

## KEY TURNING POINTS IN EXPONENT II'S HISTORY

Nancy Tate Dredge

In her editorial in the very first issue, Claudia Bushman wrote “*Exponent II*, posed on the dual platforms of Mormonism and Feminism, has two aims: to strengthen The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and to encourage and develop the talents of Mormon women.” Years later, in an attempt to be welcoming to women wherever they were on the spectrum of belief and activity in Mormonism, we, as a board, vehemently discussed and re-wrote our mission statement, changing the phrase “Our common bond is our *commitment* to the Church and the women of the Church” to “Our common bond is our *connection* to the Church and our *commitment* to women.” So, even though we questioned and diluted somewhat that first platform, we have always firmly adhered to the second, that of feminism. But Claudia was unknowingly throwing down a gauntlet by declaring our “modest little paper,” as she called it, to be feminist.

We were a little naïve about the paper’s reception. On the one hand, our ambitions about *Exponent II* were low; in the fifth issue of the paper, Claudia’s editorial stated that we had imagined eventually having perhaps 500 women who would be interested in, and subscribe to, the paper, but in less than six months we had 2,000 subscribers. By the end of that year it was 4,000—from all fifty states and several other countries. All subscriptions came by word of mouth with no advertising. On the other hand, we had a missionary zeal about sharing all we had found out about our own Mormon “herstory” through reading the original *Woman’s Exponent* (which none of us had ever heard of prior to its discovery in Widener Library) and the research we had done to

publish *Mormon Sisters: Women in Early Utah*. One of the things we did was to send copies of one of the early issues of the paper to the wives of all the General Authorities, straight to the Church Office Building. We sincerely thought they would be thrilled to read what some Mormon women were thinking and doing. We were informed, however, that our paper was not welcome and that we should never do that again. We began to have Woman's Exponent Day dinners, which highlighted influential Mormon women as speakers, in honor of that original Mormon women's newspaper, of which we called ourselves "the spiritual descendants." We invited many local women to join with us at these dinners and to become subscribers. Again, we were rebuffed by many of them (although the dinners themselves were wonderful and well attended). I asked one friend in our ward why she didn't want to become involved, and she replied, "I've already dealt with all that and have decided that my place is in the home," an interesting response considering that we had never advocated that women leave their homes to go to work. But from the very beginning, it was assumed that that was our agenda. In fact, for years we bent over backwards trying to keep a balance in the paper between women in the workplace and women in the home. Many assumed, however, that *Exponent II's* very existence was forcing women to take sides on the feminist question.

We chalked this mistrust up to being unwelcome prophetesses in our own country, but I believe it was much more than that. *Exponent II* first came out in 1974. This was the era of the Vietnam War and protesting students. We lived in Cambridge and had seen buildings on Harvard's campus taken over by students, protesting the war with sit-ins. It was also the beginning of second-wave feminism in America. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* had been published just ten years previously. I believe many Church members—including the General Authorities—saw students with beards protesting the war, pot-smoking hippies advocating free love in San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury, radical feminists burning their bras, and jumbled all these images together in their minds. They

did what most conservative groups do: retrench, long for an idyllic, more orderly past, and decry cultural change. Beards are still suspect by many in the Church, and the word *feminism* has always been an “F word” to the Mormon population at large. Some members even thought Carolyn Person’s wonderful artwork in *Exponent II* resembled protest tracts from the sixties and seventies.

Once we lost some of our naïveté and figured a few of these things out, we then had the task of navigating this part-hostile, part-welcoming environment. Some issues we took on directly. For example, the Equal Rights Amendment had been passed by both houses of Congress in 1972, just before *Exponent II*'s beginnings, and the ratification process by the states continued on until 1979. In the beginning, it was unclear what the Church’s position on the ERA would be. In its very first issue in July 1974, *Exponent II* came out with an article titled “What the ERA Will Mean to You,” trying to dispel fears that it would mean mandatory military service for women, unisex restrooms, and legalization of gay marriage while losing women’s protective labor laws and financial support in marriage and/or divorce. However, in a move that surprised many, the Church officially came out against the ERA in the spring of 1976, their stated reason being that they deemed it to be redundant because women’s rights were already protected—along with men’s—in the Fourteenth Amendment. Readers voiced their opinions on the pros and cons of the ERA in *Exponent II*; by publishing both viewpoints, we established a pattern that was to continue for years. We felt that we had a readership made up of women of all ages, from many different backgrounds, and with both conservative and liberal politics. We wanted the paper to be relevant to all of them. So we aired the feelings of women all along that spectrum, trying to maintain a balance.

