during the early 1970’s suggest an ongoing effort from the church to send a message to young women. We do not know to what extent they were driven by letters from young women themselves or by editorial staff responding to some other incentive, but the fact that questions about women missionaries were addressed four times in five years implies that the responses could not adequately settle the issue in the minds of church members.

In 1978, the *New Era* published an essay by Franklin D. Richards that reiterated the gendered mission policy but also spoke more encouragingly than most:

If a young lady is in love with a worthy man, we don’t feel that their relationship should be interrupted by a mission call to her. However, many young women are not in that situation, and if they desire and are worthy to go on a mission, they could be called. My experience has indicated that sister missionaries are as effective as elders in leading people to baptism and that *a mission gives a woman as much benefit in her later life as it does to an elder. She becomes a better wife, a better mother, a better Relief Society president—just better in every way.* So a mission is a worthy goal for any young Latter-day Saint to aspire toward [emphasis added].³⁸

This quote is even more positive than President Anderson’s 1972 list of reasons a mission can benefit a woman. It also points most explicitly to the inherent paradox of church policy: a mission will make a woman a better wife and mother, but she should prioritize marriage over mission. The blessings are comparable for men and women, but only men are obligated to go. This paradox has profound implications with regard to what men purportedly need for character development and salvation versus what women need. If a mission is a spiritual boon, why is it not extended in equal measure to men and women? Why are missions and marriage mutually exclusive for women when set side by side, but not for men? We explore possible answers to these questions in our conclusions.

Ensuing messages in the early 1980s continued to sound more encouraging to women missionaries. In an address to the 1983 BYU Women’s Conference, which was later excerpted in the *Ensign*,³⁹ Joe J.

38. Franklin D. Richards, “Have a Dream,” *New Era* 8 (January 1978): 4.

39. JoAnn Jolley, “News of the Church,” *Ensign* 13 (May 1983): 92.

Christensen, President of the Missionary Training Center, described sister missionaries as “sharp, attractive, mature, and very committed.” He then added, “They know why they are serving. Many have planned for years to go on a mission. . . . To you who are younger and single, although missionary service is not an obligation in the same sense as with elders, don’t forget the opportunity that is available to expand your world of service and experience by serving a mission.”

An address to the General Women’s Meeting in 1985 by then Apostle Gordon B. Hinckley listed full-time missionary work as one of ten gifts women receive from the Lord. The address also gave a slightly expanded version of the usual explanation for why women were not encouraged to serve in equal numbers with men:

Yours is the opportunity to proclaim the gospel. Exclusive of missionary couples, we now have 5,872 sister missionaries serving in the field. For the most part, these are young women who are called as other missionaries are called. Many mission presidents give their sister missionaries credit for being more effective than the elders in opening doors and minds to the teaching of the gospel. One mission president told me, perhaps facetiously, that if he had four pairs of sister missionaries doing the finding and the teaching, he could keep a pair of elders busy doing the baptizing.

You will immediately ask why, then, are lady missionaries not called until they are twenty-one, when young men are called at nineteen? While we recognize the vast good that sister missionaries do, and while we greatly appreciate their tremendous service, we are reluctant to have in the field the same or a larger number of sister missionaries than elders. I believe there is great wisdom in this.

Furthermore, we regard a happy marriage as the greatest mission any young woman can enjoy, and we feel that the opportunities for such will be increased if there is some delay in young women going into the mission field.

Nevertheless, you have the privilege. You have the right, conditioned upon worthiness. You have the opportunity, whether serving as full-time missionaries or on a local basis, to teach the gospel of Jesus Christ with power and conviction.⁴⁰

Calling missionary service a “right,” “opportunity,” and gift from the Lord for women is strikingly positive and proactive. This is also one of the earliest statements to allow that the message from the church seems inconsistent at face value: if sisters are valuable and effective, why then are they discouraged from serving missions on the same terms as elders? However, Hinckley’s answer to the inconsistency he acknowledged re-

40. Gordon B. Hinckley, “Ten Gifts from the Lord,” *Ensign* 15 (November 1985): 86.

mains tantalizingly vague. The word “furthermore” indicates that the emphasis on marriage was *not* the only reason to maintain separate age minimums for men and women. But Hinckley did not elaborate on why the Brethren were “reluctant” to have equal numbers of men and women in the field. He only said it was wise, leaving us to speculate on this wisdom.

