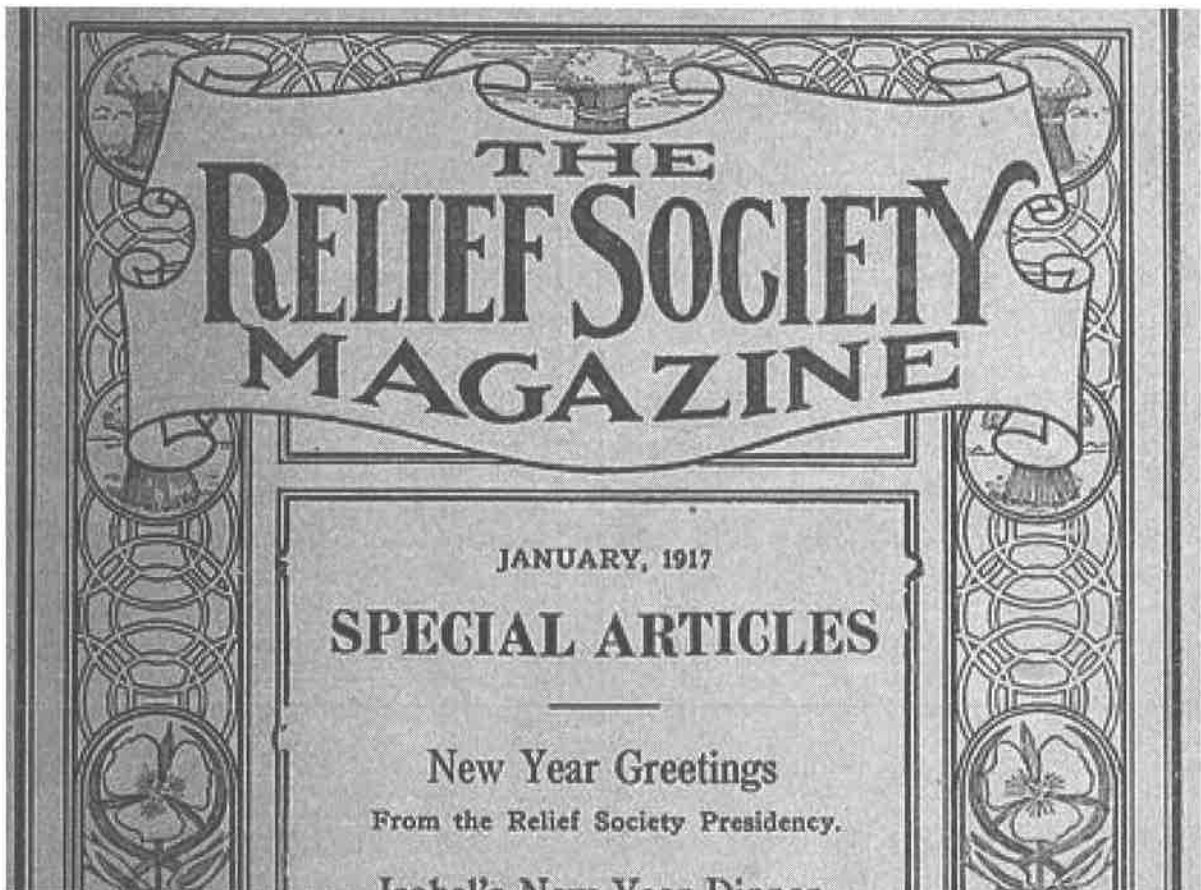


# The Relief Society is Not a Women's Organization

by Leah Marie | Feb 3, 2017 | Corporate Church, Featured, Feminism, Mormonism, Relief Society | 0 comments



After the Women's March a few weeks ago (you know the one, there was no doubt a contingent near you) there was this Facebook post making its way around the internet equating that grand action with attending Relief Society. It was quite the leap.



I've been reflecting on the Women's March. I didn't attend yesterday, however I love the comments of many women who did who said that it was inspiring to see that many women standing together. I know how you feel! I'm a member of the largest and longest-standing women's organization in the world. We have members all over the globe. We meet regularly, four or five times a month. We call each other "sister". Our purpose is to lift one another and those around us. We've saved people from starvation. We've lifted victims of tragedy and disaster. We've tutored and cared for refugees around us. We've clothed the naked. We've offered a shoulder to cry on and perhaps even a casserole or two. We "march" all together twice a year in late March and late September to feel of our sisterhood, to uplift and inspire and to declare our solidarity with each other and the causes of women. If you've been looking for this in your life, join us. We'd love to see you. We meet every Sunday at the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. We are the Relief Society.

I'm going to set aside how grossly self-congratulatory the deification of Relief Society is here. This woman's need to claim moral superiority is a topic for another day. What I take the most issue with is her central claim that the Relief Society is the largest and longest-standing women's organization in the world. It's not just an absurdly arrogant claim; it is entirely untrue. The Relief Society can't even boast that it is a women's organization at all.

Let's back this up and go over a basic timeline of Relief Society history.

The Relief Society of Nauvoo was founded in 1842. The way this gets discussed in church, you'd think it was because the Lord decreed it so right at that time. The reality is that women's organizations like this were very popular at the time, and Mormon women were far from the first to form one. What is noteworthy is that, at this point, it was entirely a women's organization. They had their own membership rolls, leadership, and they paid dues.

The Relief Society of Nauvoo was disbanded in 1844. I've learned that this will come as a shock to many—especially given that the church celebrated the sesquicentennial anniversary of the Relief Society in 1992. Alas, it had not been around for 150 years because in 1844 it ceased to exist for quite awhile. It was disbanded because women like Emma Smith were using the organization to speak out against polygamy and Brigham Young wasn't having it. (True story. Check it out in *The First Fifty Years of Relief Society*.)

Women's coalitions started popping up in local wards again in 1851. In 1866 they made it official again. For some time it is a pretty amazing organization. They join the National Council of Women, fighting for suffrage. They build hospitals. They start holding their own general

conferences. They build their own buildings, and they create their own manuals. They have their magazines.

But then something happens.

They lose their buildings, and they lose their magazines. The church takes ownership of the hospitals and co-opts their conferences. Before you know it, instead of having their own meetings and their own budget and their own agenda, they are meeting in a three-hour block of church that is presided over by men who grant them meager budgets and approve/dictate their agendas. No longer do women even run this organization on their own. Can it be called a women's organization if women do not own it?

It is referred to as an auxiliary. It is supplementary to the organization to which it belongs. Can it even be called a women's organization when it is just an auxiliary to a larger one *that is run entirely by men*?

And here's another kicker. In 1971, all adult women in the church became members of Relief Society. You can have been baptized at the age of 8, stopped attending church at the age of 13, and five years later when you turn 18, your name gets moved from the Young Women rolls to the Relief Society rolls. Can you boast the numbers of an organization that has no opt-in or opt-out procedure? Can you boast the numbers of an organization that has no control of its own membership rolls?

Can you boast the longevity of an organization that stopped being its own organization fifty years ago?

I submit that you cannot.

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