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FROM HOUSEWIVES TO PROTESTERS: THE STORY OF MORMONS FOR THE  
EQUAL RIGHTS AMENDMENT

by

Kelli N. Morrill

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

History

Approved:

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UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY  
Logan, Utah

2018

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## ABSTRACT

FROM HOUSEWIVES TO PROTESTERS: THE STORY OF MORMONS FOR THE  
EQUAL RIGHTS AMENDMENT

by

Kelli N. Morrill, Master of Arts

Utah State University, 2018

Major Professor: Dr. Victoria Grieve  
Department: History

In the mid 1970s a group of highly educated, white Mormon women living in Virginia formed the group Mormons for the ERA (MERA). They were opposed to the LDS Church's position on the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) and made it their mission to actively voice their opposition. This thesis utilizes the "Mormons for the ERA" collection housed at Utah State University's Special Collections and Archives, and draws upon MERA newsletters, newspapers, photos, and ephemera to understand their protest methods and the consequences they faced. MERA organized protests in sacred spaces, such as temples and at General Conference, which captured the attention of the media. They asserted their power as Mormon women and re-appropriated LDS hymns, rituals, and language as methods of protest. The women faced scrutiny from church leaders and members and faced institutional consequences such as being released from callings, denied temple recommends, and ultimately, excommunicated. They also suffered socially as they were no longer accepted into the Mormon community. This

research looks at their methods of protest, the consequences they faced, and tells the story of a small group that had a large impact on the LDS church.

(100 pages)

## PUBLIC ABSTRACT

FROM HOUSEWIVES TO PROTESTERS: THE STORY OF MORMONS FOR THE  
EQUAL RIGHTS AMENDMENT

Kelli N. Morrill

On November 17, 1980, twenty Mormon women and one man were arrested on criminal trespassing charges after chaining themselves to the Bellevue, Washington LDS Temple gate. The news media extensively covered the event due to the shocking photos of middle-aged housewives, covered in large chains, holding protest signs and being escorted to police cars. These women were part of the group Mormons for the Equal Rights Amendment (MERA) and were protesting the LDS Church's opposition to the ERA. The LDS Church actively opposed the ERA and played an important role in influencing the vote in key states leading to its eventual failure. However, ERA literature generally ignores the LDS Church and their influence, instead attributing the ERA's failure to lack of appeal to lower class and minority women, the ratification process, and confusing messaging about the amendment. Literature that does discuss the LDS Church and its opposition to the ERA fails to tell the story of the small, but bold and attention grabbing group of Mormon women who organized a campaign in direct opposition to the position of their church. This thesis begins with an evaluation of MERA's use of sacred space in protest, and their portrayal in the media. It then explores how MERA re-appropriated LDS hymns, rituals and language to assert their power and express

discontent with the church's position on ERA, and concludes with an evaluation of the institutional and social consequences MERA members faced as a result of their activism.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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I give a special thanks to my family, friends, and fellow graduate students for their encouragement, friendship, and willingness to listen to my ideas and provide critical feedback. I would especially like to thank my sister Jessica for her work as my personal editor and her willingness to closely read my early drafts and add commas when needed. I would also like to thank Braden Limb for his willingness to provide technical and emotional support throughout graduate school.

To my parents, Taylor and Sherri Morrill, thank you for supporting my pursuit of education throughout my life. From teaching me how to read, helping with dreaded math problems and reading numerous essays you always supported my educational experience and I am truly grateful you encouraged me to attend graduate school.

~Kelli N. Morrill



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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Following the ratification of the 19th Amendment, which gave women the right to vote, activist Alice Paul began advocating for an Equal Rights Amendment. She first introduced the amendment in 1923, and continued to do so in every session of Congress until it passed the U.S. House of Representatives and U.S. Senate on March 22, 1972. The amendment then went to the states for ratification, but failed to achieve enough votes. Opponents of the ERA took issue with the amendment's vague language and argued that women would lose important protections based on their sex. In recent years, discussion surrounding the ERA has renewed; in 2016 Nevada voted on the ERA and became the 36th state to ratify the amendment.<sup>1</sup> Understanding the history of the ERA is important for future feminist actions.

Feminism in the 1960s and 1970s encompassed a range of objectives, ideologies, and groups who clashed over issues, but were unified in their goal of working towards greater equality for women. One of the ways liberal feminists hoped to achieve equality was through the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment, which states, "Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex."<sup>2</sup> Liberal feminists hoped the ERA would elevate their position and create equality with men, by overturning discriminatory laws and providing a basis for a

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<sup>1</sup> Marsha Mercer, "#MeToo Fuels Comeback for Equal Rights Amendment," *USA Today*, March 1, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Kathleen C. Berkeley, *The Women's Liberation Movement in America* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1999), 198.

legal challenge.<sup>3</sup> Mormons for the ERA (MERA) was one among many small groups who worked for the passage of the ERA, but these women did so in direct opposition to the position of their church.<sup>4</sup>

This thesis argues MERA protested in sacred spaces, re-appropriated material culture, and faced institutional and social consequences as a result of their activism. Primary sources for this project come from the Mormons for the ERA collection at Utah State University. The collection contains photographs, correspondence between members, letters sent to government officials, personal records, newsletters, and protest ephemera. These documents reveal MERA's protest methods, motivations, and the personal and social consequences they faced. Published oral histories from the book *Mormons & Women* are also utilized to reveal the feelings of women who supported and opposed the ERA.<sup>5</sup> This research adds to the growing historiography on Mormon women, and provides a case study investigating how women have engaged in protest.

The literature on the battle over the ERA of the 1960s and 1970s is vast, and focuses on several areas of the movement including participants, and understanding why it failed. It is important to understand the ERA in the context of the larger women's liberation movement and the reasons for the push for the ERA. Early scholarship evaluating the origins of women's liberation persuasively argues that the civil rights and

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<sup>3</sup> Berkeley, 11.

<sup>4</sup> The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is the full and official name of the church. In this paper it will often be referred to as the Church or the LDS Church. Members of the church are often referred to as Mormons, a nickname they get from an additional book of scripture called *The Book of Mormon*.

<sup>5</sup> Ann Terry, Marilyn Slaght-Griffin, and Elizabeth Terry, eds., *Mormons and Women* (Santa Barbara, California: Butterfly Publishing, 1980).

New Left movements drew attention to male chauvinism, resulting in already radicalized women beginning to think about the inequality they faced in their own lives, eventually leading them to become unhappy with their own inequality and becoming leaders and participants in the women's liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>6</sup> However, newer scholarship refutes the idea of male domination and oppression as being the catalyst for the women's liberation movement. Carol Giardina suggests that women had experienced discrimination for decades without a large-scale social movement. So what had changed? Giardina contends that women involved in the Black Freedom Movement and New Left experienced "new ideas, [the] courage of one's convictions and victory through collective action," which inspired them to begin working for women's liberation.<sup>7</sup>

Contemporary scholars are challenging previous scholarships in its focus on white, middle-class women to paint an increasingly diverse picture of activists.<sup>8</sup> There are also challenges to periodization and the wave metaphor, which divides 20<sup>th</sup> century feminist movements in the United States. *In Breaking the Wave: Women, their Organizations, and Feminism, 1945-1985* Kathleen A. Laughlin and Jacqueline L.

Castledine argue that the wave metaphor gives the mistaken perception that feminist

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<sup>6</sup> Sara M. Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* (New York City: Knopf, 1979), 198-199. Other works that support this idea are: Alice Echols, *Daring to be Bad: Radical Feminism in America 1967 - 1975* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1991); Jo Freeman, *The Politics of Women's Liberation* (New York: David McKay, 1975).

<sup>7</sup> Carol Giardina, *Freedom for Women: Forging the Women's Liberation Movement, 1953 - 1970* (Gainesville: Univ. Press of Florida, 2010), 6.

<sup>8</sup> Wini Breines, *The Trouble Between Us: An Uneasy History of White and Black Women in the Feminist Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). Sara M. Evans, *Tidal Wave: How Women Changed America at Century's End*. (New York: Free Press, 2003).

movements only occurred during certain periods. They argue that there were organized efforts on the local and national scale between what is typically referred to as first and second wave feminism and provide evidence of feminism in years not typically associated with a feminist wave.<sup>9</sup>

A large body of work on second wave feminism is dedicated to the ERA and investigating why it failed. Researchers suggest contributing factors include the amendment process, lack of appeal to minorities, confusion and damaging rhetoric, and the rise of the New Right. In *Why the ERA Failed*, Frances Berry studies several constitutional amendments and their ratification processes and discusses factors needed for ratification. She argues that voters need to believe the problem is urgent and that it cannot be solved through the courts or Congress. The only way to solve the problem is to amend the Constitution. After urgency is established, she argues, it is important to employ geographical techniques in order to attain a state consensus.<sup>10</sup> She further acknowledges that the process for amendment ratification is difficult since thirty-eight states are needed to pass the amendment and only thirteen are needed to reject it, giving greater power to the minority.<sup>11</sup> Her work is important in uncovering why the ERA was unsuccessful and demonstrates the importance of studying and understanding the politics in individual states. This focus is missing from much of the literature, which emphasizes the national movement and its origins but does not devote much study to the stories of groups that played a large role at the local level, which in turn had a major influence on

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<sup>9</sup> Kathleen A. Laughlin, and Jacqueline L. Castledine. *Breaking the Wave: Women, Their Organizations, and Feminism, 1945-1985* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

<sup>10</sup> Mary Frances Berry, *Why ERA Failed: Politics, Women's Rights, and the Amending Process of the Constitution* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 3.

<sup>11</sup> Berry, 64.

the national outcome. MERA and the LDS Church organized campaigns across the country during the fight for the ERA, which included public demonstrations and campaign materials such as stickers, signs, and pamphlets pointing to a contentious political sphere.

The ERA's failure can also be attributed to its irrelevance to working-class and minority women who had different concerns.<sup>12</sup> The Equal Rights Amendment seemed unimportant, or threatening, to a large number of women and men, who feared they would lose their protective gains. Supporters of the ERA argued that the amendment would guarantee equality and improve women's economic status. However, "unionists responded that such a prediction amounted to naiveté at best, calculated cruelty to working women at worst."<sup>13</sup> The lack of unity among classes and races led to strong and effective opposition.

Scare tactics, "righteous rhetoric," and confusion about the ERA were also instrumental in its failure.<sup>14</sup> ERA opponents used scare tactics to stir up fear and diminish support through effective messaging. They told people the ERA would eliminate women's protected status in workplaces and in the military, creating fear and opposition from both women and men.<sup>15</sup> Opponents, like the LDS Church, also employed "righteous rhetoric" to argue women's subordinate role as God's will, citing biological differences

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<sup>12</sup> Winifred D. Wandersee, *On the Move: American Women in the 1970s* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1988), 199.

<sup>13</sup> Dennis Deslippe, *Rights, Not Roses: Unions and the Rise of Working-Class Feminism, 1945-80* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 5.

<sup>14</sup> Joan Hoff-Wilson, *Rights of Passage: The Past and Future of the ERA* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 77.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 80.

as making one sex more conducive to working or staying in the home.<sup>16</sup> Confusion about the ERA was widespread and proponents failed to explain the amendment and distinguish between “political and legal equality” and “sexual sameness.” The opposition exploited the idea that the ERA would create “sexual sameness” and there would be no acknowledged differences between men and women. People were not receptive to the idea of “sexual sameness” and it proved an effective way to limit approval. Scare tactics and “righteous rhetoric” were effective in creating fear and opposition to the ERA and general confusion about the amendment and what it would accomplish further diminishing public support.<sup>17</sup>

Some historians point to the social climate of the country and the commitment some Americans felt to preserving traditional family structures as key reasons the ERA failed. Much of the opposition to the ERA came from the rise of the New Right and individuals such as Phyllis Schlafly and organizations such as the John Birch Society, Happiness of Womanhood, and the League of Housewives.<sup>18</sup> The New Right is a political ideology, which argued that secular values were replacing religious values, and leading to the breakdown of society. They believed the family was the center of society and worked hard to stop the acceptance of social values they deemed harmful to the family. They worked against the ERA, abortion access, homosexuality, and affirmative action.<sup>19</sup> Phyllis Schlafly, an effective opposition leader, is credited with much of the success of the anti-ERA movement. According to Kathleen C. Berkeley, the rise of the

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 78.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 86.

<sup>18</sup> Berkeley, *The Women's Liberation Movement in America*, 86.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 87.

New Right, with its focus on family and religious values, proved instrumental in stopping the passage of the ERA.<sup>20</sup>

The LDS Church is often mentioned as part of the New Right, but its influence is largely ignored in the scholarly literature.<sup>21</sup> The role of the LDS Church in stopping the passage of the ERA is not discussed, is limited in its evaluation, or is only researched by a few scholars. For example, in the books *Why ERA Failed* and *On the Move*, the role of the LDS Church is acknowledged, but the discussion is brief and does not recognize the significance of the Church's efforts.<sup>22</sup> Neil Young argues that Mormons played an important role in the rise of the New Right and should hold a larger place in the historiography, which largely focuses on Protestant Christians and Catholic churches.<sup>23</sup>

Even so, the LDS Church launched local and national campaigns against the Equal Rights Amendment, which had a large impact on the vote in Utah, Idaho, and Nevada.<sup>24</sup> With only thirteen states needed to reject the amendment, the outcome in these

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 89.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 87-90; Neil J. Young, "The ERA Is a Moral Issue": The Mormon Church, LDS Women, and the Defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment," *American Quarterly* 59, no. 3 (2007): 625.

<sup>22</sup> Berry, *Why ERA Failed: Politics, Women's Rights, and the Amending Process of the Constitution*, 76.

<sup>23</sup> Neil J. Young, "Mormons and Same-Sex Marriage: From ERA to Prop 8," in *Out of Obscurity: Mormonism since 1945*, ed. Patrick Q. Mason & John G. Turner (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); Neil J. Young, *We Gather Together: The Religious Right and the Problem of Interfaith Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016). For important works on religion and the New Right see Kenneth J. Heineman, *God is a Conservative: Religion, Politics, and Morality in Contemporary America* (New York: New York University Press, 1998); William Martin, *With God on our Side: The Rise of the Religious Right in America* (New York: Broadway Books 1996); and Daniel K Williams, *God's Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>24</sup> Young, "The ERA Is a Moral Issue": The Mormon Church, LDS Women, and the Defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment," 636; D. Michael Quinn, "The LDS Church's



western states became even more significant. The literature looks at why the opinion of the LDS Church had such an influential effect on its members. In the case of Utah and Nevada, church members campaigned tirelessly against the passage of the ERA. LDS women showed their opposition to the amendment at the International Women's Year conference in 1977, when 10,000 women attended. Following the success of the IWY conference in Utah, the Church used the strategy at the conferences in Hawaii, Florida, New York, Mississippi, Washington, Alabama, Montana, and Kansas. Much of the scholarship focuses on the methods the LDS Church used, why the Church was opposed to the amendment, and why their opposition mobilized large numbers of their membership.<sup>25</sup> Neil Young and D. Michael Quinn point to two effective ways of mobilizing opposition; first, being the way members viewed the prophet with greater authority, and second, the way the Church framed the ERA as a moral issue, legitimizing their involvement.<sup>26</sup> Conservative groups nationwide disapproved the ERA, including the majority of Mormons, as evidenced by their political activism. However, there was some support for the ERA among women of the LDS Church, but this support is largely excluded from the historical narrative at this time. Research tends to focus on the efforts of the institutional church to prevent passage of the amendment.

Scholarship on Mormon women is limited in quantity and scope, but the field is growing with recent publications focused on early and contemporary Mormon women,

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Campaign Against the Equal Rights Amendment," *Journal of Mormon History* 20, no. 2 (1994): 86.

<sup>25</sup> Young, "The ERA Is a Moral Issue": The Mormon Church, LDS Women, and the Defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment," 626-637.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 627-629; Quinn, "The LDS Church's Campaign Against the Equal Rights Amendment," 84-98.

specifically Mormon feminists.<sup>27</sup> This scholarship offers insight into the field of Mormon women's history, addressing both theological topics and social concerns. *Mormon Feminism* is a compilation of essays along with the authors' commentary about the history of Mormon feminists from the 1970s through 2014. It directly addresses the conflict surrounding the ERA, but has limited writings from MERA. While some of these authors look at Mormon feminism, they do not include MERA and their opposition to the Church's efforts to stop the ERA.

