

SEEKING EQUALITY IN THE LDS CHURCH: ACTIVISM FOR WOMEN'S ORDINATION

An interview with Kate Kelly



In the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church or Mormons), boys may be ordained into the Aaronic priesthood at age twelve, and by age eighteen young men may be ordained into the Melchizedek priesthood. The LDS Church has a married priesthood. A male adult priesthood holder may become bishop and exercise leadership of a congregation. Ordination to the priesthood is necessary for men to exercise any type of leadership in the LDS Church. On October 5, 2013 about 250 Mormon women with an organization called Ordain Women stood outside the Tabernacle in Temple Square in Salt Lake City, Utah. As they watched boys and men enter the Tabernacle to attend the Priesthood Session, each woman respectfully asked the representative of the LDS Church if she could enter, and each woman was told no. Husbands supportive of women's ordination asked the Church representative if their wives could go with them inside to attend the Priesthood Session, and they were told no. Ordain Women members similarly requested entrance to the Priesthood Session in 2014. On June 16, 2014, Kate Kelly, the founder of Ordain Women, published an op-ed in *The Guardian* revealing that leaders of her former LDS congregation in Virginia had put her on informal probation, which meant she was prohibited from speaking in an LDS church. On June 22, 2014, the male leaders of Kelly's former congregation met and decided to excommunicate her for her activities with Ordain Women. On June 28, 2014, the Office of the First Presidency of the LDS Church, the highest governing body of the Church, which consists of twelve Apostles and a leading three-

person presidency including the Prophet and his two Counselors, all of whom are men who hold the priesthood and are considered prophets, issued a statement on the LDS Church's policy prohibiting the ordination of women. It states that men and women are equal in the eyes of God, but only men are ordained to the priesthood. This statement makes public for the first time the First Presidency's understanding of apostasy: "Apostasy is repeatedly acting in clear, open, and deliberate public opposition to the Church or its faithful leaders, or persisting, after receiving counsel, in teaching false doctrine." A poll by Pew Research Center in 2011 indicated that only 8 percent of Mormon women supported women's ordination to the LDS priesthood. The LDS Church was reported to have more than 15 million members worldwide. In March 2014 a Facebook page was opened for Mormon Women Stand for women who support the status quo. As of October 22, 2014 it had 32,196 likes. On the same date, the Facebook page for Ordain Women had 5,357 likes.

Kate Kelly, welcome to the WRSP Forum!

WRSP: What is the nature of the priesthood in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints? Who is ordained and what are the functions of the priests in the LDS Church?

Kelly: The Church is run by a lay clergy. Only male Mormons are ordained, but ALL active Mormon men are ordained, nearly without exception. Ordination is required for any position of leadership over a congregation or region, or to be a "General Authority" in the church's highest leadership structure. Women are permitted to lead other women and children, but all of the roles given to women in the Church are always supervised by a man. There are no positions with autonomous decision-making power for women.

Since there is a ban in place against women being ordained, women cannot perform any ordinances like baptism, laying on of hands or other sacred rituals that take place in Mormon temples. Mormon women also do not have any control over any money in the LDS Church, including the budgets for their own auxiliaries. As a result, the programs for young men in the Church are well funded and the programs for young women receive far less resources and money. Mormon men in leadership positions are in charge of the spiritual wellbeing of congregants and must interview them regarding "worthiness." Because women are not allowed to fill any leadership position in the congregation, adult men are tasked with privately interviewing young teenage girls about their "worthiness" including their sex lives. Many see this as a huge problem and potential liability. Those are just a tiny inkling of the problems that arise from preventing any women to serve in a leadership capacity.

WRSP: What is the purpose of interviewing everyone in the congregation to determine their "worthiness"? How often are such interviews conducted?

