

Young Single Adult Mormon Women in Tennessee:
A Brief Ethnography

by
Melody Cook

A thesis presented to the Honors College of Middle Tennessee State University in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for graduation from the University Honors College

Fall 2015

Young Single Adult Mormon Women in Tennessee:
A Brief Ethnography

by
Melody Cook

APPROVED:

Dr. Rebekka King
Department of Philosophy

Dr. Ron Bombardi
Chair, Department of Philosophy

Dr. Jackie Gilbert
Department of Management and Marketing
Honors Council Representative

Dr. John Vile
Dean, University Honors College

For Mia Sonora II

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I wish to thank my interlocutors, especially those with whom I had the opportunity to sit for interviews. These women generously shared their stories with me, and I am so grateful for their candor.

Funding for the completion of this project was provided by MTSU's Undergraduate Research Office in the form of an Undergraduate Research and Creative Activity (URECA) grant.

I am grateful to Dr. Jenna Gray-Hildenbrand for introducing me to the study of religion over Starbucks at the perfect time in my life. Thank you!

My sincerest thanks to Dr. Rebekka King, who showed me the beauty of the ethnographic method and has walked with me through every stage of this project. Thank you for your patience, constant encouragement, careful mentoring, and friendship.

Finally, I wish to thank my parents, Hope and Chip Cook, for their constant and unwavering emotional, spiritual, and financial support throughout this process.

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the lives of young single adult Mormon women living in Nashville, Tennessee. Through an ethnography of the Nashville YSA Branch, a congregation of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, I argue that my interlocutors are part of what I call the Mormon diaspora. Additionally, I find that the LDS Church provides a set of standards to be followed by its members in the interest of the future of the Church. Drawing from six months of fieldwork and five oral history interviews conducted with members of the Nashville YSA Branch, I compose a brief ethnography of a subgroup of contemporary Mormonism (i.e., YSA Mormon women) that is often ignored by scholars.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures	vi
Epigraph	vii
Introduction: Lived Mormonism	1
Chapter One: The Nashville Young Single Adult Branch	19
Chapter Two: The Mormon Diaspora in Nashville	37
Chapter Three: “Not, Like, an Altar Mormon”: Contemporary Gender Issues in the Church	49
Conclusion: Why Is No One Crying? Self-reflection, After the Field	64
References	74
Appendix A: The Family, A Proclamation to the World	78
Appendix B: Interview Questions	79
Appendix C: Interview Transcripts	80
IRB Approval	124

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: A print available for purchase from The Woods Barn	3
Figure 2: Current cover of the Book of Mormon	13
Figure 3: Official logo of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints	14
Figure 4: Artwork displayed at one of the entrances in the Nashville meetinghouse	21
Figure 5: The “Plan of Happiness” illustration	34
Figure 6: Current cover of “For the Strength of Youth”	55
Figure 7: An artifact from the field	65

EPIGRAPH

*O, remember, my son, and learn wisdom in thy youth;
yea, learn in thy youth to keep the commandments of God.*

– Alma 37:35

INTRODUCTION

Lived Mormonism

A lived-religion approach helps us go beyond stereotypes of cookie-cutter conformity and to recast Mormonism's growing diversity not as fragmentation or declension, but as evidence of the fertility of its soil for the human religious imagination.

– Tona J. Hangen (2015: 209)

An older man wearing a suit with a red and grey-striped tie ambles up to a podium situated before a filled auditorium in Salt Lake City, Utah. 91-year-old Russell M. Nelson, President of the Quorum of Twelve of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, speaks softly. He smiles to the men seated to his right and then goes on to describe recent deaths among the leadership of the Church. He speaks about the men's late wives: "It would be impossible to measure the influence that such women have [...], as wives, mothers, and grandmothers; as sisters and aunts; as teachers and leaders; and especially as exemplars and devout defenders of the faith." He tells a story referencing his "pioneering efforts in open-heart surgery" before continuing to praise the women of his Church. Closing his eyes and shaking his head, he uses an index finger to punctuate his words: "We brethren *cannot* duplicate your influence." Mimicking the phrasing of an earlier leader of the Church, he continues:

Attacks against the Church, its doctrine, and our way of life are going to increase. Because of this, we need women who have a bedrock understanding of the doctrine of Christ and who will use that understanding to teach and help raise a sin-resistant generation. We need women who can detect deception in all of its forms. We need women who know how to access the power that God makes available to covenant keepers who express their beliefs with confidence and charity. We need women who have the courage and vision of our Mother Eve.¹ (Nelson 2015)

¹ Mormonism's narrative of Eve differs from most traditional narratives. See Campbell 1992: 475-476.

As he speaks, President Nelson focuses his gaze on the crowd before him, emphasizing important phrases in his speech: *bedrock understanding*, *sin-resistant generation*, *courage*.

Standing up a bit straighter, he glances down at his notes on the podium and says, “So today I plead with my sisters of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to step forward. Take your rightful and needful place in your home, in your community, and in the kingdom of God – more than you ever have before.” Nelson’s speech ends with his testifying of the truth of his words and his thanks to the women of the Church. He turns and leaves the podium.²

The above speech, or “talk” as it is called in the Mormon vernacular, was given at the October 2015 session of the General Conference of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, also called the LDS Church or Mormon Church.³ General Conference occurs biannually and consists of talks given by the leadership of the LDS Church, known as general authorities. Church members revere these talks. Only a short time after the October 2015 Conference, quotes from Nelson’s talk printed in decorative typography were available for purchase online (see Figure 1).

² The text of Nelson’s talk is included in the General Conference section of lds.org (see Nelson 2015). I also referenced a video recording of Nelson’s talk found on YouTube.com (see Nelson [LDS General Conference] 2015).

³ When referring to the LDS Church as an institutional body, I use “Church.” Additionally, I consciously refer to members of the LDS Church as “Mormons.” Officially, the Church prefers its members to refer to themselves and be referred to as “Latter-day Saints” or “LDS”; noted historian of Mormonism Jan Shipps often uses “Saints” in her writing. However, taking into account trends in recent scholarship (e.g., Cannell 2005, Sumerau & Cragun 2015) as well as the tendencies of the Church members featured in this study, I believe that it is most appropriate to refer to my interlocutors as “Mormons.”

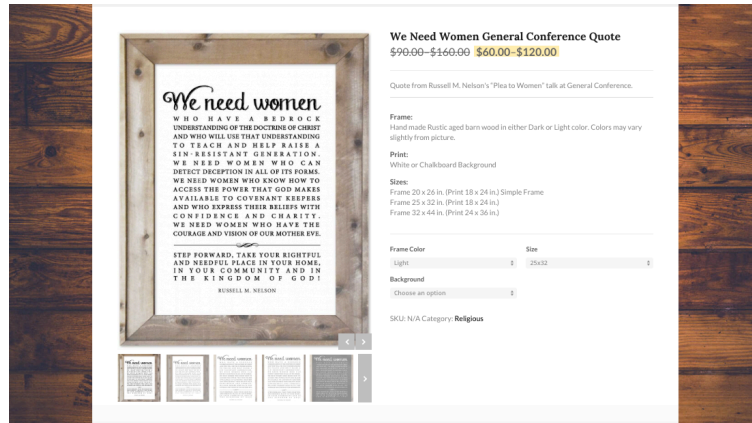


Figure 1: A print available for purchase from The Woods Barn (*The Woods Barn* 2015)

The religion founded by Joseph Smith and known as Mormonism, continues to exist in a variety of forms and organizations, such as the LDS Church, the Community of Christ, and various fundamentalist sects; the largest of these today is the LDS Church.⁴ Over the past 185 years, the LDS Church has grown from a small new religious movement into an American religious pillar with a global presence. In the mid-nineteenth century, Smith moved his new church from New York to the American Midwest, spending time in Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois. Following Smith’s murder in Illinois, Brigham Young took thousands of Mormon “pioneers” west to Utah Territory, where he founded Salt Lake City and there established Church headquarters. Today, there are LDS meetinghouses throughout the world in locations as diverse as Barrow, Alaska, and Kiribati. In 2014, the Church announced a milestone 15 million members baptized, with over 8 million members residing outside of the United States. Indeed, Jan Shipps notes, “[Mormonism] is no longer a regional faith, much less an American faith” (2000: 270), and Marie Cornwall writes, “As the [LDS Church] expands into new territories, Mormonism *once again* becomes a new religious movement” (2001: xiii, emphasis

⁴ For the remainder of the thesis, “Mormonism” and “Mormon” refer exclusively to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and its members.

mine). Despite this growth, however, the LDS Church does not appear on track to meet the expectations of Rodney Stark's (2005) infamous prediction of 265 million Mormons by 2080, and Mormons remain a minority in the United States, with the vast majority living in the area within and surrounding what is affectionately known as the "Mormon Bubble" that includes Utah and Idaho. In Tennessee, less than 1% of the population are members of the LDS Church. According to the Church, nearly 50,000 Tennesseans are members, and the state boasts two missions, two temples, and 105 congregations.⁵ In Davidson County, whose Mormons serve as the focus of this thesis, less than 0.8% of the population are members of the Church. The majority of Davidson County's religious congregations belong to the Southern Baptist Convention, which is headquartered in Nashville. Other denominations with a prominent presence include the United Methodist Church, the Roman Catholic Church, and Churches of Christ.⁶

Notably, the LDS Church maintains a sense of sameness in each of its congregations. A meetinghouse in Sandy, Utah, will look similar to one in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia; the artwork hanging in Relief Society rooms is the same in Las Vegas as in Tokyo; across the globe, male missionaries wear white shirts, dark pants, and ties. One of the touted symbols of the Church is a beehive, which represents harmony.⁷ Despite this attempt at uniformity, the Church is a vibrant organization with a diverse array of

⁵ These statistics are taken from the Church-operated website, mormonnewsroom.org (see "Facts and Statistics"). Statistics released by the Church are notorious for being inflated. I am unable to ascertain the degree of – if any – inflation to these statistics.

⁶ This information is according to data collected in 2010 (see "Davidson County, Tennessee (TN) Religion Statistics Profile"). The data stated that there were 5,022 members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints living in Davidson County in 2010, with a reported growth of 245% over ten years (1,456 members were reported in 2000). Other denominational "adherents" included: Southern Baptist Convention with 88,496; "non-denominational" with 41,423; Churches of Christ (not to be confused with the United Church of Christ) with 35,421; Catholic Church (*sic*) with 30,874; and United Methodist Church with 28,748. The largest non-Christian religious group was the "Muslim estimate" with 5,080.

⁷ See Ether 2:3. Notably, the beehive is also a state symbol of Utah, seen on the state flag and found in the state's nickname (the Beehive State).

members. As Tona Hangen writes, “While Mormonism exerts strong pressure on its members to conform within a very narrow range of well-defined behaviors and perspectives, there is unexpected plurality and dynamism in the ways believers practice Mormonism” (2015: 210). This “unexpected plurality and dynamism” of practice among Mormons is where this thesis begins. Through an ethnographic study of a single congregation located in Nashville, Tennessee, I seek to understand and provide a critical examination of unmarried Mormon women between the ages of 18-35 living their lives and practicing their religion in the American South.

Mormon Studies and Lived Religion

As a student of the study of religion with an affinity for American popular culture, I have long been interested in why Mormonism, a religion cultivated from within the United States and considered characteristically “American,” continues to be misunderstood and mocked by non-Mormon Americans, even amidst a storm of popular culture portrayals of Mormons (e.g., HBO’s *Big Love*, TLC’s *My Husband’s Not Gay* and *Sister Wives*). These popular culture portrayals do not always portray Mormons favorably. HBO’s *Big Love*, for example, appears to at times normalize the suburban polygamists at the story’s center while demonizing the LDS Church and its members. TLC’s special *My Husband’s Not Gay* chronicles the lives of several LDS mixed-orientation marriages consisting of one gay man and one heterosexual woman. The editing of *My Husband’s Not Gay* attempts to evoke sympathy for the women “trapped” in these marriages. This treatment of Mormon women is not uncommon in popular culture. Often, Mormon women are portrayed as being completely submissive and

powerless in their lives and religion; references to polygamy and the plight of polygamist women are not infrequent.⁸ Mormon women are perhaps viewed as wholly similar to the four wives of Kody Brown as seen on TLC's *Sister Wives*. Mormon women are, of course, averse to these portrayals. One of my interlocutors, Hazel, complained of the effects of such popular culture depictions:

People hear "Mormon" and they [think] – oh, those guys who come knock on the door, or those crazy sister wives, or those crazy polygamists. TV shows like *Sister Wives* – they really irritate me because they call themselves Mormons. They're not Mormons! They're fundamentalist Mormons, which means [...] they broke away, and they considered themselves true Mormons when in reality it was Joseph Smith and Brigham Young and all the people who followed them [who were true Mormons].

Hazel's distress and annoyance comes primarily from what she understands as confusion between "true" Mormons and those who are "not Mormons" – in other words, authentic and inauthentic Mormons (see footnote 15). Changing the perceptions of non-members with little familiarity with the LDS Church is an important pursuit amongst members, especially regarding women and women's roles in the Church. Mormon bloggers assert that they have agency through their religion;⁹ Kate Kelly, the founder of Ordain Women, was excommunicated in June 2014 due in part (or in whole, depending on whom you ask) to her belief that women should hold the priesthood; and women member-scholars have published a number of books regarding the role of women in Mormonism (e.g., Beecher & Anderson 1992, Brooks et al. 2015).

The aforementioned books fall under the umbrella of the academic field of Mormon studies. Mormon studies is best known for its explorations of Mormon history,

⁸ The LDS Church officially and publicly renounced polygamy in 1890. Wilford Woodruff, the fourth president of the Church, issued a "Manifesto" rejecting the practice of "plural marriage," believing he had received a revelation from Heavenly Father. Today, practicing plural marriage is grounds for excommunication from the LDS Church.

⁹ For example, an Internet search of "Mormon mommy blog" will result in countless blogs featuring similar messages.

especially the beginnings of Mormonism in the United States and the life of Joseph Smith. Member-scholar J. Spencer Fluhman avoids a straightforward definition of Mormon studies, instead relating the field to religious studies, noting that Mormon studies is “still developing in fits and starts,” and posing significant questions relating to how the study of Mormonism might move forward:

Is it a field or merely a band of scholars who happen to share an object of study? What is its relationship to those faith communities with arguably the greatest stake in its findings? What assumptions about religion or about a particular faith could or should undergird study of it? Are there special methodological, theoretical, or epistemological considerations involved with the study of Mormonism? How might Mormon studies relate to Catholic studies or Jewish studies? (2014: 3)

Perhaps unsurprisingly, a significant number of scholars of Mormonism are members of the LDS Church (hence my use of the term “member-scholars”), so it would not be improper to suggest that a certain caution must influence their work on Mormonism.¹⁰

Given the percentage of member-scholars in Mormon studies, it is natural that a variety of opinions exist regarding the future of Mormon studies. For example, in his “Defense of Methodological Pluralism,” member-scholar Brian D. Birch “[seeks] to argue that Mormon studies absent theological and apologetic voices is artificially exclusionary and unproductive” (2014: 55). Birch’s approach is problematic for a number of reasons. First, at no point in his article does he give a specific definition for what he calls the “normative voice” (apparently meaning the voices of typical temple worthy

¹⁰ Those familiar with Mormon studies will recall the scandal of the September Six: In September 1993, six member-scholars were either disfellowshipped or excommunicated for publishing work that was interpreted as criticizing the Church. It is imperative to note that I am not a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I readily admit this for two reasons. First, as I discuss in the epilogue, my status as a non-member informed my relationships with my interlocutors, as well as those who encountered my work outside the field. For example, an “Are you now or have you ever been?” moment tended to occur anytime I explained my research to an outsider to the project. Second, as a non-Mormon studying Mormonism, I feel it is important to note that I have no reason to exercise caution in the same ways that member-scholars might. In other words, while member-scholars have, in the past, faced disciplinary action by the Church for their research findings, I am in no such position. My caution in this work relates to the desire to provide an accurate cultural analysis of the worlds of my interlocutors rather than to remain a temple worthy member of the LDS Church.

members of the LDS Church) he seeks to incorporate. Second, his desire to include apologetic and theological voices into Mormon studies (an ostensibly “academic” – not apologetic/theological – field) is ambiguous: Does Birch wish for these voices to produce Mormon studies scholarship? How does he expect scholars of religion to account for these voices? Is he dismissing scholars who already include these voices as primary sources in their work? Indeed, reading and understanding theology and apologetics *should* be part of any research involving a religious community that produces such voices. Ethnographers of religion, specifically, prioritize the inclusion of these voices as interlocutors. No reputable scholar would dismiss theology and/or apologetics as unimportant to her work. So what exactly is Birch proposing here? If he is attempting to argue that a lack of attention has been paid to theological and apologetic Mormon voices by scholars of Mormonism (and I think that he is), it would be difficult to prove his point. For example, there are, as noted by Fluhman,

[a] number of academic journals [that] already address Mormonism in one way or another. Sibling periodicals relate the life of the mind to the Latter-day Saint tradition (*BYU Studies Quarterly*), express Mormon culture or place Mormonism in conversation with broader religious and secular ideas (*Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought, Sunstone*), examine the Mormon experience in terms of a single academic discipline (*Journal of Mormon History, John Whitmer Historical Association Journal, Element*), or delve deeply into Mormon texts and history in explicitly LDS terms for an LDS audience (*Journal of Book of Mormon Studies, Studies in the Bible and Antiquity, Mormon Historical Studies*). Furthermore, scholarship on Mormonism is increasingly found in academic journals with concerns that range well beyond the tradition. (2014: 2)

Fluhman is writing for the *Mormon Studies Review*, which was recently revamped and is now focused on the growing breadth of Mormon studies, “leaning toward modern Mormon studies” (Fluhman 2014: 3). To date, most of the “academic” work done by scholars of Mormonism, especially that which is published in the aforementioned journals, tends to be theological or apologetic. For example, *Dialogue: A Journal of*

Mormon Thought, which publishes peer-reviewed academic articles on Mormonism, “is edited by Latter-day Saints who wish to bring their faith into dialogue with the larger stream of world religious thought and with human experience as a whole and to foster artistic and scholarly achievement based on their cultural heritage” (“Mission Statement”). Obviously, the aims of *Dialogue* are not similar to the aims of, say, the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*. Rather, *Dialogue*, like many of its “sibling periodicals,” attempts to bring Mormons into conversation with other Mormons and religious peoples. This merging of voices appears to be the goal of a significant number of scholars who work within the realm of Mormon studies. If we take seriously Birch’s vision for Mormon studies as a field that incorporates theological and apologetic voices as more than primary sources, then it would seem that the field might never be able to advance beyond the realm of the theological discourse found in *Sunstone* and *Dialogue* to become a truly objective, academic field. While my thesis does not attempt to provide any significant contribution to Mormon studies, I am interested in pondering the questions that relate to the future of a field that is so closely related to my project. With voices similar to Birch’s seeming to dominate Mormon studies, is it time to step away from Mormon studies in order to create a new field? What are the next steps for Mormon studies, and how will the field expand and take into account academic trends in the future?

Because this thesis seeks to expand the understanding of contemporary Mormonism, scholarship from other fields in addition to Mormon studies must be taken into consideration. The methodologies of the study of lived religion – utilized by historians, anthropologists, sociologists, etc. – are especially useful. In a study focused on

a particular religious community in a particular time and place, the pursuit of an understanding of lived religion is imperative. As member-scholar Hangen writes, “[The] texture and inner realities of Mormonism can be fully grasped *only* by looking at where – and how – Mormons actually live their religion” (2015: 209, emphasis mine). Considering the recent “Mormon moment” spurred into the public imagination by events such as the presidential campaign of Mitt Romney and the breakout success of the Broadway musical *The Book of Mormon*, now is an important time to consider Mormonism’s place in contemporary American society by prioritizing the everyday religious practices of Mormons. In other words, obtaining the best possible understanding of Mormon identity is possible only through a study of lived religion with a focus on the laity.¹¹

Key to the study of lived religion is the sentiment that, at its core, religion is complex, even messy. Robert Orsi explains that the study of lived religion “disabuses us of any lingering commitment to order or coherence” (2003: 173); David Hall writes, “It is tempting to abridge, even to censure, the messiness that leaks into everyday life” but one must “acknowledge as fully as possible the play of meaning” (1997: x); and Hangen explains that the study of lived religion “treats religion not as a stable and closed system [...] but as a volatile, tensile, and even playful one” (2015: 210). Writing specifically about ethnographies of conservative Protestant women, Julie Ingersoll notes that scholars of such women “move away from a simple feminist critique of patriarchal religion toward an effort to make sense of the women in these traditions on their own terms” (2002: 163). The small amount of research examining contemporary Mormonism largely ignores unmarried Mormons in their twenties and early thirties, and much of what has

¹¹ See Hall 1997.

been published has focused on the missionary experience, specifically young men's missionary experiences (e.g., Cornwall et al. 2001). Much of the scholarship concerning Mormon women in general has investigated the lives of individual Mormon pioneer women (e.g., Vance 2007) or Mormon women in the context of the family (e.g., Cornwall et al. 2001). Consequently, in the same vein as Ingersoll, I purposefully engage with young single adult (or, YSA) Mormon women and attempt to ask challenging questions of my interlocutors. As Ingersoll writes,

When we focus only on women who find more meaning than discomfort in traditional religion, we not only do an injustice to the women we silence. We also lose sight of the way in which gender ideology is central to this subculture and in which gender conflict is symbolic conflict for control of the subculture itself. (2002: 173)

Hangen's description of the "lived-religion approach" echoes Ingersoll's position:

Lived religion seeks to understand and reconstruct subjective religious experience (what Bourdieu calls *habitus*) by granting legitimacy to the religious experiences and beliefs of a community's marginalized or deviant elements as well as, or even in preference to, its elite and official ones. (2015: 209-210)

While I did not seek out exceptionally heterodox members of the congregation with which I worked, I committed myself to the full accounting of all of my interlocutors. Ultimately, this thesis, more than attempting to forge new ground in Mormon studies, is committed to a critical study of the messiness of the lives of unmarried Mormon women living in Tennessee. In making a commitment to full consideration of my interlocutors' stories, I found that my primary interlocutors represented a spectrum of opinions regarding several aspects of the Church – perfectly representative of the messiness of lived religion.

Are Mormons Christians?

During the earliest phases of this project, my response to the question of Mormons' "Christian-ness" (most often posed to me by well-intentioned family members with little familiarity with Mormonism) was nearly visceral: "It doesn't matter!" I always followed this outburst, of course, with a reluctantly mumbled, "But the answer is, yes, for the purposes of my research, Mormons are Christians." However, upon reflection, I realize that this question *does* matter – a great deal, in fact. This question undeniably affects the lives of Mormons everywhere, certainly not least in Tennessee. Indeed, it is the first question that I as an ethnographer must address.

This question – are Mormons Christians? – is one asked by Mormons themselves. In the evangelically-saturated American South, Mormons often find themselves on the defensive about their status as Christians. In a section of *Mormonism for Dummies* titled "Quick Answers to Ten Common Questions About Mormonism," the authors devote five paragraphs to highlighting the nuances of the question of whether Mormons are Christians:

Perhaps no other question is raised as frequently as this \$64,000 one [...]. Mormons, of course, absolutely believe that they're Christians, because they love and worship the Savior, Jesus Christ, and endeavor to follow his example in all things. To paraphrase the Book of Mormon, they talk about Christ, rejoice in Christ, preach about Christ, prophesy about Christ, and look to him alone for the forgiveness of their sins [...]. In what way could they not be Christian? (Riess & Bigelow 2005: 333)¹²

The authors recognize the key to the question: "it seems that the deciding factor depends on how you define *Christian*" (Riess & Bigelow 2005: 333, emphasis in the original).

This is unequivocally the case for anyone who asks this question. The problem for many who define Mormonism as *not* Christian lies in Mormonism's rejection of Trinitarianism,

¹² See 2 Nephi 25:26.

the addition of the Book of Mormon to the scriptural canon, and LDS doctrine regarding the afterlife. Often, Mormons themselves seem to relate Christian-ness to Jesus. The authors of *Mormonism for Dummies* write that if a focus on Jesus Christ is what qualifies Christian-ness then “the answer is an absolute yes” (333). Stephen Prothero found that, even as Mormonism moved “closer to the religious mainstream,” the Church still found itself categorized as not Christian by major denominations (e.g., the United Methodist Church, the Roman Catholic Church) (2003: 193). Mormons responded by emphasizing their “intense love of Jesus” as “evidence” for their “ordinariness” (Prothero 2003: 194). In 1982, the Church added the subtitle “Another Testament of Jesus Christ” to the covers of Books of Mormon (see Figure 2), and in 1995, the Church redesigned the official logo to enlarge the words “Jesus Christ” (see Figure 3).

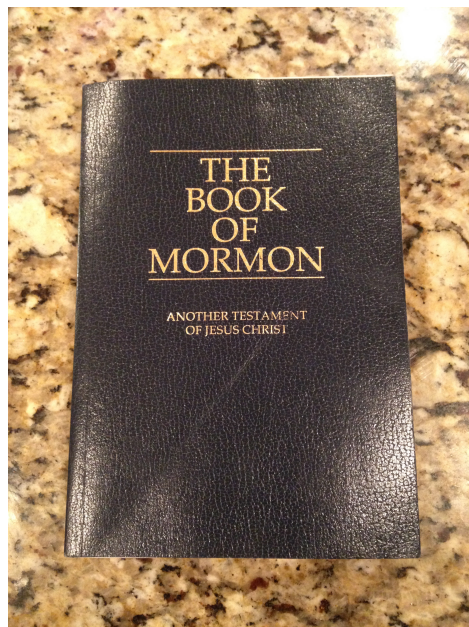


Figure 2: Current cover of the Book of Mormon



Figure 3: Official logo of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

Of course, as Prothero notes, “Perhaps because they emphasized Jesus so much, Mormons did not feel compelled to give up entirely on their distinctiveness” (2003: 197). Gordon B. Hinckley, president of the LDS Church from 1995 to 2008, said, “The traditional Christ of whom they speak is not the Christ of whom I speak. For the Christ of whom I speak has been revealed in this Dispensation of the Fulness [*sic*] of Times” (Hinckley qtd. in Prothero 2003: 197). I concur that Mormonism is at once an assimilated version of and distinct from the array of contemporary Christianities¹³ found across the globe. To include Mormonism as just one type of many Christianities seems appropriate given the encounters I have had with my interlocutors, as they consider themselves simultaneously Christian and part of a group of “peculiar people.”¹⁴ However, it is also interesting to note that Hinckley made a point of insisting that, despite differences between “the Christ of other Christians” and the Christ of the LDS Church, Mormons are indeed Christians:

We are Christians in a very real sense and that is coming to be more and more widely recognized. Once upon a time, people everywhere said we are not Christians. They have come to recognize that we are, and that we have a very vital and dynamic religion based on the teachings of Jesus Christ. We, of course, accept Jesus Christ as our Leader, our

¹³ I consciously use the plural “Christianities” to reflect my understanding of the diversity of beliefs, practices, and communities of Christians across the globe. This term is currently in use by scholars of religion (e.g., Cannell 2005).

¹⁴ For a book-length examination of Mormonism’s place within American religious culture, see Mauss 1993.

King, our Savior. [...]. He is the center of our faith and the head of our Church. (“Are Mormons Christians?” 2015)

Here Hinckley uses the same tactic noted by Prothero: he emphasizes the centrality of Jesus Christ as “the center of our faith and the head of our Church” as evidence of Mormons’ Christian-ness.

Prothero is joined by many scholars of Mormonism who ask the all-important question – are Mormons Christians? Fenella Cannell writes that the field of the anthropology of Christianity is

united in taking the Christianity of their informants seriously as a cultural fact and in refusing to marginalize it in their accounts of the areas in which they work. This means setting aside the assumption that we know in advance what Christian experience, practice, or belief might be. (2006: 5)

In my study of a particular group of Mormons, I propose to do just this: to accept “as a cultural fact” the religion of my interlocutors who identify simultaneously as Christians and Mormons. In her article “The Christianity of Anthropology,” Cannell acknowledges the challenges of studying Mormonism as an anthropologist, writing, “It is represented as at once unworthy of serious interest and as a scandalous threat – a threat, in particular, to those distinctions which should be made between authentic and inauthentic experience and between authentic and inauthentic Christianity” (2005: 339). She also problematizes some of the assumptions made by anthropologists and within accepted anthropological theory regarding Christianity:

What if, instead of a form of Christianity which insists on the opposition between this world and the next world – the material and the spiritual – you have a form of Christianity which does not? What happens to various anthropological “givens” if you have, instead, a strikingly different form of Christianity – one, say, in which heaven is a “busy” place full of people teaching, eating chocolate, holding family house parties, and having babies deep into eternity? (2005: 338)

While the focus of this thesis differs from Cannell's interests, her point is nonetheless striking: Mormonism in some ways contradicts what many anthropologists read as "authentic" Christianity.¹⁵

Shippo, noted historian of Mormonism, poses the question of whether Mormons are Christians outright in the final pages of her essay collection *Sojourner in the Promised Land: Forty Years among the Mormons* (2000: 334-357). Shippo, a practicing Methodist, considers Mormons Christian both as a scholar and as a Christian herself: "Mormonism is a legitimate way to be Christian; it is just not my way of being Christian" (2000: 331). Shippo's historical research argues that

the Mormonism of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is best understood as a form of corporate Christianity that is related to traditional Christianity – in other words, the forms of Protestantism, Catholicism, and Eastern Orthodoxy that existed in the first third of the nineteenth century – in much the same way that early Christianity was related to Judaism. (2000: 338)

Shippo's analogy is largely accepted by scholars of Mormonism and seems similar to the ways that many Mormons see themselves today. In other words, many contemporary Mormons see themselves as adjacent to and an improvement upon other Christianities and religions.