Scholars such as Laurel Thatcher Ulrich and Martha Sontagg Bradley have added to the scholarship on the ERA, publishing their own reflective stories on the International Women's Conference in Utah.<sup>28</sup> Their accounts provide important first hand knowledge of the events and include interviews with other women, however, they do not move beyond evaluating the Conference and the consequences ERA supporters faced. Bradley's book, *Pedestals and Podiums*, details the movement but doesn't focus on MERA, or the consequences these women faced due to their activism. Sonia Johnson's

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<sup>27</sup> Kate Holbrook, and Matthew Burton Bowman, *Women and Mormonism: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2016); Joanna Brooks, Rachel Hunt Steenblik, and Hannah Wheelwright. *Mormon Feminism: Essential Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Other important works in the field include: Claudia L. Bushman, *Mormon Sisters: Women in Early Utah* (Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 1997); Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, and Lavina Fielding Anderson. *Sisters in Spirit: Mormon Women in Historical and Cultural Perspective* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987); Maxine Hanks, *Women and Authority: Re-emerging Mormon Feminism* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992).

<sup>28</sup> Martha Sontagg Bradley, "The Mormon Relief Society and the International Women's Year," *Journal of Mormon History*, 21.1 (1995): 105-67; Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, "Mormon Women in the History of Second-Wave Feminism," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 43 no. 4 (2010): 45-63; Martha Sontagg Bradley, *Pedestals and Podiums: Utah Women, Religious Authority, and Equal Rights* (Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 2005).

autobiography *Housewife to Heretic* effectively tells her own personal story and the consequences of her opposition, but her book does not reveal if her story is an exception or if other women had similar experiences.<sup>29</sup> This body of scholarship clarifies specific events, conferences, and rallies but does not evaluate the group Mormons for the ERA (MERA) and their role in advocating for the ERA. This research enhances the scholarship through the analysis of protest methods and the institutional and social consequences activists faced. There is little current research on Mormon feminists and this research begins to add to the literature and scholars understanding of how women utilize their place in society to protest.

MERA strategically protested in places of significance for the LDS Church such as at temples, General Conference, and church buildings. They occupied sacred space to demonstrate the intersection of politics and religion and their belief that the church overstepped their role in advocating a particular political position. Chapter One explores the spaces they occupied and the Church's reaction to their protests. It also investigates how MERA protesters cast themselves as liberators of Mormon women and how the media portrayed the protesters and the Church.

MERA utilized LDS hymns, rituals, and language to protest the actions of their Church and assert their own views on women's place in the Church and the ERA. Chapter Two evaluates their use of material culture in protest, its relation to the conservative shift in the LDS Church, and the Church's emphasis on religious home décor, and jewelry.

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<sup>29</sup> Johnson, *From Housewife to Heretic*.

Chapter Three evaluates the consequences ERA supporters faced as a result of their activism from the institutional church, such as being released from church callings, denied Temple Recommends, and ultimately, excommunicated. It also evaluates the social consequences that came from ward members who no longer talked to these women or attended their church classes. Mormons who supported the ERA faced both institutional and social consequences as a result of their activism.

Understanding how women protest, their methods, and their level of success is important for future protesters and understanding past social movements. Recent events such as the #MeToo Movement and the Women's March suggest a desire and need for new legislation. This could come in the form of another Equal Rights Amendment or other similar legislation. Knowing the opposition previous legislation encountered and understanding the roles opposition groups such as the Mormon Church played in the ERA's defeat is essential for the success of future protests. It is also important to expand the view of what it means to be a Mormon, and offer a non-traditional narrative representing a marginalized group in the LDS Church.

CHAPTER 2  
WOMEN OF MERA: LIBERATORS, CRIMINALS, AND VICTIMS OF  
PATRIARCHY

On November 17, 1980, twenty Mormon women and one man were arrested on criminal trespassing charges after chaining themselves to the Seattle, Washington Temple gate. The news media covered the event extensively due to the shocking photos of middle-aged housewives, covered in large chains, holding protest signs, and being escorted to police cars. These women were part of the group Mormons for the Equal Rights Amendment (MERA) and were protesting The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) opposition to the ERA.<sup>30</sup> The group formed in 1978 when several women living in Virginia banded together in support of the ERA in direct opposition to the position of the LDS Church. They were predominantly white, middle to upper class, highly educated women who traveled the country organizing protests and helping local leaders establish their own smaller branches of MERA.

Early scholarship on the ERA addressed political questions such as why the ERA failed to ratify and its connection to the civil rights movement.<sup>31</sup> Recent scholarship focuses on the social aspects and intersectionality as scholars paint an increasingly

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<sup>30</sup> The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is the full and official name of the church. In this paper it will often be referred to as the Church or the LDS Church. Members of the church are often referred to as Mormons, a nickname they get from an additional book of scripture called *The Book of Mormon*.

<sup>31</sup> Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Right Movement and the New Left*, 198-199. Other works that support this idea are: Alice Echols, *Daring to be Bad: Radical Feminism in America 1967 - 1975* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1991); Jo Freeman, *The Politics of Women's Liberation* (New York: David McKay, 1975).

diverse picture of activists through the stories of black and Latina women.<sup>32</sup> Literature on the ERA occasionally addresses the role religious groups played in opposing the ERA. This scholarship generally focuses on religions that impacted the vote in the southern United States and the intermountain west due to the significant role they played in ratification. The literature focuses on Southern Baptist, and fundamentalist Christian religions, that impacted the vote in the southern United States, the LDS Church in the Intermountain West, and the Catholic Church due to the significant role they played in preventing ratification.<sup>33</sup> Scholars usually attribute the ERA's failure to its lack of appeal to working class and minority women, the difficulty of the ratification process, and confusing messaging.<sup>34</sup> Researchers who discuss the LDS Church fail to tell the story of the small, but bold and attention grabbing group of Mormon women who organized a campaign in direct opposition to the position of their Church.

This thesis investigates a different aspect of the fight for the ERA: how MERA used LDS history as a justification for and validation of their activism, protested in sacred spaces, portrayed themselves to the media as victims of patriarchy, and favorably cast themselves as the liberators of oppressed Mormon women. It employs MERA newsletters, newspapers, and photos to answer questions about their methods of protest,

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<sup>32</sup> Breines, *The Trouble Between Us: An Uneasy History of White and Black Women in the Feminist Movement*; Evans, *Tidal Wave: How Women Changed America at Century's End*.

<sup>33</sup> Laura E. Brock, "Religion and Women's Rights in Florida: An Examination of the Equal Rights Amendment Legislative Debates, 1972-1982." *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 94, no. 1 (Summer 2015): 1-39; Marjorie J. Spruill, *Divided We Stand: The Battle Over Women's Rights and Family Values That Polarized American Politics*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2017.

<sup>34</sup> Berry, 3; Wandersee, 199; Deslippe, 5; Hoff-Wilson, 77.

the LDS Church's response, and the media portrayal of MERA and the LDS Church. It differs from previous scholarship in its scope and perspective. Participant scholars published much of the literature specific to Mormon support for the ERA during the 1980s.<sup>35</sup> Additional scholarship is limited and mostly tied to larger studies of the LDS Church relating to media images and politics.<sup>36</sup> This thesis focuses on MERA, rather than the LDS Church, and will fill the gap in scholarship from a non-participant perspective.

This study begins with a brief history of Mormon women and protest, transitions to an evaluation of MERA's protest methods and media coverage, explores MERA's portrayal of themselves.

### **A Historical Justification for Equal Rights**

MERA drew justification and validation for their support of the ERA from the words of previous Church leaders who supported equal rights and women's suffrage in the nineteenth century. MERA President Sonia Johnson's testimony before the United States Senate Constitutional Rights Subcommittee on August 4, 1978 provides a historical argument for Mormon feminist activism using the words of past Mormon leaders. Johnson specifically selects quotes focusing on the promotion of women's participation in the workforce. She quotes General Relief Society President Eliza R. Snow who states that women should have "access to every avenue of employment for

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<sup>35</sup> Sontagg Bradley, "The Mormon Relief Society and the International Women's Year," 106-167. Ulrich, 45-63.

<sup>36</sup> Jan Shipps, *Sojourner in the Promised Land Forty Years among the Mormons* (Chicago: University of Illinois University Press, 2000), 101; J.B. Haws, *The Mormon Image in the American Mind* (Oxford University Press, 2013), 99; David E. Campbell, John C. Green and J. Quin Monson, *Seeking the Promised Land: Mormons and American Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 2014).

which she has physical and mental capacity.”<sup>37</sup> She also quotes the Prophet Brigham Young who wrote, “We believe that women are useful, not only to sweep houses, wash dishes, make beds, and raise babies, but that they should stand behind the counter, study law, or physics, or become good bookkeepers and be able to do the business in any counting house, and all this to enlarge their sphere of usefulness for the benefit of society at large. In following these things they but answer the design of their creation.”<sup>38</sup>

Brigham Young’s quote uses sexist language and assigns women gender specific domestic roles, but is also progressive in its advocacy that women participate in generally male dominated fields such as physics, law, and business. These quotes urging women to enter the workforce differ from Mormon messaging during the 1970s, which advocated that women remain in the home. I explore the causes of this conservative shift in Chapter three.

MERA also drew validation from the *Woman’s Exponent*, a late nineteenth and early twentieth century LDS magazine advocating for women’s suffrage. MERA published poems and quotes from the magazine in their regular newsletters, using one poem written by General Relief Society President Emmeline B. Wells entitled “Equal Rights” on a number of documents. The poem explicitly calls for equal rights, and increased education, and asks all women to join the fight.

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<sup>37</sup> Sonia Johnson. August 4, 1978. “Equal Rights and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormon)” Testimony before the United States Senate Constitutional Rights Subcommittee. Mormons for the ERA, 1977-1983. (COLL MSS 225), Box 19, Folder 17, Special Collections and Archives. Utah State University Merrill-Cazier Library. Logan, Utah. Hereafter the citation will be shortened to USUSCA.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.



### Equal Rights

Now the voice of womankind is startling all the world;  
 Woman must have equal rights with man.  
 Everywhere beneath the sun her banner is unfurled,  
 Woman must have equal rights with man.  
 We but ask for freedom and the right to live and be,  
 What we are designed in God's great plan;  
 And we're sure all thinking men will very shortly see,  
 Woman must have equal rights with man.

Come my sisters, let us rise and educate our minds,  
 Put aside our follies great and small;  
 Work with heart and soul to help all womankind,  
 Gather round our standard one and all.  
 Do not pause nor falter, but be valiant in the fight,  
 And the flame of liberty we'll fan.  
 Till it spreads o'er all the land, then hail the time of right,  
 When woman shall have equal rights with man.

Emmeline B. Wells<sup>39</sup>

MERA republished another *Woman's Exponent* quote from the Prophet Joseph F. Smith in a Washington State mailer. Smith explicitly calls for equal rights and states, "It is said if the women have equal rights they must bear equal burdens with the men. They do this already except that their burdens are made unequal in that they are deprived of the enjoyment of equal rights."<sup>40</sup> MERA used the words of previous Mormon leaders in newsletters, speeches, and on memorabilia to demonstrate earlier LDS support for women's equality. MERA intentionally used the words of former prophets and General Relief Society presidents to claim Church authority for their own cause.

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<sup>39</sup> Wells, Emmeline B. "Equal Rights." *Woman's Exponent* 23 (October 15, 1894): 195. Copy included in MERA Collection. MERA MSS 225, Box 16, Folder 22, USUSCA.

<sup>40</sup> *Woman's Exponent* (August 15, 1895): 45-56. Reprinted in *Mormons for ERA Washington State Mailer* 198. MERA MSS 225, Box 16, Folder 8, USUSCA.

Authority is a theologically important concept to Mormons because they believe select leaders can receive revelation from God for the entire Church or local congregations. The prophet is the only one who is able to receive authority for the entire Church, but others, such as the General Relief Society president, are able to receive revelation for those under their jurisdiction.<sup>41</sup> Over time, Mormon views of authority have increasingly gained strength. Historian D. Michael Quinn notes this rise through a discourse analysis of the Church-owned newspaper, the *Deseret News*. He finds that prior to 1955 Mormons did not refer to the leader of the Church as a prophet. The founder of the Church Joseph Smith held the title, and the *Deseret News* referred to contemporary leaders as president, implying an administrative role rather than a revelatory one. Between 1951 and 1970 a shift occurred when Church publications occasionally referred to David O. McKay as a Prophet; this practice continued to grow in the early 1970s. The implications of this transition in the title of the Church leader reflect how members view power and authority. In Neil Young's work on the ERA he argues, "By strengthening the president's role as God's mouthpiece on earth, rather than simply the administrative head of His Church, the Church's leadership strengthened its influence over all matters, including political issues in the lives of Mormons."<sup>42</sup> The linkage between political beliefs and support for the prophet is seen in a 1978 Vienna Ward newsletter which has a long explanation about the Church and the ERA. The newsletter encourages ward

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<sup>41</sup> The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. "Prophets," *True to the Faith* (2004): 129–30.

<sup>42</sup> Young, "The ERA Is a Moral Issue: The Mormon Church, LDS Women, and the Defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment," 628; Quinn, 86.

members to write to their congressman if they “would like to support the prophet in his opposition to the ERA.”<sup>43</sup>

Recent scholarship on Mormons and American politics corroborates this assertion and finds that when LDS leaders operate through official channels and offer specific directions on political issues, Mormons mobilize and respond quickly. The study also finds that members will even take political positions counter to their own ideological beliefs.<sup>44</sup> This understanding serves as a testament to the power of LDS leadership and authority. MERA’s use of historical statements demonstrates their effort to try to counter the authority of the living prophet with historical examples of past authorities who supported their views on the Equal Rights Amendment.

### **The Ideal Mormon Woman**

LDS teachings mirror larger trends in American society during the early to mid 20th century which placed greater emphasis on women's role in the home. Rhetoric suggesting women “return” to the home increased following WWII when women expanded their participation in the labor force. As the feminist movement grew in the 1960s, LDS Church leaders increasingly emphasized traditional gender roles and stereotypical femininity in Church talks and publications. They emphasized women’s responsibilities to care for their children and families, and to abstain from the paid labor force.<sup>45</sup> Strong language is used in an October 1979 Church News Editorial which asks,

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<sup>43</sup> “The Church and ERA” Ward Newsletter, Vienna Ward Virginia. MERA MSS 225, Box 16, Folder 25, USUSCA.

<sup>44</sup> Campbell, Green and Monson, 157.

<sup>45</sup> Laura Vance, “Evolution of Ideals for Women in Mormon Periodicals 1897-1999” *Sociology of Religion*, 63 no. 1 (2002): 106; Thomas S. Monson, “The Women’s

“what doth it profit if a mother should gain a salary, if she should lose the divine soul of her child!”<sup>46</sup> These statements reveal the immense cultural pressure for women to abstain from the paid labor force and remain in the home caring for children. Leaders also made appeals for modesty in dress and for women to avoid wearing pants and unisex clothing that made them appear more manly.<sup>47</sup> The Church asked women to emphasize their femininity, keeping them distinct from the feminist movement.

A poem printed in a 1983 MERA newsletter demonstrates one woman’s understanding of her role as a wife and mother. The poem, entitled “The Utah Dream,” by Adrienne Morris begins with the statement, “Taught her entire life, that woman equals wife...” and moves into a discussion of the choices she made because she believed that “woman equals wife.” She explains how she limited her education in math and science and instead chose to take courses in cooking and sewing in preparation for her future as a wife and mother. She writes, “And what of a career? The very thought deleted! To be a man’s sweet dear, was all they thought she needed.” At the end of the poem she finds herself twenty-five with three children and no husband. She laments her dilemma writing,

No job. No man. No fact  
Fits anything she was told.  
It’s too late to retract  
The lies that some still hold.

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Movement: Liberation of Deception” *Ensign*, January 1971. <https://www.lds.org/ensign/1971/01/the-womens-movement-liberation-or-deception?lang=eng> Accessed November 28, 2017; Jennie L. Hansen, “Handle with Prayer” *Ensign*, October 1980. <https://www.lds.org/ensign/1980/03/handle-with-prayer?lang=eng> Accessed November 28, 2017.

<sup>46</sup> “That Second Salary,” *Church News Editorial Page*, October 20, 1979. Reprinted in MERA October 1980 Newsletter. MERA MSS 225, Box 3, Folder 1, USUSCA.

