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Covering an Evolving Mormonism: A Journalist's Barometer of Prophets, Problems, and Progress

Peggy Fletcher Stack, *Salt Lake Tribune**

In 1993, apostle Boyd K. Packer identified feminism, LGBTQ issues, and "so-called intellectuals" as the three greatest threats to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Award-winning reporter Peggy Fletcher Stack, who has covered the church and other religions for *The Salt Lake Tribune* since 1991, notes that these three issues are some of the most contentious she has covered in her career, taking up a large percentage of the more than 5,000 news stories she has written over more than thirty years. This article is adapted from the 2023 Glenn Vernon lecture she gave at the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion meeting in Salt Lake City, Utah.

It is January 2015, and Latter-day Saint leaders have called a news conference to declare that they want to promote a more gracious, civil dialogue on homosexuality. After the announcement, the public affairs office of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is offering reporters a brief one-on-one with a couple of apostles, and I spend time thinking about how to phrase my questions.

"When I am in a fight with my husband, the best thing I can do is apologize for my role in the conflict," I say first to Elder D. Todd Christofferson, and repeat again to Elder Dallin H. Oaks. "Would the church ever apologize for the harsh rhetoric about LGBTQ issues used by some of its members?"

Christofferson, whose brother is gay, acknowledges that the church could "express things better." But Oaks, a former Utah Supreme Court justice, is emphatic. The church doesn't "seek apologies," he said, "and we don't give them" (Stack 2015a).

I am taken aback by his answer but dutifully report it. Then comes the pushback from members who accuse me of misrepresenting the apostle or even making up the quote since it wasn't in other reporting. When questioned

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a few days later, though, the apostle is asked about it, and makes the point even stronger—and this time during a video chat on a "Trib Talk" podcast—by insisting that the word "apology" doesn't appear in LDS scriptures (Napier-Pierce 2015).

In the ensuing years, I have been somewhat astonished to see Oaks's "no apology" statement repeated again and again out of the context of our conversation or even on the same topic as if it is a generally accepted Latter-day Saint policy, even doctrine. And that anecdote reflects so much of my decades of experience as a journalist covering Mormonism—publishing a surprising quote accurately and readers being skeptical but then passing it off as something else entirely.

Since its founding in 1830, the fledgling faith wanted and needed newspapers to help spread the word about it. The problem, of course, is that it couldn't dictate the tone or approach those reporters would take. On the positive side, it was in response to a query from a newspaper editor, John Wentworth, that founder Joseph Smith, Jr. laid out the faith's history and its Articles of Faith, which have become almost a theological creed for the church (Smith Jr. 1842). The church celebrates that exchange. Conversely, another newspaperman, Thomas Sharp, wrote editorials that excoriated Mormons in Illinois and encouraged their neighbors to force them out of the state. The church was horrified by these attacks.

To this day, the now more than 17-million-member faith—like many other religious movements—wants good press but is frustrated by its inability to control the narrative. During my 33 years reporting on Mormonism for *The Salt Lake Tribune*, I have found myself smack in the middle of that dual desire.

There are those, even in the church hierarchy, who believe journalists like me should write only good news as if we are the faith's publicity arm. And there are others who think it is my job to dig up and expose every miscreant, untoward act, or seemingly salacious practice.

Yet, there is no question that even-handed journalism has helped to prompt many of the church's changes over the years by holding up a mirror to the sometimes insular faith, allowing it to see itself more clearly. For me, the work is about seeking facts, using my news judgment, asking the right questions, and finding good sources. I am not without my biases and blindspots, of course, but overall I strive to be fair.

It is, I argue, a humbling but essential assignment.

Grappling with the Church's Public Relations Problem

In 1972, Wendell Ashton was asked by soon-to-be-Church-President Harold B. Lee to take charge of the church's communications department and, if he agreed, was promised complete access to Church leaders (Stack 1995). With that assurance, Ashton set a policy of frequent news conferences and openness with reporters. He and Lee held such news conferences in New York and Europe. When Lee died 18 months later, his successor Spencer W. Kimball had no experience with the press but was willing to continue the strategy, holding conferences in Asia, Australia, New Zealand, Samoa, Tonga, and Tahiti, among other places. After one particularly "spirited" exchange at a news conference in Washington, D.C., Kimball remarked: "These news conferences are tough but if it will help the church, I'll keep doing them."

