

## **Barbara B. Smith's Media Presence: Shaping the LDS Women Identity during the ERA Movement**

**Prof. Cornelius M. Lambi<sup>1</sup>**

### **Introduction**

In March of 1972, the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) was brought to the floor of Congress with the prerogative to establish that "equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex."<sup>2</sup> With its origins in feminist movements like the Women's Liberation Movement, the ERA motivated many rallies and caucuses across the nation that were covered by the press to bring attention and support against gender-related discrimination which many women felt; with this, issues that were once considered domestic like family and other typically personal matters were brought into the political arena.<sup>3</sup> However, this simply worded proposal was not ultimately included into the United States Constitution, events, and reactions from Americans in regards to the ERA, both leading up to its failure to be passed and after, caused a maelstrom of strife and division across the United State as demonstrated in the media.

Members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints did not escape this tumult as a wide spectrum of opinions and stances surfaced in various mass media outlets available to the general membership in the wake of the ERA. President Spencer W Kimball, sustained as prophet of the LDS Church in late 1973, along with the rest of the Church's general leadership who opposed the ERA and the philosophies that it inculcated faced criticism and estrangement within and without of the Church and in the press. Despite this, President Kimball waded against the currents of popular culture, supporting and encouraging principles related to families and gender which were being challenged in the public sphere by attitudes rooted in the ERA mentality.

Barbara B. Smith became the General Relief Society president in early 1974 and not only came to the forefront of defending womanhood both in and out of the Church but also took a central place in media discussions about the ERA. Despite an environment of reproach, disparagement, and censure, Smith used her unique position to oppose the non-gender philosophy of the ERA while championing the prophetically appointed roles of women and men and the ideals of a Christ-centered family in media sources. Smith used outlets in the media available to her to lead members of the Relief Society through the challenging and perplexing time of the ERA.

### **The Essential Preparation of Barbara B. Smith**

Smith would become a physical representation in the media of those qualities General Authorities felt were necessary in LDS women. Even many years after Barbara Smith's tenure as the General Relief Society President she was regarded as a woman of superior leadership and great spiritual strength. President Thomas Monson said of her, "[she] stood with the leaders of the world and had the capacity to be herself... she served magnificently in that calling."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Geography, University of Buea, p.O. Box 63 Buea, Cameroon.

<sup>2</sup> Spencer Rich, "ERA, Half the Way," *The Washington Post*, March 23, 1999, C13. *Opposing Viewpoints in Context*. Web. 5 Feb. 2014; "The Church and the Proposed Equal Rights Amendment: A Moral Issue," *Ensign*, March 1980, 6.

<sup>3</sup> Gale: Feminist Movement; Feminism: Opposing Views

<sup>4</sup> Gerry Avant, "Magnificent service rendered by former Relief Society leader," *Church News* (2 September 2010), 6.

He then re-visited his memories of Smith with the observation that she “never [said] an unkind word...Everyone was her friend.”<sup>5</sup> Other Church leaders have similar commentary. Elder M. Russell Ballard of the Quorum of the Twelve, speaking at Barbara Smith’s funeral in 2010, spoke of her having “the gift of gentleness, love and caring, yet had the courage to be firm in the cause of righteousness.”<sup>6</sup> These qualities that Smith possessed were portrayed through the camera lens. However, when asked in a published interview what she thought her defining character trait was Smith did not cite any special talent or propensity, but responded that it was her persistence.<sup>7</sup>

The strong family background Smith came from brought her up to be a robust, independent woman. The circumstances of her upbringing could not have been more suitable given the exposure which permeated her time as Relief Society President. In a time when the definition of womanhood, motherhood, and general femininity was being debated, a time when women were being told to abandon their divinely appointed roles and characteristics, Barbara B. Smith stood as a beacon of constancy and firmness. Her face and very embodiment became the image that LDS women clung to as the stable LDS role model. From her youth she learned the value of womanhood and the gift it could be to the world, along with the immense capability women possessed to create and achieve. She would be the one to persevere through defamation and persecution commonly faced by those standing for truth during the WLM and throughout history. Barbara Smith would be the woman to lead the members of the Relief Society through the challenging and perplexing time of the ERA and preserve the exultant title of *Woman*.

