

The Leadership Development Gained by Women Serving Full-Time Missions

Setting the Stage

Utah is below the national average in terms of women holding leadership roles within nearly all settings (e.g., business, education, government, politics, state boards and commissions, and religious). This is the case most often for two overarching reasons: *first*, organizational and societal cultures have gendered systems, processes, and practices, and, *second*, many women themselves do not have the confidence, aspirations, ambition, or perceived knowledge, skills, and abilities to “lean in” to leadership opportunities.

Although there are many types of developmental experiences and relationships that have been shown to provide powerful learning and growth, one that has not been explored is the leadership development knowledge, skills, and abilities that come as young women serve full-time missions for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the duration of which is typically 18 months. Documenting the skills that women acquire through qualitative research provides many Utah women with insights into what they have gained, how they are using mission-acquired capabilities today, and what additional experiences would have been helpful during and after their missions. The results are also useful for those individuals, initiatives, and organizations that are focused on strengthening the impact of Utah women through leadership development strategies, as well as influencers who highly value youth and young adults having opportunities to become leaders. This study focused on the following three research questions:

1. What are the leadership knowledge, skills, and abilities women developed throughout the experience of serving a full-time mission during young adulthood?
2. How are returned sister missionaries currently using these knowledge, skills, and abilities?
3. What other missionary experiences or opportunities do these women wish they would have had during their missions that they believe would have helped them to be more prepared to lead in their current lives?

Research Methods

The research instrument for this study included a number of demographic questions and four open-ended qualitative questions, which consisted of three research questions plus space for additional comments. The study also included a nine-item scale with a variety of questions to measure participants' perceptions of the value of their experience, particularly as it focused on their views of missions and leadership learning. Data were collected in December of 2018 and early January of 2019 via an online survey instrument. Participants were recruited through email newsletters, social media posts,

announcements in women's group meetings, distribution lists within The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and invitations to key faculty and administrators at Brigham Young University and LDS Business College. We aimed for 100–200 responses, but we closed the survey early when we reached 687 responses, most of which were very detailed. The flood of responses provided an extremely large sample for qualitative research, and five researchers spent nine months completing the complex analysis. All data were carefully coded and analyzed, and only select highlights are included in this brief.

Participant Demographics

Of the 687 survey responses, we were able to use 625 for our analysis. The survey participant demographics are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Survey Participant Demographics

<i>Age:</i> 20–24 years old (29.5%), 25–29 (18.4%), 30–39 (21.1%), 40–49 (18.7%), 50+ (12.3%)
<i>Martial Status:</i> married (61.3%), single (33.9%), separated, divorced, widowed, or “other” (4.8%)
<i>Highest Educational Level:</i> master's degree+ (31.9%), bachelor's degree (36.3%), associate degree (11%), “some college” (20.2%), (with many of these participants currently in college), high school diploma (0.6%)
<i>Church Activity:</i> mostly to very active (87.4%), slightly or moderately active (3.7%), not active (8.9%)
<i>Age Began Mission:</i> 19–20 (36.5%), 21 (48.2%), 22+ (15.3%)
<i>Current Work:</i> full-time homemakers (10.3%), students (18.6%), part-time jobs (18.7%), full-time careers (52.4%)
<i>Paid Work Industry:</i> education (43.6%), business (33.8%), healthcare, caregiving, or social work (12%), nonprofit, government, legal, or public policy (10.6%)
<i>Occupational Level:</i> current students, entry-level, or independent workers (51%), supervisors, coordinators, or elementary or secondary teachers (29.3%), professors, managers, or executive positions (19.7%)

Leadership Competencies Gained from Mission

Of the 625 usable survey responses, 465 (74.4%) included data relevant to the first open-ended question (including competencies mentioned in other parts of the survey): “What are the leadership knowledge, skills, and abilities you developed throughout the experience of serving a full-time mission?” A final list of competency categories was created, ranked by

percentage of individual respondents who mentioned each (see Table 2).