Kelly: To enter into Mormon temples, which are sacred spaces reserved for special ordinances like marriage and baptisms for the dead, you must have what is called a “temple recommend.” It is literally a card you carry with a barcode on it that is proof you are “worthy” to enter into the temple. The interviews are conducted to assure leaders that you tithe, are sexually pure and follow the rules and commandments of the Church. If you violate one of the commandments, or do not pay a full tithe (which is 10 percent), your temple recommend will be revoked and you will no longer be permitted to enter.

WRSP: Why did you found Ordain Women? Why do you think it is important for Mormon women to be ordained priests in the LDS Church?

Kelly: I founded Ordain Women because any institution that underutilizes over 50 percent of its population is missing out. Mormon women, like myself, are capable, talented people who have a lot more to give. There is no reason to exclude us from serving in the Church based on our gender. I see Ordain Women as an endeavor of radical self-respect. I respect my sisters and myself too much to remain silent on this issue. No one needs to tell me that I am equal. I know I am equal, but that is not adequately reflected in the institution. While a handful of brave Mormon women have written and spoken on the topic of female ordination over the years, there was no concrete action or agitation on the issue. I thought to myself, “Well someone has got to do something about this, and it might as well be me.”

WRSP: What is the decision-making structure of Ordain Women? How are decisions made about its activities?

Kelly: Ordain Women is a totally grassroots, volunteer-run organization. We have a democratic, horizontal decision-making structure led by a rotating Executive Board of 10 members. We have a leadership committee of around 35 people and various committees to carry out various tasks. We have an Action Committee to lead direct actions, a Communications Committee, a Social Media Committee, a Volunteer Management Committee, a Long Term Strategy Committee, an International Committee and a Male Allies Committee. Mormon women are extremely adept community organizers! We make decisions about our activities very carefully after much deliberation. It is very refreshing to be part of a women-led organization where we engage with each other in such a vigorous way.... Really, that is a diplomatic way of saying that we do NOT always all agree on everything. But, that’s what’s wonderful about Ordain Women. Within the LDS Church this type of rigorous debate and bold opinions by women are not part of the culture. In a way we are preparing ourselves to hold our own once the Church wakes up to the fact that women can and should contribute equally within the institution.

WRSP: What are the activities of Ordain Women?

Kelly: From the very start, the core of Ordain Women has been in-person direct action. We want to communicate our message with our words, but also with our bodies: men and women are not equal in our Church and we think that should change. We also have a very vibrant website, <http://ordainwomen.org/>, with profiles of average, everyday Mormon people who think that women should be ordained. Many things are said *about* Mormon women by men and ordainwomen.org is a way for us to take control of our own narrative and tell our stories ourselves.

Social media facilitates a large component of what we do. We have very active Facebook groups as well as Twitter, Instagram and Pinterest accounts. Our meetings are recorded and posted online to our YouTube channel. We also have a series of six Conversations that are designed for women to do at home in local groups to guide them through thinking about gender inequality in the LDS Church and a more gender-inclusive future. These Conversations also have an interactive, online component via Google Hangouts. We do live sessions and people can Tweet, comment, chat or email us questions. We try to be as interactive as possible with social media.

WRSP: You are a human rights attorney. What sorts of work do you do as a human rights attorney, and how does it affect your work with Ordain Women?

Kelly: When I graduated from law school, I began working in international human rights litigation. My main focus is litigating cases before regional human rights bodies like the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights. I have had the opportunity to work with some amazingly courageous people around the world, such as women in Zimbabwe who are routinely arrested, beaten and tortured for asking for simple concessions and to be treated equally. I have worked closely with a human rights defender in Western Sahara who is called the Gandhi of her people, Aminatou Haidar (b. 1966). Working with these women gave me a lot of pause. I began to wonder, "I'm doing all this work around the world but what am I doing for my own community?" I realized that I needed to do something to stand up for my sisters and for myself. The women I work with in my professional life taught me what this type of intimate courage looks like.

WRSP: What are the gender roles that have been promoted by the LDS Church? Are these changing, and if so, in what ways?

