

SHIFTING BOUNDARIES OF FEMINIST THEOLOGY: WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

Maxine Hanks

In April 1992, *The Salt Lake Tribune* reported that “three hours before . . . the Relief Society’s sesquicentennial [exhibit] was to open at the LDS Museum of Church History and Art, three quotes were removed” mainly because they “were just a little too sacred.”¹ Interestingly, these quotes referred to teachings in the original minutes of the Nauvoo Relief Society. The quotes were: “the Society should move according to the ancient Priesthood”²; “Joseph Smith wanted to make us . . . a ‘kingdom of priestesses’”³; and the “sisters will be queens of queens and priestesses unto the most high God.”⁴ These three quotes were removed and replaced by three statements about the Relief Society’s potential for service and blessings.⁵ I saw this censorship as part of a larger historical trend going back 150 years, in which the Relief Society had been diminished, censored, or

1. Peggy Fletcher Stack, “LDS Women’s Place? New Conflict Emerges,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, Apr. 11, 1992, A10.

2. “Minutes of the Proceedings of the Third Meeting of the Society,” *Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book*, 22, in *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <http://www.josephsmith-papers.org/paper-summary/nauvoo-relief-society-minute-book/19>.

3. Bathsheba W. Smith, “Relief Society Reports” [Pioneer Stake], *Woman’s Exponent*, July and August 1905, 14.

4. Eliza R. Snow, “An Address,” *Woman’s Exponent*, Sept. 15, 1873, 62.

5. Stack, “LDS Women’s Place?”

reinterpreted by male Church leaders. It had been diminished by conflicts over polygamy in 1843–44, then censored and disbanded by Brigham Young in 1845, then reinterpreted in the 1855 Church history, which rewrote excerpts from the R.S. minutes.⁶

For example, the Church history quoted the Relief Society minutes as saying, “I now turn the key in your behalf,”⁷ whereas the actual quote was “I now turn the key to you in the name of God, and this Society shall rejoice and knowledge and intelligence shall flow down from this time.”⁸ The Church history also used the phrase “Delivering the keys of the priesthood to the church,”⁹ yet the actual quote said, “Delivering the keys to the Society and to the church”¹⁰ and “the keys of the kingdom are about to be given to them, that they may be able to detect every thing false—as well as to the Elders.”¹¹

This tendency to rewrite Relief Society history continued from the 1850s into the 1990s. One conference talk delivered in 1992 stated that the “Prophet declared that the Relief Society was to receive instruction and

6. Jill Mulvay Derr, Janath Russell Cannon, and Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, *Women of Covenant: The Story of Relief Society* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 74.

7. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, edited by B. H. Roberts (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1902), 4:607

8. “Minutes of the Proceedings of the Sixth Meeting of the Society,” *Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book*, 40, in *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/nauvoo-relief-society-minute-book/37>.

9. *History of the Church*, 4:604.

10. “Minutes of the Proceedings of the Sixth Meeting of the Society,” 37, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/nauvoo-relief-society-minute-book/34>.

11. “Minutes of the Proceedings of the Sixth Meeting of the Society,” 38, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/nauvoo-relief-society-minute-book/35>.

direction from the priesthood leaders who presided over their activities.”¹² Yet, the R.S. minutes described an institutional independence of Relief Society, where “Sisters elect a presiding officer to preside over them . . . [and] he [Joseph] would ordain them to preside over the Society—and let them preside just as the Presidency preside over the church.”¹³

Meanwhile, the museum curator for the 1992 Relief Society ses-
quicentennial exhibit, Marjorie Conder, explained, “In 1991, I tried to
access the Relief Society minute book at the Church library, but it was
inaccessible by every route I tried. It was easier to use the photocopy
of a photocopy of a typescript I actually had in my hand than to get
permission to see the original. And, if not for that photocopy, it would
have been impossible to create the exhibit. Then, after I used quotes from
the minute book, the exhibit came under severe fire. This rocked me to
the core for years afterward. However, fifteen years later in 2007, I was
able to use the actual Relief Society minute book on display for another
exhibit that was built around thirty-three quotes from the minute book
entitled ‘Something Extraordinary.’ And it really was extraordinary—the
wheel had turned by that time.”¹⁴