<sup>47</sup> Katie Clark Blakesley, “A Style of Our Own:” Modesty and Mormon Women, 1951-2008” *Dialogue, a Journal of Mormon Thought* 42 no. 2 (2009): 28.

Taught her entire life  
 That woman equals wife....  
 How many more will buy  
 That tragic Utah lie?<sup>48</sup>

This poem criticizes the culture of Mormon femininity that assigns women strict gender roles. MERA pushed against some of these ideals in their writings, and highlighted women's economic disadvantage when they abandoned their educational and professional goals. Similar themes are seen in an unpublished cartoon that pictures two students at Brigham Young University. The male says "duh...I need somebody to put me thru school... so uh ... ya wanna get married?" The female responds "why yes... that's so "neat" and You're so "special!" We'll start our family of 12 right away... We could have our own little quorum! Oh... I just can't wait to fulfill my "role" in life... of course I'll drop out of school..."<sup>49</sup> This cartoon demonstrates the feelings of some of the women who supported MERA. They felt LDS teachings about gender roles limited their pursuits and they began poking fun at Mormon culture.

MERA's main goal was promoting the passage of the ERA and presenting an alternative to the LDS Church's position. Their newsletters reveal that for some their initial activism supporting the passage of the ERA evolved into broader discussions about church policies regarding gender, woman's place in the home, and the educational and financial repercussions of these policies. However, these challenges appear to be

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<sup>48</sup> Adrienne Morris, "The Utah Dream," *MERA Newsletter*. Spring 1981. MERA MSS 225, Box 3, Folder 1, USUSCA.

<sup>49</sup> "Happy Valley Couple." MERA MSS 225, Box 19, Folder 11, USUSCA.

discussion points in newsletters with no specific requests or formal campaigns advocating for change.

### **Protest**

MERA used public protest to provide an opposing view to the position of the LDS Church, gain access to leaders, and garner favorable media attention. They coordinated regular demonstrations outside LDS temples, churches, and the bi-annual General Conference. Their protests tended to take place in religious spaces, and brought attention to the intersectionality of the political and religious aspects of their protest. Church members consider LDS temples, churches, and General Conference as sacred spaces that are under the direction of patriarchal religious authority. Scholar Lizzie Seal argues in her analysis of feminist protest that it “turned the world upside down” when women occupied these spaces outside their usual jurisdiction.<sup>50</sup> LDS women attend the temple, church, and General Conference but the spaces and the daily operation are under male priesthood authority. MERA protesters inhabiting these spaces brought attention to gender inequity within the church, and highlighted power differentials.

The Seattle, Washington Temple Protest is one of the most widely known MERA demonstrations because of the extensive press coverage it garnered due to the arrest of twenty-one protesters. However, their arrest did not mark the first demonstration at the temple. The group began a widely promoted weekly picketing campaign months prior to their arrest during the temple dedication. A temple dedication is a special ceremony in which the leaders of the Church give the temple to God and thereafter allow only worthy

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<sup>50</sup> Lizzie Seal, "Pussy Riot and feminist cultural criminology: a new 'Femininity of Dissent'?", *Contemporary Justice Review*, 16.2 (2013): 295.

LDS members who obtain temple recommends from their leaders to enter. Because the temple dedication is such an important ceremony for Church members, the protest itself became more significant.

The November 17, 1980, protest was not a peaceful event and is rife with accounts of a temple guard assaulting protesters. Hazel Rigby corroborates Arlene Wood's account of her encounter with the temple guard in the *Great Falls Tribune*. Wood recalls, "the guard came at us and beat us down on the pavement on a public street -- to our absolute delight as the press was there."<sup>51</sup> MERA leadership understood the power of the media and made efforts to attract media attention at every protest keeping extensive records of the protest, attendees, their methods and what media outlets covered the event.<sup>52</sup>

Protests were not limited to the Seattle, Temple. MERA launched protests at temples across the country including the Washington D.C. Temple. On January 9, 1982, members of MERA chained themselves to the Washington D.C. Temple gates, blocking access to the parking lot. Sonia Johnson, the President of MERA said, 'We've locked the gates and no one will get in until the president of the temple, Wendell Eames, comes out to listen to us.' After an hour, the protesters successfully earned a conversation with Eames and their actions resulted in no arrests. Vernon Ganatt, one temple attendee stuck behind the gates asked, "Don't you think it's illegal that these women are keeping us kidnaped in here?" He added "If these women knew anything about the Mormon religion

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<sup>51</sup> Arlene Wood, "Bigfork Woman Arrested in Temple Demonstration," *Great Falls Tribune*, November 20, 1980. MERA MSS 225, Box 16, Folder 9, USUSCA.

<sup>52</sup> "Protest Details Document," MERA MSS 225, Box 16, Folder 10, USUSCA.

they wouldn't be here. Mormon women have more freedom than any others, because they're married to their husbands for eternity. That's all they need."<sup>53</sup> Characterizing protesters as not fully understanding Mormonism is a prevalent theme throughout the primary sources. Both the LDS Church leadership and other members described protesters as "other," not as true members of the Church. Temple protests succeeded in drawing attention to their cause, meeting representatives, and gaining broad media coverage from national papers such as the *Washington Post*, but they also alienated other Mormons and failed in the long run to alter church policy.

LDS General Conference also became a regular protest site for MERA. General Conference occurs during the first weekends in April and October, and features talks from Church leaders in four, two-hour sessions. There are additional separate sessions for Priesthood holders--which are all men--and one session for women. General Conference is a time when members of the Church listen to counsel and sustain Church leaders. During the Saturday afternoon session of conference, a high-ranking Church official reads the names of the general leadership. At this time members in attendance are asked to raise their hand in a sustaining vote as a public sign of support for leaders. This action is not to be confused with a vote into office. A 2012 Church magazine article clarifies that point with the following statement, "Our sustaining is a vote of confidence in the person, because we recognize that he or she has been called of God through Priesthood

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<sup>53</sup> Michael McQueen, "ERA Supporters Protest Outside Mormon Temple," *Washington Post*, January 10, 1982.



leaders we sustain.”<sup>54</sup> Refusal to sustain Church leaders is a public display of discontent with Church leadership and is a rare form of protest.

Members of MERA refused to sustain Church leaders in a number of General Conferences. On April 5, 1981 five women stood and yelled “no” when they took the Saturday morning sustaining vote. The women released a statement saying, “We fully sustain and support President Kimball as the Church’s religious leader. However, we want Church leaders to know that we do not accept them as our unelected political leaders.” The women go on to explain that since the Church chose to become politically active, they in turn opened themselves up to “repeated and continuous political demonstrations opposing its anti-ERA policy at general, stake and ward conferences around the nation.” The women justify their actions by explaining that, “We have followed our consciences and, after prayerful [prayerful] consideration, have taken our stand at General Conference to vocally reject the political leadership and coercive acts of the First Presidency on the political issue of the Equal Rights Amendment.” One of the protesters, Ms. Bradford, demonstrated her commitment to the cause by saying she was willing to be excommunicated over the ERA.<sup>55</sup> It is interesting that these women specifically note that they sustained President Kimball as their religious leader, but did not believe the Church had jurisdiction over their political beliefs. Many of the women must have felt some inner conflict over the matter, and attempted to reconcile their

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<sup>54</sup> “We Sustain Our Leaders,” *Ensign*, March 2012, <https://www.lds.org/ensign/2012/03/we-sustain-our-leaders?lang=eng>. Accessed November 20, 2017.

<sup>55</sup> Tribune Staff Writer, “Sustaining Vote Gets 5 Nays at Conference,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, Sunday April 5, 1981. MERA MSS 225, Box 3, Folder 1, USUSCA.

commitment to their faith with their political beliefs. The idea of the Church overreaching into the political sphere became a common theme and rallying cry for protesters and the national news media.

Since the LDS Church is considered a nonprofit group, they risk losing their tax-exempt status by making partisan endorsements. However, this does not restrict the Church from commenting on political matters. The LDS Church handbook states that church facilities cannot be used for political purposes except for voter registration and polling when there is not a reasonable alternative. The Church also expresses their neutrality regarding political parties, platforms, and candidates. The handbook explains, “The church does not endorse any political party or candidate. Nor does it advise members how to vote. However, in some exceptional instances the Church will take a position on specific legislation, particularly when it concludes that it is a moral issue.”<sup>56</sup> In the case of the ERA, the Church identified it as a moral issue and felt justified in taking an official position and encouraging members to mobilize in opposition to the amendment. MERA felt like the Church was overstepping its own policy of political neutrality and referenced the discrepancy in protest signs.

A year later at the October 1982 General Conference, Church officials anticipated protesters and did not call for a sustaining vote in the typical Saturday meeting. Twelve men and women intending to cast an opposing vote continued attending every session of Conference. Finally, in the last session of Conference, the vote was taken and Cheryl Dalton was able to stand and vote no, another managed to vote no, and a Church security

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<sup>56</sup> The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *Handbook 2 Administering the Church* (Salt Lake City: Utah, 2010), 21.1.29.

fell across the third's lap in an attempt to silence opposition. The newsletter humorously recounts the story saying, "There were two no votes and one squashed no vote."<sup>57</sup>

The refusal to sustain Church leaders was only one method of protest at General Conference. Planes flying over Temple Square and the Salt Lake valley towing banners became a regular part of General Conference during early 1980s. The first plane tow began in April 1979 with a banner that read, "Mormons For ERA Are Everywhere." The practice continued with banners reading, "Mother in Heaven Loves Mormons for ERA,"<sup>58</sup> and as pictured in the October 1983 conference, the banner that read, "ERA the Pearl of Great Price."<sup>59</sup> Deciding the phrase for the banner tow became a topic of debate in MERA magazines, where they asked for member's suggestions and voted on the best ones.

Protesters also took the opportunity to protest outside the Salt Lake City Tabernacle in October of 1982 holding signs stating, "When the church enters politics, politics enter the church."<sup>60</sup> Political overreach was a rallying point for MERA supporters and the media. Headlines in newspapers around the country such as "Mormon Money Worked Against Florida's ERA," "How the Mormons helped scuttle ERA,"<sup>61</sup> and

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<sup>57</sup> "Mormons for ERA Newsletter." October 1982. MERA MSS 225, Box 3, Folder 1, USUSCA.

<sup>58</sup> "Mormons for ERA Newsletter." January 1981. MERA MSS 225, Box 3, Folder 1, USUSCA.

<sup>59</sup> "Pearl of Great Price = ERA." Sky banner flying over LDS Temple in Salt Lake City. October 1983. Mormons for ERA photograph collection, 1977-1983. (P0144). Utah State University. Special Collections & Archives Department.

<sup>60</sup> "ERA Group Pickets Conference," *Salt Lake Tribune*, October 3, 1983. MERA MSS 225, Box 7, Folder 25, USUSCA.

<sup>61</sup> Linda Cicero, "Mormon Money Worked Against Florida's ERA," *Miami Herald*, April 20, 1980. MERA MSS 225, Box 7, Folder 22, USUSCA.

“Mormon Muscle... Members’ funds fought ERA”<sup>62</sup> demonstrate the realization of the Church’s political power. In a recent book scholar J.B. Haws concludes that the ERA significantly damaged the LDS Church’s image. However, the damage did not come as a result of the Church’s treatment of ERA supporters. Rather, the nation became aware and concerned with the Church’s access to political power.<sup>63</sup>

Protesters used sacred spaces under the Priesthood authority such as temples and General Conference as regular places of protest. Inhabiting these spaces brought attention to the male sphere and forced leaders to acknowledge and address protesters. The intersection of the religious and political brought further attention to what many believed was the Church’s overreach of power.

### **Response**

The LDS Church took a non-confrontational approach to protesters. They avoided engaging with the protesters by delaying the sustaining vote at General Conference and moving church meetings. A MERA newsletter in October of 1982 reported that the LDS Church intentionally delayed the sustaining vote at General Conference and asked Church security to attempt to limit public protests.<sup>64</sup> In California, leaders moved regular Sunday meetings to different buildings in order to avoid protesters who chained themselves to a Mormon meeting house in San Diego. The women preemptively obtained bail money from an anonymous donor, hoping they would be arrested. A spokeswoman

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<sup>62</sup> Diane Divoky, “Mormon Church Plays Key Role In Anti-ERA Fight,” *The Sacramento Bee*, April 19, 1980. MERA MSS 225, Box 7, Folder 22, USUSCA.

<sup>63</sup> Haws, 99.

<sup>64</sup> “Mormons for ERA Newsletter.” October 1982. MERA MSS 225, Box 3, Folder 1, USUSCA.

for the group told the *San Diego Tribune* that they “were prepared to fast in jail.”<sup>65</sup> Local leader, Stake President Craig Bullock, did not engage with the women’s protest and believed they only wanted publicity. He tried to avoid the spectacle and moved the meetings to other chapels rather than confront the women.<sup>66</sup>

### **Portrayal**

Chaining themselves to sacred spaces symbolized a connection between the LDS Church and women’s oppression, creating a powerful image of the LDS Church as an oppressor.<sup>67</sup> Media attention and imagery were at the center of MERA’s Equal Rights strategy. MERA protesters portrayed themselves as victims of patriarchy, embraced their criminality, and cast themselves as the liberators of Mormon women. This complicated depiction brought MERA favorable national media coverage while the LDS Church’s political influence was unfavorably portrayed.

MERA embraced their criminal depiction and promoted it throughout their newsletters. In several articles women describe obtaining bail money in case of arrest and MERA President Sonia Johnson describes her “elation” at being arrested.<sup>68</sup> Johnson goes further in her commitment to ERA saying, “Women must be willing to die to gain equal rights.”<sup>69</sup> In their newsletters they discuss the merits of civil disobedience and advocate for its use writing, “civil disobedience is the order of the day for the women’s movement.

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> “Mormons for ERA Newsletter.” January 1981. MERA MSS 225, Box 3, Folder 1, USUSCA.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

We have to give our message to the men in power: you have a formidable enemy.”<sup>70</sup>

Protesters drew upon civil rights methods and esteemed civil disobedience, they were successful at garnering media attention and using the media to champion their cause and place pressure on the LDS Church.

It becomes evident that MERA saw themselves as liberators of oppressed LDS women through their picket signs, and newsletters, which often contain sections asking members to contribute picket sign ideas. One of the ideas shared in the October 1980 newsletter spells LDS vertically with each letter representing a word so the sign reads “**Liberate Demoralized Sisters**”<sup>71</sup>The sentiment that LDS women are demoralized, in need of liberation, and lacking agency becomes a theme in MERA’s writings. A “Mormons Converse” section in the March 1981 newsletter further reveals the way MERA perceived of other Mormon women as disinterested in community and political debates. The rhetorical section begins asking the question, "what do Mormon women do who disagree on the Equal Rights Amendment--or abortion or sex education in schools or rape crisis centers... or any women's issue beyond the best way to make flaky pie crusts?"

--Unfortunately, they do not talk, exchange opinions, or share feelings, what Northern Virginian women do is battle it out in the “outside” local journal.

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<sup>70</sup> “Mormons for ERA Washington Mailer.” 1981. MERA MSS 225, Box 16, Folder 8, USUSCA.

<sup>71</sup> “Mormons for ERA Newsletter.” October 1980. MERA MSS 225, Box 3, Folder 1, USUSCA.

--Perhaps because only one opinion is tolerated “inside” their common culture, the Mormon church?<sup>72</sup>

This exchange portrays the split between Mormon women on the “inside” and those on the “outside.” ERA supporters are characterized as on the “outside” of the Church and those who oppose the ERA and are on the “inside” of the Church. MERA perceived that Mormon women who did not support the ERA only cared about domestic issues such as baking the perfect pie crust. It speaks to the division between those on the “inside” and “outside” of the Mormon community and characterizes the Northern Virginian women at the heart of the campaign as “outside” because of their differing opinions.

The need to free LDS women from their oppressive state is evident in a June 1981 newsletter advertisement encouraging members to sign up as ERA missionaries. The advertisements detail the goals of the mission and end with a plea to “Free Dorothy!!! There are lots of Dorothy’s in Utah. Perhaps we can help to free them--and ourselves.”<sup>73</sup> The idea that women in Utah are less free than LDS women in other parts of the country is further discussed in a “4 women” newsletter when Karen Beard equates her experience visiting Utah to that of a police state with restricted news coverage and increased police surveillance. She writes, “It was wonderful to be able to show our support of our Utah sisters and to give them news of the “outside world,” we took pictures and news clippings of the chaining’s and arrests in Bellevue, Wa. [sic] They saw photos that had been in

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<sup>72</sup> “Mormons for ERA Newsletter.” March 1981. MERA MSS 225, Box 3, Folder 1, USUSCA.

