

# ETERNAL IDENTITY MISUNDERSTOOD: A TRANSGENDER WOMAN'S JOURNEY THROUGH FAITH, REVELATION, AND LDS POLICY

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For much of my life, I tried to be the man everyone expected me to be—faithful, successful, and called by God to lead—but inside, I struggled with gender dysphoria. My journey toward self-acceptance, detailed in my memoir *Dictates of Conscience: From Mormon High Priest to My New Life as a Woman* (Signature Books, 2024), led me to transition while serving as a stake president and working as a church architect.<sup>1</sup> This essay draws on that experience to explore how the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has wrestled with gender identity, and how I tried to help its senior leaders understand what it means to be transgender in a faith that is still learning how to see us.

In the fall of 2011, I was serving as a stake president and yearning to understand the gender conflict I had long experienced. I therefore began to study the available online material regarding gender identity disorder as it was then known. Gender dysphoria, as it came to be called, had been a nearly constant debilitating force in my life. I have described dysphoria as standing on an airport runway, next to a large jet engine. It is continually running, at times increasing in speed and becoming deafening, and at other times idling more slowly, ever

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1. This essay is adapted from Laurie Lee Hall's memoir, *Dictates of Conscience: From Mormon High Priest to My New Life as a Woman* (Signature Books, 2024).

present but more tolerable. Its roar robs one of concentration or of experiencing the beauty of anything else while enduring the destructive noise. Through my study and many hours of reflection, I came to finally accept the fact that I was transgender—and that I wasn't alone.

For several months, my personal experiences and studies progressed to alleviate the guilt and shame associated with this admission, yet I was still unsure of God's stance on the issue. Having guided all aspects of my personal and family life, pastoral service, and project work for the Church using personal prayer and revelation, I was confident I could learn God's mind concerning me if I but asked.

For the first time in my life, I knelt while still presenting as Laurie, unsure of what response I would receive as I prayed, "Dear Heavenly Father, this is me, Laurie Lee, this is who I am. I have studied a lot about what it means to be transgender, and I identify as female."

I was amazed by the response. A peaceful assurance and sensation of joy revealed to me that I had finally come to accept myself as Deity had always known me, just as God had created me to be. I sat and pondered this answer for a long while.

I now had knowledge and assurance that my gender, my eternal spiritual identity, was not only acceptable to God but was previously known by God. And that mattered enough that heaven felt joy over me catching up to this knowledge. Understanding this cemented my truth! I had, after fifty years, finally accepted myself as God knew me. The thought brought joy, which penetrated deep within me. I felt as though I had been set free for the first time. I now had the strength to openly begin the process of transitioning.

Once I came out to family and a few friends, word inadvertently got back to senior Church leaders that a sitting stake president and prominent Church employee considered themselves to be transgender. Beginning in October 2012, Church leaders required me to interview with Elders L. Whitney Clayton and Don R. Clarke of the Seventy and Presiding Bishop Gary E. Stevenson. In these interviews, I shared with

them the gender dysphoria I had experienced for most of my life. It was clear to me that they could only view my explanation through the lens of the general authority training they had received on the subject of “same-sex attraction,” as they called it. We passed each other like ships in the night in these several conversations.

I was repeatedly told to go back and study what “The Family: A Proclamation to the World” teaches concerning gender. The words “gender” and “identity” may have first appeared within the same sentence in the Mormon lexicon in the proclamation, presented by President Gordon B. Hinckley in the September 23, 1995, General Relief Society meeting. “*Gender* is an essential characteristic of individual premortal, mortal, and eternal *identity* and purpose,” the proclamation states.<sup>2</sup> I had by that time already studied and prayed extensively about the meaning of this line. It was my deeply held personal conviction that it is one’s gender identity that is truly eternal and immutable, despite what temporary conditions might occur in one’s biological, mortal body. In my case, I had by this point accepted without question that my eternal gender identity was, is, and will always be female.

These men, in turn, made recommendations to the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles regarding my assertion that, although I was a priesthood leader, I considered myself transgender. My female gender identity was incongruent with the male assignment made at my birth. The result was my immediate release as stake president and being placed on probation at work.

