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# BY COMMON CONSENT

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## PREPPING FOR GENERAL CONFERENCE

Seldom has any run-up to general conference provided such a toothsome array of possible topics, given the anonymously authored series of clarifying "essays" on topics ranging from race to the historicity of the Book of Mormon, President Uchtdorf's strong endorsement of historical transparency, and whether women requesting access to priesthood meeting will be physically barred outside the gates on April 5. And that's not even counting Elder Oaks's creative re-definition of the "free exercise" of religion clause or Elder Tad Callister's "you get the man you dress for" modesty discourse, both of which were delivered at BYU-Idaho. (And why has BYU-I suddenly become the venue for what amounts to major policy statements?)

Wind-testing observers have hypothesized that cracking the door open on these traditionally ignored topics could open the door still further to stress "we have nothing to fear from the truth" or slamming it shut in what has often been the Church's traditional reaction to bad news: deny the message, punish the messenger, and crack down on "transparency." And how to appraise the fact that, for the first time, the Relief Society session will include any female age eight or over. What prompted this change? And how will it affect subjects and delivery? Will any of these topics make it into actual conference talks? And what will it mean if they do (or don't)?

Conference Critiquers will gather Monday,

April 7, at 6:30 p.m. in Conference Room A of the Salt Lake Main Library, 210 East 400 South to explore these and other topics.

Moderating the discussion will be Jennifer Bowen, a long-time conference observer and skilled moderator. She was born in Germany, while her father worked for the Boy Scouts. The family returned to the States when she was two. She grew up in St. George, Utah, and, at age eighteen, joined the army for two years as a Chaplain's Assistant. She spent one year in Seoul, South Korea, and seven months in Louisiana. She was honorably discharged as a Specialist. After her enlistment ended, Jennifer came to Salt Lake City to attend Westminster College. She graduated in 2009 with a B.A. in English, and a minor in performing music (flute). She then earned a master's of library science degree with Emporia State University. She has worked for the Sprague Branch of the city library for the past six and a half years. She enjoys reading, listening to music, and cross-stitching.

## WAS IT ONLY SIX MONTHS AGO?

The semi-annual Conference Critique of October 2013 discussed an explosive surplus of stimulating topics while moderator Paul Tinker attempted, with remarkable success, to organize the comments around into three topics (1) observations on themes, trends, and the general

environment in which conference occurred this fall; (2) interesting statistics; and (3) specific talks.

No one was surprised that missionary work received sustained and enthusiastic attention. It has been a conference staple since at least the days of President David O. McKay, but this season's catalogue of missionary talks seemed to concentrate on the new buzz-phrase of "hastening the work." One attendee reported that lowering the age obviously must have caused dislocation in wards and families--not only in timing but also in financial resources. There was no mention over the podium of these possible complications. Another attendee pointed out that the steady encouragement of members to find interested nonmembers and arrange for them to meet the missionaries "never included stories by General Authorities about how they invited nonmembers into their homes." Most attendees remember the classic stories of a couple of decades ago that began "I was sitting on a plane next to..." But it had been a long time since anyone had heard such a story.

Another seemingly new development for this conference--at least, observers had not noticed it earlier--was that General Authority wives were arranged in order so that, at the end of each session, they joined their husbands and exited hand in hand stage right. (President Monson was accompanied by a security man and his daughter, Ann Dobb.) Most of the General Authorities waved to the congregation, but the only wives who also waved were Harriet Uchtdorf and Patricia Holland, although camera cutaways may have prevented a more thorough catalogue.

Outside the building were many indications that the general environment was moving toward more inclusion: Building

Bridges, Wear Pants to Church, and a bloc of Affirmation representatives attending Music and the Spoken Word who were "overlooked in the opening announcements of visiting celebrities. After one of them pitched a fit," in the ecclesiastical language of the observer in question, "to the Public Affairs representatives, their presence was awkwardly and apologetically announced at the end of the broadcast, although not with the identifier, customary with the other groups that would have added Affirmation's subtitle as serving GLBT members.

The most electrifying "environmental impact" group was the Ordain Women event, in which several attendees had participated. It had been carefully organized, not as a protest but as a respectful request for tickets to the priesthood session. Organizers were prepared for several contingencies since they couldn't predict the Church's reaction; but between 170 men and women gathered, sang, listened to instructions about being courteous and orderly, and joined the march to the overflow session in the Tabernacle, many of them carrying cards with the names of men and women who wanted to be present but could not. "Proxy work!" exclaimed one participant.

