

Figure 1. The Savior's empathic experience. *He Binds Up the Broken Hearted* by Paige Payne, 8 × 10 inches, acrylic on paper, April 3, 2023. By permission of the artist.

Empathy in Christ-Centered Leadership

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The Book of Mormon teaches that the desire to make and keep baptismal covenants involves, among other things, a commitment to "mourn with those that mourn; yea, and comfort those that stand in need of comfort" (Mosiah 18:9).[1] Acts of service and charity often aim to provide comfort. But what of the requirement to "mourn with" others? To feel along with another person is a distinct act from offering means to relieve their suffering. These acts are distinct enough that it is possible to do one without the other. For instance, I may provide a meal for someone who has lost a family member with the intention to bring them comfort but not take the time to sit with them and share in their suffering. Similarly, observing someone in pain may cause me to feel a parallel pain, but I can often allow myself to return to the comforts of my own situation without taking any action to help relieve their suffering.

It is not only emotions associated with suffering that God asks us to share with others. Paul taught the early Saints that, as members of the body of Christ, they should not only "weep with them that weep" but also "rejoice with them that do rejoice" (Rom. 12:15). The contemporary term for the act of sharing the emotional experience of another person is *empathy.* These scriptures suggest that God asks us not only to act out

1. President Henry B. Eyring, "Draw Near unto Me," *Liahona,* May 2025, 28, recently emphasized Mosiah 18 as an important source for understanding the content of our baptismal covenant. See also Henry B. Eyring, "The Comforter," *Ensign,* May 2015, 19, where President Eyring identifies mourning with and comforting others as part of our baptismal covenants, describing one who chooses to mourn with others as a "covenant servant."

of love for one another but also to strive to share empathically in the emotional experiences of others.

If God asks us to empathize with others, what does that mean for Christ-centered leadership practices? Leadership discourse has frequently treated the importance of empathic engagement as a leadership skill,[2] especially for competence in ethical decision-making.[3] Intuitively, there are many benefits to engaging empathically with the people in our spheres of influence. We can gain an increased understanding of the lives our actions will impact and clarity about how they will be impacted. We become better at building relationships and know how to recognize and address needs as we seek to provide care and support.

The Christ-Centered Leader Model (CCLM) prompts individuals to consider the various relationships and corresponding responsibilities that fall within their spheres of influence. As individuals recognize their leadership potential in these contexts, they seek to apply the following three principles: (1) "express love," (2) "honor agency," and (3) "invite accountability."[4] Most importantly, the CCLM encourages individuals to use the example of Jesus Christ as their ultimate guide to leadership decisions. What role should empathy play in this kind of Christ-centered leadership?

The goal of this paper is to explore the role of empathy in Christ-centered leadership and consider how to think empathically as a

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2. Popular and academic articles centering empathy in effective leadership are easy to find. Here are a few examples: Tracy Brower, "Empathy Is the Most Important Leadership Skill According to Research," *Forbes,* September 19, 2021, https://www.forbes.com/sites/tracybrower/2021/09/19/empathy-is-the-most-important-leadership-skill-according-to-research/; Sanja Zivkovic, "Empathy in Leadership: How It Enhances Effectiveness," in *Economic and Social Development (Book of Proceedings): 80th International Scientific Conference on Economic and Social Development, Diversity, Equity and Inclusion: The Essence of Organisational Well-Being,* ed. Darko Tipuric, Ana Krajnovic, and Nicholas Recker (Varazdin Development and Entrepreneurship Agency, 2022), 436–49; and Caroline Muss, Dana Tüxen, and Bärbel Fürstenau, "Empathy in Leadership: A Systematic Literature Review on the Effects of Empathetic Leaders in Organizations," *Management Review Quarterly* 76, no. 1 (2026): 333–69, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11301-024-00472-7.