### Calling

In October 1974, two years after the ERA proposal, President Kimball called Barbara Smith to serve as general Relief Society president. Of those first years of service, she expressed: Very soon, it became apparent that I must be part of the continuing discussions going on about the role of women in today’s society. I do not suppose that a more vocal [or] more strident questioning of that role has occurred than during the seventies. The first part of that decade found many women involved in a consciousness-raising campaign to help others become acquainted with, and more concerned about, their situations in life. There was an enormous effort to uncover all the inequities and problems that women faced, and to push for changes. Against this backdrop, a defense of the more traditional role of wife and mother was rarely represented, especially by the media, and when represented, it was seen to be anti-woman or a defense of the stereotype.<sup>8</sup>

### Barbara B. Smith’s First Official ERA Statement

In November 1974, the Special Affairs Committee of the Church invited the new Relief Society president to take part in discussions regarding possible repercussions if the proposed amendment were to pass.<sup>9</sup> As the Church had not yet made any formal public statement regarding the ERA, the committee determined it was time to deliver a statement against the ERA in the media. Smith recalled one concern the committee had in giving a statement on women’s rights was that the public would misinterpret it to mean that the Church did “not want the women of the Church to achieve, [and] that Mormon men were trying to put women down and have them controlled by men.”<sup>10</sup> At length, the committee determined that statement should be given by the general Relief Society president—Barbara B. Smith.

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>7</sup> Barbara Smith, interview, interview by Charlotte Searle, July 28, 2010, Salt Lake City, Utah, in author’s possession.

<sup>8</sup> Barbara B. Smith, *A Fruitful Season* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1988), 62.

<sup>9</sup> “The Public Affairs Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was organized in 1972 in response to a long-felt need for channeling and coordinating information about the growing Church throughout the world. In 1983, the department’s name was expanded to Public Communications/Special Affairs after the original department merged with Special Affairs, the Church’s government and community relations office. The department is responsible to, and counsels with, the Church’s Special Affairs Committee, comprised of members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and members of the Quorums of the Seventy. It maintains ongoing contacts with news media at local, national, and international levels.” “Frequently Asked Questions about The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,” *BYU Studies Online*, accessed June 6, 2013, <http://ldsfaq.byu.edu/viewQuestion.aspx?view=6105b032-a619-4c0f-a793-f7a2f094803e>.

<sup>10</sup> Barbara B. Smith, *A Fruitful Season* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1988), 74.

On December 13, 1974, Smith presented a statement to a gathering of students at the LDS Institute of Religion near the University of Utah in Salt Lake City which was widely published. Barbara Smith's statement initially outlined a husband/wife relationship as given in scripture, along with a description of the unique talents, roles, and contributions women have had on mankind through all ages—specifically the family unit.<sup>11</sup>

Acknowledging her support for improving women's rights, she stated,

In my opinion, many of the concerns are valid, and the efforts being made to correct injustices, and unfair practices, and attitudes are deserving of support. . . . Many of these organizations and many individual citizens, however, are pinning their hopes for betterment upon a single act—the adoption of an amendment to the United States Constitution—popularly called, “The Equal Rights Amendment.” They feel the passage of the amendment will somehow be a panacea for all that remains to be accomplished. It is my considered judgment that The Equal Rights Amendment is not the way.<sup>12</sup>

