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GENDER AND MISSIONARY WORK

David Golding

Missionary work remains an enduring and dynamic feature of the Latter-day Saint experience. Joseph Smith's first followers preached with the Book of Mormon by canvassing the countryside of the 1830s United States. Within the decade, an institutional system around preaching developed: the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints issued mission calls to volunteers who carried out proselytism as a temporary occupation, leaving their homeland and families for months or years to evangelize in pairs (Harper, 1998). By the 1970s, tens of thousands of young adults embarked on mission tours annually, fostering a subculture that treated men's two-year assignment as a rite of passage (Hoyt and Patterson, 2011; Shepherd and Shepherd, 1998). Latter-day Saints at large yet embraced the New Testament mandate to proclaim the Christian gospel. Regardless of formal ordination, lay missionaries participated in their local congregations by visiting proselytes and lapsed church members and delivering home lessons (Humpherys, 1977). The church continues this intricate program of assigning, training, dispatching, and supporting missionaries, who by 2018, numbered more than 67,000—around 15 percent of the worldwide Christian missionary force (*Church News*, 2018; Johnson et al., 2016).

Unlike the majority of highly active missionary organizations, Latter-day Saints launched into proselytizing without first considering the theological or theoretical implications. Joseph Smith's revelations urged the laity to "embark" as soon as they felt the desire to preach, and this practical approach precluded any effort to articulate a missiology or check missionary work against theology. The missionaries intrepidly went and preached, following the whims and circumstances that confronted them. Today's missionaries participate in a system that has evolved on perceptions of prior effectiveness. History, therefore, not only explains changes in the missionary program but also informs the mentality of Latter-day Saint missionaries—their activities derive from what earlier missionaries have done, almost never from an agenda set by theory or missiology. Whatever has appeared to garner more baptized church members has informed the proselytizing activities administrators and missionaries have employed.

The calculus of proselytizing effectiveness included changing conventions of behavior for women and men. Between 1830 and 1898, women participated as lay missionaries or in support of missionary husbands, but public reactions toward Latter-day Saint polygamy practices during the late nineteenth century prompted church officials to call single women as certified missionaries (McBride, 2018). Later systematic reforms struggled against female participation—in many settings, male missionaries doubled as local ecclesiastical leaders, roles reserved for the male priesthood. Yet the demands of evangelism and the perceived advantages of feminine preaching kept women at the front lines of the global mission effort. The settings in which the missionaries understood their commission to preach frequently nurtured the roles and agency of women and men during periods of adolescent development and young adulthood, ensuring that missionary patterns of devotion could endure in the culture of regular congregations (Riess, 2019, pp. 33–48).

Similar to the broader field of Mormon history, scholarship on missions has favored the nineteenth century. Works treating women's experiences in the missions lean toward the twentieth century, due to women's later participation. The general context for twentieth-century missions, however, has received little synthesis and almost no institutional development has been traced. This chapter proffers five periods for Mormon missions, each characterized by a main proselytizing strategy with ramifications on gendered discourse and effects in the broader church. The following sections examine the processes of masculinization and feminization that mission has inculcated by plotting Latter-day Saint mission history in the context of gender, reviewing the scholarly literature on gender and missionary work, and entertaining the frontiers of current studies.

Freelance prelude (1829–1832)

Immediately after Joseph Smith finished the manuscript of the Book of Mormon in 1829, his relatives and associates spread the word. Smith's mother shared news of the book with her siblings, but nearly all other documented evangelizers were men who visited churches, taverns, and cottages intending to preach. A revelation in 1830 called on four men to take the book to "the Lamanites," a Book of Mormon designation Smith and his followers ascribed to Native Americans. This "mission to the Lamanites" excited the new congregation, and women led by Smith's wife Emma sewed new clothes for the missionaries (Smith, 1845, p. 189). This mission ended abruptly due to a legal technicality with the United States government. But the missionaries had reason to celebrate the endeavor: a congregation of Reform Baptists in Ohio accepted the Book of Mormon and dozens joined Smith's young church (Underwood, 2005; Anderson, 1971).

Future missions followed this initial strategy of seeking out churched Christians and holding meetings to promote how the Book of Mormon had fulfilled biblical prophecy (Porter, 1988; Williams, 1969). The method of preaching reinforced roles of women participating as spiritually active recipients of the gospel message and men engaging as scriptural interlocutors. Prominent elders like Parley P. Pratt and William E. McLellin prepared sermons and arguments anticipating intense debates among clergymen and community leaders (Givens and Grow, 2011, p. 7; Baer, 1994); prominent women like Emma Smith and Eliza R. Snow exhorted fellow congregants in church gatherings and with poetry (Derr et al., 2016, p. 5; Waspe, 1942).

During this period, the term "priesthood" gained permanent traction within the nascent movement. For the Latter-day Saints, "priesthood" held together the wide concept of ecclesiology (i.e., the theological foundations for what constituted the church, body of Christ, or kingdom of God) and its application in missions. On a structural level, priesthood officers sustained the administration of church congregations and mediated disputes. The names and duties of these offices held theological significance for missionaries contending against critics: the *organization* of the church validated the truth claims of that church. They reasoned that the proper scheme of deacons, teachers, priests, elders, apostles, bishops, high priests (and later seventies and patriarchs) should correlate with scriptural definitions of Jesus' original church. While later scholars recognized various associations of New Testament terms (like deacon and priest) with women of late antiquity, Protestant North Americans of the early 1800s routinely ascribed such roles to men (Torjesen, 1993).

