

Ecclesiastical Polity and the Challenge of Homosexuality: Two Cases of Divergence within the Mormon Tradition

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THE RESPECTIVE WEBSITES of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) and the Community of Christ,¹ provide explicit access to the public images both churches wish to project. Upon these websites, each de-

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1. The Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints adopted

nomination articulates its position on homosexuality. Under the heading of "frequently asked questions," the LDS website presents a brief statement by Church President Gordon B. Hinckley. Referring to "those who consider themselves so-called gays and lesbians" and who "may have certain inclinations which are powerful and which may be difficult to control," he asserts that "we love them as sons and daughters of God" and "want to help," "strengthen," and "assist them with their problems" and "difficulties." "But we cannot stand idle," he continues, "if they indulge in immoral activity, if they try to uphold and defend and live in a so-called same-sex marriage situation. To permit such would be to make light of the very serious and sacred foundation of God-sanctioned marriage and its very purpose, the rearing of families."² Though Hinckley's allusion to "so-called" in reference to gay and lesbian self-identification and same-sex marriage calls into question the reality of sexual orientation and denies the legitimacy of same-sex unions, the LDS website does not mention the Church's political campaign opposing any extension of gay and lesbian rights.

In contrast, the Community of Christ website provides a glimpse into the recent history of a denomination struggling to answer questions posed by homosexuality. Prior to the 2002 World Conference, the website presented two resolutions that requested a review of Church policy. The Greater Los Angeles Stake urged the First Presidency to "work with appropriate councils or quorums of the Community of Christ to implement a policy on homosexuality that is consistent with the principles of inclusion, wholeness, acceptance and the worth of persons," with a further resolution that "the First Presidency is directed to report to the next World Conference on progress towards a new policy on homosexuality."³ Another proposal from the British Columbia District asserted:

Whereas, The church had declared itself to be an inclusive, non-discriminatory community where all can seek acceptance and equality and

this name by conference action on April 6, 2001. For simplicity of reference, we will use the contemporary name throughout except in quotations.

2. "Frequently Asked Questions," 2002, retrieved June 6, 2002, from <http://www.mormon.org>. Hinckley made this statement in October 1998 general conference, published in the *Ensign*, November 1998, 71.

3. "Legislation," 2002, retrieved June 6, 2002, <http://www.cofchrist.org/wc2002/legislation>.

have the expectation of just and fair treatment as well as the opportunity of full participation; and

Whereas, The church's current policy toward homosexuality and homosexuals is outdated and potentially discriminatory; and . . .

Whereas, The process of democratic approval of priesthood calls allows for cultural diversity on this issue to be respected; be it therefore

Resolved, That the church set aside the document on homosexuality dated March 1982 and adopt a policy, either written or unwritten, that will permit the full participation of homosexual persons in the life of the church, including, without limitation, the option to join same-sex couples in marriage, where local laws permit, and to ordain homosexual persons who give evidence of living a moral lifestyle under the same criteria applied to heterosexuals and who are living or committed to live in monogamous, long-term relationships.⁴

Following the 2002 World Conference, the World Church Leadership Council met in retreat and produced a document describing how the Church would proceed as it encouraged "a loving and respectful dialogue on the difficult and often divisive issue of homosexuality." Recognizing that the issue could not even be discussed in the "cultural and legal" contexts of some nations, the council acknowledged that in other places, regardless of how individuals feel, there is "no choice but to talk together about it." With the acknowledgment that some congregations had ordained "practicing" homosexuals, apparently in opposition to a 1982 policy (see below), the document assured members that there would not be "further exceptions to the guidelines on calling and ordination unless they are adjusted through the common consent of the people."⁵ Some of the more conservative jurisdictions proposed resolutions for the 2004 World Conference, which concluded in early April, seeking to freeze the 1982 policy prohibiting priesthood ordination of "active homosexuals" and any recognition of same-sex unions. The South Mississippi District, for example, proposed resolutions that (1) called for "specific scriptural authority" and "theological interpretation" to justify a "proposed document"; (2) this scriptural authority and theological interpretation "shall be provided to the general body of members prior to each conference"; (3) the "first step" in consideration of a document shall include discussion

4. *Ibid.*

5. "Community, Common Consent, and the Issue of Homosexuality," 2003, retrieved November 6, 2003, from <http://www.cofchrist.org/news/oct2002>.

and a vote over “whether the scriptural authority used to justify the document is in accordance with the recognized scriptures of our faith”; and (4) “failure of the conference to agree by a two-thirds (2/3) vote on the adequacy of both the scriptural justification and theological interpretation shall be grounds for removal of said document from any further consideration.”⁶ Such resolutions placing inordinate restrictions upon what could be done and requiring immediate action were “set aside” without “prejudice or specific action to the First Presidency as not to hinder or limit the continuing dialogue.”⁷

Indeed, before the 2004 conference ended, the First Presidency had issued a statement, approved by the conference, defining procedures for addressing Church policy regarding homosexuality. Of primary significance was the creation of “Listening Circles,” designed for “understanding” rather than advocating a point of view, where for “the first time” some participants could “freely share their thoughts in a safe environment.”⁸ A committee charged with studying the Church and homosexuality had begun experimenting with Listening Circles following the 2002 World Conference and found that they diffused tension, generated understanding, and furthered dialogue in a more civil environment. Four missions (districts) currently employ Listening Circles, and the committee has recommended their use, with trained facilitators, in all jurisdictions of the Church where it is culturally feasible.⁹ Acknowledging that “Listening Circles are in their earliest stages,” the First Presidency endorsed the committee’s recommendations and announced that the First Presidency would report on the results and make any further recommendations to

6. “World Conference Legislation 2004,” 2003, retrieved November 6, 2003, <http://www.cofchrist.org/wc2004/announcements>.