Smith further explained that passage of the ERA could potentially nullify other protective laws for women, eliminate rights of privacy, mandate military conscription for women, and create a system without allowances for physical, biological, or emotional differences between genders.<sup>13</sup> With continued boldness she declared that the ERA was “too broad,” “too vague,” and “too non-definitive,” making it a dangerous “blanket approach” to finding solutions for women's issues.<sup>14</sup> Concluding with a strong emphasis on her desire for women to have God-given rights and opportunities, Smith encouraged that instead of the ERA a more effective approach would be an evaluation of specific laws perceived as inhibiting woman's progress be made. She suggested,

Is there a law which is unfair to men? If so, change it though the legislative process. Is there a law [that] is unfair to women? If so, change it. Seek redress in the legislatures, in the courts, through presidential decree, or by group action. Make sure that each law is carefully considered individually. Insist on the enforcement of laws in an orderly process as exemplified by the greatest suffragette leaders of the past. As you do, make sure the uniqueness of the individual is protected and the family strengthened.<sup>15</sup>

### Response to Smith's Position

Though this first statement regarding the ERA was given by Smith at a small gathering at the University of Utah, there was vast coverage of her statements in newspapers. These articles created a variety of responses. Many women gratefully accepted the statement as guidance and direction. For others however, the introductory phrasing to Smith's ERA position—“It is my considered judgment that. . .” and “It is my opinion that. . .” —caused questions of whether her position was representative of the Church or merely personal opinion.<sup>16</sup> Smith responded that she had felt the Lord's hand in the preparation and delivery of her message.<sup>17</sup>

As it would be almost two years after Smith's statement before the First Presidency would make their official statement on the issue, Smith became the target of questions and criticism. Of this she reflected, “The year of 1975 was my first full year in office. I doubt that any previous general Relief Society presidency had ever faced a more constant spotlight than was directed at my counselors and me. Relief Society became the focal point of intense scrutiny. The media tended to pit my associates and me against the proponents of equal rights for women. It was a continuing frustration.”<sup>18</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Barbara B. Smith, “Receive the Gift Bestowed” (Speech, Institute of Religion, The University of Utah, Salt Lake City, Utah, December 13, 1974), 10.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 10 (emphasis in original).

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 10-11.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 11.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 13 (emphasis in original).

<sup>16</sup> Smith, *A Fruitful Season*, 75.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 75.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 77.

Shirley Thomas, a general Relief Society board member at the time, shared her insight on Smith's influence, "I don't know if anyone realizes what [Barbara Smith] did for the ERA, she made a real difference. She went everywhere, she had to cross picket lines, she had the protection of the police, and she was in danger in many instances of protecting the Church's position because those people were fierce. The ERA was a big thing, very well organized, and supporters did not intend to lose. But they did lose, and a lot of the reason they did was because Barbara marshaled a lot of forces."<sup>19</sup> Despite Smith's efforts and position, there remained a lingering ambiguity over what the Church's official position was on the ERA.

### The Church's Official Statement

On October 22, 1976, the First Presidency delivered their first official statement regarding the proposed amendment in the *Ensign* magazine. Ironically, this statement reiterated Smith's position declaring, "There have been injustices to women before the law and in society generally. These we deplore. There are additional rights to which women are entitled. However, we firmly believe that the Equal Rights Amendment is not the answer."<sup>20</sup> Even with an official Church statement, confusion and questions continued to abound, thus in 1978 the First Presidency provided further explanation for their position against the ERA:

a. Its deceptively simple language deals with practically every aspect of American life, without considering the possible train of unnatural consequences which could result because of its very vagueness—encouragement of those who seek a unisex society, an increase in the practice of homosexual and lesbian activities, and other concepts which could alter the natural, God-given relationship of men and women.

b. It would strike at the family, the basic institution of society. ERA would bring ambiguity to the family structure which could encourage legal conflict in the relationship of husbands and wives.

c. ERA would invite legal action on every conceivable point of conflict between men and women. Its sweeping generalizations could challenge almost every legally accepted social custom, as well as every morally accepted behavior pattern in America.

d. Men and women have differences biologically, emotionally and in other ways. The proposed Equal Rights Amendment does not recognize these differences. For example, present laws protecting the rights of pregnant women in the working force could be challenged if ERA becomes law.