To answer the question – are Mormons Christians? – for myself, I return to Cannell (2005). As an ethnographer, I choose to follow the sentiment that "a 'real Christian' must mean anyone who seriously so describes him- or herself" (2005: 349). My interlocutors call themselves Christians, and so I consider them as such for the purposes of my research. This provides the simplest way to navigate such a complex question.

¹⁵ Questions of authenticity and sincerity are central to the anthropology of Christianity (see Keane 2006).

Methodology

This thesis began with a choice of methodology: namely, ethnography. Just as President Nelson believes that the LDS Church needs women, I believe that “we need women” present in our scholarship. Fundamentally, my research seeks to take religious women seriously, on their own terms. This sentiment is at the heart of this thesis. I am interested in gaining an understanding of unmarried Mormon women by beginning with unmarried Mormon women’s understandings of themselves. While the field of Mormon studies (quite naturally) began with and has focused on tracing the religion’s lineage (i.e., historical study), I aim to move into the twenty-first century with a critical ethnographic examination of contemporary members of the LDS Church.

Ethnography places the researcher into the thick of it – *it* being their interlocutors’ lives and experiences. James V. Spickard and J. Shawn Landres describe the method:

[Ethnographers] choose a specific research locale, which they spend several years getting to know. [...] They listen and watch, question, think, and listen again – always trying to make sense of their informants’ lives. Whether their topic is a foreign pilgrimage site or the church next door, whether the resulting prose is academic or popular, the ethnographer has “been there.” Their research succeeds when they can portray the natives as if from the inside. (2002: 2-3)

For this project, I, the ethnographer, chose a congregation in the nearest large city (Nashville) and conducted my fieldwork over the course of six months (March to August 2015). My interlocutors were members of the Nashville Young Single Adult Branch.¹⁶ I attended Sunday services, took extensive field notes, conducted five oral history interviews, and transcribed and coded all interviews. Using this data combined with theories taken from subfields of or fields related to religious studies (e.g., Mormon

¹⁶ All names, including that of the congregation itself, have been changed.

studies, sociology of religion, American religious history), I developed the arguments found in this thesis.

Thesis Overview

The thesis is divided into three chapters and a conclusion. The first chapter, “The Nashville Young Single Adult Branch,” provides an ethnographic overview of the branch at the center of this thesis, including detailed descriptions of all aspects of my fieldwork and each of my primary interlocutors, as well as an introduction to Hangen’s four dimensions of Mormon lived religion. In Chapter Two, “The Mormon Diaspora in Nashville,” I suggest that it is fruitful to think of LDS identity outside of Utah and Idaho (what Mormons affectionately refer to as the Mormon “Bubble”) as akin to a diasporic religious experience. Chapter Three, “‘Not, Like, an Altar Mormon’: Contemporary Gender Issues in the Church,” relies heavily on data collected from the oral history interviews, in which I asked about topics including sex, dating, marriage, and family. Finally, the conclusion, “Why Is No One Crying? Self-reflection, After the Field,” provides a brief reflection of my role as ethnographer, as well as my encounters with the various actors present in the field.

CHAPTER ONE

The Nashville Young Single Adult Branch

Mormons do not primarily live their religion as isolated individuals, striving for perfection in solitary. Rather, the arc of their soul's trajectory traces densely networked communities, centered on the family or the congregational unit or more often, a fusion of the two.
– Tona J. Hangen (2015: 214)

It is a hot Sunday afternoon in early August. Outside, the sun beats down on cars parked in front of a nondescript church building in Nashville, Tennessee. Inside the building, sixty or so twenty-somethings dressed in suits and skirts sit in the pews of the chapel. One of the leaders, a White man in his early 60s seated at the front of the chapel and facing the pews, comments on the lack of warm bodies in the room as compared to normal. It is Fast Sunday at the Nashville Young Single Adult Branch of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. During the next hour, nearly a dozen members will walk to the front of the chapel and share brief “testimonies.” One young woman will choke up as she expresses gratefulness for the atonement of Jesus Christ. A young man wearing a three-piece suit will share that he believes the Holy Spirit is present within the branch. One of the missionaries will describe a recent meeting with one of her investigators,¹⁷ citing the goodness of Heavenly Father.

Fast Sundays are my favorite days to attend an LDS Church. Once a month, members fast, consuming no food or water for two meals within a twenty-four hour period; the money that would have been spent on those two meals is donated to the Church. To break the fast, a potluck “linger longer” usually follows the Sunday service.

¹⁷ “Investigator” is the term used for someone who is currently meeting with LDS missionaries to learn more about the Church and determine whether or not s/he will choose to be baptized and become a member of the Church.

During Sacrament Meeting on Fast Sundays, the time following the taking of Sacrament – which mirrors the Eucharist/Lord’s Supper/Holy Communion in other Protestant Churches and consists of white bread and water – allows members to share their testimonies. Testimonies usually include either a short anecdote or a reflection on Church doctrine and end with a short recited statement affirming that the speakers believe that the Church/Prophet/Book of Mormon/etc. is true and that they “bear” their testimonies “in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.” In the Nashville YSA Branch, there is rarely any lull while waiting for someone to approach the microphone at the front of the chapel to testify. Members are eager to speak. One Fast Sunday, a handsome man from Utah shared that he made a New Years’ resolution to testify every Fast Sunday in 2015; he then laughed and admitted that this was his first Fast Sunday testimony of 2015 – in June. Often, the same people testify month after month. People in the pews usually listen attentively, laughing when appropriate and occasionally nodding in agreement. This type of service occurs on the first Sunday of the month in LDS Churches all over the world.

LDS Churches are remarkable (infamous?) in their sameness. This attempt at homogeneity translates across geographic space and is key to understanding the Mormon diaspora (discussed in Chapter Two). The meetinghouse of the Nashville YSA Branch is an example of this attempt at sameness. The vast majority of LDS meetinghouses look similar, and the meetinghouse of the Nashville YSA Branch, located in a wealthy area of the city, is no different. Down the road from the meetinghouse are several private universities, famed music venues, and a center for high-end shopping; a studio apartment in the area may cost upwards of \$1,200 per month. The appearance of the meetinghouse is not dissimilar from nearby Protestant churches (of which there are many): the building

is red brick with a white steeple, ample parking, and immaculate landscaping; the interior contains neutral carpet running throughout the building, plush pews in the chapel, and a plethora of artwork depicting scenes from the Bible. However, there are subtle differences from what one might expect at a Protestant church in Tennessee’s capital city. For example, a painting of Jesus surrounded by Native Americans is prominently displayed in the hallway; the chapel sits in the center of the meetinghouse with a hallway and classrooms surrounding it; and there is a distinct and noticeable lack of crosses or crucifixes. A plaque reading “THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS” marks the building.

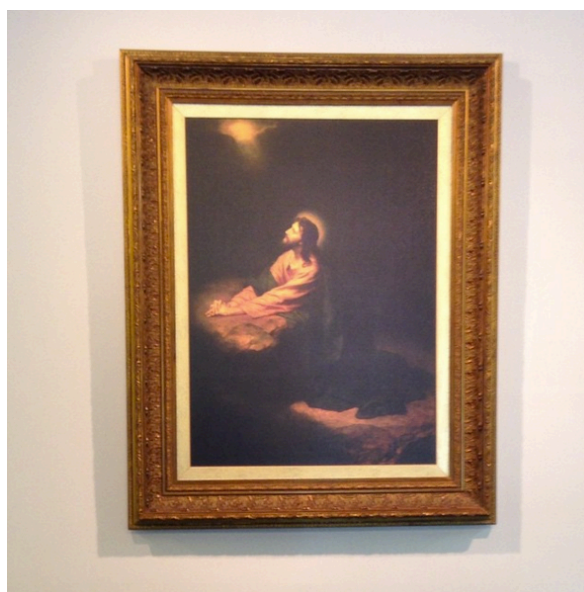


Figure 4: Artwork displayed at one of the entrances in the Nashville meetinghouse

LDS wards and branches¹⁸ stay busy. Multiple activities occur weekly for the Nashville YSA Branch, including Family Home Evening on Mondays; Institute on

¹⁸ “Wards” and “branches” are the terms used for congregations in the LDS Church. Congregations are organized geographically as well as demographically. Wards are larger than branches.

Wednesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays (members attend whichever is most convenient); and volunteer or social activities on most Saturdays; as well as regional YSA conferences every few months – all in addition to the weekly three-hour Sunday service. The Sunday service consists of three parts. First, members gather in the chapel for Sacrament Meeting, which includes branch announcements, hymn singing, prayer, and the Sacrament itself in addition to either a talk similar to those heard at General Conference¹⁹ or time for testimonies; often, musical performances occurred at the Nashville YSA Branch in place of regular talks. Following the first hour, Sunday School is held; there are two classes to choose from: Gospel Principles, which focuses on the basics of LDS teachings, and Gospel Doctrine, which delves even deeper into Mormon theology. Finally, the third hour finds women in Relief Society and men in Elders' Quorum. Occasionally, Sunday activities extend into either a linger longer or a special activity, such as a “fireside”²⁰ or special musical performance.

The members of the Nashville YSA Branch are mostly White, with a small number of Hispanic members; I took note of only three Black members during my six months attending the branch. Sundays find members dressing in dark pants and white shirts with ties for men and skirts or dresses for women. There is some variation on the part of men (e.g., a suit jacket may be worn) but not for women (i.e., I never saw a woman wearing pants on Sunday). Though facial hair is usually not seen on Mormon men, it seemed to be in fashion within the Nashville YSA Branch. Members socialize prior to the start of service as well as between the hours on Sundays, laughing and

¹⁹ Sacrament Meeting talks usually analyze one of the talks given at the most recent General Conference and are often similar in nature, including anecdotes and praise for Church doctrine and policy.

²⁰ A fireside is similar to a General Conference talk in that it consists of one person discussing a religious topic; however, these are irregular, occasionally being live-streamed from Salt Lake City or given by the branch in the home of a member.

sharing the events of their week with other members. Notably, the membership of the Nashville YSA Branch is always in flux, with members moving their records into and out of the branch on a regular basis.²¹ Many are either young professionals or students at nearby universities, including Vanderbilt and Lipscomb. For example, at one meeting I overheard one man discussing his first year at Vanderbilt's School of Medicine, and one woman I spoke with had recently finished pharmacy school. A large number have moved to Nashville to further their music careers; their talent is obvious during frequent performances on Sundays. One memorable performance (that nearly brought me to tears) was a trio of women singing "I Am a Child of God"²² in a style that brought to mind the Carter Family.

While the stellar musical performances of the Nashville YSA Branch might be a bit unique, the leadership of the branch was not. The LDS Church is extremely hierarchical.²³ The Church is led by the First Presidency, including the President and Prophet (currently Thomas S. Monson), who is considered God's spokesman on Earth, and the First and Second Counselors. Below the First Presidency is the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, followed by the Quorum of the Seventy, the Presiding Bishopric, and the General Officers; all offices represent the global LDS Church, though the majority are held by Americans. The First Presidency, the Quorum of the Seventy, and the Presiding Bishopric are exclusively men; the highest offices for women in the LDS Church are General Officers of Primary, Relief Society, and Young Women's. Below these offices

²¹ A member may be officially associated with a ward or branch for short periods of time. For example, I noted several members whose records were sent to the Nashville YSA Branch because the members were living in Nashville for the summer. Congregational memberships are based on geographic location. Notably, the high mobility of the Nashville YSA Branch may be a result of the goals of YSA members in general. In other words, single members are constantly encouraged to find an "eternal partner," get married, and move their membership to the family ward (see Chapter Three).

²² A popular LDS hymn (#301 in the 1985 hymnal).

²³ For an infographic explaining the hierarchy of the LDS Church, see "The Mormon Hierarchy" (2012).

are Stake, or regional, Presidencies. The Nashville YSA Branch is part of the Nashville, Tennessee, Stake, which currently contains six wards and two branches. Finally, there is the individual leadership of the congregation; the Nashville YSA Branch changed presidencies during my fieldwork. The First Presidency of the Nashville YSA Branch consists of a President and First and Second Counselors (the First Presidency of a ward would include a Bishop and First and Second Counselors); First Presidencies are limited to men. All leadership is considered “laity,” as “all worthy men” hold the Priesthood, and there are no paid clergy. Members – both men and women – serve in various “callings” (e.g., Relief Society First Presidency, Sunday School teacher, pianist, etc.).

Mormons beliefs are not altogether dissimilar from other, more “traditional” Protestant Christianities. However, important differences exist. Most simply, Mormonism is a restorationist branch of Christianity,²⁴ and Mormons believe that the “true church” as begun by Jesus Christ was restored in the nineteenth century by Joseph Smith. Mormons are not Trinitarian; i.e., Heavenly Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit are three separate beings. The scriptural canon is larger in Mormonism, including not only the Bible but also the Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and Pearl of Great Price.²⁵ Continuous revelation is an important aspect of Mormonism; anyone can receive revelation from Heavenly Father.²⁶

²⁴ Restorationists believe that the church must return to its form as founded by Jesus Christ in the first century, and restorationist movements of Christianity see themselves as the “restored” church. Other restorationist movements include Churches of Christ, Pentecostalism, Quakerism, etc.

²⁵ Interesting to note is Mormons’ treatment of General Conference talks as an additional type of scripture. Church members revere these talks, especially those given by the Prophet, and they are distributed following General Conference to members in the form of a magazine (*Ensign* and *Liahona*).

²⁶ Heavenly Father can change his mind, as he did in 1890 when then-Church President Wilford Woodruff received revelation from Heavenly Father to discontinue the practice of plural marriage.

Oral History Interviews

Integral to this study are five oral history interviews that I conducted near the conclusion of my fieldwork.²⁷ My five primary interlocutors – all single women and members of the LDS Church – welcomed me into their lives for anywhere from twenty minutes to two hours, answering my questions and humoring me endlessly. I met them at a variety of locations, including a local Panera Bread restaurant, Vanderbilt University, and in their homes. Hazel, Violet, Addie, Ellen, and Karen each shared their thoughts on navigating life as young single adult Mormon women living in Nashville. Hazel, Violet, and Addie are all under the age of 20, while Ellen is in her mid-20s and Karen is 30. Below, I give a brief description of each woman, offering colloquial details and any other points of interest.

Hazel

Hazel is perhaps my most organically secured interview. In other words, while other interviews were secured via a Facebook post and a sign-up sheet passed around Relief Society, I met Hazel one Sunday afternoon before Sacrament Meeting and asked her if she was interested in helping me out (she enthusiastically agreed). Hazel is also my longest interview; we meet at Panera and sit outside.

I notice immediately that Hazel is wearing a sleeveless shirt and has a few visible tattoos. These are not the only things that make Hazel stand out from my other interlocutors (as well as many Mormons).²⁸ Hazel calls herself a “hardcore feminist” and

²⁷ For a list of the questions used during interviews, see Appendix B. For the transcripts for all five interviews, see Appendix C.

²⁸ For an active Mormon to engage in any sort of body modification, including tattoos and piercings other than women’s earlobes, is highly unusual. One need only consider the moniker and popularity of convert

“equal rights activist.” Even more surprisingly, Hazel matter-of-factly states that she is bisexual when I turn our conversation to same-sex marriage. Her parents are in the midst of a divorce (it is the second for both), and Hazel is currently sharing an apartment with her father. She speaks of him often and highly, sharing a story about his mission and offering to connect me with him so that I might hear his testimony (I decline).

However, Hazel is also not entirely unusual. Her interview reveals a deep respect for the Church. As a seventh-generation Mormon (on her father’s side), she notes a desire to follow doctrine (e.g., she will not marry a woman while the Church forbids same-sex marriage), saying, “I am first and foremost Mormon.”

She has lived in the American Southeast her entire life, though she only recently relocated to Nashville. She is currently saving up to go to college; she wants to be a Disney animator. She speaks several times about money, including her desire to not have to take out loans for school and to raise her children in a home where money is no problem. When an older woman interrupts us to ask for money to pay for her lunch, Hazel offers all the cash she has – \$3.

Violet

Violet arrives at Panera promptly at our agreed-upon time, wearing her hair in a bouncy ponytail and grinning widely. Despite her perpetual smile, Violet’s story differs from my other interlocutors, decidedly darker in tone. Violet was raised in a turbulent household; her story involves drugs, rape, and financial struggles. When I ask Violet

and blogger Al Fox Carraway, the “Tattooed Mormon” (see Carraway 2015). Mormon women typically wear sleeves for the purposes of modesty; garments, which for women have cap sleeves, also restrict the type of clothing worn by Mormons who have received their endowments (special rituals that take place in LDS temples; these prepare Mormons for the afterlife and are usually first “taken” just before either leaving to serve a mission or marrying).

about her conversion, she does not hesitate to set parameters for the term, telling me that the process of conversion never ends. Though she was raised in the Church (her grandmother was the first in her family to convert), she describes being 14 and asking herself, “Who is God? [...] Like, what does this even mean?” She tells me that the “biggest conversion” she has experienced was a few years later at Young Women camp. However, she adds, “I don’t think we can ever be fully converted [...]. I’m trying to go to church as much as possible, but it’s a trial. It’s an ongoing conversion. [...] I would say it’s an ongoing conversion that really started when I was starting to become accountable for my own actions as a grown-up.”

Violet frames early struggles within her family as the reason for her quick maturation. She emphasizes that it was not easy:

[It] was me holding the fort together. It was my testimony. But then I got to the point where I was like, you know what? I’m done. I don’t want to be the glue anymore. I want to go find myself. I want to see this testimony that I’ve been expressing to people. Is this mine? Is this my profession of faith?

She calls this struggle “another conversion.” Her story is jumbled at times, but she tells me that her mother suffered abuse at the hands of a former partner and moved the family several times. Recently and with the help of her grandmother, things have improved. Violet’s mother is remarried and attends church along with her new husband. Violet graduated from high school and is saving up to start college. Though she has technically been a member of the Nashville YSA Branch for six months, she continues to attend only intermittently, returning often to her prior ward. Her busy schedule keeps her from attending many of the branch activities, so she has not made any close friends – not unlike the majority of my interlocutors. She hopes that she will soon make friends “over

the age of 18 that are a little more mature [and] going through the things that I'm going through.”

Addie

After having to reschedule our original meeting time, I drive to Addie's home in a wealthy neighboring county so that we can complete our interview. Her younger sister welcomes me into the house, yellow curls streaming down her cheeks. Addie's mother appears and apologizes for the mess – despite the fact that the house is, as far as I can tell, spotless apart from a collection of plastic toys strewn about the living room.

Addie and I sit in the living room for the interview; Addie's sister plays nearby, while her mother works in the kitchen (it's almost dinnertime). Addie laughs a lot and seems eager to share stories. She recently moved to Tennessee to rejoin her family after finishing her senior year of high school while living with a family friend near her former home in the western United States.

Born into the Church and preparing to apply to serve a mission, I would categorize Addie as passionate about the LDS Church, if a bit idealistic. She often utilizes anecdotes when answering my questions. For example, when I ask about her thoughts on marriage and family, she describes reading *Ensign* and circling the talks she planned to read; she noticed that there were several on the topic of families and marriage. She tells me, “The Lord is aware of what he knew was coming up in the future,” referring to the United States Supreme Court decision legalizing same-sex marriage. “[The] Lord knew that was coming,” she says, “and he wanted us to know how to deal with it and be prepared for it. It's a blessing to me because I know what his expectations are, and I want

to be able to live up to those expectations, and I want to [...] follow what these talks are teaching me.”

When I ask for her thoughts on pre-marital sex, she tells me a story of being unsure of whether or not to attend a baby shower for a friend who had become pregnant after having pre-marital sex. She tells me that her friend “seemed happy about it,” but Addie was not sure if “she really was or she was just faking it to make it look like she’s happy.” Unsure and desiring to do the right thing, she texted her parents to ask for their advice: “[They] said, you can go, be her friend, support her. [...] That’s what I did. I really don’t support that choice, still.”

Addie also finds ways to reaffirm her spiritual testimony as often as possible. She relates a story about a recent vehicle collision in which she was involved, telling me that the wreck “was obviously a challenge for me, but it was also a huge testimony builder for me because [...] [I] probably should’ve died with how serious it was, and so I was blessed immensely.”

Through her stories, Addie’s reverence for the Church and its values, leaders, and doctrine, as well as her desire to follow Heavenly Father, is evident.

Ellen

The first time I meet Ellen, she asks to sit next to me during Relief Society. When we sing the first hymn, I resist the urge to turn and watch her as she sings. Her voice is a deep, powerful contralto, and she harmonizes with ease. She leans over after the hymn to ask how I know the words and tune to “Choose the Right” if I’m not a member.²⁹ When I

²⁹ This particular hymn (#239 in the 1985 hymnal) would not likely be heard anywhere other than an LDS Church. The 1985 LDS hymnal contains a mix of traditional Christian hymns (e.g., “How Great Thou Art,”

answer that I read music, she gives me a knowing smile. The first thing I notice when I enter her apartment for our interview is a guitar displayed by the fireplace.

Ellen is a recent convert in her mid-twenties, the only member of the LDS Church in her family. She was raised in a mainline Protestant denomination, converted while working in Utah, and has served a domestic mission. When I ask where she served, she laughs and tells me the name of a city in the United States, only several hundred miles from Nashville. “I was so mad when I got my call!” she exclaims, throwing her hands up in the air. I laugh and admit that I have always wondered if members are disappointed when they receive a call to, say, Scottsdale, Arizona. “Yeah, that’s the thing!” she says. “Because I had grown up outside the Church, when I thought of a mission, I thought of a foreign country – like Africa or something. So when I got my call [...], I was like, okay. This is gonna be great! Then I [...] was like, are you freaking kidding me?!” Despite her initial disappointment, she describes her mission as “the best thing” and “exactly what I needed.” When I ask her later about women’s roles in the Church, she tells me that she felt “empowered” on her mission. This is a sentiment I hear often from women who have served Mormon missions.

Ellen is currently an undergraduate student studying social work at a public university in Utah, home for the summer and fall semester and planning to return in the spring. She answers my questions briefly (our interview lasts less than twenty minutes), though not unwillingly or reluctantly. She smiles as she talks about her admiration of the Mormons she met when she was first in Utah and her desire to continue learning about the Church once she returned to Tennessee: “[When] I was baptized, I was spiritually,

“I Need Thee Every Hour”) alongside traditional LDS hymns (e.g., “Come, Come, Ye Saints,” “I Am a Child of God”).

like, let's talk about the Gospel all the time! And my family wasn't really in it – they're not LDS. Other Christians have different beliefs and things. I wanted to be surrounded with LDS people.” She has only been attending the Nashville YSA Branch since April, but she speaks highly of the “Spirit” in the branch, a sentiment that I heard from the vast majority of members: “The people here are so – if you want it here, you've got to want it. Not everybody's doing it. [...] I've got to really want it. It's got to be something I really believe in, or I'm not going to do it. And you see that in people.”

Near the end of our interview, Ellen crosses her legs on the couch where we are sitting and begins to speak:

It's just hard being the minority, but at the same time I'm grateful because it helps me to really develop that faith – you better really know that it's what you believe if you're gonna make these sacrifices. [...] You have to make that decision and really decide it's something that you want to do. Other than that, people just say stuff sometimes. Some people just don't like the Church. You'll get that anywhere.

She smiles thoughtfully and adds, “Well, except for Utah.”

Karen

I meet Karen, a 30-year-old graduate student, on the campus of Vanderbilt University. We sit on the grass outside a plain brick building; mosquitoes surround us, so Karen pulls on a sweater. Karen's personality is warm, and she immediately responds to my questions, laughing and cracking jokes. She tells me that she was born and raised in the Church: her parents were first generation converts, she was baptized at the age of eight, and she has served a mission abroad.

Like many YSA Mormon women, she is worried about dating. When I ask her about her romantic life, she laughs and says,

It's interesting that you ask, because right now I'm kind of dealing with this sort of question because there's – so when I first came to Vanderbilt, there was this boy in [another] department who shares the same carrels as us. I just think he's the cutest thing ever. We never talk. Whatever. It's just, like, a nice little crush. Something to perk up my day as I, you know, go about my studies. Well, just recently – he's actually friends with some of my friends, and he told them that he's really interested in dating me, actually. I should be really excited. Like, my crush likes me! He thinks I'm pretty! But I'm not! I'm actually horrified!

She laughs loudly and looks at me. “Because he's not Mormon,” she continues, matter-of-factly. Karen's concerns resonate with me despite our many differences. I think that she is probably not so different from most YSA Mormon women who are graduate students in challenging programs at Top 20 universities.

At first glance, Karen is no different from any other graduate student. Her hair is long, her makeup minimal; she wears jeans and carries a backpack. She tells me she enjoys seeing movies and hanging out with her friends (mostly other graduate students from her program). She tends to vote for Democrats, travels often for her research, and is concerned about the academic job market.

At school, she does not actively try to hide the fact that she is religious despite the fact that, while it may be different for graduate students in other programs, the nature of Karen's field of study (in the social sciences) means that there is “a lot of pressure [...] not to be religious.” She laughs, telling me that others in her program – mentors, peers, advisors – worry for her:

I think that there is some legitimate concern among my colleagues – at least there has been in the past – about my ability to produce legitimate work because I believe in [the Book of Mormon] and I'm a true believer. I'm not a Mormon by tradition. I'm not a Mormon for fun. I'm a Mormon because I honestly and genuinely believe it with all my heart.

Karen continues to emphasize throughout our interview that she *chooses* to continue practicing the religion of her childhood – to be Mormon. When I ask Karen why she wants more friends who are members of the LDS Church, she answers, “Because it's too

hard. Being in this program, [...] I am confronted [every day] with either data or theories, [philosophies] or ideas that conflict with what I believe about the Latter-day Saints.” She acknowledges that this is not the first time she has struggled with her beliefs (later, she will confess that she believes the Book of Mormon is literally true), and tells me again, “Like I said, I’m choosing to be a Mormon. I’ve really thought it through.”

When we part ways, I notice that she is still wearing her sweater even though it is nearly 90°F, and I feel a bit guilty that I asked to sit outside.

Hangen’s Four Dimensions of Mormon Lived Religion

This thesis examines lived religion among YSA Mormons in Nashville, Tennessee, and so, in order to better organize my thoughts on the religious lives of my interlocutors, I rely on Tona Hangen’s (2015: 210-219) four dimensions of Mormon lived religion: (1) the body, (2) symbolic physical and social spaces, (3) social and kinship connections, and (4) cultural tensions. Mormonism, Hangen writes, is lived through these four dimensions: “through embodied ritual; in sacred space and time; in densely interlocked social and kin networks; and in negotiating tensions inherent to Mormonism and its adaptation to diverse cultural settings” (2015: 209).

The Body

The body is central to Mormon theology. Though I and other scholars categorize Mormons as Christians, the conception of the body is one of the great differences between other Christianities and the LDS Church in that Mormons eschew asceticism and embrace the body as good and even eternal. God, whom Mormons most often refer to as

“Heavenly Father,” has a physical body, as will you when you die. Mormons’ bodies are intriguing sites in and of themselves: Mormons avoid tattoos and piercings; Mormon women especially dress conservatively; Mormons cross their arms and often kneel while praying; and most Mormons follow the dietary guidelines laid out in the Word of Wisdom, which forbids the consumption of alcohol, tobacco, and “hot drinks.”³⁰

Symbolic Physical and Social Spaces

The navigation of symbolic space and place is important in Mormon lived religion. An active element of the Mormon imaginary is dedicated to time:

Latter-day Saints orient themselves on a cosmic timeline, anchored in the idea that they live in the “latter days” [...]. History stretches backwards to draw upon elements of primitive Christianity and from Old Testament patriarchy, and extends even farther back to an imagined preexistence. Their sense of time also stretches forward to anticipate a millennial future and a triumphant family reunion in the eternities. Mormons live inside this sacred continuum. (Hangen 2015: 213)

This temporal frame is evident when considering the Plan of Salvation, often the first tenant of the religion introduced to investigators by missionaries. The “Plan of Happiness,” a popular LDS illustration based on the Plan of Salvation (see Figure 4), is occasionally seen in Mormon communities printed on t-shirts, used as Facebook cover photos, and even described during talks.



Figure 5: The “Plan of Happiness” illustration (*LDS Happiness* 2014)

³⁰ See Doctrine and Covenants 89.

The illustration shows a series of circles and lines. The first circle represents the pre-mortal life; the first line represents birth; the second circle contains an asterisk that represents the current life (“you are here”); the second line represents death; the third circle represents the Spirit World, paradise and spirit prison; the third and fourth lines represent the Resurrection and the Final Judgment, respectively; and final three circles represent the three levels of heaven and outer darkness (*LDS Happiness* 2014). Despite the religion’s numerous exclusivist beliefs, Mormonism’s understanding of the afterlife is notably inclusive. Only worthy Mormons will reach the highest level of heaven, or “degree of glory,” the Celestial Kingdom (represented by the thinnest circle in Figure 4); all others will be dispersed in either the Terrestrial or Telestial Kingdoms, with very few being sent to outer darkness, or hell (I was once told by a missionary that not even Adolf Hitler will be in outer darkness).³¹

Social and Kinship Connections

Social structures, particularly familial ones and insider/outsider boundaries, are important in Mormonism. Hangen writes, “One way actual Mormon ‘sociality’ can be explored is by surveying its boundaries (who is Mormon and who is not?) and network mapping its social topography (how do Mormon relate to one another?)” (2015: 214). She goes on to describe different “gradations” of Mormons, which begin with the simplest division between members and non-members. The Mormons examined in this thesis are members at a very specific point on the cosmic timeline of their lives: young single

³¹ Those sent to outer darkness are called “Sons of Perdition.” It is debated whether or not there will be female Sons (Daughters?) of Perdition. Brigham Young is recorded as having said in 1860, “I doubt whether it can be found, from the revelations that are given and the facts as they exist, that there is a female in all the regions of hell” (Watt & Long 1861: 222).

adults. They are the most aware of one of the most important (and often ignored by scholars) divisions *within* the Church itself: married members and single members.