3. Rico Pohling, Danilo Bzdok, Monika Eigenstetter, Siegfried Stumpf, and Anja Strobel, "What Is Ethical Competence? The Role of Empathy, Personal Values, and the Five-Factor Model of Personality in Ethical Decision-Making," *Journal of Business Ethics* 137, no. 3 (2016): 449–74, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-015-2569-5.

4. "The Christ-Centered Leader," under "Christ-Centered Leader Model," Sorensen Center for Moral & Ethical Leadership, Brigham Young University (hereafter cited as BYU Sorensen Center), accessed June 29, 2026, https://sorensencenter.byu.edu/about/christ-centered-leader-model.

Christ-centered leader. I will first characterize the kind of empathy Latter-day Saint theology suggests we are meant to cultivate, with emphasis on scriptural examples, including those from the life of Jesus Christ. I will then consider how empathy has been explored in philosophical discourse, with an eye on the questions and challenges that have been raised concerning empathy's role in our moral lives.[5] With these in mind, I will explore how empathy ought to be engaged in the context of the CCLM. I will suggest ways to think about how empathy shows up in the four dimensions of the CCLM (relationship with God, relationship with God's children, and responsibilities to self and to a given stewardship), as well as in the application of the three principles that guide those relationships and responsibilities. I will also suggest potential ways that the CCLM answers some challenges from recent philosophical discourse if we want to insist that empathy plays a key role in our moral lives.[6]

Empathy and the Gospel of Jesus Christ

Joseph Smith taught, "It is one evidence that men are unacquainted with the principle of godliness, to behold the contraction of feeling and lack of charity."[7] To "contract" our feeling in this context is to fail to emotionally

5. Despite the useful conceptual distinction between "moral" and "ethical" at work in the CCLM, for the purposes of this paper, I will adopt the convention of philosophical discourse to use "moral" and "ethical" as synonyms.

6. The centrality of empathy in Latter-day Saint theology has been explored in Latter-day Saint discourse. See, for example, Terryl Givens and Fiona Givens, *The God Who Weeps: How Mormonism Makes Sense of Life* (Ensign Peak, 2012); Deidre Nicole Green and Eric D. Huntsman, "Introduction: Atonement in Latter-day Saint Scripture and Thought," in *Latter-Day Saint Perspectives on Atonement,* ed. Deidre Nicole Green and Eric D. Huntsman (University of Illinois Press, 2024), 1–11; J. B. Haws, "'This Perfect Atonement': Agency, Law, Theosis, and Atonement Theology in the Doctrine and Covenants," in Green and Huntsman, *Latter-day Saint Perspectives on Atonement,* 131–60; Tyler Johnson, "Empathy and the Atonement," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 55, no. 4 (2016): 105–22; and Katharina Paxman, "The Sacred Nature of Shared Feeling: The Centrality of Empathy in the Latter-day Saint Tradition," in *Contemporary Philosophy and the Latter-day Saint Tradition,* ed. Taylor-Grey Miller and Katharina Paxman (Routledge, 2026), 160–83, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003649397.

7. This is found in Joseph Smith's teachings to the Female Relief Society of Nauvoo. "1.2 Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book," in *The First Fifty Years of Relief Society: Key Documents in Latter-day Saint Women's History,* ed. Jill Murvay Derr, Carol Cornwall Madsen, Kate Holbrook, and Matthew J. Grow (Church Historian's Press, 2016), 78. Smith also spoke to the Relief Society about the "sympathies which God has planted in your bosoms," as well as "feelings of charity." "Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book," 57. Note that "sympathy" was used in the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries to mean the experience of an emotion that we perceive in some other—what we now are more likely

resonate with the feelings we perceive in another person. In the eighteenth through nineteenth centuries, this might also have been described as the failure to experience "fellow-feeling" or sympathy.[8] Joseph Smith taught that we "must not be contracted, but . . . liberal in [our] feelings" because, in a righteous community, "if one member suffer all feel it," and "by union of feeling we obtain pow'r with God."[9] He also revealed that to become a Zion people, we must learn to be "of one heart and one mind" (Moses 7:18).[10] Taken together, these teachings strongly suggest that Joseph Smith taught the necessity of engaging empathically with those around us.