The Latter-day Saint priesthood order emerged in tandem with the first commissions to preach, inflecting mission with clerical expectations. Notwithstanding the neutral language in an early revelation about the missionary call—"O ye that embark in the service of God" (Doctrine and Covenants 4:2)—the attitude of framing official church procedures as priesthood functions precluded women from assuming the call. Not only did priesthood imbue missions with a masculine character on account of male access to priesthood office, but priesthood also cast missionary work in a biblical idiom already saturated in ancient patriarchal vocabularies. In a general sense, a Latter-day Saint man with any position in the church lived a priestly life traceable to the age of the patriarchs. Mission as an extension of priesthood order introduced men to a fraternity of sacrifice and discipleship.

Emigration era (1832–1898)

Joseph Smith dictated dozens of revelations within a couple of years, all rendered in the first-person voice of Jesus Christ and addressed variously to individuals, church leaders, and the church membership. The missionaries adhered to the revelations as both a scriptural mandate and a field manual (Ellsworth, 1951, pp. 41–42, 179–80). On several occasions, revelations directed the church to "gather" the covenant people out from "among the congregations of the wicked" and from the far reaches of the earth. The gathering would culminate in the Saints erecting a holy city called Zion, living in unity, and preparing for the imminent Second Coming of Christ. The missionaries sounded "the warning voice" by calling on their proselytes to leave home for Zion (Harper, 1998).

As the mandate to gather intensified in the mid-1830s, missionary work became highly transient, splitting the world into the domains of the gathered and the ungathered, the "stakes of Zion" and the "conferences" of the mission field. Under this scheme, missionaries were those identified with venturing outward from Zion, and the covenant faithful, those flowing inward to Zion. A group of twelve apostles served as the senior directors of the effort and the presiding officials over the church in the field (Whittaker, 2012a; 2012b; Ellsworth, 1951).

An early revelation promised an "endowment of power" that should precede "going forth among all Nations," what Smith and his associates interpreted to mean a Pentecost-like outpouring of the Holy Spirit that should empower missionaries ahead of departing on foreign missions. The Quorum of the Twelve Apostles particularly needed such "gifts of the Spirit" to fulfill its mandate to bear "special witness" of the resurrected Jesus Christ (Minutes and Blessings, 1835). In this season of fervent anticipation, church leaders sometimes took displays of ecstatic religious observances, like speaking in tongues or prophesying of the latter-day glory, as instances of an endowment of power. And the direct allusions the revelations made to Luke 24 (in which Jesus tells his disciples to wait in Jerusalem before taking the gospel to all nations until they should be "endued with power from on high") cast the present teaching model as something preliminary. The endowment of power, however it should manifest itself, would inaugurate the *global* mission effort (Smith, 1831).

This theological prerequisite for foreign missions rather exclusively involved men. Only in meetings of elders and high priests did church leaders watch for signs of the endowment of power (Staker, 2009, pp. 147–62). But with the construction and dedication of the church's first temple, the "House of the Lord" in Kirtland, Ohio, in 1836, both clergy and laity recognized several meetings of heightened spirituality as fulfilling the revelations' promise of the endowment of power. Many women participated in a series of Pentecostal phenomena, and reports told of an overall sense of God manifesting his presence to the general congregation (Harper, 2005; Stapley and Wright, 2009, pp. 63–66). While some Latter-day Saints spoke of their "solemn assembly" as an endowment for all the faithful, the effects on missionary work again enlisted men. Smith consequently dispatched an apostle to head the first foreign mission to Great Britain, a commission the whole group of Twelve Apostles viewed as a gateway to a truly global expansion of the church (Allen, Esplin, and Whittaker, 1992).

In the mission context, "priesthood," "endowment of power," and the foreign world all served a powerful millenarian concern for the end times, the latter days. The gathering held urgent significance: prophecies of worldwide tribulation portended terrible, even fatal, events that could befall any nation at any time, which obligated the elders to sound the warning to everyone. Should the elder neglect this mandate or somehow lapse in performing his duties, it stood to reason that the people he might have reached could blame their suffering or death on his inaction (Golding, 2015, pp. 215–18). Dark forces like the "man of sin" described in 2 Thessalonians drove the weak toward destruction and fought against the true church of Christ. The elders needed the endowment of power and priesthood authority to win in the battle for souls.

One revelation instructed the elders to establish a school for preparing each other for church leadership and mission service and made cleansing one another from "the blood of this generation" a centerpiece in the devotions of the group (Smith, 1833 [D&C 88]). Another ritual performed specifically by the missionaries responded to rejection by having the elder privately cast the dust off his feet as a testimony against the rejectors, thus absolving the missionary of any guilt at the judgment bar of God (Weber, 2013). In this priesthood capacity, the elder exercised a prerogative to "seal up" the righteous to salvation or the wicked to the day of God's wrath (Doctrine and Covenants 1:8–10). The gravity of such actions fit within codes of masculine honor of the 1800s—where death was on the line, men possessed both the burden and the authority to confront the situation. The priesthood concept suffused with apocalypticism premised the earliest missions on an exclusively masculine liability. On record, women as missionary wives or later as "sister missionaries" did not perform feet-dusting rituals.