Table 2: Leadership Competencies Developed While Serving a Full-Time Mission

Competencies	%
1. Public Speaking	40.2
2. Conflict Management	38.9
3. Courage	37.6
4. Interpersonal Skills	35.3
5. Problem Solving	33.5
6. Planning, Organization, & Accountability	31.0
7. Other Communication	28.6
8. Confidence	26.2
9. Spiritual Growth	23.7
10. Empathy	22.6
11. Feedback (Giving & Receiving)	22.6
12. Hard Things, Grit, Resilience, & Challenges	21.1
13. Mentoring	20.4
14. Teaching	20.2
15. Critical Thinking	19.6
16. Listening	17.4
17. Personal Growth & Awareness	15.3
18. Accepting Others	14.2
19. Time Management	13.1
20. Leader Development	12.3
21. Training Others	12.0
22. Teamwork	11.4
23. Foreign Language	11.2
24. Intercultural Competencies	11.2
25. Goal Setting & Achieving	10.1
26. Managing People	10.1
27. Work Ethic	10.1
28. Serving Others	9.7
29. Taking Direction & Learning from Leaders	9.0
30. Independence & Boundaries	8.4
31. Patience	8.4
32. Decision Making & Judgment	8.0
33. Standing My Ground	7.7
34. Leading by Example	7.5
35. Using My Voice	7.5
36. Self-Discipline	6.5
37. Adaptability & Flexibility	6.2
38. Lifelong Learning	5.4

For purposes of discussion, the 38 leadership competencies were grouped into the following five major themes. All competencies discussed within the sections below are ordered according to the number of participant mentions.

1. **Interpersonal & Relationship Skills (87%):** The vast majority of women surveyed reported gaining interpersonal or relationship skills while serving. Competencies in this category included conflict management, interpersonal

skills, other communication, empathy, mentoring, listening, accepting others, training others, teamwork, serving others, taking direction and learning from leaders, and establishing independence and boundaries. For many, a mission was the first time respondents had been in close, often intense, relationships outside of their own families, including with their companions, other missionaries, those in their teaching pool, mission leaders, and other members of the Church. Hence, it is unsurprising that the relationship skills most frequently mentioned by returned missionaries were “Conflict Management” and the related skills of compromise, negotiation, and mediation.

General “Interpersonal Skills” (building trust, making connections, forming close relationships, and dealing with varied personalities) was the next most frequently mentioned competency. The development of “Other Communication” skills (initiating discussion, persuasion, and having “crucial conversations”) was mentioned by many respondents, as was “Empathy,” along with closely related terms such as compassion, love, understanding others, and forgiveness. “Mentoring,” (i.e., coaching, inspiring, and supporting others) rounded out the top five most frequently mentioned relationship competencies. Overall, nearly nine out of ten respondents reported gaining relationship or interpersonal skills, which is underscored by one participant’s insight: “Building and preserving good relationships is essential to leadership.”

2. **Professional & Practical Skills (86%):** Nearly as many participants said they gained at least one of the following professional and practical skills: public speaking; problem solving; planning, organization, and accountability; feedback (giving and receiving); teaching; critical thinking; time management; leader development; foreign language; goal setting and achieving; managing people; work ethic; decision making and judgment; and lifelong learning. Missions include a wide variety of activities, and missionaries are generally left to manage and coordinate their days independently. Therefore, young missionaries find themselves developing numerous leadership skills that have future professional and practical application.

“Public Speaking” was the top skill mentioned in any category, as missionaries had to speak frequently to large or small groups, often with little notice, throughout their missions. “Problem Solving” was the next highest ranked professional skill mentioned by respondents; this included troubleshooting, being resourceful, and pivoting when plans changed. Missions presented many logistical challenges (e.g., transportation, scheduling, and budgeting); hence “Planning, Organization, and Accountability” was an enhanced skill set that many returned missionaries listed. The next most frequently mentioned professional skill was “Feedback (giving and receiving).” Many re-

spondents recognized how critical this leadership skill was; for example, one individual stated: “I absolutely loved learning how to give good feedback, . . . but to be a good leader, it is even more important to receive good feedback.” The fifth most commonly mentioned professional competency was “Teaching,” a vital skill on a mission, and, as seen in a later section on roles, one that many of the participants took home and used in subsequent professional and church work.

3. **Courage & Confidence (60%):** A significant percentage of respondents said they gained courage or confidence on their missions. The following are the competencies in Table 2 that were grouped into this category: courage, confidence, standing my ground, leading by example, and using my voice. One of the most prominent ways this competency was mentioned was in the courage to open one’s mouth and speak about religion, an uncomfortable or even taboo topic in many areas of the world. In discussing “Courage,” survey participants reported that their missions had taught them to be brave, bold, and assertive, and to take risks by leaving their comfort zones. One said, “I learned it’s better to risk being turned down than to never know where a moment of courage could take me.”

