If I were to characterize the relationship between Mormon women and the contemporary Church, I think that relationship would lack the certainty that Carol has described in her paper. The phrase “building the kingdom” which energized so many of the religious and social efforts of nineteenth-century women no longer means the same thing today. If contemporary women were asked to define it, more likely synonyms might be “serving in the Church” and “trying to be righteous.” But such characterizations do not have the immediacy of colonizing, building, planting, and seeing settlements grow, in part, by the literal labor of adding a baby every year or two.

I see two reasons for this loss of certitude about where women fit into the Church. One is the proliferation of bureaucracy and hierarchical levels that has tended to make nearly every step more difficult. On the ward level, a Relief Society teacher is called after the Relief Society president consults with the bishop; she receives her manual from the secretary, who ordered it through the ward clerk or on her own from a distribution center, where it arrived from Church Printing Services after spending at least two years being planned by a committee, evaluated by a committee, written by a committee, edited, and then correlated by a committee.

While such a process may meet the personal needs of women today more directly, it’s a far cry from the experience of Hazel L. Peterson of Ovid, a Relief Society president in the Paris Idaho Stake for twenty-one years, whom I interviewed in 1975. Part of her assignment was “walking three miles carrying a baby and a basket...to collect the sisters’ contributions—a few eggs, a ball of yarn, a spool of thread, a few pennies.” (Lavina Fielding, "The Saints in Bear Lake Valley," Ensign, July 1975, p. 39.)

On the general level, this proliferation and complexity means a complicated bureaucratic procedure. If Eliza R. Snow had a Relief Society matter to discuss with Brigham Young, she could presumably do it at dinner where she sat on his left. Now the Relief Society president must take a concern to the auxiliary advisor, a member of the First Quorum of the Seventy, who can take it to the Presidency of the First Quorum of the Seventy, who may refer it to the executive committee of the Quorum of the Twelve, who might bring it up for discussion by the full Quorum of the Twelve, who could decide to pass the matter on to the First Presidency. Although such a system can be remarkably fast and efficient at times, the normal result is for most matters to move slowly and for some matters to be dropped altogether because one level chooses not to pass it on to another level.

The second reason for the loss of certitude about where women fit in the Church today may stem from the emphasis on the priesthood. (I offer this merely as a hypothesis because I have not done the research to support it.) But I suspect that as missionary work, genealogy, family home evening, etc. became “priesthood” responsibilities—in a possibly much-needed effort to teach men their responsibilities—the use of “men” and “priesthood” has become nearly synonymous. President Kimball has made missionary work the preeminent kingdom-building activity of his presidency, but women have not been encouraged to serve fulltime missions. It is a “priesthood responsibility.” Women are advised to “support” missionary efforts, but support activities remain uncertain and undefined, vague pious wishes and unfocused goodwill. Ironically, a sizeable number of Latter-day Saint women are literally supporting their missionary sons by working part-or-full-time to provide the funds to keep them in the mission field, but they must deal with the guilt of feeling that they disobey Church leaders’ counsel to stay home.

Of course, these two factors—bureaucratic proliferation and a tendency to separate male
contributions from female contributions and honor the male contributions as "priesthood responsibilities"—affect the whole Church, men as well as women, individuals, and families. It may have contributed to the rise of a game some Salt Lake Mormons play called China-watching the Church, an attempt to interpret inner workings of the Church from fragmentary external clues. Because the decision-making process in the Church is shrouded in silence and because the leaders are becoming increasingly remote from the members—both because of the expansion of the Church and because of the careful attention to public image recently—China-watching has developed in response to the natural human need to know not only the whats but the whys.

It's based on the larger international game of China-watching, where you tell who is in favor this year by seeing who is standing next to whom at the May Day celebrations. The rules are simple: You announce, "Hey, did you know that . . . ?" After "that" has been thoroughly described, you end with the speculation, "Well, I wonder what it means?"

For a few minutes tonight, I'd like to China-watch the Church on women with you.

1. Hey, did you know that since October 1980, seating has been provided for General Boards at general conference, putting women visibly up front at that meeting?

2. At the Regional Representative Seminar on 29 September 1978, President Kimball announced that "the First Presidency and the Council of the Twelve have determined that there is no scriptural prohibition against sisters offering prayers in sacrament meetings." It was therefore determined that it is permissible for sisters to offer prayers in any meetings they attend, including sacrament meetings, Sunday School meetings, and Stake Conferences. Relief Society visiting teachers may offer prayers in homes that they enter in fulfilling visiting teaching assignments" (Ensign, November 1978, p. 100). However, the current General Handbook of Instructions (no. 21, 1976), had not specified that only men could pray in sacrament meetings.

