

Kate Kelly's appeal to open revelation

By [Jenette Wood Crowley](#)

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Ongoing and open revelation sets the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints apart from many other religious traditions. Mormons believe there is a living prophet of God on Earth and that he has the power and authority to receive new doctrine directly from the Lord. Despite its infrequent implementation, the [ninth article of faith](#) is one of the most important tenets of Mormon doctrine: “We believe all that God has revealed, all that He does now reveal, and we believe that He will yet reveal many great and important things pertaining to the Kingdom of God.” Open revelation is at the heart of the recent excommunication of Mormon feminist Kate Kelly.

Kelly founded the group [Ordain Women](#) in 2013 and quickly became the face of a new feminist uprising in the church. Ordain Women asks church leaders to inquire of the Lord’s will with respect to women’s ordination. Its mission statement states, “We sincerely ask our leaders to take this matter to the Lord in prayer.” Kelly asks the prophet and his advisers to seek such a revelation—never claiming authority to receive revelation herself nor demanding the right to ordination.

At the same time, however, Kelly and her fellow Mormon feminists are not asking quietly. Ordain Women gained national attention by leading demonstrations at the church’s semiannual conferences at Temple Square in Salt Lake City, lining up with Mormon women of all ages outside priesthood meetings, aware that they would be barred from entering, but asking for overflow seats all the same. Ordain Women has an active website that aspires to “create a space for Mormons to articulate issues of gender inequality they may be hesitant to raise alone.” Using their website, Facebook, and Twitter as public forums, Ordain Women intends to put themselves in “the public eye and call attention to the need for the ordination of Mormon women to the priesthood.”

What is at stake for Kelly and the men and women who make up the Ordain Women movement? The church, dependent on lay clergy, relies on men and women to hold many leadership positions. But the Mormon priesthood, which is made up of men

who are ordained as early as the age of 12, is closed to women. This bans women from all but a handful of major leadership positions. More importantly, the priesthood is not just the system for church governance; it is also the spiritual power through which humans are authorized to know and enact God's will. Kelly and others at Ordain Women are not simply hoping to shake up the church structure; they want women to know and enact God's will, too. Because Mormons believe in open revelation, ordination of women is possible if the Lord reveals its truthfulness and timeliness to the prophet.

And yet, church doctrine has changed little since Joseph Smith's death in 1844. Only one official revelation has been canonized since his assassination—doctrine received by President Joseph F. Smith in 1918 concerning life after death. Two [“Official Declarations”](#)—one calling for a stay on polygamous marriages in 1891 and the other extending full membership, including priesthood ordination, to men of African descent in 1978—were also added to the Doctrine and Covenants, but only after years of intense social and political pressure from both inside and outside the church. Latter-day Saints gave up polygamy in order for Utah to obtain statehood, but it took decades of punitive legislation, incarceration, disenfranchisement, and martial law before they amended their marrying practices. By 1978, the church was well behind other public and private American institutions in removing racial membership barriers. Nearly 25 years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, and not until missionary efforts proved successful in racially mixed countries such as Brazil, did the church change its position on black people and the priesthood.

If history is our guide, Mormon women seeking ordination should know that they are in for a long struggle. Mormon feminists have been campaigning for gender equality in the church for decades and have been punished for just as long, even if they do so within the context of open revelation. Sonia Johnson was excommunicated for her work in support of the Equal Rights Amendment in 1979. In 1993, six scholars were excommunicated and disfellowshipped for scholarship that called for greater gender equality or criticized church leadership and doctrine.

Kelly joins the ranks of other Mormon feminists who have lost their church membership for publicly calling for female ordination, but this time the outcome may be different. Kelly's excommunication may not trigger a period of silence as church sanctions have in the past. The online communities may maintain momentum, as the church cannot discipline the thousands of Mormon men and women who have publicly supported Kelly and the Ordain Women movement.

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