The 1960s and 1970s were dominated by public discussion of the church's priesthood/temple ban on Black members—an issue that did not lend itself to a good sound bite or satisfying retort. Shrill critics attacked the church in the press, while many members cried religious discrimination (Harris 2024). There were also women's issues, including the church's all-male priesthood and its opposition (sometimes surreptitious) to the Equal Rights Amendment (Young 2007).

Still, Ashton felt the best policy was candor. "I've always felt you should be open and honest with the media," Ashton told me in a later interview (Stack 1995). "Even about things that are difficult like the ill health of the [church] president."

In 1985, when Mormon forger Mark Hofmann killed two people with homemade pipe bombs, national reporters descended on Salt Lake City, trying to explain what had happened. I was there when they gathered for a historic news conference in 1985 with Gordon B. Hinckley, a counselor to Kimball, flanked by apostle Oaks and Hugh Pinnock of the First Quorum of the Seventy. They answered questions about church involvement with Hofmann in defensive, angry tones (Stack 1995). They summarily closed the conference after only a short while, lecturing journalists about their questions.

After that, there were very few church-sponsored news conferences.

The "Enemies" List

When I started my job in 1991, Ezra Taft Benson, who had been a controversial figure for his ultraconservative views and associations with the right-

wing John Birch Society, was the church's president. But he was too ill to speak publicly, and his absence allowed rumors about him, his counselors, and the church to run rampant. Some even speculated that Hinckley, who was shouldering church leadership, had somehow "silenced" the prophet.

In August 1993, my colleague and I wrote a story based on documents on file with the state of Utah, which showed that in May 1989 Benson had given absolute control over the Corporation of the President to his counselors (Semerad and Stack 1993). We saw the story as pointing out that Benson's counselors knew as early as 1989 that the president was incapacitated mentally. We did not know about the attacks from the right aimed at Hinckley, who condemned our piece over the pulpit in General Conference.

A month after that story, the so-called September Six were excommunicated and Benson's grandson, Steve Benson, a cartoonist for *The Arizona Republic*, attempted to share publicly what he knew of his grandfather's ill health. He subsequently had his name removed from church membership (Skordas 1993).

From his vantage point, apostle Boyd K. Packer knew who was causing all these conflicts and bad press. The controversial leader told the All-Church Coordinating Council that the three greatest threats to the church at the end of the 20th century were "so-called intellectualism," feminism, and the "gay-lesbian movement."

Looking over the more than 5,000 stories I have written for *The Trib*, I see these three topics emerging repeatedly in my reports as the church has evolved in its approach to them and how to portray its principles to the public. Yet, they remain among the knottiest issues the church faces.

"So-called Intellectuals"

My first summer on the job, I thought I would give some publicity to the annual Sunstone Symposium. I had been instrumental in launching it before starting at *The Trib*, and it rarely got much attention in the press. I was not involved in the program, but thought it had a fascinating array of LDS topics.

Just two weeks after that reporting on the 1991 symposium, though, the church's First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles issued a statement discouraging association with "symposia" that result in "ridiculing sacred things or injuring the Church of Jesus Christ, detracting from its mission, or jeopardizing the well-being of its members" (*Church News* 1991). The late Eugene England, one of the founders of *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon*

Thought, somewhat kiddingly asked me how I felt about "killing my baby."

In other words, my reporting had brought Sunstone and all its critical thinkers to the leaders' attention in ways they hadn't been before.

But with the rise of the internet, questions about the church's founding, its scriptures, polygamy, racism, and same-sex attraction—many of which were raised by Sunstone presenters—could no longer be avoided. They continued to bedevil the leaders, especially as more and more media were writing about them, including me.