There were occasional hecklers--all of them men--but several women reported having conversations with men as they waited in line. These men seemed genuinely curious about know what was happening and why. After the visually compelling image of women waiting patiently on the sideline while men and boys entered the tabernacle with standby tickets without even a pause, the women, still in an orderly line, approached the usher one by one and asked for admittance, only to be refused by a polite and smiling Doug Anderson, an employee of LDS Public Affairs, who was heard to say after the line closed that he'd never had to do anything so "uncomfortable."

Lorie Winder, one of the Ordain Women founders, reported that the women honestly thought they would be admitted to the tabernacle, where the meeting was being broadcast on television. But the visibility of the women and the individual rejections, person by person, meant that "strategically it couldn't have been better." The Church could not control or ignore what was happening.

"It was more emotional than many women expected," commented another participant. Some women wept as they were turned away. "Katie," who posted on Young Mormon Feminists, discovered that she began sobbing uncontrollably when she was turned away. She found an isolated spot next to the Tabernacle wall and struggled to regain control. Through the window, a man looked at her, his expression communicating what she interpreted as compassion and an attempt to comfort her. He was African American.

It is possible that women's issues were this conference's hot-button question, resulting in what several participants sensed as defensiveness about the topic. On the positive side, one observer pointed out that some General Authorities quoted some contemporary women leaders and auxiliary presidents, the first time he had noticed such a pattern. There has long been a conspicuous trend of General Authorities quoting each other and past General Authorities, but the reverse has not been true. The closest approach has been anonymous (a concerned visiting teacher) or semi-anonymous women's stories (President Monson's improbable story of Tiffany, saved by a loaf of homemade bread delivered at great inconvenience by a woman she barely knew), and family stories ("my wife Kathy, "Grandmother Swenson"). A related trend is the virtual absence in the addresses by women leaders of stories about their husbands. The pattern seems well-established, however, that two women auxiliary leaders will speak per conference, reinforced since April 2013 conference by two women who now give prayers.

Another popular theme was the persistent

hostility of "the Adversary" and alarmist warnings about the evils of the world. "The approach is always that we're going to hell in a handbasket, but the actual evils are limited in scope to what we might call First World concerns," commented one observer. "It's more restricted than that," interjected another. "I'd say they're Wasatch Bench concerns--moral issues like lying, stealing, but especially sex. Nothing about poverty, environmentalism, government gridlock, gun control..."

No one was surprised that paying tithing got many references including an entire talk by Elder David A. Bednar. His main point—that the blessing may be subtle "increased resilience" rather than improved finances—was puzzling. "If the blessings are so subtle," queried one participant, "how are you supposed to figure out that it comes from paying tithing? It just sounded to me like a more complicated and general way of saying 'Give us more money.'"

When it came to the second focus of the critique—statistics—two of the few reported at this conference were that "hastening the work" had increased the number of missionaries to 80,000 and that members (no differentiation of active from inactive) had topped 15 million. Commented one math-doer, "if we take the 15 million members and conservatively define 2-3% as the 18-21-year-old singles, there could be 450,000 missionaries, not 80,000. That raises the question of how many eligible members are actually going."

Ray Felsted, statistician supreme, reported that member growth in the United States was holding at 1%, but that the growth in stakes is 2.25%, almost certainly because stakes are comprising fewer wards—"eight or nine instead of twelve or thirteen." Membership in South America is dropping, particularly in Chile and Argentina, "but Brazil is making up for it, so on average South American growth is stable." He appraised unit growth as a more accurate measure of real growth. As of June 30, 2013, the United States count for wards and branches was 13,791 plus 15,246 outside the United

States, yielding an average number of members per unit in the United States as 461 but a per-unit average of 567 outside the United States. The average number of wards and branches per U.S. stake was 9.1, but 7.3 outside the United States.