3. In October 1979, a friend of mine heard a letter read by his bishopric explaining that women could no longer be used in Sunday School presidencies. At the time four women were serving in such positions in his stake. He wrote to the Sunday School and received an answer from the executive secretary acknowledging that the question comes up frequently, "particularly where there is a lack of qualified priesthood leadership. Just recently we raised this question again with the Quorum of the Twelve and the First Presidency. They reaffirmed with us the same counsel they have previously given. We have been asked to discourage the use of women in Sunday School presidencies for basically two reasons. The first of which is a great concern with the General Authorities concerns the fact that members of a Sunday School presidency are required to meet together and travel together often in order to fulfill their responsibilities. The opportunities for indiscretion are so many that the Brethren have great concern about a mixed Sunday School presidency. The second reason concerns itself with the awkward position a sister is placed in as a member of a Sunday School presidency. The Brethren are aware that so often a sister in such a role is called upon to give direction and instruction to priesthood leaders that she finds it a difficult thing to do. Report from sisters who have served in such Sunday School positions bear out their concern in both of these areas.

   "It is felt that there are ample opportunities for leadership experience in the Relief Society, Primary, and Young Women to fill the needs for such experience by qualified sisters.

   "It is obvious that ability, enthusiasm, and other qualities for leadership are not a question . . . ." (Barrie K. Marchant to Charles E. Mitchener draft and Charles E. Mitchener to Barrie K. Marchant, 12 October 1979, Church Archives.)

4. One of my former roommates, a woman, has served as assistant ward financial clerk. I went to the general handbooks to check on this position and discovered very little about women financial clerks but quite a bit about women assistant ward clerks. In 1908 (General Handbook of Instructions, no. 9, p. 21), a ward clerk is not required to hold the priesthood but his penmanship and "general fitness for the office" should be considered. At that time, the ward clerk was paid a modest stipend out of tithing funds. The next year, in 1909, the handbook was much more elaborate: "Whenever local conditions are such that the ward clerk is not able to perform all his duties..."
promptly and to the satisfaction of the bishopric of the ward, and a competent male deputy clerk is not available, the bishopric may engage the services of a woman deputy clerk, who should be assigned a certain class of the ward clerical work, and who should be allowed such a portion of the ward clerk's allowance as may be agreed upon by the interested parties; but the ward clerk himself must take minutes of all priesthood, bishop's, and acting teachers' meetings." (No. 10, p. 21.) With minor wording changes, the same paragraph stood in the 1910 edition.

By 1921, eleven years later, this paragraph had been amended to read that the ward clerk "should hold the priesthood, but, where circumstances may require it, he may be assisted by a woman" (No. 13, p. 32). There were no changes through the editions of 1923, 1928, and 1934.

In 1940, nineteen years later, there were substantial revisions. The ward clerk, it was specified, "should have some knowledge of accounting . . . and be a good penman. He should hold the priesthood and be exemplary. If circumstances warrant, he may be assisted by a woman" (No. 16, p. 13). This is the last year the word woman is used. In 1944, the ward clerk should "hold the priesthood . . . In large wards, it may be advisable to appoint an assistant" whose sex, qualifications, and priesthood are not specified (No. 17, p. 41).

The next major revision did not occur for sixteen years. In 1960, the handbook specified that ward clerks "should hold the Melchezidek Priesthood" (No. 18, p. 40). In 1963, it stated in emphatic italics: "They must hold the Melchezidek Priesthood" (No. 19, p. 43). By 1971, bishops were counseled to appoint "ward or branch clerk[s] who hold the Melchezidek Priesthood . . . wherever possible" and it is "also desirable" that assistants hold the Melchezidek Priesthood (The Priesthood Bulletin, February 1971, vol. 7, no. 1, p. 1). This position was softened still further in the 1976 General Handbook of Instructions (no. 21, p. 10), still in current use, which states, "When a worthy Melchezidek Priesthood holder is unavailable, a worthy, responsible Aaronic Priesthood holder may be called."

5. The 1982 Relief Society manual, the one that will be used next year, has 39 examples involving women as the protagonists (almost as many involving men—28). Only three of the examples were specific and personal, identifying the women by name. Only one of the three was a living woman. Furthermore, men were quoted 112 times. Women were, excluding those in the cultural refinement lessons, quoted nine times. Eliza R. Snow was quoted once. Barbara B. Smith was quoted once.