Cultural Tensions

Cultural tensions within Mormonism, particularly between Mormons and non-Mormon culture, lie at the heart of this thesis. Hangen names two crucial categories of tensions: (1) between center and periphery (i.e., “Salt Lake” and “the mission field”), and (2) between the supernatural and the rational. She writes that these tensions “create a spectrum of possibilities for believers and give the religious system living, adaptive strength” (2015: 217). I see evidence of these tensions throughout my own research, especially among the beliefs and practices of my five primary interlocutors.

As described above, Hangen’s classificatory system of the four dimensions of Mormon lived religion provides a useful schema for this thesis, which seeks to interrogate the lives of an often overlooked subgroup of religious adherents – young single adult women – and the variety of ways that they navigate their lives as Mormons living in Tennessee. After all, as Hangen writes, “Mormon lived religion is no longer singular, but richly plural” (2015: 220); the Nashville YSA Branch is an excellent example of the diversity of Mormon lived religion. Chapters Two and Three explore even more in-depth Hangen’s dimensions of Mormon lived religion with regards to the Nashville YSA Branch.

CHAPTER TWO

The Mormon Diaspora in Nashville

Though Mormonism's roots trace back to a quiet grove in the woods of Manchester, New York, the Mormon homeland is unequivocally the Mormon "Bubble" of Utah and southwestern Idaho. Of the nearly 6.5 million Mormons in the United States, over 2 million live in Utah while over a quarter of Idaho's population are members of the Church ("Facts and Statistics"). The headquarters of the LDS Church are located in Salt Lake City, Utah; and two of the campuses of Brigham Young University, which is run by the Church, are located in Provo, Utah, and Rexburg, Idaho.

A particular culture has been formed by and among Mormons living in the Bubble; those same "standards" – including moral principles such as purity, generosity, and hard work – inform Mormon culture all over the world. Tona Hangen calls the tensions created by the presence of both Bubble Mormons and other cultures a "pull between center and periphery" – or, "Salt Lake" and "the mission field." She writes, "Salt Lake Mormonism is both real – in that it is the physical and spiritual center of a worldwide faith – and mythical, in that Mormon leaders, prophets, and scriptural exemplars become highly idealized almost to the point of myth" (2015: 217).³² Many Mormons attempt to either visit or live in the Bubble at some point; for example, several of my LDS friends have chosen to attend BYU despite a lack of family in Utah or Idaho. Hangen writes that some Mormons idealize – even mythologize – the Bubble as Zion.

Ellen was perhaps the most eager of my interlocutors to praise the Bubble – specifically Utah. During our interview, I asked if she found it easier to practice her faith

³² Figure 1 demonstrates this idealization.

while living in Utah. She answered quickly – “Yeah, sure,” citing the fact that “everybody’s doing it” (*it* being going to church on Sundays). However, she also explained the difference between Nashville and Utah: “[The] people here in Nashville are so sincere and so real. I wish you could go to an LDS YSA in Utah. You’d be like, what? This is not the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints! These people do not have the Spirit!” Commending the “sincerity” of and “the Spirit” present in the branch was a popular theme among my interlocutors. In fact, I would argue that the mythologizing occurring in the Nashville YSA Branch applies more to the branch itself than to the Bubble.

However, the culture of the Bubble continues to permeate Southern culture. For example, most Mormons refuse to drink iced sweet tea, a popular beverage in the South, due to their understanding of and commitment to the Word of Wisdom.³³ My interlocutors continue to abstain from sexual activity, despite the fact that, as Karen put it, “boys want to sleep with their girlfriends.” Misunderstandings about Mormonism run rampant among non-members; Hazel told me of being pestered about polygamy by coworkers: “I get very tired of answering the same questions over and over: How many moms do you have? Can I take you to Utah to be my second wife?”

Diaspora and Cultural Identity

One way to explore the tensions between Bubble and Southern cultures is through an examination of the diasporic characteristics of the Mormon community in Nashville.

³³ Different interpretations of the Word of Wisdom exist among Mormons. For some, abstaining from hot drinks (Doctrine and Covenants 89:9) extends to any coffee- or tea-based beverage.

Thomas Tweed (1997) provides an astute examination of diasporic religion through his research on displaced Cuban Catholics in Miami. Tweed defines diaspora broadly:

[Diasporas] are groups with shared cultures who live outside the territory which they take as their “native” place, and for whom continuing bonds with that land are decisive for their collective identity. They might feel ambivalently about, or even reject, an actual return to the homeland, although in most cases they will be deeply concerned about its current condition and future state. Further, diasporic people share a language, even if some in the group speak another tongue as well, and they appeal to common symbols, even if they struggle among themselves over their meaning. Most important, diasporic groups symbolically construct a common past and future, and their shared symbols bridge the homeland and the new land. This understanding of diasporas draws some boundaries – which include and exclude groups. (1997: 138)

I find this definition particularly effective for the context of this thesis. Mormons living outside of the Bubble are not often read as being part of a diasporic community, and the discussion of “Mormon diaspora” is nearly non-existent in Mormon studies.³⁴ However, Tweed’s definition applies to Mormons living outside the Bubble. An interrogation of the *shared cultural identity* of diasporic Mormons serves as this thesis’ primary methodological frame. The Mormon diaspora consists of Mormons who live *outside of their homeland* (the Bubble) but the Church actively continues to emphasize *the importance of the homeland* to members through images of the immaculately landscaped Temple Square in Salt Lake City shown during biannual livestreams of General Conference. While my interlocutors were not wholly interested in returning to the Bubble, they all possessed *knowledge of and concerns for* the area and its contemporary culture, as well as the “Salt Lake,” or normative, culture of Mormonism. I would suggest that the *shared “language”* of Mormons does not refer to a regional dialect or tongue (e.g., Spanish or French) as Tweed likely meant; rather, the “language” of Mormons may reference “Mormon-ese,” the symbolic jargon understood by all Mormons but perhaps not same-language outsiders, thereby combining with the “common symbols” of which

³⁴ Cf. Shipps (2000).

Tweed writes.³⁵ Finally, Mormons actively engage in conversations about *a common past and future*; all Mormons, regardless of geography, are taught the origin story of the LDS Church – the restoration by Joseph Smith of the “true church” as founded by Jesus Christ in the first century – and the expected future of Zion in Missouri as prophesied by Smith.³⁶

Diasporas are often associated with cultural narratives of displacement. Though I hesitate to overuse the phrase “displaced people” in reference to Mormons, their cultural narrative is not altogether dissimilar from that of the *original* displaced people – Jews, who formed the first diaspora following the Exodus found in the Hebrew Bible. Like Moses led the Jews out of Egypt, Joseph Smith led the first Mormons out of New York and into the Midwest; like Moses who died before reaching Canaan, Smith was murdered before the westward move, never to see what would become the Mormon homeland in Utah Territory. Even if a member of the Church is a convert whose family lineage does not trace back to mid-nineteenth century Utah Territory, they possess what could be termed a diasporic consciousness or worldview. Members hear stories of the pioneers under Brigham Young and are told of atrocities committed against Mormons in the early days of the Church. They are encouraged to display pictures of LDS temples in their homes (I noticed at least one in Addie’s living room), with most choosing to display a photograph of the Salt Lake City Temple and Temple Square. A “collective identity” centered on the Bubble is formed through these shared stories and images of the homeland.

³⁵ E.g., “TBM” refers to a “True Blue Mormon” or a “True Believing Mormon”; a “Molly Mormon” is someone who “lives the standards.”

³⁶ Though the homeland of Mormonism is unequivocally the Bubble, most Mormons believe that the future Zion will be located in Independence, Missouri, as prophesied by Joseph Smith.

Jan Shipps (2000), noted historian of Mormonism, is one scholar who utilizes the phrase “Mormon diaspora.” She describes the “gathering” of Mormons in the mid-nineteenth century and their subsequent “scattering” in the twentieth century. The gathering had an immense influence on the formation of Mormon cultural identity. She writes,

[As] the followers of the first Mormon prophet were gathered from among the nations, they internalized their understanding of themselves as Latter-day Saints by being in tension with the culture [...]. In the time of Brigham Young, the pioneer trek and the rigors of living in the kingdom that concentrated the effects of the gathering functioned as a sort of experiential crucible in which the Saints were tested and refined. For two or three decades in the middle of the twentieth century, being gathered into virtually encapsulated LDS communities in the midst of larger cultures also led to LDS identity formation. (2000: 273)

The scattering also had a great effect on Mormon cultural identity, as Mormons once again found themselves navigating the tensions between their Mormon cultural identity and the non-Mormon culture surrounding them. Shipps, writing at the close of the twentieth century, wonders whether Mormon cultural identity will remain intact:

Yet the beliefs and behaviors, activities and experiences that members of the LDS Church continue to share could well be enough to make Latter-day Saint identity formation strong enough to allow Mormonism to withstand the countervailing influences that go with being a diaspora community once again scattered among the nations. (2000: 273)

This thesis attempts to speak to Shipps’ question through related inquiries: How is Mormon cultural identity reinforced outside the Bubble? How do members of the Mormon diaspora understand the homeland of the Bubble?

These questions relate to another inquiry that must be addressed: How do outside cultures affect the diasporic community? Tweed writes that the causes and length of displacement affect the character of diasporic religion as well as the environment of the adopted land – “both the number of exiles there and the attitudes of local residents toward them” – and the “character of the tradition” before displacement (1997: 140-141). As

aforementioned, I cautiously categorize Mormons as displaced people – the Mormons found in this thesis even more so; however, I think that similar issues as those affecting displaced communities affect the Mormon diaspora. Perhaps most applicative to the context of this thesis is that of the religious landscape of the adopted land – in this case, Nashville. Mormons living in Tennessee are often asked to defend their understandings of themselves as Christians. Non-members often shame Mormons based on misconceptions about Mormonism (consider Hazel’s coworker’s crude comment about being his “second wife” above). One of the missionaries for the Nashville YSA Branch confessed that he was “disappointed” when he received his mission call to Nashville: “I just thought, it was the Bible Belt, and it was gonna be rough.”

Diasporas consist of those who share a cultural identity. While one view of cultural identity sees the concept “in terms of one, shared culture, a sort of collective ‘one true self,’ which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common,” Stuart Hall contests this definition, writing, “We cannot speak for very long, with any exactness, about ‘one experience, one identity,’ without acknowledging its other side – the ruptures and discontinuities” (1990: 225). It would seem that diaspora complicates cultural identities while simultaneously reinforcing them. As Hall writes, “Difference [...] persists – in and alongside continuity” (1990: 227). Cultural identity itself is not constant:

[Cultural] identity is not a fixed essence at all, lying unchanged outside history and culture. It is not some universal and transcendental spirit inside us on which history has made no fundamental mark. It is not once-and-for-all. It is not a fixed origin to which we can make some final and absolute Return. (1990: 226)

This concept is true of Mormon culture especially. Shippy notes the cultural changes brought about by the installation of block-meeting schedules, standard blueprints for meetinghouses, and the construction of more temples (2000: 264-273). Even Church

doctrine is subject to change because of the belief in continuous revelation, and changes in key doctrines have occurred at critical points in the Church's history. One of the most obvious examples of changing doctrine is the Church's reversal on the practice of plural marriage in 1890; today, the practice represents little more than an embarrassing historical footnote for most Mormons. Another important example is the 1978 change in policy that allowed Black men ordination into the priesthood. Contemporary Mormonism as a whole is perhaps most directly affected by the culture as it is practiced in the Bubble. For example, the organization Ordain Women, whose members believe that women are eligible for the priesthood, was founded in the Bubble and has received notable media attention for asking the leadership of the Church to ask Heavenly Father for revelation regarding this matter.³⁷

At Home in Nashville

I asked a number of questions in reference to the Mormon diasporic experience of my interlocutors.³⁸ I wanted to know where my interlocutors are from, why they are in Nashville, whether or not they plan to (re)relocate to the Bubble, and whether or not it was easier to *be* Mormon outside of Nashville. My five primary interlocutors' experiences and opinions varied on nearly all fronts.

Ellen is a Nashville native and the only one of my primary interlocutors originally from the area. Hazel's family has moved all over the Southeast for her father's work, which led them to the Nashville area. Addie and Violet are from outside of the Southeast and followed their families to Tennessee. Karen, who moved to Nashville for graduate

³⁷ I briefly discuss my interlocutors' views on women's ordination in Chapter Three.

³⁸ See Appendix B for the complete list of questions used during interviews.

school, stated that her family has lived “all over” the United States, but because she spent most of her childhood in Utah, she considers herself to be “from” Utah. One of Addie’s siblings attends BYU-Idaho. In contrast, Violet, Hazel, and Ellen have no family ties to the Bubble. When asked whether or not they plan to relocate to the Bubble, only Ellen answered in the affirmative, and this was because she studies at a university in Utah. Karen and Violet said no, while Hazel expressed an interest to visit the area – she’s never been before – but answered that she did not want to live there.³⁹

Later in the interviews, I made a point to ask if and when my interlocutors have children where they plan to raise them. In other words, do my interlocutors plan to raise their children in an area with a Mormon majority?⁴⁰ Addie and Hazel answered similarly. Addie told me that she wanted to raise her children “in the Gospel, that’s for sure. But other than that, I don’t really care too much.” Hazel echoed this sentiment, saying, “I don’t really think there’s like a geographic location. All that matters is that it’s a loving household.” She then expressed a desire to raise her children in an environment “where money is focused on, but isn’t a hindrance. I don’t want to have to raise kids who either get food or toys. I just want to be able to give everything that I possibly can to my kids.”

My other interlocutors all answered that they would definitely *not* want to raise their children in Utah or Idaho. Their respective explanations were similar. Ellen told me that, even though she “[loves] Utah,” she also wants her children to “really know what it’s like. Utah’s kind of a bubble.” Violet told me, “I just cannot take the people. [...] I just don’t like fake people. Like, let’s talk about real life, and then we’re good.

³⁹ I never directly asked Addie whether she planned to move to the Bubble.

⁴⁰ This question is a result of an earlier research project of mine, conducted with a different YSA branch in the spring of 2014 (see Cook 2014). It was at that time that I first noticed the tensions held by Tennessee Mormons regarding the Bubble, when I discovered that, though my interlocutors shared a reverence for the Bubble, they seemed averse to the idea of raising children where Mormons are a majority.

Everybody swears, everybody trips up, everybody does their own thing.” Violet expressed a desire to raise her children in the South, “because it’s the belt buckle, or whatever. Everybody’s got the basic foundation of Jesus Christ and God.” Karen said, “I would not want to raise [my children] in Utah [...] [because] I want to raise them in an area where there’s not a lot of Mormons.” She then explained that there are “two kinds of Mormons,” ones that “flourish” within Mormon communities and ones that “shine brighter” outside of Mormon communities; she is the second. She does not want her children to “grow up in a bubble,” and she expressed a desire for them to “be really comfortable having friends and being around people not of our faith.”⁴¹ Karen explained her appreciation for her own childhood experiences with friends who practiced a variety of religions such as Buddhism and Catholicism, but, she added, “That’s actually very rare [in Utah].”

What is most interesting about my interlocutors’ desires to keep their hypothetical children distant from the Bubble is that they appear to reject – to use Hangen’s terminology – Salt Lake culture in favor of the challenges of the mission field. Positive characteristics assigned to Southern culture and subsequently praised include: “good Christian values in general”; kindness and openness; and a place where “men will open the door first.” Karen told me that she does not think it is difficult to be Mormon in Tennessee because “it’s such a religious area anyway.” Each of my interlocutors seemed to recognize differences between Bubble culture and the broader culture of the American South. However, they praised these differences. As Ellen told me, “It’s [...] hard being the minority, but at the same time I’m grateful because it helps me to really develop that

⁴¹ Notably, Karen, the oldest and most educated of my interlocutors, is the only one to have expressed some hesitation at the idea of having children. She cited cultural and familial pressure to have children. “I mean,” she told me, “if I get married, I would probably have children.”

faith. You better really know that it's what you believe if you're gonna make these sacrifices." Here, she appears to echo Karen's sentiment that she has deliberately "chosen" to be Mormon amidst cultural and professional pressures to reject her faith. I once heard a member from a different YSA branch compare Tennessee to a "battlefield" of the spiritual variety; she told me that living here was exciting because every day was like "fighting a battle" alongside Heavenly Father.

In general, my interlocutors appear to take some comfort in the uniformity of the Church. Perhaps this uniformity is what allows them to be comfortable – and even prefer – being the minority. All over the world, the same lessons are being taught inside LDS meetinghouses – the same Plan of Salvation, the same origin story, the same prophetic teachings – using the same block-meeting schedule, the meetinghouses are based on a standard blueprint, and members even dress similarly. One Fast Sunday, I heard the president of the Nashville YSA Branch's Relief Society give a testimony praising the Church's consistency, using a story about a recent visit to the United Kingdom. When she and her companions could not find an LDS church, they caught a ride to a nearby city where an LDS service was being held inside a business building. Smiling widely, she said, "I'm grateful that wherever you go in the world, you can feel at home." Relatedly, I often heard members praise the structure of the Church. One returned missionary said, "I know this Church is organized perfectly in every way," and Hazel called the Church a "beautiful organization." Even though the nearby church buildings might be United Methodist, Baptist, or even Church of Christ-Scientist, there is some comfort knowing that once a member enters an LDS meetinghouse (or business building in the UK), they will be welcomed as part of a beautiful, perfectly organized institution.

Mormon Diaspora – Or Just Mormons Outside the Bubble?

Arguing for the existence of a Mormon diaspora requires a consideration of the politics of making such an argument. Spending time with my interlocutors, I found myself asking if a Mormon diaspora should even be discussed. Ron Molen (1991) sees the division between Salt Lake and the mission field as constituting “two churches of Mormonism.” By suggesting a Mormon diaspora and examining the relationship between the cultures of Salt Lake and the mission field – or, more specifically, my interlocutors’ perceptions of the two cultures – am I perpetuating the idea of “two churches of Mormonism”? The LDS Church has recently experienced an influx of negative news coverage due to cultural tensions within the Church proper.⁴² Am I only adding to the pile? Ultimately, I would disagree with such an accusation were it to arise. There is no dispute among scholars of the distinctive features of Salt Lake Mormonism; simply put, Mormons in Salt Lake enjoy majority status, while Mormons elsewhere do not.

However, there is a more insidious factor in play when suggesting a Mormon diaspora. “Diaspora” has historically been applied to displaced groups, such as Tweed’s Cuban Catholics who were forced to migrate out of their country into Miami. The Black diaspora makes up an entire field of scholarly inquiry, as does the Jewish diaspora. By accepting a broader definition – particularly one laid out by Tweed, a scholar of American religions – am I comparing Mormon diasporic experience to the experiences of post-Holocaust Jews or Black descendants of Africans displaced by the slave trade? This would require a more nuanced answer – one I am not prepared to give. Ultimately, my suggestion of a Mormon diaspora is just that – a suggestion. I find that framing my interlocutors as engaging in diasporic experiences reveals much about their views on

⁴² See Stack 2015; Kuruvilla 2015.

contemporary issues within the LDS Church (which I discuss in the following chapter).

For this reason, I confidently suggest and utilize the concept of a Mormon diaspora.

CHAPTER THREE

“Not, Like, an Altar Mormon” Contemporary Gender Issues in the Church

Sunday, July 5, 2015, is the first Sunday of the month, so time is set aside during Sacrament Meeting for members to share testimonies. A young man with a 5 o'clock shadow recalls hearing “America the Beautiful” on the radio while driving a few days before as he ruminated on the cultural changes taking place in the United States. “It’s hard to live in the world,” he says, “and the answer is the Gospel of Jesus Christ. What if everyone was Mormon? The world would probably get along, united against Satan.” Fighting back tears, he adds, “We are all brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ.” Just over a week earlier, the United States Supreme Court ruled in *Obergefell v. Hodges* that state-level bans against same-sex marriage are unconstitutional, thereby legalizing same-sex marriage in all fifty states.

The social context of this thesis is of the utmost importance. During the period that my fieldwork took place, the United States legalized same-sex marriage, Caitlin Jenner (formerly known as Bruce Jenner) appeared on the cover of *Vanity Fair*, and a woman is for only the second time⁴³ considered a plausible candidate for a major party nomination in the presidential election. All of these events speak to today’s American culture. Mormon culture also changed: activist and founder of the *Mormon Stories* podcast John Dehlin was excommunicated from the LDS Church, Kate Kelly publicly embraced her status as an excommunicated Mormon woman (Burr 2015), and women

⁴³ Hillary Clinton was first considered a likely candidate for the Democratic Party nomination in the 2008 presidential election.

reporters were allowed to attend the men's-only priesthood session of General Conference.

When I first decided to focus on questions of sex and gender in my oral history interviews, I did not realize that these issues would be at the forefront of my interlocutors' minds. Indeed, these questions elicited perhaps the most nuanced answers from the women I interviewed. Even during regular Sunday services, topics related to sex and gender appeared regularly. For example, one Sunday in Relief Society found me singing along with the popular Mormon hymn "Families Can Be Forever,"⁴⁴ after which we were taught about the importance of chastity and reminded of the rewards promised by Heavenly Father to his children who marry in the temple. This kind of rhetoric encourages an unmarried woman to marry a Mormon man and begin having children as soon as possible.

Through its teachings concerning marriage and family, the LDS Church creates and reinforces a shared cultural identity even among the Mormon diaspora. The central doctrine regarding the family (i.e., "families can be forever") is closely related to Mormon theology of the body. As Tona Hangen (2015) describes, the body is central to Mormonism. Heavenly Father has a physical body, as will you when you die. More importantly, Heavenly Father and Heavenly Mother⁴⁵ are both physical, sexual beings and worthy Mormons can become like them in the future: as the old mantra goes, "As man is, God once was; as God is, man may be."⁴⁶ I would argue that Hangen's dimensions overlap: particularly the body and social structures. The body is used to

⁴⁴ #300 in the 1985 hymnal.

⁴⁵ Though Heavenly Mother is part of official doctrine, I have never heard a member speak about her. I only include mention of her here to emphasize the presence of sexuality in the afterlife.

⁴⁶ This couplet is credited to Lorenzo Snow, who was president of the LDS Church from 1898 until his death in 1901.

reinforce social structures, as evidenced by my interlocutors' sexual practices (or lack thereof) and conservative dress. In order to further develop my understanding of the overlapping nature of Mormon social structures and the body, I will now discuss sexual purity as it is conceived in the LDS Church.

Sexual Purity and the Mormon "Nation"

Sara Moslener (2015) argues that purity culture has historically played upon the fears created out of national crises, such as the Cold War. Through her research, Moslener demonstrates "how evangelicals have successfully deployed both cultural and nationalistic strategies to situate sexual purity as a religious and therapeutic practice not as oppositional, but as foundational to American national identity" (2015: 12). In other words, evangelical culture's rhetoric of the purity movement reinforces national identity in an attempt to secure the nation's future. Moslener writes,

For much of history, sexual purity movements have been calls for collective action and social change, calls that have drawn upon theories of race and gender, formulations of national identity, and evangelical theologies in order to articulate the ways in which the nation's future is imperiled by sexual immorality. (2015: 2)

Though Moslener writes about the evangelical purity movement in the United States, her theory applies to the contemporary LDS Church. Similarly to Moslener's evangelicals, the LDS Church "promises assistance with that dilemma [between sexual desire and religious belief] by providing [...] a concrete belief system and a set of behavioral practices that ideally outweigh the curiosities and demands of sexual desire" (2015: 7). This "belief system and set of behavioral practices" is found in the "standards" laid out in the Church document "For the Strength of Youth" (see below).

The Church's goal seems to be the security of its future. I propose that the LDS Church may be thought of – for the purposes of connecting Moslener's argument to my own – as an imagined nation, especially given its diasporic characteristics outside of the Bubble. Benedict Anderson notes that “nation” is difficult to define and proposes his own definition of a nation as “an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (2006: 6). I find that Anderson's broad definition of nation fits the imagined Mormon nation. The nation is *imagined* because no member will ever know every other member (the diaspora makes this especially true); it is *limited* because members understand that the nation will never overtake the earth (my interlocutors display an awareness of this even as they embrace their identities as part of the “every member a missionary” mentality); it is *sovereign* because the notion of nation “was born in an age in which Enlightenment and Revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely-ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm” (certainly true of Mormonism, founded in nineteenth-century America); and finally the nation is *a community* because “the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship” (Anderson 2006: 6-7). Given this understanding of the concept of the nation, I find it appropriate to suggest a Mormon nation alongside the Mormon diaspora.

The LDS Church is concerned with its future, and so the Church appeals to Mormons worldwide to practice the standards. In other words, national security is important to the nation of the LDS Church because the Church's future is at risk – especially given the turbulent changes in the dominant American culture. As one woman put it on July 5 during Sacrament Meeting, “I am so lucky to have the Gospel in my life.

The [United States] government can do what they like, but we know what's right." Her conviction likely would have pleased the First Presidency of the LDS Church.

Strategies used by the Church to address purity among its members vary. One helpful example is found in J. Edward Sumerau and Ryan T. Cragun's (2015) examination of the rhetoric found in *Ensign* concerning pornography. Sumerau and Cragun identify a pattern within the rhetoric: first, *avoid dangerous associations* that may lead to temptation; second, accept the agency given to you by Heavenly Father and *take responsibility* for your actions; third, *maintain sexual purity* so that you will not fall out of Heavenly Father's "good graces"; and fourth, pornographic influence can be "overcome [...] through the guidance of the Savior and the Church," so *seek spiritual treatment* from Church leaders. Church leaders warn members of the grave consequences of sexual impurity (including viewing pornography): "Rather than simply a minor transgression, LDS leaders [...] defined any engagement with pornography as an automatic destruction of sexual purity that would lead to further immorality" (Sumerau & Cragun 2015: 11). Church leaders' teachings about the sexual impurity brought about by "engaging with" pornography is only one example of the many strategies used by the Church to encourage sexual purity among the Mormon nation.

Mormon culture often navigates tensions between Mormon culture and the culture of the outside world, or Salt Lake and the mission field. It may be fruitful to think of non-Mormon culture as taboo. Anthropologist Mary Douglas describes taboo as "a spontaneous coding practice which sets up a vocabulary of spatial limits and physical and verbal signals to hedge around vulnerable relations" (2002: xiii). If Mormons seek to maintain the standards of the LDS Church, they may keep a certain wariness of non-

Mormon culture. According to Douglas, taboo is “a spontaneous device for protecting the distinctive categories of the universe” and it “reduces intellectual and social disorder” (2002: xi). An example of Church hierarchy’s desire to “reduce intellectual and social disorder” may be found in a letter read aloud to wards and branches all over the United States reinforcing the doctrine concerning marriage; the letter was read on July 5 to the Nashville YSA Branch, just over a week after the United States Supreme Court ruling on *Obergefell v. Hodges* (see below).⁴⁷

Dating and the Standards

The Church’s expectations of its youth and YSAs are found in the standards, which provide the “concrete belief system and a set of behavioral practices” described by Moslener. Standards are laid out clearly in the Church pamphlet “For the Strength of Youth” – a copy of which was handed to me during my first-ever visit to an LDS Church. The current cover shows the spires of an LDS temple, with the gold statue of the Angel Moroni standing out against a clear blue sky; the image of the temple is a subtle reminder of the goal of temple marriage (see Figure 6). Some of the standards described within the pamphlet include chastity/purity, modesty, gratitude, integrity, and self-reliance. YSAs

⁴⁷ Douglas’ theory may have other implications for YSA Mormons. When contemplating the notion of purity among my interlocutors, it is interesting to consider the dilemma of the homeland. While my interlocutors maintain a carefully measured reverence for the Bubble – as is characteristic of diasporic communities – they harbor no desires to raise a family in an area with a Mormon majority. Recall my interlocutor who compared Tennessee to a battlefield; this interlocutor told me that she “loves” being a minority and “manning the battlefield.” Ellen explained that she appreciates her time outside of Utah because it has helped her to “develop” her faith. Indeed, Jan Shipps admits that, while she sees many Mormons attempt to “revitalize their Mormon identity” by returning to the Bubble, “even Utah is not what it once was” (2000: 271). Could this mean that the Bubble has inadvertently taken on the characteristics of something that is taboo? Douglas writes, “dirt is essentially disorder” (2002: 2). Does a Mormon majority lead to disorder? Is the presence of so-called “Jack Mormons” (Mormons who do not adhere to the Church’s standards) in the Bubble evidence of disorder? Is the Bubble *dirty*? Are these questions possible ways to frame a better understanding of *why* my interlocutors have reservations about raising family in the Bubble? Ultimately, the parameters of this thesis render this question unanswerable. However, it is an important question to consider as I examine my interlocutors’ thoughts on contemporary gender issues.

utilize the pamphlet as a reference containing guidelines for the proper behavior for a young Mormon.⁴⁸ It has been in circulation since 1965, with the most recent edition released in 2011.

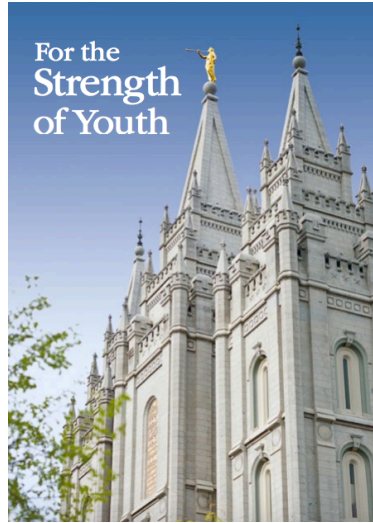


Figure 6: Current cover of “For the Strength of Youth”

The first pages of “For the Strength of Youth” contain a “Message” from the First Presidency of the Church. After encouraging readers to “stay focused on the temple,” one section of this short note reads:

Our Father in Heaven has placed great trust in you. He has a work for you to do. Seek his guidance in prayer, and counsel with your parents and leaders. The decisions you make now will set the course for much of what will follow during your mortal life and throughout eternity. (2011: iii)

By encouraging Church YSAs to seek Heavenly Father’s guidance and the counsel of parents and (Church) leaders and emphasizing the eternal impact of their decisions, the First Presidency is attempting to secure the future of the LDS Church and Mormon nation, thereby also securing the future of the Mormon diaspora.

