

LETTER FOR



**THE FIRST
PRESIDENCY**

This letter was written by Evan Sharley and read to Art Smith on 7th November, 2022.
Upon Art's suggestion, it has been adapted for the First Presidency.

The cover art is a combination of the polyamorous flag and the Community of Christ seal.

It is my prayer that we can come to embody our Enduring Principles of "Unity in Diversity" and
"Worth of All" for *everyone* in our community.

Thank you for taking the time to read this letter. I have always been remarkably surprised with the responsiveness with my church leaders in Community of Christ. I sent a letter to Steve Veazey a couple of years ago introducing myself, and was overjoyed when he responded to me.

That said, I have a deep concern regarding the future of our church and wanted to express this to you, knowing that my church leaders hear me and value me.

Background

While there are many nuances, generally speaking polyamory is a type of relationship structure where you can have multiple partners at the same time and **REQUIRES** respect, consent, transparency, honesty, and communication with all parties involved. Polyamorous people view their partners as fully formed individuals; not as possessions to claim ownership of. They view love as something to be shared; not restricted. This type of relationship structure is outside of the mononormativity that most of our society is structured around, and polyamorous people are more often than not considered to be a part of the queer community as a result.

With that in mind, there is a well-respected polyamorous Ex-Mormon woman named Monica English in the Salt Lake City congregation. Until recently she served on the pastorate team, and has been a pillar in that community and by extension for all of us with a Mormon background. Her husband lost his battle with depression and died via suicide in August. Due to information that her spouse released prior to his death and threats to her family, she felt like she had no choice but to come out as polyamorous on Facebook to be honest about what kind of support she was getting from her boyfriend.

While this widow and her 10 children were mourning, multiple World Church administrators put pressure on her pastor, Carla Long, to take action to remove Monica from priesthood. World Church seemed to be more concerned with punishing this widow for being polyamorous than providing pastoral care to her and her family. Additionally, Carla mentioned to a couple of people that she felt like if she didn't do what World Church was telling her to do, her current job, impending promotion, and career as a whole could be at risk. She was, and still is, conflicted between doing the right thing and doing what World Church wants.

This created a massive amount of needless suffering for Monica, her family, and our community. We have struggled to understand why this was done, and so many of us have read the now-outdated 2004 and 2005 priesthood manuals. In the process we found that there is no policy regarding polyamory; even Jenn Killpack, the director of Communications for the church, was unable to find evidence that this policy actually exists. The fact that we couldn't find anything led many to the conclusion that World Church either has a secret list of internal policies or simply haphazardly and inconsistently does whatever they want at the moment. In the case of this polyamorous widow, many people involved agree that this qualified a form of ecclesiastical or spiritual abuse when using the First Presidency's definitions as a metric.

Since there was no clear policy regarding this, people didn't know how they could push back against this injustice. There were peaceful protests at the SLC congregations, including in

church services and people stepping down from the pastorate team in solidarity with Monica. This topic has not been contained to the SLC congregation, and is now often brought up in conversations all around the church. For example, Parker Johnson was so disillusioned with the church over this that he handed in his priesthood card over it. He didn't want to be associated with the church's immoral actions. People have also reached out to their church leaders to express concern, just as I am doing with you now, in hopes that they could use their sway to right this injustice.

Luckily, this immediate outcry made it so that the polyamorous woman's priesthood was only suspended instead of removed. The SLC congregation then demanded that Robin Linkhart come out and talk with them about the matter. Robin sat down and talked to them for 4 hours about their thoughts and concerns. From what I have been told, Robin didn't understand the depth of the pain that was caused by this action, and she committed to finding a way to right this wrong. However, Robin reiterated that it wasn't solely up to her. John VanDerWalker, their Mission Center President, and the First Presidency may not be able to be convinced.

A friend of mine recently reached out to VanDerWalker about this, and his response was appallingly unchristian. Among other things:

- He gaslit my friend by saying that this wasn't spiritual violence, and doesn't believe that what the church administrators did was wrong. He later makes an accusation that it is the *CONGREGATION* that has spiritually abused the woman by speaking out about the church administrators' actions.
- He reiterated several times that the church is entirely justified, including morally, to release the woman from priesthood. In fact, he puts it forward as an obligation to protect the name of the church. He stated that "We are bound by the traditions and policies", while he doesn't cite what exactly those are, the elephant in the room is Nauvoo-era polygamy.
- He explicitly blamed Monica English, the polyamorous woman, for the situation that she is in, which is widowed. This is classic victim blaming from an ecclesiastical leader.

Personal

Admittedly, this is an especially concerning topic for me, as I am also polyamorous. While I am only in one relationship right now, I have had and someday may again have multiple loving, meaningful, and fulfilling relationships concurrently. I was extremely hesitant to join Community of Christ because of the general attitudes towards people like me. I felt like I would never be given the same opportunities as monogamous people, and would instead be ostracized and treated as a 2nd class citizen.