<sup>73</sup> “Mormons for ERA Newsletter.” June 1981. MERA MSS 225, Box 3, Folder 1, USUSCA.

newspapers all over the country but NOT in Utah papers.” She goes on to describe the atmosphere saying, “I knew that the atmosphere would be different in Utah--I expected more hostility than at home - but the restrictions were a surprise. I felt that I was in a police state. The police surveillance was overwhelming”<sup>74</sup>

Through MERA’s discourse in newsletters it becomes evident that they inadvertently assume a patriarchal role freeing the oppressed women of the Church. They discount the agency of LDS women and equate their decisions to blind obedience. In one newsletter they write, “If the man at the head of the Mormon church changed his mind about the ERA tonight every Mormon would be pro-ERA by morning”<sup>75</sup> These exchanges further demonstrate that MERA saw themselves as freeing Mormon women, specifically Mormon women from Utah who cannot think for themselves or make their own decisions. MERA’s leaders resided on the east and west coasts of the United States and saw Utah and the Intermountain West as an area in which they needed to focus their efforts and places that they needed educate.

While MERA portrayed themselves as freeing Mormon women, several national newspapers portrayed MERA as victims of the LDS Church's patriarchy and the LDS Church as overreaching politically. Headlines such as “Mormon Men Call All the Shots” and “Mormonism Swallows you Whole” portray the LDS Church as oppressive, all

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<sup>74</sup> Karen, Beard, “I went to Utah and Was Glad to Come Back to America,” 4 Women Newsletter, June 1981, MERA MSS 225, Box 16, Folder 8, USUSCA.

<sup>75</sup> Mormons for ERA in Washington State Newsletter. MERA MSS 225, Box 16, Folder 8, USUSCA.



encompassing and restrictive.<sup>76</sup> A political cartoon by Shaw McCutcheon appearing in the *Spokesman Review* on December 7, 1979 depicts an older man and a woman dressed in a chador holding a sign that reads “Mormon women for ERA.” The man who is labeled as the “Mormon Church” puts a veil around the woman’s face, leaving only her eyes exposed. The caption along the bottom of the cartoon reads, “Chador veils right here in the U.S.?” This cartoon demonstrates a common portrayal of the LDS Church as oppressive, restrictive, and silencing of Mormon women who support the ERA.<sup>77</sup> As previously stated, headlines such as “Mormon Money Worked Against Florida’s ERA” “how the Mormons helped scuttle ERA,”<sup>78</sup> and “Mormon Muscle... Members’ funds fought ERA”<sup>79</sup> demonstrate the characterization of the LDS Church as having numerous resources and the ability to stop the ERA. The media portrayal of MERA protesters was overwhelmingly positive; they regularly covered events and provided important publicity for their cause. The LDS Church did not have a favorable depiction in the national media, as headlines criticized their political involvement, use of members’ resources, and Church patriarchy.

MERA protesters capitalized on the power of the media to bring attention to their campaign. They portrayed themselves as the victims of the Church’s patriarchy,

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<sup>76</sup> Vera Glaser, “Mormon Men Call All the Shots,” and “Mormonism Swallows you Whole,” *Miami Herald*, January 14, 1980. MERA MSS 225, Box 7, Folder 22, USUSCA.

<sup>77</sup> Shaw McCutcheon, “Chador Veils Right Here in the US?” *Spokesman Review*, December 7, 1979. MERA MSS 225, Box 23, Folder 9, USUSCA.

<sup>78</sup> Linda Cicero, “Mormon Money Worked Against Florida’s ERA,” *Miami Herald*, April 20, 1980. MERA MSS 225, Box 7, Folder 22, USUSCA.

<sup>79</sup> Diane Divoky, “Mormon Church Plays Key Role In Anti-ERA Fight,” *The Sacramento Bee*, April, 19, 1980. MERA MSS 225, Box 7, Folder 22, USUSCA.

embraced their depiction of criminality, and cast themselves as the liberators of Mormon women. The national media favorably covered their events and negatively depicted the Church as overreaching politically.

### **Contemporary LDS Feminist Activism**

On October 4, 2013, *Salt Lake Tribune* writer Peggy Fletcher Stack wrote a column entitled “Where Have All the Mormon Feminists Gone?”<sup>80</sup> Her article stirred up discussion and reflection within the community as people thought about the history of Mormon feminism. Joanna Brooks, author of the book *Mormon Feminism: Essential Writings* wrote a poem as a response to Stack’s article, drawing upon imagery from the 1838 Missouri militia attack on the Mormon settlement of Haun’s Mill. She writes,

“Where Have All the Mormon Feminists Gone?”

The mob came for our writers first,  
For holy books written in milk, blood, tears.

We gathered pages from the dusty streets and ran for the  
cornfields.

Some us are still lying face down in the fields,  
Our damp bodies covering revelations.

Some of us are still hiding in the poplar swamps,  
Shivering in wet clothes, mud in our throats

Some of us vowed not to let them finish their job.  
We set out in dissolving boots, singing, seeking our next  
vision.

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<sup>80</sup> Peggy Fletcher Stack, “Where Have All the Mormon Feminists Gone?” *Salt Lake Tribune*, October 4, 2003.

The authors of the book write that the poet acknowledges the “flight of younger Mormon feminists” but also “affirms Mormon feminists, survival, their strength, and potential for the movement’s resurgence.”<sup>81</sup> Following the defeat of the ERA, Mormon feminist activism became less public, though several LDS scholars continued to publish articles about women and Church history. A resurgence in public protest began in 2012 as women organized internet campaigns to wear pants to Church and a new group emerged calling for Priesthood Ordination for women.<sup>82</sup>

In December of 2012, a group of middle-aged Mormon women began advocating that LDS women wear pants to Church on a specified Sunday. The group writes, “This event is not about being critical of the LDS Church or changing Church policy. We want to emphasize that there is more than one way to be a good Mormon woman and encourage changes in Mormon culture to support that idea.”<sup>83</sup> The event stirred up discussions online, in local neighborhoods, and newspapers. Organizers of the event and participants faced threats, with one Facebook user suggesting women who wear pants should be shot. Others objected to a “demonstration” in sacrament meeting as inappropriate because of the sacredness of the meeting.<sup>84</sup> The vehemence of the response demonstrates the opposition many members feel towards feminist activism and change within the Church. The challenge to tradition and fear that these women would upend the

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<sup>81</sup> Joanna, Brooks. “Where Have All the Mormon Feminists Gone.” Unpublished manuscript (2003).

<sup>82</sup> Joanna Brooks, Rachel Hunt Steenblik, and Hannah Wheelwright. *Mormon Feminism: Essential Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>83</sup> “Our Mission,” Pants to Church, accessed November 30, 2017, <http://pantsochurch.com/home>.

<sup>84</sup> Mason, Patrick Q., and John G. Turner. *Out of Obscurity: Mormonism since 1945*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 249.

structures of the church may have been the cause of the death threats and vehemence from LDS members.

Ordain Women, a group of LDS members that supports the ordination of women to the Priesthood, formed in the spring of 2013. According to their website, their mission is to call attention to gender inequality and to “put ourselves in the public eye and call attention to the need for the ordination of Mormon women to the priesthood. We sincerely ask our leaders to take this matter to the Lord in prayer.”<sup>85</sup> Ordain Women’s ultimate goal of securing Priesthood ordination for women has significant ramifications for women’s power in the Church. All high level leadership positions require priesthood ordination and therefore women cannot attain those positions. Priesthood ordination for women would dramatically change the Church’s administrative structure.

Like MERA, General Conference became a key space of protest for Ordain Women. In October 2013 and April 2014 Ordain Women coordinated efforts to have women attend the all male Priesthood Conference. The Church refused them entrance but did begin streaming the conference on TV so that everyone could watch it, regardless of gender.<sup>86</sup> Seven members of Ordain Women also refused to sustain Church leaders in the April 2015 General Conference. Leaders noted their dissent, but took no formal action.<sup>87</sup> Ordain Women successfully brought about some changes in General Conference when

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<sup>85</sup> “Mission Statement,” Ordain Women, accessed November 30, 2017, <http://ordainwomen.org/mission/>.

<sup>86</sup> Kristen Moulton, “Mormon Women Shut out of All Male Priesthood Meeting,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, October 18, 2013. <http://archive.sltrib.com/article.php?id=56963037&itype=CMSID>

<sup>87</sup> Kristen Moulton, “All is Not Well in Zion’ Says Small Band Who Voted Against Mormon Leaders,” *The Salt Lake Tribune*, April 19, 2015.

they brought attention to the fact that women had not publicly prayed in General Conference. They began a letter writing campaign and leaders answered their requests. In April 2013, Jean A. Stevens gave the opening prayer.<sup>88</sup> In 2014 Kate Kelly was excommunicated from the Church for her advocacy that LDS women receive the Priesthood. Ordain Women continues their work today, although their cause lost momentum following Kelly's excommunication.

Ordain Women successfully drew attention to gender inequality and began a serious discussion about female ordination. Their protests led to women praying in General Conference and a heightened awareness about women's role and participation in Conference leading to changes in meetings, accessibility, and participation but no real changes occurred.

### **Appropriate levels of activism**

Some members of Ordain Women, MERA and other Mormon feminists have faced excommunication as a result of their activism. This begs the question of whether there is an appropriate kind of activism for Mormon women. An analysis of the Church's actions towards activists reveals the Church is uncomfortable with feminism and the idea of women challenging patriarchal authority. There are some historical examples of feminist support, but more recently the Church has consistently opposed feminist activism and refused any major changes in church policy.

In the late 19th and early 20th century, the Church supported women's suffrage, increasing women's political rights, and women entering the workforce. Utah even

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<sup>88</sup> Peggy Fletcher Stack, "First Prayer By Woman Offered At Mormon Conference," *The Salt Lake Tribune*, April 12, 2013.

elected the first woman to the state senate in 1896. This points to previous acceptance of feminist activism when the church sanctioned it. However, as women's sphere has grown in wider US society, their power within the LDS Church has shrunk. Prior to 1970, the Relief Society published their own magazine, managed their own budget, and controlled the Relief Society. In 1970 the Church correlated the Relief Society and they lost a significant amount of their autonomy to male Mormon leaders. The correlation effort was the result of a growing international church and the need to standardize procedures around the globe. Historian Michael Quinn has identified this time period as an important shift in the Mormon view of the Prophet and an increase in Church authority, which is at the heart of the problem activists face today.

MERA and Ordain Women specifically challenged the authority of the Prophet. They questioned the Church's stance on the ERA and female ordination. When the Church opposed the ERA it signaled to Church members that the prophet had received revelation from God on the ERA. Protesting that position challenged the idea that the prophet could receive revelation on political issues and women's roles in the Church. The interpretation of feminism as a threat to authority poses a problem for future activist leaders. It is unclear if there is an appropriate way to question Church leaders' positions on social issues without challenging their religious authority. Similar questions now surround issues of gay marriage, which the Church actively fought in California in 2008. Due to Mormon's understanding of religious authority it is difficult for protesters to challenge Church policies and politics without challenging the authority of Church leaders, making appropriate activism against the Church difficult.

## **Conclusion**

Mormon women have a long history of feminism and political activism. During the fight for the ERA they justified their positions using LDS history and employed aggressive forms of protest in spaces of significance to the LDS Church. MERA portrayed themselves as victims of patriarchy, embraced their criminality, and cast themselves as the liberators of Mormon women. Contemporary Mormon women continue to protest gender policies within the Church through similar methods, and they have had similar experiences. The next chapter will explore the ways protesters asserted their power by re-appropriating LDS hymns, rituals, and language to engage in protest.

## CHAPTER 3

## “COME, COME YE SAINTS, AND PASS THE ERA”

Come, come, ye Saints, and pass the ERA;  
 and with joy come our way.  
 Tho hard to you this journey may appear,  
 great shall be equality.  
 ‘Tis better far for us to strive  
 discrimination for us to drive;  
 Do this, and joy your heart will swell--  
 ERA! ERA!<sup>89</sup>

To most active LDS people, this verse of song will seem oddly familiar with some small changes in words that have big implications for the meaning of the song. This is an example of one verse of the revised lyrics that call for the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment, increased equality for women, and an elimination of discrimination. The original lyrics of the song celebrate the LDS pioneer heritage and the first verse is as follows:

Come, come, ye Saints, no toil or labor fear;  
 But with joy wend your way.  
 Though hard to you this journey may appear,  
 Grace shall be as your day.  
 ‘Tis better far for us to strive  
 Our useless cares from us to drive;  
 Do this, and joy your hearts will swell--  
 All is well! All is well!<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Marty LaBrosse, “Come, Come, ye Saints, and Pass the ERA,” score, Mormons for the ERA, 1977-1983. (COLL MSS 225), Box 19, Folder 10, Special Collections and Archives. Utah State University Merrill-Cazier Library. Logan, Utah. Hereafter the citation will be shortened to USUSCA.

<sup>90</sup> “Come, Come, ye Saints,” *Hymns*, no. 30.



The hymn holds significance for members of the LDS Church and is regularly sung and performed. The hymn's revised version serves as an example of one of the ways Mormons for the ERA (MERA) used symbols, rituals, and the language of their faith to protest the LDS Church's opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment and draw attention to gender discrimination within the Church.

This chapter engages historiographies that argue the LDS Church became more conservative during the 1960s. It draws upon the work of Armand Mauss and Katie Holbrook to examine the conservative shift through Mauss' theories of assimilation and retrenchment and Holbrook's study of Mormon housework and Relief Society curriculum shifts.<sup>91</sup> This chapter builds upon Mauss' theories on retrenchment during the 1960s and adds that retrenchment occurred as a direct reaction to the rise of the New Left in the United States and the women's movement, coupled with the Church's quest to remain distinctive and mark their peculiarity from the world.

MERA used LDS material culture and language to protest against LDS gender norms and highlight power differentials and discrimination in the Church. At this point, feminist and Mormon material culture are relatively unstudied fields. There is some literature on Mormon quilting and canning but there is no research on how Mormon women utilize material culture in protest.<sup>92</sup> The research in this paper begins to fill this

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<sup>91</sup> Armand Mauss, *The Angel and the Beehive: The Mormon Struggle with Assimilation* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994); Kate Holbrook, "Housework: The Problem That Does Have A Name," in *Out of Obscurity: Mormonism since 1945*, ed. Patrick Q. Mason & John G. Turner (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>92</sup> For works discussing LDS and Christian material culture see: Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); David Stanley, ed., *Folklore in Utah* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2004); Eric A. Eliason and Tom

gap and utilizes ephemera within the Mormons for ERA collection at Utah State University, including revised songs, protest buttons, bumper stickers, newspaper clippings, and newsletter articles to understand protest, Mormon women's identity, and the relationship between MERA and the LDS Church. This study begins with an analysis of Mormon women's gender identity and its relation to Mormon material culture. It contextualizes MERA's protest as a reaction to conservative shifts in the LDS Church, explores the ways Mormons prove their commitment to the Church through material culture, examines the ways MERA re-appropriated Mormon material culture to use it as a form of protest, and concludes with a look at contemporary Mormon material culture.

### **Conservative Shift in the LDS Church**

Some historians suggest that the LDS Church became more conservative during the 1960s. Armand Mauss identifies the 1960s as the beginning of a period of retrenchment. He notes changes in the Church's leadership with higher numbers of Church administration coming from within the Church bureaucracy and business, rather than more liberal intellectuals as one possible reason for the conservative shift. He also argues that Church leaders feared the Church was too assimilated with broader cultural trends and no longer contained distinctive qualities.<sup>93</sup>

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Mould, ed., *Latter-Day Lore* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2013). For works on material culture in protest see: Stephanie Foote and Elizabeth Mazzolini, ed., *Histories of the Dustheap: Waste, Material Cultures, Social Justice* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012); Susan E. Reid and David Crowley, ed., *Style and Socialism: Modernity and Material Culture in Postwar Eastern Europe* (Oxford: Berg, 2000); Christina Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005).

<sup>93</sup> Mauss, *The Angel and the Beehive: The Mormon Struggle with Assimilation*, 81-85.