The debacle surrounding the International Women’s Year<sup>1</sup> happened at about the same time. The national sponsors of the IWY went from

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1. The International Women’s Year was the name given to 1975 by the United Nations. The IWY was part of a larger United Nations program and included

state convention to state convention, trying to come up with a consistent platform of proposals that would protect or promulgate women's rights. Although the General Relief Society president, Barbara Smith, encouraged women to attend, her urging was just part of the Relief Society's push to get Mormon women involved in their communities and in important political issues. However, feeling that they had been called to defend hearth and home against those supporting the ERA, the Mormon women delegates voted down most of the proposals the National IWY put forward, even innocuous ones like those having to do with child care, in an attempt to show that Utah was not pro-ERA. As we had done with the ERA, *Exponent II* published letters from women who both supported and were aghast by how the Utah convention was handled.

*Exponent II* was like the original *Woman's Exponent* in that it reported on notable meetings of Mormon women throughout the country. The *Woman's Exponent* reported on Relief Societies throughout the Utah territory as well as women's suffrage meetings held by sisters in the territory; oftentimes women's suffrage meetings were held right after Relief Society meetings or in conjunction with them. In every issue of *Exponent II*, we reprinted excerpts from the original *Woman's Exponent*, partly to let modern LDS women know about these wonderful women and their newspaper and activities, and partly to show how involved they were in the suffrage movement of the 1800s. We identified greatly with those women and their fight to advance the cause of women, and even felt that they justified our own concern for women and their rights. We thought modern Mormon women would be amazed that these early Utah women

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the drafting of the "Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women." In the United States, each state had its own convention to adopt the proposals about stopping discrimination against women. For background on Mormon involvement in the IWY convention, see Dixie Snow Huefner, "Church and Politics and the Utah IWY Conference," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 11, no. 1 (Spring 1978): 58–75, and Martha Sontag Bradley, *Pedestals and Podiums: Utah Women, Religious Authority, and Equal Rights* (Salt Lake: Signature Books, 2005), 155ff.

were involved in the movement; that they were doctors, politicians, and managers of farms; and that the Relief Society was a totally independent organization that raised its own funds and had its own industries to do so.

Other than the reports on meetings and some poetry and fiction, the format of the two papers was not that much alike. Because of the backlash against the women's movement, which came out in the form of both disparagement (calling feminists "women's libbers") and suspicion by many Church members of the faithfulness of anyone aligned with the movement, I had a firm resolve during my tenure as editor to try to help women feel as comfortable being feminists as they were being Mormons. However, we felt that we had to be careful not to alienate women who were more conservative. Therefore, although every issue of the newspaper contained at least one article with a feminist viewpoint, the paper was by no means militant. We even offended some women with our policy of "gently, gently" leading people to their own comfort zones with feminism.

Whereas the content of the *Woman's Exponent* centered on political and religious issues with some poetry and fiction thrown in, *Exponent II* has always published articles on all aspects of Mormon women's lives. The paper consistently featured pages devoted to poetry and fiction, as well as a page called "The Frugal Housewife," which was like a page out of *Woman's Day* magazine. It presented housewifely tips and recipes; typical was one titled "The Thanksgiving Feast," with a full menu to use for that holiday. Although there was no sports page, we included articles about women in sports, notably tennis (Emma Lou Thayne), jogging, skydiving, and unicycling. The "Cottage Industry" column featured women who had developed successful occupations originating in the home. "The Sisters Speak" column posed a question of interest to our readers that they would respond to in a subsequent issue. Here are just some of the topics we've covered over the years: birth control, working women, stay-at-home women, body image, infertility, mothering, sexuality, pregnancy, spiritual power, lesson manuals, raising sons, raising daughters, step-parenting, adoption, being single in a married

