



The Relief Society General Presidency at General Conference in April 2024 — J. Anette Dennis, left, President Camille N. Johnson and Kristin M. Yee.

## 'We consult, but we don't lead'

### Top women's leaders are "outsiders" in the Latter-day Saint hierarchy

Female ordination may be the only way to erase the gender gap, writer says, but even that doesn't guarantee equality.

By PEGGY FLETCHER STACK and DAVID NOYCE

I came as a surprise to Latter-day Saint feminist April Young-Bennett that the faith's top women's leaders don't meet separately with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints' governing First Presidency or even an apostle "liaison" like their predecessors.

Instead, they have joined "executive councils," with two apostles and up to 10 other men.

"I wish I were more shocked," said Young-Bennett, a writer with Exponent II, a magazine for Latter-day Saint women. "But every time I hear that Mormon women lack some kind of a power or some kind of an access, it's not such a shock, because we hear them lacking power and access a lot."

For more than a decade, Young-Bennett, who was involved with the Ordain Women movement, has seen the evolving changes for Latter-day Saints women up close.

Here are excerpts, edited for length and clarity, from her recent interview on The Salt Lake Tribune's "Mormon Land" podcast in which Young-Bennett addresses the lack of women's power and prestige and whether either could be enhanced short of — or by — female ordination.

#### What do you think of the top women's leaders being on these executive councils?

It's absolutely vital that women be on these councils. If you have a council that's completely composed of men, they are interested in women's opinions and they might call them in for feedback. But that's really not a great way for women to participate, because women are not involved in the brainstorming process that happens at the beginning. So their ideas might not even be considered. And they're not involved in the decision-making process that happens in the end. Women need to be there, at the table, the entire time. So it's important they be on these councils. That said, there's really no reason why that should be instead of meeting with the [First] Presidency. Obviously, a good manager does both, right? They have their team meetings where they meet with the whole team; they also meet with their employees individually.



These six women were the first to be appointed as international area organization advisers for Europe. They are, clockwise from top left: Traci De Marco from the United Kingdom; Julia Wondra from Austria; Ghislaine Simonet from France; Letícia dos Santos Rudloff from Spain; Sibylle Fingert from Germany; and Ann-Mari Lindberg from Denmark.

#### A big sticking point continues to be the shortage of women who speak at General Conference. What could remedy that?

There's no doctrinal reason why we have to limit conference talks to these nine women [general presidencies of the women's Relief Society, Young Women for teenage girls and children's Primary]. That is a tradition that has gone on for ages. There is nothing in the scriptures that says these are the only women who are eligible to talk in conference. Actually, we have examples from the past where women who did not fit into those nine callings were invited to speak. I would love to see a broader solution, where there's simply more women in leadership overall.... It's a great thing that we now have Seventies more involved, because now that we have such a broader group of men who have this authority within the church, we can see more demographic perspectives, people from different countries, different races, different ethnicities. We should have an equal number of women who are in these advanced callings in the church participating in councils and giving talks in General Conference.

#### When women were added to the executive councils in 2015, what did that mean to you?

I was pleased to see them there and for the symbolism of what that meant that these decisions aren't just for men. It was a step up. But the way they've set it up, they don't have a lot of power on these councils. They're outranked by every other person sitting there because

really more like consultants than leaders. That's a big deal. Because it's not that we don't value consultants, we do. But a consultant is not really part of the organization. Consultants can't advance within the organization. They can't supervise or hire or choose who their employees are. And, even though they give important recommendations and feedback, they don't make the decisions. They don't own the business. And it's concerning when church is a place where women are outsiders.... where we consult, but we don't lead.

#### How could the church better integrate women into its leadership hierarchy?

If you really want women to be fully integrated into the leadership of the church, those women need to equally rank the men. I honestly don't think that that will happen until women are ordained and they're incorporated into the same hierarchy that men are. Men in our church need the experience of reporting to a woman. It's not just that we women need to have the opportunity to report to women but also men. How will men ever respect women if they are never, in their entire church experience, called on to listen to a woman even in terms of being accountable to her?

What about actions like dismissing women leaders from the stand, a successful program in Northern California for a decade?

That's the risk that you have when you set up a situation in which men are the only ones in

the hierarchy and women are over here as consultants, outsiders. Every kind of step we gain, every improvement that we have, is completely at risk. It could be taken away at any moment by our male leaders. If we really want any progress we make to be safe, be secure, we need representatives of women who have equal power to men who are there and included in that decision-making process. We can't just have our ideas vetoed at any moment by any male person.

#### Is ordaining women really the only way to truly balance the scales?

Ordination wouldn't do it on its own. If they announced today, "Surprise, we're ordaining women," I'd be like, "Yay," and we'd have a big party. It would not fix gender inequality in the church, because it's just one necessary step. Without it, you can't get all the way there. If you look at these councils, and every male person in the room outranks them, we're never going to have equality that way.

#### Short of female ordination, are there other things the church could do for greater gender equity?

Definitely, to use an old missionary term, trying to create equity without women's ordination is "less effective." I don't know if you read that old white handbook we used to have. But there are definitely things you can do. I mean, just looking at the things that we've talked about today, OK. Instead of saying these are the nine eligible women, we can expand that. You mentioned there's already women in other countries, unfortunately not in the United States, who are working in high-level consulting callings. What if they were actually on these councils? What if they were given authority to participate in those that would be helpful? What if they were invited to speak in General Conference, so that we didn't just have to have these nine women taking turns, but we had as many women as men taking turns on the stand and having proportionate representation there? That would definitely help. So there's definitely steps we can take along the way.

#### It seems like the General Relief Society Presidency is getting much more involved in leading out on the church's humanitarian efforts. What are your thoughts on this?

Well, we don't know who they are.... So what does that mean when we have a bunch of women who are working and doing excellent work, doing a lot of work, but they're all accountable only to men and never to women? Well, that sets them up better to be, well, essentially, spokespeople for the brethren as opposed to advocates for women.

#### Under the current system, what would you like to see the general Relief Society president do?

I would love for her to push back when the brethren announce something that seems like it might not be good for women. She doesn't need to say women but I would love her taking her 15 minutes of fame, her short time when she is out there, to actually speak on behalf of women. For example, recently, I assume it was the brethren who chose garment wearing as an initiative that they care about right now, and they're making a big deal. Well, garment wearing is an initiative that has a much bigger effect on women than it does on men. They've had our female leaders acting as spokespeople on their behalf talking about this issue, and we can't tell whether this is what they sincerely believe or if this is what they are instructed to say because they're accountable to these male leaders.

In these councils, where they're vastly outnumbered, they're going to have to be even louder than any of those men in the room would have to be. They're going to have to be making their force known, making their power known and really talking loudly. The good thing is, even though women are leaders, they're wonderful people and powerful personalities [with] a lot of potential. Even within the system we have, even though women are leaders, I would love to see them do that.

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