⁴⁸ The pamphlet is also used by Young Men and Young Women, the Church auxiliaries for members aged 12 to 18.

The pamphlet is specific and clear in its guidelines. The section on “Dating,” for example, reads:

A date is a planned activity that allows a young man and a young woman to get to know each other better. In cultures where dating is acceptable, it can help you learn and practice social skills, develop friendships, have wholesome fun, and eventually find an eternal companion.

You should not date until you are at least 16 years old. When you begin dating, go with one or more additional couples. Avoid going on frequent dates with the same person. [...]

Choose to date only those who have high moral standards and in whose company you can maintain your standards. [...]

Plan dating activities that are safe, positive, and inexpensive and that will help you get to know each other. Go only to places where you can maintain your standards and remain close to the Spirit. (2011: 4)

These guidelines lay out a clear plan for dating: you should be at least 16-years-old, avoid dating the same person too often, and choose an “inexpensive” activity free from temptations. A date is defined as an activity involving a heterosexual couple. While the guidelines state that the person you are dating should “have high moral standards,” there is no restriction against dating non-members.

The rules about pre-marital sex are explicit. “For the Strength of Youth” reads, “God has commanded that sexual intimacy be reserved for marriage”; by refusing to engage in sexual activity outside of marriage, “You protect yourself from [...] spiritual and emotional damage” and “from harmful diseases” and this “helps you to be confident and truly happy and improves your ability to make good decisions now and in the future” (2011: 35). The Church teaches that sexual impurity is a grave sin: the pamphlet refers to Alma 39:5, which reads, “Know ye not, my son, that these things [sexual impurity] are an

abomination in the sight of the Lord; yea, most abominable above all sins save it be the shedding of innocent blood or denying the Holy Ghost?”⁴⁹

When I questioned them about their dating practices, my interlocutors echoed the standards listed in “For the Strength of Youth.” Karen, my oldest interlocutor at 30, lamented that she does not have much time for dating. She told me that she has dated non-members before “and it’s been fine,” but she is hesitant to date her current “crush” because he is not a member: “Boys want to sleep with their girlfriends. It’s what people do, and I get that.” She reminded me that she is, after all, 30 and has never had sexual intercourse: “I have waited so long, and I’ve worked so hard. [...] So to lose it now, after all that time?! I want to make it!” My other interlocutors all agreed that they plan – and want – to wait until they are married to engage in sexual activity. They also all agreed that dating non-Mormons is acceptable and something they are open to; however, everyone also expressed a desire to be married in the temple – that’s part of “the plan.”

Marriage in an LDS temple is expected of all Mormons. When a man and a woman (both members of the Church) are married in the temple, they are “sealed” together for all eternity, resulting in a “celestial,” or eternal, marriage. In other words, the couple will one day be together again in the Celestial Kingdom (the highest level of heaven) as husband and wife along with their children and continue growing their family in the afterlife.⁵⁰ In order to reach the Celestial Kingdom, one must be engaged in a celestial marriage. “For the Strength of Youth” reads, “Seek a companion who is worthy

⁴⁹ The Book of Alma is found in the Book of Mormon. Other books include First and Second Nephi, Jacob, Enos, Jarom, Omni, Words of Mormon, Mosiah, Helaman, Third and Fourth Nephi, Mormon, Ether, and Moroni. In the interest of clarity, I do not use abbreviations for scripture in this thesis.

⁵⁰ This doctrine finds its basis in scripture (e.g., Matthew 16:19) and revelation.

to go to the temple to be sealed to you for time and all eternity. Marrying in the temple and creating an eternal family are essential in God’s plan of happiness” (2011: 5).

Same-sex Marriage and Attraction

Though I formed my list of questions to be used during my oral history interviews before the Supreme Court ruled on *Obergefell v. Hodges*, I still made a note to ask my interlocutors for their thoughts on same-sex marriage and attraction.⁵¹ This proved timely, given the Supreme Court ruling. On July 5, the same day described in the beginning of this chapter, Sacrament Meeting ended with the branch president reading a letter from the First Presidency of the LDS Church. The letter affirmed the beliefs outlined in “The Family, A Proclamation to the World,” a document issued by the Church twenty years earlier that explicitly defines marriage as the union between a man and a woman.⁵² The Nashville YSA Branch president read the letter as members sat in the pews, seemingly uninterested. After reading the letter, he said, “I fully stand behind the presidency.”

Each of my interlocutors gave pause when I questioned them about their thoughts on same-sex marriage and attraction. Hazel admitted that she is bisexual, adding, “I don’t want to say it’s not supported by the Church because I’m not going to get excommunicated for being something other than heterosexual.” She then stated her belief that the Church will eventually allow same-sex marriage. When I asked if she would date or marry a woman, she answered that she would date a woman, but she would choose to wait to marry a woman until the Church allows same-sex marriage. Karen disagreed and

⁵¹ I use the phrase “same-sex attraction” in keeping with contemporary Mormon vernacular.

⁵² See Appendix A. Notably, I have seen framed copies of this document in several of the homes of my interlocutors.

said that she does not think same-sex marriage will ever be allowed in the Church. She supports same-sex marriage and shared that “half of my department” at Vanderbilt is gay. However, she told me, she sometimes feels guilty about supporting same-sex marriage so fervently because, “at the end of the day, I don’t really care what people think so much as I care what God thinks.” Ellen shared that “both of my best friends are gay,” but she believes that marriage is between a man and a woman. “I can’t condone the sin,” she told me, “but I condone the person, you know?” Violet shared that she understands why same-sex attraction happens:

Everybody gets those urges of, well, no guy will date me, so maybe a woman will – or, I lean more towards women, I hang out with girls, or I’m more masculine than other women. I think there’s a young man out there for every person, but if you choose not to do that, I can’t – it would be wrong of me to judge them.

She added that she expects people to respect her beliefs, just as she respects theirs. Addie noted a family connection that led her to feel strongly about the court ruling:

[That’s] recently been legalized, which breaks my heart. It really does. But that’s what the world teaches is okay, unfortunately. I think the reason why that legalization is so hard on me is because I have an uncle that’s gay and he has a mate – or partner, whatever you want to call it – and so they could go ahead and do that if they want. I don’t know. I just don’t feel very comfortable about that. There’s no way I’d ever do that.

The nuances found among the diverse answers of my interlocutors shows just how important – and contentious – the issue of same-sex marriage and attraction continues to be in the LDS Church. The Church, by releasing the letter affirming the doctrine found in “The Family, A Proclamation to the World,” continues to try to limit disorder caused by the changing cultural perceptions of same-sex marriage and attraction.

Women's Issues in the Church

Women's issues are also a popular topic of discussion among Mormons today. The Ordain Women movement has enjoyed national mainstream media coverage, though the Church is quick to respond that Ordain Women's members represent an extremely small percentage of the LDS Church. Ordain Women was founded by Kate Kelly as an organization to move forward the conversation surrounding women and the priesthood. Kelly believes that women have the right to hold the priesthood – currently a privilege reserved for “all worthy men.” For this belief, Kelly was excommunicated in June 2014. I was not sure if my interlocutors were aware of the mainstream conversation surrounding Kelly and the Ordain Women movement;⁵³ an earlier research project (Cook 2014) with a different congregation revealed that there was little knowledge of the movement (though this project was prior to Kelly's highly publicized excommunication), so I decided not to ask about the movement or Kelly in particular, but rather I broadened my questions to allow my interlocutors to interpret their meanings on their own: “How do you feel about women's roles within the Church?” and “Are there any changes you would like to see regarding women in the Church?”

Only Karen expressed anything beyond a superficial awareness of the Ordain Women movement. She admitted that she has “actually had a really hard time being a woman in the Church,” especially after she realized that she was not allowed to do things that boys were encouraged to do (e.g., Boy Scouts). As a social scientist, she tells me, “she can't be blind to [gender relations] in my own organization. Because women do not have the priesthood, and because the priesthood is so tied to administrative duties, there's

⁵³ Articles concerning Kelly's excommunication and the Ordain Women movement can be found in sources as diverse as *The New York Times* (Goodstein 2014) and *The Salt Lake Tribune* (Stack 2015).

just no way that women can have equal power in the Church without having the priesthood.” She desires more power “administratively” and does not appreciate that men are required to be present at Relief Society meetings: “I just want, like, my women’s space.” Simply put, she “[thinks] that the Prophet and the First Presidency [...] should ask [God].” When I ask if she thinks that they have asked, she exclaims, “No, I don’t!” She then laments that Kate Kelly and Ordain Women “got labeled as radicals” because “[once] you’re labeled as a radical, you’re ignored.” No matter what the answer from Heavenly Father is, Karen believes that the question of whether or not women can hold the priesthood is one that the First Presidency should be asking.

Karen also believes that “women in the Church are loved,” that they are “cherished” and “respected.” This is a sentiment shared by all of my interlocutors. Addie emphasized how much women do – “We cook, we clean, we do all that stuff at home; we take care of the kids all day, every day” – and expressed her appreciation for her stay-at-home mother’s dedication to her family. Hazel, a self-described “hardcore feminist,” stated simply, “I am” when I ask if she is comfortable with women’s roles in the Church. When I press her, she explains that “separate but equal” – though it did not succeed with regards to, say, Blacks and Whites in the segregated South – has been “done correctly” in the Church: “Even though they hold different roles and they’re given a different purpose, together men and women form the whole unity.” Similarly to Karen, Violet sometimes has difficulty accepting her assigned roles as a woman because she is “super independent”: “It’s like a ‘why don’t I have the priesthood?’ type thing.” However, she echoes Addie by emphasizing the sheer amount of expectations already placed on

women, and reminds me that behind every man – including general authorities – is a woman.

Ellen ties Southern culture into her answer: “I think [women’s roles in the Church] are awesome. Growing up in the South, [...] I was not very empowered as a woman. When I joined the Church – especially on my mission – [I was] so empowered! I was given leadership positions, encouraged to share my talents and my insight.” She hopes that her children, who will be raised Mormon and likely in the South, will not experience disempowerment as young women, citing her priesthood holder (her hypothetical husband) as a main source for empowering her hypothetical daughters. Interesting is Ellen’s rejection of narratives of Southern women’s empowerment and an embrace of her new cultural identity as a Mormon woman.

Faith in the Institution, Faith in the Future

My interlocutors demonstrate a sincere faith in the institution of the LDS Church and Church leaders’ ability to change Church doctrine in order to do the right thing. Karen hopes that the Church will ask Heavenly Father for revelation regarding women and the priesthood, and Hazel believes that same-sex marriage will one day be allowed by the Church. I am in no position to speculate; rather, I am interested in the way that the Church’s attempt at the creation of a shared cultural identity has succeeded among my interlocutors. It seems that the shared cultural identity of “Salt Lake” Mormonism wins out over mainstream Southern mores in the case of contemporary gender issues. My interlocutors displayed an awareness of and appreciation for the standards, and everyone claimed a commitment to sexual purity in the hopes that they might one day be married to

a Mormon man in the temple. Indeed, though my interlocutors may not have been, in the words of Violet who is “not like, an altar Mormons,” the Church just may have secured the future of the Mormon nation through the Mormon diaspora – at least among five young single adult women in Nashville.

CONCLUSION

Why Is No One Crying? Self-reflection, After the Field

[The] actual *doing* of anthropology – the being in the field part – is difficult to stop. Once you've turned yourself into a research tool, everything around you becomes culture, data, odd practice, magic, and example. Awash in curious movement and strange conversation, the normal world becomes mysterious and often ludicrous.

- Stephen M. Fjellman (1992: 393, emphasis in the original)

Days after I first visited the Nashville YSA Branch, I told a friend (also an aspiring scholar of contemporary Mormonism) that I did not think that I would complete the project with that branch. When he asked why, I told him that it seemed to me, judging from the three hours I had so far spent with the branch, that they were not who I wanted them to be and so they simply would not do for my project. My friend encouraged me to push through, insisting that my research could only improve.

I continued my research. I think that the preceding chapters have demonstrated the benefit of “pushing through” with a branch more heterodox than I had initially desired. More than anything, my hope for this project was to understand what research looks and feels like – to understand the experiences of the ethnographer and the effects of ethnography on the various actors involved in the process. Beyond being an exploration of the Mormon diaspora, this thesis allowed me to engage in the type of research not always available to an undergraduate student and the opportunity to *practice* ethnography. Robert J. Smith wrote,

The subjects of ethnographies, it should never be forgotten, are always more interesting than their authors. [...] If we are to continue to do ethnography at all, I cannot see that we have any other option than to listen carefully to what people say, watch what they do, and keep our voices down. (qtd. in Tweed 1997: 10)

I completely and sincerely agree with Smith, who certainly addresses the heart of the ethnographic method. However, in this chapter, I will break from his rule and no longer “keep my voice down.”

Crying: An Explanation

Throughout my field journal (a composition notebook featuring a honeycomb design in honor of my interlocutors; see Figure 7), there are occasional series of four or five exclamation points (i.e., !!!!!). At first, these clusters of punctuation may appear random, perhaps only the eagerness of a (very) junior researcher. However, upon closer examination, the exclamation points only appear after notes involving one thing: members of the congregation *crying*.

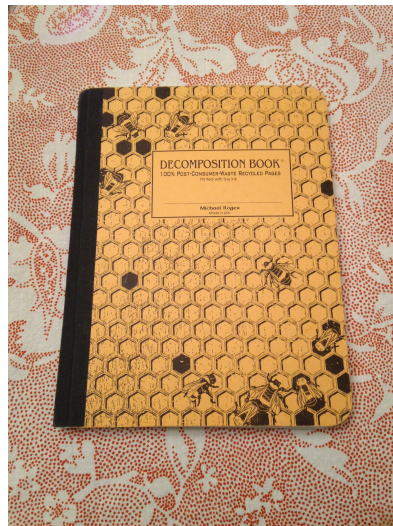


Figure 7: An artifact from the field

I like it when people cry. To explain: It is not that I particularly enjoy witnessing people in the throes of grief or confusion or whatever else causes tears. Rather, I have a

deep appreciation for the vulnerability a person must embrace in order to cry in front of a group of people.

During the first research project I ever conducted – also with a branch of YSA Mormons⁵⁴ – nary a service passed without tears shed. Typically, these tears were not shed out of grief or confusion or whatever else causes tears. No – these were more often than not tears of gratitude; in particular, gratitude for Heavenly Father, or the Church, or the branch, or some combination thereof. For example, I vividly remember a middle-aged man who visited one spring Sunday morning to speak to the branch’s Sunday School classes; during his talk, he began to weep openly – great, shaking sobs. I do not recall the exact cause of tears (was he thankful for the atonement of Jesus Christ, or for the Book of Mormon?), but I do remember the lack of surprise or secondhand embarrassment among the members of the branch. Rather than uncomfortable glances at the floor, the members nodded somberly, in agreement with whatever the man had said. I remember thinking that this man’s weeping was evidence of the acceptance of vulnerability within the branch. Certainly, it would have been an interesting element of the lived religion of that particular branch.

The members depicted in my first project cried often. So, when I set out to begin research for this thesis, I looked forward to more crying. I hoped to see more displays of great vulnerability and great trust among members. When I did not experience this at the Nashville YSA Branch – when few people cried and when the people who *did* cry did so quietly and briefly, without fanfare – I was disappointed. In the middle of every service, I found myself wondering, *Why is no one crying?* I had to make my way past my own

⁵⁴ See Cook 2014.

misgivings and unsettled preconceptions into the academic frame of mind in which I could learn about my interlocutors from my interlocutors themselves.

My first project had caused me to unknowingly develop a belief – later disproved by the Nashville YSA Branch – that all Mormons outside of the Bubble were the same as the Mormons found in that first YSA branch. While in the midst of my fieldwork for that early project, I reinforced this belief by reading a blog post interview with Jana Riess (Evans 2011), an American religious historian and Mormon convert. Though not a permanent resident of Utah, Riess was visiting the state at the time of the interview. Responding to a question about practicing Mormonism outside of the Bubble, she shared a story about a hit-and-run that occurred the night before the interview. The driver hit her rental car and drove away without stopping to exchange information. Riess writes,

I was seriously angry about this (!) ... [*sic*] and also sad to think that statistically, that jerk may well have been a Mormon. [...] Sometimes it's tough to be such a small minority [...], but it's also very freeing. There is greater tolerance for different points of view within Mormonism where I live – precisely because we are such a tiny minority [...] and we need every single person who's willing to serve. We can't afford to judge each other! (Evans 2011)

For some reason, Riess' story and her sentiments remain with me and inform my own preconceptions of Mormonism in- and outside of the Bubble. I read Riess to mean that Mormons outside of the Bubble were the *best* Mormons – kind, warm, welcoming, unable to “afford to judge each other.” I applied my own appreciation for my earliest interlocutors' tendency to cry during services (and oral history interviews) to mean that this was also “normative” of the Mormon diaspora. However, the number of exclamation points in my field journal tells a different story, one that I recognize as true evidence in the case of a single Young Single Adult branch of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Nashville, Tennessee. As disappointed as I was with the lack of displays of

great vulnerability,⁵⁵ I grew quite fond of the Nashville YSA Branch and grew to appreciate their differences from my earliest interlocutors.

My Repugnant Cultural Other and Me

I am often asked – why Mormons? Why did I – a woman born and raised in middle Tennessee by Southern Baptists, who never attended an LDS Church prior to my first research project – choose to spend so much time with Mormons? Most simply, happenstance. I attended a service for a class assignment because I had an LDS friend who promised to introduce me to other members. I found that I felt comfortable in the setting of that particular congregation, and I quickly became fascinated by Mormon theology.

To complicate this question, I must refer to a concept introduced by Susan Friend Harding (1991). Given my own identity and personal beliefs (which differ greatly from those held by many of my interlocutors), I find it helpful to understand my interlocutors as a “repugnant cultural other,” a concept introduced by Harding. Harding argues that the ultimate “other” for the anthropology of religion is the conservative Christian. Mormons represent the ultimate “other” for me. In other words, Mormons, as American Christians, represent a proximate other the way that, say, Muslims would not. I find Mormonism strangely seductive, in a way; it is the same as my own culture, yet different and incompatible with my own worldview.

⁵⁵ I must note that I have a theory about the lack of crying. I have, since reflecting on my experiences in the field, wondered if perhaps the cause of what I read to be a lack of emotive displays with in the branch might be the high mobility of the membership of the branch (i.e., many are only members for a matter of months or a few years, and the inherent character of a YSA congregation means that members are encouraged to “move on” to a family ward – in other words, get married).

In her work on fundamentalist Christians, Harding disrupts many of the notions held by scholars, and she notes her frustrations at the interrogations she often received regarding her research interests:

It seems that antiorientalizing tools of cultural criticism are better suited for some “others” and not other “others” [...]. I know this from the continuous inquiry by my colleagues into my background and my motives for choosing this and not some other, any other, ethnographic object. [...] I also know my intellectual tools are mismatched with my object of inquiry from my own incessant struggle not to ally with fundamentalists even as I collaborate with them in disrupting modern representations of them. (1991: 375)

Being a non-Mormon who researches Mormonism, Harding’s frustration resonates with me. I often experience an “Are you now or have you ever been?” line of questioning, often with an added “Do you plan to be?” These questions relate to my own religious identity, which agitates me and is one of the reasons why I hesitated to discuss the Christian-ness of my interlocutors: I felt that it too closely allied me with the LDS Church. My personal investment in my research stops short of having a stake in the debate found among other Christians regarding Mormons.

Of course, when working with one’s repugnant cultural other, limitations may present themselves. One major challenge for this project was my own social awkwardness. The members of the Nashville YSA Branch are *cool*; perhaps hipster is an appropriate descriptor. They are thin and/or muscular, White, and conventionally attractive, and they appear to have enormous incomes.⁵⁶ Admittedly, I felt intimidated by these people, especially the women. It quickly became apparent to me that my wardrobe is sorely lacking in the way of long skirts and dresses. I had no connections to the Nashville YSA Branch prior to my first visit (save for my friendship with one of the

⁵⁶ I make this assumption based on overheard conversations, the type of clothing worn by most interlocutors, and the fact that many of the members are rising young professionals in Nashville. Additionally, the apartments I visited for interviews were in high rent areas.

sister missionaries who was serving a different congregation in the meetinghouse), and I found that I had little in common with most of the members of the branch. Successful ethnography requires, to some degree, friendship. While my interviews were successful in allowing me to forge friendships – however brief – with my interlocutors, I was not as successful in the branch writ large, and this is perhaps evident through my reliance on data collected during my interviews.

These limitations led me to change my methodology. Financial constraints led me to choose only to attend Sunday services, rather than include Family Home Evenings and Institute in my data. I chose to rely on the data collected during interviews and Fast Sunday testimonies. I focused on questions of sex, gender, and diaspora, and I began to draw from secondary sources that spoke to these questions. I found that one of the greatest influences – for better or worse – on the ethnography is the ethnographer herself.

Because the ethnographer influences the ethnography, the ethnographer must be interested and invested in her interlocutors and the community of which they are a part. Though I am not a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, I have found that my research on Mormonism has affected my own life. For example, I continue to follow closely news relating to the Ordain Women movement, and I have developed an affinity for traditional Mormon hymns. Indeed, in my case, the ethnography – my interlocutors and their culture – has influenced the ethnographer.

Representational Moments

Important to note in any discussion concerning self-reflection in the field is that “ethnographers do not just *represent* and *define* ‘the field’; they *become* it” (Landres

2002: 105, emphasis in the original). In his work with Slovaks, J. Shawn Landres writes that he “consciously shaped [his] self-presentation in order to elicit the most useful possible responses to my interventions and inquiries” (2002: 101). I also “shaped my self-presentation” in my interactions with my own interlocutors. Though I chose to inform my interlocutors that I am neither a member of the LDS Church nor an investigator, I also avoided stating my personal opinions regarding aspects of Church doctrine policy, and theology so that my interlocutors did not falsely perceive insidious intentions on my part.

In order to understand better the relationship between the ethnographer and her field, Landres suggests a framework of eight “representational moments” that take place between various actors in the field:

- (1) “I the Ethnographer” represent myself and people like me to the “Others.”
- (2) The “Others” represent me to themselves.
- (3) The “Others” represent themselves within their own groups.
- (4) The “Others” represent themselves to me and to people like me.
- (5) The “Others” represent me to myself.
- (6) “I the Ethnographer” represent the “Other” to fellow ethnographers, as well as to the public.
- (7) “I the Ethnographer” represent the “Other” to themselves.
- (8) “I the Ethnographer” represent “the Ethnographer” not only to the public, but also to my fellow scholars. (2002: 106-109)

I have experienced each of these representational moments to varying degrees during my time in the field and immediately following.

(1) I represented myself as a non-Mormon undergraduate student interested in researching the community of the Nashville YSA Branch, and emphasized that my

intentions were to present an objective piece of research based on my interactions with the branch. (2) My interlocutors were extremely proud of their branch and often spoke about the Spirit being present in the branch. (3) The sharing of testimonies monthly on Fast Sundays saw my interlocutors representing themselves within the branch. (4) My interlocutors described themselves as “choosing” to practice their faith while simultaneously insisting that they successfully and regularly engage with non-Mormon culture (as Violet told me, “I’m not, like, an altar Mormon”), and they find that living in a culture in which Mormons are a minority strengthens their faith. (5) I have been referred to more than once as a “dry Mormon,” or a non-member who holds the same standards as baptized Mormons. (6) My argument regarding the question “Are Mormons Christians?” found in the introduction to this thesis is an excellent example of myself representing my interlocutors to others; indeed, this thesis is in and of itself representative of this representational moment. (7) During my discussion with Karen following our interview, she asked about the theories I was using, and I took the opportunity to share the findings of my earlier research on contemporary Mormons, allowing me to represent to Karen herself through the eyes of ethnographers. (8) Finally, this chapter finds me representing the ethnographer to the public and my fellow scholars through a discussion of the representational moments experienced in the field as well as the challenges and effects of the field.

Final Remarks

Through an examination of the Nashville YSA Branch and its diasporic characteristics, I have attempted to produce a piece of scholarship that accurately

represents the worlds of my interlocutors, particularly their views on contemporary gender issues. Through the representational moments between the various actors present in this ethnography, I have discovered more about the Mormon diaspora, the study of lived religion, and even myself than I had thought was possible when I first began to plan the project. Though my initial impressions of my interlocutors (and their lack of crying) led me to begin the project reluctantly, my interlocutors proved to be intelligent, engaging individuals who expertly navigate their lives as young single adult Mormon women in Nashville, Tennessee.

REFERENCES

- Anderson, Benedict. 2006 [1983]. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.
- “Are Mormons Christians?” 2015. *The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*. Retrieved from mormon.org/faq/mormon-christian
- Beecher, Maureen Ursenbach, & Lavina Fielding Anderson, eds. 1992. *Sisters in Spirit: Mormon Women in Historical and Cultural Perspective*. Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press.
- Big Love* [television series]. 2006-2011. New York: Home Box Office.
- Birch, Brian D. 2014. “In Defense of Methodological Pluralism: Theology, Apologetics, and the Critical Study of Mormonism.” *Mormon Studies Review* 1: 53-62.
- Brooks, Joanna, Rachel Hunt Steenblik, & Hannah Wheelwright. 2015. *Mormon Feminism: Essential Writings*. New York: Oxford.
- Burr, Thomas. 2015. “Mormon Kate Kelly ‘Happier’ and ‘Invigorated’ After Excommunication.” *Religion News Service*. Retrieved from religionnews.com/2015/04/27/mormon-kate-kelly-happier-invigorated-excommunication
- Campbell, Beverly. 1992. “Eve.” In *Encyclopedia of Mormonism, Vol. 2*. Ed. Daniel H. Ludlow. New York: Macmillan. 475-476.
- Cannell, Fenella. 2005. “The Christianity of Anthropology.” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 11: 335-356.
- . 2006. “Introduction.” In *The Anthropology of Christianity*. Ed. Fenella Cannell. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. 1-50.
- Carraway, Al. 2015. *More than the Tattooed Mormon*. Springville, UT: Cedar Fort Publishing.
- Cook, Melody. 2014. “‘As a Young Single Adult, As a Woman, As a Member of the Church’: Young Single Adult Mormon Women in Murfreesboro.” Unpublished paper.
- Cornwall, Marie. 2001 [1994]. “Introduction to the Paperback Edition.” In *Contemporary Mormonism: Social Science Perspectives*. Eds. Marie Cornwall, Tim B. Heaton, and Lawrence A. Young. Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press. vii-xv.

- Cornwall, Marie, Tim B. Heaton, & Lawrence A. Young, eds. 2001 [1994]. *Contemporary Mormonism: Social Science Perspectives*. Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press.
- “Davidson County, Tennessee (TN) Religion Statistics Profile.” *City-Data.com*. Retrieved from city-data.com/county/religion/Davidson-County-TN.html
- Douglas, Mary. 2002 [1966]. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. London: Routledge.
- Evans, Rachel Held. 2011. “Ask a Mormon...(Response).” *Rachel Held Evans*. Retrieved from rachelheldevans.com/blog/ask-a-mormon-response
- “Facts and Statistics.” *The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints Newsroom*. Retrieved from mormonnewsroom.org/facts-and-statistics/country/united-states/state/tennessee
- Fjellman, Stephen M. 1992. *Vinyl Leaves: Walt Disney World and America*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Fruhman, J. Spencer. 2014. “Friendship: An Editor’s Introduction.” *Mormon Studies Review* 1: 1-7.
- “For the Strength of Youth.” 2011. *The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*. Retrieved from standards.lds.org
- Goodstein, Laurie. 2014. “Two Activists in Mormon Church Threatened With Excommunication.” *The New York Times*. Retrieved from nytimes.com/2014/06/12/us/two-activists-within-mormon-church-threatened-with-excommunication.html
- Hall, David. 1997. “Introduction.” In *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice*. Ed. David Hall. Princeton University Press. vii-xiii.
- Hall, Stuart. 1990. “Cultural Identity and Diaspora.” In *Identity: Community, Culture, and Difference*. Ed. Jonathan Rutherford. London: Lawrence & Wishart. 222-237.
- Hangen, Tona J. 2015. “Lived Religion among Mormons.” In *The Oxford Handbook of Mormonism*. Eds. Terryl L. Givens and Philip L. Barlow. New York: Oxford. 209-223.
- Harding, Susan Friend. 1991. “Representing Fundamentalism: The Problem of the Repugnant Cultural Other.” *Social Research* 58(2): 373-393.

