What happens when Mormon women are called to ordained ministry?

Talking with five former LDS members who left to go to seminary

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MARCHING FOR CHANGE: A Mormon women's group advocating for the LDS Church to allow women in the priesthood marches to Temple Square during LDS General Conference in Salt Lake City. (AP Photo / Rick Bowmer)

"I came to div school as a Mormon ready to reconcile with a God that would give me some relief," recalled Zora, a Black woman in her early 40s, about her seminary experience in the mid-2010s. "Oddly enough, I found church there [in seminary] with these radical, beautiful other human seminarians, and then I was affirmed constantly in my teaching call and preaching."

In 2014, 500 Mormon women stood in line outside a priesthood meeting on Temple Square in Salt Lake City and asked to enter as prospective elders seeking ordination. They were denied entrance by a spokesperson from the Church of Jesus Christ of

Latter-day Saints. Shortly thereafter, Kate Kelly, the group's leader, was excommunicated, sending the larger Mormon feminist community into a time of deep searching for a way forward.

The LDS Church ordains all cisgender men and boys age 11 and older. These Mormon feminist activists were advocating for an equivalent universal ordination for girls and women. Today, some longtime Mormon feminist activists are pursuing calls to ministry by attending seminary and seeking candidacy for ordination in other denominations. In typically mainline Protestant spaces, these now former Mormons have to navigate similar and different challenges from those of their seminary peers.

We interviewed five former Mormon women about their seminary experiences and sense of calling. Two of our interviewees are now Unitarian, one is Lutheran, one is Baptist, and another is part of the Community of Christ, a denomination that is historically, but not theologically, related to the LDS Church. They attended or are attending small, medium-sized, and large seminaries. All interviewees' names have been changed to protect their privacy.

Readers might assume, given the passion of the women who protested at the priesthood meeting, that these women, like Zora, attended seminary to pursue a well-formed sense of call. Yet our interviewees found that they lacked the language of call to describe their experiences—or even resisted naming their experiences as such due to how calling had been framed for them within their Mormon lives. Seminary, along with extended communities of care, helped them reframe and reinterpret a deep, embodied sense of call they now felt had persisted throughout their lives.

Within the LDS Church, all local leadership and support positions are unpaid and referred to as callings. LDS bishops, who lead local congregations, ask specific people to fill particular roles or callings and decide when it is time for individuals to move into new roles. There is significant cultural pressure to accept all such callings. Many Mormons view it as prideful or vain to desire or aspire to a specific calling.

Many women felt a clash between this concept of calling and another one, one that was happening in their lives even while in the LDS Church and later as students in seminary. This notion of calling is rooted in the idea that God speaks in some way to individual hearts with an idea for their lives. In this version of calling, they were not beholden to the bishop's choices for them. They had to discern for themselves.

Claire is a White woman in her 40s who lives in Idaho. She sought seminary training because of unsettling experiences she had with her local LDS leaders, who do not undergo any formal training for their leadership positions. “In a lot of the Mormon feminist communities that I’ve been involved with online,” she recalled, “there have frequently been stories shared about [local leaders] saying or doing something that made [a difficult situation] worse.” She offered examples of local leaders asking women to be more positive in situations of spousal abuse and counseling them against divorce.

Even as an unmarried woman, Claire experienced problems related to a lack of training. She talked about a time when she spoke with her therapist about the difficulty of juggling life responsibilities with church callings, and her therapist encouraged her to talk to her bishop and set some boundaries. When Claire tried to enact this plan, she reported that her bishop resisted her boundary-setting efforts, telling Claire that “your therapist doesn’t understand how the church works” and refusing to release her from any of her church callings. Claire observed that in the absence of pastoral training, LDS Church leaders acted “from their natural instincts in a way that hurt people,” often favoring the functioning of the church over the well-being of its members. “That was a big determiner for me” in understanding the necessity of training for church leaders, she told us.

