“So, how many female pastors have you had at the evangelical churches you’ve attended?”

The question was asked by a good Mormon friend, himself a former evangelical. I had been complaining about his church and its policy of not ordaining women, but my friend's question caught me off guard. I had been a passive believer in the ordination of women for years, and yet, thinking back over the churches I had attended all that time, I could not deny that every single senior pastor, associate pastor, worship pastor, and youth pastor I had worked with was male. This was true at churches that were part of denominations that allowed the ordination of women, and it was even true at churches that cycled through multiple pastors in a short period of time. Not long after that conversation, I joined Christians for Biblical Equality and eventually sought out a church with a female pastor for the very first time.
I was a teenager when I began my study of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), popularly known as the Mormon Church. My journey took me through a bachelor’s degree at Brigham Young University, the church’s largest official university, which hosts a student body population that is over 98% LDS. To this day, I continue to have close friendships with Mormons and dialogue with them regularly. One area that has always been of interest to me is the problematic status of women in the LDS church, and I believe this topic represents a potential point of outreach that traditional Christian ministries to Mormons typically overlook. While the nineteenth century LDS practice of polygamy (wherein husbands were permitted and sometimes commanded to take multiple wives) has received large amounts of attention from both counter-cult ministries and the general public, few Christians bother to take an in-depth look at the theology and church policies governing life for LDS women today. This is unfortunate, as I believe Latter-day Saints and evangelical Christians have much to gain when exploring this issue together. Furthermore, a significant number of my ex-Mormon acquaintances counted feminist issues among their reasons for leaving their faith. The message of biblical equality has the potential to serve as a tool for evangelism among such disaffected Mormons because it can fulfill a yearning in their souls that current LDS teachings on gender and complementarian evangelicalism cannot.

Latter-day Saints share many themes and practices with complementarians when it comes to their teachings on gender. The church has always upheld the traditional notion of the husband and father as the authority, or head of the family, with one official proclamation declaring that “[b]y 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.” Likewise, women are “primarily responsible for the nurture of their children” with official church teaching materials encouraging women to choose child rearing and homemaking over having a career. During the temple ordinances that Mormons typically receive between the ages of nineteen and twenty-five, wives covenant to “hearken” to the counsel of their husbands, but there is no reciprocal promise from husbands to their wives. Mormons often interject that their leaders simultaneously teach that husbands and wives are fully equal partners, but an analysis of the temple liturgy demonstrates that the gender roles taught in Mormonism are clearly hierarchical.

On the ecclesiastical level, where Mormons practice a lay ministry and church responsibilities are shared among all members, the male headship pattern continues. LDS men are ordained to the lower priesthood starting at age twelve and the higher priesthood at age eighteen, but women are restricted from ordination altogether. Because of their non-ordained status, women cannot serve in a large variety of leadership callings including: apostles, prophets, bishops, stake presidents, and adult Sunday School directors. Similarly to complementarian church structures, most of the callings available to women revolve around leadership of other women and children. Church disciplinary councils are entirely handled by men, and men oversee almost all of the clerical work and management of church finances. Males perform virtually all of the ritual ordinances including baptisms, blessings of healing, and administration of the LDS version of the Eucharist. The only ordinance women are permitted to perform is a washing and anointing ritual on other women as part of temple worship, and even that is restricted to women who have no minor children living at home. Finally, missions work is considered a primarily male responsibility, with all capable men being expected to serve a two-year mission, typically at the age of nineteen. Women are allowed to serve an optional eighteen-month mission, but the minimum age required is twenty-one. In 1997, the president of the Mormon church plainly stated that the age limit is held higher for women for the purpose of decreasing the number of women who serve.

This pattern of androcentrism surfaces again in the church’s official Sunday School manuals, where female speakers and leaders are rarely cited, even when the topics concern women specifically. Twice a year, Mormon leaders gather to broadcast a series of messages meant as counsel for the entire church, but out of the twenty-nine to thirty talks that are usually given, only two of the speakers are women. Likewise, women are not invited to give the opening or closing prayer for these sessions. In the LDS church, women clearly have far fewer opportunities than men to offer spiritual guidance and admonishment to adults of both genders at the church-wide level.