7. Press release, “Community of Christ Votes to Continue Dialogue on Homosexuality,” April 1, 2004, retrieved April 11, 2004, from <http://www.cofchrist.org/wc2004/pr/g13.asp>.

8. See “Legislation,” 2004, retrieved April 11, 2004, from <http://www.cofchrist.org/wc2004/legislation/G-13>.

9. See “Legislation,” 2004, retrieved April 11, 2004, from <http://www.cofchrist.org/wc2004/legislation/H-9>.

the 2006 World Conference. No date would be set for the determination of Church policy.¹⁰

Not only do LDS and Community of Christ websites suggest important differences in views about homosexuality, but they also illustrate the divergent paths taken by the two major denominations within the Mormon tradition. Various items on the LDS website emphasize as virtues, and celebrate in practice, obedience to authority and institutional loyalty. Pronouncements from ecclesiastical officials define or underscore LDS beliefs and practices; and the website's allusions to general conference speeches by Church officials suggest that the general conference is not a deliberative body, but rather a mechanism for instructing the Saints, announcing structural and policy changes, and reinforcing or strengthening individual commitment to the institution.¹¹ The World Conference of the Community of Christ, in contrast, may realize similar ends, but it acts as a deliberative and legislative body. Instead of officials simply announcing decisions made by the highest councils of the Church, participants are actively engaged in organizational decision-making as they propose changes, instruct the First Presidency and appropriate Church councils, and ratify official decisions. The early Mormon polity that was sometimes described as "democratic theocracy" or "theocratic democracy," depending upon where one chose to place the emphasis, is manifest in its democratic flavor within the Community of Christ and its theocratic character within the LDS Church. While these polity differences have already shaped the way each institution has dealt with challenges posed by homosexuality, they promise to affect the future even more profoundly. Our purpose is to provide a brief history of institutional responses to homosexuality within both denominations through the lens of ecclesiastical polity.

10. "Legislation," 2004, retrieved April 11, 2004, from <http://www.cofchrist.org/wc2004/legislation/G-11>.

11. On LDS general conferences, see Daryl White and O. Kendall White Jr., "Charisma, Structure, and Contested Authority: The Social Construction of Authenticity in Mormonism," in *Religion and the Social Order*, Vol. 6 in *The Issue of Authenticity in the Study of Religions*, edited by David G. Bromley and Lewis F. Carter (Greenwich, Conn.: JAI Press, 1996), 93-112, and Gordon Shepherd and Gary Shepherd, *A Kingdom Transformed: Themes in the Development of Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1984).

Ecclesiastical Polity

The polity of a Church, its decision-making process and power structure, constitutes the foundation for addressing both internal and external challenges to the institution. Ranging along a continuum from highly centralized hierarchical polities at one end, to decentralized, congregationally based polities at the other, particular denominations vary in their fundamental decision-making structures and processes. While institutional policies and practices are determined by top officials in hierarchical religious organizations, they are established by local congregations in decentralized structures. Within the free church tradition, for instance, the selection of pastors, decisions about doctrinal matters, and even ownership of the chapel and property reside with the local congregation while hierarchically structured denominations assign pastors (priests), determine doctrine, establish creeds, and own ecclesiastical property. In short, a formal organization rather than a community of participants owns and controls the major economic, political, and social resources in hierarchical organizations.

The actual meaning of "Church" also differs at the two ends of the continuum. For hierarchically based organizations, the institution itself enjoys a metaphysical status as a corporate entity charged with the administration of sacred sacraments deemed essential for salvation. Since divine authority rests in the institution itself, especially in formal aspects of its hierarchically structured social relationships, individuals can be saved only through participation in its sacramental structure. In contrast to this fusion of the organizational and the sacramental, congregationally based denominations radically separate the two. For congregationally based denominations, the church is a democratic community of believers who come together for worship and mutual support. Often there is nothing metaphysical or sacred about the organization itself except to the extent that it collectively supports individuals whose salvation is grounded in personal religious experience.¹² Sometimes sacralized by collective covenant, the congregation is a site of symbolic, if not sacramental, perfor-

12. There is a parallel in these differences in religious polity with the sect-church distinction developed by the German sociologist Max Weber and his student Ernst Troeltsch. Rejecting pejorative connotations often associated with sects and the idea that they were simply underdeveloped churches, Weber and Troeltsch identified sects with democratic and egalitarian structures, including a

mances including confession of faith, baptism, and communion. For congregationalists, the church is essentially a "body of believers."

Between these two extremes are various forms of ecclesiastical polity. Embodying both hierarchical and congregational elements, but in varying combinations, these denominations often have autocratic and democratic propensities. For instance, the recent ordination of an openly gay bishop within the American Episcopal Church threatens the broader unity of the Anglican tradition. Some African bishops may refuse to acknowledge the Americans as members of the larger communion, and many American Episcopalians talk of establishing a more conservative alliance within the Church. The conflict may result in two distinct denominations within the United States. However, church polity and the importance of church buildings as the locus of liturgy and worship within the Episcopal tradition reduce the probability of such a split. Since challengers know that the building and property they regard as central to the local congregation's worship are owned by the central body, they will find it difficult to withdraw. A compromise is more likely, perhaps formal recognition of "liberal" and "conservative" congregations.¹³

Similar conflicts have erupted among Baptists following the takeover of the Southern Baptist Convention by fundamentalists. Opposition to gay rights and the ordination of women have resulted in the expulsion and withdrawal of numerous congregations and the formation of moderate and liberal alliances. A few Baptist Churches have applied for and re-

lay, unpaid ministry, and churches with hierarchical structures, including a professional priesthood and a sacramental doctrine of salvation. See Max Weber, "Church and Sect," in *Sociology and Religion: A Book of Readings*, edited by Norman Birnbaum and Gertrud Lenzer (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1969), 318-22, and Ernst Troeltsch, *Social Teachings of the Christian Churches*, 2 vols., translated by Olive Wyon (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981). For an analysis of the impact of American culture on the development of religious polity, see O. Kendall White Jr., "Constituting Norms and the Formal Organization of American Churches," *Sociological Analysis* 33 (Summer 1972), 95-109.