"Never before have we had this information age, with social networking and bloggers publishing unvetted points of view," emeritus general authority Marlin Jensen said in a 2012 interview (Stack 2013a). "The church is concerned about misinformation and distorted information, but we are doing better and trying harder to get our story told in an accurate way."

Many of the scholars whom Packer had disdained now came to the aid of their church—especially during Mitt Romney's run for the White House, when multiple misperceptions abounded. These scholars helped to explain the controversies in the past in an honest but generous way in a series known as the "Gospel Topics" essays (Harris and Bringhurst 2020). The result was that Latter-day Saint authorities, including Packer, signed off on the essays.

And Deseret Book, the church's own publishing house, now regularly publishes works by scholars who might once have been seen as disloyal for raising issues. Still, the works of the faith's "intellectuals" continues to vex church leaders, who hope to be the last, most authoritative word on every subject. They are, after all, called "general authorities."

Feminism

In 1992, I got a tip about a general authority removing quotes from the wall of an exhibit on the Relief Society's sesquicentennial at the Church History Museum. Loren C. Dunn, a Seventy, spied three quotes from Joseph Smith and early LDS women blown up on placards that he found objectionable and had them removed, saying he could not justify them to his superiors. According to a church employee, the quotes in question "all pointed out an identity of Relief Society that would prepare women to officiate in the temple" (Sunstone 1992).

One was particularly sensitive to feminists: founder Joseph Smith saying, "I now turn the key to you in the name of God." (The quote was changed in the official histories of the church sometime in the 1940s to "I turn the key in your behalf.") Dunn said that the original quote revealed "too much" about

the temple ceremony. Over Dunn's strenuous objections—and his patronizing and verbal attacks on me—I wrote about his removals.

Beyond priesthood, there have been questions about the visibility of women in the patriarchal faith. In 1993, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, the church's first female Pulitzer Prize-winning author and a devout member, was rejected as a speaker for Brigham Young University's Women's Conference, and organizer Carol Lee Hawkins's contract was not renewed. In response, some feminists at BYU and elsewhere launched an alternative, known as the "Counterpoint Conference," but skirmishes between the Utah-based faith and many of its women continued unabated. And Counterpoint eventually faded away.

In September 1997, President Hinckley scolded me like an exasperated parent when I asked him about the Mormon doctrine of Mother in Heaven, a co-deity with God and why the LDS Church was downplaying rather than celebrating that feminist idea.

"Now, Peggy, you know I have already spoken about this," he said sternly during a question-and-answer session at the annual Religion Newswriters convention in Albuquerque. He was referring, of course, to his earlier instruction not to pray to Heavenly Mother (Hinckley 1991), and several feminists were punished for publicly advocating that.

The most visible feminism effort was the 2012 movement known as Ordain Women, which garnered national and international media attention when a line of women dressed in their Sunday clothes peacefully walked to the Tabernacle and asked to be admitted to the all-male priesthood session of the church's General Conference (Stack 2013b).

Church public affairs personnel were ordered to turn them away—ever so politely—but they couldn't stop reporters from writing about it. No matter how politely the church rejected the women's plea for ordination, the leaders looked bad in the eyes of the world. Gender inequality was not a good "optic" for the 21st century.

Later, Ordain Women's co-founder, Kate Kelly, was excommunicated, but, one general authority told me, every small change for women that followed—auxiliary leaders sitting in the midst of the all-male hierarchy, the women's photos being in the Church News and on the office building's walls and so forth—was a response to OW (Stack 2015b). Ironically, in April 2014, in response to the Ordain Women movement, Oaks himself explored the idea that women have a kind of priesthood power. "Relief Society is not just a class for women," Oaks said, "but something they belong to—a divinely established

appendage to the priesthood" (Oaks 2014). Then Oaks quoted fellow apostle M. Russell Ballard, who said, "When men and women go to the temple, they are both endowed with the same power, which is priesthood power …" (Ballard 2014).

