

The Salt Lake Tribune

Commentary: LDS Church has great power, which it has wielded irresponsibly



Church President Russell M. Nelson looks on during The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints' conference Saturday, April 6, 2019, in Salt Lake City. Church members are preparing for more changes as they gather in Utah for a twice-yearly conference to hear from the faith's top leaders. (AP Photo/Rick Bowmer)

By Natasha Helfer Parker | Special to The Tribune • Published: 6 hours ago
Updated: 5 hours ago

A letter to the prophet of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints from a mental health practitioner.

President Russell M. Nelson,

I want to address your recent talk to the general membership of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints stating how not all families will be able to enjoy the afterlife together.

Let me remind you of the families I work with on a daily basis as a clinical practitioner:

- Mixed-faith families
- LGBTQ+ individuals, couples and their families (who were desperate to hear anything healing after the recent policy reversals announcement)

- Families of people who have struggled with and even died from drug and alcohol dependence (we are currently experiencing an opioid epidemic that knows no religious bound)
- Single parent families, co-parenting families after divorce and other non-traditional families
- Families where there have been complicating factors of abuse/trauma and are trying to make sense of horrific realities while still identifying as a loving entity
- Families of sexual assault survivors
- Families who are dealing with serious mental health diagnoses that affect behavior (i.e. bipolar, impulse-control, etc.)
- Families who are survivors of a loved one's death by suicide
- Any family who has an individual struggling with some behavior they are trying to improve (basically all of us)

This list is obviously not comprehensive. Most of these families are loving, dedicated, loyal and committed to their relationships. Your message will negatively affect them in regards to mental health (i.e. increased symptoms of depression, anxiety, OCD preoccupations, PTSD triggers, etc.), emotional health (i.e. worry, sadness, doubt, confusion, pain, etc.) and relational health (i.e. young impressionable children/teens worried about being separated from their parents/siblings; mixed-faith believing partners who often choose divorce because of these types of narratives; parents rejecting/shaming their adult or teen children; parents feeling responsible that they did not do enough when children use their agency to find other successful ways to live/think/believe; loss of respect and trust among family members; etc.).

As a prominent leader of a worldwide church, you have impressionable power which you wielded irresponsibly. There are serious consequences to what you say and how you say it. This week alone I've had numerous clients painfully present these in our

sessions referencing your talk (teen and adult panic attacks, domestic violence towards a transitioning spouse, several suicide assessments, divorce decision made final, and resignation from the church).

Please stop causing the type of wreckage I, and my many concerned colleagues, have to sew up in the cardiac surgical room of the therapy chair. Hearts are breaking.

As a mental health practitioner, I am trained to ask people how they can use their religious values and spiritual tools to help edify their goals towards mental and relational health. As a church member and a therapist, I see vast benefits when the Gospel of Jesus Christ is taught and lived from the lens of love, inclusion, personal agency, comfort and peace. I see great harm and un-Christlike behavior when it's taught from a place of division, rigid obedience, exclusion and hierarchy.

The teachings and truths of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints should not be in contradiction with basic concepts of mental and relational health which have been well studied and become universal standards of best care practice.

Please use your vast resources to become better informed in issues of mental health, relational health and trauma informed congregations as you serve our membership.

Natasha Helfer Parker, MS, LCMFT, CST, Wichita, Kan., runs an online practice, *Symmetry Solutions*, which focuses on helping families and individuals with faith concerns, sexuality and mental health. She hosts the *Mormon Mental Health* and *Mormon Sex Info* podcasts, is the current past-president of the *Mormon Mental Health Association* and runs a sex education program, *Sex Talk with Natasha*. She has more than 20 years of experience working with primarily an LDS clientele.