Between the 1830s and the 1890s, three major efforts sustained missionary work abroad, all headed by the Twelve Apostles: the British mission; the European mission, which sprouted smaller missions in Scandinavia, Italy, and Turkey; and the Hawaiian mission, with its beginnings in Tahiti and other Pacific islands (Whittaker, 2012a; 2012b). Joseph Smith had dispatched elders to "Germany, Palestine, New Holland, the East Indies, and other places" by 1842, but these smaller circuits quickly fell defunct (Smith, 1842). Latter-day Saint resettlement in the North American West in the 1840s and 1850s shifted the base of missionary operations to Utah Territory, and though missionaries still worked in Britain and Western Europe, expansion stalled during and after the Utah War of 1857 and 1858 (a short confrontation between the United States Army and militias commanded by church president Brigham Young). Not until the 1870s did work outside Europe resume, but by then, the Latter-day Saint practice of polygamy had received international attention, and missionaries faced increasing resistance, even open hostility and mob attacks in the southern United States (Mason, 2011).

A tangled series of antipolygamy legislation and Latter-day Saint resistance to federal enforcement culminated in a powerful law and Supreme Court decision threatening to disenfranchise the church, and Church President Wilford Woodruff issued a manifesto leading to the end of Latter-day Saint plural marriages (Gordon, 2002). The siege lifted, and Latter-day Saints confronted the daunting prospect of assimilating into the broader society. Missions presented a key province for improving relations with neighbors and enhancing the reputation of the church (Embry, 1997, p. 107). Under Woodruff, administrators established permanent mission offices, further routinized proselytizing assignments and tours, and bureaucratized overall mission organization. The Quorum of the Twelve Apostles called mission presidents to supervise the increasingly systematic effort to proclaim the Book of Mormon and gather the faithful to Zion (Allen and Leonard, 1976, pp. 425–28).

All this while immigrant converts took the mandate to gather literally and personally, funding their own travel with whatever means they possessed. A significant number of converts struggled to afford or get outfitted for the migration, and the church eventually chartered the Perpetual Emigrating Fund that provided loans travelers could repay after integrating into Latter-day Saint communities. Emigration agents stationed at mission offices helped with purchasing supplies, booking passage on ships, and advising immigrants on their travel. Just as the church disavowed polygamy, its leaders began discouraging new members from relocating to Zion. Mission offices thereafter scaled down their emigration processing and instructed missionaries in building permanent congregations (Woods, 2011).

The shift from a localized to a universalized Zion—from a central and literal gathering place to a network of stakes all representing a global Zion community—was monumental. Nothing short of the social, economic, and theological dimensions of Mormon life experienced the effect, and the religious identity transitioned toward a more assimilated relationship with the outside world. For missions, the apocalyptic character of front-line proselytism suffered a conceptual blow, now that personal salvation replaced evading last-day calamities as the central objective. While stark militaristic rhetoric continued to ornament missionary discourse, the literal posture gave way to figurative tones: the battleground for souls resided primarily in the spiritual domain (Stimmler, 2003). Women could enter this contest where persuasive preaching dwelled more on accepting new doctrine than rejecting a wicked world.

System era (1898–1951)

In the aftermath of ending church-sanctioned plural marriages, reports persuaded most mission presidents that critics forced the issue of polygamy almost constantly. In determining a response, they began to consider women as not only missionary candidates, but church representatives ideally suited for an oppositional environment. After all, critics had commonly presumed that Mormon women lived in bondage to their husbands and secretly desired deliverance. Women missionaries, leaders believed, could counter these presuppositions in person by testifying of their pleasant homes and endorsing their family arrangements. Some mission presidents considered women's decorum and poise a potent challenge to prevailing stereotypes. Wilford Woodruff agreed, and in 1898, he enacted a new policy allowing leaders to set apart women as certified missionaries and mission presidents to employ "lady missionaries" abroad (McBride, 2018).

The new policy had a measurable impact on female enrollment as local church leaders who recommended women for missionary service processed more applications. In five years, married women made up over 60 percent of the female missionary force; but within another four years, this proportion flipped, with single women making up around 60 percent of women missionaries by 1908. Nearly 40 percent of all certified missionaries were women by 1918 (Sons of Utah Pioneers, 2016, pp. 28–29). With the greater proportion of single women in the field, this first generation witnessed a discursive shift—the common title "sister missionary" replaced "lady missionary" in parlance and curriculum. The change coincided as well with a cultural turn toward women entering the workplace in greater numbers. When the larger European and American societies called on women to assist in the war effort, the church closed sister missionary calls during World War II with the exception of women skilled in secretarial work, certified school teachers, or wives of men older than draft ages. The postwar environment noticed a retrenchment in tying women to motherhood and domestic work (Radke and Cropper-Rampton, 2005).

As women further proselytized, men tended to ask whether their "sisters" should engage in the same assignments and routines as the elders. Mission presidents offered a hesitant "yes and no": elders should "visit every reputable house" without "purse or scrip" (a practice dating to the early period of freelance missions in which elders relied on their proselytes for lodging and food); lady missionaries should do largely the same work as the elders, but limit their work to cities and "not travel without 'purse or scrip' " (McMurrin, 1904, p. 540).

These adjustments to eligibility allowances coincided with structural changes to the larger mission effort. Apostles at the turn of the twentieth century recognized irregularities across the missions and proposed forming a missionary committee to systematize and coordinate the missions (Alexander, 2012, p. 229). For some administrators, a slow-going bureaucratization ensued, the first indication of a reorienting of the mission scheme around developing rather than planting churches. In Protestant parlance, "church planting" described the strategy of orienting proselytism around galvanizing new congregations in areas without a parish or church presence. Through the Emigration Era, Latter-day Saint missionaries adhered to this strategy by taking as their principal objective reaching potential converts where no Latter-day Saint church or congregation existed and developing a congregation ready to support its members in emigrating to Zion. As missions further systematized around a scheme of perpetual (as opposed to transient) congregations, the missionaries and their administrators remained with converts and cycled personnel through defined zones. In this new self-sustaining environment, missions pivoted away from carrying out an urgent mandate of warning the nations of imminent calamity toward realizing a program of finding and baptizing converts (Golding, 2015, p. 217).