More than a quarter century after Packer's declaration, the church issued a more nuanced, but still cautionary, position on "feminism" in its official magazine, the *New Era* — one that is neither an endorsement nor a denunciation (Stack 2020). Feminism can mean "different things to different people," the 2020 statement said. "Sometimes it refers to efforts to ensure basic human rights and basic fairness for women, as well as efforts to encourage women to obtain an education, develop their talents, and serve humankind in any field they choose. Latter-day Saints support these things."

But then came the warning: "Sometimes certain philosophies and social movements bearing the feminism label advocate extreme ideas that are not in harmony with the teachings of the gospel. These can lead people to become distracted from (or even work against) the ideals of marriage and family. Latter-day Saints frown upon such things."

Also in recent years, the concept of Heavenly Mother has grown in popularity. Yet, in 2022, apostle Dale G. Renlund cautioned LDS women against "wanting to know more" about this feminine deity (Stack 2022). "Speculation "can sometimes … divert us from what has been revealed," he said.

As long as gender inequity continues in the church, though, it seems out of step with much of American society, so journalists will be drawn to it.

"Gay-lesbian Movement"

Of the three "enemies" Packer listed, the "gay-lesbian" movement he condemned has received the most widespread publicity, partly because it included actions, rather than just rhetoric.

When I checked the newspaper's archives, I discovered nearly 700 of my articles with the word "gay" in them. The pieces told personal, spiritual, and institutional stories as well as sometimes evolving data. They did not all involve the LDS Church—for example, I broke the story of Utah's retired Episcopal bishop coming out—but the bulk were.

One of my first stories in 1992 was about the fact that an unusually high number of Utah women had AIDS, due to their husbands being closeted gays who were having anonymous sex rather than acknowledging their sexuality (Stack 1992).

I also reported the church's language changes from describing LGBTQ attractions as "sin" and a matter of choice to the slow recognition that most experienced their attractions as inborn, a part of their identity (Prince 2019). I tracked the development of church books and pamphlets, websites, and support groups. Many stories discussed the church's political involvement opposing same-sex marriage legislation in various states, including Hawaii and California, then finally its efforts to build bridges with LGBTQ activists.

One of the most direct connections between my journalism and the church's response was in my General Conference report in the fall of 2010 (Stack 2010a). Elder Boyd Packer addressed the question of homosexuality, reiterating that any type of union other than marriage between a man and a woman was morally wrong. He decried some LGBTQ advocates' insistence that same-sex attractions "were pre-set" and that individuals "cannot overcome what they feel are inborn tendencies toward the impure and unnatural." Packer said this was untrue: "Not so! Why would our Heavenly Father do that to anyone? Remember he is our Father."

The *Tribune* was alone with this headline: "Apostle: Same-sex attraction can change." Packer's speech generated national controversy and protests from those inside and outside the Salt Lake City-based faith, many of whom saw the apostle's statements as contributing to the self-loathing and suicides of gays (Brundin 2010).

Church public affairs officials screamed at me about the headline and the approach, saying I had overemphasized his meaning and had upset the apostle. Ultimately, it was Packer who had to change his wording to align with church teaching, which by 2010 had taken the position that it was not a sin to be homosexual, only acting on it was (Stack 2010b).

Five years later, a policy change—deeming same-sex married couples "apostates" and generally barring their children from baby blessings and baptisms—was quietly inserted into the church's handbook and was then leaked to the press. Such harsh and restrictive rules triggered widespread protests and soul-searching that were reported in the local and national press (Goodstein 2015).

"Hundreds, maybe more, resigned their church membership. Even believers felt wounded and betrayed," I wrote. "Families were torn. Tensions erupted. Some were disciplined by the church. Some died by suicide."

Though as an apostle, Russell M. Nelson had defended the policy, even calling it a "revelation," by 2019, now-church President Nelson walked back all

the hotly disputed elements (Stack 2019). Church rituals for children became okay again, and LGBTQ couples were no longer labeled apostates. It is unclear what role the public reports and opposition played in the reversal, but to me, the impact was not negligible.