This is consistent with the Book of Mormon characterization of the baptismal covenant as joining a church community with a commitment to "mourn with those that mourn" (Mosiah 18:9). And this is not the only important Book of Mormon reference to empathic experience. Prophets who preached the Savior's coming emphasized the role that Christ's embodiment and experience of mortal suffering would play in his ability to understand and heal his people (see 2 Ne. 9:21; Mosiah 3:5–7; 14:3–5; 3 Ne. 17:6–9).

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to call empathy. See *Oxford English Dictionary,* under "sympathy, noun," meaning 1.a, accessed June 2026, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1081963969. Truman G. Madsen noted this theme in Joseph Smith's teaching, arguing that Smith thought "'the contraction of feeling' . . . was one of the absolute marks that apostasy had occurred." "Joseph Smith Lecture 4: Joseph Smith and Trials," devotional, Brigham Young University, August 23, 1978, BYU Speeches, https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/truman-g-madsen/joseph-smith-trials/.

8. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, "fellow feeling" meant sharing the emotions of another. For the eighteenth- to nineteenth-century usage of "fellow feeling" and "sympathy," see the following entries from Noah Webster's 1828 and Samuel Johnson's 1773 dictionaries: *American Dictionary of the English Language,* under "sympathy," Websters Dictionary 1828, accessed June 10, 2026, https://webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/sympathy, and under "fellow-feeling," accessed June 10, 2026, https://webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/fellow-feeling; Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language* [. . .], 4th ed. (London, 1773), under "sympathy," Samuel Johnson's Dictionary, accessed June 10, 2026, https://johnsonsdictionaryonline.com/views/search.php?term=sympathy, and under "fellowfeeling," accessed June 10, 2026, https://johnsonsdictionaryonline.com/views/search.php?term=fellowfeeling.

9. "Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book," 39, 60. Sharon Eubank, "By Union of Feeling We Obtain Power with God," *Ensign,* November 2020, 57, recently taught this doctrine: "As we seek union of feeling, we will call down the power of God to make our efforts whole."

10. Joseph Smith also communicated God's call for "every man [to] esteem his brother as himself" (D&C 38:25) and his warning that "if ye are not one ye are not mine" (D&C 38:27). This is an amplification of the New Testament instruction to the Saints to "rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep" and to "be of the same mind one toward another" (Rom. 12:15–16). I would argue that empathic engagement is an essential tool to achieve these ends.

Empathy receives its most powerful presentation when Alma taught the people of Gideon the meaning of Isaiah's teachings. He preached that the Son of God, being "born of Mary," will "go forth, suffering pains and afflictions and temptations of every kind," allowing Jesus to "take upon him the pains and the sicknesses of his people" (Alma 7:10–11). With a mortal body, he would

> take upon him their infirmities, that his bowels may be filled with mercy, according to the flesh, that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities. Now the Spirit knoweth all things; nevertheless the Son of God suffereth according to the flesh that he might take upon him the sins of his people, that he might blot out their transgressions according to the power of his deliverance. (Alma 7:12–13).

A powerful connection between the Savior's empathic experience and his atoning sacrifice is suggested here (fig. 1).[11] Surely, it is worth pondering these sacred verses that we may learn how to succor others as Christ did.

A study of Christ's earthly ministry shows us that not only did he gain the experience necessary to understand our suffering but also that he took the time and made the effort to empathically engage with those around him. This is perhaps best modeled in his interaction with Mary, when she comes to him weeping and mourning the death of her brother, Lazarus. Christ likely knew he would shortly raise Lazarus from the dead. He could have tried to stop Mary's mourning, told her to cheer up, or said there was no need to cry.[12] But instead, he saw Mary and also took in the scene of people he loved, crying for the loss of someone they all loved, and "he groaned in spirit, and was troubled" (John 11:33). We learn in this story that "Jesus wept" with those who mourned

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11. With reference to Alma 7:10–13, Neal A. Maxwell, "From Whom All Blessings Flow," *Ensign,* May 1997, 11, taught, "Jesus has already borne our griefs and sicknesses. . . . He knows them firsthand; thus His empathy is earned."