During this time period Church leaders began to emphasize unique Mormon activities such as genealogy and temple work, to claim a distinctive group identity. The Church standardized and promoted new systems of Church education such as Seminary and Institute for high school and college students and correlated its programs including Relief Society, placing it under the control of the Priesthood. The era also saw an renewed emphasis on family life, and traditional nuclear families.<sup>94</sup> Mauss identifies the Church's stance on the ERA as an example of retrenchment and distinctiveness, arguing there was no doctrinal basis for opposing the ERA.<sup>95</sup>

During the 1950s the LDS Church aligned with popular U.S. cultural values that emphasized family and children. When groups started challenging those norms in the 1960s, the Church began emphasizing conservative stances on gender and family. As the LDS Church began shifting conservatively, they reemphasized the family home evening program, published the “For Strength of Youth Pamphlet,” and clarified gender roles through changes in Relief Society lessons, General Conference talks, and the implementation of the Personal Progress Program. As Church members began to embrace these practices they marked themselves as obedient Mormons as they implemented Church programs and used material culture.

In 1964 the Church affirmed the importance of the family as it reemphasized the family home evening program. Joseph F. Smith initially suggested the program in 1915 but the program did not become widespread until President David O. McKay prioritized

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid, 88-99.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid, 117-118.

it in 1964.<sup>96</sup> Following McKays admonition, the Church began publishing family home evening manuals and movies. In a 1975 *Ensign* article James A. Cullimore emphasized the importance of holding regular family home evenings. He began the article with a quote from Prophet Spencer W. Kimball who used language that described the family as under attack and in need of saving. He showed his disapproval of youth culture at the time saying, “The spirit of the times is worldliness. Hoodlumism is common. Supposedly good youth from recognized good families express their revolt in destructive acts. Many defy and resist the law-enforcing officers. Respect for authority, secular, religious, and political, seems to be at a low ebb. Immorality, drug addiction, and general moral and spiritual deterioration seem to be increasing, and the world is in turmoil.” Kimball then explained that faithful Church members were lucky because, “the Lord has offered his ageless program in new dress and it gives promise to return the world to sane living, to true family life, family interdependence.” The sentiment that the family is under attack from the world is popular in LDS language and serves as a rallying cry that encourages LDS members to turn inward towards the Church for strength and away from outside sources. The idea that the family is under attack provides a platform for Church leaders and members to fight against the changing culture that challenged authority and gender roles.

Historian Katie Holbrook discusses the Church’s shifting stance on gender roles through an exploration of Relief Society housework curriculum. Holbrook explains that prior to the 1970s, the Church stance on women’s roles largely paralleled the wider

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid, 93; “100 Years of Family Home Evening” *Ensign*, April 2015, <https://www.lds.org/ensign/2015/04/100-years-of-family-home-evening?lang=eng>.

culture. During the 1970s, however, the rhetoric on women and home diverged and expanded to become all encompassing and strictly feminine.<sup>97</sup> Holbrook identifies the tone of Relief Society lessons in the early 1960s as “pragmatic.” Lessons taught women how to approach housework in a professional way and were written by highly educated women. They approached housework as an occupation and referred to women as “home managers,” citing research from the field of home economics. The lessons had a byline and could be attributed to a single author.

In the late 1960s, Relief Society lessons began to change, gradually acquiring a romantic tone discussing housework. They were no longer written by professional women and were instead written by a committee. The lessons no longer had a byline and therefore were interpreted as coming from the institutional Church.<sup>98</sup> These lessons linked gender and housework and used a new romanticized name--homemaking. Holbrook explains that the new title “provided a justification for housework as it made explicit the link between cooking, cleaning, and the development of feminine attributes with nurturing husbands and children. Work was gender-neutral and grounded in practical considerations. Homemaking was romantically feminine.”<sup>99</sup> The shift in content is seen in the 1970s lesson preview published in the Relief Society Magazine, which expands homemaking beyond cooking and cleaning to include grooming, modesty, and daily exercise:

“The woman who devotes her talents to being a creative homemaker and a lovely wife and mother is making an unmatched contribution to society. In

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<sup>97</sup> Holbrook, 213.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid, 208-209.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid, 211.

a world where young people are confused and uncertain, mothers must set the example of poise, loveliness, and level-headedness and stability. In our course of study for this year we will give specific helps in good grooming, modesty in dress, and the importance of daily exercise. We will discuss the blessings that come to a woman and her family by her having right attitudes, improving her mind, watching her speech, and developing a pleasing personality--all factors in molding "A Lovelier You."<sup>100</sup>

The lesson preview references the changing world dynamics and the increasing importance of women maintaining their proper place. When compared with the 1960 lesson preview, which took a professional caregiver approach to caring for the sick in your home, it becomes increasingly evident that the new lessons emphasized homemaking as all-encompassing and specifically feminine.<sup>101</sup> Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the Church emphasized women's place in the home through the changing Relief Society Curriculum and General Conference Addresses that emphasized specific kinds of women's roles.

At the height of the fight for ERA, in October 1981, President Ezra Taft Benson gave a talk to women entitled "The Honored Place of Women." In the talk he described a woman's proper place as in the home. Benson refers to the voices of the world as "beguiling" and promoting "alternative life-styles" for women" including careers over marriage and motherhood. He goes on to say, "These individuals spread their discontent by the propaganda that there are more exciting and self-fulfilling roles for women than homemaking. Some even have been bold to suggest that the Church move away from the "Mormon woman stereotype" of homemaking and rearing children. They also say it is wise to limit your family so you can have more time for personal goals and self-

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid, 211.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid, 211.

fulfillment.”<sup>102</sup> This address demonstrates the views held by Church leadership on women and their roles. Women are to remain in the home, not pursue careers or limit family size, and should place their personal goals aside in order to raise a family. The language in the talk discusses women who chose to have a career or limit family size as less righteous and not following God's plan for them. He suggests women who do not embrace their role as a homemaker should pray diligently for help to increase their enjoyment and satisfaction with the tasks. Talks such as these isolated women who worked outside the home, were childless, did not find satisfaction in homemaking, or supported the ERA and increasing women's opportunities. The talk implies if you are not a homemaker satisfied with your position you are not a good Mormon woman.

The Church's conservative shift extended to new youth programs that emphasized family and gender roles. In 1965 the Church published the “For The Strength of Youth Pamphlet” which gave advice to LDS youth regarding dress, grooming, dating, dancing, and clean living. The pamphlet advises the youth to be careful in their dress and gives specific clothing standards for both men and women. It advises both to maintain a modest, clean appearance and avoid tight clothing. The pamphlet does discuss women's dress standards more specifically and advises against strapless dresses, and immodest bathing suits.<sup>103</sup> However, it does not discuss modesty in relation to sexuality. Young women are not advised to be modest to protect the young men of the Church--as they are

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<sup>102</sup> Ezra Taft Benson, “The Honored Place of Women,” *Ensign*, October 1981. <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/1981/10/the-honored-place-of-woman?lang=eng>. Accessed February 14, 2018.

<sup>103</sup> The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *For the Strength of Youth* (Salt Lake City, Utah 1965).

in later Church teachings. These pamphlets, which emphasize clothing, dancing, and grooming habits are a reaction to the youth culture of the 1960s and serve as an example of the Church's increasingly conservative stance and suspicion of larger cultural trends.

The Personal Progress program offers another example of the way the Church worked to teach LDS youth principles and proper gender roles. Personal Progress was introduced in 1977 and was specifically developed for LDS young women ages 12-18. During these years young women were encouraged to set goals and develop new skills in six areas: Spiritual Awareness, Service and Compassion, Homemaking Arts, Recreation and the World of Nature, Cultural Arts and Education, and Personal and Social Refinement. Each section begins with the words, "an ideal Latter-day Saint young woman" and then proceeds to outline the tasks and suggested goals young women should accomplish.<sup>104</sup> The implication of the program and the language suggests there are certain actions and skills a Latter-day Saint young woman should possess. Many of the skills are preparatory skills to prepare her for her future as a wife and mother. For example, the homemaking arts section specifies, "an ideal Latter-day Saint young woman makes any home a better place because she is there. As a loving sister and daughter, she does all that she can to make her home beautiful and to fill it with harmony and love. She is thoughtful and courteous to those who live and visit in her home. She learns to use the homemaking arts to make life more pleasant for those with whom she lives and to

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<sup>104</sup> The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *Young Women Personal Progress*, (Salt Lake City, Utah 1981), 10-11.



prepare for the time when she will create her own home.”<sup>105</sup> If a young woman completes the Personal Progress program she is awarded a necklace to wear, which serves as a testament of her commitment to become an ideal LDS woman.

Family home evening, general conference talks emphasizing gender, and youth programs focused on counteracting popular youth culture and emphasizing gender roles demonstrate the Church’s increasingly conservative stance and reaction to the New Left. All of these programs regulate behavior, and define limits of acceptable lifestyles for LDS members who demonstrate their commitment to the Church through implementing family home evening on Monday nights, and adhering to prescribed gender roles and for LDS women to remain in the home and have children.

### **Proving Commitment to Church**

As the Church became increasingly conservative and emphasized their peculiarities, it became important for members to mark themselves and prove their righteousness and commitment to the Church. Historian Colleen McDannell explains that within the LDS Church actions are more important than beliefs and the Church “stresses the importance of appropriate behavior in defining the committed believer.”<sup>106</sup> For Latter-day Saints it is not enough to believe in the doctrines of the Church, they must take actions to demonstrate their beliefs. Neil Young argues that in the 1970s some LDS women proved their commitment to the Church by fighting against the ERA. He writes, “Mormon women outwardly revealed to each other their internal acceptance of the

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<sup>105</sup> The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *Young Women Personal Progress*, (Salt Lake City, Utah 1981), 10-11.

<sup>106</sup> McDannell, 205.

Church's teachings about proper gender roles, male-female relations, and the submission of women. Like Puritans eager to show each other that they belonged in the community of the elect, Mormon women battled the ERA to prove to their Church, their co-religionists, and themselves that they embodied Mormonism's most fundamental beliefs."<sup>107</sup> Mormon women proved their commitment to the Church through support of the Church's stance on ERA, but also by embracing the conservative shift in the Church which focused on families, gender roles, and emphasized Mormon peculiarities through religious material culture.

The importance of materially marking a LDS member's commitment to the Church and creating distinctiveness is evident in the Church's emphasis on religious themed home decor and the creation of LDS pieces of jewelry such as the CTR ring and young women's medallion. Several *Ensign* articles suggest the importance of religious themed home decor in teaching children and solidifying their commitment to the Church. One *Ensign* article tells the story of one mother and her three sons, none of whom served an LDS mission and instead joined the Navy. The perplexed mother discussed the situation with her Bishop who, after visiting her home and viewing a large painting of a ship at sea concluded, "There is your reason... As your sons have grown up, you have told them every day through this painting of the romance and adventure of the sea. You have taught them well. No wonder they all joined the navy."<sup>108</sup> Dr. Maryon states, "the

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<sup>107</sup> Young, "The ERA Is a Moral Issue: The Mormon Church, LDS Women, and the Defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment," 625.

<sup>108</sup> Ed Maryon, "Look at Your Walls. What Do You See?" December 1973. <https://www.lds.org/ensign/1973/12/look-at-your-walls-what-do-you-see?lang=eng>. Accessed February 14, 2018.

message of this true story is obvious. Our home environment--specifically, visual images in the home--has an impact on our lives.”<sup>109</sup> Dr. Maryon continues to provide further advice for Latter-day Saints. He suggests that Church members adorn their homes with religious paintings and applauds the increase in “Mormon oriented art.” He also suggests displaying images of a family’s heritage or cultural objects and family photos that build a feeling of “unity” in the home.<sup>110</sup> One step into a Mormon household demonstrates members’ obedience to this advice. Mormon homes are often adorned with religious artwork displaying LDS temples, Christ, and scriptures.

The Church made religious art accessible through a Gospel-In-Art program in which members could pay \$1.00 for large home prints. The inexpensive cost and accessibility of these prints suggest they were widely displayed in LDS homes and increased religious themed decorating practices.<sup>111</sup> Church members have continued to follow the advice of Church leaders and many display the Church’s “Proclamation to the Family” in their homes.<sup>112</sup> President Spencer W. Kimball further advised parents to place a picture of the temple in every bedroom in their house “so the [child] from the time he is an infant could look at the picture every day and it becomes a part of his life. When he

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<sup>109</sup> Ed Maryon, “Look at Your Walls. What Do You See?” December 1973. <https://www.lds.org/ensign/1973/12/look-at-your-walls-what-do-you-see?lang=eng>. Accessed February 14, 2018.

<sup>110</sup> Ed Maryon, “Look at Your Walls. What Do You See?” December 1973. <https://www.lds.org/ensign/1973/12/look-at-your-walls-what-do-you-see?lang=eng>. Accessed February 14, 2018.

<sup>111</sup> “Announcing the Ensign Gospel-In-Art Program,” December 1973. <https://www.lds.org/ensign/1973/12/announcing-the-ensign-gospel-in-art-program?lang=eng>. Accessed February 14, 2018.

<sup>112</sup> Julie B. Beck. “Teaching the Doctrine of the Family,” March 2011. <https://www.lds.org/ensign/2011/03/teaching-the-doctrine-of-the-family?lang=eng>. Accessed February 14, 2018.

reaches the age that he needs to make this very important decision, it will already have been made.” This advice is regularly quoted in Church lessons and talks and has become part of LDS culture.<sup>113</sup> Contemporary LDS homes are filled with images of local temples, Christ, “The Proclamation of the Family,” and scripture references.

Displaying religious artwork became a way for Mormon women to demonstrate their commitment to following the counsel of Church leaders and their efforts to raise children committed to gospel teachings.<sup>114</sup> The author of the *Ensign* article discussing the religious art program urges readers, “Begin now to display in your home artwork that says something about your most cherished convictions!”<sup>115</sup> Not only was religious art a way to teach children, but it was also a way to prove personal and family commitment to the Church. It served as a way for Church members to demonstrate their distinctiveness from non-LDS homes.

During the 1970s the Church began creating wearable jewelry for members. The Primary General Board designed the CTR ring to serve as a reminder to primary children to “Choose the Right.” The rings became widely popular for children and adults and are now available around the world in over 40 languages.<sup>116</sup> Wearing the ring visibly marks a

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<sup>113</sup> Quoted in Vicki Phillips Casto, “Setting Their Sights on the Temple,” September 2011. [https://www.lds.org/ensign/2011/09/setting-their-sights-on-the-temple?lang=eng#footnote2-09609\\_000\\_010](https://www.lds.org/ensign/2011/09/setting-their-sights-on-the-temple?lang=eng#footnote2-09609_000_010). Accessed February 14, 2018.

<sup>114</sup> Rebecca Andersen, “Between Mountain and Lake: An Urban Mormon Country” Ph.D. diss., Arizona State University, 2015, 201-202.

<sup>115</sup> “Announcing the Ensign Gospel-In-Art Program,” December 1973. <https://www.lds.org/ensign/1973/12/announcing-the-ensign-gospel-in-art-program?lang=eng>. Accessed February 14, 2018.

<sup>116</sup> Vern Anderson, “CTR Ring Grows into Symbol of LDS Culture” *Deseret News*, May 31, 1997, Accessed February 26, 2018, <https://www.deseretnews.com/article/563527/CTR-ring-grows-into-symbol-of-LDS-culture.html>.

person's Church membership and desire to abide by Church teachings. The introduction of the Personal Progress program in 1977 also led to the creation of the first Young Womanhood Medallion, a necklace young women are given upon completion of the Personal Progress program.<sup>117</sup> The necklace serves as another signal that a young woman is committed and striving to follow the Church's beliefs. CTR rings and the Young Womanhood Medallion serve as a marker to other LDS members that the individual wearing the jewelry is committed to their faith and striving to embody its teachings. Both remain prominent features of LDS material culture today.

Contemporary LDS members continue to demonstrate their commitment to Mormonism through home decor featuring Temples, pictures of Christ and "The Proclamation of the Family." They use LDS-specific language on social media and blogs utilizing hashtags that symbolize their worthiness and commitment to the Church. Popular hashtags include #foreverfamily, #eternity, #CTR, and #LDSconference. They further mark their worthiness and demonstrate their commitment to purity through wedding invitations that announce the couples impending marriage in the temple. The majority of wedding invitees are not invited to the ceremony in the Temple, which only Church members with a Temple recommend from their bishop can attend. The practice is a cultural one that demonstrates to the larger community that the couple has met the requirements for temple marriage.