Then in November of 2022, the church announced—not in a news conference but an emailed release—that it was supporting the "Respect for Marriage Act," a proposed federal law that would codify marriages between same-sex couples, while protecting "religious freedoms" (H.R.8404 2022). "We believe this approach is the way forward," the church release said. "As we work together to preserve the principles and practices of religious freedom together with the rights of LGBTQ individuals, much can be accomplished to heal relationships and foster greater understanding" (CJCLDS 2022).

The way the church's support for the law was first relayed brought praise from progressives, but concerns from more orthodox members, despite the church's reiteration that its doctrine that marriage should be between a man and a woman remained unchanged.

A month later, when LDS representatives were present for the bill signing, the two parts of the bill were mentioned in reverse order: the protections for religious freedom were highlighted first and at length, while codifying the Supreme Court's support for same-sex marriage was second and not emphasized.

Could the reporting have played a role in the wording of the second release?

Hinckley's Journalistic Camelot

When President Benson died in 1994, the gentle Howard Hunter took over the church presidency, and, as a reporter, it was a delight for me to write about the man and his speeches. Sadly, he lasted less than nine months before his health gave out. Then, in 1995, a vigorous 84-year-old, Gordon B. Hinckley, became the church's 15th president.

Hinckley had a background in journalism and public relations—had even considered a career as a reporter—and he made it a priority to improve the church's image with the public. Within his first year, he gave interviews with most of the major newspapers in the country and hired a New York-based PR firm, The Edelman Group (Stack 1995). Historian J. B. Haws writes, "The Edelman Group arranged for a 'meet the press' lunch at the Harvard Club, and it was at that lunch that Hinckley agreed to sit for an interview with

60 Minutes' Mike Wallace" (Haws 2015). "'Can you tell me,'" Wallace asked in that interview, as if to underscore just how remarkable he found the occasion, "the last president of the Mormon Church who went on nationwide television to do an interview with no questions ahead of time so that you know what is coming?'"

The interview and the attendant *60 Minutes* feature, which aired in April 1996, Haws writes, "signaled something of a sea change to the wider media world and foreshadowed the type of Mormonism that would be on display in 2002," when the Winter Olympics were scheduled to come to Salt Lake City.

During the next decade-plus, the amiable Hinckley globe-trotted around the world, meeting with members and media alike. I followed him to Ghana, Zimbabwe and South Africa, and to temple dedications in Boston and Santiago, Chile (Stack 2008). For me, his openness with the press was a kind of a journalistic Camelot. I enjoyed sparring with the witty prophet while reporters with church-owned publications watched in horror at my apparent irreverence.

In Zimbabwe, he gave me a private interview about the church in Africa, lamenting the level of illiteracy among members who couldn't even read the Book of Mormon. They were converted, Hinckley said, on the faith of the missionaries.

At the dedication of the rebuilt Nauvoo Temple, I asked him if the church had re-created the building down to its smallest detail, why was the angel on top standing, rather than flying horizontally.

"I like it better," he responded.

At the dedication of the Boston Temple, the faith's 100th, I asked him why the church had spared no expense on the carpets, chairs, and chandeliers, but had cheap reproductions or no art on the walls. It's because the church was building these temples so quickly, Hinckley told me, that leaders hadn't had time to commission any. But now it had.

I learned that that was, well, not true. A source in the church office building later called to say, "Thanks for that question. President Hinckley came right home and commissioned some art."

My conversations with him were mostly face to face, though we did chat a few times on the phone, and he once told me: "I read everything you write." I was never sure whether that was meant as a compliment or a threat, but it did make me smile to think of him as one of my readers.

I continued reporting on the charismatic leader until just weeks before he died and even wrote an essay about him for the paper after his death.

No Deference to Authority

Here's a fact about me that runs counter to many Latter-day Saints: Though I may revere certain religious figures and respect their office, I have no natural deference to authority. That includes presidents, kings and magistrates. To me, respect has to be earned; it does not come automatically. That can come into conflict with a church built on hierarchical authority that is presumed with an office.

I once wrote a story about the church's response to sexual abuse among its members. I remember the church representative at the time read it and said, "You quoted our lawyer, then you quoted someone who disagreed with him."