Respondents also gained “Confidence” to speak, lead, and trust themselves, and they reported increased levels of self-esteem and self-worth after their missions. The competency “Standing My Ground” showed that women learned to defend, advocate, stand up for themselves, and have the courage to speak the truth. Respondents also listed the power of “Leading by Example.” Finally, returned missionaries mentioned “Using My Voice” as a skill gained through serving a mission, as shown by this comment: “Most importantly, it taught me that my voice as a woman in the Church is important and should be heard equally among priesthood leaders.”

4. **Personal Growth & Maturity (48%):** Nearly half of all respondents also reported gaining skills in terms of their own personal growth and maturity, as evidenced by the following competencies: spiritual growth, personal growth and awareness, intercultural competencies, patience, self-discipline, and adaptability and flexibility. Missions are a personal “coming of age” experience for many who serve, and this was clearly demonstrated by our sample. Not surprisingly, “Spiritual Growth” was mentioned by many participants; it included increased faith, humility, obedience, joy, gratitude, and reliance upon Christ.

A large number of respondents also listed “Personal Growth and Awareness” competencies, which included perspective, positivity, overcoming perfectionism, open-mindedness, and maturity. Many missionaries, especially those serving far from home, listed “Intercultural Competencies” (increased awareness, sensitivity, and respect for people and cultures very different from their own); as one sister stated, “My mission brought me out of my world and into another.” The final three competencies related to

this major theme, “Patience,” “Self-discipline,” and “Adaptability and Flexibility,” highlight specific ways that returned missionaries recognized and appreciated the personal growth and development they experienced on their missions, as well as an understanding of how increased maturity could help them develop as leaders.

5. **Managing Challenges (21%):** Finally, one in five respondents specifically mentioned learning to survive or to overcome challenges, as is demonstrated in the competency category “Hard Things, Grit, Resilience, & Challenges.” This is the 12th most commonly mentioned competency overall, and it is unique enough to warrant its own main theme. Any returned missionary knows that missions are challenging; one respondent said, “Missions are hard. They push you to your breaking point. But my mission helped me know how to get from my breaking point to my high points.” This was a common theme among re-turned missionaries, not only that missions helped them learn that they could do hard things, but that they would become stronger by doing so. Common language among these responses included grit, determination, perseverance, tenacity, resilience, endurance, persistence, and survival. Yet despite these hardships, many expressed gratitude for the challenges and the resulting strength they gained through their persistence.

In addition to the myriad of knowledge, skills, and abilities returned sister missionaries reported developing while serving, a small (10.3%) but fervent subset of respondents stated that while they did gain valuable skills, women did not get to lead for various reasons: lack of opportunity, bias or discrimination (unconscious or otherwise) from mission leaders or other missionaries, or a prevailing attitude that women were only to follow, not lead (more on these ideas below). Other respondents said they had already gained many leadership skills prior to serving, which some said they continued to develop on a mission, but others felt that their previous leadership abilities were diminished due to the negative, biased treatment they experienced during their missions.

A final important point was the tendency for some respondents to recognize skills gained, but to not see these specific skills as being related to leadership. This may have stemmed from the idea that leadership only occurs while serving in a formal role, but it also possibly reveals a failure for some to recognize how broad leadership truly is. However, our general findings from Question 1 demonstrated that the vast majority of respondents recognized and valued the numerous leadership competencies they gained and developed on their missions.

Current Use of Leadership Competencies

The second question asked was, “How are you currently using the leadership knowledge, skills, and abilities you developed during your mission?” Responses to this question came in two general formats. First, participants discussed competencies that they developed, which were moved to the analysis for Question 1. Second, they identified the main roles in which

leadership training is now being used, which is discussed here. In total, 382 respondents talked about using leadership skills in their current life roles. Although 28 different roles were mentioned, these were aggregated into five main categories.

