

The cost of the paperback is a bit stiff—\$19.95. But with fifty poems to the volume, the average cost is a mere 40 cents per poem. And this particular poem is so compelling, it is by itself worth the price of the entire book. Yes, it is that good, and in its own modest way, better than great.

Notes

1. Walter Landor, *Classical Conversations* (Wash.: Dunne Publishing, 1901), 324.
2. Susan Howe, e-mail message to author, April 23, 2013.
3. William Butler Yeats, *Selected Poems and Two Plays* (New York: Collier Books, 1962), 28.
4. English translation here by the author. Original in David A. Campbell, *Greek Lyric Poetry* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1967), 46.
5. Billy Collins, *Sailing Alone Around the Room* (New York: Random House, 2001), 138.



Empowerment at the Local Level

Neylan McBaine. *Women at Church: Magnifying LDS Women's Local Impact*. Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2014. 218 pp. Paperback: \$20.43. ISBN: 1589586883.

Reviewed by Lisa Torcasso Downing

Tension isn't new to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. From its foundation, the Church has drawn fire for its religious, social, and political stands. However, these historical tensions seem, in large measure, to have been externally crafted by outsiders who may or may not have desired the downfall of the Mormons. Today, however, the LDS Church faces a new tension, one that originates from among the ranks of our faithful,

and speaks its message broadly and clearly, both to those inside and outside the faith: Mormon women are not treated as equals. In her latest text, *Women at Church: Magnifying LDS Women's Local Impact*, Neylan McBaine, a prominent LDS feminist, blogger, and brand strategist, presents a practical, yet pastoral, guide devoted to helping faithful Latter-day Saints implement prayerful, inspired solutions that fit within the context of the current hierarchical system.

McBaine does not call for the kind of revolution those supporting the Ordain Women movement urge, one where gender equity must be achieved through institutionalizing female ordination. In fact, McBaine doesn't foresee any ready changes to the order of Church governance. *Women at Church* is her call for the faithful to uncover ways to improve the sense of honor for and openness to the contributions of LDS women. For McBaine, changing the status quo does not require changing the present Church structure.

In *Women at Church*, McBaine provides a tidy summation of the history of gender issues, both outside and inside the Mormon experience. Of particular interest is her framing of gender as a fundamental concern throughout LDS history. She briefly recounts public discussion of the controversies surrounding healing blessings performed by women in the early days of the Church, as well as of polygamy. She walks us through the mid-nineteenth century correlation efforts which stripped the Relief Society of autonomy and made political warriors out of Mormon women in the Church's fight to stop the Equal Rights Amendment. Lastly, McBaine gives a nod to the recent excommunication of Ordain Women founder, Kate Kelly, and yet she remains focused on efforts that Mormons can make within the present system.

After establishing that gender has always been openly discussed, debated, and pondered in the LDS Church, McBaine reminds her readers that those who covenant to bear one another's burdens must, in the exercise of their faith, develop empathy for those who express pain, particularly regarding gender issues. A woman who grew up as a faithful Mormon in New York City, she learned from an early age to embrace diversity. As demonstrated through

her work on the “I’m a Mormon” campaign, she appreciates the need to assume the perspective of those we seek to motivate or to serve effectively. She compels her readers to broaden their concept of gender roles by providing ample voices of those who suffer, voices like this:

I grew up in Utah, and was always fully active—graduated from BYU, served a mission in Brazil, married in the temple. The whole time, I was 100% orthodox and obedient, but secretly I was plagued by doubts, mostly about gender. I felt persistently less-than as a woman in the church. When I went to the temple, I felt deep shame as a woman. I would read the scriptures and cry because I could not find myself there. On my mission, I often felt patronized and condescended to, knowing I was an effective missionary but always being subordinate to men who were younger than me and had not studied the gospel as rigorously as I had. (25)

McBaine uses this story, and others like it, to demonstrate that today’s young women have never known a world in which gender dictated a person’s life script—except in their church. This disconnection between their experience outside and inside the religion is frictional. When Church rhetoric speaks of equality in the eyes of God, their life-lived experience becomes the measure by which they judge whether or not gender equality truly exists within their faith community. As a result, many young women judge the rhetoric hollow. The challenge, then, is for local leaders and congregations to improve the practice of what is preached.

In the second portion of *Women at Church*, McBaine argues for small changes to the way the LDS faith is implemented, suggesting small changes add up to big improvement. She advocates increasing the visibility of women, both physically by placing female leaders on the stand, and theologically by elevating the work, words, and wisdom of LDS women to manual-worthy status. Much of the latter half of the text offers examples of imaginative re-thinking of the way we practice, never once stepping beyond the Church’s official *Handbook of Instructions*. For instance, some mothers feel slighted at being left out when

their infants are given a name and a blessing. While the *Handbook* is clear that only Melchizedek priesthood holders may offer the blessing, some ward leaders, after prayerful consideration, have begun inviting mothers to participate in the rite by holding their infant while the priesthood pronounces the blessing. These creative suggestions for change, all of which comply with the wording in the *Handbook*, should, in my opinion, be read and considered by every local leader.

This is not to say that *Women at Church* will evoke only positive reaction. Some traditional Mormons are not likely to interpret McBaine's suggestions as beneficial, and others may take offense at the notion of change coming through grass-roots effort, believing divinely inspired course corrections come only from the top down. Feminists may balk when she counsels women to use "humor and graciousness" as they approach priesthood leaders or female decision-makers about their needs and concerns (93). In fact, some of McBaine's advice smacks, to my ears, of counsel that Mormon women remain well-behaved, even as they speak up about abuses they have experienced. However, her advice, as painful as it may be, is likely wise for many situations, considering that the LDS realm continues to be "embedded in a mid-century culture where men and women don't interact outside of familial ties" (105) and where men govern and women submit. Asking for change may be interpreted as an act of aggression by some, or as an insult, or a condemnation of another's love of God. Hence, McBaine's advice that women assume the responsibility to prayerfully, carefully consider to whom and how they take their concerns forward is, unfortunately, needed. Of course, such advice may be very difficult for young LDS women to navigate if they already resent their unequal footing.

Women at Church is a substantial contribution to the ongoing dialogue about gender in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. It comes at a time when many LDS women feel shut down and shut out by recent disciplinary action against leading Mormon feminists. But, with her text, McBaine reminds all Latter-day Saints that empowerment is something women can claim, not something they must wait to be granted. No matter

how a person feels about the hot topic of female ordination, she or he can push for improvements in the way LDS women are treated at the local level.



Negotiating the Paradoxes: Neylan McBaine's *Women at Church*

Neylan McBaine, *Women at Church: Magnifying LDS Women's Local Impact*, Greg Kofford Books, 2014. Paperback: \$20.43. ISBN: 1589586883.

Reviewed by Julie M. Smith

Neylan McBaine's book *Women at Church* includes the following interview excerpt:

On one Sunday in my ward, the final assigned speaker was a woman. She seemed flustered to be in the last slot, was apologetic to the audience and lamented that we weren't going to get the final word in the meeting from a priesthood holder. And then she gave her talk.

The stake president happened to be visiting, and after she finished he stood to make a few comments. He thanked her for the talk, and acknowledged she was just being self-deprecating. But he said it was his responsibility as presiding officer in the stake to correct misinformation. He then affirmed that there is nothing wrong with scheduling a sister to speak in the last slot in sacrament meeting, that that is perfectly appropriate. When we don't do that, it is just a tradition.¹

McBaine's response to this incident is "I want to shout 'Hooray!'" The irony of the story—that a woman was *not* the final speaker in the meeting and that the final word *did* come from a priesthood holder—exemplifies the many paradoxes