Bishop Stevenson informed me that the work-related probation restrictions imposed on me were formulated under the direction of Elder Lance B. Wickman, the Church’s general counsel. He emphasized that these restrictions applied to my behavior at work *and* all my activities outside the office, representing “the highest standard of conduct”

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2. Gordon B. Hinckley, “Stand Strong Against the Wiles of the World,” Sept. 23, 1995, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1995/10/stand-strong-against-the-wiles-of-the-world?lang=eng> (emphasis added).

expected of Church employees. He forbade me from wearing any article of women's clothing, grooming myself as a woman, speaking to anyone at work regarding my gender identity, or participating in social media or "online group therapy" for transgender people. Since I had employed each of those personal strategies for more than a year to mitigate my gender dysphoria successfully, I was reluctant to believe that I could maintain these restrictions for very long.

Bishop Stevenson counseled me only to seek therapists "doctrinally aligned" with the church.<sup>3</sup> I spoke with an LDS Family Services therapist, who admitted to knowing nothing about gender identity. However, he tried unsuccessfully to counsel me with ideas he used with his gay clients. I never returned. Undeterred, I sought competent professional support to mitigate my gender dysphoria. My therapist affirmed that the recognized solution to my very real health concerns was to begin social and medical gender transition.

Realizing that transition was the key to resolving my dysphoria and finding peace, I became convinced that I needed to proceed. Working as I did with the senior leaders of the Church, I also believed that if anyone had a chance to help them see the moral and medical necessity of transition for an employee, it would be me. In an August 6, 2013, letter to Bishop Stevenson, I requested that the Church accommodate my transition to live authentically as a woman while protecting my employment designing its temples.<sup>4</sup> Although we met once more six months later regarding my gender identity, he never offered a response regarding my accommodation request.

Elders Dallin H. Oaks and Jeffrey R. Holland of the Quorum of the Twelve and Sister Neill F. Marriott of the General Young Women Presidency held a unique press conference on January 27, 2015. In it,

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3. Gary E. Stevenson to Laurie Lee Hall, February 19, 2013, in Laurie Lee Hall's possession.

4. Laurie Lee Hall to Gary E. Stevenson, August 6, 2013, in Laurie Lee Hall's possession.

they called for statewide and national legislation to protect religious freedoms, while also protecting housing and employment rights, including for those LGBT citizens who did not enjoy those protections at the time.<sup>5</sup> Two days after the press conference, the *Salt Lake Tribune* broadcast a rare interactive interview with Apostles Dallin H. Oaks and D. Todd Christofferson, in which they responded to the public's questions on LGBT issues. One woman sent in a question about her transgender son and her fear that she would face Church discipline for supporting him, given that other people in similar circumstances faced the threat of excommunication. Elder Oaks replied, "This question concerns transgender, and I think we need to acknowledge that while we have been acquainted with lesbians and homosexuals for some time, being acquainted with the unique problems of a transgender situation is something we have not had so much experience with. We have some unfinished business in teaching on that."<sup>6</sup> This instance may have been the first time a senior Church leader used the word "transgender" on public record. His words evoked within me conflicting feelings of excitement that our LDS transgender community was on Church leaders' radar and dread about what their "unfinished business" might mean.

Following the Church's lead, on March 6, 2015, the Utah Legislature passed SB 296, amending the state's 1997 Antidiscrimination Act to include sexual orientation and gender identity as protected classes in housing and employment, but with an exemption for "religious

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5. "Leaders Call for Laws That Protect Religious Freedom," *Church Newsroom*, Jan. 27, 2015, <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/2015-year-in-review/article/church-news-conference-on-religious-freedom-and-nondiscrimination>.

6. Peggy Fletcher Stack and Robert Gehrke, "Balancing LGBT, Religious Rights Won't Be Easy, Mormon Leaders Concede," *Salt Lake Tribune*, March 2, 2015.

employers.” The press dubbed it the “Utah Compromise.”<sup>7</sup> The timing of the Church’s unprecedented endorsement of such a law strongly suggests that my previous request for accommodation as a transgender Church employee was a catalyst behind it. While it protected housing and employment rights, the Church had a loophole as a religious employer and could still legally fire me as a transgender employee. I openly mourned online that the newfound employment protections would not help me unless I could get the Church to understand the critical role that transitioning away from biological sex at birth played in the life of a transgender employee like me.