Kelly: Gender roles in the Mormon Church are very strictly outlined in a document called "The Family: A Proclamation to the World" (1995). It explicitly states, "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." The solitary role allocated to women is also clear, "Mothers are primarily responsible for the nurture of their children." In my view the LDS Church is deeply entrenched and desperately clinging to an outdated, idealized and oppressive worldview that values women exclusively for their

childbearing and childrearing capabilities. I do not think this is really changing and if it is, it's not changing fast enough!

In fact, the golden age of Mormon women was really at the turn of the century (the nineteenth to the twentieth century). We had much more autonomy, voice and leadership capacity then, in spite of the fact that polygamy was widely practiced at the time. Many Mormon women were prominent suffragists on the national stage and Mormon women were the first to vote in the country. The first-ever female State senator in the United States was a Mormon woman in Utah, Martha Hughes Cannon (1857-1932). If anything, gender policing in the LDS Church culture has become much more strict over the years.

Very recently a few cosmetic changes have been taking place within Mormonism, but they are just that: cosmetic. A deep, fundamental shift needs to occur in order for the organization to become an open and inclusive place for women. That will not happen without ordination.

WRSP: Is there a Mormon feminist theology? If so, what is it like?

Kelly: Mormons believe in Heavenly Parents, Father and Mother. We are not taught about Her and are often warned that She is too "sacred" to mention or discuss, but She is there. I think the doctrine of Heavenly Mother is like the deep oceanic trenches of Mormon theology. It's largely unexplored, but holds a great deal of potential and beauty.

WRSP: Do you believe that LDS Church members in the United States and other countries are ready for the gender role changes that would be involved in admitting women to the LDS priesthood?

Kelly: The wonderful thing about Mormonism is that we have a very flexible structure and an open canon. The revelation to end the ban on the priesthood for black men and the ban on black women attending the Mormon temples was widely accepted almost immediately in 1978 when a revelation came that racist exclusionary practice was to end. Likewise, I think the role of women in the LDS Church could change overnight and 99 percent of Mormons would accept it, if it came in the form of a revelation from the current Prophet. We are a very hardy and adaptable people. We could integrate female ordination into our worldview in an instant.

Would there still be work to do? Yes, of course. Black men were ordained in 1978 and black women gained access to the temple then and we are still dealing with the painful legacy of institutionalized racism within Mormonism to this day. Decades and decades of sexism are not going to be erased overnight, but from an organizational standpoint, the policy could literally change from one minute to the next. The top-down structure of the LDS Church is very helpful in that way. If something comes from Salt Lake, it can be quickly absorbed worldwide.

I served my LDS mission in Barcelona, Spain and I currently live in Nairobi, Kenya and I think the urgent need for female ordination is particularly acute in countries and areas where there is a dearth of

adult male candidates for leadership positions. In Spain, there are many congregations where there are plenty of women and only a tiny handful of men to run the congregation. This overtaxes the men and underutilizes the women in a way that just doesn't make organizational, spiritual, or emotional sense.

WRSP: How would the LDS Church and Mormon families change if women were ordained priests?

Kelly: Because the men-as-leaders paradigm is so ingrained in Mormon culture, the change would be momentous if women were ordained. The current practice is that male people (even young boys) "preside" over women, because women do not have the priesthood. Women would be able to take their place as true equals in the home as well as at church. Female ordination would take a lot of pressure off men to run Mormon congregations alone, again, particularly in areas where there are very few men and plenty of women willing and capable of serving as leaders.

Mormon women would be valued not only for motherhood, but for leadership capacity and dedication to the Church in the same ways that men are currently.

WRSP: In 2011 a Pew Research poll reported that only 8 percent of Mormon women wanted the LDS Church to ordain women into the priesthood. Why do you think this number was so low? Do you believe that the percentage remains low today in 2014? Do you think it will remain low in the future?