As women worked alongside men in expanding existing congregations, their presence entailed adapting the organization to missionaries not ordained to priesthood office. Aside from feet dusting, which by the 1890s had declined in practice enough for the First Presidency to discourage its frequent performance, not much else about proselytizing amounted to priestly rites or functions, especially with the dramatic pivot away from apocalyptic preaching (Weber, 2013, pp. 125–26). Like the elders, the first sister missionaries received setting-apart blessings and temple endowments prior to departure, and in the field, applied the elders' usual preaching methods (McBride, 2018, pp. 54–56). As preaching circuits aligned more directly with perpetual congregations, groupings of elders and sisters resembled the layout and geographic boundaries of wards and stakes. Missionary "districts" (separate from congregational districts formerly called "conferences") and parent "zones" brought elders and sisters in neighboring areas together, though under the leadership of an elder or pair of elders designated by the mission president the district leader or zone leader.

Though the proselytizing functions between elders and sisters differed very little, the chain of decision-making held women accountable to men and men accountable to rotating leadership. At least one mission president experimented with a sister missionary leader: in 1928, Marian Gardner was set apart as a "supervisory lady missionary" tasked with the same responsibilities as "supervisory elders," but only over women throughout the mission. When elders voiced confusion over Gardner's authority, the mission president conducted training meetings reiterating her role as an assistant to the president (Watt and Watt, 2017, pp. 140–41). Gardner's service proved the exception throughout the System Era as church leaders maintained the mission hierarchy as a training ground for young adult men to learn the order of the priesthood and receive preparation for future church leadership (Murdock, 1973, pp. 71–72).

Stake presidents in Utah—where greater than 92 percent of the total church membership resided in 1912—saw missionary possibilities in the heartland. They secured permission from the First Presidency to set apart local elders to proselytize within a stake (Keeler, Knight, and Merrill, 1912). Though the "stake missionaries" worked part-time, their deployment within congregations already deemed "gathered" and permanent shifted the scope of prior evangelism. Existing stakes seemed to require preaching regardless of the level of religious saturation in the locale. Such a model invited an assessment of how the ecclesiastical order should integrate with missionary organization patterns. The First Presidency, Quorum of the Twelve, and Missionary Committee revisited the scheme repeatedly, aiming to reduce the complexity of the missionary environment from a variable operation to a stable and replicable system. The trade-off meant an elaborate and highly defined matrix of church and mission units, church and mission leadership, and church and missionary activity.[1]

Apostle and member of the Missionary Committee, David O. McKay, commenced a world-wide tour of the missions in 1921 to survey the overall effort for systematic improvements. Sixty-one thousand miles and 366 days later, McKay returned to Utah reporting a somewhat dismal situation: local leadership struggled, infighting abounded, and congregations lacked adequate facilities (Cannon, 2011). Previously an accomplished businessman, Church President Heber J. Grant enacted corporate measures to streamline the missions. He maintained previous conventions, particularly categories of priesthood officers, while reconfiguring mission procedures around administrative efficiency.

Between 1925 and the late 1930s, broader Progressive Era influences had translated into a new mission system supervised more than ever before from Salt Lake City offices and subject to regular administrative calibrating. In 1925, the Missionary Home (a renovated house on the church headquarters campus in Salt Lake City) opened as a training center for outgoing missionaries. Each new class entered the Home for five to seven days of instruction by senior church leaders in policy, preaching methods, and general advice. Mission presidents praised the concentrated orientation newcomers received and suggested curriculum enhancements that led to standardized manuals and training reports (Snow, 1928; Cowan, 1984). That same year, Apostle Melvin J. Ballard traveled to Buenos Aires to dedicate South America for missionary work—the most conspicuous expansion of a new mission field since the ambitious opening of Asia in 1901. (Ballard's mission had followed Grant closing the Japan Mission due to political tensions, language difficulty, and purported minor church growth [Neilson, 2010].) Two years later, the church retired "conferences" and reformatted the hierarchy of units to proceed from mission to "district" to branch, with elders sometimes serving as district and branch presidents (Talmage, 1927). Elders noticed a fastening of leadership patterns to their status as missionaries. Sister missionaries heard more encouragement to lead women's Relief Society gatherings than to organize branch meetings; their numbers declined as mission calls overall dropped slightly throughout the 1920s (Embry, 1997, p. 110).

The updates overall adhered to a central and bureaucratic paradigm. The First Presidency increasingly sought for a reproducible scheme of personnel and activities, and a fundamental unit dating to Joseph Smith's grand Zion vision—the stake—emerged as the ideal cohort for consolidating such features. In 1930, stakes outside of Utah numbered only sixteen and had been organized only in Canada, Mexico, California, Colorado, Arizona, and Idaho. With sights on the Pacific and Latin American fields, Heber J. Grant anticipated stake growth emerging from within the missions and a proceeding from a model of expanding-then-dividing stake boundaries. The stakes should resemble each other in size, staff, activity, and devotion. No longer fully blended as in Brigham Young's pioneer "Deseret," church operations and the civic community separated, sometimes through active measures by Grant, the Twelve Apostles, and the Presiding Bishopric. Grant orchestrated the founding of the Corporation of the President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and through it started consolidating business components left over from the earlier Mormon enterprises. He oversaw the separation of administrative concerns into church departments and committees (Alexander, 2011, pp. 308–14).