- Ingersoll, Julie. 2002. "Against Univocality: Re-reading Ethnographies of Conservative Protestant Women." In *Personal Knowledge and Beyond: Reshaping the Ethnography of Religion*. Eds. James V. Spickard, J. Shawn Landres, and Meredith B. McGuire. New York University Press. 162-174.
- Keane, Webb. 2006. *Christian Moderns: Freedom and Fetish in the Mission Encounter*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Kuruvilla, Carol. 2015. "Mormon Church's New LGBT Stance Draws Mixed Response From Gay Mormons." *HuffPost Religion*. Retrieved from huffingtonpost.com/2015/01/28/Mormon-church-lgbt_n_6559272.html
- Landres, J. Shawn. 2002. "Being (in) the Field: Defining Ethnography in Southern California and Central Slovakia." In *Personal Knowledge and Beyond: Reshaping the Ethnography of Religion*. Eds. James V. Spickard, J. Shawn Landres, and Meredith B. McGuire. New York University Press. 100-112.
- LDS Happiness*. 2014. Retrieved from lds-happiness.com
- Mauss, Armand. 1994. *The Angel and the Beehive: The Mormon Struggle with Assimilation*. Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press.
- "Mission Statement." 2015. *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*. Retrieved from dialoguejournal.com/portfolio/mission-statement
- Molen, Ron. 1991. "The Two Churches of Mormonism." In *The Wilderness of Faith: Essays on Contemporary Mormon Thought*. Ed. John Sillito. Salt Lake City, UT: Signature. 26-35.
- "The Mormon Hierarchy: How the LDS church is organized." 2012. *Slate*. Retrieved from slate.com/articles/life/faithbased/2012/11/lds_leadership_chart_how_the_mormon_hierarchy_is_organized.html
- Moslener, Sara. 2015. *Virgin Nation: Sexual Purity and American Adolescence*. New York: Oxford.
- My Husband's Not Gay* [television broadcast]. 2015. Silver Spring, MD: TLC.
- Nelson, Russell M. 2015. "A Plea to My Sisters." *The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*. Retrieved from lds.org/general-conference/2015/10/a-plea-to-my-sisters?lang=eng
- Nelson, Russell M. [LDS General Conference]. 2015. *A Plea to My Sisters* [video file]. Retrieved from youtube.com/watch?v=oMwO3RAH9bE

- Orsi, Robert A. 2003. "Is the Study of Lived Religion Irrelevant to the World We Live in? Special Presidential Plenary Address, Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, Salt Lake City, November 2, 2002." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 42(2): 169-174.
- Prothero, Stephen. 2003. "Mormon Elder Brother." In *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 161-199.
- Riess, Jana, & Christopher Kimball Bigelow. 2005. *Mormonism for Dummies*. Indianapolis, IN: Wiley.
- Shippo, Jan. 2000. *Sojourner in the Promised Land: Forty Years among the Mormons*. Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press.
- Sister Wives* [television series]. 2010-present. Silver Spring, MD: TLC.
- Spickard, James V., & J. Shawn Landres. 2002. "Whither Ethnography? Transforming the Social-Scientific Study of Religion." In *Personal Knowledge and Beyond: Reshaping the Ethnography of Religion*. Eds. James V. Spickard, J. Shawn Landres, and Meredith B. McGuire. New York University Press. 1-14.
- Stark, Rodney. 2005. *The Rise of Mormonism*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Stack, Peggy Fletcher. 2015. "A Year After Her Mormon Excommunication, Where Do Kate Kelly and the Ordain Women Movement Stand?" *The Salt Lake Tribune*. Retrieved from sltrib.com/home/2653329-155/year-after-her-mormon-excommunication-where
- Sumerau, J. Edward, & Ryan T. Cragun. 2015. "'Avoid that Pornographic Playground': Teaching Pornographic Abstinence in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints." *Critical Research on Religion* 0(0): 1-21.
- Tweed, Thomas A. 1997. *Our Lady of the Exile: Diasporic Religion at a Cuban Catholic Shrine in Miami*. New York: Oxford.
- Vance, Laura L. 2007. "Review Essay: Recent Studies of Mormon Women." *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 10(4): 113-127.
- Watt, G. D., & J. V. Long. 1861. *Journal of Discourses, Delivered by President Brigham Young, His Two Counselors, The Twelve Apostles, and Others. Volumes 8-9*. 222.
- The Woods Barn*. 2015. Retrieved from woodsbarnc.com/shop

APPENDIX A

The Family, A Proclamation to the World

THE FAMILY

A PROCLAMATION TO THE WORLD

THE FIRST PRESIDENCY AND COUNCIL OF THE TWELVE APOSTLES OF THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS

WE, THE FIRST PRESIDENCY and the Council of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, solemnly proclaim that marriage between a man and a woman is ordained of God and that the family is central to the Creator's plan for the eternal destiny of His children.

ALL HUMAN BEINGS—male and female—are created in the image of God. Each is a beloved spirit son or daughter of heavenly parents, and, as such, each has a divine nature and destiny. Gender is an essential characteristic of individual premortal, mortal, and eternal identity and purpose.

IN THE PREMORTAL REALM, spirit sons and daughters knew and worshipped God as their Eternal Father and accepted His plan by which His children could obtain a physical body and gain earthly experience to progress toward perfection and ultimately realize their divine destiny as heirs of eternal life. The divine plan of happiness enables family relationships to be perpetuated beyond the grave. Sacred ordinances and covenants available in holy temples make it possible for individuals to return to the presence of God and for families to be united eternally.

THE FIRST COMMANDMENT that God gave to Adam and Eve pertained to their potential for parenthood as husband and wife. We declare that God's commandment for His children to multiply and replenish the earth remains in force. We further declare that God has commanded that the sacred powers of procreation are to be employed only between man and woman, lawfully wedded as husband and wife.

WE DECLARE the means by which mortal life is created to be divinely appointed. We affirm the sanctity of life and of its importance in God's eternal plan.

HUSBAND AND WIFE have a solemn responsibility to love and care for each other and for their children. "Children are an heritage of the Lord" (Psalm 127:3). Parents have a sacred duty to rear their children in love and righteousness,

to provide for their physical and spiritual needs, and to teach them to love and serve one another, observe the commandments of God, and be law-abiding citizens wherever they live. Husbands and wives—mothers and fathers—will be held accountable before God for the discharge of these obligations.

THE FAMILY is ordained of God. Marriage between man and woman is essential to His eternal plan. Children are entitled to birth within the bonds of matrimony, and to be reared by a father and a mother who honor marital vows with complete fidelity. Happiness in family life is most likely to be achieved when founded upon the teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ. Successful marriages and families are established and maintained on principles of faith, prayer, repentance, forgiveness, respect, love, compassion, work, and wholesome recreational activities. By divine design, fathers are to preside over their families in love and righteousness and are responsible to provide the necessities of life and protection for their families. Mothers are primarily responsible for the nurture of their children. In these sacred responsibilities, fathers and mothers are obligated to help one another as equal partners. Disability, death, or other circumstances may necessitate individual adaptation. Extended families should lend support when needed.

WE WARN that individuals who violate covenants of chastity, who abuse spouse or offspring, or who fail to fulfill family responsibilities will one day stand accountable before God. Further, we warn that the disintegration of the family will bring upon individuals, communities, and nations the calamities foretold by ancient and modern prophets.

WE CALL UPON responsible citizens and officers of government everywhere to promote those measures designed to maintain and strengthen the family as the fundamental unit of society.

This proclamation was read by President Gordon B. Hinckley as part of his message at the General Relief Society Meeting held September 23, 1995, in Salt Lake City, Utah.

APPENDIX B

Interview Questions

1. Tell me about your conversion.
What are your thoughts on agency?
2. What brought you to Nashville?
Where does your family live?
If you are from Utah/Idaho, do you find it easier or more difficult to be Mormon in Tennessee?
Do you plan to return to Utah/Idaho?
3. Tell me about your education.
If you are a student, where? If not currently, where have you attended university previously?
What did you major/minor/concentrate in?
What activities did you participate in while in school?
Do you plan on furthering your education?
What about your employment history?
4. How long have you been attending the YSA branch in Nashville?
What branch activities are you involved in?
How much time do you spend doing activities related to the branch each week?
5. What would you say the ratio of Church members to non-Church members is among your friendships?
What non-Church activities are you involved in?
6. What role does the Church play in your dating life/expectations concerning marriage and family?
Is dating outside of the Church something you feel comfortable with?
If/when you have children, where do you plan to raise them?
What are your thoughts on pre-marital sex?
What about same-sex marriage/attraction?
7. How do you feel about women's roles within the Church?
Are there any changes you would like to see regarding women in the Church?
What role should women have in society?
8. Are there any specific opportunities or challenges that come with being Mormon in Nashville that you want to address?

APPENDIX C

Interview Transcripts

Note: The transcripts below use pseudonyms and contain redactions necessary to conceal the identities of my interlocutors. In transcribing the interviews, I chose to not include the vast majority of oft-repeated filler words and phrases (e.g., “um,” “you know,” “like”). I chose to not indicate any significant pauses or vocal stressing of words and phrases made by my interlocutors or myself. Additionally, during certain sections of the recorded interviews, the audio is unclear; I have indicated these instances as such in the transcripts.

HAZEL

MELODY: Here we go. Okay. Alright, so tell me about your conversion, spiritual journey. However you want to phrase that.

HAZEL: Well, I was born Mormon. So, there was really no conversion, you know. I grew up in the Gospel. And really, the spiritual journey – I haven’t really had one. I know a lot of people talk about how, you know, they kind of have this road that they had to follow, and they had this great, you know, realization about the Church and everything. I’ve never really had that. It’s more like I’ve always just been extremely comfortable in it. Like, it just feels so natural that I’ve never had to, like, question it and then have, you know, kind of fall away from it like a lot of people do. It’s just always been a part of my life, a part of who I am, and so I’d say that, I guess, my whole life has kind of been a spiritual journey but not in like a “spiritual journey” magical awakening sense. It’s just kind of how I’ve always been.

MELODY: Agency is an important part of, you know, whenever you go through the discussions, and they all tell you about agency. What are your thoughts on that? Why is that important to you? Or is it important to you?

HAZEL: You mean, like, free agency? Like being able to do [unclear]. I just think it’s important for everybody to feel free to do what they want to do, and the thing that I get asked the most is, how do you deal with all the rules? That is the, like, number one question I’m asked as a Mormon, besides the polygamy deal that I hate. [LAUGHS] [unclear] How do you feel about the rules, and my sister actually also, you know, [unclear] and she actually got away from the Church. She doesn’t like it. She hates all the rules, and so she feels like she’s not free to do what she wants to do. I never felt – I never feel like I’m limited. I mean, my agency’s extremely important to me. I’m a hardcore feminist, you know, equal rights activist, you know, whatever you want to call it. I just think that everyone has the right to choose what they want to do, and I never feel limited in that. I know a lot of people do, but I just never have. I mean, the way I like to put it is, I can do whatever I want. The Church isn’t gonna stop me from doing whatever I want to do. They just give you recommendations for how to live a healthy, happy lifestyle. Like, the big one – don’t smoke, don’t drink. You know, you don’t drink caffeine. You know, we just don’t do anything that’s bad

for your body. Really, technically, I'm not supposed to have tattoos. You see I've chosen to kind of glance over that. No, I don't glance over it, but I just feel like tattoos are what's right for me, whereas smoking and drinking aren't. I know a lot of people would see that as, well, you can't pick and choose which rules to follow. It's like, I'm not. Because they're not necessarily "rules." I'm not committing adultery, you know. It's not – we don't consider them sins. It's just – hey, this might help you lead a healthier [unclear]. I don't feel limited at all. It's just never occurred to me to think of it like that. I know it has other people – like my sister, for instance. And I think a lot of people don't really understand that. Because it's easier for me to [unclear]. No, thanks, I don't drink caffeine. Like, what? Why not? How do you survive without caffeine? I'm like, well, I've never had it. I don't drink it for religious purposes. And they're like, what! People hear that, and they're like, what are you, like Amish? Or [unclear]. It's not necessarily like that. It's just I choose to follow those guidelines. It is an act of free agency for me to choose which rules I want to follow and to choose to follow the rules set forth by the Church.

MELODY: We've talked a little bit about this. What brought you to Nashville? Where does your family live?

HAZEL: Well, my mom lives in [redacted]. My sister lives in [redacted]. My dad and I just moved up here to an apartment on [redacted] because he and my mom are in the process of getting a divorce.

MELODY: Is that hard?

HAZEL: Kind of, you know. Yes and no. In a way. Growing up, I was always the one whose parents were still together. All my friends' parents were divorced, and I was [unclear] they had to split between their houses. I remember being so confused by people. Like, oh man, I left my textbook at my dad's house. That just always seemed weird to me. I was always really happy that, you know, I had parents who were still together and still loved each other. But they just recently got a divorce – or they're in the process. They came to our attention about a year ago. We didn't realize my mom has been planning this for about four or five years now. Talking to lawyers, you know, secretly, and all this stuff. You know, I mean, I'm still kind of mad at her about it. But at the same time, I know she wasn't happy and it was causing a lot of tension unnecessary – unnecessary tension in the house. I think, you know, at 19, I'm able to look at the wider picture of the world. This is what's better for everybody involved – is for them to separate.

MELODY: Are they still active in the Church?

HAZEL: My dad is. My mom isn't. She'd been – gave up her garments and everything. Like, she's just [unclear]. This is kind of sad, but the thing about my mom is, she gets into one thing, and she's really into it for a while, and then she just drops off. When she and my dad met, she had just started going to the Church. I think she had just been recently converted. [unclear] And they got married about two months after they met and started dating. And so for the first, you know, years and years and years of my life, that was her thing – was being Mormon and, you know, being newly Mormon and being a wife and a mother. Even I noticed it as a kid – her interest started to slowly taper off. She wasn't as interested in getting us to church anymore. Especially once we moved up here from [redacted]. We moved when I was 9. We went to my old ward in [redacted] – for the first couple years, we were pretty regular. As my dad got busier, we kind of started to taper off a little bit. And then when he was working pretty much every weekend non-stop, my mom made no effort to take me or my sister to church. And shortly after that, my sister started to question the Gospel and started to fall away from it. Now, she's sworn off religion all together. I actually am only just recently active again, because of work and school and all the extracurriculars that I've tried to do, especially senior year. I just – I also – we hadn't gone in so long that, once I could drive myself, I still didn't go. I actually haven't been regularly since I was about – I wanna say, like, 14 or 15. And I'm really trying to fix that now, especially because, you know, we're so close to the building. It's just – and I really do like this ward. My dad hasn't been as active as I know he wants to be, because he's worked so much.

[unclear:

a woman approached our table and asked for money for a meal; the tape cuts off briefly]

MELODY: Alright, where were we? Oh.

HAZEL: I know I was talking about my dad.

MELODY: Yeah.

HAZEL: But, you know, like, he's – I know he wants to be active, especially now that we're so close to the building. And with me going, and every day I get home, he's like, so how was church? Church was good. He's an assistant manager right now, and his manager at [REDACTED] [unclear]. So she always gives herself Sunday off and makes my dad work all day long, like, every week. So he just hasn't been able to [unclear] come to church. But I know he stays active as much as he can. Like, he likes to watch old Church movies and stuff like that. He likes to talk – and any time I want to talk about something related to, like, Church history or family history in the Church, anything about the Gospel. He is right there. So I know it's been hard on him to not feel that he is active [unclear]. But it's not for lack of interest. It's just lack of opportunity and a busy life trying to make ends meet. So that's the big thing for us right now, is just trying to work enough to pay the bills, like so many other people.

MELODY: Speaking of that – tell me about your education. I know you're not in college yet, but what you might want to do.

HAZEL: I plan to go to college as soon as I can afford it. Scholarships, grants. I really don't want to take out loans, but I will if I have to. Just the bare minimum. But I want to go to [REDACTED] around here so I can stay in the area, and I want to study to be a Disney animator.

MELODY: Where'd you go to high school?

HAZEL: [REDACTED] High School [unclear] [REDACTED], Tennessee. [unclear]

MELODY: Your family is from around here?

HAZEL: No, actually. We're from [REDACTED]. All of – most of my extended family still lives down there. We've actually followed [REDACTED] then we followed them here when they started opening stores here as well.

MELODY: Is your family Mormon? Other than your dad?

HAZEL: I know, on his side, we're seven – I'm seven generations Mormon on my dad's side. I know that all of his brothers – or his brother and sisters – I know they were raised in the Church. I don't think any of them still are active. I don't know about my uncle. He and my dad don't talk because my uncle is a terrible person. [LAUGHS]

MELODY: That happens.

HAZEL: Yeah. But he might be, or his kids might be. I'm not sure. I want to say they are. But I'm not sure. I know they live up in Utah, so they probably are.

MELODY: Do you go to Utah?

HAZEL: I've never been to Utah.

MELODY: You've never been? Do you want to?

HAZEL: Yes! I've never been out of the South. [unclear] The furthest I've been away from the South was I took [unclear] on a weeklong trip with my best friend to see her grandparents in [unclear], and that's it. I've never been out west. I would love to go to Utah. And not just because, you know, that's where Mormons are, you know, based or whatever. I just want to see it. I just think it looks beautiful out there, and I want to

see it. But I plan to serve a mission when I turn 21 or somewhere around there, so I'll definitely get to go to Utah then when I go to the MTC.

MELODY: Yeah. Why are you choosing to wait to go on your mission?

HAZEL: I have to. Girls can't serve until 21.

MELODY: They can serve at 19, can't they?

HAZEL: I don't [unclear].

MELODY: Oh, no. You're right. That was me.

HAZEL: Also, I mean, think about it. I'm 19 right now, and –

MELODY: It's the boys. They just lowered the boys' age from 19 to 18. That's what it is.

HAZEL: Did they really?

MELODY: Yeah.

HAZEL: I didn't know it. The way my dad explained it is, the missions are just as much for the missionaries as they are for the people they talk to and the people that they help. And girls mature so much earlier. Part of the reason boys are encouraged to go on missions is so they can get out there and they can see different cultures and they can meet and they can mature and grow with the help of the Gospel and the people that they're surrounded with. For girls, they mature so much faster than – you know, it's not really necessary when girls leave home that they immediately go someplace where they can learn to mature because they've already got a handle on things. But I think it's also [unclear] you know, no one's ever explained to me exactly why – what the Church's reasons are for girls having to go later, but I think that it's because teenage boys, you know, with the sexism that exists all over the place, boys are a lot less likely to get into physical danger than two teenage girls would be. At least, in [unclear]. When you're into your twenties, you're a little bit out of that danger zone.

MELODY: What do you mean by that?

HAZEL: I mean, teenage girls are – I feel like they're more likely to be taken advantage of – attacked – especially by – you know, people can get violent when they see missionaries because a lot of people just see Mormon missionaries as just, ah, those crazy people that come knock on the door and shove it down your face. I know my dad had an experience in [redacted] when he served his mission. This lady came up and started screaming violently at him and his companion. And that sort of thing happens every day. The coolest thing actually happened [unclear]. This is one of my biggest stories of his. His companion was freaking out because this lady was sitting there yelling at them in [redacted] and just clearly just livid. And he turned my dad, you know, what should we do? And my dad just got this huge feeling of peace and he was like, it's gonna be okay. We don't do anything. It's gonna be okay. And he just repeating that because it knew it would be. All of a sudden, everybody in the crowd around them turns on her, and they talk really calmly and quietly and they tell her – I think – to go away. Dad wasn't sure what they were saying because he was so relatively new. He didn't understand it conversationally yet. She just went away, and the crowd just turned back to what they were doing, didn't even look at my dad with his companion. But everything was fine. But people get violent like that on a regular basis, and I just think that a lot of [unclear] sending young girls out to face that sort of difficulty. Especially because boys are taught to handle themselves, you know. Boys are the ones who are encouraged to fight back and, you know, be strong, whereas girls are raised to be more meek and that's just a societal norm, which it shouldn't be, but girls are raised to be more, you know, complacent and, you know, girls aren't necessarily taught to fight back or to speak up when something's, you know, going wrong. I think it's just to give girls a little bit of time – extra time – to prepare for that. For being alone in [unclear] doesn't necessarily see girls as being strong and confident, and to do what they have to do to be missionaries. I don't know if that's actually the reason. [unclear]

MELODY: Do you want to relocate to Utah?

HAZEL: No.

MELODY: No?

HAZEL: I don't know.

MELODY: Anywhere out there? Why?

HAZEL: I don't know. It's beautiful, but it's just not the place for me. I don't really know where I want to go, is my big problem. It's like – I'm pretty sure that I'd love to go somewhere like England or Ireland, you know, the places that you hear about. A lot of people say, oh, you just want to vacation there. It's like, no, I think I want to live there. But at the same time, if I do end up getting the job that I want at Pixar, I'd have to move out to California to work in the studio. So I think it all relates – depends on that. I think there's also an animation studio – like, sister studio – in Orlando, on Disney property, so that would be an option. But I think mostly it just kind of depends on that. On where my job takes me.

[unclear]

MELODY: While you were in high school, what activities did you participate in?

HAZEL: I did a lot of theater. A lot of theater, a lot of theater. And the winter of my senior year, I was also in winter guard, which is like color guard but without the marching band.

MELODY: I know. Yeah. I was a band kid.

HAZEL: All right!

MELODY: Yeah.

HAZEL: Well, I did winter guard for one season. Ended up going to the [unclear] wearing two knee braces, but [unclear]. But yeah, I've done a lot of theater in high school, so that's pretty much what I stuck to.

MELODY: Your employment history – is it just [redacted]?

HAZEL: No. When I turned 17, I wanna say, I started working for [unclear] Pizza. Just right there in [redacted], was really close to my high school. So I would just go there after school and work. And then after I graduated high school, I spent a few months working for [unclear] restaurant, and that was miserable. So I moved over – I switched to [redacted]. My dad was working at the store that I'm at now, and he said, hey, just [unclear] it makes you miserable, it stresses you out, and they need cashiers at [redacted]. Just come over here. And so I did. I went in with my dad to apply, and I met the assistant store manager and the assistant customer service manager, and I was [unclear].

MELODY: How long have you been attending this YSA branch?

HAZEL: Actually, this Sunday – this upcoming Sunday is gonna be a month. It's gonna be my fourth Sunday counting.

MELODY: And what branch activities are you involved in? Did you have [unclear] however you want to. I know you've only been back for like a month. So you don't have a calling or anything. I know that.

HAZEL: As for this branch, nothing.

MELODY: Nothing? Have you been going to Institute or anything? FHE?

HAZEL: No.

MELODY: No?

HAZEL: I went to one FHE, but I was late because I had to do something with my mom in [REDACTED].

MELODY: How was it?

HAZEL: Huh?

MELODY: How was it?

HAZEL: It was fine, you know. I mean, I'm really shy. So I didn't talk to anybody.

[unclear]

HAZEL: So I guess I have [unclear] FHE. It was interesting. I didn't know anybody, didn't try to introduce myself to anybody. I like to just sit and observe. [unclear] Everyone just looked really happy to be there. Everyone kind of – it just feels like a family. No matter where you go, it's like having a family. Even though I am really shy and introverted, too afraid to talk to anybody, I still don't necessarily feel like I'm out of place. I just don't fit perfectly yet. You know? So there's that. But at my old ward, I was in Young Women's. I went to Girls' Camp. I went to one youth conference. Before that, everybody does Achievement Days, Primary. The normal stuff that you go through. That's it.

MELODY: Great. How much time do you spend doing activities related to the branch each week?

HAZEL: None. I go to church for three hours exactly.

MELODY: Yeah. Okay, what would you say the ratio of Church members to non-Church members is among your friends?

HAZEL: Usually, I'm the only one.

MELODY: You're the only one?

HAZEL: I'm the only one. Especially in high school, because where I lived all the people that were in my ward. This is gonna sound really mean, and I swear I don't mean it mean. But I went to church with a lot of country bumpkins. They were very backwoods. They all lived on farms. They were all related. [LAUGHS] Second of all, it was like three or four main families and that was it. And they were all intermarried. And so they did the traditional homeschooling their kids and everything. There just wasn't a huge – I mean, it's grown a lot [unclear] but when we first moved here [unclear]. When my sister first started going to school there, we were the only ones because everyone in the area was homeschooled. So, you know, I had to – I won't say had to – I just made friends outside the Church [unclear]. I didn't go to school with anybody else that was Mormon. The interesting thing is, despite that I made amazing friends who respected my beliefs and who also shared a lot [unclear] just because – I just made friends with a lot of really great people. My sister, on the other hand, made friends with people who thought that being Mormon was boring and stupid, and my sister's extremely impressionable and that kind of carried on to her.

MELODY: Is your sister older or younger?

HAZEL: She's older by sixteen months. She's extremely impressionable, so these kids really had a really bad effect on her emotionally. She was depressed, suicidal, and her friends didn't help with that. She just never found a really uplifting group of people. I feel like that kind of contributed to her eventually leaving the Church, because she never had positive influences.

[unclear:

the woman returns and thanks us for her lunch; I complain about the cost of the sandwich]

HAZEL: But, yeah, like all my friends – they kind of got to the point where – okay, one of my best friends through high school [unclear]. She always has a sleepover for her birthday because her birthday is in the middle of summer so there's no school or anything, and she always made a point of saying, oh, I told my mom to buy Sprite for you. You know, just little things like that. If someone would offer me coffee – before I could even step in to say something, one of my friends would be like, oh, no, she doesn't drink coffee. They would stop that before it even got to me, and I cannot tell you how many times my friends sat around and listened to me rant about all the things I hate about people who don't understand Mormonism and who don't want to listen to me try to explain. You know, the kids who make the polygamy jokes, and then that's all they're there for. My friends will sit there and listen to me talk about it. Like, guys, I hate this so much, and they're like, we know, we know. They'll sit there and they'll talk about it with me. And I've always had that. That's been all through middle school and everything. So it's just – even though I don't have any friends, any close friends in the faith, my friends still help me stay true to it and kind of stay who I am and help uplift me the way that friends in the Church should. So I've never really felt deprived of anything because my friends share the same values anyway.

MELODY: Do you hope you make more Mormon friends?

HAZEL: Oh, absolutely!

MELODY: Now that you're active again?

HAZEL: I would love to. I just find it so hard to socialize and make new friends, but I keep – that's why I keep trying to go to FHE, and my first Sunday at the ward, there was a potluck dinner that night, and even though I was so anxious about it [unclear] and jittery, I forced myself to go, to try and make friends because that's really all I want, is to build a network within the Church now because I have gone without it and I'd like to know what it's like, especially because my dad, growing up – half of his high school was Mormon. He had a huge group of friends he went to school with and that he went to seminary with and went to church with and hung out on the weekends. He just had that real great bond with a lot of people in his Church, especially since he grew up in the same ward from little tyke on up to his adult years. He and his first wife went to this ward. We went to this ward after me and my sister were born.

MELODY: What happened to your dad's first wife?

HAZEL: They got divorced.

[unclear]

HAZEL: It just didn't work out. My mom's already been married once before as well. It just happens.

MELODY: Yeah. Are you involved in any non-Church activities at the moment?

HAZEL: I mean, I'm not involved [unclear]. I'm just curious as to what that would be.

MELODY: I don't know. Anything. You, you know, you're in community theater? I don't know.

HAZEL: No, all I do is work. I'm interested in community theater.

MELODY: That's fair.

HAZEL: I just spend so much time working. I really pour all of my energy into my job. At the end of the day or on my days off, I just rarely have the energy to do anything in particular.

MELODY: Whenever you hang out with your friends, what are some things you guys like to do?

HAZEL: I don't really hang out with my friends all that often. Not like a daily or weekly thing or anything. But here recently – about the past – I'd say, this year and last year, when I do hang out with my friends, we go hiking, or I just went canoeing for the first time with a bunch of friends from work. So just things like that. I've never really been to what I would call a party, like a house party or something that I know a lot of kids went to in high school. Until junior year, I thought they were fake. I thought they were made up for movies. I just didn't know. It's just not things –

MELODY: I still think that. [LAUGHS]

HAZEL: I mean, does it really happen? We just kind of do outdoorsy stuff. I have a couple friends who really like to go rock climbing. I've been rock climbing with them once or twice. Hiking out at [REDACTED] twice. Canoeing. Most of my friends are from work, and so it's very rare for us to all have a day off together to hang out. But when we do, it's usually [unclear]. My best friend spent the night the night before last. We basically just stayed up all night watching movies and talking and painting our nails. You know, the typical stereotypical girl slumber party.

MELODY: Changing direction – what role does the Church play in your dating life? Your expectations concerning marriage and family?

HAZEL: In regards to dating life, I don't have one, first of all. I just – it would be great to date a Mormon guy, but the big thing for me is, it's just – the Church itself is just played such a role in creating my views.

MELODY: That one bird.

[unclear:
a bird is loudly screaming/crowing in the background; it is very irritating]

HAZEL: The Church has played such a big role in my morals. [unclear] If I can't find someone in the Church, I have to have someone who's willing to – I don't want to say put up with me, though they have to accept those are ground rules. Those are my morals. You know, they have to stay like that. I mean, don't get me wrong, I would absolutely love to date someone in the Church. I feel like girls in the Church are told from a very young age that, yeah, the goal, the perfect man should be a returned missionary, go get married in the temple, and have a family. I don't follow those exactly. I would love – I mean, I would love to date a guy from the Church. I would love to get married in the temple. I would love to have a family at some point. I know a lot of people treat it like, this has to happen in this order and then you do your career and blah blah blah blah blah. The way I see it is like, I want to date for a while, maybe get married fairly early on, but I don't want a family until – like, I don't want kids until I feel like I'm ready to be responsible for the life of a child, which for me means [unclear] a stable career first. Traveling to all the places I want to go first. Because I refuse to be one of those parents who leaves their kid with a nanny while they go off to [unclear]. But I also want to be able to enjoy [unclear] with a husband first. I want to have a married life before I have a married life with children, and that's extremely important to me. Another thing is, I just have to be able to find a guy who's also a feminist, and I feel like that's gonna be really hard because there's so much internalized misogyny that happens just – I mean, I'm not saying, you know, the Church is misogynistic or anything. But there's just a lot of internalized misogyny that even women have [unclear]. I feel like it's gonna take a lot of trying, a lot of trial and error, to find someone who shares that and which is also in line with the moral views of the Church because a lot of people hear “feminist” and they think, like, in the '70s, when feminism was really starting to pick up. It was all free love. '60s and '70s feminism meant free love. Have sex with whoever and whenever because it's your body and you can do what you want with it. That's okay! It's just not for me. So I feel like it's gonna be really hard to find that balance of strong feminist values and strong Church values in the same person.

[unclear:
the bird returns]

HAZEL: And someone who's okay with having a partner who sees that the same way, you know.