13. For a review of news coverage of the challenges posed by homosexuality for the Anglican communion, see Frank Kirkpatrick, "The Anglican Crackup," *Religion in the News* 6, no. 3 (Fall 2003): 2-4, 20.

ceived affiliation with the United Church of Christ which welcomes gay-friendly congregations.¹⁴

Within the Mormon tradition, the Latter-day Saints and the Community of Christ, in response to both internal and external challenges throughout their respective histories, have diverged in the development of their polities. Moreover, these divergent polities are clearly affecting responses of the two churches to gay and lesbian members and broader cultural challenges posed by issues surrounding homosexuality.

The LDS Church and Homosexuality

Latter-day Saints typically identify their polity in terms of a lay ministry in which only the very top officials, known as General Authorities, receive monetary compensation for their services. No one occupying leadership roles in either centralized or local positions is required to complete any theological training. Both doctrinal and policy decisions reside in the governing bodies of the First Presidency, composed of the president of the Church and his counselors, and the Council or Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, all of whom are believed to be called by revelation. In the ideological justification of Brigham Young's assumption of leadership, the LDS Church formally began the institutionalization of a succession process in which the senior member of the Quorum of the Twelve, upon the death of the president, automatically becomes the next president of the Church. Moreover, the First Presidency, sometimes with the involvement of the Twelve, selects all new apostles. Sustained as the prophet, seer, and revelator, the Church president can speak for God and enjoys ultimate deci-

14. See Daryl White and O. Kendall White Jr., "Issues of Homosexuality in Congregational and Denominational Realignment," paper presented at the Association for the Sociology of Religion, Atlanta, Georgia, August 15-17, 2003; "Gay-Affirming Congregations, Local Church Autonomy, and the Remaking of Southern Baptist Polity," paper presented at the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, October 18-21, 2001, Columbus, Ohio; Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Baptist Battles: Social Change and Religious Conflict in the Southern Baptist Convention* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1990); Nancy Tatom Ammerman, ed., *Southern Baptists Observed: Multiple Perspectives on a Changing Denomination* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1993); Arthur Emery Farnsley II, *Southern Baptist Politics: Authority and Power in the Restructuring of an American Denomination* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994).

sion-making prerogatives regarding doctrine and policy. A highly centralized bureaucracy, composed of the First Presidency and the Council of the Twelve, is the decision-making body that determines Church doctrine and policy. Though Church officials and, rarely, formal doctrinal changes are presented for approval to Church members at semi-annual general conferences, the process of "sustaining" Church leaders and accepting new doctrine or policy is a purely perfunctory ratification ritual in which opposition is completely absent or ignored.¹⁵ Given the thousands of local, regional, and central offices held by members of the Church, it may be said that the LDS Church depends upon extensive lay participation to carry out its ecclesiastical operations, but it would be a misnomer to identity it as a participatory democracy. Although highly participatory, the LDS Church is not democratic. Notwithstanding a rejection of the distinction between clergy and laity, the Church is governed by a highly centralized bureaucracy with decision-making prerogatives, control over institutional resources, and other forms of power located at the apex of a well-defined hierarchy.¹⁶

It is within this structural context that the official LDS response to homosexuality must be understood. D. Michael Quinn's examination of a variety of same-sex relations among Mormons during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, indicating much more tolerant attitudes, implies that current LDS policy and practice could be quite different.¹⁷ Contemporary policy, as we will argue, is primarily a function of an organizational structure that grants exceptional power to General Authorities.

Perhaps no one played a more crucial role in defining modern Church policy than J. Reuben Clark Jr.. His influence as a counselor in the First Presidency (1933-61) not only thwarted a potential liberalization of Mormon theology and democratization of LDS polity, but it also enhanced a growing preoccupation with Victorian sexual relations and attitudes. Along with Clark's aggressive attacks on polygamists emerged a new preoccupation with homosexuality. Though Apostles Spencer W. Kimball and Mark E. Petersen had been assigned the task of counseling

15. White and White, "Charisma, Structure, and Contested Authority," 99-100.

16. *Ibid.*, 106-7.

17. D. Michael Quinn, *Same-Sex Dynamics among Nineteenth-Century Americans: A Mormon Example* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996).

prospective missionaries who were dealing with problems of homosexuality in 1947,¹⁸ Clark delivered the first public address mentioning “homosexuality” by name in 1952. Speaking to a Churchwide audience of women and alluding to “the crimes for which Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed,” he lamented the coining of the “softer name” of “homosexuality, which, it is tragic to say, is found among both sexes” and asserted that this “malformation” threatens to destroy American society as “homosexuals are today exercising great influence in shaping our arts, literature, music, and drama.”¹⁹ Led by conservative Church officials like Clark and Kimball, the Latter-day Saints shared the homophobia of the McCarthy era.