church, dealing with infidelity, drug usage among Mormons, dealing with grief, growing older, family size, women and the priesthood, interfaith marriages, eating disorders, war, disabilities, role models, dealing with cancer, widowhood, becoming grandmothers, the international church, sister missionaries, women in politics, women in the theatre, women in teaching, OCD, PMS, menopause, friendship, marriage, the socialization of women in the Church, healing, music, cooking, Mother's Day, women's relationship to the temple, and Mormons and politics.

Some historians and commentators have noted the fact that the *Woman's Exponent* and *Exponent II* had their beginnings in similar times and circumstances—in the midst of a movement for women. Similarly, the editorial in the third edition of *Exponent II* declares, in response to the question “What do you hope to accomplish” by publishing a newspaper for Mormon women, that we hoped to give women “a little status.” Claudia goes on to say: “No one thinks of Mormon women today as exploited slaves [as they did in the nineteenth century] but few people realize what extraordinary people they are. Is there another group that can touch them for service to others, efficiency, devotion, imagination, intelligence, education, beauty? Yet modest and supportive by long training, they limit their aspirations. . . . *Exponent II* wants to shed light on the achievements of the sisters.” The other two reasons given for the paper were “to disseminate useful information” and “to keep in touch.” Claudia famously described the paper as “like a long letter from a dear friend.” In an attempt to give women status, we accepted articles from both experienced writers and those who sent us their first attempts at writing. Our editors worked with authors to help them improve their written work.

One of *Exponent II*'s landmark contributions was our issue on depression.<sup>2</sup> Depression and other mental illnesses still have a stigma attached to them, but at that time depression just wasn't talked about. This was true in the general culture as well as in Mormondom, but Mormons were supposed to be a happy people because they had the

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2. *Exponent II* 5, no. 3 (1979).

true religion. Admitting to depression was practically a sin among God's chosen. In 1979, Salt Lake City's KSL TV aired a documentary produced by Louise Degn about Mormon women and depression. The response in Utah was overwhelming; suddenly it was all right to talk about depression. We received a copy of the documentary, watched it, solicited articles by women who had experienced depression, and had a "Sisters Speak" column where women wrote in about their experiences. We continued what the Utah documentary had started, helping to create a sense of acceptance for people suffering from depression.

And, over the years, *Exponent II* has stayed abreast of—or even led the way in—current movements and concerns among Mormons. In our board meetings, we debated whether or not to publish articles on very sensitive topics such as abortion and LGBTQ Mormons. We always felt the tension between publishing what needed to be talked about and keeping our broad range of readers. We always heard from women who thought we were too far out there and women who thought we were not forthright enough.

Jan Shipps gave a talk about *Exponent II* in 1999, comparing the paper to "stealth bombers." She noted that, like those bombers, we had kept under the radar of the Church's notice by letting women's voices speak for themselves rather than taking stances on issues. She says, "What I discovered [in reviewing the content of *Exponent II* was that the articles in the paper] are direct and candid accounts of experience. . . . What the *Exponent II* editors did is to add immeasurably to what Latter-day Saints in the future will be able to discern about what being a Mormon woman was like in the last quarter of the twentieth century."<sup>3</sup>

The current magazine (no longer a lowly "newspaper") has taken on some controversial topics, but *Exponent II* has tried to remain balanced and fair on both sides of the major issues, publishing articles in women's own words. The publication's greatest effort has been to

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3. Jan Shipps, "Exponent II: Mormonism's Stealth Alternative," *Exponent II* 22 (Summer 1999): 28–33.

provide a forum for Mormon women to speak their minds, to share their thoughts, and to help each other by doing so. This has always been what *Exponent II* is all about.