MELODY: Would you be okay with dating outside the Church?

HAZEL: Yeah, yeah. Yeah. They just – I just wouldn't date anybody who's not okay with me being in the Church.

MELODY: It wouldn't be necessary to have to join the Church?

HAZEL: Right. Unless it was – I mean, dating? No. Marriage? Preferable. Because I do hope I get married in the temple. That's really important to me, and another thing about getting married is being sealed for eternity. That's extremely important.

MELODY: If and when you have children, where do you want to raise them?

HAZEL: I don't really think there's like a geographic location. All that matters is that it's a loving household. A stable household. Preferably, and I know this is a long shot in today's economy, a household where money is focused on, but isn't a hindrance. I don't want to have to raise kids who either get food or toys. I just want to be able to give everything that I possibly can to my kids. I don't really – I mean, I'll raise children anywhere as long as it's a good place to be.

MELODY: What are your thoughts pre-marital sex?

HAZEL: I mean, to each their own. It's not for me. And, not only from a moral standpoint, but also, if I'm going to have sex with somebody, me being the way I am, I have got to trust them no matter what. In any circumstances, no matter what happens. And to me, that's someone that you're gonna marry. So why not just wait until you're married? There's nothing I want that bad that it can't wait, and I know a lot of people are like, well, what if you're just engaged? It's gonna happen anyway, so why not just go ahead? And it's like, if you've waited this long for your partner, your significant other, you can wait just a little bit longer and it'll make it that much sweeter when it does happen. I know a lot of people take that really far, like no kissing before you're married, no hugging before you're married. Things like that. That's a little extreme because at the same time – it's this really weird balance – at the same time, you have to know – I think you have to know that you're compatible in that way, because there is such thing as loving someone but not being sexually attracted to them, and that makes a marriage extremely difficult. [unclear] It's important to understand that it's not gonna be perfect and it's not gonna be magical the first few times, but I think it's also important that if you get married and you later find out that you're not compatible – there are ways to work on that. You can get past that. I know [unclear] well, I have to know beforehand or I have to have sex with them to make sure I love them enough to marry them and I just don't agree with that. But at the same time, the feminist side of me is like, I don't agree with your choices, but I'm not going to tell you, you're going to hell for doing this or you can't do that. That's not allowed. I never feel like it's my place to say that about anybody else because we're not put on this earth to judge. But, personally, it's not for me.

MELODY: What about same-sex marriage? Same-sex attraction?

HAZEL: I agree with it. I am bisexual, which is not – I don't want to say it's not supported by the Church because I'm not going to get excommunicated for being something other than heterosexual. It's just not going to happen. I don't think the Church currently does same-sex marriage, but I feel like it's gonna get there. Because the Church, since its beginning, actually – you know, a lot of people call it old-fashioned – it's actually an extremely progressive church. I feel like it's only a matter of time before they recognize that Mormons –

MELODY: So would you date a woman? Would you marry a woman?

HAZEL: Yeah. Yeah, sure. As long as its condoned by the Church.

MELODY: So you wouldn't do it now?

HAZEL: I don't think I would do it now, just because I want it to be completely and one hundred percent accepted by the group of people that I identify with the most, which is Mormons. I am first and foremost Mormon. I am myself, you know, Mormon, and so it's extremely vital to me that it be accepted first. I just feel like the Church is going to [unclear] at some point, probably before I'm ready to marry, because I don't see myself marrying for a while. My sister has asked me that before. You know, how can you possibly be comfortable going to a church that doesn't support gay marriage? I'm like, call me crazy, but I just have the feeling that they're gonna get there. It's the same kind of sense of certainty about the Church in general. It's like, they're gonna get there. It's all gonna work out somehow, and I just trust that – I don't – I mean, sometimes I do question it. Like, why am I so sure? And then it's like, I just am. I know my Church. I know what we're capable of. It's gonna happen.

MELODY: How do you feel about women's roles in the Church? Are you comfortable with them?

HAZEL: I am.

MELODY: You are?

HAZEL: Which also boggles my sister [unclear] she says, you're such a feminist! How can you be okay with it? I'm like, it's all – okay. In regards to, say, like, racism – the whole separate but equal thing never worked out on a grand scheme. It was happening in the Civil Rights era having Black and White bathrooms supposed to be separate but equal. Black bathrooms were never, ever as nice as what White people got, and that was drinking fountains, buses, places of work, schools – they were never up to par with what the other races got. However, in the Church, I feel like it's been done correctly. I have never felt like I'm less than the men of my church. Even though they hold different roles and they're given a different purpose, together men and women form the whole unity. I personally like the roles of women in the Church. Even though – what a lot of people see on the outside is, women are just expected to bear the babies and become [unclear]. Which is one thing. That's one way a lot of people take it. A lot of women – that's all they want. They want to marry their husband in the temple and they want to have as many children as possible and they want to be the housewife. They want to have that connection to their family, which is amazing. I love that. I'm totally one hundred percent accepting of women who want to do whatever they want to do – including raise a massive family. That's amazing, that's great. Kudos to anybody who has the patience and the love to do that. I think that's amazing. But the Church also is just – it's willing to look at any opportunity that a woman can have – it's going to support. Any you know that in Relief Society – it's the class specifically for women – and it is a very much a caretaking role. [unclear] We're the ones who reach out [unclear] be in need of help. When my family was extremely broke for a while, it was Relief Society who provided our meals for once a week. They would send someone out. They would assign someone to make us dinner one night a week so that we could have a home cooked meal. That's what the Relief Society takes care of, and the men don't do that. I mean, there's nothing stopping them from doing that. We have male home teachers [unclear]. And if a woman decides she doesn't want to do that, there are other avenues she can take. The Church isn't gonna say, no, you have to do this. It's just being able to branch out and having the courage to branch out from what most people in the Church expect and that's all you have to do. [unclear] I love it.

MELODY: Are there any changes you want to see?

HAZEL: In the Church? Not really.

MELODY: No?

HAZEL: No. I mean, the same-sex marriage thing is important to me, obviously. But other than that, I love it. Outside of the Church –

MELODY: Yeah, my next question is, what role should women have in society?

HAZEL: Women should have every role that a man has in society. That's equality. That's all that needs to happen – across the board. Equality for the races, equality for the different sexes, equality for different sexualities, equality for the rich, the poor, the middle class – all economic levels. But another thing that I

wish would change in the Church is people's opinions about the Church. I will defend the Mormon Church until I die [unclear], and I get so – but at the same time, I get very tired of answering the same questions over and over. How many moms do you have? Can I take you to Utah to be my second wife? That one is from one of my managers at my store. I find that unpleasant. [LAUGHS] People don't understand [unclear] because they don't want to understand. People hear Mormon and they – oh, those guys who come knock on the door, or, oh, those crazy sister wives, or those crazy polygamists. TV shows like *Sister Wives* – that really irritate me because they call themselves Mormons. They're not Mormons! They're fundamentalist Mormons, which means when Joseph Smith was starting the Church, everything was fine for a while and then there was a man and a small group of people that agreed with him that disagreed with what Joseph Smith was saying, and so they broke away and they considered themselves true Mormons when in reality it was Joseph Smith and Brigham Young and all the people who followed them. They continued to receive revelations, and they continued to [unclear] –

MELODY: I don't think so. There wasn't a bird up there. [unclear]

HAZEL: But anyway, they continued to receive revelations that the true prophets came from the followers of Joseph Smith and today it's President Monson. These people who became fundamentalist Mormons – they really don't follow anymore of the Church's teachings and they don't hold to the same structure or values as the true Church, including polygamy. One of the most important, fundamental laws of the Church is, first and foremost, you must follow the laws of the land in which you live. So, yes, Mormons were polygamists at one time when it was necessary. When it no longer became a necessity, they stopped. When it became illegal in the state of Utah, they stopped. Because the first rule is to follow the laws of the land. You must be a law-abiding citizen, and polygamy is against the law. Already, fundamentalist Mormons are going against one of the laws of the Church. I just hate to hear those questions [unclear] over and over and over again. The same manager who jokes with me about taking me to Utah to be his second wife – I told him, you realize that Mormons aren't actually polygamists. I hope you're kidding. We're not polygamists. He goes, oh. He thought we really were even though I had told him before that we're not. He had talked to my dad one day at work, and my dad jokingly said, yes. And he took it to be serious. I was like, you know we're not actually polygamists. He was like, well, why would anybody be Mormon if they can't have that perk? Like, ooh, please don't say that! Ever, ever again. People treat it like it's some funny joke – ha ha ha, they have multiple wives, ah ha ha, they're greedy. It's not even true, first of all. It just hurts that this is such a beautiful organization, a beautiful church. It's, for the most part, dedicated to helping others and creating and uplifting environment. I just hate that more people don't understand that. And there's a lot of misunderstandings. People are shocked that we don't have pastors. People give me a super weird look when I say we have temples. People don't understand, say, baptisms for the dead. When I first started being able to do that – when I first got my temple recommend, when I joined Young Women's, and I started doing baptisms for the dead – I would tell my friends about it, and they'd be like, you baptize dead bodies? There's just so much ignorance involved around the Church, and I understand. A lot of what goes on in our temples – they're sacred rituals that we're really not supposed to [unclear] about and just let everyone in on the secrets. But just because something's secret or sacred doesn't mean that it's bad, and it doesn't mean that you should call us a cult or make fun of us. People just can't seem to wrap their heads around the idea that maybe this group of people is actually amazing. If there was anything I could change, it would be more education about the Church [unclear] for non-members. It would be easier for Mormons to interact with non-members. [unclear] to face hardship and to face adversity, to know how to overcome it and deal with it and come out stronger because of it. But, at the same time, it discourages people from every talking about [unclear]. It discourages people from spreading the word and spreading knowledge because they won't even own up to it in the first place because they're so ashamed. People make them feel ashamed. I think that comes from ignorance in the Church as well. People not knowing how to answer the question of, say, polygamy. A lot of people just kind of brush it off and say, ha ha ha, yeah. They never explain – or they never have it explained to them – about the role it used to play and the way it ended. It just leads to a lot of shame and lack of communication among members and non-members.

MELODY: Last question! Are there any specific opportunities or challenges that come with being Mormon in Nashville? Is it harder to be Mormon in Nashville than [redacted] or [redacted]?

HAZEL: I'm not sure because I haven't lived here very long. But I'm sure it is with all the opportunities with bars or clubs – just general temptations. But, at the same time, just the opportunity for Mormons in Nashville to be stronger – when I lived in [REDACTED] – we lived in [REDACTED], which is a very impressionable age – it was so easy, so easy, to be Mormon because I didn't have to do anything. We were a very small branch where I lived. I lived in [REDACTED]. Very small town, very po-dunk town. So it's not like I had a huge support group in the Church or anything, but, at the same time, it was small town life. [unclear] gambling opportunities – not that I would gamble [unclear], but for my parents or something. It was just extremely easy to go to church every Sunday and that was it. That's all we had to do. I don't remember facing any sort of hardships involved in our religion or beliefs or anything. I feel like it made me a very lazy person spiritually. I've never read the Bible all the way through, I've never read the Book of Mormon all the way through, I've never read any of our doctrines all the way through cover to cover. It's not because I wasn't raised right [unclear]. It was easy to go to church. That was it. They always told me what to read in class, and I'd go home and I wouldn't read anything. I feel like, on the one hand, it can be easy to be a Mormon, but that doesn't make you stronger, and I have personally noticed – I know a lot of people said this on Sunday – that the Spirit is extremely strong in the YSA ward. I know what they're talking about. I'm relatively new to the ward, but I've never been to a ward where I've felt so strongly the strength of everybody else. I feel like living in an environment like Nashville – which, I love Nashville – but I can see where it does kind of give of wear and tear with all the temptations that are around. But that just makes [unclear] stronger in the long run. I thought that would be the benefit, then, is it's easier to be stronger because you're so busy fighting keeping your moral that you really have to start figuring out why you support the Church – why you want to uphold the rules and all these, all these restrictions – which I don't think they're restrictions. You really have to consider why you are a Mormon, and it makes you so much stronger in that – in your faith. I feel like it gives me personally more of a testimony. I've never defended myself so strongly as when I start talking to people in the area who don't understand.

MELODY: Anything else?

HAZEL: Nope.

MELODY: No?

VIOLET

MELODY: Alright, so tell me about your conversion.

VIOLET: My conversion? I've grown up in a pretty rough household. I mean, the first convert of my entire family is my grandma. It's kind of gone from there. When I was growing up, my mom was making really bad decisions, so she may have been Mormon but kind of did her own thing. I went to church with my grandparents when I could, but by 14, I kind of just – who is God? I don't even believe in this? Like, what does this even mean? I started realizing what life was after age 14, so probably the biggest conversion I've ever had in my life was 16-17 years old. I went to Girls Camp, getting ready to go to college – you know, life is really happening and I need a path and I got my patriarchal blessing and I [unclear] it was vague. I feel like – I almost was let down by that. But the conversion still goes. I don't think we can ever be fully converted because we're all [unclear] always try [unclear]. I'm trying to go to church as much as possible, but it's a trial. It's an ongoing conversion. Going to church, knowing the things that I need to be knowing, doing the things that I need to be doing. I would say it's an ongoing conversion that really started when I was starting to become accountable for my own actions as a grown-up. I've had to grow up a little earlier – when you have a single mom [unclear] going on.

MELODY: Where's your dad?

VIOLET: My dad's in [REDACTED]. [LAUGHS] My mom remarried [unclear] living with a man for a few years [unclear] dad, but she just got married in the temple [unclear]. Still.

MELODY: Does your mom go to church?

VIOLET: She does now. So does my stepdad. But in the beginning, it was me holding the fort together. It was my testimony. But then I got to the point where I was like, you know what, I'm done. I don't want to be the glue anymore. I want to go find myself. I want to see this testimony that I've been expressing to people – is this mine? Is this my profession of faith? And I've struggled – I went almost three or four months just not talking to people in church, whatever. You just kind of come back and you feel like what you missed – I missed those people, I missed feeling the way – I missed feeling love in a sense – not only by everyone else around me, but by my Heavenly Father. I missed that connection. I cut out because I felt like I wasn't – I don't know. You just feel lost almost. Again, it's like another conversion again. You just keep going.

MELODY: Do you have any siblings?

VIOLET: I do. [REDACTED]

MELODY: And if I ask you something that you're not comfortable with –

VIOLET: Don't worry! [unclear]

MELODY: Please, please, just tell me okay. Seriously, stop. What bad decisions were your mom making?

VIOLET: I mean, one, she married outside of the faith, which there's nothing wrong with that, to be honest. I almost kind of [unclear] more attractive [LAUGHS]. She married outside of her faith, and her ideal was that she could change my real dad. You can never change anybody when they're set in their ways. [unclear] life. [REDACTED] – I guess that's when she realized there needs to be a divorce. There needed to be.

MELODY: So she left him?

VIOLET: Yeah. She was making decisions [unclear] not terribly. Just better men, and things like that. Trying to find a new husband. She got to the point where she knew she was making wrong decisions, so she had taken her garments off. [unclear] without being asked. She said, I'm not doing what I need to be doing, I shouldn't be allowed to wear these. It just kind of went from there. Like, guy after guy, her going to school, her doing whatever she wanted to do. Nothing that she [unclear] my brother and I first. It was always us first and her working. [REDACTED]

MELODY: [REDACTED]

VIOLET: [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] I love my dad, but that man – who he is – is not my dad that I grew up with.

MELODY: Do you live at home right now?

VIOLET: I do, right now. Just because it's a little easier. I've been going to [REDACTED], so there's really no point for me to find an apartment if it's going to be cheaper to stay there. But I do live in the lower level of the house [unclear] until – I'm thinking about going to [REDACTED], but I still have a couple of years to go. I'm doing [REDACTED]. You know what [unclear] is?

MELODY: No.

VIOLET: I'm doing a technical school for [REDACTED], and then I'll decide if I want to just go to work or finish a professional degree at [REDACTED].

MELODY: Right. They do have a great program.

VIOLET: I love [REDACTED]!

MELODY: So what brought your family to Nashville?

VIOLET: [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

MELODY: Does your family have any ties to Utah or Idaho?

VIOLET: No.

MELODY: Do you want to live there?

VIOLET: No. [LAUGHS]

MELODY: No?

VIOLET: I'm – no. [LAUGHS] I'm not, like, an altar Mormon. What's funny is, I've visited there before, [REDACTED]. I went there, and I was like, you know, the people are not as friendly as I thought. I almost think [unclear] from Utah or Idaho – I'm just like, you don't know what – do you even know what sin is? Do you know what trying of the faith is? What it really means to live [unclear]? I'm just [unclear] taught your whole life, and yes, it is easier to keep your standards around people who have the same standards, but I feel like you almost become a little fake. [unclear] never had your faith tried.

MELODY: What do you think about whenever you think about agency?

VIOLET: Agency?

MELODY: Yeah.

VIOLET: I think that's like [unclear]. Don't take my agency away. I'm 100% independent. I do what I need to do. But I do know we can make decisions that will take our agency away [unclear] kind of decisions. If you start becoming addicted to anything – you can be addicted to food, you can be addicted to watching TV, you can be addicted to [unclear] video games – when you start letting things overpower your life to the point where that's all you can do. You can't make your own decisions, you can't ask your own questions, you can't explore your own freedom – I think that's where you're running the line of, am I in Satan's grasp or am I living my own free agency that I have been blessed to have on this earth?

MELODY: You're a student at – what'd you say – [REDACTED]?

VIOLET: Yeah.

MELODY: Student at [REDACTED]. So did you just graduate high school?

VIOLET: I did, yeah.

MELODY: And you're studying?

VIOLET: I'm just getting general studies, but my goal's to get a final degree in [REDACTED]. That's what I'm taking all the classes to go towards.

MELODY: What activities – [unclear] activities at [REDACTED]?

[unclear]

MELODY: Go to class? Yeah. If you further your education, you'll go to [REDACTED]?

VIOLET: Oh, yeah.

MELODY: [REDACTED], right. What about work?

VIOLET: Work? I work for an [REDACTED] right now, and I work at the [REDACTED]. I just resigned from a managerial position I had because I can't manage both the [REDACTED] and school.

MELODY: What do you do at the [REDACTED]?

VIOLET: I'm a [REDACTED]. I just love it so much.

MELODY: At [REDACTED]?

VIOLET: Yeah. I love it more than the [REDACTED], so I was like, well, do I choose something that's towards my career or just a job that I've had since high school? That's kind of what determined that [unclear].

MELODY: How long have you lived in Tennessee?

VIOLET: [unclear]

MELODY: Six, seven years. How long have you been at the branch?

VIOLET: At the YSA branch?

MELODY: Yeah.

VIOLET: I have supposed to be coming, let's say, for about six months now, but I've been going to my home ward, which [unclear], but I've really been supposed to be coming. [unclear] afraid to go. [unclear]

MELODY: How long have you been coming?

VIOLET: Let's say, two weeks.

[unclear]

MELODY: What do you think so far?

VIOLET: I kind of like it. [unclear] people more my age, we're talking about [unclear] relate more to me [unclear] married people. I'm like, yeah, that's great, you've got lots of kids, cool. It's more of a perspective that I can relate to more. You can talk about things and you're not gonna offend an elder [unclear].

MELODY: What branch activities are you involved in/going to be involved in?

VIOLET: I'd do Young Women's, and I kind of checked out of that too to be at home more when I was trying to find myself. I've always had leadership positions. It's like, Vi is good at being a leader. But what else is she good at? And that kind of hit me hard – like, what else am I good at? So I decided that I didn't want to be the president of Young Women's [unclear]. I told my bishop [unclear] make me do it. [unclear] I kind of stopped doing that. Then we had seminary. It's kind of like [unclear]. It was early morning, and then I started doing [unclear] which was actually really cool because I didn't know you could do it online. It's like, it makes you go in and read for yourself. Nobody's telling you what scripture is. You go in, you read it, you're prompted. It gives you – tells you questions [unclear] actually forced to [unclear]. Not just sitting through a class like most other people do and then go home after that. [unclear] kind of an introverted extrovert, so I kind of [unclear] unless I'm [unclear].

MELODY: You don't think you'll be at FHE every week?

VIOLET: [LAUGHS] I [REDACTED] on Mondays. I would go, but I would really nervous to go my first time. It took me this long to go to church by myself, so I'm like – ooh. I mean, yes and no. I would definitely want to go, but I would need somebody to encourage me or I'd be very [unclear]. I'm not gonna go.

MELODY: So no good friends yet?

VIOLET: Not yet. [LAUGHS]

MELODY: How much time – none of these questions work. How much time do you think you'll be spending – or do you spend – with the branch every week?

VIOLET: I mean, I have to be spending, besides going to church – I do work on Sundays [unclear] three hours that I'm there. I'd hope that I'd be involved [unclear] activities now that I've [unclear] my other job, just to make other friends [unclear] best influence on me. I almost feel like I'm babysitting them. I'm really interesting in making friends over the age of 18 that are a little more mature, going through the things that I'm going through.

MELODY: What would you say the ratio of Church member friends to non-Church member friends are?

VIOLET: Here?

MELODY: Yes. Or in general. In your life.

VIOLET: Yeah, I mean, like, I have [unclear] at work. I mean, I have colleagues in general because of the position that I've been in – not that I'm super close to a lot of people – but I would say that if I'm going to

go hang out with someone, usually they're not LDS. So ratio-wise, I would say a member to four non-members and one to one [unclear] –

MELODY: What do you do when you're hanging out?

VIOLET: [unclear]

MELODY: Yeah.

VIOLET: I mean, I really try and choose good things that would not get me in trouble [unclear] watching me. I want to look good always. Fairs, movies – I try and watch good movies if I can.

MELODY: No bars?

VIOLET: I mean, I've been to a bar. [LAUGHS] But yeah, no. I'm just not feeling it. The music is cool, but if I go, I'm not drinking or smoking, but I'm not judging people for that. If they want to do that, that's fine. I just [unclear] I'm not gonna do it. If you need a ride home, or if you want to respect me enough not to get shit-faced.

MELODY: Are you involved in any non-Church activities? Like, clubs or –

VIOLET: Yeah, I was. All through high school. I rarely was doing stuff with the Church. I was in my drama club, my [REDACTED] club – like, literally –

MELODY: Where'd you go to high school?

VIOLET: [REDACTED]. Church was almost like my last thing, and then [unclear] because there's a lot of youth my age or [unclear] who understand being stuck in a bubble type thing. I can't blame parents for not wanting to tell their children what the world is really like [unclear] 18-years-old, if you're not ready for the world, I don't think [unclear] best job – not ready to talk about stuff that's not necessarily Church-appropriate.

MELODY: What role does the Church play in your dating life and your expectations for a family?

VIOLET: That's a really hard one. That's something I've been struggling with because I really – it took my mom [unclear] to get married in the temple, and that goes for most [unclear] family. I watched them get married, and I thought it was the most beautiful thing in the whole wide world, so my goal is to eventually get married in the temple. Does that mean I'll get married before? I might. But my expectations of a man is that he's worthy enough for my standards, not an alcoholic [REDACTED], don't smoke or do drugs just because I'm like a health freak – only what's good for your body, not addicted to anything. I think that they just need to genuinely be good people, have a good foundation of Christ and God. But if they're not members, I'm not gonna force them to be a member.

MELODY: So you're comfortable with dating –

VIOLET: Yeah.

MELODY: – non-members?

VIOLET: Oh. Yeah.

MELODY: If and when you have children, where do you want to raise them?

VIOLET: I want to raise them – I don't want to raise them in an entirety Mormon culture.

MELODY: So no Utah-Idaho?

VIOLET: No. I just cannot take the people. And I may be stereotyping them, but maybe I'm just – I don't know.

MELODY: I should preface this with – like, you're not going to offend me. I promise. I am not from Utah or Idaho.

VIOLET: Those people are just kind of – they just come off so – I just don't like fake people. Like, let's talk about real life, and then we're good. Everybody swears, everybody trips up, everybody does their own thing. I want to raise my kids – it's gonna be in a really good atmosphere because I think the home is where the heart is, and the home should be the safest place from evils of the world. But they're gonna go to public school – they're not gonna be homeschooled. I just want to find a good area [unclear]. Good schooling, good people, Christian values generally. I like the South because it is the belt buckle, whatever. Everybody's got the basic foundation of Jesus Christ and God, and that's why [unclear] because we're all believing the same thing – we just have different aspects of [unclear].

MELODY: Thoughts on pre-marital sex?

VIOLET: So great. [LAUGHS] I really [unclear] because I've dated people before, just like, yeah. But I see a lot of girls do it before, and when the relationship ends, it's kind of sad. So is it really making love? I don't know. I don't necessarily want to wait – just because I don't want to become attached to somebody and then it not work out and me just kind of hanging there. It's hard to stay chaste. Very hard. Trying your best. I would not advise it just because emotionally you're going to get attached to that person and if they're not for you, they're not for you.

MELODY: What about same-sex marriage, same-sex attraction?

VIOLET: That's kind of hard. Everybody gets those urges of, well, no guy will date me, so maybe a woman will – or I lean more towards women, I hang out with girls, or I'm more masculine than other women. I think there's a young man out there for every person, but if you choose not to do that, I mean, I can't – it would be wrong of me to judge them. [unclear] It would be so – hate the sin, love the sinner type thing. That's the only thing that I could come up, but I would ask them to respect [unclear] be disgusting in front of me or anything like that. But I would never just throw down [unclear] because of it [unclear].

MELODY: Switching up – how do you feel with women's roles in the Church?

VIOLET: You know, that's a hard one because I'm super independent. Like, why don't I have the priesthood? type thing. I almost think that the more than I've got into it – because [unclear] really bitter about this – but honestly, if women had the priesthood, I don't know if we could manage everything else that we do and still stay worthy [unclear]. I feel like men have that opportunity to do that because – not to down on guys – but that's all they have. Like, here you go, you go for it, you do you. I think women – we rule the roost, pretty much. No matter what, the men may be the face of some things, but you know there's a woman [unclear] he's getting guidance from his wife. It's a hard thing. It's almost traditional. But I feel like if we were to veer away from the traditional aspect, you know, maybe switching roles – a man would be acting all like a woman and a woman would be acting like a man [unclear]. It would just – I don't know how that would [unclear].

MELODY: Are there any changes that you would like to see regarding women's roles?

VIOLET: I mean, I've seen some of the changes in the Church. [unclear] face of woman on more – like, women can conduct some meetings and things like that – I don't think I would want to change anything because I don't feel like my agency as a woman is being taken away or degraded. I almost feel like women are put on a statue because of everything else that we do. [unclear] trying to follow along [unclear]. But no, I mean, I think the Church will evolve and change in due time with new things coming out, but I couldn't say what needed to be changed because I think it's great the way it is [unclear].

MELODY: What role should women have in society? Should women's roles in the Church mirror women's roles in society?

VIOLET: What do you mean?

MELODY: For example, do you think that women should be equal in society and equal in the Church? Does that make sense?

VIOLET: I mean, yes. I believe that they're equal both ways. Some people say equality or chivalry. I almost feel like without a man and a woman, there is no team type thing. We can't – there is no team. You can't get stuff done if you don't have one aspect and another, especially because I'm in [REDACTED]. You ask a woman – I come off of a different perspective and a man comes off a different perspective, and I think together they make an exemplary team. They're both equal, both the same knowledge, both equal at what they do, but they're both different, which makes it perfect.

MELODY: Right. Are there any specific opportunities or challenges that come along with being a Mormon here?

VIOLET: A lot of people think that I have multiple moms.

MELODY: Really? Still?

VIOLET: Yeah. I don't know why. It's like, come on, guys, that show was over a long time ago. Or that I don't believe in Christ. A lot of people throw the Book of Mormon in my face, and honestly I'm more [unclear] to dive in and take the Book of Mormon and the Bible and just compare, go through, go through, go through. Now [unclear] just read the Book of Mormon, just all the time. The perks about it is when you know the Mormons, you're like, hey, you're part of my community too! You're making decisions at the time, but you know at one point you had a testimony and you felt the Spirit and that's never gonna go away. The point that you feel like the Spirit – it can't go away. You're always gonna know what that feeling is, whether you leave or come back to the Church. You know that you had that moment where you're kind of [unclear]. Other than that, it does get hard when you're dating or making friends or just making choices in general. Well, do I choose what I've been taught, or do I just say, peace out? There are people – I mean, I've chosen the opposite and been like, I don't care, I'm gonna do what I want to do. I can see why they say, hey, not the best idea [unclear] well, this is why.

MELODY: Is there anything else you want to share?

VIOLET: Other than my – no. Just a testimony of the Gospel in general. The hardest thing I run into – the Church is perfect, the people in it aren't. I'm never gonna be perfect. [unclear] perfect. Just kind of have to accept it and go on and not worry about me. If anything [unclear] think, well, one day, I'm gonna meet this guy and I'm gonna ask him all the questions in the world. I'm gonna ask him why this happened, this – like, I just can't wait to just talk to him face to face [unclear]. Were you real? Did this go on? How did this work? Give me the law. Why are there so many of these things? I can't wait to just have the [unclear] see what happens after you die. What is the plan – what actually happens?

MELODY: Alright.

ADDIE

MELODY: Alright, so tell me about your spiritual journey, I guess. [LAUGHS]

ADDIE: [LAUGHS] I was raised in the Church. I was born and raised into the Church, so it's about all that I've ever known. I've never known anything different, which I'm grateful for because I see other friends of

mine. Here, my friends are Church, because I don't know anyone outside of the Church around here because I did homeschooling this last school year. [unclear] So around here, literally, all that I know is people from Church pretty much.

MELODY: Okay.

ADDIE: And a few random people from the rec center that I exercise with [unclear]. We're not gonna get started on that. [LAUGHS] However, over the years, my – sorry [unclear] – over the years [LAUGHS], different things that have in one way or another changed my testimony of the Gospel and just everything in the Gospel. In fact, one of the most recent things that I can think of right now [unclear] – she said that it also changed hers as well. It increased my [unclear] and made me more aware of how aware of me the Lord is, which is comforting to me because I know that I am being watched over because of that and that he does know what I'm going through and what I'm dealing with [unclear].