Kelly: The 2011 Pew poll was highly problematic for many reasons. It was obviously not a Mormon researcher who wrote the question about ordination. Even as the founder of Ordain Women, the way the question was worded, I likely would have answered in the negative. They erroneously interpreted their results to indicate that many women "oppose" female ordination. So, I do not think those results are accurate. In addition, Ordain Women broke this conversation wide open in 2013. Before we launched, you could literally count on one hand the Mormons who publicly advocated for the ordination of women. The conversation has completely changed in such a short time span, that it's really important to get new, accurate data. And again, one thing that cannot be reflected in polling data is the fact that the LDS Church is not a democracy. If Thomas S. Monson (b. 1927), the current President and therefore Prophet, were to say that women could be ordained, nearly all Mormons would immediately accept and integrate this teaching into practice without delay.

WRSP: What does excommunication mean practically and theologically in the LDS Church?

Kelly: Excommunication means that you are no longer a member of the Church. All of your ordinances are voided: your baptism, your confirmation, your endowment (temple covenant), your sealing (marriage) to your spouse. In the minds of LDS Church leaders, they are literally kicking you out of heaven, because only people baptized Mormon can get into the highest heaven in their eyes. Practically it means that I can no longer participate in Sunday worship, I am literally banned from speaking at

church. I can no longer tithe. I cannot attend weddings or other ordinance ceremonies in Mormon temples. I am not only branded a non-Mormon outsider, I am considered dangerous to many orthodox Mormons. It is as if I have a scarlet A on my forehead. A for "Apostate."

WRSP: Who excommunicated you, and what was the rationale given for your excommunication?

Kelly: The Bishop of my former ward in Vienna, Virginia excommunicated me. His name is Mark Harrison. He's just a regular guy. He's an attorney for Exxon-Mobile, and in his free time he volunteers to run a congregation of several hundred people. A man in my position would have had to be tried by a higher church leader called a Stake President who presides over several congregations. The trial of a man would have to be held by 15 people. However, women need only be tried by only three people (all men): the Bishop and his two counselors. In my case, one of the counselors recused himself because he is a full-time employee of LDS Church Public Affairs. So, another random man from the congregation whom I don't know at all stepped in to judge me.

I was tried *en absentia* after I had already moved away from the area, so I was not privy to the reasoning or rationale. The email I received informing me of my excommunication stated that I was guilty of "conduct unbecoming of a member of the church," which is fantastically vague.

WRSP: Explain for non-Mormons what the First Presidency in the LDS Church is. What is the position of the First Presidency on your excommunication?

Kelly: The President of the Church is its highest leader and prophet. It's the approximate analogous position to the Pope in the Roman Catholic Church, but Mormons view him as the modern day Moses or Lehi (Prophet in the Book of Mormon). He has two counselors and they form the First Presidency. I am appealing my conviction to my Stake President (regional leader) and, if unsuccessful, I will then appeal to the First Presidency. They have not made any statement on my case to date. The current Prophet, Thomas S. Monson, is 87 years old and not in good health, and it remains to be seen whether they will reply to my appeal. It's totally up to their discretion, but I think I've got a pretty good case.

WRSP: How has excommunication affected you and members of your family?

Kelly: My parents have also been targeted for sanctions by their local congregation in Provo, Utah due to my excommunication. Provo is the number one most highly concentrated population of Mormons in the world, so they are suffering a lot more than I am. I was initially very devastated by the violent and abusive nature of excommunication. But, as I live in Nairobi, Kenya now, I am relatively insulated from the negative reactions of others. In some ways, I remain unscathed. I stood up for myself and for gender equality. There is nothing I would do to change what I have done. Many young women have left the LDS Church due to gender inequality. If anything, I think the Church is really missing out by not having me,

and other bright, talented young women as members, and not the other way around.

WRSP: Why was John Dehlin disciplined shortly after you were excommunicated? Do you think that his being disciplined and your being excommunicated are related, and if so, how?