This story illustrates a boundary shift between 1991 and 2007
regarding access and use of LDS historical documents like the original
Relief Society minutes from being inaccessible to staff even for legitimate
use in Church-sponsored projects to being openly available in official
and widely public forms. The significance of this boundary shift can’t

12. “The Relief Society and the Church,” Apr. 1992, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/1992/04/the-relief-society-and-the-church?lang=eng>.

13. “A Record of the Organization, and Proceedings of The Female Relief Society of Nauvoo,” *Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book*, 7, in *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/nauvoo-relief-society-minute-book/4>.

14. Personal conversation with Marjorie Conder, who recounted this story in 2013. The minutes were available to the R.S. Presidency, and quoted in some Church publications, but not accessible to staff or members.

be overstated; new access to historical materials, including formerly restricted ones, has accelerated in the Church archives and online. (Another example is the minutes of the Council of Fifty, rarely seen by Church historians and unknown to the public, now being published in the *Joseph Smith Papers*.) We can't access everything in Church archives, but we have drastically more access than we had before.

This shift in access has affected women's history itself—from being limited or rewritten in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to publishing the original texts in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The entire text of the original *Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book* has been published by the Church in its DVD *Selected Collections from the Archives* (2002), online in *The Joseph Smith Papers* (2009), excerpted in the handbook *Daughters of My Kingdom* (2011), and fully published with annotated commentary in the book *The Relief Society: The First Fifty Years* (2016).¹⁵

This progress also reflects another shift in regard to the Relief Society, from being disempowered by changes in the 1840s and 1920s and 1970s to recovering its history since the 1970s. Mormon women's history was previously found only in limited articles, independent journals, and books, but the increasing accessibility and appearance of women's history and historical documents in Church projects and online since 2000 represents a shifting focus on women as more central, less marginal. Examples include the Women in Church History Research Guide at LDS.org and the Mormon Women's Studies Resource at Brigham Young University.¹⁶

The recovery of Mormon women's history is vital because women's authority and practices are recorded in their discourse. The Relief Society

15. For access to the *Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book*, see <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/nauvoo-relief-society-minute-book>.

16. Women in Church History Research Guide, https://history.lds.org/article/women_in_church_history_research_guide?lang=eng; Mormon Women's Studies Resource, <https://sites.lib.byu.edu/mormonwomen>.

minutes were Mormon women's "Constitution and Law"—the official canon of women's authority, autonomy, organization, and priesthood.¹⁷ Directly linked to section 25 of the Doctrine and Covenants as further developing that revelation, plus containing the women's own inspiration, revelation, decisions, testimony, blessings, and practices, the Relief Society minutes functioned like a women's Doctrine and Covenants. It was revered as the governing document for Relief Society throughout the nineteenth century, with new minute books created for each local Relief Society adding to the canon. These minutes also will be published online.

Access to our Relief Society canon is just one boundary shift related to LDS women's discourse, authority, practices, and theology, which have waxed and waned at different times throughout two centuries of Mormon history. Policy changes have affected women's status in LDS religion in both positive and negative ways.

Yet, the Relief Society exists and operates within another context: that of women's theology or "feminist theology." This includes women's spirituality, spiritual practices, and religious experience, their views and expressions of God, their exercise of ministry, preaching, and writing about religion, interpretation of scripture, their recovery of women's religious history and theology, their reconsideration of religious tradition, critiques of male constructs and language, assertions in participation and authority, evaluations of gender in religion, exploration of women's status, identity, and potential, including motherhood and career.¹⁸ These

17. "A Record of the Organization, and Proceedings of The Female Relief Society of Nauvoo," 8, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/nauvoo-relief-society-minute-book/5>.