There are some ways that Latter-day Saints have done well in their treatment of women for which they deserve full credit. They have no qualms with women serving as adult coed Sunday School teachers, an issue that has been controversial in some complementarian churches, and, because local preaching is considered the responsibility of the laity, women deliver the Sunday sermons in Mormon congregations almost as often as men do. In fact, one is far more likely to encounter a woman speaking on Sunday in the average Mormon church than the average evangelical church. Mormons also showed some progressive sparks early in their history, with Utah becoming the second territory in the nation to give women the right to vote and the first state to induct a female state senator. However, in spite of these promising early trends, LDS feminists have arguably demonstrated that the church gradually became more restrictive in its attitude towards women over the course of the twentieth century — a phenomenon that evangelicals are no strangers to. For example, in the 1800s, Mormon women were encouraged to anoint people with oil and administer blessings of healing, but today’s Mormon woman is restricted from doing likewise.
I believe that egalitarians have much to offer and much to gain by entering into constructive dialogue with Latter-day Saints on gender. To any evangelicals looking to build bridges with their LDS friends on this issue, I offer the following guidelines:

Know that there are Mormons who want to talk about this. One of the most common responses from Latter-day Saints when they are challenged on this matter is that the women of the church do not mind their current situation and are not complaining about it, so there is little point in agonizing over it. I have found this to be untrue. There are many LDS women and men who believe the church’s gender policies could use improvement to some extent or another; however, because the church discourages dissent and openly speaking out against its leaders, they tend to be uncomfortable and reserved about their feelings on the subject.

Be ready to acknowledge our own shortcomings. I’m grateful for the work of advocacy organizations like Christians for Biblical Equality; for the existence of churches and denominations that ordain women as pastors, elders, and deacons; and for the wealth of biblical and historical scholarship in recent decades that has explored this issue. These are things that the Latter-day Saint movement either lacks entirely or has only begun to develop. However, it is no secret that if we want to find a religious tradition that is guilty of oppressing women and denying them the exercise of their spiritual gifts, we can start with ours. Many evangelical churches have policies towards women that are equal to or even worse than those of the LDS church, and you can expect your LDS friends to point this out. We must always remember that we ourselves are a work in progress on this subject, being continually transformed by God’s Spirit and the renewal of our minds (Rom. 12:2).

Be ready to explain what egalitarians have done or are doing well. As a general rule, Latter-day Saints do not know very much about Christian traditions, and they certainly will not know very much about a subset of the movement such as egalitarianism. Be prepared to delve into subjects such as interpretations of relevant biblical passages, ontology, women in Christian history and in the Bible, gender-inclusive translations, denominations that ordain women, and other issues that egalitarians have made strong progress on since the movement grew legs in the 1970s. If you have advocated for women in ministry with your local church, be ready to talk about your own struggles and any accomplishments you have achieved.

Come ready to learn. I said in the last paragraph that Latter-day Saints do not often know very much about evangelicals, but the converse is true as well. Always give your LDS friends the courtesy of defining for themselves what they believe, then build from there. Leave room to be surprised and challenged by what you hear.

My own interactions with Latter-day Saints on this matter have been very gratifying. I’ve commiserated with my LDS companions on the lack of female voice in their modern-day scriptures and teaching manuals, and I’ve recommended gender-inclusive translations to LDS and ex-LDS friends who have asked. A few of my friends have made the decision to attend evangelical churches, at least partially out of a desire to be part of an egalitarian congregation, while others have simply come to a deeper understanding of and appreciation for the work of egalitarian evangelicals while opting to stay Mormon. I’ve also formed lasting friendships with people who are able to analyze my work and give me refining feedback from the perspective of a completely different religious tradition. Most of all, my interactions with Latter-day Saints have made me bolder and more secure in my own egalitarian convictions and in the power of our gospel message, leading me to the realization that biblical equality can be an evangelism bridge between Mormonism and the Christian faith. I encourage other Christians to get involved in this bridge-building work. The workers are currently few, but the harvest is plenty.

2. See, for example, the section on “Mothers’ Employment outside the Home” in the 2003 Eternal Marriage Student Manual.
4. For a number of essays exploring this topic, see Maxine Hanks, ed., Women and Authority: Re-emerging Mormon Feminism (Salt Lake City, Ut.: Signature Books, 1992).

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A bridge is a structure built to span a physical obstacle, such as a body of water, valley, or road, without closing the way underneath. It is constructed for the purpose of providing passage over the obstacle, usually something that is otherwise difficult or impossible to cross. There are many different designs that each serve a particular purpose and apply to different situations. Designs of bridges vary depending on the function of the bridge, the nature of the terrain where the bridge is located, and the materials available. Some designs are built for safety, others for aesthetics, and still others for durability.

If being a Christian means believing that the Bible is the authentic, trustworthy Word of God and that Christ is our Creator and Savior, the answer is no. One cannot believe these things and also believe in evolution as the explanation for the origin of life on our earth as we know it. Some theologians have attempted to reconcile the biblical Creation story with the evolutionary explanation for the origin of life. But to do so requires interpreting the six days of creation in Genesis as long, indefinite periods of time rather than six literal, 24 hour days as the text indicates.

How Wide the Divide is a superb debate between BYU Professor Stephen Robinson, and Evangelical scholar Craig Blomberg concerning Scripture, God & Deification, Christ & the Trinity, and Salvation. Each of these four chapters contains initial statements of belief, comments upon each other's position, and a jointly written conclusion. The authors are respectful in their disagreement, and are often surprised to find agreement where they thought they had none. The format served well to expose misun...