12. I suspect that this is what many of us do when we see someone suffering and believe that if they understood something differently, they would stop feeling that way. We offer reasons for them to stop feeling the things they feel. Perhaps we say, "It's all in God's hands. Just have faith!" We are often uncomfortable with the discomfort of others, and sometimes our efforts to change how they feel are driven (at least in part) by our desire to feel more comfortable ourselves. This tendency is one reason that Christ's example when faced with Mary's mourning is so significant. He allowed himself to be vulnerable to the pain she was feeling. He treated her mourning not as a problem to fix but as something sacred to be honored.

(v. 35). Despite knowing that he could raise Lazarus from the dead, he wept all the way to the grave of his friend, choosing not to "contract" but to expand his feeling in resonance with all those around him.[13]

The second great commandment, "thou shalt love thy neighbor *as thyself*" (Matt. 22:38–39, emphasis added), also tells us something about why empathy might be important. My self-love can only be pointed at the one person I can know explicitly—myself (being inside my own experience, feeling what I feel, and knowing what I know). Appropriate love for self requires me to admit all that I know about myself and still see my value as God does. This kind of self-knowledge is essential to keeping the second of the Lord's great commandments, as "love of [others] is governed, in part, by esteem of self."[14] If I am to love others as myself, I need to seek to understand them, meaning that I attempt to feel something of what it is like to be them and then seek to see them through God's eyes.

Philosophers on Empathy: Concepts and Questions

While particular examples of empathic experience in scripture and beyond are often easy to recognize, generating a conceptual characterization of empathy has proven to be more difficult. The term is used broadly and sometimes ambiguously in both academic and popular discourse. Philosophers have been thinking seriously about how best to understand empathy for a long time.[15] I suggest we start with my basic definition: Empathy is the act of mind that allows us to experience the thoughts and feelings that we perceive in another person.

Empathy theorists[16] sometimes distinguish between cognitive empathy (the *understanding* of the mental content of another person)

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13. See Benjamin Keogh, "Relational Atonement: Groundwork," in Green and Huntsman, *Latter-day Saint Perspectives on Atonement,* 213–17.

14. Russell M. Nelson, "Joy Cometh in the Morning," *Ensign,* November 1986, 68.

15. My own research into the history of the concept of empathy is centered on the eighteenth-century philosopher David Hume, who used the term "sympathy." See David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature: A Critical Edition,* ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton, vol. 1, *Texts* (Clarendon Press, 2007), 2.1.11.2–5 and 3.3.1; David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals: A Critical edition,* ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (Clarendon Press, 1998), 5.23–43.

16. This paper considers the work of empathy theorists engaging in philosophical discourse, which is often focused on defending theoretical accounts and clarifying relevant conceptual questions instead of presenting new empirical data. But it should be noted that much contemporary philosophical discourse is richly informed by research coming out of empirical sciences, such as psychology, psychiatry, and neuroscience. The primary empathy theory anthology cited in this paper, Amy Coplan and Peter Goldie,

and affective empathy (*feeling* the feelings we perceive in another person). Most empathy theorists suggest that empathic experience includes some combination of these elements: We understand something about the beliefs and perspectives of another person, and we experience feelings we perceive in another person.[17] I take the affective component of empathic experience to be of particular importance to the kind of empathy discussed in the last section: God is not asking us to understand the minds of others in a way that is descriptively accurate but emotionally disengaged; God asks us to both understand the feelings of others and make ourselves available to resonate emotionally with them. Thus, we must not only know that they mourn or rejoice; we must feel their mourning or rejoicing along with them (fig. 2).



Figure 2. Christ rejoices when we rejoice. *He Is There in the Joy* by Paige Payne, 5 × 7 inches, acrylic on paper, January 16, 2023. By permission of the artist.