6. The Primary curriculum is being revised, but the current Blazer B and Merrie Miss manuals, which contain identical lessons on priesthood, make this statement: "When a boy or man receives the priesthood, . . . he becomes a worker in God's kingdom" (Merrie Miss B, p. 58; Blazer-B, p. 51). While this may be true, it raises some questions: was the boy not a worker in God's kingdom before? And can someone without the priesthood—for example, everyone in the girls' class including the teacher—be such a worker? How much difference does the priesthood really make? And should differences be emphasized, or even created, when they are not concerned with clearly relevant matters such as administration and ordinances?

Merrie Miss girls are encouraged to help their brothers or friends honor the priesthood—an important principle—by the following practices: they are to encourage deacons to attend meetings, not plan activities that would interfere with the boys' assignments, let brothers take charge of decision-making "under the direction of mother, when father is not present," leave him the bathroom on Sunday morning, press his clothes, shine his shoes, and help him memorize scriptures (Merrie Miss B Memo for lesson 11). The image is of a twelve-year-old deacon to whom everyone in the family, including the mother, defers, who expects the family schedule to revolve around him, who requires personal body service, who cannot study without an audience/tutor, and who will not carry out assignments and attend meetings unless he is "encouraged" to do so and has no competition from other activities. It also implies that women are in charge of the spiritual life of the family, must "manage" the boys and men in their spiritual responsibilities, must defer, and must provide actual physical services before their men will meet their obligations.

The manual gives no examples of girls striving for intellectual or scholastic achievement. There are no women missionaries. No girls play sports. No boys play musical instruments. Only boys earn money. Only boys save lives. Boys learn to read topographic maps and
compasses and test their skills on hikes. Girls glue crushed aluminum foil and string in patterns on the backs of cardboard mirrors, which are to remind them always have pleasant faces. In our urban society, being pleasant may actually be a more useful skill than reading a topographic map, but I wonder what the eventual impact on a girl becomes when she is told, overtly and covertly, that her most important job is to become pleasing and pretty.

7. The Young Women's curriculum defines femininity as "the tender qualities and attitudes not characteristic of men" and illustrates it with a list of essential feminine qualities that begin with hair, eyes, makeup, clothing, expression, and poise. (Laurel A, pp. 95-113.)

8. According to the 1974 Higley-Squire survey at BYU, only 40 percent of the young women who entered graduated with a four-year degree. Eighty percent of the young men who entered graduated. Nearly half of the women who did not graduate indicated that marriage was the reason. A follow-up study for 1974-1980 indicated that 64 percent of the men who graduated were married; only 26 percent of the women who graduated were married. A woman who marries as a freshman has a 5 percent chance of graduating; a sophomore has a 20 percent chance; a junior has a 75 percent chance; and a senior has a 99.5 percent chance. The author seriously proposes that women be encouraged not to marry until after age 21 (their junior year or later); but in the entire Primary and Young Women's curriculum, there was only one example of a woman who had graduated from college. (Brent A. Barlow, "Marriage, Education, or Both at BYU: Facts and Fantasies," address to ASBYU Women, 9 October 1980, manuscript.)

9. Utah women, and presumably LDS women, have sought employment in such numbers that one researcher has concluded that "there is no difference" between them and the national statistics. (Howard M. Bahr, "The Declining Distinctiveness of Utah's Working Women," BYU Studies 19 [Summer 1979]: 525-43.)

Authoritative statements on the subject have varied from the very negative to the relatively positive, but without acknowledging either changes or differences of opinion. For example, in 1963 Spencer W. Kimball, then a member of the Quorum of the Twelve, queried: "How nearly perfect can a mother be who rushes in the morning to get everybody off and settled for the day, herself included, then returns weary after a hard day of employment to a tired husband... and to children and youth with problems, and then to her homemaking, cooking, cleaning, and... social calendar. From such homes come many conflicts, marital problems, and divorces, and delinquent children" ("Keep Mothers in the Home," Improvement Era, December 1963, p. 1072).

Sixteen years later at the women's fireside, in October 1979, he said, now as president of the Church, "Some women, because of circumstances beyond their control, must work. We understand that. We understand further that as families are raised, the talents God has given you and blessed you with can often be put to effective use in additional service to mankind. Do not, however, make the mistake of being drawn off into secondary tasks which will cause the neglect of your eternal assignment such as giving birth to and rearing the spirit children of our Father in Heaven. Pray carefully over all your decisions." (Ensign, November 1979, p. 103.)