1. **Church Roles (22%):** Unsurprisingly, respondents said they were using leadership skills in various roles within The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Not only had respondents transferred their mission leadership experiences to a leadership role in church, they also said that they had taken on many leadership roles, including being the president of women's, youth, and children's organizations within their local congregations. They also talked about their love for teaching at church, a skill learned on their mission. Teaching occurs at all levels in the Church, from training new missionaries to teaching Sunday school. Some talked about using planning and organizing skills, while others discussed understanding how congregation processes work and developing a range of people skills. Some of the most important include listening, empathy, and advocacy, as can be seen in the following quotation: "I am in the Relief Society presidency now and am constantly having opportunities to listen deeply to what our struggling sisters are saying. This compassion and desire to listen came a lot from my mission."
2. **Education & Guidance Roles (21%):** As with church roles, just over one-fifth of respondents reported that they use leadership skills in their various roles outside the Church, as they are teaching, developing, coaching, mentoring, and advocating for others. In fact, many participants reported being in professional teaching roles, from preschool to university professors to department chairs. Some stated that their success in education was directly due to the skills learned on their mission, specifically, increased confidence, public speaking, and "doing difficult things." One participant's comment shows how important it is to pass on these skills to others: "I'm a teacher and actually teach a leadership class. I interact with college students regularly, and I encourage them to push themselves and do things that they see as hard."
3. **Family Roles (20%):** In alignment with the first two categories, one-fifth of respondents said they are using their leadership skills in a range of family roles. Many respondents talked about how the skills learned on their mission help considerably in their work as a mother. In particular, they point to the importance of assertiveness skills and building confidence, which are seen as essential to being an advocate for their children, as evidenced by the following quote: "I'm assertive. As a mom, I can tactfully but assertively approach teachers to advocate for my child." There were also comments about how they were passing on the importance of independence and resilience to their daughters. An interesting set of comments talked about leading in the family in their role as a wife. People and relationship skills learned on a mission were considered to be the building blocks for leading their families well. Understanding that compromise and collaboration are essential to a successful marriage comes directly from skills learned on a mission. Even simple family management techniques, such as planning and goal setting through family discussions, were highlighted as useful aspects drawn from mission experiences.
4. **Professional & Work Roles (17%):** Respondents mentioned a wide range of work roles in which mission-learned leadership skills are regularly used. In addition to the "Education & Guidance Roles" category, respondents also reported that mission skills prepared them well for the world of work. Along with public speaking, giving presentations, and people management, the ability to communicate complex ideas in a simple format was given as an example of a skill that made the respondents stand out at work. Participants said that a mission helped them develop tenacity and resilience, as well as to recognize the value and benefits of taking on difficult tasks. Comments concerning their work as managers demonstrated a focus on seeing themselves as people-centered leaders. Leadership success was discussed in terms of helping others to become leaders or being able to have compassion for everyone, while recognizing the importance of balancing performance levels with a people focus. One respondent spoke of being consulted for her leadership knowledge and skills: "I'm often invited in to consult on leadership and team development across my company." The specific types of jobs mentioned included supervisor, manager, business owner, researcher, project manager, and support staff within a variety of fields.
5. **College & School Roles (10%):** Respondents also said that their mission learning experiences had a considerable impact on their engagement with education. Skills learned on a mission appear to correlate well with those needed to succeed in higher education. Of special mention are the concepts of resilience, planning and problem solving, and public speaking. The ability to work well with people from different backgrounds was also identified as a useful skill learned on a mission.

Throughout, respondents talked about taking on leadership roles at work, in the family, and at church more generally. Leading in an educational environment is by far the most common experience reported. However, a small number listed very senior leadership roles in project management, business, and engineering. A critical aspect of leadership mentioned by several respondents is the ability to be a good role model for younger women. Again, skills such as conflict resolution, relationship building, and empathy were mentioned as central to leading in many life roles.

Finally, less than 2% of respondents talked about using leadership skills in their community roles; this included being involved in politics and campaigning and, in particular, being an advocate for the disadvantaged. As one returned sister missionary stated: “I also use my leadership skills in advocating for the voiceless and disenfranchised . . . within my community and my congregation. These efforts do not require a title or position, . . . and I know I would not feel confident or equipped to carry them forward without a lifetime of opportunities—including my mission—to prepare me to make them happen.”

Other Missionary Experiences and Opportunities

The next open-ended question asked was “What other missionary experiences or opportunities do you wish you would have had so that you would have been more prepared to lead and/or influence (or other things) now in your life?” Overall, 413 people replied to this question, but 26 wrote a word or so to let us know they had no response to the question, so 387 contributions were analyzed. Although a host of categories emerged during the analysis, they were combined into five core themes:

1. **Leadership Roles & Assignments (62%):** The majority of respondents discussed leadership roles and assignments they wish they would have had or thought other sisters should experience. Although a few mentioned being a senior companion as a leadership role, most did not consider it as such. Over 8% mentioned serving as a trainer, while 18% felt that the position of “sister training leader” was a significant improvement and appreciated serving in or wished they could have served in that role. Nearly 10% specifically mentioned that they would have liked to be a district leader, zone leader, or assistant to the president, roles assumed only by male missionaries.