Perhaps these slightly more welcoming statements softened the ground for more women to choose missions: by the mid-1980s the ratio of women to men in the missionary force climbed from 15% to about 20%.⁴¹ Most likely, changes in American culture and demographics were having a significant impact as well. From the 1950s to the 1990s, U.S. marriage rates declined while the median age at first marriage went up for both men and women. For example, in 1970 there were about 140 marriages for every 1,000 women and by 1985 there were only about 95. In 1970 the median age at first marriage was 23.2 for men and 20.8 for women. By 1985 the ages had climbed to 25.5 and 23.3 respectively (see table).⁴²

YEAR	U. S. Marriage Rate for Women (per 1,000)	Median Age at Marriage	
		Men	Women
1970	140	23.2	20.8
1985	95	25.5	23.3

These shifts in marriage culture and a growing number of choices in education and the workforce for women reduced the stigma of marrying later in life. Women serving full-time missions at age 21 would re-enter the marriage market at age 22.5, well below the national median (although still well above the Utah median of about 21).

MESSAGES IN YOUTH LITERATURE

This rise in the number of women serving missions certainly cannot be laid at the feet of the lesson manuals for the Young Women program. In 1982, Lavina Fielding Anderson published a review of the 1977-78 Young Women manuals.⁴³ In 1994 Janine Boyce published a similar re-

41. Hanks, 317.

42. See <http://www.ed.gov/pubs/YouthIndicators/indtab03.html>

43. Lavina Fielding Anderson, “Messages from the Manuals,” *Exponent II* 8 (Winter 1982).

view of the revised manuals, which came out in 1983 and 1988.⁴⁴ Neither found any discussion of women serving full-time missions. Lessons focused on fellowshipping, member-missionary work and supporting elders on their missions while stories and pictures of full-time missionaries referred exclusively to men. Our own content analysis of the three young women lesson manuals currently in use (1992, 1993, and 1994) showed little change.

Of seven lessons in the three manuals on being involved in missionary work, only two are focused on full-time missionaries: "Understanding a Missionary's Responsibilities" and "Sustaining Missionaries through Letters."⁴⁵ Both lessons are carefully gender neutral in their references to missionaries, but significantly the only explicit mention of women serving missions comes not in the text of the lesson material but in the notes to teachers. The stated objective of the letter-writing lesson is: "Each young woman will learn ways to encourage and support young men *and young women* in the mission field" (emphasis added). The other lesson begins with the only statement of official church policy on women serving missions in all three manuals as a "Note to Teacher."⁴⁶ The only story in either lesson involving a female in the mission field is a quote from a mission president's wife.

By contrast, throughout the seventies, eighties, and nineties, the church youth magazine *New Era* is liberally sprinkled with stories about sister missionaries in the field, young women preparing to serve missions, and letters from sister missionaries. A 1973 article, for example, describes the then five-day missionary training experience largely from the perspective of sister missionaries, including snippets of bathroom chatter about everything from make-up and boyfriends to testimonies of Christ and spiritual reasons for serving a mission:

"...because the Lord wants me here, that's why."

"My goal is to go through every temple in the world."

"Everyone told me I'd probably be called to some place close, and now just think, Southern Italy. Wow!"

44. Janine Boyce, "Messages From the Manuals—Twelve Years Later" *Dialogue* 27 (Summer 1994, 2): 205.

45. See *Young Woman Manual* 3 (1994): 72, and *Young Woman Manual* 2 (1993): 78, respectively.

46. "Note to Teacher: This lesson discusses the responsibilities of full-time missionaries. All young men should serve missions. Unmarried women age twenty-one and older may also serve full-time missions. However, young sisters should not feel obligated and should not be urged unduly to serve full-time missions. A mission should not interfere with a young woman's opportunity for marriage." *Young Woman Manual* 3, 72.

"If someone could just take my make-up case, it would take care of my six excess pounds of luggage."

"My boyfriend said he'd wait for me, but. . ."47

The difference between the *New Era*, which reflects more of the reality of women serving missions, and the Young Woman manuals, which never suggest to young women that a mission is a possible choice, is palpable. This contrast illustrates the paradoxical policy of offering only backhanded invitations to women but acknowledging and supporting them once they come forward of their own accord.

RE-ESTABLISHING POLICY

By 1997 the median age of American women at first marriage had climbed to 25.0.⁴⁸ In October of that same year, Gordon B. Hinckley (now president of the church) gave a talk in the priesthood session of General Conference spurring considerable discussion in LDS circles about sister missionaries.

There seems to be growing in the Church an idea that all young women as well as all young men should go on missions. We need some young women. They perform a remarkable work. They can get in homes where the elders cannot.

I confess that I have two granddaughters on missions. They are bright and beautiful young women. They are working hard and accomplishing much good. Speaking with their bishops and their parents, they made their own decisions to go. They did not tell me until they turned their papers in. I had nothing to do with their decision to go.