MELODY: Are there any significant experiences that [unclear] that direction?

ADDIE: This last month has been crappy.

MELODY: [unclear]

ADDIE: That's not a very good thing to say! [LAUGHS] [unclear] But that's a pretty decent way to describe it. [unclear] You actually had that [unclear] the first Sunday out of the entire month that I was able to go to the YSA branch this month, and so I only went two of the five Sundays that we had this month. I missed going there. I mean, I went to my family's branch, but they're a little on the outnumbered side [unclear] in Relief Society, it's me and like 30 plus. [LAUGHS] So you can imagine how that has to be for me. That's why I love going to YSA more [unclear]. I think that's a main reason. That and [unclear] flat-out amazing. But the first Sunday of the month, I was trying to go to church out there at the YSA branch and I got in an accident about three minutes away from the church.

MELODY: Oh, that's awful.

ADDIE: [unclear] Three minutes. Ruined my car big time. It's in the shop right now because – I have not gone a single week this month without it being in one shop or another. It was there for repairs from that, and then now it's got major engine issues.

[unclear:
her mother speaks from the kitchen]

ADDIE: I literally have not gone a single week without it being in one shop or another. [LAUGHS] So I'm just [unclear] five weeks now. [unclear] I love my family's branch, I really do. They love me. They express their love for me. One week – I can't even tell you. But it's just not the same. There's not – I mean, the Spirit was there, but there's just something different, you know? [LAUGHS] But that one experience that Sunday was obviously a challenge for me, but it was also a huge testimony builder for me because, with how bad it really was, honestly, I was blessed. I don't think I should've lived through what happened. I honestly could've been – probably should've died with how serious it was, and so I was blessed immensely. I was telling one of my friends who's going to school in BYU about it because she and her brother are the reason that I'm going in the first place. They're the ones that talked me into going to the YSA branch. But I told her about it and told her that I was okay and everything. She said that it was even a testimony builder for her to hear that because, honestly, [unclear] my mission on earth isn't [unclear] I have more to do on this earth, which is a happy thing. It makes me happy to hear that because I'm excited for what's coming up in my life next because right now [unclear] to serve a mission.

MELODY: Oh, that's so exciting. Do you know where you're going?

ADDIE: I'm actually starting to talk to President [REDACTED] about it.

MELODY: Oh, how wonderful.

ADDIE: I talked to him last Sunday, so [unclear] –

MELODY: That's wonderful.

ADDIE: I can't ask for a better branch president. He's phenomenal.

MELODY: Yeah, people speak very highly of him. I mean, I like him.

ADDIE: I've only known him for two months now. I've only been going for July – first part of July – and I'm already loving him. That was only the second time that I've talked with him, the first time that I've really talked with him [unclear]. It was kind of interesting, two Sundays ago, because I [unclear]. It's understandable but I was counting that. It took forever to get it figured out. Then I was going to give it to him anyway, and he came up to me after Sacramento Meeting was over because I had had a chance to get out of my pew or whatever, and he came up to me and shook my hand, took my [unclear] from me, and asked how I was doing. Then I said I was okay, and he said, what can I get for you? [unclear] how great he is. We talked for a pretty decent amount of time that day. I guess, a couple days ago, on Sunday, he came up to me before church had started and asked once again how I was doing, so that meant a lot to me.

MELODY: I've been asking everyone, what are your thoughts on agency?

ADDIE: I kind of struggle with that. [LAUGHS] I will admit to that. Despite how much I tend to struggle with it, I'm grateful for it because, with agency and accountability, I have the agency or the option to do what I want to do. I will be counted for whatever choices I make, what I do.

MELODY: Tell me about your education. What have you done? What are you planning to do?

ADDIE: I just graduated high school last June – May.

MELODY: So 2015 or 2014?

ADDIE: Yes.

MELODY: 2015.

ADDIE: So I just graduated, back in May, from high school. I'm currently taking a break from school because I just couldn't [unclear] right now after last year because it was not fun.

MELODY: You said you were homeschooled?

ADDIE: I tried. Just because we moved here from [REDACTED] last summer. So not this summer that just got over but the summer [LAUGHS]. We came out for spring break that year and just kind of checked out the area, go house hunting, things like that. [REDACTED]

MELODY: Oh, wow.

ADDIE: Yeah. That was hard. That was really hard. But it was worth it in the end. I actually made it through high school. So now I'm kind of taking a break from school for a while, but eventually – I don't know when, but eventually – I want to go to college to hopefully be a [REDACTED].

MELODY: Oh, wow!

ADDIE: That's my hopes for schooling now. [unclear] [LAUGHS]

MELODY: That's cool. What activities did you do while you were in school?

ADDIE: I was involved in Key Club, which – you seem like you actually know what that is.

MELODY: Yeah, I do.

ADDIE: Which means you're not from Tennessee!

MELODY: Really? I mean, my high school didn't have it.

ADDIE: Yeah. [unclear]

MELODY: My high school didn't have it.

ADDIE: I loved it. It was my favorite club ever. I was in it all four years. I started in freshman year and kind of went through senior year, but senior year kind of quit because of school – school kind of overpowered my life. School was my life. So I did Key Club for four years [unclear] and I was involved in a club called [REDACTED], which was [unclear] which was a lot of fun, but they didn't start that until my junior year. [unclear] I don't know one of the two. [REDACTED]

MELODY: What about work history?

ADDIE: I haven't had any work. [unclear] I'd like to get a job.

MELODY: I didn't work while I was in high school. I didn't have a job until I got to college. What brought you guys to Nashville?

ADDIE: My dad's work. He does something. Mom, what does Dad do?

[unclear:
her mom answers from the next room; ADDIE laughs a lot]

ADDIE: [REDACTED]

MELODY: Do you like it?

ADDIE: I love it now. I just didn't love it at the time. My math teacher last year [unclear] so he would always give me crap about it and make up songs about Tennessee and all this other crap and always, always sing while I was [unclear]. I miss him. [LAUGHS]

MELODY: Where were you guys at in [REDACTED]?

ADDIE: Have you heard of [unclear]?

MELODY: No.

ADDIE: That doesn't surprise me. [LAUGHS]

MELODY: Where is that, geographically? Is it, like, [REDACTED]?

ADDIE: [unclear]

MELODY: I know, like, the major – [REDACTED].

ADDIE: I don't know where it is. [LAUGHS]

MELODY: That's cool. Where does the rest of your family live?

HALIEGH: My oldest sister – there's a lot of us, just to warn you. [REDACTED]

MELODY: Were you guys always in [REDACTED]?

ADDIE: I was born in [unclear]. Before [unclear], we lived in Salt Lake and [REDACTED]. This is just where I know where my sisters' [unclear], but I was born in [unclear] and we moved to [REDACTED] when I was four and then we moved here.

MELODY: Did you find it easier or more difficult to practice your faith in [REDACTED]? Or the same?

ADDIE: For the most part, I would probably say about the same. Here, it's been kind of interesting for me because, like I said, most of the people that I know around here are LDS because I don't have much of a life outside of church. [LAUGHS] That sounds so awful! But it's true. I really don't have much of a life outside of school – or outside of church, I mean. I will go exercise at the rec center once in a while – not very often [unclear]. I need to get better about that. This year, there's been some interesting moments there. There's been people – there was a guy that worked there. [unclear] I don't know for sure. But he knew quite well that I was LDS, and so, once in a while, he would come up to me – he would always, always talk to me when I was there. Always. Once in a while, [unclear] he would come up to me and ask me things like – one day, he started asking me about Relief Society. He informed me one day that the Mormons are going to take over the world. [LAUGHS]

MELODY: Good to know.

ADDIE: Glad to know that about us. Thanks for teaching me something about me that I didn't even know. [LAUGHS] It's been harder because of that kind of thing. [unclear] We're not gonna get started on that either. [LAUGHS] But overall, it's been about the same in [REDACTED].

MELODY: I forgot what I was gonna ask you.

ADDIE: [LAUGHS]

MELODY: Do you want to go back?

ADDIE: To [REDACTED]?

MELODY: Yeah.

ADDIE: Yeah, I kind of do. [LAUGHS] I mean, like to see people around there because – they started school last Monday at the high school, and one of my best friends out there sent me a picture of some of my favorite adults, and that was kind of hard for me because I don't get to see them anymore. I miss [REDACTED].

but I love it out here. The weather is so much nicer out there this time of year with summer. Out here, I like the fall more.

MELODY: How long have you been attending the branch here?

ADDIE: Since the first Sunday in July, whenever that was. [LAUGHS]

MELODY: Are you really involved in any branch activities yet?

ADDIE: I'd like to be. [LAUGHS] I haven't that much.

MELODY: Several of my interviews so far have been people who've been very recent newcomers. So these questions are not very easy.

ADDIE: Yeah, I've been pretty recent, and I haven't had a car for a while.

MELODY: You said that you had a lot more LDS friends – like, the ratio of Church friends to non-Church friends – there's a lot of Church friends?

ADDIE: Yeah. I wouldn't necessarily say a lot of Church friends around here, but I don't have any friends that are outside of the Church.

MELODY: Right. That makes sense. Switching gears – what role does the Church play in your dating life or your expectations concerning marriage and family?

ADDIE: [unclear] because yesterday after Family Home Evening, I came home to eat some dinner, and then I wasn't really tired despite how late it was, so I stayed up and read some talks of the General Conferences – from this last Conference. Just looking through the thing at the front [unclear] the different talks that are on [unclear] now, I circled different ones that might help me out with different things right now in my life. I went [unclear] counted – as I was going through and circling those other ones, I noticed that there was quite a few that said something about family, which I didn't know that was the case because I only saw a day's Conference this last time because I was travelling Saturday. I wasn't aware of how – I don't think I realized on Sunday how many talks there were on families and marriage and [unclear], but as I was looking through yesterday – or last night – there were quite a few, and I don't really remember how many there were total that I counted, but I saw – the Lord is aware of what he knew was coming up in the future, he knew that. [unclear] gay marriage, and honestly I think that's a big part of why there were so many talks that last conference about marriage and families – because the Lord knew that was coming, and he wanted us to know how to deal with it and be prepared for it. It's a blessing to me because I know what his expectations are, and I want to be able to live up to those expectations, and I want to be able to go through with – follow what these talks are teaching me. I've seen my friends – some friends of me that aren't LDS [unclear] [LAUGHS] but I've seen them and seen that they've dated different people throughout high school and seen what that's done to their lives, seen how heartbroken they've been when their boyfriends or whatever broken up with them, and I'm grateful that I haven't had to deal with that. I don't the desire of dating really right now. [LAUGHS] Never have. Don't know if I will anytime soon. [LAUGHS] I'm okay with that. I'm not caring about that right now. I don't want to [unclear] kind of drama right now.

MELODY: But one day, you want to be married and have –

ADDIE: One day. But not right now, obviously.

MELODY: So if and when you begin dating, is dating outside the Church something you're comfortable with?

ADDIE: Probably not, because my second oldest sister, which is the one with the [unclear] kids, she dated outside the Church, and, I mean, he was a great guy. I don't remember much about him, so it's [unclear]

years, but he was a great guy, but there's just a different feeling about him than there was about her current husband, and it wasn't like he was a terrible person. He seemed pretty nice from what I knew of him. I just don't think that there's as much of a spirit with non-members – with dating non-members – as there would be with members.

MELODY: Right. Thoughts on pre-marital sex?

ADDIE: [LAUGHS] I wouldn't go for that, because of all – this is gonna sound kind of bad, I'm afraid – but I've also seen that. A friend of a friend – we haven't really talked for quite some time now, so that's why I said it like that – but she had that kind of thing, and ended up having a baby this last school year. [unclear] second baby, actually. But she seemed happy about it, but I don't know what that was, because she really was or she was just faking it to make it look like she's happy. I don't know. I just don't – that's not something that I support personally, and honestly I [unclear] what do I do? Do I go? Do I not go? Because I know. I know the person that [unclear], and so I knew what I [unclear] didn't know whether I should go or not. Lucky for me, I have two lovely parents that I can text, because that was still when I was out in [REDACTED] [unclear] this last year. So I texted them and asked what I should do, and they said, you can go, be her friend, support her. [unclear] That's what I did. I really don't really support that choice still.

MELODY: Thoughts on same-sex marriage and attraction?

ADDIE: [LAUGHS]

MELODY: I know. These are the worst questions.

ADDIE: [LAUGHS] That one actually is interesting for me, because, like I said, that's recently been legalized, which breaks my heart. It really does. But that's what the world teaches is okay, unfortunately. I think the reason why that legalization is so hard on me is because I have an uncle that's gay and he has a mate – or partner whatever you want to call it – and so they could go ahead and do that if they want. I don't know. I just don't feel very comfortable about that. There's no way I'd ever do that. [LAUGHS]

MELODY: Right. Changing marriage – we've already done that. [LAUGHS VERY UNCOMFORTABLY] Changing direction – how do you feel about women's roles in the Church?

ADDIE: You hear people say that they don't have very big roles [unclear]. Sorry. You hear all the time that they don't have very big rule – roles. I don't know what – [LAUGHS] rules in the Church, but we really do. They had, a while back, those people saying that they should give women the right to have the priesthood, but I don't know why. We already do plenty in the Church. I feel like they gave that to the men and not the women because we do so much. We're mothers. We cook, we clean, we do all that stuff at home. We take care of the kids all day, every day. Or, at least, that's what we're taught to do, anyway. [LAUGHS] I feel like we have plenty of responsibility, and I don't know why anyone would want more responsibility than we already have. I feel like it's pretty fair how things are in the Church with women.

MELODY: Are there any changes you would like to see regarding women in the Church?

ADDIE: I don't really think so. At least, not that I can think of.

MELODY: What role do you think that women should have in society? Do you think that women's roles in larger society should mirror the Church, or do you think that there's a difference? Or there should be a difference?

ADDIE: There definitely is a difference. [LAUGHS] There's not doubt about that. But I don't feel like there should be. I have friends who have parents – both the mom and the dad work –

MELODY: Your mom doesn't work?

ADDIE: No, she's a stay-at-home mom. So all day with her [REDACTED]. Crazy. [unclear]
[LAUGHS] But I see those friends that have parents that both work – mom and dad both work – and I see how that affects them differently than me. I'm grateful that I don't have two that work. I'm grateful to have one, but I'm grateful that I can go home to – when I had school – that I could go home to a mom, a parent at home.

MELODY: I forgot to ask you, if and when you have children, where do you want to raise them?

ADDIE: Where?

MELODY: Yeah.

ADDIE: I don't [unclear] –

MELODY: I'm basically asking, do you want to raise them in Utah or Idaho? That's what I'm asking.

ADDIE: [LAUGHS] Definitely within the Gospel. That's for sure. But other than that, I really don't care too much.

MELODY: Last question – are there any specific opportunities or challenges that come with being LDS and living here in the Bible Belt that you want to address?

ADDIE: [LAUGHS] Difficulties. It's been hard considering how short a time I've been here.

MELODY: But you've already spoken to – at the rec center, so –

ADDIE: [LAUGHS] So fun. I definitely see [unclear] experiences there how – or why – it's called the Bible Belt or whatever. People around here are definitely more religious than they were up in [REDACTED]. Way more than I every thought I would experience. One of the other experiences there that I was mentioning previously – I was exercising one morning, and [unclear] was. I still don't know who this was. Never seen him before, never talked with him, nothing. And just out of the blue, comes up to me and asks if he could pray for me – [REDACTED].

MELODY: That's so strange.

ADDIE: [unclear] [LAUGHS]

MELODY: So you said yes?

ADDIE: No! I didn't even respond to him! [LAUGHS] It was the most awkward thing ever.

MELODY: Oh my.

ADDIE: Yeah. Awkward, awkward, awkward.

MELODY: Oh my.

ADDIE: After that, I could see why they call it the Bible Belt.

MELODY: And this is around here?

ADDIE: Yeah.

MELODY: Wow.

ADDIE: Yeah! [LAUGHS]

MELODY: That's strange.

ADDIE: Yeah.

MELODY: Anything else?

ADDIE: Not anything I can think of right now.

MELODY: All right. We're done. Easy peasy.

ELLEN

MELODY: Okay, my questions are on my phone. Alright. Tell me about your conversion, your spiritual journey, what-have-you.

ELLEN: To the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints?

MELODY: Yeah.

ELLEN: Well, I was raised here in Nashville as a [REDACTED].

MELODY: Oh, wow.

ELLEN: Yeah. My whole family was of that faith, but as we grew up – my sisters kind of did their own thing, they don't really believe in God; my brother did his own thing; they all kind of went their own way. And I'd always believed in God. My family taught me that. I believed in it. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] but my experience there was incredible. I had never really felt that kind of love from people. They had a spirit about them – something about them that I was just like, what is going on? And it compelled me to want to change – the love they showed me. I want to become better, and so I decided to change my life, [REDACTED] Finished my senior year of high school and got a job out in Utah [REDACTED], and I lived with an LDS family, and they were just like the people I'd been with before but this time I could talk with them about it and ask questions. They taught me about the Gospel, and I was hooked. I was like, I want everything you have. Teach me, teach me, teach me. They taught me, and I've been taught to pray and to ask the Lord things. I asked him about the Gospel. I prayed about it a lot, like, is this for real? If it is, I want to be a part of it. I felt really strong about. Got baptized. I've been on a mission.

MELODY: Where'd you do your mission?

ELLEN: [REDACTED].

MELODY: Wow.

ELLEN: I was so mad when I got my call. Like, [REDACTED]?

MELODY: I always wonder if I can ask people, like, are you disappointed if you get a call to, like, Scottsdale? Are you disappointed? I would be disappointed.

ELLEN: Yeah, that's the thing! Because I had grown up outside the Church, when I thought of a mission, I thought of a foreign country, like Africa or something. So when I got my call – and I'd had a friend that'd just left for a Brazil and I had a friend that went to Madagascar – I was like, okay. This is gonna be great. Then I got [REDACTED], and I was like, are you freaking kidding me? That's like a state over from where I grew up! But it was the best thing. It was exactly what I needed, and I wouldn't give anything – anything – for my mission. It was amazing.

MELODY: Can I ask what kind of trouble you were in?

ELLEN: In high school and stuff [REDACTED]

MELODY: Good for you!

ELLEN: Thank you.

MELODY: That's awesome. What are your thoughts on agency?

[unclear]

ELLEN: Yeah, that's a very good question. I think agency is a part of the plan. Heavenly Father's all about agency. We all have a choice when we come to earth if we're gonna choose to do good or if we're gonna choose to do evil, if we're gonna choose to follow him – and he can't interfere with that. I firmly believe that we get to make a choice, and he can't be like, no, no, no – that's why terrible things happen, because people get that choice, and he doesn't want it to happen. It's not a part of his plan, but he can't because it would ruin the whole plan, if he was like, no, you can't [unclear]. If that makes sense.

MELODY: Yeah. What brought you to Nashville?

ELLEN: I was born and raised here.

MELODY: Right. Does your family live here?

ELLEN: Yep. [unclear] my mom's house.

MELODY: You said you lived in Utah or Idaho for a while.

ELLEN: Yep.

MELODY: Did you find it easier to be Mormon? To practice your faith in Utah?

ELLEN: Yeah, sure. And that's – right when I got baptized, I tried to move back here, and it was so hard because – when I was baptized, I was spiritually, like, let's talk about the Gospel all the time! And my family wasn't really in it – they're not LDS. Other Christians have different beliefs and things. I wanted to be surrounded with LDS people because I want to talk about [unclear], you know? So it was good to live in Utah. Now, living here – coming into our ward, the branch that you've been going to – it is incredible to see the difference between Utah and the Nashville ward because the people here in Nashville are so sincere and so real. I wish you could go to an LDS YSA in Utah. You'd be like, what? This is not the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints? These people do not have the Spirit! The people here are so – if you want it here, you've got to want it. Not everybody's doing it. I wake up on Sunday in Utah, and if I'm not going to the LDS Church, I'm the only one. It's just like, everybody's doing it. Let's do it. But here, I've got to really want it. It's got to be something I really believe in, or I'm not going to do it. And you see that in people.

MELODY: Do you plan to go back?

ELLEN: Yeah.

MELODY: Yeah?

ELLEN: Yeah. I've been in school there. I just took a leave of absence because there's some stuff going on [unclear] I wanted to be here to help out and be a part of it. I just came home for the fall. I want to go finish my education there.

MELODY: Where were you at there?

ELLEN: [REDACTED].

MELODY: What do you study?

ELLEN: Social work.

MELODY: Social work. Are you an undergrad?

ELLEN: Mm-hmm.

MELODY: Is that the only place you've been studying –

ELLEN: I did study at [unclear] college before my mission, but I didn't do much studying. [LAUGHS] It's like glorified high school.

MELODY: What activities were you a part of in school?

ELLEN: Like, in college?

MELODY: Yeah.

ELLEN: Like, organized activities?

MELODY: What did you do – essentially, how did you spend your time?

ELLEN: Okay. [REDACTED]

MELODY: What do you do? [REDACTED]

ELLEN: [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

MELODY: That's awesome.

ELLEN: Yeah, it was awesome. [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] we'd go to temple, I'd do a lot of Church stuff. Pretty basic – very basic life, but I was happy.

MELODY: Do you plan on doing anything else education-wise?

ELLEN: Yeah, I want to get my Master's in social work, eventually.

MELODY: What do you want to do?

ELLEN: I want to work in [REDACTED].

MELODY: What about your work history? What does that look like?

ELLEN: My work history?

MELODY: Yeah. Just whatever you've done.

ELLEN: [REDACTED]

MELODY: How long have you been attending the branch here?

ELLEN: The branch here? I moved back end of April. So, May, June, July, August – like, four months.

MELODY: So that was the first time that you started with this branch? Are you going back on Wednesday – is that what you're doing?

ELLEN: To Utah? Just to visit for a week. Then I'll be here through the fall.

MELODY: What activities are you involved in in the branch?

ELLEN: I'm a branch missionary, so I work for the sisters a lot. I go on lessons with them. I'm part of Correlation. It's a meeting where they talk about [unclear] missionaries, ward missionaries, branch missionaries – they get together and talk about the people that they're teaching and recently baptized. I'm part of Institute. I go to Institute. [unclear] the basics.

MELODY: How much time do you think you spend a week on branch stuff?

ELLEN: Branch stuff, or like Gospel stuff? Because –

MELODY: Let's do everything.

ELLEN: Everything? So, like, prayer, scripture study –

MELODY: Sure. And then how much of that do you think is with the branch?

ELLEN: Probably – probably about 17 hours a week, and then probably 10 of that is with the branch.

MELODY: Yeah, that makes sense. I should have these questions memorized by now, but I don't.

ELLEN: It's okay.

MELODY: What would you say the ratio of Church members to non-Church members is among your friendships?

ELLEN: Among my friends? I'm the only –

MELODY: The only one?

ELLEN: Yeah, well, one girl – but we're not really – no, no, it's just me.

MELODY: So you haven't made a whole lot of friends – close friends in the branch?

ELLEN: No. Just because I haven't – there's a lot of people I want potentially, but I just haven't really been here. My friends I grew up and my friends here in Nashville – no – and my family – no.

MELODY: What do you do whenever you're not doing Church stuff?

ELLEN: I really enjoy music – I sing and play guitar. I like to write music. [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] I volunteer at the homeless shelter. I go sing to the old folks' home. I just try to stay busy.

MELODY: Switching gears – what role does the Church play in your dating life and your expectations concerning marriage and family? [LAUGHS]

ELLEN: That is huge. That is everything. I get a lot of crap because my family's like, you're so picky. I'm like, no, I'm not. I'm just not gonna take [unclear] you guys take. No, I have huge standards. My expectation – I want to be married in the temple, and there's expectations there. I want someone who loves the Gospel as much as I do. I want to be with somebody who has the same passion, because it's such a big part of my life. They need to have that so that we can enjoy that together. And the priesthood – I want someone with the priesthood to be my husband one day.

MELODY: Dating outside of the Church – yes or no?

ELLEN: I mean, I would date if they had the same standards as me. But I wouldn't go any further than dating unless they were seriously considering – because I want to be married in the temple. That's important to me.

MELODY: If and when you have kids, where do you want to raise them?

ELLEN: I don't know.

MELODY: As in, do you want to raise them in Utah or –

ELLEN: Or Nashville –

MELODY: Or bring them home?

ELLEN: Like, this is my home, and this is where my family is, so I want that, but I also love Utah. I think more so outside of Utah because I want them to be – like, really know what it's like. Utah's kind of a bubble. You need to go there just to see. It's amazing. It's a very, very good place, very good people. It's just a different world. It would blow your mind.

MELODY: What about pre-marital sex – yes or no?

ELLEN: No.

MELODY: No?

ELLEN: No. Absolutely not.

MELODY: Thoughts on same-sex marriage and attraction?

ELLEN: [REDACTED] Like, Mormons hate – I'm like, no. I love them the same no matter what, but I do believe that marriage should be between a man and a woman. That's God and that's not gonna change. But it doesn't change the love that I should have for them. They don't change – it's just the sin – I can't condone the sin, but I condone the person, you know? But no, I don't think same-sex marriage [unclear].

MELODY: Switching gears again – how do you feel about women’s roles in the Church? Are you comfortable with them?

ELLEN: I think they’re awesome. Growing up in the South [unclear] family – I was not very empowered as a woman. When I joined the Church – especially on my mission – so empowered! I was given leadership positions, encourage to share my talents and my insight. People wanted to know what I thought and what I believed and wanting my help. Especially on my mission. I had a mission president and a bishop that were just like, we want to know what you think. Please help us. We value your opinion. I’m like, this is amazing. No one has ever empowered me like that.

MELODY: How did you feel before the Church?

ELLEN: Growing up, [unclear] my dad being like, you can’t do that because you’re a girl – my brother being like, you can’t do that because you’re a girl. No one really listens to you. I don’t know. Just not being heard –

MELODY: And you feel like your kids won’t experience that to the same degree?

ELLEN: I hope not in my family, inside of my house. I would want to empower them. I would hope that a priesthood – my husband would do that same. [unclear]

MELODY: [LAUGHS] Are there any changes you would like to see regarding women in the Church?

ELLEN: No.

MELODY: No? You’re good?

ELLEN: Yeah.

MELODY: What about women in society? How do you feel – you’ve already spoken on that a little bit – growing up outside of the Church –

ELLEN: Yeah, women in society, I would love a huge change in that. [LAUGHS] I think that women aren’t appreciated for what they really are in society and that they’re undermined and they’re not heard and they’re not empowered – and they’re the most powerful – not the most powerful – I believe that men and women are equal but different. I think they’re so different, but they’re equally influential in this world and that men and women should be treated equally. Not to put men down at all – they’re great, hardworking, have so many things to bring – but women need to be treated the same. I don’t think the world does that at all. Especially in the media. I hate the media – despise – I think it’s awful.

MELODY: Do you think that the Church does a better job with women’s roles – with empowering women in general?

ELLEN: I think that they do a better job of loving women for who they are and empowering them. I think they world tries to tell women that they need to be this certain thing and that if you don’t look this way, if you’re not this way, then you’re not as good as you can be. The Church, I’ve found, is – there’s just so much love in the Church. It’s just about accepting people and loving them for who they are and teaching them values. [unclear]

MELODY: Last question – are there any specific challenges or opportunities that come with practicing your faith in Nashville that you want to talk about?

ELLEN: It’s just hard being the minority, but at the same time I’m grateful because it helps me to really develop that faith – you better really know that it’s what you believe if you’re gonna make these sacrifices. Like on Sundays – my family’s going out to eat, doing all these things, going to do fun stuff, and I’m going

to Church and not going to eat and staying home. You have to make that decision and really decide it's something that you want to do. Other than that, people just say stuff sometimes. Some people just don't like the Church. You'll get that anywhere – except for Utah.

MELODY: [LAUGHS] Okay.

ELLEN: [unclear] No. I hope that that helped.

KAREN

MELODY: Alright, so just start with telling me about your conversion, your spiritual journey.

KAREN: In the Mormon Church?

MELODY: Yes.

KAREN: Well, I was –

MELODY: Or overall.

KAREN: Sure. I was born into the Church. Both my parents were converts. They had met with missionaries and decided to join, so by the time I came around, they were already members and so I grew up as a member of the Church. I was baptized at the age of 8. I've always been really spiritually inclined, actually. So I always – my whole life, I by far was the one with the strongest testimony in my family, even stronger than my parents. [LAUGHS] I just – I've always just naturally – I'm just naturally drawn to things of a spiritual nature and to God. So I think even if I wasn't born LDS that I would be drawn to some sort of – I think I would have been looking for something. So I don't actually have, like, a moment where I feel like everything changed. I think it's just something that I've always worked on and maybe been, you know, a gradual process, but I started praying independently at a very, very young age, and I feel like at a very young age, I had developed a very independent relationship with my Father in heaven and Savior. Very independent from my parents or anyone else. So I feel like – yeah, I feel like my whole life has kind of been a process of conversion. Yeah. I don't know. [LAUGHS] Sorry.

MELODY: No, no. This is good, this is good, this is good. So, okay, okay. Speaking on that – what are your thoughts on agency?

KAREN: On agency? In what regard?

MELODY: So whenever I went through – I went through the discussions during my first project and they talked a lot about agency. So what does agency mean to you? Especially regarding your relationship with Heavenly Father?