Since at least René Descartes (1596–1650), philosophers in the Western tradition have wondered how it is we come to know other minds (or really, anything other than the contents of our own minds, but we will focus on the problem of other minds here). Our natural tendency to empathize with others appears to be one way we gain knowledge of

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eds., *Empathy: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives* (Oxford University Press, 2011), includes contributions from scholars working across these fields.

17. See Martin L. Hoffman, "Empathy, Justice, and the Law," in Coplan and Goldie, *Empathy,* 230–31. We are also susceptible to brute emotional contagion, where we feel some emotion that we are perceiving, but don't register that the cause of this emotion is resonance with the feelings of some other. Think of walking into a room and becoming anxious because there are other anxious people in the room but not realizing that this is why you are feeling that way. Humans are deeply social creatures and have brains built to mirror the minds they perceive around them, sometimes without clearly distinguishing between self and other. Philosophers sometimes identify emotional contagion of this sort as low-level empathy and contrast it with high-level empathy, which involves adopting the perspective of another person while remaining aware of the self-other distinction. For a helpful introduction to the philosophical discourse on empathy, see the introduction to Coplan and Goldie, *Empathy,* ix–xlvii.

other minds, even if our beliefs about the content of their mental states can be inaccurate.[18] In recent years, neuroscience has determined that our brains are indeed built to resonate with or "mirror" the thoughts and feelings we perceive in those around us,[19] providing us with essential information for navigating our socially saturated environments.

But empathic experience can be more than a source of beliefs about the contents of other minds: This would only be cognitive empathy (understanding, not feeling). Affective empathy (feeling what another feels) helps determine how we act and, perhaps, tells us something about how we *ought* to act. Much of the contemporary discourse about empathy focuses on affective empathy in particular. Philosophers have asked: How does sharing the feelings of another person impact how I am motivated to behave? Am I more likely to act morally when I allow empathy to motivate my actions? Alternatively, can I be truly moral if I remain unaffected by the pains or pleasures of the people impacted by my actions? For example, giving to the poor is generally taken to be a morally good act, yet many of us would find the act morally impoverished were we to learn that the giver was not affected by the suffering or the relief of the people receiving the gift. Does this mean that an empathic response is part of a moral response?

Since humans are susceptible to emotional contagion (the tendency to automatically "catch" emotions from others merely from exposure to them),[20] philosophers have asked how we should engage with empathy. Should we lean into this passive tendency and cultivate empathy? Is there a difference between our automatic tendencies to empathize and our intentionally cultivated efforts to empathize? And what exactly am I doing when I empathize? Am I imagining myself in another person's position? Am I imagining what it is like to be them? If they are experiencing something I have not experienced before, is my ability to empathize with them limited by my lived experience, or can I experience something new vicariously? For instance, my husband did not give birth to our children,

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18. For an overview of how empathy discourse interacts with discourse on the development of "theory of mind," see C. Daniel Batson, *Empathic Concern: What It Is and Why It's Important* (Oxford University Press, 2023), 44.

19. Coplan and Goldie, *Empathy,* xxviii–xxx.

20. Emotional contagion is a basic emotional resonance phenomenon that can occur in infants, and even some animals. One need not even be aware of the source of emotional responses that are a result of contagion—or even of any kind of distinction between self and other. For a discussion of how emotional contagion fits into broader empathy discourse, see *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* "Empathy," last revised October 6, 2025, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/empathy/.

but he was right beside me the whole time, sharing the experience. What can he know from being with me, feeling along with me in that process? What can't he know? And how can he tell if his empathic experience really is an accurate reflection of what I experienced? How can we tell if the information we gain from an empathic experience is really information about the mind and experience of another person?

These are all live questions in the philosophical discourse on empathy, and the various ways of considering and answering them have led to a range of concerns about the role of empathy both as a source of information and as a component of moral life. Before discussing the role of empathy in Christ-centered leadership, it is worth considering these concerns within three broad types of challenges philosophers have raised against the centering of empathy in moral life, whether as a source of information or for moral motivation and judgment.