18. Maxine Hanks, "Preface," *Women and Authority: Re-emerging Mormon Feminism* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), vii–ix; Maxine Hanks, "Introduction," *Women and Authority*, xi–xxx. See also Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow, eds., "Preface," "Introduction," *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1992), vii–viii, xii–xiii, 1–16; Pamela Sue Anderson and Beverley Clack, eds., "Introduction," *Feminist Philosophy of Religion: Critical Readings* (London: Routledge, 2003), xiv–xv, 4–7.

practices are abundant in LDS women's history, discourse, and activity from Kirtland to Nauvoo to Utah to the worldwide present.

I've described Mormon feminist theology as "revisionist theology," claiming that "Mormon theology, history, and doctrine need to be reevaluated in light of women's participation, resistance, and perspectives."¹⁹ Mormon feminist theologians "examine how religion is gendered" ranging from ways they "reveal the feminine as inherent in Mormon theology" to considering "how gender is embedded in religious ideas and texts, how it's constructed . . . how religion shapes gender, how gender shapes religion."²⁰

In reality, Mormon women have been exploring aspects of feminist theology in one way or another from the beginnings of the LDS Church to the present time.²¹ The list of women who've engaged theology or explored women's status in the religion is endless, beginning with Lucy Mack Smith and Emma Hale Smith, Mary Whitmer and Elizabeth Whitney, Eliza R. Snow and Sarah Granger Kimball, Zina D. H. Young and Bathsheba W. Smith, Emmeline B. Wells and the *Woman's Exponent*, Susa Young Gates and Leah Widtsoe, the *Relief Society Magazine* and Amy Brown Lyman and Belle S. Spafford, feminists at *Dialogue* like Mary L. Bradford, and Martha S. Bradley; historians like Carol C. Madsen, Jill Mulvay Derr, Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, or Claudia L. Bushman and Laurel Thatcher Ulrich at *Exponent II*, feminists at BYU like Reba Keele, Jan L. Tyler, Cecelia K. Farr, Gail Houston, and Valerie Hudson, or at Ricks College like myself; Sonia Johnson with MERA, and the Algie Ballif Forum; feminists at Sunstone like Peggy Fletcher and Susan Staker; feminists at MHA like Val Avery and Linda K. Newell, and *Journal of Mormon History* like Lavina Fielding Anderson and Martha

19. Hanks, "Introduction," xxv–xxvi.

20. Maxine Hanks, "Maxine Hanks," in *Latter-day Dissent: At the Crossroads of Intellectual Inquiry and Ecclesiastical Authority*, edited by Philip Lindholm (Salt Lake City: Kofford Books, 2010), 63–64.

21. Hanks, "Preface," vii–ix; Hanks, "Introduction," xi–xxx.

Taysom, groups like Pilgrimage, Mormon Women's Forum, and BYU Voice; online groups like ELWC and MFN, and internet blogs, podcasts like Feminist Mormon Housewives, Mormon Women Project, and Facebook groups.

The scope of Mormon feminist theology goes far beyond what we've realized or recovered in our history and Church practices. Yet, it is centrally present in our theology, doctrine, ministry, and Church structures, even if unrecognized. Having sought feminist theology since the 1970s, I see its centrality in my path and practice. So, I want to highlight a few boundary shifts in Mormon feminist theology over the past twenty-five years that were significant for me personally.

I saw 1990 as a pivotal year. A new general Relief Society presidency was called, and they were feminists: Elaine Jack, Chieko Okazaki, and Aileen Clyde. These women engaged an empowered presence in their office, sermons, and activities, in planning the Relief Society sesquicentennial, and encouraging women's history. They modeled authentic voice and position. The "dream team," as we called them, represented a visible shift forward for women within the institution; they were doing feminism and feminist theology without using the labels.