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<sup>117</sup> "Young Women's Timeline," Mormon Women's Studies Resource, last modified April 6, 2018, accessed February 26, 2018, <https://sites.lib.byu.edu/mormonwomen/young-womens-portal/young-women-timeline/>.

These subcultural markers that mark LDS members through outward displays also create avenues for protesters to utilize the same materials to demonstrate against the Church. MERA embraced this strategy and modified Church hymns, rituals, and language to protest against the LDS Church, highlight power differentials, and discrimination.

### **“Angry Anthems”**

MERA newsletters and papers reveal the group changed the words to LDS hymns, calling them “Angry Anthems” and wrote their own versions calling for equality and an end to discrimination. It is unknown how many hymns were altered but one newsletter advertises the sale of MERA singer Cheryl Dalton’s tapes of her original songs as well as others she has adapted, suggesting a demand for the material.<sup>118</sup> The MERA collection does have a copy of a MERA newsletter and score of their version of “Come, Come Ye Saints” and “Battle Hymn of the Republic.”

“Come, Come ye Saints” is a historically significant hymns to LDS members. It describes the group’s pioneer heritage and their trek west after persecution. William Clayton wrote the original hymn which opening verse is as follows:

Come, come, ye Saints, no toil or labor fear;  
 But with joy wend your way.  
 Though hard to you this journey may appear,  
 Grace shall be as your day.  
 ‘Tis better far for us to strive  
 Our useless cares from us to drive;  
 Do this, and joy your hearts will swell--  
 All is well! All is well!<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> “Mormons for ERA Newsletter.” April 1982. MERA MSS 225, Box 3, Folder 1, USUSCA.

<sup>119</sup> “Come, Come, ye Saints,” *Hymns*, no. 30.

MERA altered the words, inserting a call to pass the ERA, increase equality, and drive out discrimination:

Come, come, ye Saints, and pass the ERA;  
and with joy come our way.  
Tho hard to you this journey may appear,  
great shall be equality.  
'Tis better far for us to strive  
discrimination for us to drive;  
Do this, and joy your heart will swell--  
ERA! ERA!<sup>120</sup>

MERA's alteration to the words of the song are significant due to the beloved nature of the hymn and its meaning to the community. This surely would have been considered sacrilegious and orthodox Mormons likely took offense to the practice. The altered hymn calls for equality and to pass the ERA, but the tone of the song is not one of anger and hostility. In contrast, the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" hymn alteration takes a tone of anger. This hymn was widely used throughout the national women's movement, and MERA likely published the words in their newsletters because the hymn would have resonated with their Mormon audience, one that regularly sings the original hymn in church meetings. The hymn uses strong imagery and language with words such as "rage" "smoldering" "burning" and "prisoners" and the first verse of the song reads:

"Battle Hymn of Women"  
Mine eyes have seen the glory of the flame of women's rage  
Smoldering for centuries, now burning in this age  
We no longer will be prisoners in the same old gilded cage,  
That's why we're marching on.

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<sup>120</sup> Marty LaBrosse, "Come, Come, ye Saints, and Pass the ERA," score, Mormons for the ERA, 1977-1983. MERA MSS 225, Box 19, Folder 10, USUSCA.

Chorus: Move on over or we'll move on over you  
 Move on over or we'll move on over you  
 Move on over or we'll move on over you  
 For women's time has come<sup>121</sup>

The reader can feel the anger emanating from the verses. The additional verses of the song discuss women “speaking softly,” not being paid for their home labor, and doing all the household cooking and the cleaning. The last line again emphasizes their anger and reads:

Our anger eats into us, we'll no longer bow to kings  
 That's why we're marching on.<sup>122</sup>

MERA's choice to alter and adapt religious songs serves as a reminder that their protest was both political and religious.

### **Fasting for Justice**

MERA utilized religious rituals such as fasting and missionary work for the purpose of promoting and drawing attention to the ERA. In May and June of 1982 seven women, three of whom came from Mormon backgrounds, fasted for 37 days. The fast had long been part of the larger feminist movement, and recalled the practice of fasting and hunger strikes during the struggle for the 19th Amendment. However, this was specifically a fast that called upon a higher power for help in the fight for ratification. In a statement issued on the first day of the fast the women asserted, “We hope the spiritual energy and enlightenment we generate will ultimately free both the oppressed and the

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<sup>121</sup> “Battle Hymn of the Republic” MERA Newsletter April 1982. MERA MSS 225, Box 19, Folder 10, USUSCA.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.



oppressors from the cycle of injustice in which we have both been bound.”<sup>123</sup> These women were using fasting as a method of focusing their faith and calling upon a higher power who they believed would help them in their quest for equality and ERA ratification. ERA supporters also drew upon religious rituals such as missionary work in an effort to promote their cause.

In the spring of 1981 ERA missionaries began targeting the Salt Lake Valley seeking to “convert” residents to support ratification of the amendment. The missionaries patterned themselves after the LDS Church’s program and traveled in twos wearing professional dress and knocking on resident’s doors with the hope of sharing their message. The National Organization for Women (NOW) explained that their aim was to “expose the church hierarchy’s political involvement in opposing constitutional equality for women.”<sup>124</sup> ERA missionaries were part of a national campaign and not strictly a MERA initiative. In the call for missionaries NOW makes it very clear this protest technique directly targets the LDS Church. They write:

We propose to focus our first project of non-violent protest on one major institution, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormon) - a religious establishment, a political force, and a multi-billion dollar empire which is systematically blocking ERA ratification in several states including Utah, Nevada, Arizona, Missouri, Virginia and Florida. The Mormon church has officially and actively opposed ERA ratification and the extension and has fought for recession. Therefore, it is time to bring the ERA campaign home to the Mormon Church and to Utah. Each year, the Mormon hierarchy sends male missionaries across the world to preach its word. We must send feminist missionaries to Utah.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> “Women’s Fast for Justice” MERA Newsletter 1982. MERA MSS 225, Box 3, Folder 1, USUSCA.

<sup>124</sup> George Raine, “Equal Rights Missionaries in Mormon Country,” *New York Times*, MERA MSS 225, Box 19, Folder 10, USUSCA.

<sup>125</sup> “ERA: Call to Mission,” MERA MSS 225, Box 16, Folder 2, USUSCA.

NOW published stories from the missionaries who viewed the protest technique as a great success.<sup>126</sup> Local newspapers printed headlines using LDS language such as “NOW Missionaries Begin Utah Tracting Today.”<sup>127</sup>

Fasting and missionary work are not strictly male rituals in the LDS faith. They are open to both men’s and women’s participation. However, the Church primarily sees missionary work as a male priesthood responsibility. Women are able to serve missions, but at that time were not able to do so until the age of twenty-one, and it is not considered one of their responsibilities. MERA participation in missionary efforts serves as an example of how activists directly entered the male sphere and fulfilled a role that is typically reserved for LDS men.

### **“Latter-day Suffragists”**

MERA altered the language of the LDS Church and used it for their own purposes in advancing equality for women. They prominently displayed their “Mormonness” and promoted their connection with the LDS Church through protest buttons, bumper stickers, and a column in their newsletter. MERA strategically used popular phrases from the Church for their own purposes. For example, they altered the popular LDS acronym for “Latter-day Saint” to instead stand for “Latter-day Suffragist.”<sup>128</sup> Bumper stickers promoting the cause read “Another Mormon for ERA.”<sup>129</sup> And the group’s name

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<sup>126</sup> “Reflections from ERA Missionaries,” MERA MSS 225, Box 16, Folder 2, USUSCA.

<sup>127</sup> “Now Missionaries Begin Utah Tracting Today” *The Herald*, May 4, 1981. MERA MSS 225, Box 16, Folder 2, USUSCA.

<sup>128</sup> “Latter-day Suffragist,” Protest Button, MERA MSS 225, Box 24, USUSCA.

<sup>129</sup> “Another Mormon for ERA,” Bumper sticker, MERA MSS 225, Box 19, Folder 10, USUSCA.

“Mormons for ERA” was promoted on t-shirts participants wore to rallies.”<sup>130</sup> MERA placed their Church membership at the forefront of their protest materials. They wanted to be associated with the LDS Church and demonstrate that they could be “good Mormons” and support the ERA. Re-appropriating church material for their protests also served as a way for Mormon women to assert power in a religion dominated by men. In their sphere of protest, they were the leaders and they could choose how they interpreted and used LDS language, rituals, and hymns. Using this form of protest served as a powerful way for LDS women to claim elements of their culture as their own.

MERA used a popular LDS phrase “exalted” to highlight power differentials and gender discrimination within the Church. Their newsletter regularly published a column entitled “We’re so exalted that.” The column provided a space for readers to contribute to the newsletter about experiences where they felt they were not able to fully participate in church activities due to their “exalted status” based on their gender. Johnson explains that, “Where equality does not even pertain, the word “exalted” is a mockery. One wonders if the leaders of the Church would gladly exchange their sex and become so exalted.”<sup>131</sup> Johnson offers several examples of Mormon women’s exalted status such as their inability to pray in sacrament meeting, publish their own magazine, manage the Relief Society budget, and stand in the circle of baby blessings to name a few of her examples.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> “Twentieth Anniversary of Martin Luther King March.” August 27, 1983. MERA PO144, Box 1, Folder 17, USUSCA.

<sup>131</sup> “Mormons for ERA Newsletter.” August 1980. MERA MSS 225, Box 3, Folder 1, USUSCA.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

The newsletter regularly published a column of readers' submissions about how they experienced their "exalted" status. Several describe church leaders position on dress as an example of their exalted status. One reader described Sunday dress at girl's camp, writing, "Church leaders in one stake have mandated "proper attire" on Sunday at Girls Camp. They require dresses to be worn in the high brush and thick dust of camp for the entire day on Sunday. Regarding this bylaw from the brethren, one woman wrote in frustration, "my question is whether they have worn a dress for an entire day, much less in a camping situation."<sup>133</sup> Another from Utah writes, "For the first time in the history of Brigham Young University, the dress code was changed to allow women students to wear denims on campus. The change did NOT come about because the Mormon Church Board of Directors decided to give women the same rights with men, who have been allowed to wear denim jeans to classes for years. Instead, the change became necessary ONLY because "it became difficult to sort the difference between jeans and slacks," as told the *LA Times* by the director of university standards.<sup>134</sup> Another contributor from California laments the discrepancy in how the Church views divorced men and women in the Church. They write, "A couple of years ago, a single divorced woman in my ward expressed an interest in working in the Young Women's organization. She is a junior high school teacher, and so is accustomed to working with young people. She was told that she could not work with the young women, however, because she was not a "proper role model" Just a few weeks ago, a single divorced man in my ward was called to be the

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<sup>133</sup> "Mormons for ERA Newsletter." January 1982. MERA MSS 225, Box 3, Folder 1, USUSCA.

<sup>134</sup> "Mormons for ERA Newsletter." April 1982. MERA MSS 225, Box 3, Folder 1, USUSCA.

Young Men's Mutual President."<sup>135</sup> These examples are a sampling of the ways MERA contributors saw gender discrimination in the Church.

In response, MERA inhabited the male sphere as they altered religious hymns, rituals and language for their own purposes. Their re-appropriation of church materials served as a way of protesting the patriarchy of the Church. In this way MERA reclaimed and repurposed their religion to meet their needs and serve a cause they supported.

### **Contemporary Mormon Material Culture**

Contemporary Mormon women continue to express their gendered identity through material culture. Canning and quilting are still elements of Mormon material culture, however other practices such as decor, jewelry making, and handicrafts are more popular among younger women. Some of the conservative trends of the 1970s and 1980s are still apparent today. For example, if one Googles "LDS décor," you will find pages of results for home decor incorporating important LDS scripture phrases, and quotes. Many Mormon women today are profiting from their material culture through websites such as Etsy, which provide a platform for women to sell their handicrafts and make additional income.

Mormon women also highlight their lifestyle and culture through popular housewife blogs, which have become a kind of internet phenomenon. Journalist Emily Matchar wrote an interesting article and book in which she investigates Mormon

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<sup>135</sup> "Mormons for ERA Newsletter." January 1982. MERA MSS 225, Box 3, Folder 1, USUSCA.

housewife blogs and “New Domesticity.” Matchar defines New Domesticity as “the re-embrace of home and hearth by those who have the means to reject these things.”<sup>136</sup>

She reveals that for many Mormon women, connecting with New Domesticity is a way for them to connect with their pioneer heritage and Mormon history. For one woman, Amy, domesticity and a culture of “do it yourself” is a spiritual calling which she argues church teachings doctrinally support.<sup>137</sup>

Material culture is an important part of the Mormon community and forms a crucial part of some Mormon women’s identity. Sharing religious beliefs through home decor, jewelry, and blogging allow women to express their religion in a distinctly female way. It also provides opportunities for protesters to re-appropriate material culture for their own uses. At this time there is no evidence that other LDS feminist groups such as Ordain Women use Mormon material culture as a method of protest.

## **Conclusion**

The 1960s mark a significant decade of transition for the LDS Church, which began to shift conservatively and highlight its distinctiveness. During the 1960s, 70s, and 80s the Church developed new programs to combat the pressures of mainstream American culture and emphasize the family and traditional gender roles through the institution of the Family Home Evening Program, codes of conduct for youth in “The Strength of Youth” pamphlet, and the Personal Progress Program. During this period, church members sought to demonstrate their commitment to the faith through their

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<sup>136</sup> Emily Matchar, *Homeward Bound: Why Americans are Embracing the New Domesticity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013), 12.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid*, 224.

opposition to the ratification of the ERA and emphasize their commitment to the Church through the proliferation of religious themed home decor and LDS jewelry. MERA protested against this conservative shift and re-appropriated LDS songs, rituals, and language to demonstrate their opposition to the LDS Church's position on the ERA. The next chapter will discuss the consequences these protesters faced as a result of their activism.

## CHAPTER 4

## “THROWING THE FIRST STONE”

Talking, whispering behind my back.  
 I sit down to play the organ.  
 As I play I am totally aware of every move I make.  
 The words I sing come out  
 Stiffly, I feel like I'm going to choke.  
 I'm not at all at home.

I walk out of the stake center  
 Slowly thinking.  
 I feel a sinking feeling.  
 I know that ERA is right.  
 I wish Bishop Willis would see the light.

I glance at the dreaded letter.  
 I felt that it would happen all along.  
 Father, Mother, I am still your child.  
 Is my family still sealed together  
 For all eternity?  
 Father, mother, give me strength<sup>138</sup>

This poem illustrates some of the consequences Mormon supporters of the ERA faced as a result of their activism. Some were excommunicated, others lost their temple recommends or callings, and many faced less public consequences in the form of ostracism from ward members and family. Dissenters faced these consequences due to a strong, subcultural Mormon identity that did not allow room for dissent. The ERA became a test of religious commitment.

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<sup>138</sup> Melissa Ann Sillito, “Whispers,” December 1979. Mormons for the ERA, 1977-1983. (COLL MSS 225), Box 19, Folder 16, Special Collections and Archives. Utah State University Merrill-Cazier Library. Logan, Utah. Hereafter the citation will be shortened to USUSCA.



Scholars have grappled with understanding Mormonism as a distinct culture. Early researchers considered classifying Mormons as an ethnic group and *The Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups* actually included an entry for Mormons.<sup>139</sup> However, recent scholarship tends to agree that Mormons do not qualify as an ethnic group and instead explains Mormons' distinctiveness as having a strong subcultural identity, which explains the group's cohesiveness and the tension that arises when members object to the Church's stance on issues such as the ERA.<sup>140</sup>

This chapter argues that Mormons for the ERA activists faced severe institutional and social consequences due to Mormonism's strong subcultural identity, and the ERA becoming a test of religious commitment. At this time there is not a study on Mormons that explains the consequences of dissent for a large group rather than the individual. This chapter adds to the current historiography of dissent by contributing a case study of a group of objectors and draws upon the literature that classifies Mormons as a subcultural identity. This research evaluates the interaction and social impact between the LDS Church and Mormons for ERA. It employs MERA newsletters, newspapers, and published oral histories to understand how the Church framed the ERA as a test of religious commitment and to identify the consequences ERA supporters faced due to their political stance.

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<sup>139</sup> Dean L. May, "Mormons" In *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*, ed. Stephan Thernstrom (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1980). 720-731.

<sup>140</sup> Thomas F. O'Dea, *The Mormons* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957); Laurence Moore, *Religious Outsiders and the Making of Americans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Mauss, *The Angel and the Beehive: The Mormon Struggle with Assimilation*; Campbell, Green and Monson, *Seeking the Promised Land: Mormons and American Politics*.

