

Mormon Youth Perspectives and Understandings of the Same-Sex Relationship Policies of the  
LDS Church: Understanding Diversity in Religious Beliefs

By

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### **Abstract**

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (LDS, Mormons) and its members are often discussed as an interesting if not foreign religious group. In regards to the LDS Church, the lack of basic understanding of the Church and its gospel, plus the dominant belief of religion as a none rational experience, fosters the public discourse that Mormons allow their religious beliefs to cloud their judgements. I call to attention the diverse perspectives of youth Mormons (18-26) on the same-sex relationship policies of the LDS Church to show that while they might all support these policies they all used varied reasoning and rationality to formulate arguments for their support. The basic tenets of the LDS Church regarding agency and the LDS Church history of policy change, hint that contrary to popular belief the LDS Church encourages its members to shape understandings of their policies that are not entirely orthodox but valuable to comprehension of this religion. By discussing the heterodoxic perspectives and understandings of the youth I interviewed on the same-sex relationship policies of the LDS Church, I seek to dispel with the belief that religious belief is a suspension of rationality and reasoning, but rather the opposite.

### **An Honorary Member**

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (LDS Church) is an ever-present force in Utah, where I grew up. Within a single mile radius of my house in Cottonwood Heights, Utah, there are ten LDS Church-related buildings (Figure 1), from meeting houses and stake centers<sup>1</sup>, to seminaries for education of the high schoolers of the neighborhood. Most of the people I attended school with, until university, were members of the LDS faith (Mormons), and the discussions of their stake dances, temple visits, and treks<sup>2</sup> were the fodder for everyday conversation in my childhood. I was never a member of the LDS Church, but I was constantly involved in their minor rituals of everyday life. Occasionally I would participate in larger Mormon rituals, such as mission farewells, weddings, and funeral services. My discussion with friends, Mormon or not, often focused around the missteps of faithful Mormons or the exciting news that came from large LDS Church gatherings. Not being Mormon did not stop me from learning about all the changes and happenings in the LDS Church and of its members.

Despite this constant interaction with Mormonism and the inclusion in many a LDS Church event, I often found myself not quite fitting in, whether by choice or due to the behavior of others. The topics I discussed, the fact that I swore, and the clothes that I wore all distanced me in little ways from my community members. People never directly mentioned or made me aware of my difference, nor did they ever tell me specifically that it was a problem, but I could

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<sup>1</sup> Meeting houses are equivalent to chapels and are where daily Sunday worship occurs. Stake houses are meeting areas where there are administrative offices for those serving in positions of leadership in the stake and the place of gathering for large events, like youth dances (stake dances) and stake conferences.

<sup>2</sup> Trek or Pioneer Trek, is an activity in which the youth reenact some of the faith-building experiences of the pioneers who journeyed to the Salt Lake Valley in the mid-1800s. Youth could be organized into groups or “families,” wear pioneer-era clothing, pull handcarts, and discuss the faith of those who made courageous sacrifices to gather to Zion.

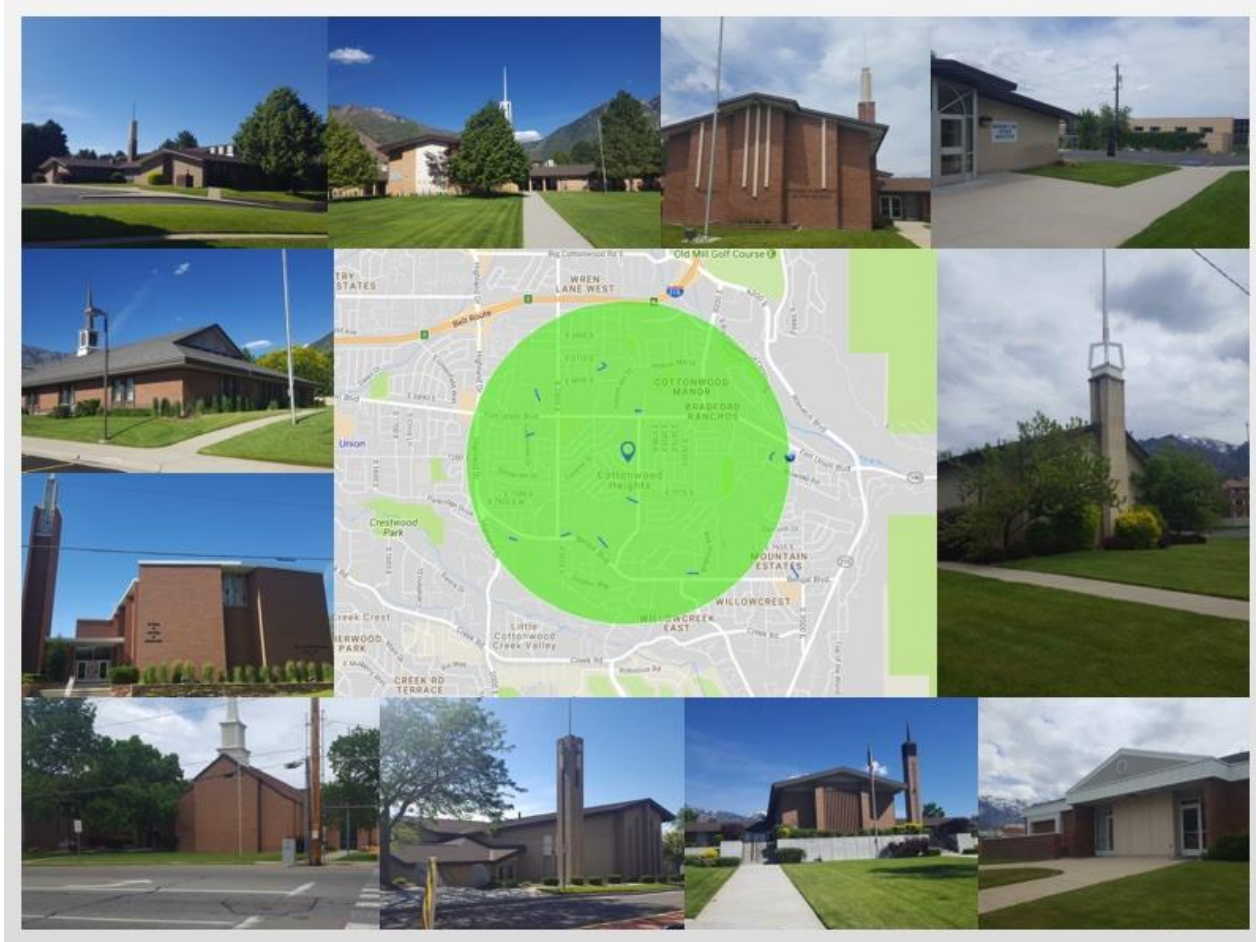


Figure 1: The LDS-Church Affiliated Building within a mile of my house

detect the discomfort in people's faces and hear a slight change in topic and tone when I entered a conversation. None of it was cruel, and I was always welcomed and provided with aide from Mormons I did not even know, but it was clear on some level that I was different. That said, I did have friends who strongly identified with their faith and still maintained their relationships with me. Only at moments when the LDS faith was at the center of our interaction would I be reminded that I was not a member of their faith.

This distance from others in my community was partially my choice as well. I often choose to create a space for myself in my community separate from the Mormons. Whenever I mention I am from Utah, I preempt the inevitable question by making it clear that I am not

Mormon. I actively choose to dress, speak, and act in ways when in Utah to highlight my differences. Most of all, I actively avoid friendships or extended interactions with those in my community who I identified as more likely to try and convert me or entirely ignore me. I wanted to make it clear to everyone in my community that while I supported their Mormon faith I needed them to respect my beliefs.

Beyond these simply acts that separated me from Mormons my advocacy for LGBT+ rights did not exactly fit in with my Mormon peers. Opposite to the dominant discourse about Utah, Salt Lake City is very liberal place and one of the only cities with an openly lesbian mayor in the United States. Along with this tone in SLC and my mom's and religion's<sup>3</sup> continuous emphasis on equity for all, regardless of sexuality and gender, I grew to form my own opinions in support for LGBT+ rights. For this reason, I always strongly advocated for LGBT+ rights and even lead the Gay-Straight Alliance at my school to provide a safe and empowering place for the LGBT+ members of my high school. All of this once again created a distance between me and my Mormon community, and I rarely, if ever, talked to anyone about these issues.

This way of living in Utah created a gap between me and the Mormons in my life and a gap in my understanding of their faith and individual beliefs. The dominant public depiction of Mormons in modern times per Michael Austin, a Mormon literature analyst, is of them as "hyperobedient, patriotic, conservative, and, in all probability, sexually repressed," and this gap created between myself and my Mormon community has fostered a very similar theory to the

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<sup>3</sup> I grew up Unitarian Universalists and our opening statement always included this fundamental line "Come, come, whoever you are -No matter whom you love, or how you speak, or whatever your abilities - you are welcome here!" The UU Church is a strong advocate for LGBT+ rights and promotes equity and respect for all. (Morel-Ensminger 2001).

popular discourse about Mormons (1994). The theory that their beliefs unlike my own were not diverse nor logical, and if I knew one opinion I knew them all.

When I left Utah for Michigan, I noticed this disturbing gap of knowledge of the people I had grown up with. Why had I never discussed LGBT+ issues or problems of gender with my friends? For all those years I spent surrounded by Mormon culture, I had failed to truly understand the people I interacted and socialized with. Centered in a culture all its own, I had instead chosen to simply interact and not ask questions that might have required me to dispel of my own biases. When it came time to choose my thesis topic I realized that I wanted to go home to Utah and ask hard-hitting questions: I wanted to talk to my friends and other young Mormons about how they saw the world differently from me, especially when it came to topics like LGBT+ issues.

According to a study done by Jana Riess, a Mormon theology professor at Miami University, Mormon youth are among the most faithful Millennials, ages 18-34, with 82% of them feeling God's presence at least once a week and 2/3 of them sharing their belief in the LDS Church at least once a week (2016). My history in Utah and with young Mormon members of my community gave me a foot in the door to talk with these young faithful members of the LDS Church. While I was still an outsider, the life experiences, culture, and language I share with them set me apart from any random stranger. I was an honorary member of their community. I am a visible member at Mormon events, a fellow Utahan, and a vocal supporter of my Mormon friends' religious choices. While not entirely an insider perspective on the Mormon religion, I had a window into a world that is often closed off to anyone not of the faith.

On that note, it is valuable to state that because of my lack of true membership to the LDS Church I cannot nor should I make a claim that the arguments made within this paper are



those of the LDS Church and all its members. In this paper, I am not trying to prove anyone wrong or right, or provide a comprehensive paper about all the beliefs and perspectives of every member of the LDS Church. Instead, this is simply a paper to discuss the beliefs and perspectives of the youth, roughly between the ages of 18 and 30, and what they might tell us about the LDS Church and the ways of believing built into it.

When I reached out to old friends and proposed the idea they all told me that most if not all Mormon youths would be willing to discuss the same-sex relationship policies of the LDS Church with me. Many of them even agreed to help me find people to interview. Lily, a friend of many years, was the most supportive of all by providing insight into ideas and questions I should discuss with the people I interviewed. Lily worked through my questions with me and was the first interview I conducted, helping dispel minor misconceptions or ideas that pervaded my discussions. Old friends invited me to LDS Church gatherings and introduced me to others, helping me to form a network of people to whom I could talk and begin to form a participant group with. Through this networking and further outreach I developed a set of participants from all over Utah to talk to.

All my interviews occurred with people between the ages of 19 and 27, who identified themselves as members of the LDS Church. A majority of them were women, mostly due to my friends and their friends being female, but four out of the thirteen participants were male. Only one of the interviewees was a person of color, which makes sense since nine out of ten members of the U.S. Mormon faith are Caucasian (Mims 1991). Most were students at or recently graduated from universities and colleges within Utah, studying a wide variety of topics. Unlike I expected, the participants were from a variety of states and even from another country, but all considered Utah to be their home for the foreseeable future. None were married, but a few were

engaged. All of the participants identified themselves as heterosexual, whether engaged or not. A third of them came from divorced parent or single parent homes, while the rest were from married heterosexual parent families. It is important to note that all participants names were changed to protect their anonymity and you will see to me referring to them via those names.