However, John Hamer assured me that I would be a valued member of the community and I would be given the same opportunities that others have in the church. I was assured that Community of Christ values the Enduring Principle of "Unity in Diversity", and that includes

everything about who I am. His assurance was enough for me to feel comfortable joining the church.

Before I joined Community of Christ, I sent Steve Veazey a letter introducing myself, and also came out as polyamorous. I was extraordinarily nervous to do this, but I believed that Community of Christ accepted me for who I am. I anxiously awaited a letter, and I finally got one back several months later. Among other things, Steve said that my story "illustrates the great need in our world to promote communities of faith and spirituality that truly affirm the worth and giftedness of all people" and that "the church is being enriched by your participation and giftedness". I was elated, and again felt like this was the home I would unconditionally be loved and valued again.

However, seeing World Church now actively making my fears come true by discriminating and alienating people like me has been isolating. It has made me wonder if all of the talk about inclusion, worth, giftedness, and enrichment was all honest, or just good P.R.. I have been scared, confused, and hurt by what is going on, and it has been a harrowing experience trying to understand. I needed to reach out and express these concerns to you.

Future

Joseph Smith Jr. used his ecclesiastical position to sexually extort and abuse people. The Smith family, who have led our church for most of our history, tried to rewrite history to hide that fact. In the process they have made their familial trauma an institutional trauma and instilled a hatred for non-monogamous individuals and families in our church policies. This included D&C 150's phrasing, which includes calling people like me a burden to the church. Instead of addressing this now-institutional trauma, we as a people have continued to perpetuate it by punishing Monica, who is an innocent polyamorous widow. These are all matters of historical fact that we cannot change.

However, what we CAN do is choose what we do with our future. I believe our church has a unique set of principles, phrases, and scriptures that can help us heal from this nearly 200-year-old trauma that polygamy brought to our church. Instead of being "bound by the traditions and policies", we should instead take the advice found in D&C 162:2D and "not be unduly bound by interpretations and procedures that no longer fit the needs of a worldwide church."

Some of these valuable resources include:

- The Enduring Principles of "Worth of All" and "Unity in Diversity". We recognize that there are people who live rather different lives, but they are no less a part of us (and our institutional church) because of these differences. In fact, we believe that these differences strengthen us as a people. By necessity, "Worth of All" and "Unity in Diversity" *must* include polyamorous folks. There *must* be no compromising our principles with exclusionary exceptions.

- Hymn #273 of Community of Christ Sings. In this song, our church proclaims that we seek to "draw the circle wide". Previous generations have undeniably drawn the circle wider, and the consequences for doing the right thing has often been painful. The schism following the canonization of D&C 156 shows that we must do what is right and let the consequence follow. Today, there are many who feel as if we have drawn the circle wide enough, but this hymn continues to encourage us: "draw the circle wider still".
- Among the most powerful of these resources, and one of the most pertinent to the topic at hand, is found in D&C 164:6, which in part says:

“As revealed in Christ, God, the Creator of all, ultimately is concerned about behaviors and relationships that uphold the worth and giftedness of all people and that protect the most vulnerable. Such relationships are to be rooted in the principles of Christ-like love, mutual respect, responsibility, justice, covenant, and faithfulness, against which there is no law.

If the church more fully will understand and consistently apply these principles, questions arising about responsible human sexuality;... relationships; [and] marriage ... may be resolved according to God’s divine purposes.”

Conclusion

The church is at a crossroads. Will we live up to our Enduring Principles and recognize the diversity and worth of polyamorous people OR will reject and diminish the worth of polyamorous people due to our unaddressed institutional trauma? Will we “draw the circle wider” OR “circle the wagons”? Will we follow the counsel in D&C 164:6C and “turn to scripture to find insight and inspiration ... for the Living Word that brings life, healing, and hope to all, [and then] embrace and proclaim these liberating truths” OR embody the warning that was given in D&C 163: 3C and claim to represent Christ, but divide people to accomplish our destructive aims and harden one human heart against another by constructing walls of fear?

If the church chooses acceptance, inclusion, and diversity it will be a beacon of love in a cruel world and many passionate and marginalized people will become more interested in what we have to offer as a community.

However, if the church chooses rejection and exclusivity, it will not only alienate those who are looking into our faith, but I believe it will also trigger a rather large exodus of Ex-Mormons and queer members of the church as a result.

I beg you, please use your sway at World Church to fight for the most vulnerable among us, which in this case are polyamorous people. I beg you to recognize the worth of Monica english. I beg you to recognize my worth. I beg you to help the church actualize its inclusive and loving aspirations. I beg you to not relegate me to being a 2nd class citizen in my own church. I beg you to help me draw the circle wider.