The 1960s, with the invention of “the pill” and advent of a new sexual revolution, only strengthened Mormon commitment to Victorian sexuality and the resolve to resist national trends toward the redefining of gender roles, a less restrictive sexual code, and an emerging tolerance of same-sex relations. Brigham Young University not only implemented a strict dress code, but expelled gay and lesbian students, embraced reparative therapy with the use of a behaviorist form of aversive conditioning, and worked closely with local and state law enforcement officials to identify and prosecute gay students.²⁰ The conference addresses of General Authorities, according to Gordon and Gary Shepherd’s highly sophisticated content analysis, increasingly emphasized premarital chastity, marital fidelity, and “celestial” or “temple” marriage.²¹ The *General Handbook of Instructions*, which outlines policy and procedures for Church officials,

18. *Ibid.*, 434.

19. Quoted in Rocky Donovan, “‘The Abominable and Detestable Crime Against Nature’: A Brief History of Homosexuality and Mormonism,” in *Multiply and Replenish: Mormon Essays on Sex and the Family*, edited by Brent D. Corcoran (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994), 147.

20. *Ibid.*, 146–60; Daryl White and O. Kendall White Jr., “Mormonism and Homosexuality: A Historical Overview,” in *Anticipating the End: The Experiences of the Nineties. Proceedings of the 1999 Virginia Humanities Conference*, edited by Susan Blair Green (Staunton, Va.: Mary Baldwin College, 1999), 109–20.

21. Shepherd and Shepherd, *A Kingdom Transformed*, 85–87.

first identified homoerotic behavior as punishable by excommunication in its 1968 edition.²²

However, this aversion to homosexuality is not simply a result of homophobia. LDS beliefs that the family can persist beyond death (eternal or "celestial" marriage), the requirement of celestial marriage as a necessary condition for ultimate salvation (exaltation), and a preoccupation with procreation define as threatening any form of human sexuality that does not entail marriage and fertility. Thus, contemporary trends encouraging childless families, easier divorce, cohabitation outside marriage, single life styles, redefined gender roles, and greater tolerance of homosexuality within the broader society are presumed to challenge the Mormon ideal of celestial marriage.²³ This was the context in which Church leaders entered the political arena to oppose ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment. During the late 1970s, they initiated a formal, overt campaign to persuade Mormons and non-Mormons alike of dangers to "traditional" family values along with an informal, covert mobilization of people, money, and institutional resources in anti-ERA lobbies at state and national levels.²⁴ The covert campaign disguised both the identification of participants as LDS and the Church's involvement in fund raising, and it sometimes led to informal coalitions with the new Christian Right.²⁵

Emboldened by the defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment, Mormon officials embarked on a political campaign against the legalization of

22. Quinn, *Same-Sex Dynamics*, 380.

23. See White and White, "Mormonism and Homosexuality"; O. Kendall White Jr., "Ideology of the Family in Nineteenth-Century Mormonism," *Sociological Spectrum* 6 (June 1986): 289-305; Armand L. Mauss, "On 'Defense of Marriage': A Reply to Quinn," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 33, no. 3 (Fall 2000): 53-65.

24. O. Kendall White Jr., "Overt and Covert Politics: The Mormon Church's Anti-ERA Campaign in Virginia," *Virginia Social Science Journal* 19 (Winter 1984): 11-16, and his "Mormonism and the Equal Rights Amendment," *Journal of Church and State* 31, no. 2 (Spring 1989): 249-67; D. Michael Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Extensions of Power* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1997), chap. 10.

25. O. Kendall White Jr., "A Review and Commentary on the Prospects of a Mormon New Christian Right Coalition," *Review of Religious Research* 28 (December 1986): 180-88.

same-sex marriage and domestic partnerships. Hiring a marketing agency, Hill and Knowlton, in 1988 to monitor activities of state legislatures and the U.S. Congress and to promote the Church's political agenda on same-sex issues,²⁶ Church officials could shield their involvement while benefitting from the continuous monitoring and lobbying activity of an ostensibly independent firm. Consequently, the Church was well prepared when, in 1994, the First Presidency issued a proclamation against same-sex marriage, urging members to "appeal to legislators, judges, and other government officials to preserve the purposes and sanctity of marriage" and to "reject all efforts" for "legal authorization" or "official approval" of "marriages between persons of the same gender."²⁷

As Church officials created front organizations similar to those employed in the covert campaign against the ERA, Latter-day Saints joined like-minded citizens in grass-roots opposition to gay and lesbian rights in local and state referenda in Hawaii, Colorado, Alaska, and California.²⁸ While Church officials publicly acknowledged spending millions of dollars of Church funds in Hawaii, Alaska, and California, they also admitted "setting apart" (a religious ritual involving the "laying on of hands") retirement-age couples on short-term missions to assist local political organizations in their campaign against same-sex marriages in Hawaii.²⁹ The most visible and perhaps most divisive of the Church's anti-gay rights activities to date was California's 2000 campaign for Proposition 22 that prevents the state legislature from passing laws supporting same-sex marriage and requires that California not acknowledge such unions recognized by other states or nations.³⁰ Whether such state laws can withstand legal challenges is unclear, especially given the U.S. Supreme Court's June 2003 decision overturning Texas's sodomy

26. Richley Crapo, "Chronology of LDS Involvement in Same-Sex Marriage Politics," Paper presented to the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, November 8, 1997, San Diego, California.

27. "LDS Church Opposing Gay Marriages," *Deseret News*, March 30, 1994, A-10.

28. Crapo, "Chronology"; Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Extensions of Power*, 402-6; D. Michael Quinn, "Prelude to the National 'Defense of Marriage' Campaign: Civil Discrimination against Feared or Despised Minorities," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 33, no. 3 (Fall 2000): 1-52.

29. Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Extensions of Power*, 402.