All the interviews but one took place in the participant's homes, where I was invited in and often provided with food. Every person greeted me with enthusiasm and a willingness to welcome me into their personal space. These settings, as opposed to a more formal facility, nurtured very conversational interviews, where side tangents were often made and the conversation would often veer into topics not originally planned. All the topics discussed were not entirely relevant to the thesis, such as a five-minute venture into YouTube videos about otters, but these moments of laughter created a welcoming environment for them to discuss more personal topics. My planned questions were simply a guide to delve into topics that I nor I imagine my participants discuss often. Every interview was recorded, but that never changed the tone of the interviews. It was often a learning experience for the participants and myself, where we came to learn a little bit about each other and gain respect for each person's individual perspective on LGBT+ issues. Questions were asked by both myself and the participants and often the most informative answers came from moments when we would dissect a question to get to the real core of it and how to best answer it. Listening back to all the interviews and transcribing them bit by bit, it became very clear that there were themes in the participants' answers that I never expected.

When discussing the policies of the LDS Church that touched on LGBT+ issues it became evident that for my participants, these LGBT+ policies were more about same-sex relationships, whether of the sexual, marital or familial nature. This is not to say that my

participants or myself fail to recognize transgender, bisexual, intersex, or other sexual or gender identities. Instead, my participants seem to be focusing their discussion of LGBT+ issues mostly through the topic of same-sex relationships, because most of the LDS Church doctrine and policies are more directly addressing same-sex relationships. As will be discussed in a later chapter, the LDS Church leadership, in response to the prominence of same-sex marriage in the secular sphere, is currently and urgently working to define marriage and relationships as between man and woman. Thus, when discussing the LGBT+ policies of the LDS Church, the participants are discussing same-sex relationships because for them these are the most important and often discussed LGBT+ issues. For this reason, throughout the paper I will be talking about the policies created by the LDS Church that address same-sex relationships instead of the entire body of LGBT+ policies created by the LDS Church.<sup>4</sup>

This work culminated in a very different conclusion than I expected at the beginning of my work on this thesis. Originally, I hypothesized that all the participants would come to the same conclusion on the same-sex policies of the LDS Church that they supported them and believed they were right for the LDS Church. I also thought that they would all have the same reasoning for their support for the policies, that it was what God had revealed and thus what was right. While I was right about the first prediction, I was sorely wrong about the second. Mormon youth have heterodox understandings of the gospel of the LDS Church to explain and reinforce their support for the LDS Church's same-sex relationship policies. Each youth regardless of their support for the policies as correct for the LDS Church and society, had heterodox perspectives in the sense that they had opinions at variance with the official or orthodox position, by not exactly

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<sup>4</sup> Throughout the LDS Church literature and in interviews with my participants the term "same-sex" is used interchangeable with "same-gender," but more often, which is why I choose this term.

falling in line with the statements released by the LDS Church leadership in regards to these policies (Henderson 1998). Contrary to what I expected, rationality and logic is embedded in their religious beliefs. Throughout this paper, I will show how these Mormon youths are using their agency, empowered by the LDS Church doctrine, to formulate their own understandings and perspectives to support to the same conclusion that the same-sex relationship policies of the LDS Church are right for the LDS Church and the larger society. I argue that that contrary to secular stereotype of religion, religious belief is not a suspension of reasoning and rationality. Instead, religious belief is an enactment of various skills and abilities by faithful people, to use doctrines and covenants of their faith to form their own support for policies and actions of their religion.

In Defining religion in the Modern World, I discuss the definition of religion and the concept of “deprivatization,” to explain how religion helps its members make meaning and connection with things throughout their world. Next, in An Eternity with Apostles and Advocates, I discuss the role of revelation, the LDS Church’s position as conservator of traditional values, and the eternal nature of family, to explain how members of the LDS Church gain a steadfast faith in the doctrines and policies of the LDS Church. The chapters Changes of Church Policies and the Myth of Continuity and Same-sex Relationship Policy Changes and Participants View of their Continuity discuss the myth of continuity created in regards to policy changes in the LDS Church and how the same-sex relationship policies are in line with policy changes of the past fit into the belief that all changes are known by God before they are even made. Next in The Fundamentals of Choice in the Church, I discuss the core tenet of choice in the LDS Church and how the availability of agency creates a steadfast belief in all policies of the LDS Church, especially the same-sex relationship policies, but also a wide variety of

perspectives on why the policies fit into the LDS Church. In Diversity of Youth Perspective, I go over the heterodox views of the participants on why the same-sex relationship policies of the LDS Church fit into the LDS Church and society. Finally, the last chapter ties together all these ideas to make the argument that despite the single conclusion that the Mormon youth opinions come to about supporting the same-sex relationship policies of the LDS Church, there are a whole set of perspectives, based on different reasoning and understanding of doctrines, on why the policies are right for the LDS Church and the larger society.

### **Defining Religion in the Modern World**

Morton Klass in his work, *Ordered Universe*, discussed the many definitions of religion created in the field of anthropology. Religion has long been a topic of interest for anthropologists, including Emilé Durkheim or Clifford Geertz. Geertz discussed religion as the use of symbols to establish an order of existence which makes moods and motivations seem realistic, while Durkheim discussed religion as a projection of the social values of society, where symbolic language makes statements about the social order. One theory could ignore or build on another, but inevitably their discussion is trying to format a definition for what religion is and how it works within itself, but not a definition that includes discussion about “religion as a rubric for culture” (Klass 1995, 23). What this means is that many anthropologists ignore the fact that religion can set the rules and standards by which culture and the issues that arise within it are measured. Klass sees religion as a means to understand and build culture. Religion helps form beliefs that explain cultural phenomena and our opinions “about some aspect of the universe—and it reflects the presence, usually below the level of consciousness and therefore consideration, of assumptions about the fundamental nature of the universe” (Klass 1995, 55). To Klass religion forms some form of fundamental understanding of the universe that either consciously or

subconsciously formats the faithful person's opinions about some aspect of the culture, society, and universe. It "serves to satisfy our need for explanation" (Klass 1995, 15). These theories about religion helped Klass form this definition of religion:

Religion in a given society will be that instituted process of interaction among the members of that society—and between them and the universe at large as they conceive it to be constituted—which provides them with meaning, coherence, direction, unity, easement, and whatever degree of control over events they perceive as possible (38).

When discussing Mormonism, I am not concerned with what makes it a religion or its structural elements, I am interested in how Mormonism has specifically affected and structured the beliefs that my participants have on same-sex relationship policies of the LDS Church and how they fit into greater society. This means definitions that only discuss religion as its own separate entity, with no influence on or power over culture, ignores the vital role Mormonism is playing in shaping its members' understandings of things in their surrounding society and culture.

I believe for this reason that the LDS Church readily fits the definition of religion given by Klass, as discussed above, which will be shown throughout this paper. The LDS Church does, as Klass states, provide meaning and a degree of direction in regards to events that its members need in their given society, by creating an interaction between the members and God that formats their assumptions about the universe. Each participant that I interviewed has used their religion to structure their interactions with other members of society and aspects of their culture. Thus, it makes sense that when it comes to same-sex relationship issues, Mormons will use religion to understand them and shape their perspectives on them.

The gospel of the LDS Church is the main way of integrating the interaction between members of the LDS Church and God, but the question remains: in what way is the gospel of the LDS Church discussing modern, or what might generally be held to be secular, issues? There are many theories that explain the interactions of religion with the secular world, but a once common

theory in the field of anthropology, is that of secularization. The theory of secularization claims that religion is fading and that it will eventually play no role in shaping society and people's viewpoints; however, Mormonism is not following this pattern. The LDS Church is growing continuously and as will be demonstrated throughout this paper is interacting with the secular world in a way that contradicts secularization. The LDS Church is expanding its use of gospel to address secular issues, like LGBT+ rights and marriage, abortion, etc., in a fashion that emulates José Casanova's idea of deprivatization.

Deprivatization, as defined by Casanova, is the pattern of religious institutions and organizations refusing "to restrict themselves to the pastoral care of individual souls" and instead continuing "to raise questions about the interconnections of private and public morality and to challenge the claims of the subsystems, particularly states and markets, to be exempt from extraneous normative considerations" (Casanova 1994, 5). There has been a great outpouring of religious outreach into secular issues, contrary to what theories of secularization would suggest. While many religions enter the political and secular sphere to "defend their traditional turf," they are also participating "in the very struggles to define and set the modern boundaries between the private and public spheres" (Casanova 1994, 7). Religions, like the LDS Church, are working to help modern society reflect on issues of norms and ethics within itself. Religions are working against the marginalization of their role by inserting their views and beliefs into new and prominent branches of politics and society. This new role of religion puts its members in the role of being advocates for the arguments of their religious organizations, and creates for them a new means of understanding the issues primarily through the lens of their religions.

In this way, deprivatization is the religious model of Klass at its finest, with the religious organizations working to form a way of interaction between their members and the society. The

religions, like the LDS Church, politicize their gospel and beliefs to help their members construct ways of understanding and meaning about secular issues and create a sense of unity and direction about the topics. While breaking away from the model that society has set out for them, as the unimportant social structure of the past, the religious organizations are also acting as a means of understanding the wider society for their members.

As will be discussed throughout this paper, the LDS Church closely reflects both the model of Klass and Casanova. It is the deprivatization of the LDS Church and its role in its members' lives that has helped to determine my participants heterodox understandings and perspectives on the same-sex relationship policies created by the LDS Church leadership and how those policies fit into society outside of the LDS Church. It is important to understand the role the LDS Church has in influencing the members' ideas and thoughts about things outside of the gospel, because it shows how belief and faithfulness shift people's understanding of the world.

### **An Eternity with Apostles and Advocates**

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints is a growing religion that at its current rate of growth is predicted by 2080 to become one of the major world religions (Bushman 2006, 1). Young adults constitute sixty percent of baptisms into the LDS Church and eighty-five percent of converts stay part of the LDS Church for the rest of their lives (Bushman 2006, 30). Accompanying this increasing size is a great deal of inquiry into the practices and rituals of the LDS Church. People I meet are always fascinated to learn about the temple garments<sup>5</sup> or what

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<sup>5</sup> Temple garments are worn under normal clothing by adult members of the Church, who have made sacred promises of fidelity to God's commandments and the gospel. They represent the sacred and personal aspect of their relationship with God and their commitment to live good, honorable lives.



the inside of a temple looks like, and while these are fascinating questions, it is beyond the scope of this paper to write about them here.<sup>6</sup> Instead, this chapter contains the necessary information for understanding the topics we will be discussing. Complex as this religion is, the structures that make it up help define how the youth I interviewed at once all come to the same conclusion about the same-sex relationship policies of the LDS Church, yet still hold heterodox understandings of these same policies. The trust in the President of the LDS Church and his revelation, the role the LDS Church leadership has made for itself as the conservator of traditional values, and the conceptualization of the eternal nature of human life and family, all fundamentally shape the policies created in relation to the same-sex relationships and how the youth form their understandings of these policies.<sup>7</sup>

To set the record for the rest of the paper, *the Church* in this paper is describing the LDS Church as an organization. When discussing the Church, I mean the gospel, policies, population of faithful and structure. The Church is its own entity able to influence and shape the members' beliefs, but the changes that occur within the religion happen due to the role of the Church leadership. *The Church leadership*, while being part of the Church, is the functional part of the Church that has the power to change it. Made up of the President and his apostles, they are the structure of Church that configures the new policies, receives revelation, and works to govern the Church and its members. *The members* are another part of the Church I discuss in this paper and all of participants are part of this group. Their roles vary in the Church, but all have a belief in the word of God as told in the *Book of Mormon*. This tripartite format of Mormonism is a

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<sup>6</sup> See *Covenant Clocks: Mormon Temple Garments in Light of Identity Theory* by Adam J. Powell, or *Keeping the Sacred: Structured Silence in the Enactment of Priesthood Authority, Gendered Worship, and Sacramental Kinship in Mormonism* by Bradley H. Kramer

<sup>7</sup> For a detailed history of Mormonism, see PBS for an in-depth analysis and discussion of the LDS Church, called "The Mormons," which can be found online.

simplified version of the whole church structure, but they are in a sense the main players that have a role in this ethnographic study.

Revelation, unlike in other religions, is a constant and current possibility for the Church leadership. “Mormons believe that divine revelation for the direction of the entire Church comes from God to the President of the Church, who is regarded by LDS saints as a prophet, seer, and revelator” (Bushman 2006, 17). He is a prophet like Abraham, Moses, Peter and Joseph Smith Jr. Each new President is taking over the role that Smith played: President and prophet. Revelation is received by them when they are in contemplation and God has something that needs to be revealed to his faithful. These revelations can come at any time, but most often when God sees that it is necessary and important for his faithful to be made aware and united on certain topics. Some revelations can be small section changes in the gospel and others can shift the entirety of the Church structure, like the banning of polygamy. Either way revelations are announced by the President to the entire Church, and then integrated into the gospel with rapid succession.

