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Mormon Bishop Excommunicates Woman Who Is Supporting ERA

By Majorie Hyer

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Sonia Johnson, the fifth-generation Mormon who leads Mormons for ERA, was notified yesterday that she has been excommunicated from the church.

Jeffrey Willis, the bishop, or congregation leader, of Johnson's Sterling Park church, notified her in a 1 1/2-page letter that was hand-delivered early yesterday afternoon that he had found her guilty of the charges he had levied against her in a church trial last Saturday night, Johnson said she would appeal the decision.

Johnson, who has campaigned actively for the Equal Rights Amendment, had been charged with spreading false doctrine and with working against both the teachings of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and its leaders.

Willis has maintained that the ERA, which the Mormon hierarchy vigorously opposes, was not at issue in the case and refused to hear testimony about it at Johnson's trial. She has continued to insist that her vigorous opposition to the church's tactics in battling ERA is at the heart of her troubles.

The Loudon County woman appeared stunned yesterday afternoon by the excommunication order. She was not bitter, she said, but "very, very sad. I just feel betrayed and a great sense of loss."

In an impromptu press conference outside her red brick home in Sterling, she said the decision "is not right. It is morally wrong. I know that because I know my own heart."

Excommunication in the Mormon church means that Johnson is stripped of all offices. She is allowed to attend but barred from participating in church services, including speaking in the testimony meetings that are an important part of Mormon worship. "I've even been told by someone that I can't participate in discussion in class," she said.

Under terms of the excommunication order, Johnson, a college English instructor, will be permanently barred from teaching a class to the women's group of her local church; she had already been suspended from the voluntary teaching post by her bishop before last Saturday's trial. In addition, she will no longer be able to play the organ for the church's Sunday services. s

But perhaps the hardest part of excommunication in the Mormon church is spiritual rather than temporal. Mormons believe that those who are faithful to the rites and teachings of the church and who are married in

the temple will be together with their spouse and children throughout eternity.

While the excommunication order does not effect the civil status of Johnson's marriage, it would, under church doctrine, cut her off from her family in the hereafter.

The family's membership is not threatened by Johnson's excommunication. However, Johnson's husband Richard, a convert at the time of their marriage, has indicated he would leave the church if his wife were excommunicated.

Though church teaching maintains that excommunication cuts one off from God. Johnson insisted that she is convinced God has not abandoned her. "I'm sure he hasn't," he knows my heart." In an allusion to the all-male structure of the Mormon church, she added, "I don't think God is boxed in by a men's club."

There are two avenues of appeal open to Johnson. She could appeal first to the level of the stake -- the equivalent of a diocese -- and ultimately to the president of the church, Spencer W. Kimball, whom the faithful consider to be a prophet who receives revelations directly from God.

But Johnson said yesterday that she was not hopeful that her appeal would be successful.

Johnson also could be reinstated in the church by repenting and being baptized again, but she has maintained that she has nothing to repent.

Willis, in a statement he said he was releasing because Johnson "raised the issue to the media," said that in 18 months of discussions with Johnson he had "at no time" tried to dissuade her from seeking ratification of the ERA. "I have counseled with you relative to your support of church leaders and doctrine."

He said that the issues, which he said Johnson had agreed with, were:

"Have your [Johnson's] actions influenced members and nonmembers to oppose church programs -- i.e., missionary programs.

"Have your actions and statements advocated diminished support of church leaders?"

"Have you presented false doctrine which could damage others spiritually?"

Johnson contended yesterday that some of the specifics of Willis' charges were taken out of context or, in some cases, were wrong.

Willis said in his statement that Johnson had testified that she believed and publicly stated that "Mormon society, specifically including church leaders has (in Mrs. Johnson's words) a savage misogyny," or hatred of women. Willis said church doctrine is that "exaltation can be gained only through the love that results in the eternal bonding of man and woman."

Johnson said that charge grew out of a scholarly paper she presented last September at a seminar of the American Psychological Association. She said yesterday that she had been referring to the culture at large and did not specify leaders of the church.

In his statement, Willis also said that Johnson had also taught that Mormon missionaries should not be invited into people's homes.

At her press conference, Johnson said that charge was in response to a speech she made in Montana in which she advised a group of women to write church leaders, to protest the church's opposition to ERA and to tell them "we'll listen to you if you listen to us."

Emphasizing that the ERA is a political issue and the comments were made in a political context, Johnson said, "I have not taught people not to let missionaries into their home."

Willis also charged that Johnson's speeches are "evidence in spirit that you [Johnson] are not in harmony with church doctrine concerning the nature of God . . ."

Johnson responded yesterday that the issue had not come up at the trial and she was at a loss to explain it. But she recalled that several months ago she was charged with forming a "cult" devoted to the concept of God as mother as well as God the father. "It [the charge] must have something to do with the idea of mother in heaven," she said. She contended that the concept was not heretical in the church.

Johnson said that several months ago, Willis "started calling up my friends, calling them into his office, . . . asking them if I was trying to get them to pray to Her [God as mother in heaven]."

She said the matter "just surfaced briefly at the first [session of the] trial" held two weeks ago, but that it was ruled out as one of the issues on which she was being tried.

Willis also said Johnson had taught that the church is dedicated to imposing the "moral Directives" of church leader Kimball on all Americans, when Willis said, the church preaches that all persons are free to choose the directives "dictated by their own consciences." Kimball has publicly opposed the ERA.

Johnson said that charge was true.

Willis said that members of Johnson's church and stake "are encouraged to let her know of their love for her, and to assist her in appropriate ways should she indicate a desire one day to have her membership restored."

Johnson said she will probably continue to go to church with her family "for the sake of the children and for my sake. I don't want to be embittered."

But she said she has no intention of abandoning her fight for the ERA. "I just can't wait to get into Missouri and Illinois," states where the ratification battle is raging. "As soon as you all leave," she waved to the

gathered press, I'm going to get on a plane and do everything I can." CAPTION: Picture, SONIA JOHNSON . .

. "a great sense of loss"

 **Comments**