Regular Latter-day Saints could recognize a new layering of occupations and programs, some centralized in a headquartered administration and others given to the purview of the stake to which they belonged. Missions overlapped with districts and stakes—the stake presidency and other stake officers served independently of the mission president and missionaries, but sisters and elders were dispatched to stakes in addition to unproselytized areas, increasingly assisting lay missionaries in ministering to proselytes, new converts, and lapsed church members. The Missionary Department, nothing more than a secretary and a couple of office assistants in Salt Lake City, suddenly noticed greater demands on processing mission calls, securing travel visas, planning itineraries, interfacing with mission presidents, and tracking statistics (Murdock, 1973, pp. 17–25, 61–68).

One elder in the largest and most active mission of the time, the British Mission, and future church president, Gordon B. Hinckley, caught attention for building rapport with local newspapers and successfully staging preaching and open house events. Apostles interviewed the missionary after his return to Utah, and decided to launch a new public relations committee with Hinckley as its executive secretary. The Radio, Publicity, and Mission Literature Committee began in 1935 developing broadcasts, public information campaigns, and new missionary curricula. By 1937, the committee had reviewed several plans circulating in the missions and published a standard manual, the *Missionary's Hand Book*, that set church-wide mission policies in writing for the first time. The handbook instructed mission presidents and elders to direct special attention to several routines in the districts, including a leadership pattern assigning sister missionaries to lead Relief Society groups and elders assuming ecclesiastical responsibilities under the mission president's direction. The pattern solidified the districts as proto-stakes headed by men and shepherded toward permanence and incorporating church programs (*The Missionary's Hand Book*, 1937; Dew, 1996, pp. 84–85).

The pace of mission work experienced a dramatic pause with World War II, particularly with the closure of the European field, male missionary candidates serving in war, and administrators passing on recruiting more women. When David O. McKay became church president in 1951, over 90 percent of total church members resided in the United States; over the next forty years, that percentage dropped by an average of about 1 percent per year. Targeted adjustments in the church and its missions inaugurated an era of coordinated and correlated programs created with a strong interest in expanding the church internationally (Boone, 2012).

Program era (1951–2012)

David O. McKay adopted a thoroughly bureaucratic structure and programmed routine into the missions. He sought to accelerate convert baptisms by coordinating closely with mission presidents to find the models that achieved higher growth church-wide. Reports persuaded McKay that missionary uniformity enhanced their presentation and curbed attrition. He advanced policies requiring uniform attire, curriculum, training centers, length of tours, application procedures, certification process, and field manuals (LoRusso, 2016; Prince and Wright, 2005, pp. 232–36). Whether in a mission, stake, district, or branch, each participant joined in a worldwide program, a unified effort to expand the church membership through proselytism. The features of that program came under scrutiny by an expanding Missionary Department managed by Gordon B. Hinckley who reported to the First Presidency (Dew, 1996, pp. 84–85, 143–58).

McKay marshaled the full membership into the program, declaring a motto that resonated for decades: "Every member a missionary." The structure for participating in mission had turned so routine, McKay could frame mission as a "responsibility" resting on all church members, a universal mandate touching all corners of the Latter-day Saint community (Prince and Wright, 2005, p. 230). Referring potential proselytes—what missionaries and laypersons increasingly called "investigators" for their having "investigated" whether to join the church—for in-home lessons emerged as a sign of discipleship and for some ardent "member-missionaries," a sacred duty. The distinction between full-time service and local or part-time volunteer work divided along gendered expectations: men of the priesthood possessed a duty to enter the mission field by virtue of their covenant of ordination; women's duty went only so far as that expected of all disciples and could be fulfilled by impromptu or local outreach.

Marriageability soon preoccupied senior church leaders deciding on destinations for missionary candidates, who noticed a wave of single women applying for missionary service. In 1951, McKay adjusted women's age of missionary candidacy from 21 to 23. "It is surprising how eagerly the young women and some married women seek calls to go on missions," he said of the new policy.

> We commend them for it, but the responsibility of proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ rests upon the priesthood of the Church. It is quite possible now, in view of the present emergency [i.e., influx of sister missionaries], that we shall have to return to the standard age for young women, which is twenty-three.
>
> *(Radke-Moss, 2016; Embry, 1997, p. 112).*

Another surge of female missionary participation did not occur again until 2012 and another change to the minimum age of service.

The steady growth of church congregations corresponded with predictable growth in missionary candidates, but a sharp increase in convert baptisms and missionary participation began to intensify in 1960. Stakes abroad started to multiply—in eleven years, a stake was organized on each continent. McKay and Hinckley encouraged a new paradigm in administration: instead of sending missionaries to canvass vast stretches, mission presidents should assign them to existing congregations and subdivide mission zones as growth happened. Even when opening a town or city to proselytism, the presidents should branch out from centers of planted groups. The days of a missionary pair wandering into distant, unevangelized areas diminished; adhering to more familiar extensions of staffed mission fields allowed sister missionaries into the intrepid work of opening a new area for the first time (Prince and Wright, 2005, pp. 227–55).