While the President is the primary source of revelation, others in the Church are encouraged to ask God to answer their questions about anything. As stated in the gospel, “even so surely shall you receive a knowledge of whatsoever things you shall ask in faith, with an honest heart” (Doctrines and Covenants, 8: 1-3). The members are put into a direct relationship with God, but it is made clear that even with this relationship “only one speaks for the Lord and he is chosen by the Lord” (Doctrines and Covenants, 43:1-7). The President will always be the only one to receive revelation directly from God. While the members can have interaction with God, it is solely about finding meaning and coherence on passages already in the gospel. Both the members and the President are acting in a way consistent with Klass’s definition of religion by gaining means of interacting with God. However, members are asking questions and

interacting with God based in knowledge already provided in the gospel, while the President is making those means of interaction possible through shaping the gospel and working to set clearer and more unified messages about all issues addressing the Church.

The role of the President as the receiver of revelation creates in the members a sense of faith in the President and his counselors. The President and his counselors are those who are in direct contact with God, which means they know best what God wants from his faithful and how best to structure the Church. Many of my participants mentioned that they trust the prophet only second most to God Himself. Merida, one of my interviewees, said she has created testimony<sup>8</sup>, through praying and has “received a personal answer that these are the people that God has put on the Earth today to lead us and guide us through life.” This trust between the members and the President creates a trust in their statements and guidance in regards to the Church. In terms of policy changes, this means that members often trust that the President and his counselors are guiding the Church on the right path due to their connection with God.

The Church’s role in the world is one of the important things that the President and his counselors shape with their revelations and interactions with God. Before modern day, the role of the Church might have been different, but the trend of deprivatization has pushed the Church leadership to redefine the Church “as a protector of the traditional family, a conservator of traditional values” (Bushman 2006, 4). As President Gordon B. Hinckley, the 15<sup>th</sup> President of the Church, stated in 1994, the role of the Church is to “be a voice in defense of the truth” and “stand as a conservator of those values which are important in our civilization and our society.” The Church is deprivatizing “to protect the traditional life-world from administrative or juridical

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<sup>8</sup> A testimony is a spiritual witness given by the Holy Ghost to members of the faith. With this foundation, a testimony grows to include all principles of the gospel. It is often shared with others to show faith in God or reveal to others the possibility of their own testimony.

state penetration” (Casanova 1994, 58). This protecting of traditional life, often means opposition against things like abortion and gay marriage, but does not mean a total turn against more liberal social policies and social services<sup>9</sup>. In general, what the Church seems to consider as threats to traditional values and family are issues that directly challenge these core tenets of the gospel, such as family and marriage.

Acting as the conservator of traditional values does not mean that the Church is always separated from the government. Instead, Joseph Smith made his religion to be “in full harmony with the scientific principle that the universe is controlled by law” and so, the gospel emphasizes in many different texts the importance of following the law of land as faithfully as the law of God (Alexander 1986, 275). “Let no man break the laws of the land, for he that keepeth the laws of God hath no need to break the laws of the land” (Doctrine and Covenants, 58: 21). God, as Smith revealed, wanted his faithful to follow the constitution and all that is written within it, because it was brought about by God just as much as his gospels were. All members of the Church should be able to live in unison with law of the land and law of God.

The only caveat to this doctrine is that while the Church respects the law of land and the separation of church and state, they also strongly believe in the practice of freedom of religion. In every interview I conducted, there was mention that there is freedom of religion in the Constitution, which means everyone—including Mormons—can worship however they want and fight for whatever they believe in. What this means for the political stance of the Church is that if the government or politics attack the religious rights of its members, or the supports something that goes against the core doctrines of the Church, the Church leadership will “call upon its

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<sup>9</sup> For example, the Church leadership was very vocal about their support of the anti-discrimination bill for LGBT+ in regards to housing and workplace in 2015 (Boorstein 2015, Romboy 2015)

children to stand with the Church for self-preservation” (Alexander 1986, 248; Bushman 2006, 45). Jamie communicated this exactly by saying, “as long as they [the government] are making righteous decisions and as long as they are making godly decisions, Mormons will follow the law, but if not then we cannot.” In this way, the Church practices its right to freedom of religion. They fight that which goes against their gospel, in an attempt to change the dominant discourse of politics in the country to better represent what they believe in, so that they can both fall the laws of the land and the laws of God.

Notwithstanding the fact that in the United States there exists controversy about religions fighting against issues such as gay marriage and abortion as a contradiction to separation of church and state, the Mormon practice of fighting these issues seems like a necessity for the practice of their faith. Deprivatization for the Church seems logical, as they take issues normally considered out of their territory and demonstrate to the public that these issues can be state issues but also have pertinence to the lives of those of the Mormon faith, in that they challenge their fundamental beliefs. Belief in freedom of speech gives the Church the agency to have opinions which contradict those of the state in favor of their religion and to deprivatize these issues, while remaining a law-abiding facet of the U.S.

Besides their belief in freedom of religion creating space for deprivatization, it also creates a space for the members of the Church and Church leadership as advocates and representatives for the gospel of the Church. “As citizens, Church members are encouraged to participate in political and governmental affairs... and also urged to be actively engaged in worthy causes to improve their communities and make them wholesome places” (Handbook 2, 3.4.5). In no place is it more evident that the role of members is as advocates for the Church than in the position that youth are given in the Church.

Youth in the Church are put into different positions from their peers outside of the Mormon faith. Their job in this new deprivatized sphere of the Church, as the protector of traditional values, is to be messengers and advocates for the Church's doctrines and covenants. On the Church website specifically designed for youth, there are many resources about how to live a life true to the Church, including how to be civically and politically engaged. In one of the many articles on this website, the Church leadership invites the youth to "put on the whole armor of God [and] join the battle today, as the sons of Helaman<sup>10</sup> did so many years ago. Don't wait until you get married or start your lifelong career or get older. The Church needs our youth now. The Lord needs you now" (Hinckley 2007). Youth are thrust into the position of fighters for the beliefs and doctrines of the Church. One of my participants, Veronica, discussed her role in the Church saying "if something is right or better [than the law of the land] I feel like it is my duty to fight for that." She and other participants echoed this sentiment, making it abundantly clear that the youth do have a role in representing and fighting for their Church. They like the adult members, have "a duty to honor and obey God before anyone else" (Jamie). Thus, these youths alongside the Church and the Church leadership become individual protectors of the traditional family and values of the Church. Their understandings of and perspectives on of the policies are shaped by this role and influence their discussion of it with others.

The last, and most complex, piece of Mormonism is the eternal nature of human life and family, or eternal progression. Eternal progression is one of the major foundations of the Church and "a person's attitude about eternal progression will largely determine his philosophy of life " (Young, Journal of Discourses 16:165). Due to the idea of eternal progression, Mormons

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<sup>10</sup> Helaman is an apostle from the *Book of Mormon*, who helped reestablish the Church and continue writing its history after they were attacked. Leading two thousand young warriors they battled the Lamanites [those who do not believe] and were preserved by faith.

“constantly seek personal and righteous improvement not only by establishing Zion<sup>11</sup> in this world, but by anticipating the continuation of progression eternally” (Adams 1992, 467). The way to improve and continue one’s eternal progression is through the stages of living— premortal life, mortality, post mortal spirit life, and the resurrected state in the presence of God— where each member must be moving to become more Christ-like and fulfilling their covenant with God. There are many ways to be more Christ-like, such as following all the commandments and gospels of God, but creating a family and having children is one of the most important ways to become more Christ-like<sup>12</sup>.

The chain of eternity begins before the members enter life as a mortal being on Earth, in what is called the premortal life. During the premortal life, many souls live together awaiting the time for them to start their mortal lives on Earth. Eternal progression begins here and, due to that, many things can occur before they enter mortality. None of this can be remembered when members enter the mortal life, but the connections and progress made is still there. First, souls can choose to follow Christ or Lucifer, and many battles have been said to occur here between those who choose to believe in Christ and those who do not<sup>13</sup>. Once mortal, this does not mean people cannot change and believe in Christ, but choosing to believe often determines if you are born into a believing family or not, thus avoiding the challenges that come with trying to convert. Second, along with choosing to believe, souls in my understanding also meet their future family

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<sup>11</sup> Zion refers to “the place or land appointed by the Lord for the gathering of those who accept his gospel” and “the lands of Zion are places where the pure in heart live together in righteousness” (Doctrines and Covenants, 101: 16-22).

<sup>12</sup> While Jesus does not have children or a wife, the idea of a perfect family comes from the structure of God as father and Mary as mother.

<sup>13</sup> There is a theory within the Church literature and among Church scholars that those of African descent were those who choose Lucifer in premortal life and were born with the darker skin to mark their choices (Smith and Bringhurst 2004).

and create bonds that will transcend premortal life. What is meant by this is that a soul can meet its future family, for example say its parents, and create a connection with them, i.e. as parent and child, that will play out in its mortal life, when its soul is born to its premortal parents as their child. This is one of the many ways that family becomes eternal and one begins the eternal progression towards a Christ-like life.

Once in the mortal life, the eternal progression can be shaped in many more ways, because that progression occurs through everything that people learn and experience. “Obtaining a physical body is a crucial step, enabling a person to experience physical sensations of all kinds and to progress in knowledge and understanding, all of which will rise with the person in the Resurrection” (Doctrines and Covenants, 130:18). During the mortal life, as with their premortal life, they can choose to follow Christ and follow the gospels of the Church or not. Yet, while living a mortal life, one of the most important things members can do to continue their eternal progression is to create a family and have children.

As a member of the Church, getting married is one’s first sacred task. Marriage occurs only between man and woman, the importance of which we will discuss more later. Getting married is an important covenant that is kept with both God and with a spouse, but it is also the first step toward creating the eternal family. Once married, man and woman are sealed to one another, which is a set of rituals that “seal familial relationships in the temple, making possible the existence of them as husband and wife throughout eternity” (“Guide to Scriptures”, 2016). Thus, the members start an eternal family by creating a family base together with marriage.

Once married and sealed, the next task in the mortal life is by far the most sacred of all and links back to *The Bible*: having children. Just like many other religions, the Church encourages members to “be ye fruitful, and multiply; bring forth abundantly in the earth, and



multiply therein” (Genesis 9:7, King James Version). Married couples should seek to have children and create a family, bringing into their life the souls they met in premortal existence. Once born, the children are also sealed to their parents, creating a link between them that will secure their relationships for eternity. Thus, in their mortal life members create and seal their whole family together insuring that for eternity they will be together and they have created the eternal family. This process also insures that they are continuing their eternal progression by choosing to follow the laws of God and becoming more Christ-like through the process of worshipping and creating a family.

Once members have died, they enter the post-mortal life in the Celestial Kingdom and await the time when they will be resurrected with God. Even during their post-mortal life, they must still work to be more Christ-like and work on their eternal progression. As stated by one of my participants, in the post mortal life “God will set everything right and all will be fixed” (Ross). This means many transgressions and issues of the soul, such as having homosexual attraction, will be fixed and made right, pushing them more towards a Christ-like existence. Each person will “be assigned a degree of glory” and “further progress is believed possible within each degree” (Adams 1992, 466). But members also begin to see the rewards of their work of eternal progression in both the pre-mortal and mortal life. Marriage and family continue into the Celestial Kingdom due to the marriages and sealings performed in the mortal life. The eternal family created thus allows for “eternal increase” as asked for by God (Cannell 1994, 156). Once resurrection occurs, all these families are still together and their continued relationships allows for them to be following God’s gospel.

Eternal progression in Mormonism creates beliefs in the eternally progress of everything, including its members. The belief in the eternal element of their life means that members are

always attempting to be more Christ-like and better live under the gospels of the Church. One of the many ways they try to honor the gospels of God is to create the family God calls for: a family of man, wife and children. Family thus becomes the center of the Church in the mortal existence because it is the one constant means of becoming more Christ-like. The principle of the “eternal unit of man and wife and being able to reproduce eternally” becomes "a principle that doesn't last just on this earth but all eternity" (Ross and Pritchard). By creating a family, the members are following the gospels of God in premortal, mortal, and post-mortal existence, eternally progressing always.