Now, having made that confession, I wish to say that the First Presidency and the Council of the Twelve are united in saying to our young sisters that they are not under obligation to go on missions. I hope I can say what I have to say in a way that will not be offensive to anyone. Young women should not feel that they have a duty comparable to that of young men. Some of them will very much wish to go. If so, they should counsel with their bishop as well as their parents. If the idea persists, the bishop will know what to do.

I say what has been said before, that missionary work is essentially a priesthood responsibility. As such, our young men must carry the major burden. This is their responsibility and their obligation.

47. Susan Moultrie, "The Missionary Home: A Five-day Transition," *New Era* 3 (June 1973): 57.

48. See <http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0005061.html>. It should be noted, however, that the median age of Utah women at first marriage has held steady at about 21 since the 1960s (see <http://www.utahmarriage.org/>).

We do not ask the young women to consider a mission as an essential part of their life's program. Over a period of many years, we have held the age level higher for them in an effort to keep the number going relatively small. Again to the sisters I say that you will be as highly respected, you will be considered as being as much in the line of duty, your efforts will be as acceptable to the Lord and to the Church whether you go on a mission or do not go on a mission.

We constantly receive letters from young women asking why the age for sister missionaries is not the same as it is for elders. We simply give them the reasons. We know that they are disappointed. We know that many have set their hearts on missions. We know that many of them wish this experience before they marry and go forward with their adult lives. I certainly do not wish to say or imply that their services are not wanted. I simply say that a mission is not necessary as a part of their lives.⁴⁹

This is one of the most revelatory statements on church sister missionary policy that we can document. President Hinckley's stated desire not to offend anyone indicates a full awareness of how charged the issue is in a climate sensitive to sex discrimination. It is one of the most sensitive and forthright explanations of the policy made from the pulpit and suggests that this issue had not been settled in the twelve years since Hinckley's 1985 apostolic address to the women of the church cited earlier.

Hinckley's description of a growing culture where women are pressured to serve missions is corroborated by anecdotal evidence. Many personal accounts suggest that this culture shift was real and that women who turned 21 without any obvious romantic attachments were assumed to be preparing for missions, especially at Brigham Young University.⁵⁰ Perhaps President Hinckley was responding to the phenomenon described in a 1995 *BYU News* article titled "Mission before Marriage Becoming Acceptable for Women" which cited that 60% of BYU students in "Sharing the Gospel" classes were women.⁵¹

Even as Hinckley once again emphasizes that women have a small but crucial role to play in the mission field, his "confession" that two of his own granddaughters were serving missions implies something out of line with church policy. He intimates with his choice of words, however playfully, that having sister missionaries in his own family was a secret to be confessed rather than an accomplishment to be proud of. This si-

49. Gordon B. Hinckley, "Some Thoughts on Temples, Retention of Converts, and Missionary Service," *Ensign* 27 (Nov. 1997): 49.

50. See for example Mary Ellen Robertson's essay in this volume and Tonia Andrus, "Sister missionaries very valuable, still needed," *Newsnet* (Brigham Young University, April 29, 1998): <http://newsnet.byu.edu/story.cfm/23479>.

51. Rhonda Sluder, "Mission before marriage becoming more acceptable for women," *Daily Universe* (Brigham Young University, October 24, 1995).

multaneous use of both positive and negative imagery continues to reinforce the inherent contradictions of the church policy.

This conference address is the most explicit statement we have on the purpose of the age gap: "to keep the number [of women] going relatively small." This contrasts with the previously most-cited reason: to give women a longer opportunity to find a marriage partner. The comment that the church "constantly" receives queries from women wishing to serve earlier than 21 indicates that the minimum age is working exactly as intended. It also indicates that there have been a noticeable number of women who wish to serve, preferably at a time better suited to their life plans.

In an especially weighty statement, President Hinckley asserts that there is no social or spiritual penalty for women who do not serve full-time missions: "you will be as highly respected, you will be considered as being as much in the line of duty, your efforts will be as acceptable to the Lord and to the Church whether you go on a mission or do not go on a mission." Since Gordon B. Hinckley can hardly predict the feelings and behavior of individual church leaders and members, this is obviously a prescriptive statement. It is his desire regarding the manner in which non-missionary women should be perceived. It is a reassuring statement to those who choose not to serve or to those who do not desire a full-time mission, but its implied corollary raises a question: can sisters who serve derive *any* benefit from their missions that they could not receive by staying home? The phrase "being acceptable to the Lord and the Church" is important. President Hinckley did not say there was *no* benefit to be had for women serving missions, only that whichever path of spiritual growth women choose is acceptable. Men, however, clearly have something to lose (at least respect and acceptance) by forgoing a mission.⁵²

Hinckley's final sentences again show the underlying tension in church policy toward women serving missions: it is not that women's services are not wanted (although the church has actively worked to keep numbers of women low); they simply aren't necessary for women. How can something be so essential for men but not for women when women (and church baptismal rates) admittedly benefit in many ways from serving missions? What functions then do church leaders believe missions should serve beyond the simple imperative to preach the gospel to all the world? Why should the numbers of women be kept low relative to the numbers of men in the mission field?