e. Passage of ERA, with its simplistic approach to complex and vitally important problems, could nullify many accumulated benefits to women in present statutes, such as those protecting mothers and children from fathers who do not accept their legal responsibilities to their families.<sup>21</sup>

### Unrest and Dissonance

Even with prophetic guidance, many LDS continued to wrestle with the rampant ideologies pressed upon them by various media outlets. Smith recalled there being a "divisive spirit...upon many men and women in and out of the Church" and "an underlying awareness of the unrest that was upsetting the thinking of some of our sisters and causing them much pain as they struggled to find harmony in their hearts and minds."<sup>22</sup> Elaine Jack, a general Relief Society board member at the time, remembered, "It was during that time was when there was a lot of unrest and dissonance among our women. There were those who were protesting and criticizing the Church's attitude toward women."<sup>23</sup>

One LDS woman, Sonia Johnson, brought national media attention to both Relief Society and the Church as she aggressively advocated for the ERA. In an overzealous attempt to rally support for her pro-ERA loyalties, she developed anti-LDS attitudes and behaviors, which ultimately led to her excommunication in December 1979. This action created a significant stir nationwide as media coverage made it appear the Church was a strong patriarchy silencing women who spoke out for woman's rights.

<sup>19</sup> Shirley Thomas, oral history, interview by Carrie Taylor Anguiano, January 14, 2012, Salt Lake City, transcription in author's possession.

<sup>20</sup> "The Church and the Proposed Equal Rights Amendment: A Moral Issue," *Ensign*, March 1980, insert: 1.

<sup>21</sup> "First Presidency Reaffirms Opposition to ERA," *Ensign*, October 1978, 63–64.

<sup>22</sup> Smith, *A Fruitful Season*, 76.

<sup>23</sup> Elaine L. Jack, oral history, interview by Carrie Taylor Anguiano, November 21, 2011, Salt Lake City, in author's possession.

Great confusion abounded in the nation and within the Church over the reasons for Johnson's excommunication. An article in the February 1980 *Ensign* provided a clear explanation for the action: The excommunication of Mrs. Sonia Johnson from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has been widely reported in the news media. The real reasons for the excommunication, however, have often been overlooked or ignored by the media, although we provided a detailed explanation after announcing the decision to Mrs. Johnson.

That Mrs. Johnson had taken public issue with the Church's opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment was *not* among the grounds for the ecclesiastical action leading to her excommunication. But, in her advocacy of ERA, Mrs. Johnson expressed attitudes and views which went beyond that issue and constituted a direct and irresponsible attack upon the Church, its leaders, doctrines, and programs.

In public statements she urged the obstruction of the Church's worldwide missionary effort, demonstrated that she was not in harmony with Church doctrine, and misrepresented and held up to ridicule the leadership and membership of the Church.<sup>24</sup>

### **Nation-wide Exposure**

Because the Johnson incident became publically controversial, it caught the attention of national talk show host Phil Donahue.<sup>25</sup> Initially Donahue invited Smith to make an appearance with Johnson on one of his shows. Smith politely declined the offer and suggested Beverly Campbell, the Church's ERA spokesperson, be invited in her place. When invited, Campbell accepted. However, at the last minute, Donahue canceled with Campbell saying that Johnson had refused to appear with her. Johnson aired alone for the full hour.<sup>26</sup>

Oddly enough, during the show Donahue explained to the audience that Johnson appeared alone because "no woman from the Mormon Church would appear with Mrs. Johnson."<sup>27</sup> Smith recalled how LDS women all over the nation called Campbell wanting to confirm Donahue's assertion. Donahue also received phone calls—mostly calls from upset women.<sup>28</sup> In time, he again invited Barbara Smith to appear on his show and offered her the full hour. Smith asked Donahue to invite Campbell to appear with her and requested that Donahue give a public apology for his false statement. Donahue agreed to her requests.<sup>29</sup>

Smith and Campbell appeared on the Phil Donahue Show on February 4, 1980. This was the first time a general relief society appeared on a national television program. As promised Donahue delivered a public apology for his misleading statement and then led a lively discussion that initially targeted Johnson's excommunication and why the Church spoke out on the ERA. Smith and Campbell competently responded to both Donahue and the audience's questions and comments through the duration of the program. More than on any other venue, Smith appearing on the Donahue show clarified the stance of LDS women in reference to the ERA.