Claire started to distance herself from her Mormon community and explored her church options in a Unitarian Universalist congregation. One Sunday, the sermon spoke to her, and she realized, “I want to do that. I wanted to preach, but because the word that came to me was *want,* I kind of pushed it aside for a while.” When we asked her to explain further, she said that she was concerned that this desire came from her own ego and therefore felt suspect. In Mormonism, there is no sense of a church-related job that you would discern for yourself, except for the role of full-time missionary. Claire felt that she was not supposed to want a specific job at church, even as she was experiencing a strong desire to preach in a UU setting. While further experiences confirmed her sense of call, she purposefully waited to speak to anyone at her new church about this call until 14 months after she became an official member of the congregation.

Today, Claire is a seminary student. She experiences similar draws toward new ways of experiencing her faith and church but also the pull of her Mormon formation. This tension shows up as she encounters new ways of interpreting scripture. She has decided to focus on her personal spiritual formation as she completes her

assignments, often having to reconcile her Mormon past with what she is learning now. She describes this as a tension between “holding and opening,” meaning holding and interrogating what she has received from Mormonism while remaining open to new ideas, interpretations, and methods that she encounters in seminary classes.

“I had hang-ups about the term call,” said Barbara, despite a lifetime of church service.

The women we interviewed often wanted to let go of Mormon beliefs and culture, yet all of them struggled with this process. Barbara is a White woman in her late 40s. She left the LDS Church in her mid-20s and spent many years serving a UU congregation in Utah in the area of religious education. A few years ago, she moved to attend seminary on the East Coast. “I feel like I’ve been doing ministry all of my life, in the sense [of] serving others in a religious capacity,” she said. “So it didn’t seem to matter whether [I did that] when I was Mormon or after I left the LDS Church and became a Unitarian Universalist; I always found myself in these kinds of ministering capacities.”

However, a lifetime of church service still left Barbara struggling with the idea that she had a call to ministry. “I had serious hang-ups about the term *call*. And I’ve had a hard time accepting that as what I am following. I think that’s because of Mormonism . . . because calling . . . is what Heavenly Father wants you to do . . . [and is] mediated through someone else. . . . The fact that I am following something that comes from within me I have always questioned.” Barbara also worries that her feelings of call are really an expression of traditional Mormon gender roles. “I have been so culturally conditioned to serve others first and to care about others first. Is this [call] just another way that I’m manifesting that I’m good at being selfless? . . . At [being] this ideal of a Mormon woman who is always giving of herself?”

Challenging ministry experiences have given Barbara further insight on these questions. While serving in her Utah UU congregation, a young adult child of congregants died by suicide. Instead of being overwhelmed by the difficulty of navigating the situation with the family, Barbara said she felt that “this is the right place for me.” Ultimately, Barbara answered this question of call by realizing, “I’ve come to a place now where . . . the relationships that I have, and the experiences that I have, tied together with what I feel passionate [about are] where I feel most alive.”

Claire and Barbara felt a strong pull to preach and serve in congregational life. Other interviewees experienced calls to ministry in other capacities. Miriam is a White woman in her 30s and lives in the Midwest. She felt drawn to leadership opportunities on the fringes of the Mormon community and was invited to speak about faith in settings outside church, to contribute to a popular Mormon feminist blog, and to be a frequent guest on fringe Mormon podcasts. As a result of these experiences, she looked into the possibility of becoming a chaplain, but she found the LDS Church would not endorse women as chaplains. Observing that many women in the Mormon feminist community were going to graduate school to become therapists, she found a marriage and family therapy program that included a year at seminary, something that she felt increasingly drawn to. She would be able to receive the theological education she desired while pursuing an acceptable career path.

Most of the former Mormon women seminarians described having the experience of someone outside the LDS Church name and affirm their call. Miriam spent some time in conversation about faith with a Community of Christ pastor, who first named Miriam's call to ministry. However, Miriam struggled to understand what this could mean in her life as a practicing Mormon. For Mormon women, expressing a desire for priesthood or anything like it comes with high social costs. "What does it mean to have a call to ministry if you can't be ordained?" she asked. "That's a question that I wrestled with for a long time." For Miriam, pursuing her sense of call meant joining a tradition that would ordain her. She is now a candidate for ordination in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and works at a seminary.