52. For a more detailed discussion of the expectations of male missionaries and the cost of early returns from missions, see Levi Peterson, 42-45.

WHY THE POLICY?

Without access to the behind-doors discussions that generated and maintain this gendered mission policy, we can only speculate on the possible reasons for perpetuating it. Some of the explanations we put forth here are explicit in the repetitive policy statements we have already cited. Some are pure conjecture—thought exercises to pursue with further research. And some may simply be unintended, although not undesired, consequences of such a policy.

Perhaps the most explicit justification for the gender gap is that from the very inception of the church, missionary work has been considered a priesthood calling.⁵³ As previously mentioned and attributed to David O. McKay, “Missionary work is primarily a priesthood responsibility, and as such it devolves primarily upon holders of the priesthood.”⁵⁴ Women are guests in the work, but not hosts and should not overwhelm the priesthood character of preaching the gospel. A gender-balanced or predominantly female missionary force might overwhelm or threaten the all-male priesthood.

Closely related to this is that a mission is likely to be viewed as a training ground for future priesthood leaders. In a church that depends on a lay clergy, completing a volunteer mission is loosely akin to graduating from theological seminary. It is an efficient and effective tool to train young members in the organization and implementation of the church structure as well as in its scripture and doctrine. The lack of priesthood callings and the subsequent smaller number of leadership positions for women in the church give men logical precedence in serving missions as a form of leadership training.

The third reason also emerges frequently in official statements, most notably President Hinckley’s 1997 reaffirmation of the policy: a mission is seen as a necessary rite of passage and a means to maturity for young men while it is not essential as such for women. In her recent research on LDS missionaries, Shauna Sweet notes the disparity in the ways elders and sisters perceive their missions:

A mission is part of young men’s prescribed life plan. The mission is a rite of passage: it marks the end of boyhood and the beginning of adulthood. Two years is a long time, and they anticipate that in those two years they are probably going to change significantly. Others expect them to change and plan accordingly.

This stands in striking contrast to the cultural expectations for sisters:

53. Hanks, 316.

54. As quoted by Gordon B. Hinckley in Kelly, 29.

Young women's experiences were markedly different: the mission didn't mark a collective rite of passage from one stage of life to another. They were adults before leaving on a mission, and they were adults upon returning home. . . . Unlike their male counterparts, the sisters were welcomed back from their missions and expected to be exactly the same as they were before they left.⁵⁵

These observations are very much in line with repeated statements that missions are not a necessary part of a woman's life course. Women are often perceived to bring their talents and gifts to the mission field rather than discover and grow them there.

Intertwined with these emphases on a gendered priesthood and separate life paths for men and women, the powerful force of Mormon gender culture likely shapes mission policies. Missionary work, like helping people move or setting up and taking down chairs, is simply part of the male domain. Especially in the early days of preaching without purse or scrip, but still today, most would agree that a mission can be physically arduous (even dangerous) and emotionally demoralizing: hardly the appropriate setting for members of the gentler sex.

A fifth possible reason for the policy might be to reduce the number of mission romances. The rules for conduct between elders and sisters are strictly delineated. The missionary handbook or "white bible" cautions: "Never be alone with or associate inappropriately with anyone of the opposite sex. Flirting or dating is not tolerated. You are not to telephone, write to, or accept calls or letters from anyone of the opposite sex living within or near mission boundaries."⁵⁶ Keeping the number of sister missionaries low reduces the statistical odds of romantic pairing and increases the odds that district and zone meetings will have the atmosphere of a professional gathering rather than a group date.

Sixth is the possibility that sister missionaries take up more mission resources as compared to their male counterparts. As evidenced in a May 1982 letter from the First Presidency to Mission Presidents regarding sisters and mission safety, keeping the sister missionaries in safe areas and situations may command more attention (and occasionally money for lodging in safer areas) than is needed for elders. Our initial interviews with a handful of mission presidents also suggest a common belief that sister missionaries are generally higher maintenance: they require more of presidents' time per capita than elders. Although elders tend to have

55. Shauna Sweet, "Personal Growth and Spiritual Progress: Gender and the LDS Missionary Experience," Paper presented at the Eastern Sociological Society Conference in Philadelphia, PA (February 28, 2003): 2,4.