30. Quinn, "Prelude to the National 'Defense of Marriage' Campaign";

statute (*Lawrence v. Texas*) and the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court's decision in November 2003 permitting same-sex marriage; but both decisions are likely to intensify the political activity of Mormon officials and to increase their willingness to use institutional resources, including Church funds, in opposition to extending gay rights.³¹

Whatever the motivation of LDS leaders in their campaign to prohibit same-sex marriage and corporate and state recognition of domestic partnerships, their commitment of institutional resources and mobilization of Church membership follows the autocratic character of LDS polity. Since Church officials decide when to enter the political arena and which institutional resources will be employed, Latter-day Saints committed to a different political agenda find their Church acting against their own interests. Decisions are made at the highest level of the Mormon hierarchy by processes that are opaque to members; members are strongly urged to participate; and values of obedience to Church authority and loyalty to the institution are invoked to elicit compliance. In both the anti-ERA campaign and the current crusade against same-sex marriage, a number of people were threatened with reprisals and/or subjected to Church discipline for active opposition to a political agenda contradicting their own values.³² Below the apex of the hierarchy, Latter-day Saints play no formal or direct role in the determination of Church policy and practice.

Mauss, "On 'Defense of Marriage'"; "Proposition 22 Dominates California Wards' Attention, Divides Members," *Sunstone*, No. 118 (April 2001): 86-92.

31. Brooke Adams, "Court Rules Gay Couples Can Marry," *Salt Lake Tribune*, November 19, 2003, online edition.

32. In spite of formal denials, some Church members were "called" to positions leading local opposition to ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment, and others were informed that it was their "assignment" to mobilize opposition. See White, "Overt and Covert Politics," 13-14, and Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Extensions of Power*, 385-91. Notwithstanding official claims to the contrary, the loyalty of dissenters was often questioned and some people experienced reprisals and even Church discipline. Sonia Johnson's excommunication was the most famous case, but Mormons for ERA also received letters from faithful Church members whose bishops impugned their loyalty, threatened to deny temple recommends, and sometimes suggested even more extreme measures. Many of these letters are now available in the Sonia Johnson Papers, Special Collections, Manuscript Division, Marriott Library, University of Utah, Salt Lake City. See also

The Community of Christ and Homosexuality

Following the assassination of the Mormon prophet, Joseph Smith Jr., in 1844, the Mormons were in disarray, and the major problem confronting them was leadership succession. Factions formed around various charismatic claimants to Church leadership and different rules for guiding the succession process. Arguing that the Council of the Twelve was to become the governing body upon the death of the Church president, Brigham Young successfully led the largest group on the trek westward. Others followed various charismatic figures with revelatory claims to be Smith's legitimate successor, but a principle holding that the Church presidency should pass through the lineage of the Prophet Joseph was introduced by Jason Briggs.³³

Briggs, who had supported Brigham Young in opposition to Sidney Rigdon, subsequently left the Utah Mormons, joining, and later leaving,

Sonia Johnson, *From Housewife to Heretic* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1981); Alice Allred Pottmyer, "Sonia Johnson: Mormonism's Feminist Heretic" in *Differing Visions: Dissenters in Mormon History*, edited by Roger D. Launius and Linda Thatcher (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 366-89; O. Kendall White Jr., "A Feminist Challenge: 'Mormons for ERA' as an Internal Social Movement," *Journal of Ethnic Studies* 13, no. 1 (Spring 1985): 29-50; and Robert Gottlieb and Peter Wiley, *America's Saints: The Rise of Mormon Power* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1984), chap. 7.

With the even more aggressive public campaign against same-sex marriage in Alaska, Hawaii, and California begun in the mid-1990s, the same pattern of intimidation emerged. Although the Church again officially disavowed any threat of discipline for those opposing its campaign on behalf of Proposition 22 in California, members received letters on official stationery requesting money, and some families were asked to meet with their bishops to determine the amount of their contribution. Though many disgruntled Latter-day Saints who complained about intimidation would not allow reporters to use their names, a few identified themselves. Alan and Yvette Hansen, for instance, were placed on "informal probation" by their bishop when they wrote a letter to the editor of a local newspaper opposing the church's position. See "Proposition 22," 90-92; Crapo, "Chronology"; O. Kendall White Jr. and Bryan Waterman, "Revisiting the Mormon-Conservative Christian Political Coalition," Paper presented to the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, November 5-7, 1999, Boston.

33. Alma R. Blair, "The Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints: Moderate Mormonism," in *The Restoration Movement: Essays in Mormon*

groups led by Joseph Smith's brother William and James J. Strang. In 1851, Briggs claimed a revelation affirming the principle of lineal descent for selecting the Church president. Several loosely linked factions, already rejecting the claims of Young and other "pretenders" to the office, began coalescing into a more formal body that soon became the basis for the Reorganization. On April 6, 1853, a general conference convened to reorganize the Mormon Church. Following two days of debate, this conference endorsed the principle of lineal succession, selected Briggs as conference president and as "President *pro tem* of the Church," and chose seven members of the Quorum of the Twelve, twenty Seventies, and a high council.³⁴ Despite initial resistance, Joseph Smith III finally consented to accept the presidency in 1860, and the new organization officially became the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints.

Though the fundamental ecclesiastical structure followed the model established by Joseph Smith Jr. which remains recognizable in its LDS form, the experience of the Community of Christ has produced an organization in which its members exercise much greater influence over institutional policy and practice. In spite of increased organizational efficiency obtained through a centralization of power from the leadership of Frederick Madison Smith, the son of Joseph Smith III,³⁵ the Community of Christ traditionally uses its General Conference as a deliberative body. Controversies during the 1960s enhanced the significance of the conferences. Meeting biannually, they were renamed World Conferences. Through Church leadership and World Conferences, the 1960s saw the RLDS Church redefine itself more along the lines of mainline Protestantism than traditional Mormonism.³⁶ No longer claiming to be the "only" true church, its emphasis on inclusiveness, nondiscrimination, and ecumenicalism subsequently resulted, in the 1984 acceptance of women for

History, edited by F. Mark McKiernan, Alma R. Blair, and Paul M. Edwards (Independence, Mo.: Herald House, 1879), 207-30.