Conflict over gender and sexuality erupted again in July 2015 with the United States Supreme Court landmark decision in the *Obergefell v. Hodges* case, guaranteeing the right of same-sex couples to marry. In response, on November 5, 2015, the Church released a new policy directed at same-sex couples, including those now legally married, labeling them “apostates,” requiring Church discipline, and denying sacred ordinances to their minor children.<sup>8</sup> Even though Russell M. Nelson, then president of the Quorum of the Twelve, while speaking at a worldwide devotional for young adults on January 10, 2016, called the policy an inspired revelation from God, his colleagues did not subsequently testify to the origin story he shared. Instead, they were silent. One of the members of the Presidency of the Seventy told a small group, which included a worried gay father whose young children were Church members, that some in the Quorum of the Twelve were

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7. For more on SB 296, see Gregory A Prince, *Gay Rights and the Mormon Church: Intended Actions, Unintended Consequences* (University of Utah Press, 2019), chap. 23.

8. “Church Provides Context on Handbook Changes Affecting Same-Sex Marriages,” *Church Newsroom*, Nov. 6, 2015, <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/handbook-changes-same-sex-marriages-elder-christofferson>.

upset with this policy. “I guarantee you that this policy will not last,” the General Authority said.<sup>9</sup>

Concurrently, Church leaders placed increased emphasis on centrally managing Church discipline. According to documents found on MormonLeaks, in a January 8, 2016, correlation meeting of the Utah Areas Area Seventies—just two days before President Nelson spoke at that worldwide devotional—Elder Larry Y. Wilson of the Seventy provided “church discipline” training to the Area Seventies who supervised Utah’s stake presidents. Wilson taught that “stake presidents and bishops who are unwilling to address disciplinary matters are subject to being released” and that “those who will not apply the appropriate discipline have misunderstood what compassion is.”<sup>10</sup>

Then, at the following correlation meeting for these Area Seventies held on June 10, 2016, Elder Wilson provided further explanation on disciplining transgender members. The meeting began with the announcement that three of those Area Seventies present—all attorneys by trade—would “assist stake presidents with disciplinary situations” that “may become public or involve media attention.” Requests for their involvement in disciplinary action against a Church member could “come at the request of a General Authority, Area Seventy, or Stake President.” Issues requiring discipline included “same-sex marriage, ordaining women, apostasy, transgender issues, or other items” that might not be addressed yet in the Church handbook. The three attorneys would “walk through procedures with the stake president and help him design a measured way to deal with the situation.” One scenario was described: “A stake president with a brother who has transgender

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9. Interviews with Bryce Cook, January 31, 2016, and August 24, 2024, cited in Prince, *Gay Rights*, 267.

10. Utah Areas, Area Council Meeting Minutes, January 8, 2016, MormonLeaks, archived Apr. 15, 2023, [https://web.archive.org/web/20230415120236/https://mormonleaks.io/wiki/index.php?title=File:Area\\_Council\\_Meeting\\_Minutes\\_-\\_January-2016-02-10.pdf](https://web.archive.org/web/20230415120236/https://mormonleaks.io/wiki/index.php?title=File:Area_Council_Meeting_Minutes_-_January-2016-02-10.pdf).

desires wants to dress as a woman in church, sit by his wife, and go to Relief Society. Counsel to the brother should be given not to disrupt the church or its members. They [should] come to church dressed and acting like who God made them. They should understand that it is important to keep everyone else comfortable.”<sup>11</sup> Specific issues, including constraining the behavior of transgender members, clearly had become of the highest level of concern at church headquarters—a fact that I would soon experience personally.

Unaware of that general training, and with my bishop’s support, I came out as transgender to my ward and community three weeks later. In essence, I declared that though I had previously held the priesthood and priesthood keys, I had been a woman all along. Acceptance in the ward I had once led as a bishop was mixed. Many stated that my admission and vulnerability created one of the most spiritual meetings they had ever attended. Others claimed it was the most abominable thing they had experienced in a chapel.

