

INTERVIEW

“WE HAVE A STRONGER CHURCH”

An Interview with Marjorie and M. Richard Troeh



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MARJORIE BRADLEY TROEH and M. RICHARD TROEH are a married couple who belong to the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. Together, they have had extensive experience in the RLDS church and are the co-authors of *The Conferring Church* (Independence, Mo.: Herald House, 1987), which details the church’s democratic processes. Marge was commissioner of Women’s Ministries (the equivalent of head of the Relief Society) from 1971 to 1982. She was ordained a high priest in 1994 and currently chairs the World Church Committee on Ministry for Older Adults. Richard, a practicing physician in Independence, Missouri, is also a high priest. He has served in most capacities in RLDS congregations and on several world church committees and medical missions.

This interview was conducted by Bryan Waterman.

How does the RLDS general conference/legislation/decision-making work?

Marge: Our world conferences occur every two years; they are legislative conferences. There used to be more of an educational emphasis, and now there’s a lot of worship and celebration that goes on. But they are primarily legislative conferences.

Conference is the time for establishing

budgets, sustaining officers, and dealing with legislative issues. It’s a representative conference: 2,800 delegates are selected proportionately from throughout the world, and each jurisdiction selects its own. Because international travel is expensive and difficult, many times the international delegations are not able to fill their representatives, and so they select others to represent them.

Richard: In the past, Marge and I have

been representatives for Zaire. They try to select people who have some knowledge and sympathy for their area. And some of the delegation are actually from Zaire.

Marge: The only ex-officio delegates are the general church officers—about thirty. All the rest are elected delegates.

Proposed legislation can be initiated by the First Presidency or any stake, district, or region. Zaire brought a resolution about rebaptism. Minnesota brought a resolution about sharing the communion emblems with people who are not baptized, RLDS members. Other legislative issues deal with our stand on peace or contemporary social issues. So when legislation is forwarded to the conference from a jurisdiction, or if the First Presidency or one of the quorums initiates it, then it has a hearing. A committee is assigned to spearhead the hearing, then there’s an open debate, pro and con, and anyone can go and respond to it. A summary of the pros and cons is published. Then you go to the legislative session where proposed items are brought up along with the report of the hearing committee, and then it’s open to debate, amendment, referral, whatever. Our conferences are very lively.

Richard: At one past World Conference, only 50 percent of the items presented by the First Presidency got past the conference unchanged. Legislation from jurisdictions have had only about a 20 percent chance of being passed as introduced.

How did the RLDS church come to ordain women?

Marge: Certainly the women in Nauvoo were healing the sick and those kinds of things that have priesthood implications. In the RLDS tradition during the early 1900s, we had an organization called the Religio Society, a kind of precursor to our Christian Education with intergenerational activities. Fanny Pender Page traveled with her husband who was a missionary to the western states and she organized Religio Societies. At the national conference of the Religio Society, she and her husband petitioned that she be ordained because if she were, she would receive half fare on the railroad. Well, the Religio Society felt that it could not act on the resolution and referred it to the church’s general conference. The conference referred it to a committee, and the committee studied it with some of the general officers. They ended up saying that there was no precedent for the calling of women and they did not see their way clear to ordain women just to save the church railroad fare.

The point is that they didn’t say, “Well, no,

you can't ordain women; there are theological barriers to it." But they said, "Under these circumstances and these conditions we don't feel like we have any guidance."

Richard: That remained the only official statement on ordination of women for more than fifty years.

Marge: In the 1960s, outside professionals looked at our church organization and said that by having a strong women's organization, women are potentially tangential—you have members, and then you have women. So, as part of the restructuring, they did away with the general department of women and the general director of women, which removed women's line of authority. It was a trade off, and women's organizations and their independent budgets were folded into the congregational structure. When you lose financial control, you lose a lot.

Richard: A year later, they stopped publishing *Distaff*, the women's publication.

Marge: For me personally, the trade-off was that as Women's Ministries consultant, I was now assigned to work with three populations. I still worked with women in preparing women's study resources and in dealing with organizational dimensions. But I also worked with the general membership and helped them perceive what women did as their "ministry." It was an attempt to understand what women did and to see them as central to the church. Third, I worked with church administration at all levels and helped evaluate how church policies affected

women.

Over time, we began to really try to help women. In 1970, resolutions at the general conference were proposed that asked the Presidency to report on the status of women in the church and to investigate the ordination of women. Those resolutions got tabled.

Another resolution from Oregon on opportunities for women began: "Whereas women constitute over 50 percent of the membership . . ." It hoped to establish more opportunities for women.

Richard: There was a motion to refer this legislation on opportunities for women to the First Presidency and the joint council, whereupon I stood to take the floor and church President Smith warned me that a motion to refer is debatable only on the wisdom of referral and the body to which it is referred. I said, "Yes, sir, I will just point out to the conference that this motion to refer an item on opportunities for women is being referred to an all-male body." There was laughter, and they voted down the motion to refer and tabled the motion on opportunities for women.

Marge: Well, if the 1970 resolution had passed, the Presidency would have been required to provide a study. Since it got tabled, a study became optional, and the Presidency took the initiative and appointed a committee in 1971 to study roles for women. I served on that committee. The committee made its report to the First Presidency who then brought it to the conference of 1974

with their recommendations.