Ray added that this total of wards and branches is "further complicated by the fact there are about 100 units in countries (like China, Viet Nam, Saudi Arabia, etc.) that are not published but whose membership is included in the total." There are also one or two hundred "groups," in which members meet regularly but lack enough leadership (ordained men) to act as a normal branch. These "groups" usually appear in "new proselyting areas, such as outlying cities in Africa, Southeast Asia, etc." Most of these statistics, Ray notes, are available on [ldschurch.org](http://ldschurch.org) which sets up an account with a user name and password, [ldstemples.com](http://ldstemples.com), and [cumorah.com](http://cumorah.com), the last two available to anyone. Most interestingly, Ray noted, membership in the United States as of June 30 was 6,360,300, while it was just above 8,600,000 outside the United States. In October 2012 (six months before the age change), the total number of missionaries was 58,700; 44,800 (76%) were young elders; 8,100 (14%) were young sisters, and 5,800 (10%) were senior couples. In October 2013--six months after the age change, the total was 79,800 (boosted to 80,333 according to the announcement in conference), with 54,200 (68%) as young elders, 19,300 (24%) as single sisters, and 6,300 (8%) as senior couples. Fascinatingly, the percentage of increase in sisters was 140%. These statistics do not include the approximately 22,000 Church service missionaries who live at home and serve part time in various service areas.

According to another participant, former Presiding Bishop David Burton addressed a family reunion in August 2013. He reportedly said that the current activity rate (still defined as attending one meeting per month) worldwide is 36% while 20% are temple endowed. This report did not come with enough details to increase its plausibility. Obviously, those under age 18 would have to be excluded when calculating

endowment rates.

Actuarial data also supplied the statistic that the average age of the apostles and First Presidency is 88. Going by age alone, "we'll have President Packer for another six and a half years" followed by Oaks, Holland, and Bednar.

A mild surprise to attendees is that President Monson did not announce any new temples. He was sustained at the April 2008 general conference and announced five in the following October. In exactly half of the succeeding ten general conferences, he has announced at least one (usually two or even three) new temples. (No announcement during 2009, 2010, and April 2012). With 140 temples now functioning, about 30 are under construction, planned, or stalled at some point.

When it came to specific talks, President Monson's simple reiteration in the Relief Society session of God's love was moving to many but raised the historical question of whether Russell Nelson's universally despised *Ensign* article that God's love was not unconditional was controlling the rhetoric. God's love was described as eternal, as "divine," great/greatest, "perfect" (4 times), unchanging, profound, always there, etc., but not as unconditional. A hopeful sign, however, was that Nelson's article has not been quoted in manuals, other *Ensign* articles, or other authoritative settings that participants could identify.

President Uchtdorf's amazingly open admission that doubts are natural and that the seeds of faith can grow in the "sandy soil" of doubt seemed to have drawn heavily and specifically--right down to the terminology--on the survey by John Dehlin about why members leave. President Uchtdorf specifically rejected the traditional explanations of "laziness, being offended, or the desire to disobey certain commandments." Instead, Dehlin found that the overwhelming top reason was difficulty with Church history questions, particularly about Joseph Smith. One attendee suggested that Dehlin had been encouraged to conduct this survey by an emeritus General Authority



(possibly Church Historian Marlin Jensen?) and that President Uchtdorf's response that leaders had made mistakes--even though qualified by assertions that the doctrine was pure and that God would not allow the Church to "drift" away from the gospel--was an important acknowledgment that was not overlooked by local, national, and international media. Even those who enthusiastically welcomed this talk, however, noted that he provided no examples of a "mistake," nor any suggestions of how, on the local level, individuals, wards, and leaders should deal with such acknowledgments.

Another favorite talk was Elder Gerald Caussé, eloquently urged: "Our wards and our quorums do not belong to us. They belong to Jesus Christ." He also counseled, "My brothers, it is your duty to reach out to anyone who appears at the doors of your Church buildings." Would this statement work as a caption of the Ordain Women group sidelined at the tabernacle?

A piece of "new" doctrine seemed to emerge from Elder Robert D. Hales's talk. He picked up a passing reference from D&C 124:88 to "my general conference" and insisted that the talks given would be what God would say if He were speaking. "That raises the importance of general conference to a whole new level," observed one participant. Another found "creepy" Elder Hales's instructions for families to study conference talks and use them for parent-child interviews. She recalled that her primary motivation as a young woman was to avoid as much of conference as possible because it was so stultifying.