By the 1960s, a philosophical shift in how Latter-day Saints understood church programs gained momentum. This "Priesthood Correlation" effort sought to subsume all programs under a hierarchy of priesthood direction. The whole institution underwent a series of theological audits: how could this auxiliary or that procedure be integrated within a priesthood line of oversight? The centralized bureaucracy assembled several standing councils to set objectives and agendas for church departments. In 1971, a report solicited from third-party consultants recommended that the church staff its departments with professional employees (Prince, 2016, pp. 86–88, 193–94, 294). Socioeconomic norms of the time already favored men for executive and professional candidacy; women initially worked in the Missionary Department as secretaries, stenographers, and office assistants. The executive councils dispatching women and men on missions comprised men bearing elite ecclesiastical credentials. The missionary program reverted to a male-dominated scheme with women as auxiliary counterparts just as signs of growing missionary interest among young women had begun to surface (Lyon and McFarland, 2003; Payne, 2005, p. 128).

Professionalization encouraged an institutional separation of business concerns. Executives created new divisions within the Missionary Department based on strategic assessments of church-wide proselytization and program logistics. As the divisions within the department expanded, the number of infield experiments increased. Mission presidents attempted new door-to-door techniques, lesson scripts, teaching props, and public information campaigns, relaying a regular stream of reports to the Missionary Department. The variables of success revolved around missionary safety and rates of baptism. An ambivalent culture of creative experimentation on the one hand and strict adherence to battle-tested standards on the other modulated the mission experience through the 1970s and 1980s. Reports of fresh preaching methods placed rhetorical emphasis on personal obedience to mission rules (Shepherd and Shepherd, 1998; Adams and Clopton, 1990; Jensen, 1974).

The divide-and-conquer formula persisted, and the rate of splitting off new stakes and missions climbed. Latin America and the Philippines experienced unprecedented growth, and sensing the momentum, Church President Spencer W. Kimball demanded all hands on deck. He gave an impassioned plea to "lengthen our stride" and raise up powerful missionaries, calling on all young men to live a higher code of conduct and apply to serve a mission. The ratio of certified missionaries to total church members peaked in the late 1970s (Kimball, 2005, pp. 113–15; Boone, 2012). The strong 1970s rhetoric of all young men serving missions occasioned a rise in negative sister stereotypes like the "unmarried Old Maid," and cultural elements like the popular musical *Saturday's Warrior* reinforced women's role in supporting missionary boyfriends rather than applying for missions themselves. The effects more often delimited sister missionary agency along supporting men through marriage, home and family life, and menial office work. Winning over male counterparts in the mission field added stresses to sisters' routines between the 1970s and 1990s. The proportion of sisters to elders dropped below 20 percent, encouraging more young women to assent to a contingency plan mentality: a significant number of sisters opted for a mission after perceiving their window for courtship had closed. The (often militaristic) rhetoric that motivated elders to brave long hours of rejection cast sisters as delicate, thus circumscribing women's service around safe and controlled activities (Radke and Cropper-Rampton, 2005).

Kimball's greatest legacy came with a prophetic revelation he announced in 1978—a restriction against men of black African descent being ordained to the priesthood and against women and men of black African descent participating in temple rituals was lifted (Kimball, 2008). Missionaries who had labored over the policy's red tape—filing black proselytes' pedigrees to determine ancestry before baptism—could preach baptism, priesthood, and temple without regard to race. Baptism rates through the 1980s in Central and South America soared. By 1979, Latter-day Saints in Chile numbered more than half a million and represented more than 3 percent of the country's population, more per capita than in the United States (Cannon and Cowan, 2002, p. 286). More missionary candidates applied from outside North America, creating demand for additional training centers. The missiological phenomenon of "reverse missions" touched Latter-day Saints for the first time as sisters and elders from outside the Anglophone subculture received mission calls to the church's heartlands in Utah and the rest of the western United States. Language-specific branches, especially Spanish, proliferated across North American stakes and were regularly supported by certified missionaries (Embry and Richards, 2012).

By the 1980s, the church presented missionaries as official representatives bearing not only ministerial certificates but also name badges and a uniform appearance so recognizable, the male Mormon missionary sporting a white shirt, necktie, and black tag became the poster child of Mormon culture.[2] Sister missionaries weathered several iterations of dress and grooming standards, receiving at one point an experimental course in business fashion from modeling consultants, but settling on a conservative wardrobe of typical North American office wear (Blakesley, 2009, pp. 33–35; Buehner, 1982). Since 1901, the extent of proselytizing tourists at the most-visited site of the church, Temple Square in Salt Lake City, had involved a Bureau of Information distributing pamphlets, presenting short tours, and offering on-hand guides (Hafen, 1997, p. 362; Richardson, 2003, pp. 79–80). In 1989, around seventy sister missionaries replaced over 900 part-time volunteers in delivering all tours and presentations. Field evaluations had persuaded Temple Square administrators that visitors were "more quickly comfortable with a young lady" than with elders and senior couples. The church trusted its busiest interface with the public to young sister missionaries and their friendly demeanor, a plan still in effect (*Church News*, 1989; Bremer, 2000, p. 430).

Both sisters and elders beyond Temple Square negotiated standards of appearance and conduct, but codes differed depending on gender. Women not only coordinated their attire to match an acceptable fashion but also received instruction on their appearance that administrators linked with personal development. The initiative to improve feminine presentation of sister missionaries was titled the "Personal Development Program" and associated wardrobe decisions of color and dress ensembles with inner esteem and confidence. To dress mindfully was to display one's serious intention to live righteously. The "motley assortment of house dresses, jumpers, and little girl type clothes" evident in typical sister missionary dress reflected poorly on the gospel message, program developer Alice Buehner reported in 1982. A greater burden of nonverbal communication rested on women for how they could more effectively attract proselytes than men (Buehner, 1982, pp. 6–13). Standards evolved almost negligibly for elders.

