

## *Among Mormon Women, Frank Talk About Sacred Underclothes*

Frustrated by itchy, constrictive church-designed garments, they are asking for better fit, more options and “buttery soft fabric.”



Sasha Piton, 33, has called on the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to manufacture more breathable and comfortable temple garments for its members. Kim Raff for The New York Times

**By Ruth Graham**

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Sasha Piton was on a hike near her home in Idaho Falls, Idaho, when she realized something was wrong. The trek was just a few miles, and not strenuous, but a rash was spreading along the crease above her thigh.

Ms. Piton quickly identified the cause. Like many members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, she wears a white two-piece set of sacred temple garments, which are functionally underwear, almost all of the time.

After another painful hike, Ms. Piton reluctantly stopped wearing the garments when exercising and occasionally removed them overnight. Both changes felt significant, since church members have historically been encouraged to wear the garments “night and day.” But they were simply too uncomfortable.

And she did not stop there. Last month, Ms. Piton posted several cheerfully direct pleas to Instagram, where she discusses church culture as @themormonhippie. “We really want buttery soft fabric,” she said, addressing her comments to the church’s 96-year-old president, Russell M. Nelson. “My vagina has to breathe.”

And Ms. Piton encouraged her 17,100 followers to email the church about their own experiences.

Ms. Piton, 33, had tapped into a familiar problem that few women in the church felt bold enough to discuss publicly. Her posts drew thousands of comments and private messages, in which women vented their frustrations with the holy apparel: itchy hems, bunched seams, pinching waistbands and even chronic yeast infections caused by fabric that does not breathe.

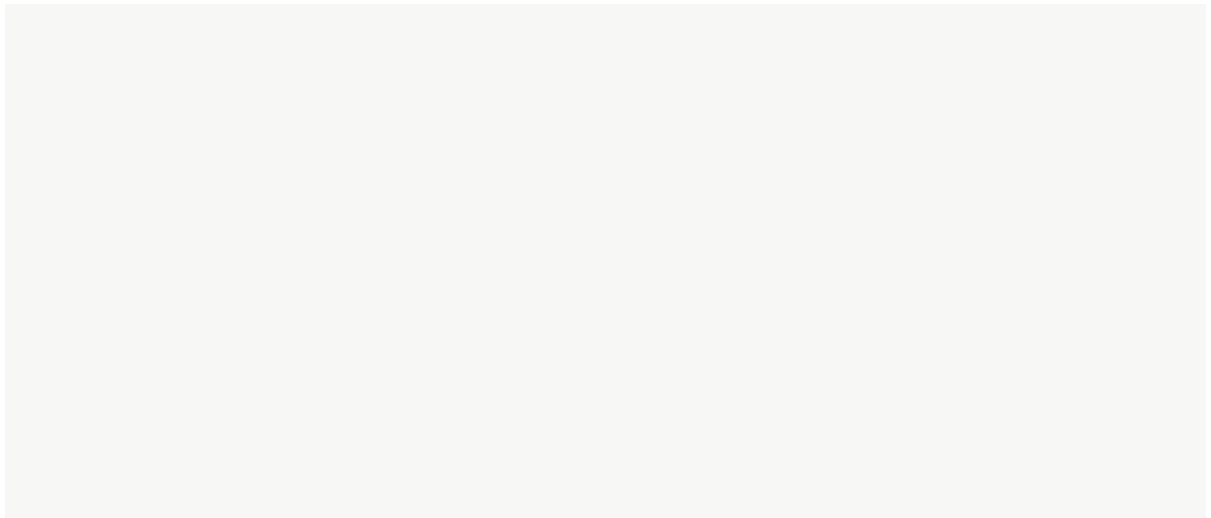
“It’s sacred,” one commenter wrote. “But it’s still actual underwear.”

Temple garments date back to the church’s origins in the 19th century and symbolize the wearer’s commitment to the faith, akin to the religious garments of many other faith traditions. Adult Latter-day Saints wear them after their “temple endowment,” a private membership ritual that typically takes place before missionary service or marriage. The church controls the design and manufacturing process of the garments, and sells

them globally at low prices.

Most active church members, including young people, take seriously the exhortation to wear them as often as possible. In a 2016 poll of 1,100 Latter-day Saints, just 14 percent of millennial church members said they believed it was acceptable to remove the garments if they were uncomfortable.

A spokesman for the church declined an interview request and declined to answer a list of detailed questions, instead sending a link to a [brief video about the garments](#) produced by the church.



A screenshot from a video released by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints that outlines the various pieces of sacred temple clothing worn by church members.

Most of the available temple garment fabrics are synthetic. “If you’re trying to optimize someone’s gynecologic health, it’s not recommended,” said Dr. Kellie Woodfield, an obstetrician-gynecologist in Utah who is a member of the church. The cotton option is more breathable, she said, but tight and significantly thicker.