The basic recommendations were specific actions to take at the world church level and for district, stake, regional, and congregational levels. They included equal pay statements and a lot of really good stuff. They did not include the question of ordination, but there began to be more and more discussion about women. The Women's Commission held a series of women's meetings dealing with stewardship and personhood and began to explore options in life; then they moved into community building. The Women's Commission issued new resource information for women's organizations in the local congregations. Instead of only one legitimate form of organization, many options were offered. Instead of having, necessarily, a separate women's group, one option suggested looking at the congregations' needs, organizing commissions for each of these functions, and having anybody serve on them. And so that emerged into the basic pattern of congregation life.

Those innovations were published first in our women's resource book in 1974 and then were incorporated in the congregational leaders' handbook later in the decade. The church moved into a commission structure where you have a worship commission as well as commissions for education, stewardship, pastoral care, evangelism, Zion building, and sometimes leadership. And a variety of people—men and women—served on those commissions.

We began moving toward a more inclusive ministry, using the specific gifts of the individual. We were moving away from priesthood-dominated worship services. Presiding had to be priesthood; ordinances had to be priesthood. But beyond that you could use the gifts of all people. That was helpful, so that by the time women were ordained, we were in a situation where we were already utilizing people in these roles.

In the late 1970s, local presiding officers were receiving requests for women's ordination, and they didn't know what to do. They forwarded them to the First Presidency, and the requests sat on the Presidency's desk because there was no precedent.

Richard: In 1980, we had a resolution from a jurisdiction in Australia essentially asking for home rule. They said, "Maybe the rest of the church is not ready to ordain women, but we are. Let us." But the Presidency said it needed to be world wide.

Marge: That's because ordination is universal; it goes with you wherever you go. There were these stimuli from all different kinds of sources, and so women's ordination

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finally was done by revelation. It could have also been accomplished by simply removing that ridiculous resolution that said we aren't going to ordain women to get cheaper railroad fares.

Richard: The First Presidency had actually tabled a female ordination proposal at general conference four years earlier, but they also made a public statement that there was no theological reason why women could not be ordained.

Marge: I didn't think we needed an all-church revelation for the change, because each call is a revelation. What I wanted to do was just get the barriers out of the way. If God wants to call women, God can call women. If God doesn't want to call women, God won't call women. But I do realize that, pragmatically, for most people, the smoothest way was through a revelation.

Richard: I roughly estimate that a fourth of the church was eager for it to happen and wondered why it hadn't a long time ago.

Marge: Prior to that revelation, there was a survey published in the *Herald*.

Richard: Basically, about half of the people said, "Fine, as long as God says so." At that point, maybe 20 percent were saying, "No way!" Then when it came, about half of that 20 percent said, "Yeah, we'll change," and the other 10 percent left the church.

Marge: The church set November 17, 1985, as the first day that women could actually be ordained. And on that day, fifty services were held throughout the world, and various women were ordained. Sometimes one, sometimes two or three, or whatever. That removed the chance that there would be "the first woman" to be ordained.

Are RLDS priesthood offices progressive as in the LDS church?

Marge: Most adults aren't ordained to any priesthood. For those who are, the emphasis is on ministry, and each office has particular ministerial responsibilities. Calling

individuals to an office is a process of matching the gifts of the individual and needs of the church and the world.

The deacon is very much a temporal calling, dealing with the physical realities of the building, and so forth, and also the stewardship idea of working with individuals to help them with budgeting, planning, financing, tithing, etc. A teacher is very much a reconciling minister, looking over the relationships between individuals where there is estrangement or between an individual and the church.

Richard: It is not seen as progressing through stages of the ministry. Somebody might be a teacher forever, the only office to which they will ever be called. Their personal characteristics may fit them for that kind of ministry.

Marge: Priests are oriented toward family ministries and they also deal with some of the ordinances and the sacraments. They can marry, baptize.

Richard: We have some sixty-year-old deacons who just revel in being able to minister to the physical needs of our congregation.

Has Marge's ordination affected your marriage?

Marge: I think we already had an egalitarian relationship. It's not fully there; we can work on things.

Richard: She didn't have to be ordained in order to have me respect her ministerial abilities. They were there. The ordination merely meant that the community at large recognized them. As for my feelings about authority, she had the authority to minister already.

I've heard up to 35,000 left the RLDS church after the revelation.

Richard: For many, it was simply the final straw. Many had been questioning some of the decisions of the church for quite some time, feeling that it had become too liberal and that the church was not emphasizing enough the Book of Mormon and authority.

Marge: It was the final straw. A thing like the ordination of women is very tangible: either you do it or you don't. Questions of authority and our movement toward ecumenical participation were other things they didn't like, but each of these occurred in degrees. Ordination of women became the benchmark; when that happened, it was very difficult for them to stay.

Richard: What is not emphasized, though, is that although we lost many, we gained a certain number, including people like me who came back or stayed in, people we might have lost otherwise. Also, I think of the strength it has given those who have remained; we have a stronger church now.



"Oh, Yeah? Well, if God did make men and women equal, why do women only get eighteen-month missions?"