

Latter-day Saint women need a platform where they can safely — and freely — speak their minds

Social media fills some of that role, but those outlets carry risks from haters.

Nearly three months later, the speech by general Relief Society first counselor J. Anette Dennis about the power and authority of Latter-day Saint women in the church continues to create a stir.

In the immediate aftermath, thousands upon thousands of members, mostly women, commented on the Instagram post by The Church of Jesus of Latter-day Saints about the sermon, prompting Dennis herself to respond and thank the masses for reaching out.

Never before have I witnessed so many Latter-day Saint women speak with one another and to their general leaders about how the church impacts their lives.

NATALIE BROWN

Indeed, mainstream Latter-day Saint women are more typically noted and praised for their silence on issues pertaining to women's status in the church. Women who desire change are often dismissed as a disgruntled minority whose yearnings are inappropriate or entitled. For example, then-



Anette Dennis
■ Speech about power and authority of women creates a stir.

church President Gordon B. Hinckley famously stated on "Larry King Live" that women were not "complaining" about lacking in the priesthood. In this instance, Hinckley fell into the worn pattern of delegitimizing female desire by framing it in the language of complaint. His assumption about women, however, was based partly on lack of information, because Latter-day Saint women have no effective way to directly communicate with their leaders.

We cannot truly know what Latter-day women think about most issues pertaining to the church as long as many risk being potentially threatened with harassment, church discipline, loss of welfare assistance, breakups of the marriages on which they financially depend, or ridicule when they speak up or step out of line. In such a context, expressing opinions and desires is a calculated and often claustrophobic exercise in adhering to and pushing the boundaries of prescribed conversation under the gaze of male authority.



RICK EGAN / The Salt Lake Tribune

Latter-day Saint faithful walk to the Conference Center for a women's session of General Conference in 2022. Tribune guest columnist Natalie Brown argues Latter-day Saint women need a way to safely and freely speak out within the global church.

Finding a forum online

Like many women, I turned to conversations on social media because I had no other effective way to express my opinions to men with authority to make changes. While members are encouraged to work through their bishops or stake presidents, they have no way of being heard through official channels should any leader in the chain of command disagree with their concerns. Too often, local lay leaders are part of the problem. This structure is particularly ineffective for making visible women's concerns, because the leaders with the power to enact most reforms are men.

The internet, by contrast, can potentially amplify all voices. It remains, however, an unrepresentative and imperfect mechanism for meaningful discussion partly because of the hostility directed toward women brave enough to share their concerns online. Some of this hostility takes the form of the routine dismissal that male and female members too often inflict on one another: Women telling other women that their concerns are not valid because they feel equal. Women being labeled as "complainers" for raising concerns or expressing reforms. Men questioning whether a woman's personal experience, in fact, occurred.

Increasingly, however, hostility on social media has moved beyond

routine and important disagreement to harassment targeted at individuals, leaving many feeling unsafe. Sometimes, for example, women are told by anonymous voices, some of whom assert to be acting with priesthood authority, that they will be struck down by God. In a society in which gendered and gun violence is constantly in the news, this harassment leads to a pervasive feeling of anxiety as to if and when harassment might cross the line into something more. As allusions to violence have become routine in the political sphere, it has become more difficult to distinguish serious threats to safety from rhetorical bluster.

Speaking about gender in connection with the church is particularly likely to elicit misogynistic and threatening comments. The Salt Lake Tribune has reported on the #DezNat (Deseret Nation) movement, which is unaffiliated with the church but seeks to defend its often anonymous participants' interpretations of Latter-day Saint practices. Researchers Amy Chapman of Teachers College at Columbia University, and Spencer Greenhalgh of the University of Kentucky studied the movement and found that "many of the posts were aimed at gender and women's issues." Greenhalgh told The Tribune, "A lot of conversations and complaints I've heard about DezNat focus on questions of politics and race, but it was clear to [us] that gender and sexuality were also major themes in DezNat postings. That's especially important because, while the church has encouraged members to take steps against racism and has condemned

white nationalism and political violence, it's harder to tell whether the church would disapprove of the aggressive stances on gender and sexuality that we saw in our posts."

Chilling effect

It is unsurprising that women are often the targets of such posts within a religious culture that gives them less formal governing authority. While the church has disassociated itself from online extremism and encouraged civility, it has disciplined members for speaking about the question of women and the priesthood. Most recently, its highly publicized excommunication of Ordain Women co-founder Kate Kelly cast a chill across members' efforts to understand women's relationship to the priesthood.

It is disingenuous to point to women's silence as evidence that they do not desire the priesthood while also threatening to cast those who advocate for their ordination. In such a context, women may be told that they might lose their membership if they do not conform to the proper script. Latter-day Saint women know that they are susceptible to being labeled as apostate or reported to church leaders by members who seek to police their sincere questions.