A definite non-favorite was Elder Christofferson's genuinely baffling address. He seemed uneasy, fidgeting, and laughing awkwardly at his own un-funny jokes about Mother's Day talks, how his wife was a perfect woman, and how a young Mexican mother made "bending, lifting, and balancing" her young children look easy.

But the content of his address was most disturbing. "It was patronizing, a 'put women back on the pedestal' talk, straight out of the

seventies, when feminism meant bra-burning man haters," some of the participants commented. He did not equate motherhood and priesthood but he claimed that women had "innate moral authority" with which they were mystically endowed from birth and which gave them the "divine gift" of instilling good qualities "in relationships and cultures"--but which should be exercised above all in the home, an assertion which raised the logical question about why, given such skills, they should not also be using them in institutional settings. He defended motherhood as a "career," a definition which makes the term (compared to professional careers) virtually meaningless. (The online--and presumably print--version changed "some feminist thinkers view homemaking with downright contempt" to "some view homemaking with downright contempt.")

He decried abortion "for personal and social convenience" as destroying culture, a claim that seemed to require more proof. However, most listeners agreed that the critique of the traditional double standard for sexual behavior had the effect allowing women to be promiscuous rather than raising men to the higher standard of women. One participant speculated that the "moral authority" language was an attempt to repackage the motherhood-priesthood dichotomy in more acceptable language, "but basically he succeeded only in making it more confusing."

Interestingly, Elder Christofferson may have had a partially disclosed and undeveloped subtext that does not explain, but helps to modify, this strained and strange address. After praising the one-man-one-woman family, he added: "Where this ideal does not exist, people strive to duplicate it as best they can in their particular circumstances." Was he talking about faithful and committed same-sex partners who seek to be as married as they can be? Another participant commented that Elder Christofferson's brother, Tom, who is gay and married to his long-time partner, is also a board member of Affirmation. So the jury is still out.

Quentin Cook was another who insisted on the world's evils (this time citing Jeremiah) but ignored the genuine improvements in reducing violent crimes, providing clean water, and greatly decreasing the mortality rate among children through inoculation against childhood diseases. He also used the "scare" rhetoric of cultural practices that would violate religious conscience, such as forcing physicians to perform abortions or lose their jobs.

Elder Adrian Ochoa also invoked the evils of the world but put in the same sentence "filth, accusers of the prophets, and anything that causes you to question your faith," asserting that both Jesus and Joseph Smith were "killed by false accusers."

This lumping together of evils reminded one participant of hearing a Young Women's general president address a conference of young women in Europe. She warned them that "bad language and R-rated movies" were the greatest dangers they would face. This participant was stunned by the "cluelessness" thus revealed of real and present dangers like the sex trafficking in its various forms, honor killings, and exclusion from education.

Another address that participants found both disheartening and alarming was the "legal brief" in which Elder Dallin H. Oaks made it clear in harsh terms that anti-gay rights were still a major point on the agenda. Oaks did not mention his favorite topic—the alleged erosion of religious freedom on which he has spoken in many national venues. Elder Oaks defined having children as a "sacred duty" and expressed concern about declines in marriage and birthrate that "threaten the survival of cultures" in the

United States and Europe. Most participants, speaking from an environmental perspective, found a slower population growth rate to be a positive aspect and a higher median rate for marriage helpful in reducing divorce and poverty.

In an ironic moment, Elder Nelson queried: "Why don't adults sing 'I Am a Child of God'?" Outside the tabernacle, excluded from the priesthood session, the men and women participating in "Ordain Women" did, in fact, sing that Primary song before returning to the park.

Elder Holland's talk was inspirational to ost listeners as he spoke about "major depressive disorder." His candid, personal confession of suffering from such depression at a difficult period of his life and his urging members to seek not only spiritual support but help from competent professionals were extremely welcome. So was his counsel to take other steps of personal discipline, such as to "faithfully pursue devotional practices" and "believe in miracles" but "if the bitter cup does not pass, drink it and be strong." He specifically encouraged: "Whatever your struggle, do not vote against the preciousness of life by ending it." He also urged caregivers not to destroy their own health in trying to care for a loved one, a message that countered the traditional, sentimentalized praise of women by President Monson in the Relief Society session "who have aging parents who require the loving care only you can give."

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