When Gordon B. Hinckley became church president in 1995, the missionary force had never been larger, and convert baptisms exceeded 300,000 per year (Boone, 2012). Hinckley noticed in the upswell of converts a related rise in lapsed church members. Whereas a generation of missionaries had looked to expand wards and stakes, the latest corps received directives to locate and "reactivate" the "less-active." Several measures aimed at improving quality over quantity of conversions: more thorough proselyte instruction and interviews before baptism; shifting primary oversight of missionary work to ward bishops and local leaders; coordinating better with lay and certified missionaries; and revising curriculum to steer missionaries away from rote presentations toward adapted lessons and spiritual inspiration (Hinckley, 1999; Smith, 2015). Candidates for full-time service heard Hinckley announce greater insistence on missionary qualifications—"raising the bar"—to seek out "missionaries to match the message of salvation." Within three years, the number of certified missionaries dropped by 20 percent (Boone, 2012). The release of *Preach My Gospel*—a revised curriculum of missionary preparation, proselyte lessons, and field training—further emphasized a culture of skilled preaching and personal righteousness. Rhetoric of a "greatest generation of missionaries" supplanted the duty-speak of the 1970s and 1980s as young people spoke of valued experience over sacrifice (Riess, 2019).

Multifaceted era (2012–present)

In the Program Era, minor adjustments to minimum age requirements and length of service stabilized around 19 years old and twenty-four-month tours for men and 21 years old and eighteen-month tours for women. In 2012, Church President Thomas S. Monson inaugurated a shift in age standards, lowering the age of eligibility to 18 and 19 for men and women respectively. The change elicited a surge in sister missionary participation: in a year, fifty-eight new missions were created, bringing the total to 405, and total certified missionaries rose from 58,000 to over 80,000, the majority of the increase owed to a significant number of female applicants (Rabada, 2014, pp. 20–21; Toone, 2018).

Monson and other leaders followed the policy change with an initiative branded "Hastening the Work of Salvation." This multifaceted effort discouraged door-to-door proselytizing and called on church members and missionaries to combine their interactions with potential proselytes. Social media campaigns placed certified missionaries in contact with online inquirers and advertised the neighborly posture of regular Latter-day Saints with slogans "I'm a Mormon" and "Meet the Mormons." Other media initiatives orchestrated by the Missionary and Public Affairs departments followed, bringing highly coordinated and strategized public messaging into the mainstream of missionary proselytism (Hastening the Work of Salvation, 2013).

Though "the surge" reverted to an earlier mean average of personnel, sister missionaries maintained a greater proportion than previously, leading to adjustments in mission hierarchies. The position of "sister training leader" emerged, but not in precise parity with elders' leadership. While a sister training leader supervised sisters, she still answered to male district leaders, zone leaders, and assistants to the mission president (Rabada, 2014, pp. 21–25). Competitive rhetoric had appeared throughout history—among the first mission presidents to employ sister missionaries, some compared levels of usefulness between sisters and elders (McMurrin, 1904, pp. 540–41). "I used to like to challenge [the sisters] to beat the elders," one mission president reported in 1974, "because I think historically lady missionaries are kind of second-class citizens" (Winder, 1974, p. 89). Sisters before and after the surge often posted similar statistics as the elders but could sense jealousy from elders who remarked about perceived advantages (such as car privileges and more populated assigned areas) owed to common regulations designed to protect sisters from harassment or assault (Radke and Cropper-Rampton, 2005). Sister missionaries by 2013 reported a commensurate degree of spiritual intensity and proselytizing work ethic and exceeded elders in personal religiosity, yet combated both the regular rejection on the street and negative projections from the elders (Chou, 2013, pp. 215–16).

Though the stresses of missionary life did not appear to subside for sisters after the surge, the environment fostered greater collaboration between women in official council groups in the mission and unofficial support networks outside the mission. Personal blogs grew into a popular medium for missionaries to narrate their experiences and include their families and friends in their service. Sisters especially utilized blogs to connect with other women and claim an authoritative voice in reporting on local conditions and proselytizing effectiveness (Mormon Missionary Collection, 2013–2019). Advice books previously centered on elders' challenges were written by returned sister missionaries for young women, drastically altering the categories by which missionary preparation had been typically articulated. Women embraced the language of adventurous, physical, and combative settings, assuring potential missionaries they could conquer any insecurity and endure hardships for Christ. Sisters could claim virtually every blessing promised to men of the priesthood on account of their calling as certified missionaries, but they offered something unique: their own personality, all her traits and character in delivering ministerial service to people in need of connecting with the Holy Spirit (Hahl and Knight, 2014; Young, 2014). Sister missionaries by 2019 displayed a willingness to experiment in less formal proselytism and more humanitarianism, a mission approach resonating with Latter-day Saint Millennials more broadly (Riess, 2019).

Male returned missionaries occupied a class of pre-leaders groomed through the mission experience for callings and assignments reserved for members of the priesthood. They often enjoyed a privileged status during courtship, as many women ranked the qualities of honoring the priesthood and completing a mission at the top of their mate selection criteria (Stacy, 2004). A sample of returned elders attending Brigham Young University in 2007 did not appear to reciprocate, instead placing a priority on dating partners being accepting and friendly (McLaughlin, 2007). After the surge in 2012 and 2013, female returned missionaries, especially in the United States, appeared more normalized and brought a more even appraisal of sister contributions (Chou, 2013). Campus folklore indicated the cachet previously held by recently returned elders receded with the rise of returned sisters; stories of awkward dates arising from men betraying missionary quirks spread among female students, rendering the male returned missionary more of a klutz than a catch (Green, 2016). The surge has appeared to have altered the mission appeal in dating contexts and purchased for women greater influence in resetting values (Riess, 2019, pp. 40–44; Bordelon, 2013).