Kelly: John Dehlin is a dear friend and his discipline procedure is still pending. I believe we received notice of discipline on the same day. He has a podcast called Mormon Stories that tackles tough issues within the community and is a staunch ally to the LGBTIA community. Yet, there has been no decision one way or the other in his case, to this day. John was a very early supporter of Ordain Women and of me personally and he has a profile on www.ordainwomen.org. His support of Ordain Women was also mentioned by the leaders as one reason he was being disciplined, in addition to his podcast and support for LGBTIA persons. Disciplinary procedures are extremely opaque, so I doubt we'll ever know concretely if the two events were a coordinated attack or related in any way. The timing seems suspect, but again, the process is too opaque to know for certain.

WRSP: What kinds of support have you received from Mormons as a result of your excommunication? Have you experienced shunning or condemnation from Mormons?

Kelly: There has been both an outpouring of love and support, as well as an outpouring of condemnation from the Mormon community. I have felt very buoyed up by supporters who have reached out to express love and solidarity. Over 1,000 people took the time to write letters of support on my behalf to Bishop Harrison who excommunicated me. Those letters were heartbreaking and beautiful to read.

However, there is a very deeply entrenched culture of victim-blaming within Mormonism. Even prominent CEO of Deseret Book, the largest LDS book publisher, Sheri Dew recently said in a talk at Claremont Graduate University, "I hope Kate knows what she has given up." It is common among orthodox Mormons to say that I "chose" to be excommunicated, in spite of the fact that I was tried *en absentia* and against my will for simply stating a fact. The entire excommunication process is one filled with the language of abusive relationships. "You made me do this to you." "I am doing this (horribly abusive and violent act) out of love." In fact, within Mormonism the trials for excommunication are literally called "Courts of Love." That nomenclature is dripping with irony. What I experienced was clearly spiritual abuse, but many Mormons insist on thinking and saying I brought this upon myself. It says so much about the culture and about the exact reason we need to stamp out sexism. Women have to be extremely brave to tell the truth out loud and then they are severely punished by the community for doing so. Houston, we have a problem!

WRSP: Have you received expressions of support from women and men in other denominations? If so, how has this support been expressed?

Kelly: I have received many messages of solidarity from people of other faiths. My most vocal interfaith support has come from the Women's Ordination Conference, an organization of feminist Catholic women working for ordination of women as priests in the Roman Catholic Church. The Catholic women know something of excommunication themselves and we are uniquely tied in solidarity on the ordination front. It is fascinating to learn of the struggles of feminists in all major faith traditions. We all have a long way to go.

WRSP: What sorts of parallels and differences do you see between the situations of women in other Christian denominations and the LDS Church?

Kelly: There are many, many similarities to women in multiple faith traditions and Mormon women. When we meet together, as we did on August 26, 2013 for an interfaith fast called "Equal in Faith," I keep discovering how very much we do indeed have in common. One of the differences is that within Mormonism ALL men are ordained. So, with the female ordination question, we are not talking about a handful of Mormon women who would be dedicated full-time to ministry, as in some other faith traditions. We are talking about every, single Mormon woman and girl on the planet. Another difference is that we have a living prophet within Mormonism. There is no voting. Our ninth article of faith states that God will "yet reveal many great important things...." From one day to the next, the Prophet of the Mormon Church could reveal new doctrine, as has happened on several occasions in the past. That new doctrine trumps what was said in the past.

WRSP: After your excommunication, you issued a statement asking LDS Church leaders to pray about the question of the ordination of Mormon women. What did you mean by making that request?

Kelly: We have said from day one of Ordain Women that we want our leaders to "prayerfully consider the ordination of women." This reflects the pattern of revelation that all Mormon people believe in, as outlined in Matthew 7:7, "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you."

WRSP: In a July 23, 2014 letter to church leaders in your former church in Virginia, you appealed your excommunication and asked that it be rescinded. What arguments did you give for the rescinding of the excommunication?