The following month, I pressed my work department leadership again to allow me to transition my gender presentation fully and have my employment protected, consistent with the *spirit* of the Utah Compromise bill that the Church helped pass. Within days, the executive secretary in our stake overheard my stake president on a heated phone call with someone at Church headquarters who demanded that he cancel my temple recommend.<sup>12</sup> The caller gave him no choice, even though it would disqualify me from my job. My stake president then informed me that he had acted alone and canceled my recommend,

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11. Utah Areas, Area Seventies Correlation Meeting Minutes, June 10, 2016, MormonLeaks, archived Apr. 15, 2023, [https://web.archive.org/web/20230415120857/https://mormonleaks.io/wiki/index.php?title=File:Area\\_Seventies\\_Meeting\\_Minutes\\_of\\_June\\_10\\_2016-2016-06-25.pdf](https://web.archive.org/web/20230415120857/https://mormonleaks.io/wiki/index.php?title=File:Area_Seventies_Meeting_Minutes_of_June_10_2016-2016-06-25.pdf).

12. As described by Jeffrey Houston to Barbara Jones Brown in a conversation at the offices of Signature Books, December 4, 2024.

which forced me to retire before my Church department leadership terminated my employment.

Two years after Elder Oaks declared the Church had “unfinished business” on transgender issues, the Church began to convey a definitive gender policy publicly. On January 10, 2017, Salt Lake City’s Kirton McConkie law firm filed an amicus brief on behalf of the LDS Church and other religious organizations to the United States Supreme Court in the case of *G[avin]. G[rimm]. v. Gloucester County School Board*. Gavin Grimm was a transgender boy at a Virginia high school who sued his local school board after it dictated that he must use the girls’ restrooms based on his sex assigned at birth. Kirton McConkie’s amicus brief stated that the participating churches held the scriptural description of “male” and “female” found in the Bible’s creation story as their core tenet and refuted any self-determination of gender identity on the part of an individual.<sup>13</sup>

That spring, I learned that some stake presidents across the United States had forbidden transgender women from attending Relief Society, threatening church discipline if they did so. In April, I attended our ward Relief Society meeting to assist an elderly sister whom I had been helping in the library. I wasn’t even there long enough for it to be an affirming experience. Although my Relief Society president was eager to welcome me among the sisters, which I yearned for, the stake president had already forbidden my attendance.

In May, several stake presidents told transgender women, including me, to either “detransition to male or write a letter resigning [our] membership,” and warned our spouses that they might experience discipline for remaining in a “same-sex marriage.” I was shocked to be told that I would have to resign my membership if I did not detransition.

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13. Brief of Major Religious Organizations as *Amici Curiae* Supporting Petitioners, *Masterpiece Cakeshop, Ltd. v. Colorado Civil Rights Commission*, No. 16-273, 584 U.S. \_\_\_ (2018), [https://scotusblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/16-273-amicus-petitioner-major\\_religious\\_organizations.pdf](https://scotusblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/16-273-amicus-petitioner-major_religious_organizations.pdf).

Never, as a Church leader, had I threatened another Church member in that way. I told our stake president I could not safely detransition, and it was not in my heart to resign. He replied that he would then hold a disciplinary council. When the warning was spoken against my spouse, I was flabbergasted. How could they say I was not a woman, then threaten her for being married to a woman?

On June 4, 2017, my stake president excommunicated me. My only “transgression” was presenting as female and having attended a portion of a single Relief Society class. Having previously been ordered to resign my membership and refusing to do so, it was apparent what the outcome of the council would be. My last request was to be allowed to worship God according to the dictates of my conscience, and my conscience confirmed to me that I am a woman. I had already accepted what would happen, but it took a very long time to grieve fully all I had lost at their hands.