Well, yes, that's what I do.

After Hinckley died in 2008, Thomas S. Monson took the church's helm. Though long associated with the church-owned Deseret News, the newly installed leader held but a single news conference at the beginning of his tenure and allowed only one question per reporter. I asked: Can Mormons disagree with church politics without being disciplined?

"That depends on what the disagreement is … if … [it's] an apostasy situation, that would not be appropriate," Monson said. "If it were something political … there's room for opinions" (Stack 2014).

Monson never took questions from journalists again.

And that was the year of Proposition 8 in California, with the church enlisting its members to donate and volunteer to support it.

Gone were the days of a church president who loved the press, and with it, much of the faith's response to journalists, too.

But 2012 was a time when the country was experiencing its "Mormon Moment," with Mitt Romney's presidential nomination and *The Book of Mormon* musical.

It was during that campaign when a story in *The Washington Post* exposed continued racist explanations for the church's ban (Horowitz 2012). The writer quoted BYU religion professor Randy Bott as saying that LDS scriptures indicate that descendants of the biblical Cain—who killed his brother Abel and was "cursed" by God—were Black and subsequently barred from the priesthood. He also noted that past LDS leaders suggested Blacks were less valiant in the sphere known in Mormon theology as the "premortal existence."

In a response for the paper, the church strongly denounced racism and dismissed Bott's views, calling them "folk beliefs about why the Utah-based faith banned blacks from its all-male priesthood until 1978" (Stack 2012).

In the following years, there was so much negative press, according to McKay Coppins's 2024 biography of Mitt Romney, that apostle M. Russell Ballard approached the Utah senator asking him to explore the possibility of an LDS version of the Jewish Anti-Defamation League (Coppins 2024). Romney declined.

In 2018, Russell M. Nelson became the church's 17th president and held his first news conference. (He has only had two in Utah since then, both having to do with the church's association with and donations to the NAACP.) That first one was a memorable—some might say existential—moment for me. Again, the handlers allowed a small group of reporters only one question each so I planned my words carefully, using as many commas as I could.

The church has made much progress on women's issues, I said, but "what will you do to increase the involvement of international members, women, and people of color in your decision-making?"

The then-93-year-old Nelson launched into a list of my relatives that he knew, and ended with: "What was your question?" He then remembered only the clause about non-Americans and addressed that. Returning to my chair, I feared he would wind up not answering anything about women. So I broke the rules and called out, "What about women?"

"We love them," was Nelson's response.

Though not particularly satisfied with his answer, I was undaunted.

His tenure in office, though, has been fairly eventful, starting with his strong statements about "rooting out racism" among members, outreach to the historic Black group, NAACP, and his willingness to donate church funds to their projects (Stack 2018).

Speaking of church funds, the public airing of its huge Ensign Peak investment portfolio has prompted major conversations among members of the faith's finances and whether it should direct some of the reserve to humanitarian efforts.

Nelson, a former surgeon, also presided over the church's first online-only General Conference due to the global COVID-19 pandemic. He set the example for members by letting himself—and the top leaders—be photographed getting the vaccine.

These five-plus years have also seen the rise of ultraconservatives in the U.S., during Donald Trump's time in office. And now there is a war in the Middle East.

There is never enough time or space in the paper for me to write all the faith stories I would like. But I do remember what *New York Times* religion reporter Peter Steinfels told me years ago.

"You have a better job than I do," he said. When I balked at that, he said, "Your readers care about religion. They talk about it. You can get on the front page any time you want. I have to fight to get editors to care."

Indeed, Utah is a great place to report on faith. It is the Vatican of Mormonism, and I have a front row seat.

I continue to believe that the church needs journalists like me to report fairly and ask questions that others won't. (Me to apostle David Bednar: "What kind of hair gel do you use?" Him: "None. Want to touch it?" Me: "Yes." Conclusion: No gel.)

We serve an important, even noble, purpose. While I often find myself on the firing line, taking hits from all sides, there's no place I'd rather be than reporting on this American-born movement as it rolls across the globe.

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