I thought we should own the terms "feminism" and "feminist theology" since Mormon women had been doing both all along. So, I began compiling a book about them. In 1990, I called for feminist theology or "Thea-logy" in the *Mormon Women's Forum Quarterly*²²; and in 1991, I presented a paper, "Toward a Mormon Feminist Theology," on a panel about "The Current State of Mormon Theology" at Sunstone. Peter Appleby from the University of Utah concluded, "The new horizon in Mormon theology is clearly feminist theology."²³ In 1990, my anthology

22. Maxine Hanks, "Emerging Mormon Thea-logy," *Mormon Women's Forum Quarterly* 1, no. 4 (Fall 1990): 15–16, available at <http://66.147.244.239/~girlsgo6/mormonwomensforum/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/MWFFVol1Num4.pdf>.

23. "The Current State of Mormon Theology," panel discussion, Salt Lake Sunstone Symposium, Aug. 9, 1991; speakers: Lowell Durham, Peter Appleby,

Women and Authority: Re-emerging Mormon Feminism was advertised in the Signature Books catalogue, along with *Strangers in Paradox*, a book that also engaged feminist theology (without using the term). *Women and Authority* reclaimed “feminism” and “feminist theology” in name and practice as truly Mormon, inherent in our own tradition; it also reclaimed the word “priesthood” as related to LDS women.

In 1990, these were scary moves because at that time, although many LDS women were practicing and writing feminism, very few feminists were willing to use the words “feminism” or “priesthood” in public or print. The excommunication of Sonia Johnson in 1979 had stigmatized Mormon feminism like a shroud of shame in the ’80s, creating an invisible boundary or veil of fear. I felt we needed to confront that fear and de-stigmatize Mormon feminism as a collective. Jan Tyler told me that *Women and Authority* vindicated Sonia, yet I would add that it vindicated all Mormon feminists by owning feminism and crossing the boundary of fear. Afterward, more women and men were talking about “feminism” in public, as if we had always done it.

Unfortunately, the Church’s boundary differed from ours. In 1990–93, warnings about feminism arose in Church talks and I was advised by leaders and members not to talk about feminism in public. It was okay to be feminist, just not in public. Since I was editing a book on Mormon feminist theology, I knew I’d be crossing that boundary. After the book appeared in 1993, I met with a Church authority to discuss concerns—in an attempt to bridge an institutional boundary, the gap between men and women, leaders and members. He explained that feminism imposed secular ideas on the Church, which would never be accepted by the Brethren. I explained that we were not importing secular feminism, we were recovering Mormon feminism—our own tradition. He was firm that discussing LDS feminism in public was

James Faulconer, Richard Sherlock, Blake Ostler, Mark Gustavson, Paul Toscano, Janice Allred, Maxine Hanks.

wrong and advised me to stop. I knew I had to continue. It was a matter of conviction. The boundary against LDS feminism was based on fear, not truth. We didn't bridge much; we failed to find common ground. I shared some of the blame because we both were defensive and didn't really hear each other. That same week, Elder Packer gave his now famous talk warning of three "dangers" facing the Church: feminists, scholars, and gays, who signified the secular.²⁴ His concern was protecting the Church from secular intrusions on sacred space. Yet we weren't imposing the secular, we were excavating the sacred and using secular tools to understand the sacred better—to see what we hadn't seen within our own religious tradition.

Soon after, some of us were excommunicated in September 1993. Much has been written about that event, but in reality, it was simple: excommunication resulted from fear, of each other and of the secular intruding on the sacred. Fortunately, in some ways, we've come a long way since 1993.

In 2000, the Church's treatment of scholars began to shift as the Church began to publicly embrace objective scholarship, including non-LDS scholarly work, sponsor Mormon studies conferences, and undertake work on the Joseph Smith Papers Project.²⁵ Since that time,

24. Boyd K. Packer, "All-Church Coordinating Council Meeting," May 18, 1993, available at <http://www.lds-mormon.com/face.shtml>.