These discussed gospels and structures of the Church are only a few in the vast literature provided by the Church, but they are fundamental in shaping the youth understanding of same-sex relationship policies of the Church. For one, the trust between the members of the Church and the leadership of the Church creates a steadfast confidence in the policies they create, especially those pertaining to core doctrines of the Church, such as the eternal family. The role the members, especially the youth, play in helping the Church enact its role as the protector of traditional values are empowered by this trust in Church leadership. Their important role as emphasized by the Church leadership forces them to understand and form perspectives on all the deprivatization policies the Church creates so they can explain it and transform others people's views on the topics. When it comes to same-sex relationship policies, this means the members of the faith filter their understanding of them through the doctrine on the eternal family, through how the Church leadership discusses them, and through their own interaction and role in protecting and discussing the policies. These multiple processes of understanding allow for a diversity of heterodox understandings of the policy in the youth. Yet, it also encourages the same

conclusion because all together the gospel of the Church “serves to satisfy” the members’ “need for explanation” and “provides the sense of unity inherent to a cultural system” (Klass 1995, 15).

### **Changes of Church Policies and the Myth of Continuity**

In Alma 37:11-12, Alma tells his son he doesn’t know all of God’s mysteries “And it may suffice if I only say they are preserved for a wise purpose, which purpose is known unto God; for He doth counsel in wisdom over all His works, and His paths are straight, and His course is one eternal round.”

All the doctrine, when laid out, seems like an unchanging and unmoving entity, that, as Alma states, follow paths that are straight. These large bodies of sacred texts, like the *Holy Bible*, are mapped out and they mark what is seen as an unchanging and true history of the events, but unlike many other religions the LDS Church still has living prophets who are able to change the policies and doctrines of the Church. “We [the First Presidency<sup>14</sup>] believe all that God has revealed, all that He does now reveal, and we believe that He will yet reveal many great and important things pertaining to the Kingdom of God” (Articles of Faith, 9). For the members of the LDS Church, articles of their religion can be altered at any time by the apostles when they receive inspiration from God, as discussed above. God could speak to his apostles at any moment and inform them of changes and revisions necessary to continue to follow his word. This means that the Church can alter any policy at any time, no matter the duration or relevance of the doctrine or policy. The changes made can be small or large, but each time they happen, the implication is often that someone in the Church must change their lifestyle in a certain way. There have been two major instances, other than same-sex relationship policies, where the First

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<sup>14</sup> The First Presidency is the highest governing body of the Church. Made up of the President of the Church, and two other apostles he selects as his counselors by inspiration. Members of the First Presidency are special witnesses of Jesus Christ, called to teach and testify of Him throughout the world.

Presidency and Quorum of Twelve<sup>15</sup> have used this power to alter doctrine: polygamy in 1890, and the right of Priesthood for those of African descent in 1978.

The ending of polygamy was one of the largest and most prominent changes in the lives of the early Mormons in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Polygamy had been practiced by many members of the Church from the beginnings of the faith in New York to their settlement in Utah, and was even practiced by prominent members of the Church leadership, such as Joseph Smith and Brigham Young (Bushman 2006). While it was practiced freely and openly among members of the faith, even before the changes of 1890, there was some disagreement about the possibility of polygamy within the gospel itself. In the *Book of Mormon*, it is stated that “for there shall not any man among you have save it be one wife” (Ja 2:27) Whereas in the *Doctrines and Covenants*, section 132 it is stated that “If virgins give consent to plural marriages then the husband is not committing adultery.” Polygamy was in one text approved and in another condemned, so what did this mean for the Church and its members? What did this mean for the policy changes in regards to polygamy? It meant that the arguments of the Church for the ending of polygamy did not come to existence without some conflict, in addition to continued disagreement to present day about the place of polygamy in the Church.

In 1890, Utah Territory was on the verge of becoming a state. Complete with an adequate population of people who had developed a government and infrastructure, it was the perfect candidate for statehood, apart from one thing: the practice of polygamy. The federal government reached out to the Utahan government, or, more accurately, the Church leadership, and told them

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<sup>15</sup> Quorum of Twelve is the second-highest governing body in the Church (the First Presidency being the highest). These apostles are also special witnesses of Jesus Christ, called to teach and testify of Him throughout the world, but are not given direct revelation from God.

that polygamy would have to be outlawed if Utah were to be given statehood. A practice of the Church for fifty years, they faced a conflict between “the need to preserve the church and its teachings pure and undefiled and the need to preserve the church organization itself to provide ordinances of salvation to its members and to spread the gospel abroad” (Alexander 1986, 73). In 1890 President Wilford Woodruff released *The Manifesto*, which later was called Official Declaration One in *The Doctrines and Covenants* that stated the following:

There is nothing in my teachings to the Church or in those of my associates, during the time specified, which can be reasonably construed to inculcate or encourage polygamy; and when any Elder of the Church has used language which appeared to convey any such teaching, he has been promptly reproved.

This meant an end to further plural marriages and that members of the Church who had already entered plural marriages would no longer be able to live in them (Bushman 2006, 52).

While many members simply moved into separate homes and began to live their lives separately from those they had been in plural marriages with, many Church members were enraged. Many critics of the time claimed that polygamy was “simply jettisoned to allow Utah to enter the Union” and that the presidency was ignoring the “will of God” and His gospel (Bushman 2006, 52). Some members even choose to leave the faith in order to create what is now called the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (FLDS), where members would continue to practice polygamy, despite its illegality.

*The Manifesto* and the cessation of polygamy was the first of many policy changes that would cause members to speak up about their beliefs and disagree with the Church leadership. In addition, this was also the first example of behavior I saw in my study, where many of the Mormons came to understand the policy change as necessary and the obvious path of God

towards a more perfect church via their doctrine and their understanding of these doctrine, as we will discuss later.

Race and the opening of positions in the priesthood to those of African Descent<sup>16</sup> was the second significant policy change that fundamentally affected the Church in the way it practiced. Until 1978, the priesthood was withheld from men of African ancestry, “long beyond the time when African Americans won national civil rights victories” (Bushman 2006, 91). The Church leadership, through the turbulent years of the 1960s, justified the continued withholding of the priesthood for those of African descent by showing the rights that black members already had, such as being able to attend sermons and take part in any Church activities not including the temple or priesthood work. Regardless of the rights they had, not being able hold priesthood meant no missions and no marriages or sealing in the temples. Anger and frustration began to grow within the African members of the Church, causing complications because “missionaries preached the gospel to a wider world population [and] the practice of barring anyone with Negro blood from the priesthood raised problems of definition” (Bushman 2006, 96).

Throughout the *Book of Mormon*, especially 2 Nephi, it is stated that those who were the seed of Lamanite are given black skin, cursed, and are not to be members of the Church. They are the “lazy, indolent, and stupid” members of the world, who have descended from those who have sinned most egregiously, but it is also mentioned that “all those who are sinful, Jews and Lamanites shall be forgiven and can rejoin the church if they believe the word” (The Book of Mormon, 2 Ne11:27). Along with this doctrinal belief, integrated throughout the *Book of Mormon*, there is the idea that all should be able to come to the Church and repent, regardless of

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<sup>16</sup> Interestingly, it was specifically only those of African descent who were forbidden to join the Priesthood. Native American, Asian, and Pacific Islander members of the faith were allowed to enter the Priesthood long before those of African descent.

skin color. When Smith created the Church, he made it clear through his statements that all souls were said to be worthy of the priesthood and therefore those of African descent were included in that statement.

To make matters more confusing, during his time as leader of the Church, Smith had called for equality of all men, and had allowed for the ordination of those of African descent. Elijah Abel and Q. Walker Lewis were two African Americans ordained into the priesthood and allowed to serve in positions of Church leadership during Smith's life. After Smith's death, Brigham Young initiated the practice of denying those of African descent priesthood (Bushman 2006; Smith and Bringhurst 2004; Allred 2004). He stated, "Any man having one drop of the seed of [Lamanites] ... in him cannot hold the priesthood and if no other Prophet ever spake I before I will say it now in the name of Jesus Christ I know it is true and others know it" (Young 1852). From that point forward, there were no Africans ordained or put into positions of power in the Church.

With these conflicting doctrinal statements and practices in regarding African priesthood and the societal context of the time—namely the Civil Rights movement—it only seemed fitting when Official Declaration Two was released in 1978. It stated:

the First Presidency announced that a revelation had been received by President Spencer W. Kimball extending priesthood and temple blessings to all worthy male members of the Church.

This statement made it clear that all male members, even those of African descent, could be members of the priesthood. It seems like most people were ecstatic for this change, and many people celebrated the change and apologized for the length of time it took to make it (Smith 2004; Bringhurst 2004; Bushman 2006). Those who did not approve either did not speak up or were not recorded in the annals of history; either way, it seems this change was accepted with unanimous support within the Church.

Unlike with the *Manifesto* and the ending of polygamy, the change of the policy about Africans in the priesthood did not lead to a great outpouring of loud and vehement disapproval. There was no splintering of the Church over the changing of this policy. Regardless of this fact, this was another example of policy change within the Church with respect to a long-held part of the Church practices. At this juncture, there was not as much outpouring of disapproval and argument against the Church and this policy change. Rather, there was more discussion of this change as having occurred due to God's plan to perfect the Church and members believed that this policy change was required by God to occur at this exact time in order for it to work most effectively.

Both the policies changes on polygamy and the allowance of Africans in the priesthood came at times when the issues that were addressed were points of interest in the public agenda. Past policy changes, "came about because the social climate changed. We... the Church was receiving persecution for not following those now social norms" (Cherie). These seem like moments when the Church moved towards deprivatizing, taking issues that were seen as non-religious and inserting their doctrines and opinions into them. If this is the case, the social pressure did force the Church to deprivatize, as I have described above, and it seems likely that they played a small role due to the timeline of the events; however this is not the only explanation. As I mentioned above and as Bushman states, these policy changes "are examples of practices not so much foresworn as revised or reinterpreted as God's will for His people at the current time," which is a statement echoed by my participants (Bushman 2006, 2). Rachel put it best by saying, "It's not that the Church changed its mind. God always intended for that to happen, but people were not ready for it." Many policy changes occurred at the times they did because, according to my participants and many other members of the faith, God realized they



were necessary and it seemed like the most likely time when His believers would follow His guidance.

This is what Armand L. Mauss calls the “myth of continuity” of the Church: the idea that changes in the church are due to revelation and are linear because they are “logical fulfillment of policies and teachings already anticipated by earlier prophets” (Mauss 2004, 107). The myth of continuity, as described by Mauss, is when the Church and its members explains changes of old and often controversial policies as planned points that God set out before even creating the policies. It is the idea that God knows when it is best to enact policy changes even if to an outsider it seems too late or early. In terms of African priesthood, the change came about because God realized that He was not allowing all His faithful to serve Him fully. God, and Joseph Smith for that matter, had always intended for all worthy males to be members of the priesthood, so when this policy change came, it was just a continuation of God’s ultimate plan. For the two policies changes above many wanted an apology, but “an apology would imply that past prophets were mistaken, a possibility the official Church is reluctant to acknowledge” (Bushman 2006, 100). This erasure of any possibility of social influences on the Church leadership leading them to create policies that were socially erroneous as time progressed, is not acknowledged and this myth of continuity promoted by the Church is integrated into the way that my participants discussed the policy changes of polygamy and African priesthood (Mauss 2004 and Benjamin 1940).

On one hand, all my participants noted that polygamy was in the doctrine at one point, citing the fact that God must have had it there for a reason. The participants came up with many theories, from the possibility that God commanded them to practice polygamy to help “the Church grow and spread” (Mckenzie and Janessa); because there are more women in heaven

then men (Ross); or because more husbands were dying than wives (Merida), but all of these explanations feed into the idea of continuity, argued by Mauss, that God made this policy for a certain reason, and that the policy changed when it was no longer needed. For them, this was all laid out from the beginning of the Church and the *Manifesto* was just a follow through on that fact. Drawing out the idea of continuity further, multiple participants noted that if God commanded polygamy once again they would participate, because there might be a need for it again. "The policy to not do it [polygamy] was socially driven, so the doctrine has not changed, polygamy is only for very specific circumstances as authorized by God" (Ross).

On the other hand, all my participants recognized that there was no strong doctrinal statement that specifically withheld priesthood from those of African descent. Instead, they emphasize the point that Smith had always wanted all men in the priesthood, and so did God, but He withheld and later put the policy in place because He knew it would not be accepted at the original time. "Everyone was racist. That was the law of the land and the Church followed," stated McKenzie, "people weren't ready to accept God's plans for Africans in the priesthood." God knew that before 1970, there was too much racial tension and issues for the Church to risk its member population by calling out for Africans to be given the priesthood. For my participants, while this policy and its repercussions were heavily negative, they agreed that it made the most sense at the time, and God knew all along that things would eventually change.