Three Philosophical Challenges to Empathy

(1) *The problem of projecting the self onto the other.* This is an epistemic challenge to empathy concerned with the accuracy of the beliefs we form about the mental states of other people as a result of our empathic engagement with them. Whether we are experiencing passive emotional contagion or actively seeking to imagine the thoughts and feelings of some other mind, we often fail to accurately capture the experience of the other person due to misinterpretation and "emotional egocentricity bias."[21] We may inappropriately project our own experience onto the person who is the target of our empathic engagement. Amy Coplan describes this as a failure to notice the difference between "the self- and other-oriented varieties" of empathy.[22]

We can use the situations of others to learn something about ourselves. We often do this when we engage in fiction and ask, "What would I do in this character's situation?" This can be a helpful source of self-knowledge. But when we put ourselves in someone else's shoes in this way, we are not actually empathizing with that person. To imagine *me* in *your* situation is actually more like empathizing with a fictional version

21. Elizabeth A. Segal, Karen E. Gerdes, Cynthia A. Lietz, M. Alex Wagaman, and Jennifer M. Geiger, *Assessing Empathy* (Columbia University Press, 2017), 80–81; G. Silani, C. Lamm, C. C. Ruff, and T. Singer, "Right Supramarginal Gyrus Is Crucial to Overcome Emotional Egocentricity Bias in Social Judgments," *Journal of Neuroscience* 33, no. 39 (2013): 15466–76.

22. Amy Coplan, "Understanding Empathy: Its Features and Effects," in Coplan and Goldie, *Empathy,* 9.

of myself rather than empathizing with you.[23] To really empathize with another person, we need to do the cognitive work to ensure that we are engaging in "other-oriented perspective-taking," which "requires greater mental flexibility and emotional regulation and often has different effects than self-oriented perspective-taking."[24]

(2) *The problem of limitations to empathic understanding.* Even if we successfully resist projecting ourselves onto some other person, there is still a possibility that we can have only an impoverished understanding of the other person's experience. Perceived differences in group identity between an empathizer and their empathic target have been shown to weaken empathic responses to others.[25] In other words, the categories we assign to others can impact our empathic responses to them. For instance, if someone shares some group identity with me (perhaps religious, political, or cultural), I am likely to empathize with them more easily than I would with someone who does not share a relevant social category with me.

In addition, the target of my empathy may have particular lived experiences that are considerably different from my own. For example, if I have never experienced mobility challenges, it would take considerable cognitive work to understand the experience of a wheelchair user. If I have never experienced a serious trauma, I really do not know what it is like to live with PTSD. Some empathy skeptics have argued that no amount of empathic imagining can help us fully understand experiences

23. While not identical to the problem of projecting self onto other, empathy theorists also distinguish between reactions of empathic concern and of personal distress. When I perceive the suffering of another person, I am likely to feel uncomfortable. If that discomfort is other-oriented, it may lead to my feeling an empathic concern for that person: I may feel sympathy for them and act out of compassion. On the other hand, I may feel a discomfort that is more self-oriented and primarily motivates me to alleviate my own personal distress. The distinction is significant in moral psychology: Where other-oriented distress is a discomfort that is alleviated by helping the other, self-oriented distress can motivate actions that do nothing to provide care for the other, such as getting physically away from them or distracting myself from their suffering. I do not treat this distinction in this paper because I take it to be about how we respond to our empathic experience, not empathy itself. But since God expects us to provide care for others, it is relevant to the broader question of how a Christ-centered leader ought to engage empathically. For an overview of the distinction between "empathic concern" and "personal distress," see C. Daniel Batson, "Distinguishing Empathic Concern from Personal Distress," chap. 2 in *Empathic Concern,* 25–41.