25. For example: 2002: Latter-day Saint Council on Mormon Studies formed to sponsor lectures, conferences, fellowships, professorships, and created the Howard W. Hunter Chair for Mormon studies at Claremont Graduate University School of Religion. 2003: BYU cosponsored conference at Yale University Divinity School, "God, Humanity, and Revelation: Perspectives from Mormon Philosophy and History." 2004: the LDSCMS sponsored a conference on academic study of Mormonism, "Positioning Mormonism in Religious Studies and American History" at Claremont Graduate University School of Religion. 2005: BYU cosponsored "The Worlds of Joseph Smith" at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. 2005: The LDS Church and the LDSCMS cosponsored "Joseph Smith and the Prophetic Tradition" the second conference on Mormon studies at Claremont Graduate University.

major progress has occurred in the Church's public engagement with scholarship and feminism. For example, feminist theology of the LDS Mother in Heaven was surveyed in *BYU Studies* in 2011.²⁶

Why did this shift occur? Likely, several reasons: a maturation of scholarly and feminist work happening inside the Church; non-LDS scholars showing more interest in Mormon studies and historical documents; access to Church archival documents increasing in-house and online; changing times and culture wherein feminism became a given for women, the cultural norm; and the influence of the internet with its Mormon blogs, feminism, and candid Mormon history. Even excommunication confronted fears as dissenters and leaders faced each other. Conflicts between leaders and scholars/feminists in the 1990s crossed so many boundaries, it took a decade to complete the "purge of 1993," paradoxically closing that chapter of conflicted relations and opening the way for a new chapter in relationships after 2000.²⁷ All of this helped shift boundaries after 2000.

In 2007, Bruce Hafen wrote an *Ensign* article entitled "Crossing Thresholds and Becoming Equal Partners," noting that "For too long in the Church, the men have been the theologians while the women have been the Christians. To be equal partners, each should be both a theologian *and* a Christian."²⁸ Previously, in 1993, Hafen, unlike other

26. See David L. Paulsen and Martin Pulido, "'A Mother There': A Survey of Historical Teachings about Mother in Heaven," *BYU Studies* 50, no. 1 (2011): 71–97, <https://byustudies.byu.edu/content/mother-there-survey-historical-teachings-about-mother-heaven>.

27. The excommunications of 1993 continued through the 1990s, with Janice Allred, Brent Metcalf, and David Wright, ending with Margaret Toscano in 2000, which completed what began as the purge of the 1990s

28. Bruce C. Hafen, "Crossing Thresholds and Becoming Equal Partners," *Ensign*, Aug. 2007, 24–29, available at <https://www.lds.org/ensign/2007/08/crossing-thresholds-and-becoming-equal-partners?lang=eng>.

male leaders, had acknowledged the validity of at least some feminisms.²⁹ I saw his *Ensign* article as a major shift forward in positive attitude toward feminist theology. This progress was evidenced in 2009 when the Church published the Relief Society minutes online—the visible return of women’s canon and feminist theology.

This decade, from 2000–2011, reflected an institutional shift from fear to embrace, inaccessibility to availability, censorship to transparency. Topics we couldn’t talk about in public and documents we couldn’t see ten years earlier were going online. Also, beginning in 2009, President Julie B. Beck gave a series of talks about women’s access to priesthood power and authority, using words like “ministry” and “priesthood” applied to women and describing their authority as parallel with male priesthood quorums.³⁰ I noticed this because as general Relief Society

29. See also Bruce C. Hafen, “Teach Ye Diligently and My Grace Shall Attend You,” BYU Annual University Conference, Aug. 25, 1993, https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/bruce-c-hafen_teach-ye-diligently-grace-shall-attend; and Bruce C. Hafen, “Women, Feminism, and the Blessings of the Priesthood,” Ricks College devotional, Jan. 10, 1984. The same address was given at BYU Women’s Conference, Mar. 29, 1985, though the title has been changed on the BYU Speeches website: “Women, Feminism, and the Blessings of the Gospel,” https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/bruce-c-hafen_women-feminism-blessings-gospel/.