The church leadership has neither confirmed nor denied any of these arguments for the policy changes. Resources are provided<sup>17</sup> that give context to the policy changes and provide some information on the processes of God and the Church leadership. Despite the church

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<sup>17</sup> *Revelations in Context* is one example of these resources which can be found online. It goes through many policy and doctrine changes in narrative form and describes the stories around them.

leadership's lack of strong statements, it is hard to ignore all of the social pressures that were shaping the transformation of the policy. It is also important to acknowledge that Mauss's idea of continuity threads its way through many of the arguments around the policy changes. All of my participants spoke both of the surrounding context of policies, but also made sure to comment on the importance of God in formatting the policies across time as he saw fit.

When discussing same-sex relationship policies, it is valuable to remember these ways of discussing policy change. The social changes of the last ten years or so have altered entirely how our society approaches LGBT+ issues, which has increased social pressure on the Church. Despite this, the Church holds beliefs that emphasize the traditional family, as discussed earlier. To them these most recent policy changes are just continuations of what God has always intended. As Ross argued, this "change was more than the sum of the parts with both social pressure and the realization of God of the necessity of change acting to introduce a revised but not new policy."

The next chapter will discuss this more deeply, but it is important to recall that the members of the Church think of policy changes as continuations of God's plan over time, and that each new change is just a greater perfection of His overarching goals for the Church and its members. In Mormon, section 8 verse 12, Mormon says, "And whoso receiveth this record, and shall not condemn it because of the imperfections which are in it, the same shall know of greater things than these." Despite imperfections in current policy, there will be greater things to come as ordained by God, as he perfects his gospel and policies.

### **Same-sex Relationship Policy Changes and Participants View of its Continuity**

Changes in the civil law do not, indeed cannot, change the moral law that God has established. God expects us to uphold and keep His commandments regardless of divergent opinions or trends in society (Ballard 2014).

While polygamy and race were two controversial policy changes, as of 2015, the newest policy change of the Church has been the most talked about in recent times: non-baptism of children of same-sex marriages. This policy which directly addresses the children of LGBT+ families is just one of the multiple policies in regards to the LGBT+ community, all of which stir much controversy, especially after the legalization of same-sex marriage in the United States in 2015. As shown in the statement above, which was released immediately after the legalization of same-sex marriage, these policy changes were created by Church leadership to attempt to repoliticize an issue that they see as a norm in society that does not fit their doctrines or beliefs. These same-sex relationship policy changes are attempts to challenge the political system in a way that will eventually steer legal policies in the direction that is more godly and remove the Church from the marginalized sphere of private life. These same-sex relationship policy changes are an example of the Church acting in their role as the protector of traditional family values and deprivatizing the issue of marriage. Through the lens of Klass, they are providing a united front and meaning to its members about a topic not entirely understood or ever before addressed in the Church through their gospel, and like past policy changes it is seen by many members of the faith as a policy that is simply a continuation of God's intention for the future of the Church.

Doctrine pre-20<sup>th</sup> century is scarce in addressing homosexuality. The many references to marriage in the *Book of Mormon* all call for everyone to get married, as it is one of the most sacred and respected sacraments in the eternal progression. Most of the time the gospel simply states "marriage is between man and wife," no more no less (Doctrines and Covenants, 132). Homosexuality is never explicitly condemned in any of the older Church gospel. Many historians point out that you did not begin to hear anything anti-LGBT+ coming from the Church leadership until it began to become a more heavily punished social taboo in legal laws, but that is

an entirely different study itself (Quinn 1996). What must be noted is that it was not until later in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, that the Church began to integrate their gospel into arguments about same-sex relationship issues and in a sense deprivatize issues that never before had been addressed by the Church.

The first time the Church made a statement about the role, or more accurately the non-role, of same-sex relationship in the Church was in 1995 with the release of *The Family: A Proclamation to the World*. This section of gospel was issued by the Church leadership to discuss their views of marriage, gender, and family. It stated that marriage was between a man and a woman and “children are entitled to a birth within bonds of matrimony,” thus only husbands and wives should have children (The Family, paragraph #5).<sup>18</sup> While not explicitly stated, this gospel opposed the idea of same-sex marriage and same-sex parents. *The Family* had laid out the rules and guidelines for those who identify as LGBT+, but this was one of the first times that the Church policy on same-sex relationship issues was laid out in such explicit terms. Before *The Family*, “there was no Latter-day revelation or teaching that either condemned or validated same-gender sexual acts” (Quinn 1996, 265). *The Family* laid the ground for the role of the Church as the protector of traditional values in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and therefore also established the groundwork for the role of the members as advocates for the anti-same sex marriage cause. The huge outpouring of support of Mormons for Proposition 22 and 8 in California as well as advocacy in Hawaii and Alaska attested to this new role of members. This text would set the tone of the beliefs and understandings of the members of the Church in regards to same-sex relationship issues moving forward.

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<sup>18</sup> Also, within the text it was made clear that men and women are created in the image of God and that gender is eternal, which does not allow for Church members to identify as transgender.

Along with the release of *The Family*, many more portions of the gospel began to address same-sex relationships and feelings in the late 1990s and early 2000s. In *Handbook 2*, which provides a doctrinal foundation for the work of the Church to members of the Church, parts were changed and released in the 2000s that contained many arguments against same sex relationships. It states that “the nature of male and female spirits is such that they complete each other” and that “by divine design, both a man and a woman are essential for bringing children into mortality and providing the best setting for the rearing and nurturing of children” (Handbook 2, 1.3.1-2). Even more directly it makes clear that “sexual relations are proper only between a man and a woman who are legally and lawfully wedded as husband and wife” and that “homosexual behavior violates the commandments of God, is contrary to the purposes of human sexuality, and deprives people of the blessings that can be found in family life and in the saving ordinances of the gospel” (Handbook 2, 21.4.5-6). Unlike in the past, it is made clear to all reading these gospels that homosexual relations are against the Church. From sex to marriage, the Church leadership wanted to make it known that same-sex relationships are not correct, holy, or right. The definition of marriage set by this gospel is that marriage is a “legal and lawful union between a man and a woman” (Handbook 2, 21.4.10).

Even though there were many arguments against those with same sex attraction within *Handbook 2*, it is also important to note this following verse:

If members feel same-gender attraction but do not engage in any homosexual behavior, leaders should support and encourage them in their resolve to live the law of chastity and to control unrighteous thoughts. These members may receive Church callings. If they are worthy and qualified in every other way, they may also hold temple recommends and receive temple ordinances (21.4.6).

This verse communicates an idea, which often made an appearance in the way my participants discussed homosexuality and is one of the core arguments of the Church in regards to the same-sex relationships. The argument is that same-sex attraction is not sinful, only acting upon those

feelings and engaging in same-sex relationships, sexual or marital, are the sins. This argument is the one most often touched upon when members of the Church leadership discuss the policies regarding same-sex attraction. This argument also means that those who identify with same-sex attraction, either openly or not, are allowed and encouraged to be part of the Church as long as they choose to abstain from same-sex relationships.

The speeches of Church leadership often serve to soften what seem like the harsher tones of these doctrines, through this argument of same-sex sexual relationship being the sin, not the attraction. What the Church leadership seems to attempt to do in every statement about same-sex relationship issues is to make clear that those with same-sex attraction are still welcome in Church as long as they choose not to act on their feelings. President Hinckley stated:

We love them as sons and daughters of God. They may have certain inclinations which are powerful and which may be difficult to control. Most people have inclinations of one kind or another at various times. If they do not act upon these inclinations, then they can go forward as do all other members of the Church. If they violate the law of chastity and the moral standards of the Church, then they are subject to the discipline of the Church, just as others are (2015).

There have even been times when members of Church leadership have discussed their own family members who struggle with same-sex attraction.<sup>19</sup>

In general, the mass amount of doctrine and policy regarding same-sex relationships, especially marriage, condemns it. The Church has a clear outline of what marriage is supposed to look like and since the late 20<sup>th</sup> century has been more explicitly stating it in their policy. As stated by Klass, Mormonism is providing a means for its members to understand and interact with the wider society, while also deprivatizing same-sex relationship, which have often been

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<sup>19</sup> Elder D. Todd Christofferson of the church's Quorum of the Twelve Apostles has a self-proscribed gay brother, Tom Christofferson, with whom he did a special TV interview where they discussed Tom's return to the Church even while identifying as gay (Toone and Jones 2017)

considered outside of the religious bounds. While it condemns same-sex marriage, the Church does not fully scorn those members of the Church who identify with having same-sex attraction. This jumble of policies is most of what I discussed with my participants, as they are the ones that are often considered and portrayed in mass media, but rarely discussed with members in the Church.

The one specific policy change that I directly discussed with my participants, which also happens to be the newest policy, is the changing of *Handbook 1*<sup>20</sup> in 2015, which forbade the baptism of children of LGBT+ couples. While I cannot directly quote this change since access to *Handbook 1* is only provided to those who hold positions of leadership in the Church, I will be discussing the information provided to the public on this change. The basics of this policy are that “children must disavow the practice of their parents to be part of their church” and be baptized before the age of 18, but if they choose not to disavow their parents they are not allowed to be baptized until they turn 18 (Weaver 2015). The Church leadership in their many public statements and many of my participants have stated this policy was created to protect the children from “discomfort and challenges” they would face if trying to convert (Weaver 2015). “Splitting up of the family is the last thing a baptism to the Church of Jesus Christ is supposed to do” (Janessa).

Notwithstanding the fact that many people said this policy was uncalled for, doctrine can be found that foreshadows the reasoning for this policy. The role of adult members as parents in the Church is addressed often in the gospel. The Church leadership often puts an “emphasis on [the] idea that ‘ordinary’ earthly parenthood could be profoundly sacred in character, and could

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<sup>20</sup> *Handbook 1*, contains information that is primarily relevant to the functions and duties of stake presidents, bishops, mission presidents, and many other positions of leadership.



be the channel through which ritual and sacramental power could flow to successive generations” (Cannell 1994, 161). The role of parenthood is one of the most sacred roles that a member can achieve and their job is to raise children to be Christ-like and willing to follow the word of God. Being a parent and raising a family is also one of the many ways to for members to continue their eternal progression. This creates a strong image of the parent as valuable to the child, and despite the fact that the Church emphasizes the importance of a father and a mother, this idea of strong parenthood carries over into the policy regarding children of LGBT+ parents. The Church’s goal is to make the family the center of the Church and, because of this fact, they most likely would not want to break up a family for their religion, even if in the gospel it states “every member of the church of Christ having children is to bring them unto the elders before the church, who are to lay their hands upon them in the name of Jesus Christ, and bless them in his name” (Doctrine and Covenants, 20:70). The family and the idea of maintaining that unit is too fundamental for the Church to encourage any break from that order, but the gospel encourages all to still “give special attention to individuals who do not presently enjoy the support of a family of strong Church members” because “they are covenant members of God’s eternal family, deeply loved by Him” (Handbook 2, 1.4.3).

When discussing the same-sex relationship policies of the Church it became clear that most of my participants felt the same way, that these policies fit the doctrine of the Church and were continuations of previous laws of God. The path to this exact same conclusion was different for each participant and that will be discussed later, but it is important to discuss the conclusion.

To Ross, it is "laid out clearly in *The Family: Proclamation of the World* how marriage is between a man and a woman and part of that marriage union is to produce offspring and the policies match that clearly." He, like many of my other participants, saw the policies regarding

the children of LGBT+ couples and same-sex relationships, including marriage, as an obvious fit to the Church doctrine. For my participants, the idea of same-sex marriage challenged the cores of the Church and unlike the other policies on polygamy and African priesthood, which “were of the time”, the same-sex relationship policies “is of doctrine” (Jamie). To them any breaking of these new policies would violate the entire core of the Church. Even the policy regarding children would split up families “which would go against our core. So, I understand them” (Rachel). My participants all communicated that same-sex relationship issues are tied to doctrine, and if you understand the doctrine then you would see these policies as having a place in the Church. The way you understand the doctrine might be varied, but the idea is that you “try to live like He [God] has commanded you to live” and live up to the core gospel He has laid out, which to my participants means living with these policies (Janessa).

Support for the policies as part of the doctrine of the Church also caused my participants to address the history and long-term practices of the Church in regards to same-sex relationship and baptism issues. To them these policies, were not changes, nor were they new; rather, they had always been there, and just now they were becoming relevant, because “our government screwed up and God wouldn't want us to follow the law of the land right now” (Belle).