Studies and frontiers

Most studies that concentrate on gender in the Latter-day Saint mission experience focus on women and sister missionaries. Feminist theory has informed various works, but masculinities studies have remained largely absent. Without established fields of Latter-day Saint mission studies or missiology, the topic of gender in missionary work has been eclectic in the scholarly literature and predominantly studied by historians (see Whittaker, 2000). Several histories of female missionaries narrate the emergence of certified sister missionaries and the effects of their proselytism. Matthew S. McBride (2018) collects the correspondence between mission presidents and Church President Wilford Woodruff to document the development of the policy permitting certified sister missionaries. The article notes several episodes of gendered discourse that fashioned an ambiguous missionary identity for women, encapsulated in the phrase "female brethren" written by one sister to chide elders who had addressed assemblies of missionaries as "brethren" out of habit. Andrea G. Radke and Rebecca Cropper-Rampton (2005) notice the ongoing ambiguities and binds imposed on sisters throughout the Program Era, especially in the category of courtship—women could not completely escape assumptions that they had failed to attract a spouse in deciding to serve a mission, yet they also could not satisfy demands of piety when treated as a potential temptation for the elders. The bind of being projected as simultaneously unattractive and too attractive induced unique stressors not broadly reported by male missionaries. Tania Rands Lyon and MaryAnn Shumway McFarland (2003) analyze the tensions apparent in age policies and priesthood discourse: women received accommodation but not the invitation to represent the church to the world, particularly in the changing age standards that counteracted higher female participation.

Surveys of sister missionary history include Calvin S. Kunz (1976), Jessie L. Embry (1997), Tally S. Payne (2005), and a special issue of *Pioneer* (Sons of Utah Pioneers, 2016). Reid L. Neilson and Fred E. Woods (2012) offer an anthology of studies on latest topics of interest, particularly drawing more global and regional awareness of missions. Jana Riess (2019) presents data and recent historical context for changing attitudes toward missions and sister missionary participation in the Multifaceted Era among the rising generation of missionaries.

Sociological studies tend to examine gender dynamics within the broader concern for courtship and marriage cultures.[3] Hui-Tzu Grace Chou (2013) conducted a survey of returned missionaries and compares elder and sister responses to determine statistically significant differences. Religiosity before and after the mission factored prominently in the class of female missionaries, whereas pressure ranked higher for male missionaries. Nancy C. McLaughlin (2000 and 2007) tracks dating behaviors of male returned missionaries but researches the class of young adults rather than active missionaries.

The array of multilingual and multivocal sources typical of missionary encounters challenges scholars and promises fresh perspectives for gender studies. Globalization as a setting and process has gained considerable traction in mission studies and historiography, though reception history and processes of conversion and disaffiliation within mission fields, among proselytes, and about non-white missionaries have received minor attention. Some scholars have argued the state of the scholarship necessitates decolonization; bringing gender studies and missiology together could displace the dominant narratives favoring missionary administrators and elders (Colvin and Brooks, 2018). Postcolonialism, a theory and critique missiologists more broadly have deliberated since the 1990s (Grimshaw and May, 2010), has yet to inform studies of Latter-day Saint missions. As gender amounts to a core concern of postcolonial interventions (Mohanty, 1984; Donaldson and Kwok, 2002), questions of indigeneity, agency, and sovereign subjectivities in the missionary encounter invite considerations of gendering discourse and effects. A conspicuous omission in mission historiography remains integrating indigenous voices—especially indigenous women's voices—into analyses of change over time and space. Future studies should leverage the growing network of globalization specialists and diverse scholars listed on the Global Mormon Studies directory (globalmormonstudies.org) and build a source base from the already rich archive of digitized missionary blogs curated by the L. Tom Perry Special Collections at Brigham Young University (Mormon Missionary Collection, 2013–2019).

Due to a lack of formal missiology within the Latter-day Saint religious community and Mormon studies scholarship, the chance to build missiology with a sound postcolonial and feminist perspective awaits. Especially as parity between sisters and elders appears to increase with the "Hastening the Work of Salvation" initiative, women's agency in fashioning a missiology—in conceptualizing and executing a religious commission—invites exploration. The ways mission has capitalized on male labor and mission theology has articulated masculine identity deserve attention, especially if a systematic missiology is to parse patriarchal and sovereign discourses in the service of a transnational or global framework.

Notes

1 No study has yet tracked the development of the office of mission president or the bureaucracy of the Missionary Department (Whittaker, 2011, pp. 672–73).

2 The Provo Utah Missionary Training Center reported to librarians at the Church History Library in Salt Lake City that the Brigham Young University Bookstore began supplying standard-issue name tags to missionaries at the Center and throughout the world in August 1980; Jim Kimball, qtd. in Ryan Combs, email to author, May 15, 2019.

3 See Whittaker (2000) for an overview of sociological studies of Latter-day Saint missions.

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Further reading

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Reviews and charts Mormon mission theology in the context of comparative missiology.

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Provides the broadest survey and analysis of sister missionaries in the nineteenth century and addresses the gendered differences between earliest Latter-day Saint missionaries.

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