This chapter begins with an explanation of Mormon subcultural identity and describes how this identity heightened consequences for dissenters. It will then examine how the ERA became a test of religious commitment where dissenters became classified as “other” and their commitment to the faith came into question. It concludes with an analysis of the ostracism and consequences ERA supporters faced from the institutional Church and church members.

### **Subcultural Identity**

In the book *Seeking the Promised Land: Mormons and American Politics*, authors David E. Campbell, John C. Green and J. Quin Monson apply a previous theory of evangelical subcultural identity to Mormonism.<sup>141</sup> They define subcultural identity as referring “to a group, religious or otherwise, that combines points of contact with as well as points of distinction from, the broader culture.”<sup>142</sup> They identify elements of subcultural identity as having high solidarity with one another, tension with outsiders, and their own subcultural institutions.

Campbell and colleagues find that when compared to other religious groups, Mormons show an unusual amount of “cohesiveness and uniformity” in beliefs, creating a high level of solidarity with one another socially and religiously.<sup>143</sup> Mormons have developed points of distinction or tension from non-Mormons through their religious health code, the Word of Wisdom, and their beliefs about sexuality and modesty. These

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<sup>141</sup> Christian Smith, Michael Emerson, Sally Gallagher, Paul Kennedy, and David Sikkink, *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

<sup>142</sup> Campbell, Green and Monson, 30.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid*, 49.

beliefs mark them as different from larger western society and serve as a marker for faithful Mormons. Armand L. Mauss supports this idea, writing that “Mormons have felt the need since the sixties to reach ever more deeply into their bag of cultural peculiarities to find either symbolic or actual traits that will help them mark their subcultural boundaries and thus their very identity as a special people.”<sup>144</sup> Mormons have also developed their own institutions through a church-sponsored university, bookstores, movies, music, and matchmaking websites where they can meet others of the same religion.<sup>145</sup> This research applies the concept of a subcultural identity to explain the tension between the LDS Church and Mormons for the ERA. The ERA served as a way for the Church to distinguish itself from wider American culture and draw distinctions between their view of the family and gender roles.

### **A Test of Religious Commitment**

Neil J. Young argues that the ERA became a test of religious commitment for Mormons and a way for Mormon women to “prove to their church, their co-religionists, and themselves that they embodied Mormonism’s most fundamental beliefs.”<sup>146</sup> Those who supported the passage of the ERA were classified as “other” and their commitment to the Church was called into question. The ERA split Mormons between those deemed good and obedient versus the bad, disobedient, not real Mormons.

One visual representation in a MERA newsletter entitled “Mormons on a Continuum, Where do you fit?” attempts to provide members a scale to measure their

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<sup>144</sup> Mauss, *The Angel and the Beehive: The Mormon Struggle with Assimilation*, 77.

<sup>145</sup> Campbell, Green, and Monson, 32.

<sup>146</sup> Young, “The ERA Is a Moral Issue: The Mormon Church, LDS Women, and the Defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment,” 625.

ERA support compared to the larger church. The scale is numbered one through eight with number one not supporting the ERA and number eight supporting the ERA. Between numbers seven through eight is a line illustrating that numbers one through seven can remain in the Church, but also illustrating that there is a point at which ERA supporters may not be able to remain in the Church. Underneath the image the author explains that the Church creates a “false polarization of any moral issue by declaring--through the Prophet, apostle, mission president, bishop, etc.--the Lord’s side.” The author goes on to explain that “the further a church member’s beliefs stray from the Lord’s opinion the further they are estranged from true believers.” They go on to say “Thus, the closer a woman gets to calling herself a “feminist,” the closer she gets to the outside edge of the system.” According to the continuum, those in the 4-6 range are tentatively questioning and those in the 7-8 range confront church policies about woman’s place.<sup>147</sup> There seems to be some awareness of a range of options, and that it is not strictly a black and white issue. The implication of this visual attests to the dichotomy within the church and demonstrates that ERA supporters questioned whether they could remain in the church and support the ERA. It is interesting that MERA perceives that the thing that will push someone closer to the outside of the church is calling themselves a “feminist.” This could be because women who consider themselves feminist might no longer feel comfortable in a patriarchal church where women are unable to attain the highest leadership positions based on their gender. They might also consider feminist women as close to the outside of the church because of the way that the church perceives feminists

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<sup>147</sup> “Mormons on a Continuum, Where do you fit?” MERA Newsletter, March 1981, MERA MSS 225, Box 3, Folder 1, USUSCA.

as attacking the church and its policies. The church says, however, that belief is not a reason for excommunication but action against the church itself is.

A letter from a General Authority confronts this dilemma and suggests ERA supporters are not able to maintain their position within the LDS church. In a letter to Teddie Wood, a MERA founder, General Authority Harman Rector Jr., accused Wood of not being a true Mormon. He writes, "The Lord has spoken through his Prophet Spencer W. Kimball. If you are really serious about being a Mormon, you will sustain the Prophet. ... So far as I am concerned--you are not a 'Mormon' and should'nt (sic) make pretenses that you are--certainly you don't represent the rank and file membership of the Church."<sup>148</sup> High ranking church officials were not the only ones to question ERA supporters' commitment to Mormonism. Sonia Johnson reports frequently answering the phone to members yelling at her that she was not a Mormon.<sup>149</sup> In a published oral history, Mormon author Shirley Sealy discusses her opinions on Mormons who support the ERA. The interviewer asked if there are Mormon women who support the ERA. She replied "yes, there are a few. But in my opinion these are those that aren't aware of the gospel and what it can give them. They aren't living it." When asked if they ever speak in Relief Society Shirley responded "No, I've never heard them in Relief Society. Usually active women aren't for the ERA. I think there might be a few."<sup>150</sup> These examples illustrate that for many Mormons, the decision to oppose the ERA became a question of

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<sup>148</sup> Hartman Rector Jr., letter to Mrs. Teddie Wood, August 29, 1978, in White, "A Feminist Challenge," 44.

<sup>149</sup> Young, "The ERA Is a Moral Issue: The Mormon Church, LDS Women, and the Defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment," 638.

<sup>150</sup> Terry, Slaght-Griffin, and Terry, 89.

supporting the prophet and a testament to their faith in their leaders. Church leaders and members did not acknowledge the validity of Mormon ERA supporters and instead questioned their faith and commitment to the church, and ultimately declared them as not real Mormons. The church requires Mormon women to actively participate in their religion through fulfilling callings, regularly attending church, and obeying the teachings of church leaders.

The ERA became characterized as a test of obedience for church members. This is seen through a number of quotes from church leaders urging members to oppose the ERA as a matter of obedience. MERA grapples with this in a newsletter article entitled “Our ‘catch-22’” which describes the dilemma between individual responsibility vs. blind, trusting obedience. The author begins with a series of questions such as, “Is blind obedience a virtue? Can we safely abdicate our individual responsibility even to a supposedly infallible church leadership?” The author then places quotes from church leaders who state that church members should not support the ERA because they should be obedient to church leadership.<sup>151</sup> The implication here is that good Mormons follow the church regardless of their personal feelings. In contrast, less faithful Mormons question the authority of the prophet, leading to their characterization as lesser Mormons. Because the ERA became a test of religious commitment it heightened the stakes for both sides, increasing the divisiveness of the issue and contributing to ERA supporters feeling like they no longer belonged in the church.

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<sup>151</sup> “Our ‘Catch-22’” MERA Newsletter, August 1980, MERA MSS 225, Box 3, Folder 1, USUSCA.

There is dissonance between the words and actions of church leaders concerning the Equal Rights Amendment. In a March 1980 *Ensign* article entitled “The Church and the Proposed Equal Rights Amendment: A Moral Issue,” leaders state that church members are encouraged to choose for themselves concerning such issues as the ERA. The article goes on to explain that members are not expected to accept the words of the prophet without receiving their own confirmation of their truth. This leaves open the possibility that members may receive a different answer than the prophet. The article highlights a story from a mid 19th century church leader President George Q. Cannon who addresses this dilemma:

A friend ... wished to know whether we ... considered an honest difference of opinion between a member of the Church and the authorities of the Church was apostasy. ... We replied that we had not stated that an honest difference of opinion between a member of the Church and the authorities constituted apostasy; ... but we could not conceive of a man publishing those differences of opinion, and seeking by arguments, sophistry and special pleading to enforce upon the people to produce division and strife, and to place the acts and counsels of the authorities of the Church, if possible, in a wrong light, and not be an apostate, for such conduct was apostasy as we understood the term. We further said that while a man might honestly differ in opinion from the authorities through a want of understanding, he had to be exceedingly careful how he acted in relation to such differences, or the adversary would take advantage of him, and he would soon become imbued with the spirit of apostasy, and be found fighting against God and the authority which He had placed here to govern His Church.”<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> “The Church and the Proposed Equal Rights Amendment: A Moral Issue” *Ensign*, 10:3 (1980):<https://www.lds.org/ensign/1980/03/the-church-and-the-proposed-equal-rights-amendment-a-moral-issue/the-latter-day-saint-perspective?lang=eng>

The Church believed members could potentially have a differing opinion on matters deemed a moral issue, however they were not allowed to promote or validate their opinions. The statements imply that a difference in opinion is due to a lack of faith and ignorance on the part of the church member. From this perspective it is not possible for LDS members to actively oppose a moral position of the church and remain a faithful member in the eyes of church leaders.

Marilee Latta, President of the Equal Rights Coalition of Utah and a member of MERA addresses concerns of conformity and differences of opinion in a published oral history interview. Latta felt immense pressure to conform to the Church's stance on ERA, but she felt it was important for her to fight for her right to support equal rights and her own conscience. She describes the competing messaging she faced saying, "many people who are in the church say, 'O.K., you can be for the E.R.A., O.K.' But it really isn't O.K. In ward houses, the official statements of the church are against the E.R.A., they are not taking the other side of the pro-E.R.A., no one can talk about pro-E.R.A. in any ward, yet they can talk about anti-E.R.A. When the church comes out against an issue like this, the people themselves have got to conform to that or there is this feeling of not belonging." Latta goes on to state that ERA supporters "are segregating ourselves and we are not viewed as worthy as the rest of the Mormons because we are saying something, we are expressing feelings."<sup>153</sup> Latta ends her interview stating,

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<sup>153</sup> Terry, Slaght-Griffin, and Terry, 113.



“this isn’t just a woman’s issue. It’s an issue of what do you do when you are at odds with the prevailing philosophy of the First Presidency.”<sup>154</sup>

### **ERA Dissent**

Dissent and excommunication research explores the idea of what to do when personal beliefs are contrary to the position of the church. There is little research in this field which Leonard Arrington contends is the result of the study being “perceived as less than faith promoting and somehow suspect.”<sup>155</sup> Armand Mauss focuses on twentieth century dissent in his essay “Authority and Dissent in Mormonism.” Mauss argues that increased church discipline in the later half of the twentieth century was the result of a period of retrenchment in the church. His work focuses on intellectual dissent, arguing that the ERA “provoked the first important outbreak of dissent to that point in the century.”<sup>156</sup> *Differing Visions: Dissenters in Mormon History* contextualizes Mormon dissent and contains biographies of famous LDS dissenters, which are important for understanding the stories of high profile dissenters, who are not discussed within the LDS faith.

The book’s introduction explains the history of LDS dissent, and how LDS members understand the concept. Pollock explains that historically, “dissent was portrayed as the outward sign of personal weakness and sin.”<sup>157</sup> This understanding by the LDS Church places all of the responsibility upon the dissenter and does not

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid, 114.

<sup>155</sup> Leonard Arrington, foreword in *Differing Visions: Dissenters in Mormon History*, ed. Roger D. Launius and Linda Thatcher (University of Illinois Press, 1994).

<sup>156</sup> Mauss, “Authority and Dissent in Mormonism,” 393.

<sup>157</sup> Gordon D. Pollock, “In search for Security: The Mormons and the Kingdom of God on Earth, 1830-1844,” Ph.D. diss., Queen’s University, 1977, 292-93.

acknowledge the legitimacy of dissent within the church. Dissent can have a number of levels, from the quietly disagreeing congregant to those who publicly question leaders and theology. For some there is little consequence, but others are excommunicated and lose their church membership. MERA president, Sonia Johnson was excommunicated because she openly disagreed with church leadership on the church's position on the ERA. Her support for ERA was portrayed as a weakness in her faith with the understanding that if she was a better Mormon she would not support ERA. Johnson's biography is slightly problematic in *Differing Visions* because it was written by her friend and ally Alice Allred Pottmyer suggesting there is bias and motive behind the essay. The book provides some guidance for the reader on LDS ideas about dissent, however, no additional analysis follows Johnson's biography.<sup>158</sup>

Excommunication is defined as “an ecclesiastical censure depriving a person of the rights of church membership.”<sup>159</sup> The March 1980 *Ensign* addresses questions from church members who ask if favoring the ERA qualified as grounds for excommunication from the Church. The fact that the Church felt it necessary to publish an answer in the monthly church magazine signals the seriousness of members concerns. The Church states,

Membership in the Church has not been threatened nor withdrawn simply because of expressed agreement with the proposed amendment. In this, as in all other matters, members are free to accept or reject the counsel of the First Presidency. Freedom to discuss the merits of any public issue is a legitimate exercise of citizenship, recognized and encouraged by the

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<sup>158</sup> Roger D. Launius and Linda Thatcher, *Differing Visions: Dissenters in Mormon History*. (University of Illinois Press, 1994).

<sup>159</sup> Merriam-Webster OnLine, s.v. “excommunication,” accessed January 18, 2018, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/excommunication>.

Church. This can be done without indulging in ridicule or attacking those with opposing views. The mission of the Church is to save, but when those of its members publicly deride it, demean its leaders, and openly encourage others to interfere with its mission, then it may exercise its right to dissociate itself from them.<sup>160</sup>

This statement again suggests that church members may disagree with church positions, however they cannot publically question the church's position without possible repercussions. It is unclear why the church is so opposed to negative publicity or public questioning of policies. Perhaps it is because the church is a relatively young faith and lacks a long history of members continued support through internal dissent. Or it could be the result of the church's conservative shift in the 1960s, which Armand Mauss refers to as a period of retrenchment. He argues that prior to the mid-twentieth century "the church had rarely moved against its internal critics and dissenters in any formal or explicit way."<sup>161</sup> However, as the church entered a period of retrenchment, discipline against intellectuals, and those questioning the church's positions on race and women's roles faced increased scrutiny and discipline.

In 1979, the LDS Church excommunicated MERA President Sonia Johnson. Major news outlets extensively covered the public and controversial affair. In a March 1980 *Ensign* article the LDS church explained the excommunication from their perspective. The church stated "Mrs. Johnson had taken public issue with the Church's opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment

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<sup>160</sup> "Frequently Asked Questions about the Proposed Equal Rights Amendment: A Closer Look" *Ensign*, 10:3 (1980): <https://www.lds.org/ensign/1980/03/the-church-and-the-proposed-equal-rights-amendment-a-moral-issue/frequently-asked-questions-about-the-proposed-equal-rights-amendment-a-closer-look?lang=eng>.

<sup>161</sup> Mauss, "Authority and Dissent in Mormonism," 390.

was *not* among the grounds for the ecclesiastical action leading to her excommunication.” The Church goes on to explain that Johnson faced excommunication because she “expressed attitudes and views which went beyond that issue and constituted a direct and irresponsible attack upon the Church, its leaders, doctrines, and programs.” They go on to cite specific examples of how Johnson encouraged “the obstruction of the Church’s worldwide missionary effort, demonstrated that she was not in harmony with Church doctrine, and misrepresented and held up to ridicule the leadership and membership of the Church.”<sup>162</sup> Sonia Johnson pushed back against these statements and argued that her excommunication was the result of her gender and challenge to the Church’s patriarchy.

Other women contend that they were also excommunicated because of the ERA. However they all note that “it is not the reason our bishops gave. They pin it on something vague like preaching false doctrine.”<sup>163</sup> Sonia Johnson describes her excommunication in her book *From Housewife to Heretic*. She explains how she was notified of her trial and possible excommunication, the court-like experience, and her feelings of being tried and judged by a panel comprised entirely of men.<sup>164</sup> Excommunication is the most extreme consequence for dissenters within the Church. There are no publically available numbers on how many ERA supporters the Church

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<sup>162</sup> “Church Court Action Clarified” *Ensign*, March 1980.