According to many of my participants, the Church is formatting these policies now to “create a solid front from which to discuss these things with non-Mormons,” make their resources more available to all members of the Church or public who have questions, and “end any ambiguousness that came before these policies” (Rachel, Roger, Veronica). While this might be the case, many other participants made reference to the fact that these policies while not entirely new and were simply continuations of the work God was doing.

Same-sex marriage was never a “doctrine of the Church and never has been. Because that is one of God's laws that never changes” and many cannot “see a circumstance where God would have a need to change that” (Merida and Rachel). So, when the policies regarding marriage were released, not only did they end the ambiguous views of the Church, but also voiced God’s concerns that these issues were not being addressed by the Church at that time. God had created these same-sex relationship policies to follow in the footsteps of His past doctrine, which did not include gay marriage.

When specifically talking about the baptism policy, Janessa and Savannah even called out to specific policies of the past they saw this one in relation to. Janessa called to the fact that husbands must approve wives’ baptisms before one can convert and join the Church to prevent families being torn apart. Savannah pointed out this policy “is just an addendum of other policies that were already in place”, namely the policy that children from Muslim families cannot be baptized until they are 18 as well. Here too did participants say that God always intended for the family to stay whole and this policy was just a continuation of His plans to always maintain those eternal families.

God and His apostles wanted the members and the public to understand that the way forward for the Church and families was the path not explicitly stated before and so they created these policies. In this way, all my participants and the Church leaders continue to discuss these policies as simple continuations of all the doctrines of the past. God always intended for these policies to exist at this time and place, and their relevance is very apparent to my participants. These policies mark a point that was always there in God’s plan, and supply more strength to the idea of continuity. As Jamie stated, for her “at this time I think these policies are appropriate.”

Only one person disagreed with the idea that these policies were a continuation of the laws of God, and felt that she was not entirely certain about these policies: Cherie. "I have a hard time understanding why Heavenly Father, who loves and accepts everyone, would have these policies that exclude people." Cherie could see all the doctrine supporting the same-sex relationship policies and even called back to the idea of freedom of religion when she said that same-sex marriages should never be forced to occur in temples, but for some reason she couldn't entirely support them. "I see why they have them there, but as far as me personally agreeing with them...I don't think that I do. Somewhere... I have a hard time really supporting these policies." Cherie was an important outlier because while her conclusion was different, she often called back to the same doctrine for their existence, a point emphasized later, but it still shows that even a doubting conclusion still holds some vestiges of the meaning-making that the Church provided its members with.

A study by Jana Riess stated that in 2016 over 80% of Mormons support the same-sex relationship policies, which I think is telling. A majority of my participants emphasized the fact that these policies fit the doctrine and are part of God's continued plan to better the Church and its members, furnishing stronger support for the idea of continuity that made an appearance with the race and polygamy policies. These policies also aptly display the deprivatized role the Church is trying to play in politics, by addressing the issues head on and reinforcing their arguments with their gospel. As a religion, it is working to provide meaning on issues originally outside of its bounds. Obviously, these policies and the doctrine that seem to support them create an ending point for my participants that seems as certain as any other of the policy changes of the past. It only makes sense that by providing meaning in areas otherwise not addressed, they are helping to shape the understandings and perspectives of their members about same-sex

relationship issues and people, and giving them any easy conclusion to come to, the conclusion that the same-sex relationship policies of the Church are correct for the Church and for society.

### The Fundamentals of Choice in the Church

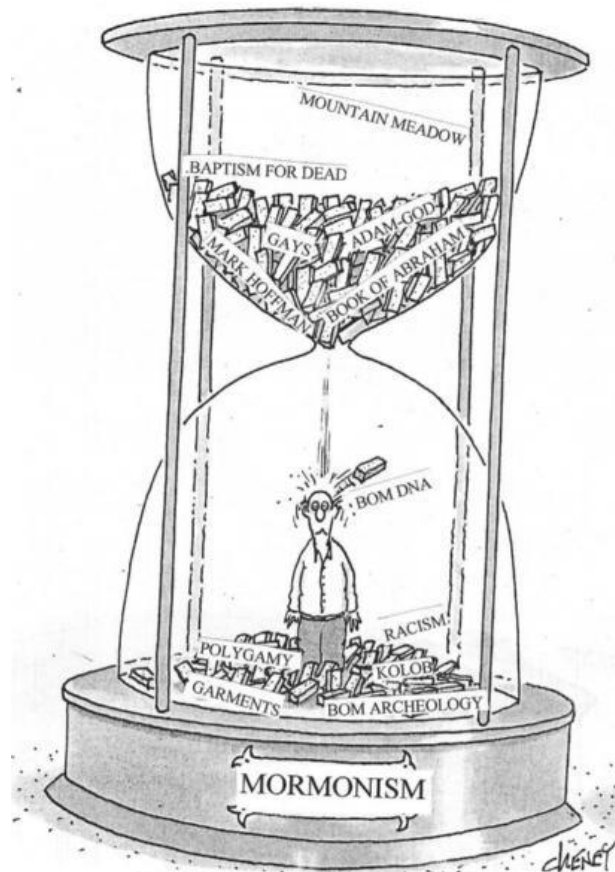


Fig. 2. Cheney, Reminds me of the old joke, 2003, in New Yorker Magazine (New York: Condé Nast Publishing 2005)

Cartoon by Cheney Aug 11, 2003 New Yorker Magazine:  
Reminds me of the old joke:  
"Why are you hitting yourself on the head with a hammer?"  
"Because it feels so good when I stop!"  
Adapted by Hamster 1-2005

Often Mormons, with their cherubic missionaries, are seen by society as cookie-cutter members of faith, as people who never question the commandments and policies of the Church. Depictions of them in media (Figure 2) and entertainment, such as the play *Book of Mormon*—which satirizes missionary work and the Mormon gospel through raunchy musical numbers—portray an image of Mormons as willing to follow all directions, despite any questions of legitimacy or rationality. As Fenella Cannell discusses, when she first expressed interest in

studying Mormons, many told her that “they would simply repeat orthodox views and statements stratified by the central church leadership” (Cannell 2017, 13). McKenzie, one of my participants, emphasized that it is "easy for people to bash on the Church," because they see you as a brainwashed follower of the LDS Church, but this is not, nor never was the intention of the Church. Joseph Smith Jr., the founder of the LDS Church, had one key belief at the center of the creation of his church: that “no one be compelled or coerced into believing him” (McConkie and Boss 2005, 455). The creation of the Church was not founded in creating idle believers who just followed what they were told. Unlike those who were following the other “fanatical” religions of the Second Great Awakening, Smith wanted his followers to have a choice (McConkie and Boss 2005; Allred 2004). The choice whether or not to believe what the Church is telling them to be true and the word a God is one of the core tenets of the LDS Church. As Ross stated, "one of the basic tenets of the gospel is agency, you are allowed to do and believe whatever you want there is no one to tell you you can't do it." In almost all my conversations, the youth referenced Smith and his idea of choice within the faith and used choice to discuss the Church’s policies in different ways that fit their own belief in the doctrines and covenants.

While I will be focusing on the importance of choice in regard to how the youth choose to believe, agency in the Church is not only about choosing how to understand and believe the gospel of the Church, but also intertwines into many other important decisions. Often Mormons, especially the youth, must make many decisions before they even reach the age of thirty. Youth choose when to be baptized, whether they want to go on a mission, how to form their testimony, and most importantly, if they want to remain members of the Church. As Rachel stated, “The Church itself has made statements, but the people in the Church choose how faithfully they want to live by the Church’s standards.” It is left to the members to choose exactly the way in which

they will take part in their faith and it is by “choosing to keep those commandments that you can get more then you would get otherwise [from life]" (Ross).

Each choice is important to shaping their position in the Church and how they view themselves fitting into the ideal model of the Church. For example, missions are often seen as rites of passage for young men, but not for women, so that when a woman chooses to go on a mission she is showing what might be perceived as an even greater sign of faith. Thus, the women who I interviewed who went on missions seem to discuss a greater understanding of the gospel and policies of the Church after their missions.

The choice to be faithful and to be an active member of the Church is one of the biggest influences on how practicing Mormons choose to believe in the gospel. When discussing with my participant how their faithfulness affected their opinion about same-sex relationship policies, the consensus was that the more faithful members of the Church choose to be, the more likely they were to agree with the policies of the Church. In other words, the more members participated in the Church, studied the doctrines and covenants and strive to believe that this is the word of God, the more they could understand the reason for the policies of the Church, like those that address same-sex relationships issues. Lily stated it best by saying, "usually people who are more faithful to the Church have a better understanding of the doctrine and thereby they have a better understanding of the policy... and thus can support them." Choosing to be faithful and staying an active member of the Church means members are better able to think through and discover how to accept the policies created by the Church leadership as the true word of God. All of these choices ultimately affected how the youth I interviewed came to choose how to understand and form perspectives on the policies of the Church.

With all the choices influencing their choice on how to believe and understand policies, there is a greater likelihood that not every member will come to the same conclusions that the Church leadership does. This creates a space for a diversity of opinions and interpretations of policies and doctrines, one that was recognized in almost every conversation I had with the youth. Each participant discussed that the gospel is always true and perfect, but they made sure to make it clear that the interpretation of these doctrines and covenants are not always as ideal. "The gospel is perfect but people aren't" (Belle): each participant deemed it necessary to clarify that all policies are inherently meant to support the teachings of God, but at times they can be warped and changed based on the views and perspectives of the interpreters. As Lily states, it is "sometimes the way people believe and enact the Church policies can get a little too overboard or crazy and then they kind of extrapolate it away from what the policy is."

There is obviously a distinct separation between the Church, the Church leadership, and the people of the Church, because the people of the Church can choose to think differently. They can shape their understandings of the doctrines and policies in ways that the Church leadership did not intend. This freedom of choice creates what R. Potter calls *interpretative disagreements*, which are disagreeing interpretations of the same policies. "The existence of interpretative disagreements indicates that two believers might utter the same sentence and yet mean something quite different" (Potter 2016, 44). These interpretative disagreements are all about making meaning, and while each may be different from another they are all attempting to change what is "said into what is believed" (Potter 2016, 45). Each new interpretation by Church leadership has the distinct possibility of being interpreted in new and diverse ways, and many of the interviewees commented that often those situations are what draw all the attention to the Church policies, whether they are interpreted to be good or bad. Interpretative disagreements are



created each time a policy change occurs as members attempt to make meaning out of them. Regarding same-sex relationship issues, this open interpretation of the policies and how to understand them can often lead some members of the faith to be stricter in following the rules, while others are more lenient.

Occasionally, there are moments when this fundamental focus on choice has allowed for dissent among members of the faith. For example, the Fundamentalist LDS break that occurred when the *Manifesto* was released and polygamy was banned. Fundamentalists argued that they believed “in the original word handed down through the prophet Joseph Smith,” which stated that God wanted his followers to practice polygamy (Bushman 2006, 53). This argument stemmed from actual doctrine found within the *Book of Mormon*, as discussed earlier, but it went against the new interpretation and understanding of doctrine as given by the Church leadership. The Fundamentalists had created interpretative disagreements with the Church leadership regarding polygamy, but they were not punished, as Thomas G. Alexander states in *Mormonism in Transition: A History of the Latter-Day Saints, 1890-1930*,

“Far from being vindictive or ruthless, the church leadership tended to be lenient with wayward members who were basically in harmony with the church and its doctrines.” (Alexander 1986, 70)

The Fundamentalists used agency provided by the Church gospel regarding how to understand and believe the doctrine, which is an important element of the Church inserted by Smith. This is just one example throughout the history of the Church where disagreement occurred and those who disagreed were both respected and listened to. Not every case was this extreme, as the Fundamentalists promptly formed their own sect, but no matter the nature or severity of the disagreement, the Church encourages members to ask questions, provided that the questions stay

within the terms of the doctrines and covenants. The members of the faith have the freedom to choose to dissent.

Even the one participant, who voiced doubt and some disagreement with the same-sex relationship policies of the Church continued to hold her “testimonies from the Church” and saw value in the doctrines addressing family, but had made a conscious choice to think about the complexity of her position in regards to the policies. Even with the difference of interpretation between her and the Church leadership, it was Cherie who had chosen to distance herself from the Church. The Church allows the members to shape their thoughts, even dissenting ones, about the policies and doctrines. Though members in some case “changed their views because of pressure from church leaders,” Alexander believes that ultimately, they “do so voluntarily since the church had no power to attack their lives or property” (Alexander 1986, 60-61). Smith believed in “protecting the rights of all to speak and be heard, and encouraging energetic participation by all” (McConkie and Boss 2005, 445). This way of thinking has continued into the modern-day Church, where the leadership welcomes a well-made discussion and encourages its members to think about what it is they are asked to do by the Church. For members, “the central commitment to human free agency is theoretically reconciled with the equally central commitment to the reality of revelation by the injunction to ‘choose the right’” (Cannell 1994, 13).