In fact, there was a striking difference between sisters who served in all-sister zones (mostly at visitors centers) and those who did not, particularly in their perceptions of leadership opportunities. Sisters in all-sister districts or zones did get more leadership assignments, which they highly valued. Other respondents wanted to serve in mission councils, ward and stake councils, and have mission office roles. Still others wished they could have had assignments such as speaking or delivering training at conferences, planning meetings or projects, and managing people and reporting.

2. **Equal Opportunity Issues (38%):** More than one-third of respondents mentioned unequal or unfair opportunities or treatment either directly or within contexts of the other discussions (see other categories in this section). Only a few comments had to do with women getting the priesthood. Nearly all related to lack of opportunities (e.g., leadership, training, providing input, being in strategic conversations); disrespectful and unfair treatment from elders, ward leaders, or mission presidents (e.g., “unrighteous dominion”); unconscious bias and attitudes that

sisters are “less than”; not feeling valued and being underutilized; and overall inequality in opportunity and treatment. Some felt that gender and unconscious bias training for mission presidents and their wives would be helpful in raising consciousness and providing tools to missions. Finally, 4.4% of respondents specifically stated that sisters should have more opportunities to lead both elders and sisters, not just sisters.

3. **Learning & Growth (26%):** Study participants mentioned a host of topics that they felt would have been beneficial for them or others to learn about during their missions. Some of the topics mentioned included language skills, overcoming perfectionism, teaching, public speaking, dealing with sexism, management/administrative skills, mental health, developing others, self-understanding and love, courage and confidence, gender differences, giving and receiving feedback, communication skills, human relations, and Church doctrine, structure, and spirituality.
4. **Developmental Relationships (25%):** About 10% of the respondents mentioned the desire to have more female role models (including more meaningful interactions with the mission president’s wife and the desire for her to be viewed as having a higher mission status and formal title), networking, women-only learning opportunities, and additional exchanges and time with sisters in the mission. Another 10% discussed characteristics of their mission presidents, with a striking difference between the experiences of sisters with presidents who respected and appreciated sisters and those who did not (consciously and unconsciously). Many wrote about presidents who sought for equality in mission experiences for elders and sisters, as well as the sincere desire to find ways to have more meaningful interactions. At least half, however, discussed how their presidents did not respect sisters, didn’t take sisters seriously, made sexist comments, or didn’t understand subtle discrimination that took place. Another 5% discussed wanting mentoring from adult leaders, senior missionaries, and others.
5. **Formal Training & Development (25%):** Respondents also suggested that additional training during their missions would have enhanced their experience and performance. These included specific training for roles (i.e., senior companion, trainer, sister training leader) and leadership training and related elements (e.g., communication, conflict management, planning, resilience, counseling others, culture). There was also a clear recognition by many that sisters had significantly fewer opportunities for leadership training than did elders, primarily because of less availability of formal leadership roles. Again, many participants expressed a desire for more sister-only training, development, and conferences.

Although there were hundreds of topics that arose from these responses, only two more are noted here. First, some respondents (20%) felt their missions gave them all of the opportunities and experiences they needed to lead and influ-

ence. They made comments such as, “I wouldn’t change anything about my mission,” “My mission did everything that I needed it to for my life,” “I had wonderful opportunities,” “It was sufficient,” “I had a full and plentiful mission,” and “I wouldn’t change a thing.” And, second, about 7% of respondents expressed the desire for improved preparation before serving. Some mentioned they should have done better with learning from scriptures, seminary, and personal study. However, more wished they would have had more leadership training, practice sharing the Gospel through experiences with full-time missionaries or ministering assignments (including role playing and teaching), and had been given more meaningful responsibility as youth.

Quantitative Perceptions

A 9-item scale measured general perceptions of the mission experience, its influence on learning and leadership development, and the responsibility and role of women preparing to become leaders (see Table 3). The 625 respondents used a 7-point scale (1=Strongly Disagree to 7=Strongly Agree) to answer the following questions.