34. *Ibid.*, 215-16.

35. Paul M. Edwards, "Theocratic-Democracy: Philosopher-King in the Reorganization," in *The Restoration Movement: Essays in Mormon History*, 341, calls him "the most controversial figure in Reorganization history."

36. Roger D. Launius, "Coming of Age? The Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints in the 1960s," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 28, no. 2 (Summer 1995): 31-57.

priesthood ordination and callings to top ecclesiastical offices, including the Quorum of the Twelve.³⁷ According to historian Roger Launius, the RLDS Church has left its sectarian status and has become a denomination sharing broader societal values.³⁸ Its realignment with Protestantism undoubtedly encouraged the World Conference in 2000 to authorize changing the name of the organization to the Community of Christ, a step that became operational in 2001.

The Community of Christ World Conference, unlike the LDS general conference, provides Church members with the means of shaping institutional policy. The conference establishes budgets, sustains officials, and addresses legislative issues. Marjorie Bradley Troeh, who was ordained a high priest in 1994, noted that “2,800 delegates are selected proportionately from throughout the world, and each jurisdiction selects its own.” While approximately thirty general Church officers act as *ex-officio* delegates, the rest are elected.³⁹ Local jurisdictions, until recently called districts, stakes, or regions, are now organized as mission centers; one of their prerogatives is initiating resolutions prior to the World Conference. Delegates at the World Conference, through priesthood quorums and

37. Reactions to the general theological liberalization during the 1960s and 1970s resulted in some schismatic activity, but conservatives (“fundamentalists”) typically remained in the fold, largely by transferring their membership to more compatible congregations. The World Conference’s approval of the ordination of women in 1984 resulted in approximately 100 formal withdrawals. A movement to rescind the decision failed at the 1986 World Conference. For those choosing not to leave the Church, the favorite strategy is to affiliate with like-minded congregations that do not ordain women. However, at the institutional level, women hold offices of apostle as well as membership in leading church councils. See William D. Russell, “Defenders of the Faith: Varieties of RLDS Dissent,” *Sunstone* 14, no. 3 (June 1990): 14–19; Paul M. Edwards, “RLDS Priesthood: Structure and Process,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 17, no. 3 (Autumn 1984): 6–11; Madelon L. Brunson, “‘Stranger in a Strange Land’: A Personal Response to the 1984 Document,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 17, no. 3 (Autumn 1984): 11–17.

38. Launius, “Coming of Age,” esp. 54–55. See also William D. Russell, “Ordaining Women and the Transformation from Sect to Denomination,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 36, no. 3 (Autumn 2003): 61–64.

39. Marjorie Bradley Troeh and M. Richard Troeh, “‘We Have a Stronger Church’: An Interview with Marjorie and M. Richard Troeh,” interviewed by Bryan Waterman, *Sunstone* 20, no. 2 (July 1997): 61.

bodies for unordained members and for youth, can initiate additional resolutions at the conference. Then, collectively, delegates deliberate upon and pass or reject resolutions urging the First Presidency, various councils, and the Church body as a whole to address specific issues. They also vote to accept or reject documents identifying new Church policy. Revelations are deliberated upon by delegates in priesthood quorums, meetings of the unordained and youth, and then collectively by the Church. When passed by conference vote, they are added to the Doctrine and Covenants.⁴⁰

Madelon L. Brunson, former head of the Women's Commission, provided a historical account of the role of each World Conference from 1970 to 1984 leading to the admission of women to the priesthood.⁴¹ A delegate to the 1984 World Conference, Brunson voted to accept President Wallace B. Smith's presentation of the priesthood document with some reservations because she feared that women might be assimilated into a structure over which they would have little control. Given a much more limited and selective priesthood than the LDS Church, requiring recognition of unique potential and worthiness of the candidate by a Church official, along with evaluation and approval from the congregation, only women who qualify by the criteria of male officials would be called to priesthood offices.⁴² Whatever the merit of Brunson's concerns, the Community of Christ now appears to be following a comparable path regarding gay and lesbian issues, perhaps with the lag of a few decades.

Like the Latter-day Saints, the RLDS first publicly addressed the question of homosexuality during the 1950s, when Apostle George Mesley resigned his position during the April 1954 General Conference. Mesley, who tendered his resignation in the face of threats from critics who intended to "out" him as a homosexual, was subsequently "silenced" (his priesthood was removed) over charges regarding his sexual orientation. Later, in the early sixties, the First Presidency assigned the Standing High Council to study homosexuality in the Church, especially to determine if it constituted grounds for divorce or called into question an individual's priesthood and/or membership. While the First Presidency en-

40. Ibid. For some additional detail, we are indebted to one of the anonymous reviewers.

41. Brunson, "Stranger in a Strange Land."

42. Ibid.

joys the prerogative of accepting or rejecting the council's advice, they apparently adopted the council's conclusion that the "persistent practice" of homosexuality was a sin and that such individuals should be excommunicated, which, in the RLDS tradition, means that they are no longer members in "good standing" and cannot partake of communion or be a delegate to the World Conference. Though a male homosexual could not be expelled from the Church, as in the LDS meaning of excommunication, he could be silenced from his priesthood should he continue an active homosexual life. The Standing High Council's 1962 policy was never published, but in 1971 portions were quoted in an article in the *Saints' Herald*, initiating some discussion among members of the Church.⁴³