<https://www.lds.org/ensign/1980/03/news-of-the-church/church-court-action-clarified?lang=eng>. Accessed January 13, 2018.

<sup>163</sup> Vera Glaser, “Mormonism and ERA: Is it either/or?” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, January 14, 1980. MERA MSS 225, Box 7, Folder 22, USUSCA.

<sup>164</sup> Johnson, *Housewife to Heretic*, 271-353.

excommunicated or how many supporters asked to have their names removed from the church membership lists. It is difficult from a scholarly perspective to fairly analyze the conflicting accounts from Johnson and the church because the only Church accounts are the ones they published for public use. Internal excommunication documents are not available and Church leaders involved in the excommunication process are not supposed to discuss the details of the trial. However, evidence suggests that the Church was uncomfortable with Johnson's public criticism and they likely encouraged local leaders to discipline her. It is not hard to imagine church leaders attributing excommunication to vague things such as preaching false doctrines, while the true unspoken reason was being support for the ERA and challenging the Church's patriarchal structure. The church disciplinary system is inherently gendered and unequal. Johnson refers to this in her book when she describes being tried and judged by men. Men hold all the power to determine worthiness, callings, and discipline. This is especially problematic concerning questions and protests about gender because there is no one for women to appeal to besides men. If there were more women in leadership positions within the church who had the power to determine worthiness, callings, and discipline women would have greater power to discuss their concerns.

The vast majority of ERA supporters did not face excommunication, but faced other institutional consequences such as the loss of church positions, referred to as callings, and access to the temple. Church members believe they are called by God to serve in specific capacities in the church. Priesthood leaders issue callings to ward members and ask them to serve as Sunday school teachers, youth leaders, and in other

capacities necessary to the functioning of a ward.<sup>165</sup> Generally, most members of a ward hold callings and serve in the functioning of the ward. Several ERA supporters report that after expressing their views on the ERA they were prematurely released from callings, signaling that the church did not want these women in positions of authority or to regularly teach church congregations. Wanda Scott reported being released from her Relief Society teaching calling after expressing her support for the Equal Rights Amendment.<sup>166</sup> Another described her removal from her calling working with young women in a 1980 *Philadelphia Inquirer* article.<sup>167</sup> Both of these women held positions of authority in their wards and regularly taught other women in the church. Local leaders might have perceived them as a threat and feared they would spread feminist ideas through their lessons to the congregation.

Other women in the Church received warnings from their local leaders and some faced increased scrutiny when seeking a temple recommend. Sonia Johnson recounts the difficulties her mother faced after she signed a letter to all U.S. Legislators asking for ERA extension. Sonia's mother recalls that her bishop warned her that her church membership was in danger. Several months later her mother and father applied for temple recommends. During the interview the bishop insinuated that Johnson's mother was not worthy to attend the temple based on her support for ERA and suggested she think it

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<sup>165</sup> The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *Handbook 2 Administering the Church* (Salt Lake City: Utah, 2010), 19.1.1.

<sup>166</sup> Young, "The ERA Is a Moral Issue: The Mormon Church, LDS Women, and the Defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment," 638.

<sup>167</sup> Vera Glaser, "Mormonism and ERA: Is it either/or?" *Philadelphia Inquirer*, January 14, 1980. MERA MSS 225, Box 7, Folder 22, USUSCA.

over. Her mother replied, “I don’t need to think it over.”<sup>168</sup> Ultimately, Johnson’s mother received her temple recommend, but it came at the price of additional scrutiny, feelings of embarrassment, and doubts about her commitment to the church. Another woman shared a similar experience in a September 1980 meeting of the Alice Louise Reynolds forum. In this woman’s case, she initially received a temple recommend and a short time later had it revoked due to her support of the ERA.<sup>169</sup> For many women full participation in the LDS church and support for the ERA were not possible. The newspaper headline, “Mormonism and ERA; IS it either/or?” encapsulates this idea.<sup>170</sup> ERA supporters quickly learned of the institutional consequences and the difficulties of remaining a Mormon in good standing while also supporting the ERA. Some women were preemptively released from callings or denied access to the temple based on their political beliefs.

ERA supporters also faced social consequences for their activism. These consequences are difficult to quantify because they are not often specific moments. Rather they are cold shoulders at church, or no longer being called on to participate in lessons or church functions. ERA supporters routinely describe feelings of pressure and no longer fitting in to the tight-knit Mormon community. Some women elaborate upon these feelings in a *Miami Herald* story, “Mormonsim Swallows You Whole.” Marilee Latta, president of the Utah Equal Rights Coalition states, “Anyone who says there are no

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<sup>168</sup> Johnson, 202-203.

<sup>169</sup> Amy L. Bentley, “Comforting the Motherless Children: The Alice Louise Reynolds Women’s Forum,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 23.3 (Fall 1990): 55.

<sup>170</sup> Vera Glaser, “Mormonism and ERA: Is it either/or?” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, January 14, 1980. MERA MSS 225, Box 7, Folder 22, USUSCA.

pressures on ERA supporters is not speaking the truth... the pressures are tremendous.” She goes on to state that “ERA supporters are ostracized by other ward members. They are badgered by employees who happen to be Mormon.” At church-owned Brigham Young University in Provo, a faculty wife who supports ERA refused to be interviewed. “It would cost my husband his job,” she said.<sup>171</sup>

Another woman who spoke to the reporter under the false name of J.P. Neal described how after attaching a bumper sticker to her car reading “Another Mormon for ERA,” attendance in her Sunday school class dropped from an average of 50-60 people to fewer than six. She recounts one time when she “was too ill to get out of bed, I couldn’t get anyone to come and heat a can of soup for me. I was shunned by everyone, including the bishop. I had a great sense of fear and aloneness. At that time I believed in the priesthood and wanted a blessing. It was as if I didn’t exist. In short, I was quietly removed because of my politics.”<sup>172</sup> MERA newsletters provided a space for ERA supporters to share their experiences of ostracism within the LDS community in a column entitled “Throwing the first stone,” a title taken from the biblical story of Jesus Christ and the adulterous woman. Within the column MERA members are encouraged to tell stories of the negative consequences they faced as a result their political opinions and activism.<sup>173</sup> In the column Sonia Johnson shared a few of the letters in her mailbox. One from Art Gibson of Madison, Wisconsin accused “you must live a very busy and

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<sup>171</sup> Vera Glaser, “Mormonism Swallows you Whole,” *Miami Herald*, January 14, 1980. MERA MSS 225, Box 7, Folder 22, USUSCA.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>173</sup> “Throwing the first stone,” MERA Newsletter, June 1981. MERA MSS 225, Box 3, Folder 1, USUSCA.



unhappy life; maybe you can wake up and realize what you have done to your life by being the devil's advocate. Woman, when are you going to wake up and understand your own problems come from your selfish greed for POWER? May Lucifer continue to enrich you with the curses he has so cunningly entrapped you in."<sup>174</sup> This letter serves as a sampling of the ostracism Johnson and others report and highlights her quest for additional power in the church. The author of this letter defined women who wanted power as selfish and greedy, a common way for men to denigrate women who advocate for a restructuring of power dynamics in society.

A thread throughout the primary sources reveals that ERA supporters feared losing their community and social group. In a *Washington Post* article, MERA President Sonia Johnson explains that she believes there are thousands of Mormons who support the ERA, however she suspects many are afraid to speak out because "It means real ostracism for them in their congregations. You know Mormons. Their church is their social group. We're a very close bunch of people. It's a very serious matter if you're ostracized from your church group. And it's not just you. Your family, your mothers, your brothers, your sisters, your friends become suspect."<sup>175</sup> Johnson goes on to explain the repercussions of her activism on not only herself but also her family. She discusses how her "parents' best friends no longer want to be seen with them." She reflects that "It's pretty sad. My parents are in their 70s. They've devoted their whole lives to the church. She (her mother) wishes I didn't feel as I do, but she doesn't keep me from trying

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<sup>174</sup> Ibid.

<sup>175</sup> Judy Mann, "A Mormon for ERA Fearful of Ostracism," *The Washington Post Metro Federal Diary*, August 10, 1979. MERA MSS 225, Box 7, Folder 21, USUSCA.

to do what I have to do... She worries that I'll lose the esteem of my many women friends. She doesn't want to see me ostracized. She doesn't want to see my family treated badly."<sup>176</sup> Many Mormon women felt that they had to balance their desire for change with the likely results of their activism for themselves, and also their family members. Due to Mormonism's strong subcultural identity, increased tensions arose when members challenged the church's stance on issues such as the ERA. For these women, it was a painful experience to be shunned by their church and friends with whom they had strong relationships. For many, their religion made up an important part of their identity.

ERA supporters demonstrate their feelings of otherness in a 1980 MERA newsletter headline titled "The Gathering of the Other Saints." The newsletter details the reactions MERA members faced following the yearly Days of '47 Parade celebrating Mormon pioneer's entrance into the Salt Lake Valley. At the parade MERA passed out balloons reading ERA-YES. One woman recalled that from an angry mother of six ERA holding children, they heard, "you let those balloons go this instant! Do you hear me kids? I said, let those balloons go right this instant!" She also shared some of the names they were called along the way, "wookie, wizzie, floozie, loon, weirdo, wacky dame, ass, ERA faggot." The reactions were not completely negative. One woman asked for an extra balloon for her grandchildren, and another said to "tell Sonia to hang in there, we think she's right on!" These reactions demonstrate the divisiveness of the issue on the Mormon community and LDS members willingness to use harsh language to make their opinions known.

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<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

ERA supporters faced a variety of mental, emotional and physical duress as a result of their activism. Marty LaBrosse recounts her claims of assault in a press release on April 21, 1981. She describes the consequences of her activism saying “I am called names, yelled at, thrown stones at, given the finger, narrowly missed by cars and assaulted by good Mormons. My husband wasn’t so lucky, he was hit by a car driven by a good Mormon woman.” She concludes the statement with what she has learned from her “Mormon brothers 1) do not believe in equal rights for Mormon women 2) do not believe in free speech under the U.S. Constitution 3) do not tolerate opposing views from church women 4) do not tolerate expression of religious freedom if the expression differs with the male hierarchy.”<sup>177</sup> LaBrosse account demonstrates the intense feelings on both sides of the issue and the lengths members would go to to demonstrate their commitment to the church and opposition to the ERA. Church members viewed these women in a such a negative light that they were willing to engage in behavior that most would regularly consider abhorrent, and rose to the level of physically assaulting protesters.

Understanding dissent specifically during the ERA is important in understanding LDS history since 1985. Armand Mauss argues that the ERA provoked the first outbreak of dissent in this century.<sup>178</sup> Since the ERA there have been a number of high profile LDS excommunications. Six intellectuals, referred to as the September 6, were excommunicated in 1993 for some of their scholarly research. More recently Kate Kelly, an advocate for women’s Priesthood ordination was excommunicated for her activism.

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<sup>177</sup> Marty LaBrosse, “Assault Press Release on April 21, 1981,” MERA Mailer. MERA MSS 225, Box 16, Folder 8, USUSCA.

<sup>178</sup> Mauss, “Authority and Dissent in Mormonism,” 393.

The internet has provided new platforms for Mormons to connect and share ideas and questions about the church and has sparked new forms of dissent with little secondary literature.<sup>179</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Mormons who supported the ERA faced a number of social and institutional consequences as a result of their activism. Some were formally excommunicated from the church, had their temple recommends taken away or were removed from callings, but for the vast majority of supporters their consequence came as a classification of “other” from the institutional church, and comments questioning their commitment to the faith. It also came from remarks at church or from neighbors and feelings of not fitting in. ERA supporters faced these consequences because of Mormon’s strong subcultural identity, which creates tension with those who do not conform to the prescribed identity. Because the ERA became characterized as a religious test it became easier for the institutional church and members to classify ERA supporters as “other” and inflict consequences for their behavior. As the fight for ERA progressed it moved from being an issue about women’s rights to a larger issue of dissent and power structures within the church. As Marilee Latta eloquently explained the ERA “isn’t just a woman’s issue. It’s an issue of what do you do when you are at odds with the prevailing philosophy of the First Presidency.”<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> Rosemary Avance, “Seeing the Light: Mormon Conversion and Deconversion in Off and Online Worlds,” *Journal of Media and Religion* 12, no. 1 (2013): 16-24.

<sup>180</sup> Terry, Slaght-Griffin, and Terry, 114.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

In many ways, the story of Mormons for the ERA follows national trends. The group consisted of white, middle to upper class, highly educated women who engaged in protest marches, and wrote to their political leaders. Consistent with other pro-ERA groups, Mormons for ERA struggled to get the support of working class and minority women who did not feel the ERA would improve their lives. However, Mormons for the ERA's story is unusual in the dramatic consequences activists faced because of their actions. A number of religions did not support the ERA, such as the Catholic Church, Southern Baptists, and fundamentalist Christian churches, but their pro-ERA members were not shunned from their community and did not face formal consequences for their actions. The LDS experience stands apart from other ERA protest groups because of the significant consequences activists faced from the LDS Church and community.

Divisive feelings surrounding the ERA and feminism remain for many members in the LDS Church. In 1992, following the death of Sonia Johnson's mother, Johnson did not return to Utah for her mother's funeral because her mother feared for her daughter's life.<sup>181</sup> She instead wrote an obituary as a tribute to her mother's life. The fact that Johnson's mother did not feel comfortable about her daughter returning to Logan, Utah for her funeral speaks to the deep feelings that remain about Johnson and the movement she stands for. More recent movements such as Ordain Women and the call to wear pants

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<sup>181</sup> "Sonia Johnson fears for her life" *Salt Lake Tribune*, Alison Thorne Collection MSS 216 Box, 14, Folder 1, USUSCA.

to church have also divided Church members and led to some activists no longer feeling comfortable at church or resulted in their formal excommunication, as in the case of Kate Kelly.

This thesis contributes to relatively unstudied areas in LDS history, exploring the history of LDS women and protest, conflicts between LDS women and patriarchal authority, LDS material culture, and dissent within the LDS Church. All of these topics are relatively unstudied areas and deserve further research. Future scholars should consider devoting more time to these specific areas but could also expand the field of research to investigate youth programs in the Church, how the church teaches gender roles, and how children actually respond to these lessons. There is little research on the Young Men's and Young Women's programs of the Church and there are numerous primary sources available, making it an appealing area of research.

Contemporary LDS teachings emphasize the equality between men and women, but also affirm the differences between them and their roles. A 2012 survey of LDS members found that the majority of Mormons are satisfied with their position in the Church and are not seeking changes. A survey, which asked respondents to strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree with the following statement, "Women do not have enough say in the LDS Church" found that 49% strongly disagreed with that statement and 35% disagree. Only 16% agreed or strongly agreed. Another question asked respondents to rank their feelings on women holding the priesthood. It stated, "The fact that women do not hold the priesthood sometimes bothers me." Again respondents overwhelmingly disagreed with the statements. Sixty-three percent said they strongly

disagree and 24% disagree, leaving 13% saying they are bothered women do not hold the Priesthood.<sup>182</sup> The same survey finds that Mormons generally agree with the church's prescribed gender roles. When surveyed, 73% of Mormons agreed that "It is much better for everyone involved if the man is the achiever outside the home and the woman takes care of the home and family."<sup>183</sup> These surveys suggest that LDS church members are largely supportive of gender policies within the church and are not advocating for changes in church policies and culture. Perhaps the #Metoo movement and allegations of domestic and sexual abuse from LDS women, might bring changes to the Church. New, younger, and more diverse leadership may bring about changes to women's position in the church.

Through this research we learn that MERA occupied sacred spaces, re-appropriated LDS materials for their own purposes, and faced institutional and religious consequences as a result of their activism. This research provides a case study for how a group of Mormon women protested, but these concepts can be applied to all protesters who use elements of their culture to protest against their assigned less powerful positions in society. In the case of MERA they used the space and materials from a highly patriarchal church to unveil gender discrimination and question the church's stance on the ERA. Their spaces of protest, language, and methods captured the attention of church members and the national media who proved helpful to their cause. They proved unsuccessful in their fight for ERA ratification, and did not bring about lasting, significant changes for LDS women. In fact, their efforts may have contributed to LDS

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<sup>182</sup> Campbell, Monson, Quin, 72.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid, 114.

members disdain for feminists. However, they did provide an alternative voice for LDS members and brought about important questions for members to consider such as the church's role in politics, women's place in the church, and the challenging of authority.



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