Dr. Woodfield, who wore the garments for most of her adult life, said the conversation around garments was indicative of larger struggles over women’s issues in the male-led tradition. While women feel increasingly emboldened to speak up on social media, they often feel stymied by what they describe as a lack of transparency and empathy. “How the church responds to this movement is a really interesting litmus test for how much the church is starting to trust women,” Dr. Woodfield said.

In the church’s early years, men and women wore the same pattern, a design that was “revealed from heaven,” as an early 20th-century church

leader wrote. But the church has since modified its designs several times, including shortening the sleeves and pant legs, and expanding the number of styles and fabric options. (In the 1950s, the church [enlisted the well-known swimsuit designer Rose Marie Reid for help.](#)) One common option now consists of a T-shirt, with cap-sleeves for women, and knee-length shorts. Each piece is subtly marked with sacred symbols.

While they hope for further design improvements, church members share hacks to mitigate discomfort. Some people turn their garments inside out, to relieve pressure from biting seams. Some members have cut off itchy tags; others snip out the crotch fabric for breathability. And many women wear traditional panties under their garments during their periods, finding the bottoms incompatible with pads and panty liners.

In Idaho, Ms. Piton ticked off the items on her wish list in the [recent Instagram video](#): “buttery soft, seamless, thick waistband that’s not cutting into my spleen, breathable fabric.”

Though she is having fun with her campaign, Ms. Piton is serious about why it matters to her. She converted to the faith a decade ago and was profoundly moved by the temple endowment ritual, which includes putting on the garments for the first time and receiving a blessing specifically for the body.

In that moment, “I just felt this divine connection to my body,” she said. “In a world where my entire life being a bigger woman, I’ve been told my body should look different,” receiving a blessing focused on her body’s strength and holiness was a moving experience.

Not everyone is attached to the idea of preserving the garments. Lindsay Perez, 24, who lives in Salt Lake City, used to experience persistent urinary tract infections that she believes were made worse by her garments. She now leaves them off at night, and after she showers.

If she had her choice, she said, she would prefer to wear a cross necklace, or a ring — popular among young church members — with the letters C.T.R., a reference to the motto “Choose the Right,” a reminder to make ethical choices. “There are so many different ways to remind myself of what I’ve promised,” Ms. Perez said. “I don’t need that to be through my underwear.”

In private Facebook groups for women in the church, she said, garments are a constant topic of discussion, with some women hoping for improvements and others defending the garments as they are. But few



women feel comfortable approaching male leaders to discuss bodily fluids, infections and sexual intimacy.

“People are scared to be brutally honest, to say: ‘This isn’t working for me. It isn’t bringing me closer to Christ, it’s giving me U.T.I.s,’” Ms. Perez said.

Open discussion is also thorny because the garments are frequent targets of mockery from outsiders. When Mitt Romney, a church member, was running for president in 2012, he was derided by some mainstream commentators for wearing “magic underwear.”

That kind of ridicule is “acutely painful,” said Jana Riess, a senior columnist for Religion News Service who writes about the church and who conducted the 2016 poll with a colleague.

It is especially hurtful because the garments symbolize a profound spiritual connection to God. “One of the most beautiful things about them is they are underwear,” Ms. Riess said. “It expresses my belief that there’s no part of my messy humanity that isn’t beloved of God.”

Ms. Riess celebrated when the church [tweaked its undergarment designs](#) in 2018, adding mesh side panels, and less constrictive underarms, for example. But she is not surprised that younger women are now asking for more. “Young people have been brought up with a lot of choice,” she said, “and it’s something they don’t check at the door when they come to church.”

The church’s official handbook includes only a few paragraphs about the garments. Many practices around them are passed down within families and circulated among friends. Some families throw garments in the washing machine with other laundry, for example, while others keep them separate.

Afton Southam Parker, a mother of five who was raised in the church, has lived in Uganda and Thailand, where the garments felt especially stifling in the heat. In furtive conversations with other women, she realized she was not alone. “Everybody I talked to was getting some kind of rash or infection,” she said.

The word she heard over and over from women was “suffocation.”

Ms. Parker made it her mission to get church leaders to produce garments that fit and felt better. She approached one church leader after a talk, and wrote to anyone she thought could help. When a church designer finally agreed to meet with her last year, she showed him 34 PowerPoint slides

that explained the garments' many problems for women.

The initial result was disheartening, although she was encouraged recently when the church's design team asked her for more feedback. "You're talking about pads and gore," she recalled the man responding at first. The implication was that such earthy topics were inappropriate for discussions of sacred matters.

"It's of a greater magnitude than the church has any idea about," Ms. Parker said. "Either get into the underwear business or get out."

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