To have each member with their own form of heterodoxy it might seem like an inefficient way to run a Church — and maybe it would be in other religious models—but in the case of the Mormon youth I interviewed, it strengthened their likelihood to come to the same conclusions about policies that the Church did (Henderson 1998). Many stated that because they were given the option to think about and research the policies and doctrines at hand, they could form

stronger testimonies, because they were able to understand them on a more individual level. Each of them by learning and thinking about the policies, formed heterodoxies that they each had their own personal arguments to support. It seems like for these youth that the more you have the ability to think and discuss the doctrines, the more likely you are to come to similar conclusions to the original body.

Unsurprisingly, this is again what Smith was straining for:

“achieving internal harmony was more important than staking out definitive positions. The views expressed... were not specific but short and welcoming to all” (Alexander 1986, 304).

Policies are clearly stated, but no member is forced to interpret them a certain way. All policies are meant to be welcoming to all interpretations and create interpretative disagreements, provided that they stay loyal to the core doctrines of the Church, such as the eternal family, God as Father, etc. As stated above, this can cause a diversity of opinions and possibilities for dissent, but more often than not, as displayed by my interviewees, it leads to a faith in the Church that is based on individual understanding and perceptions of the doctrines and policies of the Church.

Often, like I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Mormons are seen as mindless believers who suspend their rationality when it comes to their religion, and this is a perception held about many religions beyond Mormonism. That this idea of choice is imbued in the LDS Church is a prime example of a case against this theory of irrationality in religion. As Klass defines religion, it plays a role in helping mediate interaction between its members and their understanding and meaning of the universe at large. This is what Mormonism does: it provides ways of meaning making and understanding that the members may then choose to enact. The push by the Church to force members of the faith to think about what they believe and how they believe it is fighting the idea of mindless following. I believe this is a strong argument for the rationality and reasoning that can be found in religions. While it might seem like a contradiction,

the viewpoints and perceptions of my participants listed out in the next chapter are evidence of my participants practicing critical thinking and reasoning to develop and support their beliefs and to make connections between the world around them and their own faith. The ability to rationally choose what to believe erases any belief of mind-washing, because members of the Church are using multiple strategies of connection and explanation, provided by the Church and other social entities, to reason through their beliefs in whatever manners are necessary to support their conclusions and the conclusions of the Church.

In regards to same-sex relationship issues, specific opinions, which will be discussed below, this phenomenon of choice creates heterodox views. There is a great diversity of opinions and reactions to the policies of the Church on same-sex relationship issues. As I discussed, the church leadership gives no specific reasoning for their policies, but instead simply releases them. This leave interpretation up to the individual and means that each youth can have a different way of understanding the same-sex relationship policies. Each youth is given the choice by the Church to look at the doctrines and covenants in order to form their opinions on the same-sex relationship policies created by the Church leadership. Each youth has the choice to formulate how they do or do not support the policies, whether they choose that *The Family: A Proclamation to the World* or the *Holy Bible* is what determines their answer, and the choice of how then they see the policy as part of the Church based on their own understanding of it. Some participants disagree with certain elements of the policies, but often they collectively come to the same conclusion— same-sex relationship policies fit the Church and are important for the greater society. In this next chapter I will demonstrate these heterodox opinions which contribute to this conclusion.

### **Youth Beliefs on Same-sex Relationship Policies**

Ultimately, the conclusion that same-sex relationship policies of the Church fit into the Church itself and are correct for society, is the same among almost all my participants, but the arguments they make for this conclusion are as diverse as they are. Each person seemed to have their own way of reasoning through the doctrine and policies to create an argument to support this conclusion. At times, their perspectives can seem to be shadowing the Church leadership's statement exactly, but in other cases it seems like a combination of dominant dogma of non-Mormon sources and the Church gospel. Thus, their interpretations vary from orthodox to heterodox. Either way, these interpretative disagreements create opinions that are at variance from the minor official Church explanation of support given for these policies, yet they always come back to the same conclusion. This shows the availability of choice for Church members about how to believe and understand these policies, and at the same time their ability to come to the same conclusion shows the strong role the Church has ultimately played in forming its members' interaction with the larger society. When going through these heterodox opinions, it is interesting to see that they all feed back to the same conclusion, but each of the six perspectives has its own brand of reasoning that creates that connection between what the Church says and how they believe it.

In view of the fact that the Church policies are mostly targeted at addressing same-sex marriage, it only makes sense that one of the perspectives about why the policies of the Church are correct is based on the idea of marriage itself. "We believe that a standard that God has set is that marriage should be between a man and a woman" (Janessa). To Janessa, Roger, and Veronica, the doctrine is clear and always has been that marriage will always be between a man and a woman. Adam and Eve were the first example of this. They were a man and a woman

united and they were designed to be attracted to and fit one another. “Homosexual marriages is just not the way the Lord designed us to act” (Veronica). Whether it is the *Book of Mormon* or *The Bible*, in their eyes, it has been made clear by God through His prophets that heterosexual marriage is the only way marriage can exist. It is a straightforward argument that immediately endorses the policy of no same-sex marriage, because instantaneously any variation to this standard of a man and a woman goes against it. It also reaffirms the doctrines that discourage any same-sex relations, but not same-sex feelings, because it shows that any homosexual relationships could never end in the most sacred sacrament, marriage, yet does not claim those feeling are wrong or unnatural themselves. Their argument is that marriage between man and woman has always been the only possibility, and that means same-sex marriage is not a possibility, plain and simple.

This brand of reasoning might seem to closely echo, if not entirely repeat, the gospel and Church leadership statements I discussed before. Out of all the diverse arguments about their support for the Church policies, this perspective is the one where the most direct tie can be seen between the doctrine and the Mormon youth opinions. This does not mean they thought less or chose the easiest belief to discuss, but instead shows that the statements by the Church leadership and the doctrine provided by them on policies makes the most sense to Roger, Veronica, and Janessa as members of the faith. They have taken the meaning provided by the Church and immediately incorporated it into their beliefs and understandings of the world.

The family unit is eternal in all the stages of existence from premortal to mortal to post-mortal life as we discussed earlier, but per Ross’s perspective what must be remembered is that the eternal unit is “man and wife... being able to reproduce eternally.” Life in any of its stages is meant to push Mormons on that path of eternal progression to become more Christ-like and for

eternity they are supposed to be in that correct unit of man and woman with children. For Ross, this has nothing to do with sexuality, in fact since everything in eternity “will be set right,” i.e. man and woman together, Ross believes that there “won’t be homosexuality in eternity” and there “won’t be any sexuality period.” People will just be in the eternal unit that God set out for everyone. What this means for same-sex relations is that they are not eternally sustainable. There is no way, even if the Church married same-sex couples in the mortal life, to stay in those relationships when they entered the post-mortal life. Instead, they would be put into relationships that fit the eternal unit. As Ross sees it “because it can’t be eternally sustainable it shouldn’t happen. It would distract from your relationship with God” and “it would restrict them for the eternal joy and progress they could have.” In lieu of progressing in their mortal life and later in their post-mortal life, they would stay the same throughout mortal life and only finally start progressing during their post-mortal life. Ross saw this as unfair to the highest degree to give people this option, but deny it later, and leave them without any progress or eternal joy. Ross’s perspective effectively addresses the idea that same-sex relationships and families in any form are just not sustainable long term. Ross argued that his support for these same-sex relationship policies stems from the fact that these policies were simply following the eternal unit, and due to God’s arrangement of that unit, same-sex relationships and families are not eternal, hence it only makes sense to not allow them here on earth.

McKenzie’s perspective was one of the heterodox views that seemed to draw most heavily from the discussions that occur in the political sphere. For her, same-sex relations are just not natural. “If you are a little kid and see two guys kissing you would be like ‘Umm that is not natural’. That is how child will feel regardless [of what they are taught].” These are the ideas that can often be see running through political material that is anti-LGBT+. For example, on the

website of Stand to Reason, a source which teaches Christians how to discuss their values publically, it is stated that in *the Bible* “Paul says that men abandoned the natural sexual function of women and engaged in unnatural sex with men. His words make it clear that homosexual behavior is unnatural because it is a rejection of God’s design.” From this perspective, gay relationships are simply unnatural because it goes against what God has always designed relations to be. McKenzie felt it was unnatural and “you know it from the moment you see it something is not right” in same-sex relations. Through her perspective, she argued that same-sex attraction was also unnatural, because “it drives people to abandon the natural design of human sex.” She felt that for this reason the policies were just protecting what is natural and preventing people from acting on unnatural tendencies that could cause you to go against what God has ordained as natural and good. The Church policies to McKenzie prevent people from making choices that might hurt them and those around them in the long run, because naturally these same-sex relationships should not exist.

Gender roles were mentioned by many participants, but none discussed them with the intensity that Belle did. Before even discussing if the policies were correct, she discussed how she saw gender roles as the major cause of same-sex attraction. To her, our society has created gender roles that force masculine and feminine traits on men and women respectively. People are attracted to masculine and feminine traits regardless of the genders assigned these traits by society. Society, according to Belle, says men cannot be feminine and women cannot be masculine, thus if someone is male and is attracted to masculine traits he must choose a man to be attracted to, because a woman cannot have those traits. The only issue with a man being with a man and a woman being with a woman is that there is “a key for a hole” and the genitalia just do not match up, so if gender roles were gone it would just be based on “a key for a hole,” so a



man with a woman (Belle). For Belle, the gender roles of society have conflicted with our genitalia and created same-sex attraction.

What this meant for her perspective on the policies was that she felt they were just making people match their genitalia and forcing people to work through those gender roles. “I feel like with the policies the Church has gone back to *the Bible* with man and woman together, because it works best that way, because of science, because of feminine and masculine bodies.” To Belle, gender roles have caused people to have same-sex attractions that are just not truly compatible to their bodies, which means same-sex relations should not exist at all. The same-sex relationship Church policies are a move to reinforce the true way people should feel and the relationships they are supposed to be in, despite the gender roles that exist. Belle saw these policies as a way to not condemn same-sex attractions, but help set right those feelings by forcing people to look at gender roles and match their genitalia.

One of the perspectives that was voiced by most of my participants was the fact that families are meant to be created by a man and a woman. “God has ordained families to be here and to have a man and a woman lawfully wedded in marriage” (Merida). As discussed before, families are eternal and the unit which they are made up of, according to my participants, is man, woman, and children. For these participants, with this eternal family unit as the center of our church, “any practices that takes away from that unit or changes it from what the original intent is” the participants nor the “Church can promote those practices” especially in their temples (Rachel). This means families made up of same-sex couples are not the eternal units and thus are not what God has ordained.

Beyond the participants not only believing families were meant to be man and woman, they also believed that families are most functional and successful when constructed with a man

and a woman at the center. For these youth, they have observed and seen trends that prove that this form of family is the “best way for children to be raised and receive everything they need for their developmental stages as they are growing up” (Pritchard). Not to mention that “there are things you learn in these family relationships, and ways you are taught in these family relationships” that you are not able to get from families that do not contain a mother and father (Jamie).

With this idea of family being men, women, and children, the same-sex relationship policies are exact fits for my participants because they preserve marriage between man and woman, which is the basis for families. To say nothing of the fact that, the policies, like that of the children of LGBT+ families, presses the idea of a family that contains a man and a woman. The “ideal family of man and woman will never change” and these Church policies are a way of making sure of that (Savannah).

The final perspective comes from my primary informant Lily; she stated that because sex requires man and woman to make children, homosexual sexual relations are obviously not how God created us to be together. “The doctrine is that sex is only between a man and a woman,” because “the reason people can have sex is to have children. So, if you are gonna have sex with a person you can’t have a kid with, it’s kind of making a mockery of the procreation power.” To Lily, homosexual relations cannot fulfill the purpose of sex to make life, so it seems illogical then to support that form of relationship. In this lens, it is not so much that a family has to be a man and a woman, but to have children and make a family you need sex that functionally works to create life, which only occurs between a man and a woman. Lily told me that she believes this perspective because her family does not fit the traditional eternal unit of man, wife and children, so for her the issue of same-sex relations is more based on sex than family or marriage. Same-sex

sex is the focus of this perspective, which does not seem to immediately link into the policies, but if you believe, like the Church does, that sex should only occur between married couples it begins to come together. Only heterosexual sex makes life and that can only occur after marriage, so policies that protect against same-sex marriage prevent the “mockery” that is homosexual sex occurring within the bounds of marriage. In a sense, Lily is saying that these policies stop and discourage the mockery of homosexual sex from occurring thus encouraging individuals to live life the way God has intended.