In March 1980, Barbara B. Smith said, "The decision of a mother to go to work outside her home is an individual matter. Some widowed and divorced mothers may find they have to work to support themselves and their children. For some women working is a right decision at a certain time; for others it is not." (Relief Society Today: A Conversation with Barbara B. Smith, Ensign, March 1980, p. 21; see also Ensign, November 1979, p. 108.)

This statement was published twelve months after President Ezra Taft Benson, speaking to a fourteen-stake fireside at BYU told the men in the audience, "You TO THE EXTENT THAT CALLINGS REQUIRE US TO SERVE PROGRAMS RATHER THAN PEOPLE, I SUGGEST HUSBANDING OUR RESOURCES CAREFULLY.

are the provider and it takes the edge off your manliness when you have the mother of your children also be a provider." ("In His Steps," 1979 Devotional Speeches of the Year [Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University 1980], p. 64.)

Well, these nine examples are all very interesting, but what do they mean? By selecting nine other examples, of course, one could produce an entirely different conclusion about the relationship of women to the Church and how the Church seems to value women. As far as these examples go, they may be straws blowing in
the wind, but they tell us nothing about the wind itself. That answer must come from research that identifies not only what was said but who the major voices were, when they spoke, what events in the Church and in the world influenced their pronouncements, what sources of information they had access to, what they perceived as problems, and what they perceived as solutions. I have deliberately not tried to create that kind of context.

The conclusions that I wish to draw are fewer and simpler. China-watching is interesting in the short run but ultimately boring and confusing in the long run. It presupposes a unified policy on a given issue when the chances are that no such policy exists—or should exist. The joy of the gospel comes in studying its principles and finding individual ways of translating those principles into practice. To the extent that we look to the institutional church for a list of approved practices—how to have a good family home evening, how to spend Sundays now that we have the consolidated meeting schedule, how to have a good marriage—we are depriving ourselves of the joy of seeking and receiving individual revelation.

Let me expand on that last point. It is sometimes difficult to move from principle to practice. Leaders, members, and manual writers, in an effort to help others make that transfer, sometimes—perhaps even frequently—tell people how to live the gospel rather than encouraging them to find their own ways to do so. When they do, I think they often pour the new wine of the gospel into the old skins of culture, custom, and the traditions of the fathers, tainting the gospel and actually limiting its practice by their prescriptions.

In a Church that is led by men and where a majority of decisions are made in the absence of women or even in the absence of significant information provided by women, I think it is almost inevitable that the role of women will be limited. Sometimes this will be because the capabilities of women are doubted or because individual women are mistrusted by those in positions of authority; but far more commonly, I believe, they are simply overlooked. This is a situation that has the potential for causing great pain to many individual women and limiting the growth of both men and women.

However, to the extent that women attack the institutional church directly as the problem and demand, wheedle, argue, or plead for acceptance and validation by the institution, they are making a mistake. And so are men. By focusing their attention on the institutional church, they are limiting themselves from exploring much more valuable aspects of the gospel.

My suggestion, based on whatever peace I have reached at this point in my life, is that we accept responsibilities and callings as they come to us and fulfill them intelligently, faithfully, and resourcefully to the extent that we are serving others. To the extent that those callings require us to serve programs rather than people, I suggest husbanding our resources carefully.

I also suggest that we beware of attempts to gain institutional power. To do that or to use what influence we have to gain more is to play bureaucratic games by a bureaucracy's amoral rules. Such a course of action will cut us off from the forces of heaven. Despite the current concern with institutional visibility, position, representation, and power for women, I deeply feel that there is only one form of power worth seeking, that of personal righteousness. It is the only form of power that will endure when the Lord receives and judges his church, they are limiting themselves from exploring much more valuable aspects of the gospel.

Personal righteousness is based on faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and his redemptive sacrifice, a commitment to the never-ending process of change called repentance, increasing sensitivity to the Holy Ghost to the point where its companionship can be constant, and relationships with others governed by the law of charity. Whatever position one may be called to, whatever assignment, whatever calling will simply be yet another arena for the exercise of these qualities. And one's ecclesiastical position may be, I think, largely irrelevant to the quality of the life that fills it.

In a beautiful verse in the Doctrine and Covenants (5:14), the Lord speaks of the coming forth "of my church out of the wilderness—clear as the moon, and fair as the sun, and terrible as an army with banners." He gave that revelation in March 1829, over a year before the organization of the Church. We are still coming forth from the wilderness to meet our Lord—but I suspect that we will meet him not as wards, not as stakes, certainly not as central Church committees, departments, and divisions, but as individuals and possibly as families who have taken his name upon us and sought, in love and humility, to see his face.

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