Sophie is a White woman in her early 30s living in Utah. Sophie's Community of Christ pastor was able to affirm and discuss Sophie's call with her. This pastor provided significant support for Sophie. But, like Miriam, Sophie felt the pull of her prior Mormon beliefs, even though she no longer claimed those beliefs. The new possibilities of leadership and ordination created tension and upset the way that she understood her role in Mormonism. Sophie found no straightforward process to move from assent to the idea that women have limited roles in the church to embracing the idea that their roles are unlimited.

As she tried to overcome her old beliefs, Sophie experienced surprisingly negative feelings about these new possibilities. It took time for her to realize that her call had been present in her life for a long time, but she had not been able to recognize it in a tradition that did not offer her language for her experiences. "I feel like the sense

of call, my desire to be involved with religion has always been there, and then it was . . . squashed," she said. "And when I say 'involved with religion' I mean . . . actively involved in the formation of community. . . . It was squashed . . . and then rekindled just a few years ago."

When Zora graduated from her social science PhD program, she thought she would become a professor. She was deeply frustrated when she could not find academic employment. Her LDS Church leaders asked her to teach a class for young adults, but the opportunity was canceled at the last minute. When she pushed her local leaders to explain the cancellation, they told her that "we know you're voting a certain way. . . . It has nothing to do with your worthiness . . . [but] we felt you were a liability." Zora reflected on her predicament: "I felt in every avenue in my life where I was called to teach I couldn't, both professionally and religiously . . . what happens to a call denied? . . . I felt like it was a fire shut up in my bones."

While wrestling with these disappointments and searching for a way forward, a friend of Zora's suggested that she work through her questions of faith and call in seminary. Zora, however, worried about taking on more graduate school debt.

To get more insight into her situation, Zora spoke with her grandmother, a Pentecostal minister. Her grandmother told her, "You'll need this. You do this. There's a call in your life." Then she told her of a dream she had. "You were speaking to thousands of people at once," her grandmother revealed. Zora told us that her grandmother's "affirmation didn't make sense in my Mormon context." She "couldn't understand the language of her affirming."

Despite her initial hesitancy, Zora applied and was admitted to a flagship mainline seminary. As she explains, seminary expanded the scope of her calling. Zora stated, "I was affirmed constantly in my teaching call, and preaching. . . . I think that's the first time I'd ever heard the prophetic named into my atmosphere [and] the first time I'd ever heard preaching and a preacher named into my atmosphere. So it was just all these words I had never heard other people affirm for me—so part of call is literally community affirmation."

Zora experienced her Mormon community's inability to affirm her call as a rejection of her body, and this undermined her sense of self. "The Mormon community had no words to affirm a body like mine, in the call erupting from a body like mine. . . . I was in a world that was deeply suffocating and harmful."

This “culture of disbelief,” as scholar Eileen Campbell-Reed describes it, is not limited to women in full-time ministerial positions, and it is by no means limited to Mormonism. It begins as soon as women begin to experience their call in settings that cannot affirm them. The culture of disbelief is especially strong in Mormon congregations, where the primary qualification for ordination is simply being cisgender and male.

Seminaries anticipate guiding students on gentle and supported journeys of faith maturation, encouraging future ministers to question their theology and assumptions about God and church. Former Mormon women have typically been on dramatic and painful journeys of faith marked by rejection and loss of community and family relationships. Yet the women we interviewed pursued God and their sense of calling, even when these acts of faith were interpreted by friends and family as acts of apostasy.

Women in many traditions struggle to identify, understand, and live out the call they are experiencing. LGBTQ folks, people with disabilities, and people of color may be in a similar position. Our hope in writing about the seminary experiences of former Mormon women is that professors, fellow students, and clergy colleagues will appreciate that those who make a difficult journey away from a tradition that cannot affirm them have skills, experiences, and a deep sense of call that has survived numerous challenges.

The stories of Miriam, Zora, Sophie, Claire, and Barbara also highlight the crucial way that seminaries themselves can equip such individuals with language to affirm new possibilities for their lives. Such language can burn bright as a God-sent revelation. As Miriam told us, seminary revealed to her, “I am called. I am called. I really am.”

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “New possibilities.”