A community that cares about women needs to provide platforms in which they can safely and freely

speak. Within the church, that might mean a forum in which members can privately provide feedback directly to general church leaders. Within the online communities adjacent to the church, it might mean agreement to adhere to community norms, moderation of comments engaged in explicitly violent speech or harassment targeting individuals, and rejecting incentives to create harmful clickbait. Members would do well to listen to church President Russell M. Nelson's calls for greater civility and stop engaging in rhetoric that perpetuates hate and dismisses people.

How we share the gospel is as important as the contents of our message.

And, yet, it seems probable that these conditions will not substantially improve in the foreseeable future. For those of us who sometimes feel scared to speak due to patriarchal structure and harassment, it is important to ponder whether we are overestimating the cost of a scolding by a local leader or an encounter with a troll and underestimating the cost of

our silence, particularly if it contributes to family, friends and future generations leaving the church because they feel alone in their concerns and see no hope for change.

Natalie Brown is a Latter-day Saint based in Colorado. She is writing in her personal capacity. Her views do not necessarily reflect those of the church or her employer.



Kate Kelly
■ Excommunication further clouded women's relationship with priesthood.

Latter-day Saints can be better peacemakers — and here's how to do it, author says in book

By TAMARRA KEMSELEY

The Salt Lake Tribune

David Ostler is tired of fighting. Friends, family, strangers — Ostler has argued with them all over one issue or another in recent years, and to what end? It's not as though the debates have been productive, and their costs have been steep.

"I've had conversations with people who are really good people who don't see the world the way I do," the retired business executive said. "And we end up alienated from each other." A former bishop (by leader of a congregation), stake president (lay regional leader) and mission president for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Ostler was tempted to give up on meaningful dialogue with people he disagreed with.

But the author of "Bridges: Ministering to Those Who Question" couldn't stomach the idea of simply not talking about hot-button topics ever again. Doing so, he said, "yields the ground" on important issues with real impact on people's lives.

"I felt," he said, "like I needed to be able to engage in positive ways on

contentious issues."

It's a tall order and one he explores in detail in his new book, "Healing Our Divides: Answering the Savior's Call to Be Peacemakers." The practical guide is stuffed with tips ("eliminate political labels that demean") and tools meant to empower readers who, like him, aren't satisfied with simply talking about sports and the weather for the rest of their lives. The Salt Lake Tribune spoke with him about what he learned through the process and what peacemaking means to him. (The following has been edited for length and clarity.)

What was your motivation for writing this book?

I see this growing problem in the world, which is we have a hard time dealing with people who have different beliefs. They become our enemies. We don't know how to talk with them. We view them as dangerous.

The level of political polarization has never been this high in my lifetime. The ability to tolerate violence as a legitimate way to achieve one's political objectives in the United



ILLUSTRATION BY CHRISTOPHER CHERINGTON / The Salt Lake Tribune

States is as high today as it was in Northern Ireland in the '70s. We're on the cusp of possible bad futures. And then I worry about the generation that we're raising in this environment of polarization and conflict. I worry about what it does for them.

What is peacemaking? And what is it not?

Peacemaking is being able to engage in today's difficult issues in a way that doesn't create alienation or separation. It doesn't mean that we avoid conflict. It doesn't mean we avoid topics that might be controversial, but that we approach them with respect and dignity and in a way that allows for differences.

When Jesus said blessed are the peacemakers, I don't think, in historical context, he was trying to create a group of people who could cooperate in a bipartisan way. They lived in a Roman rule. There was no political process for individual engagement. He was defining the individual pathway of discipleship that includes

peacemaking as a way of individual righteousness, not as a way to solve the problems of the world.

It's the way we affirm our discipleship, by doing the hard work inside our own hearts to understand why we might be prone to contention, to violence, and in the process, we become what Jesus wants us to be.

Is there a particularly Latter-day Saint approach or way to think about peacemaking?

We understand our divine parentage. We're all family. None of us are lesser than anyone. We literally bind ourselves together as humanity when we are baptized. And, at least for me, that includes not just a community of fellow believers but the community that I live in.

Our divine potential also matters. There's divinity within us all, and that includes the person that votes for this party or that party or has this particular belief or not.

We also believe there's a unique part of us that's always been there

and that causes us to be different, and that difference is an essential element of who we are as people.

And then there are some cultural things that should help us with peacemaking. We send missionaries out into all other parts of the world, and they just don't see those labels we use to polarize ourselves when they're out talking to people about eternal things.

What are some of the stumbling blocks Latter-day Saints face as a people when it comes to peacemaking?

We suffer a bit from certainty bias. We feel very enlightened about spiritual things, and we might transfer that feeling to other issues, particularly political issues. When we talk about having a unique truth in the church, that can create a level of superiority that means we're maybe less willing to honor the way other people feel.

How do you make peace with someone who would deny the rights and dignity of the marginalized?

I could never find any common ground with someone who wanted to roll the clock back on women's rights, civil rights and people who want to deprive marginalized groups of power. But a conflict that I can't avoid. But I can live in that conflict in a way that's grounded in the principles of peacemaking. That means not sweeping our differences under the rug but believing people are sincere, that something in their experiences has brought them to the positions they hold and that the spark of divinity is within them.