Kelly: You can read my appeal documents here: <http://ordainwomen.org/kate-kellys-appeal-to-her-stake-president/>

My good friend Nadine Hansen wrote the brief, but ironically she had to use a bootlegged copy of the Church Handbook of Instructions (the LDS Church legal canon) uploaded to the Internet by Wikileaks, because only male leaders are permitted to have access to the Handbook. Mormon women are not even

permitted to read the rules by which they are governed.

WRSP: What will you do if the excommunication is not rescinded?

Kelly: If my appeal is unsuccessful, I'll continue to live a happy, fulfilled life, as I have done up to this point. One thing I have definitely learned through this ordeal is that men do not control my happiness and they do not have the power to take away what I will not relinquish voluntarily. No person, man or woman, can come between you and God.

I will continue to tell the truth: men and women are not equal in our Church. My excommunication letter said I can be "re-baptized" after a year. However, I will not seek rebaptism, because that would require that I recant what I have said and written on the subject. I am unwilling to betray my own conscience or Mormon women in that way. I am confident history will vindicate me, and I am perfectly satisfied with that outcome. The leaders who excommunicated me are exercising unrighteous dominion and as a result, what they think they have taken from me, they have no power over.

WRSP: Has your excommunication affected your work with Ordain Women? If so, how?

Kelly: My excommunication has, in many ways, strengthened the organization. We have had many join us because what happened to me was the perfect illustration of why men and women are not equal in our Church. People realized in a new way that the leaders of the LDS Church are unwilling to acknowledge this reality in the twenty-first century.

WRSP: On July 24, 2014 nearly 500 Mormons resigned from the LDS Church to protest your excommunication and the disciplining of John Dehlin. What are your thoughts about their action?

Kelly: I think people should do what best helps them preserve mental and emotional health and wellbeing. If that involves leaving the LDS Church, they definitely should. However, they should not do so on my account. No one should look at me for clues on how to behave or what to do; they should look inside themselves. I think the entire exercise of Ordain Women is just that, like I said: an exercise in radical self respect. It's a way for Mormon women to learn to trust ourselves and our inner voices above the din of naysayers or status-quo maintainers. We have learned to speak for ourselves and act for ourselves, at all costs. I think that's what everyone should do. It is worth paying any price to live an authentic life.

WRSP: What are your plans for future activism for the cause of ordaining women in the LDS Church?

Kelly: I think many saw my excommunication as the end of the conversation on female ordination, but it is the very, very tip of the iceberg. This conversation has only just begun. We remain committed to in-person direct action to agitate for gender equality in the Mormon Church. That will take many forms

over the months and years to come. But, the success of our movement does not depend on the male leaders of the LDS Church. We are engaged in a truly transformative process and that transformation cannot be stymied by them or by anyone else. We are daughters of Heavenly Parents who love us, and we will continue to grow. We will teach our daughters what is taught to us in Mormon scripture, “all are alike unto God” (2 Nephi 26:33).

Kate Kelly, thank you for participating in the WRSP Forum!

Kate Kelly is a feminist Mormon, who despite being excommunicated by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in 2014 considers herself to be a faithful Mormon. She grew up in a Mormon family in Hood River, Oregon. Her father is a former bishop in the LDS Church. Kelly graduated from Brigham Young University in 2006 with a bachelor’s degree in political science. She was married in the Salt Lake Temple in Salt Lake City, Utah. She served a mission in Barcelona, Spain. She earned her law degree at American University Washington College of Law in 2012. In March 2013 she founded Ordain Women, which has a website at <http://ordainwomen.org/> and a Facebook page, both featuring profiles of women and men advocating the ordination of women in the LDS Church. She serves on the executive board of Ordain Women. She lived in Virginia from 2011 to 2014 where she attended the Mormon church that excommunicated her in 2014. She was living in Utah when she was excommunicated. She now lives with her husband in Nairobi, Kenya.

WRSP Interviewer:

Dr. Catherine Wessinger