Table 3: The Influence of Missions on Learning, Growth, & Perceptions

Questions	M	S.D.
1. My mission was a powerful experience in my life.	6.60	.92
2. My mission taught me to lead.	5.53	1.59
3. My mission taught me a lot, but not about leadership.	3.17	1.93
4. My mission changed my life in positive ways.	6.27	1.29
5. My mission did not teach me much.	1.40	0.96
6. Women need to be prepared to influence people around them.	6.56	1.00
7. Women need to be prepared to be leaders.	6.67	.84
8. Men in the Church need to learn to lead more than women.	1.89	1.49
9. I’m glad I served a mission.	6.51	1.20

Most participants felt that their mission was a powerful experience in their lives (Q1) and they were glad they served (Q9); there were no statistically significant differences between responses in all demographic variables except for activity level. Expectedly, most active respondents were more likely to agree with these two questions. Younger women (including those not married and who had lower education levels) were significantly more likely to agree that their missions taught them to lead, although high ratings were found in all ages and levels. However, those who started their missions at 19 or 20 were more likely to agree with this question.

There was little agreement to the statement (Q8) that men needed to learn to lead more than women (12.8% disagreed and 64.2% strongly disagreed), while only 7.1% expressed some level of agreement. Over 76% of participants answered “strongly agree” to the question about women needing to be prepared to influence (Q6), with 17.5% answering “somewhat agree” to “agree.” In response to Q7 (women need to be prepared to be leaders), 79.3% strongly agreed, while 17.6% also either agreed or at least somewhat agreed, leaving only 3% on either question being neutral or in the three “disagree” options. Although we don’t have a control sample in this study to compare, we found responses to these two questions particularly strong. It would be interesting to compare these responses with Utah women in the Church who did not serve missions.

Recommendations

Overall, scholars carefully analyzed thousands of responses to see what categories and themes would emerge during the research process, and only the most prominent were reported in this brief. The vast majority of respondents were positive in looking back on the leadership skills gained or strengthened while serving a mission for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Nearly all study participants also stated that they use those abilities and competencies currently in many different roles in their homes, Church congregations, and in their workplaces, while only a few stated they are currently using them to influence and lead in their communities. Yet, the majority of those who participated in the study, no matter their current activity status in the Church, offered suggestions on ways to improve their experience specifically related to the development of leadership knowledge, skills, and abilities. These comments, along with findings from women’s leadership development research, provide the foundation for the following recommendations. Although these are geared toward Latter-day Saint missionaries, overall implications can be applied to other contexts and settings.

First, Church leaders and other influencers who are invested in developing more women leaders can be more intentional and explicit in framing the numerous competencies missionaries gain as the leadership skills they are. One of the barriers to leadership is that, because of socialization during childhood and youth, girls and women fail to develop a true “leader identity,” as do boys and men. Intentional framing can assist.

Second, Church and mission leaders can carefully and critically consider which missionary roles can be expanded or created to include more formal and informal leadership positions and experiences for sister missionaries. This will then increase the available opportunities for more sisters to participate in mission leadership meetings and trainings.

Third, unconscious bias workshops and gender trainings can provide mission presidents, area authorities, and their spouses opportunities to strengthen their capacity to provide more

intentional, thoughtful, and beneficial guidance and development for *all* missionaries, leaders, and members serving within their areas of influence.

Fourth, training and development for missionaries at missionary training centers and within missions can be more strategically designed to include consistent curriculum for those moving into leadership roles, as well as specific leadership skills training for all missionaries. Presidents could consider calling senior couples to coordinate training throughout the mission to make this a priority.

Finally, mission leaders can create and support additional sister-only learning opportunities, including trainings, conferences, developmental networking, exchanges, peer coaching, and one-on-one mentoring with mission president wives, senior sister missionaries, and influential sisters in wards, stakes, regions, and communities. Research shows that women-only developmental experiences are particularly impactful if they are strategically designed and created for open and meaningful interaction and learning.

Conclusion

This research clearly shows that women who serve full-time missions for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints experience powerful developmental experiences and relationships that provide leadership development, learning, and growth, particularly when they are given formal and informal opportunities to lead. This is the first study we have found that has documented the experiences of returned sister missionaries in this way. These findings can assist influencers who care about raising the next generation of leaders to positively impact Utah's communities and the state as a whole. Though this research was specific in scope, the findings and especially the recommendations are generalizable to a wide variety of settings and situations. As we continue to focus on increasing women's representation in positions of influence within Utah, it is vital to understand how we can develop and strengthen girls and young women in all arenas, including religious settings. If we do not, Utah will continue to miss many of the benefits that come when men and women work, serve, and lead together.

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