With the RLDS Church moving toward mainline Protestantism during the 1970s, there was some reconsideration of the 1962 policy. Within two months of Wallace B. Smith's 1978 ordination as president, the First Presidency appointed a Human Sexuality Committee comprising a wide range of professionals in psychology, counseling, medicine, and education. The 100-page committee report contained nine pages on homosexuality written by Kenneth Robinson, a professional clinical psychologist who is currently a member of the First Presidency. The report urged continued study with the appointment of a Task Force on Human Sexuality. According to William D. Russell, a historian at the Community of Christ's Graceland University, the task force's "interim draft on homosexuality (April 1981) was very progressive, advocating acceptance of homosexuality and responsible covenant relationships and calling for civil rights advocacy for gays. It left open the ordination of gays."⁴⁴ A distinction in the report between homosexual orientation and homosexual activity left an opening for celibate homosexual ordination to the priesthood.

The First Presidency, possibly in response to negative reactions, prepared a compromise that barely advanced the 1962 policy. All that this compromise policy established was that homosexuals who committed themselves to celibacy could be ordained. It made no distinction

43. William D. Russell, "Homosexuals in the RLDS Church: A Continuing Tension," 1-2, paper presented to the John Whitmer Historical Association, September 9, 2000, Independence, Missouri, photocopy in our possession, used by permission.

44. *Ibid.*, 4.

between promiscuity and committed, monogamous relationships. Again, publication of the policy followed the 1962 scenario, with pertinent parts being published three years later in a "Question Time" column in the *Saints' Herald*. All homosexual acts were equated with promiscuity, and any active homosexual should be silenced from his priesthood, but celibate gay men could be ordained.⁴⁵

The 1982 statement from the Standing High Council remains the official position of the Church. However, resolutions proposed for the 2002 World Conference, described in our introduction, urged the adoption of an inclusive nondiscriminatory policy embracing same-sex unions and the ordination of gay and lesbian members to the priesthood. The attendant conflict resulted in the publication after the conference of "Community, Common Consent, and the Issue of Homosexuality" by the World Church Leadership Council, composed of the First Presidency, Council of the Twelve Apostles, and the Presiding Bishopric.⁴⁶ It stated that the Church would follow the provisions of the 1982 policy while encouraging dialogue and discussion in countries and areas where change is possible and dialogue is permitted. A conservative reaction expressed in the resolutions proposed by traditional jurisdictions for the 2004 World Conference, like that of the Southern Mississippi delegation (see introduction), suggests that homosexuality will remain a contested issue, at least for the immediate future.

The most promising signals of change come from the organizing of gay and lesbian members, the action of local congregations, and the commitment of some Community of Christ officials. Like gay and lesbian Latter-day Saints who joined one another in the formation of Affirmation, an organization establishing networks and articulating collective interests, Community of Christ gays and lesbians have created GALA (Gay and Lesbian Acceptance), which organizes retreats, publishes a newsletter, maintains a website, and mobilizes support for their interests within the Church. Unlike the LDS situation, where Affirmation's voice is heard only in marginal contexts such as the Sunstone Symposia and internet chat groups, GALA enjoys some success in reaching the mainstream Com-

45. *Ibid.*, 5.

46. World Church Leadership Council, "Community, Common Consent, and the Issue of Homosexuality," retrieved November 6, 2003, from <http://www.cofchrist.org/news/oct2>.

munity of Christ. Organized in 1987, GALA made its presence known at World Conferences during the late 1980s and early 1990s, soon taking charge of the AIDS Ministry, organizing services for parents and friends of lesbians and gays, obtaining an official booth, which has enjoyed an increasingly central and more visible location at World Conferences, and enjoying the support of prominent ecclesiastical officials, including apostles and members of the First Presidency, who have preached to and/or participated in GALA-sponsored worship services.⁴⁷

A few officers in various jurisdictions of the Church have ordained to priesthood positions homosexuals who live in committed, monogamous relationships, apparently with support from the local congregation and in defiance of the official 1982 policy.⁴⁸ Speaking of one couple, Keith and Robert, whose congregation has accepted their relationship and Keith's priesthood ordination, Russell, who with his wife Lois, is an enthusiastic catalyst for GALA, nonetheless acknowledges "a nagging, haunting fear" that "the Church may someday pull the rug on Keith and Robert and withdraw the support and love that they have received."⁴⁹ But there are encouraging signs for gay and lesbian members of the Community of Christ. The author of the most progressive position on homosexuality in the 1978 document, Kenneth Robinson, is now a member of the First Presidency. Some apostles appear supportive of a new policy; and at least one official, John Billings, regional administrator for the East Central States Region, vowed to engage in "ecclesiastical disobedience" by refusing to enforce the Church's policy on silencing gay priesthood. He was "warmly applauded" when he announced to the St. Louis Stake at a fellowship service that as a matter of conscience he would leave his new appointment as stake president if there were no place for gays and lesbians in the Church.⁵⁰ Many gay and lesbian members were encouraged by the sermon of W. Grant McMurray, Community of Christ president, at the 1998 World Conference:

47. Russell, "Homosexuals in the RLDS Church: A Continuing Tension," 5-6.

48. Ibid.; William D. Russell, "Christ and Culture in Conflict: The Church and Homosexuals," *GalaNews Letter* 12, No. 1 (Winter 2001): 1, 7-8.

49. Russell, "Christ and Culture in Conflict," 8.

50. Russell, "Homosexuals in the RLDS Church: A Continuing Tension," 7.

We struggle today with the proper way of expressing the sense of calling and giftedness of persons with varying lifestyles and orientations, including those who identify themselves as gay and lesbian. We often do not speak openly of the issue. Tonight I will. Let me make a heartfelt plea with all of you, whatever your views on this difficult issue may be. In a world that cannot come to common ground on any of the medical, psychological, cultural, and social issues that swirl around this topic, the church cannot be expected to have ready answers.