Cherie, the one participant who voiced some disapproval for the policies and a support for LGBT+ people, was one of the most fascinating interviews, because she combined almost all the perspectives discussed above into her argument about her undecided stance on the policies. She stated that same-sex couples “cannot procreate naturally, so it is not following God’s will,” but that many straight couples cannot have children without IVF, sperm donation, etc., so was that not going against God’s will as well. She “sees a lot of the wisdom in the traditional family structure...I see the value in a two parent system,” but she knows gay couples who have raised wonderful children by providing equally as loving homes. While she sees the importance of both male and female figures, she often struggles with the gender roles laid out and finds there is a lot of guilt surrounding those who don’t live up to the “ideal” family standards. It was almost like in her mind she was going through all the beliefs and reasoning she had heard about the same-sex relationship policies and providing both the support and opposition for each argument. But I think this proves an interesting point that all these arguments and various beliefs I discuss seem to carry equal weight in her mind for supporting the conclusion that these same-sex relationship policies are right and same-sex relationships are wrong.

At first glance, it seems easy to simply equate all the Mormon youth opinions to the one single conclusion they all come to about the same-sex relationship policies of the Church, but by doing this it would ignore an entire set of perspectives within what seems like a homogenized group. Each of these varying perspectives, uses different ways of understanding and reasoning to come to the same conclusion, which shows that, unlike many believe, Mormons are not simply followers. These youths are talking about these issues using the gospels of the Church, but they are using the gospels and beliefs of the Church in ways that they understand them and choose to believe them. It is important not to ignore the doctrine and the history of same-sex relationship policies when it comes to their individual opinions, but it is also important to remember choice and the ability to rationally develop their set of beliefs is its own tenet of the Church. These youth, like any other person in the world, have created their own meaning and understanding of issues they face in the daily life, with just the addition of input from their faith.

### **What does this all mean?**

My work with Mormons provided me the chance to learn so much more about the Church than what I learned during my entire childhood living in Utah. Being able to ask questions in a space that was both safe for me and those who were members of the Church fostered a discussion rarely had by members of different faiths. Beyond just teaching me new things, this project brought light to a deeper discussion of how religion and gospel shape religious people's understanding of the world. In the case of these Mormon youth, their roles as advocates for traditional family, their faith in the continuity of policies and the apostles' connection to God allow them all to come to similar conclusions about the same-sex relationship policies of the Church. Yet, the idea of agency heavily entwined in the gospel and encouraged by Church

leaderships allows them to understand and shape their own perspective on why the same-sex relationship policies are the word of God and right for the Church and general society.

With the greater focus of politics on issues like abortion, same-sex marriage, and birth control, many religions have begun to take action in the public sphere. Religion, unlike many theories of secularization have predicted, has in some ways grown its sphere of influence, branching out to discuss and provide guidance for their members on these political issues, and the LDS Church is no different. The LDS Church leadership has started to invest in many attempts to raise questions about the public and political morality as compared to the private, religious morality of the Church, and challenge the norms that promote the gap between these two forms of morality. In the terms of Casanova, they are working to deprivatize their viewpoints and integrate their beliefs and doctrines into the public sphere.

When it comes to same-sex relationship issues this deprivatization means that the Church has taken on the role of the protector of traditional families and family values in a broader public sphere. This deprivatization was especially apparent with the Church's grassroots political movement and mass fundraising to support the passing of Prop. 8 in California, which was ultimately successful. Here their work to challenge public morality shifted to the Church leadership exerting their political influence in the state and federal policies on same-sex relationship issues, closing the gap between the public and the Church's private morality. They are constantly advocating for the rights of religious organizations to practice their freedom of religion in any way they deem necessary, like denying same-sex marriages in the temples. They are often advocating for a return of the U.S. government to a system of marriage between man and woman. This makes same-sex marriage one of the biggest topics where they foray into the public sphere and incorporate their gospel into arguments against it.

As conservators of the traditional family and values, the Church leadership does a lot of work to reach out and educate the public about these issues, but they depend on the members, specifically the Mormon youth, to help spread the message and fight for the traditional values. The role of the youth in the Church is as advocates, and thus they are put in the position of needing evidence to support their arguments against same-sex marriage. They must be prepared to “fight” for their beliefs and represent the Church’s position whenever necessary, meaning they must have their reasoning behind those beliefs prepared always. They become individual protectors of the traditional family, with steadfast beliefs and strong reasoning based on doctrine and other non-Church related evidence behind them so when asked questions by non-Church members of society they can answer them. This fosters a strong sense of faith in the stances provided by the Church, because if you cannot come to the same conclusion as the Church, you cannot function well in your role as advocate for the Church. Consequently, the Mormon youth I interviewed were strong advocates for the Church’s stance on same-sex relationship issues, coming to the conclusion provided by the Church through their own forms of reasoning.

Another strong reinforcing element that ensures that the members of the Church come to similar conclusions as the Church leadership, is their faith in the apostles as living prophets ergo their faith in the continuity of policies. Existence of the Church leadership as living prophets give the members of the Church access to the doctrines and covenants of God at this moment in time, unlike other religions that depend solely on gospel that is not altered in modern times. Members of the Church, through the Church leadership, are linked continuously with God and his desire for the future of the Church and their lives. Each revelation provided by an apostle during modern day is equally a word of God in relation to any revelation made by Joseph Smith, Peter, John, etc. This means that for members revelations always hold the weight of God’s word. This

makes it hard to argue against revelations on issues, such as same-sex marriage, because they are direct doctrines and covenants from God made specifically for the Church.

The context set for revelation, the idea of continuity, also reinforces the power of these revelations in the views of the members. Whether it is polygamy, race, or same-sex relationship issues, the policy changes are all seen as stops in God's ultimate plan for the Church and its members. No policy change is marked as a mistake or zig-zag from the path that God has set out. It might look like apostles, or even God, made a mistake with certain policies, but the argument is that God made specific policy changes at these times because that is when they would have the most influence on and acceptance from the Church members. For members, even if a policy change makes no sense to them, in the long run these policy changes will help improve the Church and will come to make sense, and for that reason there must be trust in all of God's revelations to the Church leadership. As with the policies on polygamy and race, this means that same-sex relationship policies might change or they might not, but no matter what they are, they are what God wants the members to follow and believe in now.

All the youth I interviewed, except one participant, had strong conviction in their belief that the same-sex relationship policies of the Church were correct for the Church and the rest of the society. Some of this came from their role as advocates for traditional values, and some came from their trust in the revelations of the Church leadership from God, but either way they believed in the conclusion that these policies were right. Despite all of the participants having the same conclusion, it must also be noted that each youth had their own understanding and perspective on how these policies were right and fit in the Church. This is where the core tenet of agency and choice embedded within the Church began to allow for more diversity in opinions and understandings.

Despite its emphasis on the Church leadership as direct contact with God, by providing their members with the ability to choose how to believe the Church policies and doctrines, the Church leadership is stimulating, if not cultivating, heterodox views on their gospels. Unlike many perceptions of religions as hegemonic systems of control, the LDS Church seems to foster in members a belief in their own ability to make decisions about important religious issues. With requiring the members to represent them, the Church also has an ethics of reasoning entwined that requires the members to rationally think about their beliefs (Keane 2015). By deprivatizing, the Church is also asking its members to take the doctrines and covenants they have learned in the Church and apply them outwards to issues not traditionally marked as the primary domain of religion. What's more, asking members to advocate on issues not often spoken of by the Church provides members the opportunity to integrate arguments about these secular issues from non-Church associated sources, such as politics or science, into their arguments that are based on doctrine. This freedom to choose and form their understandings and reasoning for supporting these policies, both by deciding which doctrine to use and if they want to use non-Church related arguments, creates a more diverse set of perspectives on their support for Church policies than if they simply followed the Church leadership's reasoning.

For my participants, this ability to choose was seen in the multitude of perspectives they had on why the same-sex relationship policies of the Church fit with the doctrine and gospel of the Church and society. Their heterodox opinions, while different than the Church leadership's statements, often still included bits and pieces of the gospel of the Church, as well as from statements provided by the Church leadership. When looking at their individual perspectives, it is immediately visible to see these bits and pieces of the Church doctrine, but it is also possible to see the incorporation of non-Church dogma about same-sex relationships. Agency and choice



allow these participants to reason through why they do not support same-sex marriage and families. Instead of simply believing in the same-sex relationship policies, they reasoned through their support and determined via the gospel and non-Church ideas how they choose to believe in these policies.

For these youth, they are not just believing, but choosing how to believe. Mormonism unlike other religions is asking its members especially its youth to actively seek out people with whom to discuss their faith, whether through missions or their daily life. These youth as advocates for the traditional values of their Church must be prepared to give their argument to the world about their support for not only the Church's same-sex relationship policies, but all the other policies that are misunderstood by greater society. My interviews of them mimicked this role they are supposed to play, by giving them a platform to discuss their beliefs and reasoning with me, an outsider. Their diverse reasoning varied from heterodox to more orthodox, from deeper reasoning, like Belle's discussion of gender roles, to more closely repeated rhetoric of the Church, like three of the participants' discussion as marriage between a man and a woman. Either way there is obvious reasoning going on, whether that reasoning is used to format and create their beliefs, or to simply rationalize beliefs they already have.

All of this together provides an understanding of Mormon youth perspectives and understandings of the same-sex relationship policies of the LDS Church. It is not a new conclusion that most of the Mormon youth accept and highly believe in these policies, Jana Riess showed that with her survey that revealed 66% of Mormon youth are in favor of the policies. What is new is the understanding that their support for these policies all stem from different gospel and evidence. Some of it is influenced by their own personal background, but a lot of it is affected by their own understanding and perspectives of gospels and surrounding theories on

same-sex relationship issues. No two Mormon youth are the same, but more importantly no two Mormon youth think the same. Their role as advocates and faith in the apostles and idea of continuity give them a basis from which to learn, but the freedom of choice provides them chances to reason through their beliefs and come to an argument for the conclusion that they can believe in and fight for. They are forced to be prepared to discuss their beliefs and reasoning and faith seem to play an equal role in determining the perspectives and understanding they share.

This new set of data comes together to show that, alternatively to what many believe to be true, there is reasoning behind these religious arguments. For these youth, and possibly other Mormons, they have taken concepts and beliefs that might seem abstract and non-influential on non-religious topics and shaped them to make these new and different concepts. The deprivatization of the Church by the Church leadership has created space for these types of interactions, but the format of the Church overall also has an important influence. Religion, as described by Klass, is a process of interaction between the members of the Church and the universe at large. Religion provides a way of making meaning, coherence and unity within the society, and this can all be seen within the LDS Church. The leaders of the Church are creating policies, such as the same-sex relationship policies, to provide a unified message and direction through which the members can come to interact with what might be new and seemingly uncontrollable situations. The Church provides these policies, but also asks that the members find their own way to gain control back over the situation and explain the policies, and that requires them to use their own personal reasoning to make sense of it all. The diversity of perspectives about support for the conclusions provided by the Church all come from the members making their own connections through the framework provided by the Church. These perspectives highlight the point that religious belief, in the case of Mormonism, is not a

suspension of rationality— rather an application of it. In fact, there seems to be a lot of reasoning and rationalization going on to develop beliefs and understandings made up of various parts and interactions. Through various different strategies of connection and explanation, these youth are coming to the same conclusion, but not through same reasoning and understanding. This raises the question if religious belief for Mormons is about collective understanding and perspective, as perceived, or about individual understandings and perspectives made through reason.

The final and most important takeaway for me is that Mormons are not fundamentally different than anyone else, religious or not. My curiosity at their thoughts and beliefs came from a place of othering them and imagining that somehow their arguments would lack logic, but I learned the exact opposite. The LDS Church a very underrepresented and under-studied religion in the field of Anthropology provides a fascinating view into religious belief as a form of reasoning. It is not my place to say that the LDS Church is the only religion whose members base their religious belief on reasoning, but they do add a new perspective to how members of the faith form their religious perspectives and understandings.

With all this work said and done, I can only be grateful for the time I spent at home with these members of my community. I never would have imagined that twenty-one years later, I would be looking at the LDS Church and wondering what more I could learn from them or what more they have to teach us about how people see the world. Yet here I am asking those questions and hoping to continue to meet more Mormons and hear their perspectives and understandings.

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