30. See, for example, Julie B. Beck, “Relief Society: A Sacred Work,” Oct. 2009, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2009/10/relief-society-a-sacred-work?lang=eng>; Julie B. Beck, “Daughters in My Kingdom: The History and Work of Relief Society,” Oct. 2010, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2010/10/daughters-in-my-kingdom-the-history-and-work-of-relief-society?lang=eng>; Julie B. Beck, “What I Hope My Granddaughters (and Grandsons) Will Understand about Relief Society,” Oct. 2011, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2011/10/what-i-hope-my-granddaughters-and-grandsons-will-understand-about-relief-society?lang=eng>; and Julie B. Beck, “The Vision of Prophets Regarding Relief Society: Faith, Family, Relief,” Apr. 2012, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2012/04/the-vision-of-prophets-regarding-relief-society-faith-family-relief?lang=eng>; and Julie B. Beck, “Why We Are Organized into Quorums and Relief Societ-

president she was engaging terms, ideas, and boundaries that a decade earlier were dangerous or forbidden for feminists.

In 2012, another boundary shifted when a member of the “September Six” returned to the Church. Like the shroud of shame in the 1980s, the clouds of censure, rejection, and mistrust in the 1990s loomed like an impenetrable storm. Again, I felt compelled and called to challenge that barrier in 2012, as I had 1992—crossing a line of excommunication and alienation. Someone had to cross that boundary and close that gap; I did it not just for myself, but on behalf of others. A higher wisdom required it. The empowering truths in LDS theology and ministry, including feminist theology, deserved to be recovered and embraced. The previous boundaries imposed against feminist theology were dissolving and truly have shifted in the past twenty-five years, although many younger Mormons and critics don’t see that transition.

In the 1990s we couldn’t talk about feminist theology or women’s relationship to priesthood in public without censure or threat of discipline. Today, we can do feminist theology by name and in public. We can argue and debate it, arm wrestle with each other, and publish it. Even Church leaders high and low are talking about women’s theology and relationship to priesthood. Members are advancing feminist theology in an explosion of articles, books, blogs, and groups like *Feminist Mormon Housewives* and *Ordain Women*.

Unfortunately, in 2014 we saw the return of Church discipline after some OW feminists attempted to enter the men’s priesthood session on Temple Square. Church discipline asserted a boundary in response to dissent that challenged that boundary publicly, physically, and theologically. The Church reiterated its boundary in a First Presidency statement on June 28, 2014, saying that “Only men are ordained to serve in priesthood offices.” The statement added that “[m]embers are always free to ask . . . questions and earnestly seek greater understanding” but

ies,” BYU devotional address, Jan. 17, 2012, https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/julie-b-beck_why-we-are-organized-into-quorums-and-relief-societies.

not to act “in clear, open, deliberate public opposition to the Church or its faithful leaders, or persisting, after receiving counsel, in teaching false doctrine.”³¹ This also implied that only men can attend the general conference session designated as “priesthood meeting.” Ordain Women had challenged these boundaries and as a result Church discipline of Kate Kelly and other OW members enacted the boundary on their membership.

Personally, I felt no call to cross those theological boundaries (of requesting ordination to male orders and offices or attending men’s priesthood meeting) since my view of women’s ordination differed; however, I cared very much about the women who did, so I supported them personally and pastorally.