In response to Johnson's situation Smith clarified the difference between disagreeing and dissenting from Church doctrine. When asked by Donahue if it was correct that she was against the ERA, Smith replied with a simple, "We are."<sup>30</sup> Campbell articulated the Church's position as supportive of women's rights but that the ERA was not the right answer to achieve those goals. She particularly emphasized that laws were already in place to provide the equality and rights women need.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>24</sup> "LDS Scene," *Ensign*, February 1980, 80.

<sup>25</sup> "The Phil Donahue Show, also known as *Donahue*, is an American television talk show that ran for 26 years on national television. Its run was preceded by three years of local broadcast in Dayton, Ohio, and it was broadcast nationwide between 1967 and 1996." Wikipedia, s.v. "The Phil Donahue Show," accessed June 6, 2013, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Phil\\_Donahue\\_Show](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Phil_Donahue_Show).

<sup>26</sup> Smith, *A Fruitful Season*, 163.

<sup>27</sup> "The Phil Donahue Show," (Multimedia Inc., 1976–1982, Chicago, Illinois), February 4, 1980 (hereafter cited in text as Donahue Transcript).

<sup>28</sup> Smith, *A Fruitful Season*, 165.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 163-164.

<sup>30</sup> Donahue Transcript.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

Concerning potential effects of the ERA, Smith shared her unease with a requirement for women to enter into military combat due to the brutalizing effect combat can have on a woman and the effect that could have on a family. Smith conveyed to the audience that central to a woman's role is the importance of protecting the family. She received supportive audience applause with her statement, "Women have a different role than men. Women must bear and nurture children, and we can't destroy the life giving source and then expect civilization to go on."<sup>32</sup>

While agreeing with her statement, Donahue expressed his concern that LDS Church leaders were molding their members' thoughts by making the Church's position on the ERA doctrinal.<sup>33</sup> Campbell responded with what was perhaps at the heart of the Church's position on ERA, "We feel it's a moral issue and these issues can affect family. That's why churches exist—to protect moral issues."<sup>34</sup>

In the remaining seconds of the show Smith answered Donahue's final question, "What has the Mormon Church done for women in general?"<sup>35</sup> Her response touched on the idea that Relief Society provided positions of responsibility and opportunities for leadership and that the work of women in the Church is equal but different to the work of men. Campbell added that without women working within the Church, the Church would not function.

In hindsight, Barbara Smith wrote that she felt that the time aired on The Phil Donahue Show had been effective.<sup>36</sup> The fact that both she and Donahue had such a response after the show through letters and phone calls provided evidence to her that women of the Church wanted someone to represent and speak up for them and that her appearance had been of value.<sup>37</sup> Perhaps the greatest benefit of Smith and Campbell appearing on The Phil Donahue Show was the opportunity to clarify on a national level that despite the Church's position on the ERA it did indeed support equality for women and was open to discuss the issues in non-contentious ways. Ultimately, the ERA issue created division and controversy during the 1970s and into the early 1980s, but in 1982 the proposal was three states short for ratification and expired.

### **LDS Women Choosing Direction**

For some, the confusion and contention over the ERA served as an obstacle to individual faith and commitment to womanhood, marriage, and family. Sonia Johnson's conduct also created some misunderstandings for many about the Church. Smith's opportunity to discuss the issue on The Phil Donahue Show provided opportunity to explain that while the Church was indeed against the ERA it was supportive of correcting injustices towards women through other avenues. This model for talking to others in non-contentious ways about the Church's position gave LDS men and women guidance and confidence to do the same.