56. *Missionary Handbook*, 1986: 25.

much higher rates of disciplinary problems, sisters seem on average to need longer interviews, more frequent counseling, and are more likely to have (or at least discuss) personal and health problems.

Finally, the full-time missionary program was designed by men, for men. It is permeated by a male culture (see Alison Stimmler's essay in this volume for an example of this). To welcome women in equal numbers and on equal footing to men would likely require or instigate some profound changes in mission administration and mission culture. There may well be a latent institutional and cultural resistance to change. There may also be a belief that a low percentage of sister missionaries is beneficial to the work in that it inspires the elders to work harder without tempting them away unduly from their spiritual duties. In a 1944 general conference address, Elder Thomas E. McKay paid tribute to the women of the Canadian Mission because they were "following the injunction of the Prophet Joseph, viz., 'to provoke the brethren to good works.'⁵⁷ Similarly, a 1987 *New Era* article quoted one sister missionary as saying: "They tell us over and over again how glad they are to have sisters in the MTC, because then the elders settle down a little bit more."⁵⁸ Consequently, having a few sister missionaries in the field may provide a certain tempering influence and encourage the elders to be more productive than having none at all.

Thus, another function of the policy's implicit discouragement of sister missionaries is to send a clear message that women who do choose to serve will be entering a male realm, designed for men but tolerant of women. Women offer a valuable leavening effect to the work, but they are not integral to the structure. This message effectively shapes women's expectations and perceptions of missionary work and in turn perpetuates the culture that supports a certain division of labor by sex.

It also suggests that sister missionaries are presumed to serve the patriarchal organization of the church. From Franklin D. Richards's 1978 quote that a mission will make women better wives, mothers, and Relief Society Presidents (not simply better individuals) to the widespread perception that women don't need a mission to mature, but bring their maturity to the mission, to the notion that women are involved to help settle the men and "provoke [them] to good works," to the repeated

57. Elder Thomas E. McKay, Assistant to the Council of the Twelve Apostles, *Conference Report* (October 1944): 68.

58. Richard M. Romney, "To Prepare," *New Era* 17 (June 1987): 12. In a similar vein outside of LDS culture, Wendy Shalit in her book *A Return To Modesty* contends that a modest woman's presence can "spiritualize men" by motivating men to achieve more and to be better than they otherwise would be. See Wendy Shalit, *A Return to Modesty*, (New York: Free Press, 1999): 148.

statement that women fill a certain niche in missionary work ("reaching out where elders cannot go"), women are expected to conform to a certain kind of role. Men are also expected to serve the patriarchal institution, but their role for accomplishing this is defined differently. Missionary work is an intensified version of the different tracks men and women are expected to hold to in the church.

IMPACT OF POLICY ON PERCEPTIONS

The impact of this century-long policy toward full-time single women missionaries is multi-fold. In the decades when the median age of marriage in the U.S. was lower (20-21) and the minimum missionary age was set at 23 for a two-year mission, the repercussions for a young woman's marriageability were much more acute. The stereotype that only leftovers from the marriage market served missions proved to be tenacious in Mormon culture. When explaining the reaction she got from her decision to serve a mission in 1962, Mary Ellen Edmunds wrote: "I was aware of the stereotype of sister missionaries—some people thought going on a mission was, for women, an 'end-of-the-line' opportunity."⁵⁹ Another woman wrote a letter to the editor of *Dialogue* in 1972 setting forth some of the prevailing stereotypes used to describe "lady missionaries": husband-hunting, mentally unfit, over-emotional, aggressive and unfeminine, or useless and unfit for missionary work. She added "Several young women have said to me that they would have loved to go on a mission, but they could not see themselves as lady missionaries, or they were pressured into marriage and babies 'before it was too late' and they became old maids at twenty-two or three."⁶⁰

It is not hard to make the link between a limited and ambiguous call for sister missionaries and a subtle sense of marginalization among sisters in the field. One woman missionary who served from 1989-1990 reported a question from a member as he drove her and her companion to an appointment: "Why aren't the missionaries teaching these people?"⁶¹ The lingering assumption that sisters are peripheral extras, not the real thing, echoes through many interviews and memoirs. As Evans concluded in her early 1980s research on official church rhetoric about women:

59. Mary Ellen Edmunds, "The People Have Given Me a New Heart," *Ensign* 12 (Sept. 1982): 14.

60. "Letters to the Editor," *Dialogue* 7, no. 2 (Summer 1972): 5.

61. Julie Lauper Cook, Interview transcript with a returned sister missionary who served in an Eastern state from 1989-1990 (Independent research, 1996). In possession of authors.