On April 4, 2019, at a training session for General Authorities during the Church’s general conference, First Presidency counselor Dallin H. Oaks announced that the First Presidency was effectively rescinding its November 2015 exclusionary policies for lesbian and gay couples and their children. The First Presidency’s official statement called the abrupt change a reflection of “the continuing revelation that has been part of the modern Church” since its beginning. The Church no longer considered married same-sex couples “apostates” requiring Church discipline, Oaks said, though he cautioned that the change did not represent a shift in Church doctrine. Also, “children of parents who identify themselves as lesbian, gay, *bisexual*, or *transgender* may be baptized if the custodial parents permit the baptism.”<sup>14</sup> This statement struck me as odd since the original policy never mentioned bisexual or transgender members, only parents in same-sex relationships. Though

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14. “First Presidency Shares Messages from General Conference Leadership Session,” *Mormon Newsroom*, Apr. 4, 2019, <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/first-presidency-messages-general-conference-leadership-session-april-2019> (emphasis added).

I felt grateful for the easing of the policy restrictions on gay couples and their children, so much harm had occurred. The announcement did not address unresolved issues surrounding transgender Church members, who experienced uncertainty over their future in the Church.

The Church's focus then shifted from sexual orientation to gender identity. On October 2, 2019, again at the general conference leadership training, President Oaks laid out the Church's stance on gender identity and biological sex assigned at birth. Despite medical evidence and lived experiences proving the contrary, Oaks cited the Church's family proclamation as evidence that gender identity and "biological sex at birth" are the same and that "binary creation is essential to the plan of salvation."<sup>15</sup> Oaks's statement dramatically changed the conversation with transgender Latter-day Saints, and I responded publicly by declaring the statement would send "shock waves through the transgender community."<sup>16</sup>

On October 8, six days after this statement, the United States Supreme Court heard the related case of *R.G. & G. R. Harris Funeral Homes, Inc. v. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC)*. In this landmark case, the EEOC argued that a funeral home where a transgender woman worked could not fire her because of her surgical and social transition. Lawyers contended that Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act included sexual orientation and gender identity in its list of classes protected from employment discrimination.<sup>17</sup> News broke that the LDS Church's legal counsel at Kirton McConkie filed an amicus

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15. "General Conference Leadership Meetings Begin," *Church Newsroom*, Oct. 2, 2019, <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/october-2019-general-conference-first-presidency-leadership-session>.

16. Peggy Fletcher Stack, "In 'Dark Day' for Transgender Latter-day Saints, Oaks Defines Gender as 'Biological Sex at Birth,'" *Salt Lake Tribune*, Oct. 2, 2019.

17. Robert L. Stevens, Erica L. Wondolowski, and Gregory A. Wilson, "Navigating the Unique Landscape of Clients Who Identify as LGBTQ+ in Vocational Rehabilitation: A Social Justice Primer," *Journal of Applied Rehabilitation Counseling* 51, no. 4 (2020): 304–22.

brief on the case on behalf of the Church and several other religious organizations in this case, too. The brief stated that construing Title VII to include sexual orientation and gender identity in its protected classes would conflict with the rights of religious organizations to have workplaces that advance their spiritual missions.

One so-called hypothetical example that Kirton McConkie gave as a possible scenario was “a transgender woman [suing] when not hired as a chapel architect at a denominational headquarters.”<sup>18</sup> This so-called hypothetical scenario closely mirrored my situation, suggesting again that the Church continued to focus on my situation, long after I had been removed. In February 2020, the First Presidency added its new policy on gender identity and biological sex at birth to the Church’s online general handbook. It reads: “Gender is an essential characteristic of Heavenly Father’s plan of happiness. The intended meaning of gender in the family proclamation is biological sex at birth. Some people experience feelings of incongruence between their biological sex and their gender identity. As a result, they may identify as transgender. The Church does not take a position on the causes of people identifying as transgender.”<sup>19</sup> It seems unfortunate to me that these same leaders had access to me to help them understand gender identity from a personal perspective, not to mention the wealth of verified scientific studies on the subject.

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18. Brief of National Association of Evangelicals et al. as *Amici Curiae* in Support of Employers, R.G. & G. R. Harris Funeral Homes v. EEOC, Nos. 17-1618, 17-1623, 18-107, Aug. 2019, 9, [https://www.supremecourt.gov/DocketPDF/18/18-107/113604/20190826131230679\\_Harris%20Amicus%20Brief%20Final%20Version.pdf](https://www.supremecourt.gov/DocketPDF/18/18-107/113604/20190826131230679_Harris%20Amicus%20Brief%20Final%20Version.pdf).