Smith and other general Church leaders were concerned with the idea of 'agency.' Feminists maintained their view of 'liberation' as license to think, act, and live in a manner of their choosing, without restraint; displaying a loss of understanding regarding choice and accountability. Smith emphasized the doctrine of agency in a published speech at BYU stating, "Responsibility is a key word as we try to understand and relate to any idea in the world today. We have many options as to how to spend our lives, but we must not forget that option and agency do not mean license. The fundamental concept of agency is that one who makes choices must also accept the responsibility for whatever comes of that choice."<sup>38</sup> Smith's statements indicate that she hoped Relief Society women would recognize opportunities offered to them, but use their agency and knowledge of truth to act with moderation and wisdom, to become confident and educated mothers, and to be committed to marriage and family. She observed, "One of the fundamental and urgent questions being explored [at that time] was that of the right of women to choose the direction of their lives. Energy and time were also devoted to raising women's awareness of their situations in life, with an emphasis on what were perceived as inequitable situations."<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Smith, *A Fruitful Season*, 168.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 169.

<sup>38</sup> Barbara B. Smith, "Roots and Wings," *Brigham Young University Speeches*, Provo, Utah, February 9, 1978, 6.

<sup>39</sup> Smith, *A Fruitful Season*, 83.

It quickly became evident to Smith that Relief Society was not designed to support political purposes, rather it was to unite women with testimony, care for those in need, and internalize and teach Church doctrine.<sup>40</sup> Smith came to recognize that general Church leadership could use mass media to help maintain or instill within women their roles as a woman, wife, and mother.

### Speaking in General Conference

One advancement in using the television to enforce Smith's ideas was the introduction of general female leaders speaking in general conference and having their talks available in the *Ensign*. In October 1976, general Church leaders began holding Welfare sessions on Saturday mornings as part of general conference. Smith spoke in that first welfare session and continued to do so almost regularly until October 1982 when they ended.

In October 1979, the First Presidency asked Smith to speak at the welfare session of general conference and explain the role Relief Society women would play within Church councils. Smith began her talk explaining that "a fundamental reason for organizing the Relief Society was so that the sisters could act together to extend the work of the bishop in caring for the Saints and thus help build the kingdom of God on earth."<sup>41</sup> She felt that all Church members, especially Relief Society members, should understand how the new developments emphasized the essential aspect of Relief Society being involved at every level, adding that those who would be involved had a vast influence upon the Church.<sup>42</sup>

Smith continued by outlining each council established within the Church—the general welfare services committee, area councils, multi-regional councils, regional councils, stake and ward councils, and family councils. In detail she explained the role women would play in each and then provided examples of how women had influenced decisions, types of data they had collected, input women had given that changed decisions, and compassionate perspective women had provided.<sup>43</sup>

The emphasis on Church councils was not a new program, but gave greater organization, representation, and support to the council system was what Smith outlined. Similarly, encouragement for women to participate in Church councils was not a new part of the program, but was more specifically outlined and expected that women be involved at every level of council.<sup>44</sup> In fact, for the first time the Welfare Services Department instructional handbook specified Relief Society participation at every level.<sup>45</sup>

In the April 1984 session of general conference, President Kimball released Barbara B. Smith as general Relief Society president and called Barbara W. Winder; he then released Elaine A. Cannon as general Young Women's president and called Ardeth Green Kapp. Each spoke in the session. For the first time since 1929, a woman (in this case four women) spoke in a general session of conference.<sup>46</sup> Women did not speak again in general conference until April 1988 under direction of President Ezra Taft Benson, although in 1980 the First Presidency began inviting the general presidencies of the Relief Society, Young Women, and Primary to sit on the stand at general conference.<sup>47</sup> These changes were significant as they encouraged a perception of equality and importance between the work of Relief Society and the work of the priesthood.