Although the Sisters have served in numbers ranging from one to forty percent of the total missionary force, typically less than five percent of authoritative discourse has validated or rewarded that service. Currently, there is but slight concern with Sister missionaries in the Church; and woman's missionary image is correspondingly weak. Some discourse even suggests that while the woman missionary should be "indulged" in her desires to serve, her interests are "deviant." Certainly female missionaries are not as highly esteemed as are wives, mothers, or those Sisters who staff the women's organizations; and the proselyting Sister is not an exemplar for young girls.⁶²

We believe that the estimation of sister missionaries improved in the twenty years that followed this assessment. One support for this belief is President Hinckley's 1997 conference talk which addressed a trend of increasing expectations that young women serve missions. The way in which many church members interpreted his message, however, provides evidence that women on missions continue to be met with disapproval.

In his 1997 address, President Hinckley restated the message of a very consistent policy: women who choose are welcome to serve missions, but should not feel any pressure or obligation to do so. However, many members heard this to mean that women should not aspire to serve at all. A sister missionary, working on Temple Square as men emerged from that particular priesthood session of General Conference, reported a member grasping her hand in a hearty shake and saying "I bet you're feeling real dumb about being on a mission right about now."⁶³ A BYU student reported that the first she heard about the priesthood session came from several men in her apartment complex who walked through her door that night and blurted out, "President Hinckley said no more sister missionaries."⁶⁴ This willingness to carry President Hinckley's statement to an unintended extreme (even in jest) intimates a latent hostility toward women missionaries in Mormon culture.

Anecdotal evidence hints that the number of women filing papers to serve missions did in fact drop for a time immediately following this address. However, a recent BYU news article reported that the number of sister missionaries has increased for the past three years in a row. In 2003, there were almost 9,000 sisters in the mission field—approximately 15% of the total missionary force.⁶⁵ If the missionary force was indeed

62. Vella Neil Evans, "Women's Image in Authoritative Mormon Discourse: A Rhetorical Analysis," (University of Utah, Dissertation, 1985), 159.

63. Angela Michelle Bryner, Temple Square missionary from 1996-1998, personal correspondence with authors (February 7, 2003).

64. Andrus, 1998.

65. Britt Balkcom, "RMs wait for sister missionaries" *NewsNet* (Brigham Young University, February 18, 2003) <http://newsnet.byu.edu/story.cfm/42371>

20% women in the mid-1980s as described by Hanks (1992), then it would seem that there was a significant drop or fluctuation in the number of women relative to men at some point during the 1990s. As the church does not publicly release missionary statistics by gender, this question remains open to further research.

DISCUSSION

One of the most surprising findings in our research is that this policy has been so consistent since its inception. From 1898 to the present, church leaders have not significantly varied their official statements on women missionaries. Small adjustments have been made over the years—codifying minimum age, length of service, dress standards—but the core message has been reinforced with every publication and conference address: women are not explicitly invited to the party, but they are welcome if they choose to crash it. It is an impressive policy that has effectively achieved its goal (bring women in but keep their numbers low) with no overt coercion. Women do the self-selecting based on the prevailing expectations this policy has nurtured, and the church never has to turn any desiring, qualified woman away.

It is, however, an extremely ambiguous policy with some confusing internal contradictions.⁶⁶ In expounding the policy, church leaders have consistently referred to the efficacy of women in the mission field: they work harder, they prepare more people for baptism, they are more mature, more compliant with mission rules. At the same time, leaders emphasize the importance of keeping women's participation rates low. Even in times of war when women logically could have carried on missionary work (at least domestically) in place of an absent generation of men, as they did with production in the workplace, the church explicitly discouraged this option. It seems that full-time missionary work is much more than a vehicle for sharing the gospel with the most people possible. It is also a role intended or designed for men, but not for women.

In juggling the message that some women are needed and fill important roles—roles that elders cannot always fill—many leaders have sent mixed messages about the perceived benefits of serving missions. Young men are told repeatedly that a mission will be a transforming turning point in their lives, that they will learn things on their missions they could not learn anywhere else. Women, on the other hand, are repeatedly

66. Although this contradiction is evident in our own analysis of official church discourse, Maxine Hanks also noted the paradoxical nature of the sister missionary role: "It grants women some ecclesiastical authority without priesthood authority; it confers the authorization to preach the saving 'principles and ordinances of the gospel' but not to perform or administer them" (Hanks, 315).

assured either that they will not receive any greater social or spiritual reward on a mission than they would receive as a wife and mother (i.e. Hinckley 1997), or that serving a mission will make them better wives and mothers (i.e. Richards 1978). Why should a mission accrue more benefits to men than to women? If a mission can improve women as wives and mothers, why not encourage more women to serve?