But here is what we can expect—that every person who walks through our doors will be received with open arms. We will listen to the life stories of each person who graces our fellowship and embrace them in love. On this there can be no compromise.⁵¹

While the World Church Leadership Council acknowledged deviations from the 1982 policy, it committed the Church to that policy until it is officially changed. Staff who are specialized in conflict resolution are designing procedures for continuing the discussion, and the 2004 World Conference has extended the dialogue with the introduction of Listening Circles and trained facilitators, a process that should raise the quality of discussion, enhance prospects for a more inclusive policy, and reduce the likelihood of schism. Whatever the eventual outcome, the involvement of members of the Community of Christ in the fundamental decision-making processes of the organization, between and during their World Conferences, is ensured by their polity. Local congregations through their delegates will decide institutional policy. Consequently, the Church as a whole is much more likely to be responsive to its gay and lesbian members than is the LDS Church.

Conclusion

It is quite clear that the hierarchical nature of LDS polity limits decision-making prerogatives to the First Presidency and Council of the Twelve. The particular beliefs and attitudes of rank-and-file members of the Church on the merits of gay and lesbian rights and same-sex unions are irrelevant to institutional policy. To the extent that members agree with the edicts of ecclesiastical officials, they will enter the political arena in coalitions with other opponents of gay and lesbian rights with varying degrees of enthusiasm. Should they disagree with Church officials on

51. Quoted in William D. Russell, "Homosexuals in the RLDS Church: A Progress Report," *GalaNews Letter*, special edition, n.d., 1.

these matters, they must either abstain from active political action in opposition to the Church's position or run the risk of potential disciplinary action. Whatever the position of individual Latter-day Saints, the resources of the institution will be mobilized, at least in the immediate future, in both overt and covert campaigns to defeat same-sex unions and domestic partnerships in political jurisdictions throughout the land. The continuing development of gay and lesbian organizations on the periphery of the Church, which is a topic for a different article, will provide limited sources of acceptance and support within the broader Mormon community—i.e., marginal subcultures. However, there is virtually no possibility for these Latter-day Saints to influence institutional policy and practice at any time in the foreseeable future.

The polity of the Community of Christ, on the other hand, appears to be in a more democratic trajectory and increasingly responsive to the Church membership.⁵² We suspect that General Authorities in the LDS Church are more conservative than the general membership while the general membership in the Community of Christ is more conservative

52. The democratic polity of the Community of Christ does not ensure that the final policy will be progressive or inclusive. It simply means that the general membership will have a much larger say in the outcome. James R. Wood, "Authority and Controversial Policy: The Churches and Civil Rights," *American Sociological Review* 35 (December 1967): 1057–69, in a comparative analysis of denominations in the American South during the 1960s, found that those with the most democratic polities, including the congregation's ownership of the chapel and right to hire and fire their own pastors, were much less likely to support civil rights for African Americans or integration of their own congregations than denominations with more hierarchical structures where pastors were assigned by ecclesiastical officials and property was owned by the denomination. See also James R. Wood and Mayer N. Zald, "Aspects of Racial Integration in the Methodist Church: Sources of Resistance to Organizational Policy," *Social Forces* 45 (December 1966): 255–65. For the importance of polity, also see Mayer N. Zald, "Theological Crucibles: Social Movements in and of Religion," *Review of Religious Research* 23, no. 4 (June 1982): 317–36. D. Paul Sullins, "An Organizational Classification of Protestant Denominations," *Review of Religious Research* 45, no. 3 (March 2004): 278–92, found polity to be a very good predictor of voting for George W. Bush among Protestant fundamentalists during the 2000 presidential election. The more hierarchical their denomination, the greater the likelihood that they would vote for Bush—53 percent in denominations with decentralized

than the leadership. If we are correct in these assumptions and accurate in the descriptions and importance of organizational polity, then, ironically, the general advancement of the interests of gay and lesbian members in both denominations is inhibited by their institutional polities. Why? The more progressive leadership in the Community of Christ is restrained by the power of a less progressive membership while any progressive influences among LDS members are mitigated by the inordinate power of a conservative hierarchy. The Community of Christ World Conference has become a deliberative body that enables its members to participate in setting the agenda for issues to be discussed, debated, and decided in the name of the institution. While there are reasons for concern among gay and lesbian members of the Community of Christ, with the Church still maintaining an official policy that permits the ordination of only celibate homosexuals, there are other indications that many within the Church may be moving toward a much more inclusive policy that will recognize the legitimacy of homosexual relations in the context of commitment and monogamy. This tendency may be reinforced by general societal trends toward greater acceptance of homosexuality and the legal extension of fundamental rights acknowledging sexual orientation. GALA is clearly gaining access as a legitimate body at World Conferences and other contexts within the Church. If some observers, including William Russell, are correct, then the Church is not likely to experience the adoption of an inclusive policy as a significant challenge to its membership base. He suspects that the "majority of the seriously homophobic members left the Church in the 1980s, in the battle over women's ordination."⁵³

Whatever the merits of Russell's judgment, the two major denominations within the Mormon fold are once again taking divergent paths. While the Community of Christ, in both theology and social policy, moves closer to liberal Protestantism, the Latter-day Saints, in both theology and social policy, move ever closer to Protestant fundamentalism.

polities, 61 percent in moderately centralized polities, and 75 percent in highly centralized polities.

53. Russell, "Homosexuals in the RLDS Church: A Progress Report," 4.