19. “A Look Inside the New General Handbook for Church Leaders and Members,” *Church Newsroom*, Feb. 19, 2020, [https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/new-general-handbook?cid=email-OCA\\_Handbook\\_021920\\_LearnMore](https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/new-general-handbook?cid=email-OCA_Handbook_021920_LearnMore) (emphasis added).

On August 19, 2024, the Church released new policy guidelines in the form of restrictions upon members who pursue “surgical, medical, or social transition away from their biological sex at birth” and instructed Church leaders to discourage members from transitioning in any way.<sup>20</sup> This, even though, for individuals who experience long-term gender dysphoria, social, medical, and even surgical transition is the medically proven standard for the treatment of gender dysphoria.

The Church’s new restrictions include prohibiting attendance at classes and activities that do not align with one’s biological sex at birth. Those who have pursued transition may not participate in any overnight activities but will be sent home in the care of a responsible guardian. Transitioned members may no longer be teachers, serve in any position with children or youth, or have any gendered responsibilities.<sup>21</sup> This prohibition means that transgender members can no longer serve in most Church callings. Thus, this new policy significantly reduces the social involvement of members within the Church who have transitioned. This policy also enacts a bathroom ban in church buildings, reviving their support for bathroom bans that dates back to the 2017 amicus brief.<sup>22</sup>

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20. Tamarra Kemsley, “New LDS Church Policies Relegate Trans Members to ‘Second-Class’ Status, Scholars Warn,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, Aug. 19, 2024.

21. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “Church Participation of Individuals Who Identify as Transgender: Guiding Principles for Local Leaders,” 2024, supplement to *General Handbook: Serving in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, sec. 38.6.23, “Individuals Who Identify as Transgender,” [https://assets.churchofjesuschrist.org/1d/76/1d76991533df11efbaeaeecaecl7e66fbf94a7/general\\_handbook\\_guiding\\_principles\\_for\\_local\\_leaders.pdf](https://assets.churchofjesuschrist.org/1d/76/1d76991533df11efbaeaeecaecl7e66fbf94a7/general_handbook_guiding_principles_for_local_leaders.pdf).

22. According to the August 2024 policy, transgender people are to use single-occupancy restrooms in ward buildings. If those are not available, they are to use the bathroom that either aligns with their biological sex at birth or corresponds to their gender identity—if someone else goes with them and clears the bathroom first.

When viewed as a whole, the restrictions reinforce the false perception that transgender persons present a danger to others, including annotating transgender members' records to alert all future Church leaders, in the same way leaders flag records of abusers, sex offenders, and those who steal from the Church. These restrictions may foster a surveillance culture targeting anyone, particularly youth who appear to vary from strict gender binary actions, dress, or habits. Again, recognizing that for many, as it was for me, the only effective mitigation of significant, debilitating gender dysphoria is to "transition away from one's biological sex at birth," the Church has in effect criminalized the essential healthcare required by its transgender members.

My review of primary sources, as well as my own lived experience as a transgender ecclesiastical leader and employee of the Church, demonstrates that the church's movement is toward increasingly harsh restrictions on members with atypical gender identities. These restrictions stem from incorrectly conflating gender identity with biological sex assigned at birth. This conflation and its associated restrictions have provoked despair and sorrow among many transgender individuals and their allies. Trans members who once hoped to find a place within their ward communities have found it impossible to attend a church whose policies demean their humanity.<sup>23</sup> The cost of these policies is immeasurable, both to trans individuals and to the Church, as members lose trust in their leaders and distance themselves from the Church. Just as Church leaders in the past have changed course upon realizing that specific Church policies were insupportable, I hope that today's Church leaders will embark on a similar course by listening to transgender members and scientific evidence to understand the reality of gender identity. The best of Mormon teachings promotes strong, loving, and inclusive communities, a compassionate understanding of one another,

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23. Valerie Green, "Last Day," *Exponent II* (blog), Sept. 13, 2024, <https://expotentii.org/blog/last-day/>.

and reaching out to the most marginalized members of society. These are teachings to be proud of. I look forward to the day when leaders will follow the best of their tradition by lifting the current, egregious restrictions against transgender members and by more compassionately ministering to and including transgender children of God.

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