The policy is, thus, non-coercive but internally inconsistent and confusing. We have documented a starkly two-track approach to men and women in the mission field. This disparity is explained only vaguely and is rooted in a sex-segregated priesthood. However, we have also found resonance in our research with a growing argument in the wider sociological literature on gender: dominant gender discourse can be experienced as a constraint, but it can also be deployed tactically to survive and even thrive in varied situations. More and more gender scholars are finding evidence that "gender is manipulable"—by both institutions and individuals.⁶⁷ We suggest that church policy on sister missionaries is not a rigid framework holding women to an inferior status compared to men. It both constrains and enables individual women seeking a mission experience.

Yes, the policy leaves women with less clarity and direction on how to spend their young adult lives should they not marry by age 21. Yes, the policy has stigmatized women missionaries as deviant, unmarriedable, and usurpers of a male domain. However, this very ambiguity and minority status bequeaths its own freedoms and powers. Women missionaries may be seen as deviant in some way, but they can also feel special, unique, chosen. They are expected to have received a personal call from God and may serve with a greater sense of purpose as a result.

Men have no leeway in official discourse to wonder whether or not to serve a mission. They are urged to comply with a blanket revelation that supplies them with a clear mandate. Women who contemplate serving a mission are expected to rely on personal revelation and, "if the idea persists," counsel from their parents and bishop (Hinckley 1997). In many cases they would need to feel an individual call strong enough to override the implicit discouragement of women in mission policy as well as to undertake a significant time commitment at what is usually a crucial point in a woman's plans for education, career, and marriage (age 21 as opposed to age 19). Vella Neil Evans noted that:

...the Church apparently restricts the talent it might otherwise employ in its proselyting program. On the other hand, such a non-supportive posture also

67. For a recent review of this literature see the introduction to Janet Johnson and Jean Robinson, eds., *Living Gender: Gender as Tactic in Postcommunism*. Forthcoming.

yields women missionaries who are reported by their leaders to be both unusually dedicated and effective.⁶⁸

This personal soul-searching changes both the premise and the experience of a mission for women. As one sister missionary wrote, "Because I wasn't forced to go and had absolutely no expectations placed on me to go, I knew that what became of my experience there was entirely up to me, and I wasn't going to waste my time."⁶⁹ A sense of personal responsibility for women's decision to serve naturally evolves into a personal responsibility for their mission experience.

This same two-edged sword of ambiguous minority-status means that mission presidents have considerable leeway in the way they relate to and make use of the sister missionaries under their jurisdictions. Our preliminary research suggests that women's mission experiences fall across a much wider spectrum than men's. Sisters can find themselves heavily marginalized and even degraded in some missions while other mission presidents experiment with creative leadership opportunities—everything from "sister trainers" to "sister APs" to all-female districts with sister district leaders and so on. The all-female Temple Square mission is a fascinating exception to a male-dominated mission experience. The very ambiguity of what it means to be a sister missionary can work both for and against women in the field.

One of the latest adjustments in mission policy came in 2002 from Apostle M. Russell Ballard and President Gordon B. Hinckley in a priesthood session of the October General Conference. The message was aimed at young men, and Elder Ballard minced no words:

We don't need spiritually weak and semicommitted young men. We don't need you to just fill a position; we need your whole heart and soul. We need vibrant, thinking, passionate missionaries who know how to listen to and respond to the whisperings of the Holy Spirit. This isn't a time for spiritual weaklings. We cannot send you on a mission to be reactivated, reformed, or to receive a testimony. We just don't have time for that.⁷⁰

President Hinckley then endorsed Elder Ballard's words and added a few of his own, drawing women into the message: "I hope that our young men, and our young women, will rise to the challenge he has set forth. We must raise the bar on the worthiness and qualifications of those

68. Evans, 160.

69. Angela Michelle Bryner, Temple Square missionary from 1996-1998, personal correspondence with authors (February 7, 2003).

70. M. Russell Ballard, "The Greatest Generation of Missionaries," *Ensign* 32 (November 2002).

who go into the world as ambassadors of the Lord Jesus Christ."⁷¹ Although church leaders have emphasized the need for worthy and prepared missionaries since the beginning of missionary work, this was unusual in its strong wording. It rescinded the automatic and compulsory nature of serving missions for young men. We emphasize this recent change because on average women have already come to missions with greater commitment and a stronger sense of personal, spiritual purpose. It seems likely that such a "raising of the bar" for missionaries will cut off more men from serving than women. With possibly fewer men submitting mission papers, might we see a growing *percentage* of women serving missions as a result?

