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A Voice for Women, a Defense of Family:
Barbara B. Smith and a Decade of Change
Prospectus

Barbara Bradshaw Smith became general president of the Relief Society in 1974, as Americans debated the Equal Rights Amendment, women's work, marriage, and family responsibility. She served until 1984, a decade in which questions about women's roles became both political and deeply personal. Smith opposed the ERA and defended distinct responsibilities for women and men, but she also encouraged women to pursue education, participate in civic life, and develop their abilities. In a 1978 address, she repeated questions she had heard from women raising children, supporting families alone, and trying to find their place in a family-centered Church without a husband.¹ Their questions suggest that her understanding of women's roles cannot be explained by her position on the ERA alone. This paper will ask how Smith's experiences as a wife, mother, and Relief Society general president shaped the way she understood women's authority and family responsibility, and how she explained those ideas to Church members and a wider public. Her life offers a way to examine how a Latter-day Saint woman leader responded to competing expectations of women during the 1970s and early 1980s.

Smith's published addresses will provide the first major group of primary sources. Her general conference talks show how she presented women's responsibilities to Church audiences throughout her presidency. In "Women's Greatest Challenge," delivered in 1978, Smith called on women to exercise responsible citizenship while acknowledging the different circumstances of single women and women supporting families. In "A Safe Place for Marriages and Families,"

¹ Barbara B. Smith, "Women's Greatest Challenge," October 1978 general conference.

delivered in 1981, she described a home sustained by work, trust, and service. She assigned mothers primary responsibility for maintaining order in the home but expected husbands and children to share its work, especially when a mother was employed outside the home.² Reading these addresses together will help me examine how Smith understood the relationship between family responsibility and women's opportunities outside the home.

Archival records may reveal parts of Smith's leadership that are less visible in her published speeches. The Winslow W. and Alice Smith papers at Utah State University contain records from Alice Colton Smith's service on the Relief Society General Board. The finding aid lists two 1974 folders titled "Notes for Barbara Smith," along with board records, materials on women's education and roles, a 1976 presentation concerning the role of women, and reminiscences of Smith's presidency.³ Because these are Alice Colton Smith's records rather than Barbara B. Smith's private papers, I will examine them before deciding what they reveal about Smith herself. They may show which concerns reached Relief Society leaders and how those women discussed and responded to them.

Contemporary media will provide a different view of Smith's public leadership. A 1976 *Washington Star* interview and her appearance with Beverly Campbell on *The Phil Donahue Show* placed her before national audiences during the ERA controversy.⁴ I plan to locate the Donahue transcript or recording and compare Smith's statements there with her Church addresses. Newspaper coverage may also show how reporters presented her views to readers

² Smith, "Women's Greatest Challenge"; Barbara B. Smith, "A Safe Place for Marriages and Families," October 1981 general conference.

³ "Winslow W. and Alice Smith Papers, 1880–2001," finding aid, USU_COLL MSS 379, Special Collections and Archives, Merrill-Cazier Library, Utah State University, Logan. The folder descriptions come from the finding aid; the folders have not yet been examined.

⁴ Randy Sue Coburn, "A Mormon Tells Why She Opposes ERA," *Washington Star*, May 11, 1976, A1, A6; "Donahue Transcript, February 18, 1980, WGN-TV, Chicago, Ill.: Appearances Mr. Phil Donahue, Ms. Barbara Smith, Ms. Beverly Campbell," WorldCat catalog record, OCLC 367503990. The catalog date has not been checked against the broadcast.

outside the Church. Together, these sources will help me determine whether Smith adapted her explanations for different audiences and how she represented Latter-day Saint women in public.

Secondary scholarship will place Smith within the larger history of women, religious authority, and the ERA. Martha Sonntag Bradley's *Pedestals and Podiums* examines the conflict over the ERA in Utah and the relationship between women's political activity and religious authority. Mary Jane Woodger and Carrie Taylor Anguiano's study of Smith examines her role in defining women's issues within the Church.⁵ Scholarship on Smith has understandably emphasized the ERA because it dominated much of the public discussion during her presidency. That emphasis, however, can leave less room for the other questions she addressed about education, work, marriage, motherhood, civic responsibility, and women's development. A biographical approach can bring those parts of her leadership together and ask whether they formed a consistent understanding of women's place within family and society.

This paper will contribute to the history of Latter-day Saint women by placing Smith's position on the ERA within the broader context of her life and leadership. Rather than assume that her views were either contradictory or consistent, I will compare her speeches, Relief Society records, and public appearances to see how she understood the relationship between women's opportunities and family responsibilities. This approach will also keep the work of Smith's counselors and other Relief Society women visible. It may show how one woman's public voice emerged from both personal conviction and shared institutional work at a time when the Church and the country were arguing over women's roles.

⁵ Martha Sonntag Bradley, *Pedestals and Podiums: Utah Women, Religious Authority, and Equal Rights* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2005); Mary Jane Woodger and Carrie Taylor Anguiano, "Combating the 'Too Broad, Too Vague, and Too Non-Definitive, Blanket Approach' to Finding Solutions for Women's Issues: The Essential Barbara B. Smith in Defining the Role of Women in the LDS Church," *Journal of Mormon History* 43, no. 3 (2017): 122–44.

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