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<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 75.

<sup>41</sup>Barbara B. Smith, "The Role of Relief Society in Priesthood Councils," *Ensign*, October 1979, 87.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., 89.

<sup>44</sup>Derr, Cannon, and Beecher, *Women of Covenant*, 313. According to Relief Society Minutes, President Belle S. Spafford spoke in the priesthood session of general conference in 1946 teaching encouraging bishops to work in partnership with Relief Society by utilizing the expertise of Relief Society presidents "in determining the needs of families receiving welfare assistance" to better meet the needs of their congregants.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., 354.

<sup>46</sup>At general conference October 2, 1929 LDS Church President Heber J. Grant stated, "We have listened to a great many testimonies from our brethren during this conference. We shall now call on some of our sisters." He then called on Louise Robison, Ruth May Fox, and May Anderson. Heber J. Grant, in Conference Report, October 1929, 84.

<sup>47</sup>Edward L. Kimball, *Lengthen Your Stride: The Presidency of Spencer W. Kimball* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 2005), 166.

The repeated request for Barbara Smith to speak in welfare sessions to outline and instruct men and women concerning the role of Relief Society carried a powerful message—the role and contribution made by women was paramount in the success of assisting families through the welfare system. Furthermore, the emphasis of having women participate implied that the ability for women to develop skills and confidence in counseling with priesthood leadership was a priority to the Brethren.

### Models for Womanhood

Early in his administration, President Kimball observed that a previous marker memorializing the organization of Relief Society in Nauvoo had deteriorated. When President Kimball asked Smith if she and her presidency were interested in undertaking the project to construct a new monument to women, Smith became very interested. Together with her counselors—Janath R. Canon and Marion R. Boyer—they eagerly went to work as they asked themselves: “What would it look like?” “Where would it be placed?” “How would it be financed?” and “What purposes could it serve to represent?”<sup>48</sup> Before returning to President Kimball for guidance, they contacted sculptor Florence Hansen for an idea about a possible statue. Hansen produced a clay model of a woman with a child holding a violin. Motivated by the model, Smith made an appointment with President Kimball. During the appointment, President Kimball asked the general Relief Society presidency if they felt the clay model adequately conveyed what they wanted it to represent. This question generated a mutual response from Smith and her counselors that the model did represent a portion of what they wanted to portray about a woman’s work, but that a woman nurturing a child’s skills did not encompass their full vision of a woman’s capacity and influence.

Determined to expand their vision, the Relief Society presidency arranged for a variety of sculptors to submit new ideas.<sup>49</sup> Additionally, they suggested that the women of the Church finance the project through voluntary contributions, and asked President Kimball if they could announce the project at the upcoming Relief Society general conference. The prophet approved the project.<sup>50</sup> With full support from President Kimball and his encouragement for women to contribute for the construction of the monuments, the general Relief Society presidency announced in a Church magazine in June 1975, “We propose that we, as women of the church today, erect a fitting monument that will be symbolic of women of the past, women today, and women of the future. We propose that it be a monument of heroic proportions that would stand as a symbol of womanhood as conceived from a Latter-day Saint point of view.”<sup>51</sup> Church members readily accepted the project, as was evidenced by the fact that during the next three years, LDS women contributed sufficient funds to sculpt thirteen statues.<sup>52</sup>

On February 9, 1978, four months before the dedication of the Nauvoo Monuments, Smith addressed students at Brigham Young University. She began her talk by explaining her concern and desire for Church members to grasp fully the significance of the divine role of womanhood. “One way,” she explained, “seemed to open up when we were given approval by the First Presidency to ask the women of the Church to contribute funds to build a monument in Nauvoo . . . Here such a statement about faith in God and faith in self could be made.”<sup>53</sup> From this statement, it was clear that Smith viewed the monuments as a simple and non-contentious method for outlining the role of womanhood for LDS members and the community at large.

