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Women's role in LDS Church is questioned

By [Marin Decker](#)

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OREM A University of Utah professor and excommunicated member of the LDS Church encouraged a roomful of religious-minded listeners to critically examine the role gender plays in the church.

Margaret Toscano, who spoke Friday at Utah Valley State College as part of the school's fifth annual Mormon Studies Conference, focused her remarks on the conflict between male-dominated leadership and gender equality in the church.

"If the male always presides, even in love and righteousness, isn't the other partner subordinate, at least in rule, if not in rank?" Toscano asked. "And if so, does this lead to inequality that contradicts the ideal set forth in the Book of Mormon?"

Toscano examined the question of inequality using three examples.

The first was a talk given by President Gordon B. Hinckley, leader of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, during last October's General Conference, extolling women and chastening men who demean them.

"I think President Hinckley's purpose is to elevate women in this talk, and I think he's very concerned with the status of women," she said. "And yet, what I worry about is that his telling of the creation puts women in the role of the receiver, not the active participant. To say that women are the culmination of creation, rather than the active source, is to say that women are derivative, not primary; important, not essential; separate, not equal."

Toscano said how the patriarchal structure of the church subordinates women can be seen in the Ensign, a church magazine.



Margaret Toscano speaks at UVSC's Mormon Studies Conference.

Scott G. Winterton, Deseret Morning News

"Most of the (articles written by women) deal with relationships and practical problems; most of the men's articles deal with church history and doctrine," Toscano said. "Overall, the impression given is that women are a very important part of the church, and contribute to it in many ways, but men lead and define it."

Toscano's third example of perceived gender inequity was the church's exclusive portrayal of the divine as masculine.

"What if, as we flipped through the pages of the Ensign, we didn't see male leaders highlighted, but female leaders?" she asked. "What if we had pictures of the feminine Divine? How would our image of things change?"

Toscano acknowledged that she believes it's important to consider that many LDS women say they're content with their role.

"When I ask most active Mormon women, they say, yes, they are satisfied," she said. "They say that they do not envy men their position and responsibility."

But Toscano said this view is a result of LDS Church leadership being solely identified with maleness. That, she said, can result in damage to the female self-image.

"(LDS women feel) that for a woman to be dissatisfied with her exclusion from power is tantamount to being dissatisfied with herself, her gender and her mothering function," she said. "In my view, the reason why most Mormon women say they're satisfied with their role in the church is that they have concluded that the advantages of membership in what they believe is Christ's true church outweigh any disadvantages that they might feel."

Toscano said freedom to inquire about gender issues is lacking in the church and that she experienced intolerance when she was excommunicated from the church in 2000.

"Any woman who complains about gender equity in the church is immediately accused of being power-hungry," she said. "I know. I've been there . . . I was told to be quiet."

Toscano encouraged audience members to conclude that "it's just simply wrong," and to fight for social change, even if they may not succeed.

In an interview after her remarks, Toscano said she tried to be respectful of her audience members and their various views.

"I hope that the students at UVSC get a sense that I'm trying to be fair and respectful," she said. "I wasn't trying to attack the position of women that feel happy in the church. I may feel that

things are very unequal, but if you don't, that's your experience, and I cannot say that you are wrong, you have a different experience than I do."

Toscano said although she is no longer a member of the LDS Church, she is not anti-Mormon. "I don't see myself as anti-church, because I think that there's so much good in Mormonism," she said.

But Toscano said she does think that changes should be made in the church and suggested the joint-holding of priesthood callings by couples, an independent Relief Society and more deference to women's opinions as steps that could be taken.

"There's a way in which a good man kind of always shares things with his wife anyway, but to acknowledge her, and say that what she has to say is important," she said. "At least half of the church is women, so I think that their opinion on every matter should be looked at and consulted. That happens now when you have a really good and open leader, but I think it should be part of the church structure and policy."

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