KAREN: I think – I mean agency, as you probably know, is really emphasized in the Church. It's – I guess you could say the second or third greatest gift God has ever given us. The ability to choose for ourselves. And it's a very integral part of the Adam and Eve narrative. Exercising one's agency. So for me, you know, my ultimate goal is to return to my Father in Heaven and to become like him, and He can't make me. [LAUGHS] He can't make me do that. I have to choose for myself. I have to choose for myself to obey the commandments or not to obey the commandments. I have to choose for myself. Basically, this Church is what I want or is for me. I mean, I know some people argue that we don't have a lot of agency in this Church [LAUGHS] and that we're like following things like blind sheep, but I've always felt like I have a lot of agency to choose for myself what I wanted to do. I don't have family pressure to be a Mormon though, so maybe that's why I've always felt very free.

MELODY: Why don't you have family pressure to be Mormon?

KAREN: Because most of my family is not Mormon.

MELODY: Okay.

KAREN: Like I said, my parents are converts, and they were very much – agency is a big deal to my dad. And so he raised us – they hoped that we would all be Mormon, but they definitely raised us to make our own decisions and they wanted it to be something that we wanted. And I come from a family of six children, and there was a point in time where I was the only one that was a Mormon. [LAUGHS]

MELODY: Wow. Are you still?

KAREN: No. My sister, after hitting rock bottom in life, decided that maybe she's gonna try this again. So she's – I would say she's fully active now. But none of my four brothers are still – they don't really have any interest in it. My parents – it hurt them, but they respect that. So, I don't know. And most of my friends aren't LDS either. I just – and there's a lot of pressure here at Vanderbilt in my program not to be religious. [LAUGHS]

MELODY: Yeah, you're in [REDACTED], right?

KAREN: So that's been hard. I feel like – I've actually had to actively choose to be Mormon as opposed to just, oh, it's a cultural thing or it's what I grew up with. I've had to actively choose throughout my life to be a member of this Church.

MELODY: Where are you from?

KAREN: Well, I kind of am from all over. But I usually say Utah because I spent most of my childhood there.

MELODY: Is that where your family lives?

KAREN: That's where my parents live right now, yeah.

MELODY: Where are your siblings living?

KAREN: I have two in [REDACTED]. I have one that still lives at home in Utah. And then the other one is going to [REDACTED], so that's in another part of Utah.

MELODY: Did you find it easier to be a Mormon in Utah?

KAREN: Oh, you mean, easier than here?

MELODY: Yeah, easier than here.

KAREN: That's hard. [unclear] We're fine. I'm just putting on my sweater.

MELODY: Oh, okay! We can go somewhere else if you want to.

KAREN: Are you not getting bit?

MELODY: I don't – bugs are not attracted to me.

[unclear]

KAREN: Sorry, okay. I think it's very easy being Mormon in Utah because a lot of people are Mormon, and I think it's actually pretty hard not to be Mormon in Utah. People just assume you're Mormon. You have to – my best friend growing up was Catholic, and I had another good friend who was Buddhist. So, you know. Everyone just assumes you're Mormon.

MELODY: Where were you from in Utah?

KAREN: [REDACTED]. That's actually really rare. I'm just a weirdo!

MELODY: Yeah, yeah! That's really – that's interesting.

KAREN: [LAUGHS] So I know how hard it was for them because they were always like, oh, I'm not LDS. So I think it's really easy. But I don't feel like it's very hard out in Tennessee because it's such a religious area anyway. It's a very Christian area. I think the difference is – I got my Master's at BYU, and of course it's easy to be Mormon there in the anthropology department, it's actually expected. It's really hard to be Mormon here, so I think the greatest challenge I've had is being Mormon at Vanderbilt, not in Nashville. But it's led to a lot of really cool opportunities too, where I can share what I believe with [unclear]. But it's been hard. [LAUGHS]

MELODY: Do you plan to go back to Utah?

KAREN: No. [LAUGHS]

MELODY: No? Why?

KAREN: I never really liked living there. It's just not – for a lot of – I think it's a good place, but I just – I think it would be really hard to find a job there doing what I do. I also like living in a place where there's not as many Mormons because I get – I love missionary work, and it gives me an opportunity to share what I believe, and it's really hard to do that in Utah because there's just a lot of Mormons there. And then, also, I just don't feel like that's where I'm supposed to be, where I'm supposed to end up. I know it's weird, but I feel like I've spent enough of my time there. The world is huge. I've got other places to see. [LAUGHS]

MELODY: Did you serve a mission?

KAREN: I did.

MELODY: You did? Where?

KAREN: In [REDACTED].

MELODY: [REDACTED]? Wow, that's awesome.

KAREN: It is awesome. I loved it.

MELODY: That's great. Tell me about your education.

KAREN: Okay. I did my undergrad at Brigham Young University at [REDACTED], and my major was [REDACTED] with an emphasis in [REDACTED]. Longest title ever. But I had some [REDACTED] courses. Absolutely no [REDACTED], but some [REDACTED] courses, and then also some [REDACTED] courses and [REDACTED], so it was kind of a conglomeration of a couple different [unclear]. And then after that, I proceeded to get my Master's at Brigham Young University in [REDACTED].

MELODY: [REDACTED]?

KAREN: Yeah, in [REDACTED]. In [REDACTED], which was interesting because I'd never taken an [REDACTED] course prior to entering [unclear] so I don't recommend that. So I did that. I had to take an extra

year of preliminary undergraduate courses in order to be fully accepted into the program, of course, because I had no background. So I did that and then I applied here and am in the doctoral program, even though they're making me get another Master's. So, I'm working on my second Master's [unclear]. Hopefully then I will become a doctor eventually.

MELODY: What do you want to do?

KAREN: Well, there's only one thing I can do, which is become a university professor and then do research during the summer. That would be ideal. There are a lot of downsides to that. There's so much pressure, and the job market is really poor. I think maybe down the road, as I approach graduation – which is so far away – I might consider other options and kind of look for different things that I could do with my background, but as of right now that's kind of what I'm thinking.

MELODY: What activities did you participate in while in school? Throughout school, but especially here?

KAREN: At Vanderbilt?

MELODY: Sure, at Vanderbilt.

KAREN: Activities?

MELODY: Like extracurricular.

KAREN: Well, there's not a whole lot of time. [LAUGHS] I am involved in the Latin American student association or something – it's for all Latin Americans and then also all Latin American Studies people. I'm involved in that, and then also just [unclear].

MELODY: Do you consider yourself Latin American?

KAREN: Yes.

[unclear]

KAREN: Yeah, my mom is from [REDACTED]. My dad wasn't – not because he didn't want to be – but he wasn't really around much when I was growing up. Not because he didn't want to be, but because he couldn't be. So I grew up in a very, very Latin household. [LAUGHS] So, yeah, I do consider myself Latin American, even though I might not look it.

MELODY: No! Latinas, they range so far.

KAREN: They do! A lot of people, in their minds, have a very stereotypical view of what I should look like. Like, okay, whatever.

MELODY: What about your employment history?

KAREN: Employment history?

MELODY: Yeah. What have you done?

KAREN: Oh my gosh. All the way back to my first job? Or what?

MELODY: Whatever you want to say.

KAREN: Okay.

MELODY: You can tell me what's relevant. You can tell me about your – you know, whatever.

KAREN: Well, I [unclear] so during my undergrad, my parents – I come from a very, very poor background and my parents didn't have any money to give us for school. So I, got some [unclear] money, but it wasn't enough [unclear] so I ended up having to work 40 hours a week and go to school full time. So I worked all kinds of jobs. I sold vacuums, I was a tour guide at the [REDACTED], I waitressed at three different restaurants. I worked tons of random jobs, and once I got into graduate school, then I could be, like, a TA, and so I TA'd for [REDACTED] for a couple of years. I worked on a couple of [REDACTED] to gain experience and I did lab work, [REDACTED], [REDACTED], [REDACTED], and then helped with some publications – not actually writing it, but formatting and other things – just being involved in other people's publications. And then, here at Vanderbilt, we TA for a variety of different courses.

MELODY: Cool. Alright, changing directions. How long have you been attending the branch in Nashville?

KAREN: Two years.

MELODY: Two years. Since you got here?

KAREN: Yeah.

MELODY: What activities are you involved in? What callings?

KAREN: So, my first semester, I didn't have any calling – other than visiting teaching, which everybody does. And then, starting my second semester, I got three callings at once and I was like, ahhh, I can't do this! I was Relief Society Presidency [REDACTED], and then I was also on the committee to help for housing for a large regional YSA conference they were having, and then I was also put on the Temple Family History committee. So right now I'm still on the Family History – now it's just Family History.

MELODY: Alright. Cool. How much time do you spend doing activities? How much time do you spend with the branch every week?

KAREN: With the branch? On average, probably four.

MELODY: Four hours?

KAREN: Basically, church, which is three hours. And then I go to Institute on Fridays here at Vandy, so that's another hour. I don't go to FHE because I don't have time, and then everyone's [unclear]. There's a women's conference tomorrow night, so I'll go to that.

MELODY: What would you say the ratio of Church members to non-Church members is among your friends?

KAREN: Here in Nashville, or just in general?

MELODY: How about both?

KAREN: Here in Nashville, my ratio of good friends that I regularly go out with is, like, maybe 10%. [LAUGHS] Which is sad. I'm trying to change that.

MELODY: Why are you trying to change that?

KAREN: Because it's too hard. Being in this program, like, I'm – every day that I walk through these doors, I am confronted with either data or theories, philosophy or ideas that conflict with what I believe about the Latter-day Saints. And that's fine. This isn't the first time that I've struggled through things, and then, being an academic, I'm naturally inclined to think things through, you know? Like I said, I'm choosing to be Mormon. I've really thought it through. But it gets – most of the time it's fine, but there are

some days where I'm just so exhausted. I'm so sick of the struggle, for trying to explain myself. The fact that I'm religious and in a Ph.D. program in [REDACTED] is insane. I think people – it's not that people aren't accepting of me, but it's almost like they're embarrassed for me. It's almost this attitude of like, oh, Karen, how can you believe what you believe knowing what we know? We're [REDACTED]. We're above religion. [LAUGHS] I don't know that they realize that that's the attitude. They don't even know it's conscious. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] But I ended up being forced to do a road show for the branch – to be in the road show. I was really angry to be in it. [LAUGHS]

MELODY: What is a road show?

KAREN: I had never been to one ever in my life. So what it is is basically – you know what a stake is, right?

MELODY: Yeah.

KAREN: So the stake will have a road show and each ward will present a 15-minute musical skit, and it's just for fun, I guess. It's a competition too, and the best-written one and the one with the best [unclear] wins prizes. So the branch threw a Disney Princess road show, and they're like, we want you to be [REDACTED]. I don't want to do this! But anyways, long story short, I got forced into doing it, and I was all mad, but it was the first time I hung out with anyone from the branch and I realized how nice it was to be around members. Like, just to be around people I didn't have to explain myself to. We weren't gonna go out drinking. I wasn't gonna have to take anyone. I wasn't gonna have to be designated driver. There was no pressure to do anything. It was, like, free. To not worry about stuff. It was just nice. So, that's why. I was, like, you really need to get more member friends. Like, keep your friends that aren't members, but I need that. I don't have my family here. I need some more [unclear]. I don't know. I'm just rambling now.

MELODY: No, no. This is great! So what non-Church activities do you do? What do you like to go out and do? With Church members or without?

KAREN: I love to go see movies. I love movies. I love to be – no, really, I like to just go out to eat, and I like just talking about stuff. So, you know, I like just going to friends' houses and, you know eating ice cream – well, I don't eat ice cream, but, you know, eating a snack or something – and just like talking about – just hanging out, I guess. Watching movies. Playing games. I'm pretty boring, I guess. I like just hanging out and talking with friends, you know.

MELODY: So, your non-Mormon friends – do you go out and go to the bar with them?

KAREN: Mm-hmm.

MELODY: Do you drink?

KAREN: No.

MELODY: Alright, so what role does the church play in your dating life and your expectations concerning marriage and family?

KAREN: Oh, I'm gonna get all personal!

MELODY: Let me throw the other questions out here: Is dating outside the church something you feel comfortable with? If you have children, where do you plan to raise them? What are your thoughts about pre-marital sex? And what about same-sex marriage, or same-sex attraction?

KAREN: Okay. Okay, that's a lot.

MELODY: I can remind you.

KAREN: I am very devout, so obviously I don't practice premarital sex. I don't practice that at all. I have dated non-members before and it's been fine. I don't have a lot of time to date. I'm kind of nerd and [unclear] studying. It's interesting that you ask, because right now I'm kind of dealing with this sort of question because there's – so when I first came to Vanderbilt, there was this boy in the [REDACTED] department who shares the same carrels as us. I just think he's the cutest thing ever. We never talk. Whatever. It's just, like, a nice little crush. Something to perk up my day as I, you know, go about my studies. Well, just recently – he's actually friends with some of my friends, and he told them that he's really interested in dating me, actually. I should be really excited. Like, my crush likes me! He thinks I'm pretty! But I'm not! I'm actually horrified! [LAUGHS] Because he's not Mormon. And because it's really, really hard, like, people – boys want to sleep with their girlfriends. It's what people do, and I get that. I don't deem them as immoral. People have a really hard time understanding how religious I am. You know, maybe because I'm not wearing religious clothes. I just – for the most part – seem normal. So, they just forget, but there's been so much pressure here – which is another reason why I need more Mormon friends – to engage in premarital sex. By the girls in my department, who keep telling me that it's really not that big of a deal. And I'm like, I don't – I'm, like, really nervous to date this boy because I'm sure – well, first off, if I tell him, it's an awkward conversation to come up with. Like, hey, I like you, but I'm never gonna sleep with you, just FYI. That's really awkward. How do you bring that up? And then, so he'll either be like, you're too religious, I can't handle that – and that will hurt because rejection hurts. Or he'll be like, sure, that's fine, we can deal with that – but I feel like, in his mind, after a couple of months, he would still be like – I don't know. I feel like if we fell in love, or whatever, he would expect it. [LAUGHS] Like, we'd get to a point where he'd be, I think, really tired of not having sex, at which point we'd either break up or it'd just cause problems that I just don't want to have. And I don't have a ton of self-control anyway! So I really want to be with someone who is also just as dedicated to the Lord and also dedicated to waiting, so that we can help each other out. Because it's not gonna take very much for me to be like, let's do it! [LAUGHS] And I have waited so long, and I've worked so hard.

MELODY: How old are you?

KAREN: I'm 30. So to lose it now, after all of that time! Ugh! I want to make it!

MELODY: Yeah!

KAREN: What were your other – so, it makes it hard. I really want to date Mormons, but it's hard because the guys in the branch I don't like. [LAUGHS] [unclear] I would not date any of them. They're nice. There's a lot of cool guys. I'm just not interested.

MELODY: If/when you have children – do you want to have children, and where do you plan to raise them?

KAREN: It's an interesting question. Sometimes I want children, because I know it's expected of me, and I was raised knowing that it would be expected of me. And not just as a Mormon, but [unclear]. It's what we do. I get – my mother hates that I'm here in graduate school. She just wants me to be married and have children, and that's not – that's not a Mormon thing, it's more of a [REDACTED] thing. I don't actually really like children, and I hate babies. But I've been told that it's different when you have your own, so I don't know. And it's different when you have someone that you want to have children with. So, we'll see. I mean, if I get married, I would probably have children. I would not want to raise them in Utah.

MELODY: Why?

KAREN: Because I want to raise them in an area where there's not a lot of Mormons. I feel like – so, you get two kinds of Mormons, really. You get the kind that do really well in, like, all Mormon communities and they really flourish. And then you get others that actually shine brighter outside of Mormon

communities. I'm the second. [LAUGHS] So, I do better, and I'm actually more devout when I'm not – when I'm outside of Utah. I don't know. I just – I want my kids to be – I don't want them to grow up in a bubble. Like, there's such a great big world out there, and there's so much they can do and there's so much they can see and be, and I want [unclear] and I want them to be really comfortable having friends and being around people that are not of our faith. I don't want that to be a big deal for them. I don't know.

[unclear]

MELODY: I'm glad you've thought about this. [LAUGHS] Alright, how do you feel about women's roles in the Church?

KAREN: What do you mean?

MELODY: I mean, do you feel comfortable – like, women don't hold the priesthood, right? Is this something you're comfortable with? Are you comfortable with the fact that, you know, Relief Society is your thing? I don't know. I'm not a woman in the Church. You tell me!

KAREN: Okay, I just wasn't sure what you meant. I don't know. I've actually had a really hard time being a woman in this Church. Since I was eight years old – which is technically when I became a member – because it was at the point that I realized that I could never be a Boy Scout, and the Church didn't have an equivalent program for me because I'm a girl, and that broke my heart as an eight-year-old. [unclear] as a kid, it was a big deal. Women in the Church is something that I've thought about and think about all the time. I love this Church. Like, clearly I choose to be a part of it. I think women in the Church are loved. They are so loved, and they are cherished, and I think they're respected. But none of those words mean the same as equality. If you were to ask, do I think that men and women are equal in the Church, I would say no. There's no way. As an [REDACTED], like, deconstructing gender relations and power [unclear] is what I do. I can't be blind to it in my own organization. Because women do not have the priesthood, and because the priesthood is so tied to administrative duties, there's just no way that women can have equal power in the Church without having the priesthood. That being said, I understand that the priesthood is a gift [unclear] and that the Lord has always been very exclusive with who holds that power, and traditionally, like, going back to the Old Testament, you know – it's not like every male could hold the priesthood. It was a very select group of individuals that were even able to. So the fact that all worthy men can hold the priesthood now is, I mean, amazing because it's never been the case. I don't know that – I know women can't hold the priesthood now, but that's not to say that one day they won't be able to.

MELODY: Do you think that one day they will be able to?

KAREN: I'm not sure.

MELODY: Do you want that?

KAREN: I'm okay either way. Like, it would be really, really nice administratively to have more power. Man, I would get so irritated, even as a young woman, because every time we did anything that was, like, all women anything, there were always men. The men always had to come because they had the priesthood. So, every campout, we had to have men. Every Relief Society – there's always men that come, and it drives me crazy because there's no women that go to any of their stuff. They're able to have that men's space, for them. And I don't know why it irritates me so much. It probably shouldn't. [LAUGHS] I just want, like, my women's space, you know? Or, like, the fact that the Bishop or the President can sit in on Relief Society. There's no women sitting in on Elder's Quorum. Yeah, I just – I wish we had more power administratively. I would either hope that there would be a disconnect between the priesthood and administrative duties of the Church – that they would no longer be tied together – or that women would have the priesthood. But I recognize that something that any of us have the power to change, that it can only come from on high. I do, however, think that the Prophet and the First Presidency – it's something that they should ask.

MELODY: Do you think they are asking it?

KAREN: No, I don't!

MELODY: You don't think that Kate Kelly has made them ask it?

KAREN: No, they're not – I feel like – ugh! I've been watching the whole Ordain Women deal very closely, and I [unclear] a lot of the things they have to say. The problem is – I think they went a little bit too far, and because they went too far they got labeled as radicals. Once you're labeled as a radical, you're ignored. And if they had maybe toned it down – like, maybe not done protests. Because she asked a lot of really interested questions, and, really, all they were asking for was that they First Presidency ask. And, you know, either they would get revelation saying no, not at this time, or no, not ever, or yes, or whatever. But then we'd at least know, because it's the same thing with Blacks in the priesthood. It wasn't until they asked that they were given revelation. That's a huge thing with us. If you want revelation, you have to ask certain questions. And nothing that they've said in Conference has suggested to me that they had done that at all.

MELODY: And you think they should?

KAREN: I totally think they should! [LAUGHS] Because hopefully, like I said, I think it would resolve a lot of issues. You know, if we got a definitive no, I think that would resolve a lot of issues for women that are kind of, maybe on the fence. I mean, just by asking, they might get some really interesting revelation. I don't know. [unclear] It's weird too, because the early history of the Church – women were more involved in the priesthood than they are now. So, it's interesting how that has changed. And women actually practiced parts of the priesthood in the Temple, so that's also very interesting. I totally think women – like there's nothing biological that suggests that we can't have the priesthood.

MELODY: Right. Should women be totally equal in society? What role should women have in society? Should it mirror the Church?

KAREN: No! [LAUGHS] [unclear] No, I totally – I think there should be total equality in society. It drives me crazy that there still isn't, you know? I mean, I'm working in a field that is predominantly male. I mean, not [REDACTED] in terms of students, but you don't get a lot of [REDACTED] that go all they way through Ph.D. programs and get jobs that are female. Even though there are actually more female [REDACTED] than male – they're not going as far, and they're not getting the tenured jobs. It drives me crazy. I would love to have a female president. I would love to have more women in college.

MELODY: Do you like Hillary?

KAREN: Not really. I mean, I'll be honest, she looks way better than anybody else, right? Like, seriously!

MELODY: No, I'm not disagreeing with you at all.

KAREN: I mean, she has no competition. [LAUGHS] But I'm not a huge fan of hers. Like, when she ran last time, I voted for – like, I liked Obama way more than I liked her. Even though I totally want a woman in office. I just feel like – I don't know. I feel like she's [unclear]. I don't know. We'll see. I'll probably vote for her just because her competition is so awful. It's almost like [unclear] I don't really have a choice. But, I mean, I wish we had more women in politics. I wish we had more women as CEOs. I wish we had more women everywhere.

MELODY: Alright, last question. Are there any specific opportunities or challenges that come with being a Mormon in Nashville that you want to address?

KAREN: With – just being in Nashville?

MELODY: Sure.

KAREN: No. Like I said, at Vanderbilt, but that's the nature of the program.

MELODY: Do you want to address that some more? Or do you think you've covered it?

KAREN: [unclear] Well, I picked the stupidest major ever! Just imagine for a minute [unclear] to be a [redacted] and believe in a whole book that talks about migration to the Americas. Like, do you know how crazy that sounds to my colleagues? There is actually a –

MELODY: So, like, do you believe that the Book of Mormon is literally true?

KAREN: Absolutely. Absolutely. So, this is another thing where I have to – I really have to struggle with and kind of figure out how to reconcile certain things. Because as I read the Book of Mormon, there are a lot of things that make no sense with what we know archaeologically. Absolutely no sense. There are other things, smaller things, that make perfect sense. But for every one thing that I could show you that relates to [redacted], there's, like, ten things that don't. But I know that the principles in that book are true. For a while, I wasn't actually sure if I should take it as literally being true. For a while, I kind of just took it as – I know, as a missionary, and just in my own life that living the principles taught in that book is transformative, and it brings joy and it brings a closer relationship to God. In the end, that's what really matters, and not so much whether or not it is literal. But, lately, I'm of the mind that, no, it actually does matter quite a bit whether or not it was literal. And that I can't –

MELODY: Why do you think that's so important now?

KAREN: That it's so important?

MELODY: Yeah.

KAREN: Because there are a lot of specific promises that the Lord makes to people in that book and to the descendants of the people in that book, so it matters if it's fiction or not. I also think it really matters whether or not Christ came – literally, came – to the Americas or not. Whether or not that's a literal, real, honest-to-goodness testament to his divinity. If it's not, then, I mean, maybe he's still the savior of the world, maybe not. But if it is true, then he is the savior of the world. It matters. It really does matter. And I think, you know, it wasn't meant to be a historical record, and I'm sure that one day – maybe not in this life – it'll all be reconciled. But here's the other thing, the other conclusion that I came to. I mean, the very tenants of our religion [unclear] there's only one way to know [unclear]. That promise that I'm sure they read to you in Moroni chapter 10 states that the only way you can know is through witness from God. You have to study it, ponder it, and ask. And, you know, it's never gonna be through science. That's never how we're gonna know. I mean, the tenants of our religion tell us, so I don't know why – you get a lot of Mormons that are really interested in finding these connections. Like, you're not gonna find them. It's not gonna be that simple. And, you know what, even if there was an abundance of evidence, there would still be people who wouldn't believe. The Book of Mormon has never been a question of science. It's always been a question of epistemology. I think once I realized that, I was okay. Because I have received that witness, and I have received the changes that it's made in my life. But I think that there is some legitimate concern among my colleagues – at least there has been in the past – about my ability to produce legitimate work because I believe in this book and I'm a true believer. I'm not a Mormon by tradition. I'm not a Mormon for fun. [LAUGHS] I'm a Mormon because I honestly and genuinely believe it with all my heart.

MELODY: How would you respond to your colleagues who are questioning, you know? What are you gonna say to them?

KAREN: I say what I said to you, and I have. It's come up before. And you know what – it's really hard. It takes a lot of courage because these are people that I want – I want them to respect me so badly. I want them to perceive me as someone who's competent and can do good work. It's terrifying going up against people I really respect, and the response I get is usually awkwardness or usually a sense of, like, we're

embarrassed for you. We're embarrassed for you because [LAUGHS] because we're [REDACTED]. It's crazy, but –

MELODY: Do you think it would be different if it wasn't [REDACTED]?

KAREN: Oh, yeah. I've mentioned this in Institute before, and I'm with other, you know, doctoral candidates from various programs in the Institute here, and they're all like, we've never had any problem. Like, in math [unclear]. Religion doesn't even come up. But religion constantly comes up. I'm always having to talk about, like, feminism in the Church, or homosexuality in the Church. You know, because half my department is gay and open. That's been really hard too.

MELODY: Yeah? Was that hard? Back in June, whenever the marriage came out and –

KAREN: No! I support gay marriage. I've always – well, I couldn't say I've always supported it. I've supported it as long as – I think, starting about six years ago is when I started supporting it, because I never really thought about it beforehand – but when I started thinking about it. I totally believe that – as a devout Mormon, I believe that marriage, as he has designed it, is between a man and a woman. I don't feel like – I feel very uncomfortable with imposing my ideas onto other people. [unclear] I choose to live this lifestyle, and I ask people to respect me for it. I want to extend that same respect to other people. I also – I know a lot of gays. There's a lot here. You know, I don't look at them as immoral people. Like, they're good, good people who honestly just want to be – I can see their perspective. They just want to be with people they love. That's all they want. And they don't live the standards that I live. They don't believe in the same things that I believe. It's okay with me. So, I was happy, actually, when that came out. I don't know, though. There are moments when I feel guilty for being such a supporter of gay marriage.

MELODY: Really?

KAREN: Sometimes. I worry because, at the end of the day, I don't really care what people think so much as I care what God thinks. I really care a lot about what he thinks. And, like, my greatest desire is, when I pass on from this life, to see him again and to have him be proud of how I lived my life. [unclear] as a representative of him even when it wasn't popular or when it was hard. But I also want to be a person who shows compassion and love and tolerance and understanding, so trying to find a balance between that can be hard sometimes. You know, I trust him and I – I don't know. Homosexuality is a hard thing, because I believe that people are born that way. I don't know. [LAUGHS]

MELODY: Do you think the Church's stance is not – is not loving and tolerant?

KAREN: Well, it's a tough position to be in because you can't change doctrine. And I think that you get members reacting in a variety of different ways. You have members that are totally homophobic, and I don't think it has anything to do with their Mormonism necessarily as much as it does with the fact that they're from Texas. You know what I mean? I think they'd be that way even if they weren't Mormon. And then you have others, you know. For example, there's a bishop out in Seattle I was reading a blog about – he said [unclear] you know, just come. Just come, come and worship with us, and don't worry about it. And you have some wards that you have, you know, gay couples attending. They can't participate in certain rituals, but the ward has still tried to embrace them. They've tried to find a sort of middle ground. It is – it'll be interesting in the next 10, 15 years to see how the Church has – I feel like their attitudes have already softened significantly, because beforehand I think the attitude was very much, like, you can't be born with this. Nobody's born with this. I don't think it's true. I feel like a lot more people are [unclear] find a middle ground. That being said, I don't think that gay marriage will ever be allowed in the Church. That's not – that will never change. So, like, where do we go from here? It'll be interesting to watch and see what happens though, in the next 10 years.

MELODY: Anything else?

KAREN: I don't know.

MELODY: You don't know? Alright, we'll be done then.

KAREN: [LAUGHS] Okay.

IRB APPROVAL

IRB
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
Office of Research Compliance,
010A Sam Ingram Building,
2269 Middle Tennessee Blvd
Murfreesboro, TN 37129



EXPEDITED PROTOCOL APPROVAL NOTICE

7/13/2015

Investigator(s): Melody Cook (PI) and Rebekka King
Investigator(s) Email: mhc2s@mtmail.mtsu.edu; rebekka.king@mtsu.edu
Department: Department of Philosophy
Protocol Title: "Unmarried Mormon Women in Tennessee "
Protocol ID: 15-326

Dear Investigator(s),

The MTSU Institutional Review Board (IRB), or its' representative, has reviewed the research proposal identified above. The MTSU IRB or its representative has determined that the study poses minimal risk to participants and qualifies for an EXPEDITED review under 45 CFR 46.110 and 21 CFR 56.110 within the category (7) *Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior*. This approval is valid for one year from the date of this letter for 20 (TWENTY) participants and it expires on 6/13/2016.

Any unanticipated harms to participants or adverse events must be reported to the Office of Compliance at (615) 494-8918 within 48 hours of the incident. Any change(s) to this protocol must be approved by the IRB. The MTSU HRP defines a "researcher" as someone who works with data or has contact with participants. Anyone meeting this definition needs to be listed on the protocol and needs to complete the required training. New researchers can be amended to this protocol by submitting an Addendum request researchers to the Office of Compliance before they begin to work on the project.

Completion of this protocol MUST be notified to the Office of Compliance. A "completed research" refers to a protocol in which no further data collection or analysis is carried out. This protocol can be continued up to THREE years by submitting annual Progress Reports prior to expiration. Failure to request for continuation will automatically result in cancellation of this protocol and you will not be able to collect or use any new data.

All research materials must be retained by the PI or the faculty advisor (if the PI is a student) for at least three (3) years after study completion. Subsequently, the researcher may destroy the data in a manner that maintains confidentiality and anonymity. IRB reserves the right to modify, change or cancel the terms of this letter without prior notice. Be advised that IRB also reserves the right to inspect or audit your records if needed.

Sincerely,

Institutional Review Board
Middle Tennessee State University

IRBN001

Version 1.0

Revision Date 05.11.2015