By June of 1978, the designated women’s garden in Nauvoo, Illinois displayed the thirteen life-size monuments. Designed to show the many roles of a woman within society, the center monument displayed a confident looking woman, with the other twelve monuments surrounding her in a circular pattern. At the base of each statue was a plaque with a specific title and scripture inscription to clarify the role it symbolized. Provided below are the titles, descriptions, and scriptures on each statue.

<sup>48</sup> Barbara B. Smith, *A Fruitful Season* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1988), 96-97.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 97-98.

<sup>51</sup> Jill Mulvay Derr, Janath Russell Cannon, and Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, *Women of Covenant* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1992), 360.

<sup>52</sup> “Donations by members and families are made to their ward Relief Society secretary-treasurer, who keeps a list of donors. Lists of donors to the monument who contribute prior to 1 January 1978 will be bound in volumes and placed in the visitor’s center in Nauvoo. Lists of donors making contributions after 1 January 1978 will be placed in a separate volume.” “Nauvoo Woman’s Monument Donations Still Needed,” *Ensign*, December 1977, 67.

<sup>53</sup> Barbara B. Smith, “Roots and Wings,” *Brigham Young University Speeches*, Provo, Utah, February 9, 1978, 2.



Smith conveyed her thoughts concerning the purpose of the monuments, as follows: "It is a matter of deep concern that social and economic conditions today are enticing, if not forcing, woman out of the sphere in which she can find the most happiness and can render the greatest good to mankind. . . The purpose of this monument is twofold. First, to honor the founding of Relief Society by the Prophet Joseph Smith in Nauvoo, where he turned the key in behalf of women that knowledge and intelligence might flow down to them; and second, to make it possible to portray to the world the role of women in the gospel plan, as understood by the Latter-day Saints."<sup>54</sup>

Barbara Smith expressed that the Nauvoo Monuments epitomized the roles of womanhood and served a purpose in conveying that perspective to the world. Rather than being contentious or pointing out where the media and negative publicity was in error, the Nauvoo Monuments enabled general Church leaders to emphasize womanhood as designed by the Lord in a positive, yet firm manner.

One reporter at the dedication asked Smith this question: "Isn't your monument to women old-fashioned and traditional?" She replied with confidence, "Yes, if life is old-fashioned and traditional; if personal development, self-esteem, and selflessness are old-fashioned and traditional. For it will be a statement in bronze about the essential, eternal worth of women as individuals in the family setting. We consider these figures and their messages as timeless. A woman is an essential part of that plan of life and salvation yesterday, today, and forever."<sup>55</sup> It was evident that Smith regarded the Nauvoo Monuments project as revelation from the Lord and believed they served as a statement to all that the 'traditional' role of a woman was to be valued. Collectively, the monuments provided the multi-dimensional perspective of divine womanhood. In June 1977, Barbara Smith remarked, "It is necessary for women to know that they are different from men, with different responsibilities in life. Not less than men, just different."<sup>56</sup>

## Conclusion

Barbara B. Smith was president of the Relief Society at a critical and challenging time of intense conflict over women's issues in both Church and U.S. history. Yet she rose gracefully to the challenges concerning women's rights, the ERA, and other foundational LDS doctrines becoming a central media figure. Smith was not afraid of criticism or opposition from the press, or even members of the Church. She confidently came to the forefront of Church sponsored media and by defending womanhood on the airways and took a central place in media discussions on both a church and nationwide level. Whether it was in Church magazines, broadcasts across the nation, or on public television, Smith was vital in preserving and clarifying the Mormon woman identity on ERA-related issues and foundational doctrines of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

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<sup>54</sup>"News of the Church," *Ensign*, March 1976, 77–80.

<sup>55</sup> Barbara B. Smith, *A Fruitful Season* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1988), 133.

<sup>56</sup>"The Exemplary Womanhood Award," *Ensign*, June 1977, 94.