We found evidence that maintaining a predominantly male missionary force was at least as important as the work itself. This priority was especially visible during wartime when women were expressly *not* recruited to bolster the flagging numbers of missionaries and is prominent in an ongoing discourse which praises women for being more productive than men in the mission field yet discourages them from serving in larger numbers. The more recent shift toward "raising the bar" for all missionaries implies that a mission is now to be less a right of priesthood ordination or a rite of male passage and more a privilege for the righteous and committed. Although Gordon B. Hinckley included both men and women in his call to prepare for missions, M. Russell Ballard's more pointed message was aimed directly at young men, using the pronoun "you" and in the context of a General Priesthood Session. This shift is an important adjustment in male missionary policy, while no comparable shift in emphasis has emerged for women. The internally contradictory but institutionally beneficial sister missionary policy has continued to hold sway for over one hundred years. Although the culture defining women's roles in the mission field may have changed, official church rhetoric has not.

71. Gordon B. Hinckley, "To Men of the Priesthood," *Ensign* 32 (November 2002).

Sister Missionary Policy Timeline

- 1830 Lucy Mack Smith accompanies Hyrum and preaches to her family on a trip to Pontiac Michigan.
- 1850 Louisa Barns Pratt is "blessed, set apart, and ordained" by Brigham Young to serve with her husband Addison in the Society Islands.
- 1851 Christine Bentsen Anderson is called to accompany two Elders to her hometown of Bornholm, Denmark, to find them accommodations and open up teaching opportunities.
- 1865 Thirteen women are called and set apart to serve with their husbands and for the first time appear on official church records as missionaries.
- 1898 Jennie Brimhall and Inez Knight receive calls to England as the first single full-time proselyting sister missionaries. Jennie Brimhall serves from April to November and is issued an honorable release due to health concerns. Liza Chipman replaces her, and she and Inez Knight continue to serve until their release in May 1900.
- 1898 George Q. Cannon inaugurates the single sister missionary age; women missionaries are for the first time "certified" but no longer "ordained to serve."
- 1941 First Presidency discourages local leaders from calling women to fill missionary shortage caused by WWII due to the "exceptional hazards which will now be incident to missionary work."
- 1942 First Presidency announces it will call only older men ordained as high priests or seventies on full-time missions for the duration of the war.
- 1943 First Presidency continues to discourage local leaders from calling women on missions unless they are skilled stenographers, schoolteachers serving only in the summer, and wives accompanying husbands who exceed the draft age.
- 1950 Korean war and "special requests from mission presidents for more experienced help" prompt First Presidency to lower age limit from twenty-three to twenty-one for women. At the time, young men had to be twenty years old unless they had served in the military or completed two years of college.
- 1951 David O. McKay sets the age minimum back to 23 for women.
- 1953 (January) Minimum age lowered for "a few competent stenographers and bookkeepers" to 21.
- 1953 (July) Minimum age returned to 23.
- 1960 (June) Age limit for women is 23 generally but 21 for those with office skills "who were sufficiently mature and able"; age

- limit for men dropped to 19 if they had completed 2 years of college or one year of college and 6 months of military service.
- 1960 (July) All men may serve missions starting at age 19.⁷²
- 1964 Minimum age lowered from 23 to 21 for women.
- 1971 Length of service lowered from 24 to 18 months for women.
- 1977 Inception of The Personal Development Program for Lady Missionaries at the Missionary Training Center (MTC) to assist sister missionaries with grooming, poise, makeup, and hair care.
- 1979 First Presidency issues letter to mission presidents, asking them to be sensitive to special health problems of couples and older single women.
- 1980 First Presidency clarifies age and length of service for women in good health and without dependent children at home:
- ages 21-40 in good health: 18 months
 - ages 41-70: 12 months
 - age over 70: not recommended.
- 1982 (April) Length of service for full-time single elders lowered from 2 years to 18 months.
- 1982 (May) Mission presidents receive missionary safety letter, emphasizing the need to watch the environment and circumstances in which the sister missionaries work.
- 1985 (January) Length of service for full-time single elders restored to 2 years.
- 1994 New standardized clothing guidelines issued for sister missionaries.
- 1997 In the priesthood session of the October General Conference, President Hinckley reasserts that women should not feel pressured to serve missions.
- 2002 In the priesthood session of the October General Conference, President Hinckley calls for the church to "raise the bar on the worthiness and qualifications" for all missionaries.

Sources: Embry, Hanks, Kunz, and Alice Buehner, "The Communicational Functions of Wearing Apparel for Lady Missionaries of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints," (Dissertation, Brigham Young University, 1982).

72. According to Embry, 113. However, the *Deseret News 2001-2002 Church Almanac* lists this event as occurring in March 1962 (see p. 535).