Other than this boundary battle about women’s ordination, progress has moved forward for scholars and feminists since 2000. However, not so for LGBT members. Recently, an entirely new punitive act of exclusion was asserted in the November 2015 Church policy for gay couples and their children, which views them as apostate and thus unable to receive Church ordinances. This new boundary has generated intense suffering, concerns, dissent, conflicts, and exits among members. I felt called to cross this boundary—to minister to gay members and their families as part of the body of Christ (as I minister to members of Ordain Women). As members struggle with this new boundary, or leave the Church, it’s easy to forget that such dilemmas existed the past and are always engaged in the present. There is no avoiding the challenge.

However, coexisting alongside this new harsh boundary against gay members are other statements that demonstrate that some positive shifts continue forward in feminist theology.

In 2014, Elder Oaks said, “We are not accustomed to speaking of women having the authority of the priesthood in their Church callings,

31. Statement of The First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve, Jun. 28, 2014, <https://www.lds.org/prophets-and-apostles/june-first-presidency-statement?lang=eng>.

but what other authority can it be? When a woman—young or old—is set apart to preach the gospel as a full-time missionary, she is given priesthood authority to perform a priesthood function. The same is true when a woman is set apart to function as an officer or teacher in a Church organization under the direction of one who holds the keys of the priesthood. Whoever functions in an office or calling received from one who holds priesthood keys exercises priesthood authority in performing her or his assigned duties.”³² This again signifies a shift forward for feminist theology, making points similar to ones Michael Quinn and I raised in 1992.³³

So, in closing, what have we learned, or what have I learned, through some of this boundary shifting? I’ve learned that Church boundaries do shift, as do our personal boundaries. Progress is needed, yet progress is not simply about pushing forward, but higher—unfolding greater wisdom and inclusion. We have simultaneous boundaries of progress and contraction, but if we see only the contraction or only the progress, we’re not seeing the whole picture. For some members, boundaries signify a need to make an extreme either/or choice to be all-in or all-out, to conform or reject, stay or leave, one or the other. For others, boundaries signify an invitation to practice engagement on a case-by-case basis as a personal spiritual discipline, discerning which boundary one will honor and which boundary one will violate or cross. Tension or dissonance between personal boundaries and group boundaries is normal in every group or organization; tension is an inescapable reality. Our individual paths, identities, and ethics may overlap with the group or may depart

32. Dallin H. Oaks, “The Keys and Authority of the Priesthood,” Apr. 2014, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2014/04/the-keys-and-authority-of-the-priesthood?lang=eng>.

33. See Hanks, “Introducton,” xi-xxx; Hanks, “Sister Missionaries and Authority,” 315–34; and D. Michael Quinn, “Mormon Women Have Had the Priesthood Since 1843,” 365–410, all found in *Women and Authority: Re-emerging Mormon Feminism* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992).

sharply, and we all have to live and work with that, and give each other permission to do so. A boundary is a signifier of choice, yet it's not a true choice unless you have real freedom to consider both options—the agency to choose either one—because sometimes the right choice is to cross a boundary, violate it, and other times the right choice is to honor it. I think the most crucial issue is not whether we cross a boundary or honor it, but whether that decision is truly our own—and whether we can give each other the space to navigate these boundaries and narratives individually.

We are all continually making and changing boundaries in our decisions, personal ethics, and identities. As I wrote in 1992, it's “not about a power struggle, but about finding identity. . . . We shift and choose what we believe in many moments of personal revelation and choices, continually identifying what we will reject and retain of our own upbringing, culture, and theology. The challenge is to keep these as personal decisions, rather than surrender our voice to another.”³⁴

So today, yesterday, and looking forward to the future, I still see this as the most crucial issue facing members of the Church and former members: our personal agency to discern our own ethical boundaries, and distinguish truth from error in our history, theology, doctrine, worship, culture, practice, and policies. Our ability and need to engage boundaries or cross them, to honor them or reject them, to change our view or position without punishment from each other, is a sign of our divine agency. We have been given this gift from a wise God so that we may decide for ourselves what we will do as we strive to refine and improve both our religion and ourselves.

34. Hanks, “Introduction,” xxviii.