24. Coplan, "Understanding Empathy: Its Features and Effects," 10.

25. Segal and others, *Assessing Empathy,* 81–82.

that are very far from our own.[26] For instance, someone who has always lived with security and safety, who can assume that those around them will respect their rights and autonomy, might struggle to understand the anxiety experienced by someone who has lived with chronic insecurity and threat of harm. I may make a genuine effort to empathize with the plight of a refugee who has experienced war and homelessness, and listening to their story is likely to cause me to feel deep empathic emotion. But I cannot assume that my feelings indicate a true understanding of their experience. Empathy critics may suggest that we ought not to treat empathic experience as a source of information about others because inaccurate beliefs about the experience of the vulnerable have the potential to cause harm.[27]

(3) *The dangers of empathy as a source of moral judgment or motivation.* Even if we somehow achieve an accurate empathic understanding of another person, it is still an open question how that empathic information ought to inform our actions. Moral theorists actively debate the role that empathy ought to play in our moral evaluations.[28] For example, empathic adoption of another's pain might feel like a legitimate reason to label the pain as bad and take actions to prevent it. But as anyone who has worked to develop muscle can tell you, discomfort isn't always bad (nor, of course, is comfort always desirable). In addition, well-intentioned attempts to experience another's pain can minimize their pain when you don't feel their pain to the same degree or in the same way.

Empathy critics have argued that empathy can actively impair good moral decision-making because empathic experience is so susceptible to our biases. In addition, critics observe that actively engaging in strong

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26. See Janine Jones, "Disappearing Black People Through Failures of White Empathy," in *Feminist Philosophy of Mind,* ed. Keya Maitra and Jennifer McWeeny (Oxford University Press, 2022), 86–102.

27. Jesse Prinz, "Against Empathy," in "Spindel Supplement: Empathy and Ethics," special issue, *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 49, no. 1 (2011): 214–33, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2041-6962.2011.00069.x; Louise Braddock, "Sympathy and Projection, and Why We Should Be Wary of Empathy," in *Philosophical Perspectives on Empathy: Theoretical Approaches and Emerging Challenges,* ed. Derek Matravers and Anik Waldow (Routledge, 2018), 91–107; Peter Goldie, "Anti-Empathy," in Coplan and Goldie, *Empathy,* 302–17.

28. Jean Decety, "Why Empathy Is Not a Reliable Source of Information in Moral Decision Making," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 30, no. 5 (2021): 425–30, https://doi.org/10.1177/09637214211031943; Jesse Prinz, "Is Empathy Necessary for Morality?," in Coplan and Goldie, *Empathy,* 211–29.

emotional experience leads to acting on emotional impulse instead of judging and acting in a careful, considered manner.[29]

I suggested above that God asks us to engage empathically with one another, that empathy is important in achieving a Zion community, and that Christ models empathic engagement for us in both his earthly ministry and the way he succors his people as he offers healing and atonement. I think this is good evidence that empathy plays an important role in Latter-day Saint theology and in our moral lives. But the questions raised by empathy critics are important to consider. A naïve assumption that empathy is always good can obscure questions of who is centered in my empathic experience, what I can reasonably know through empathy, and how the feelings of others ought to impact my moral judgment and subsequent actions. Considering the conceptual tools provided by the philosophical discourse on empathy, including that of empathy critics, can help us avoid naïve engagement with our empathic natures. In the next section, I will make a preliminary effort to sketch the role of empathy in the CCLM, suggest some ways that the model can guide our use of empathy in Christ-centered leadership, and offer some answers to the concerns of empathy critics.

Empathy and the CCLM

The leadership modeled by Christ's ministry was deeply interpersonal. Sermons to large groups were the exception; interactions with individuals and small groups were the rule. Christ's pattern of "ministering to the one"[30] facilitated empathic experiences. Christ sought to ensure that those he engaged with felt fully seen and understood.

Consider the woman taken in adultery (John 8:3–11), who was being used in a vicious, impersonal, and highly public way by those in power. Christ would not engage in a dehumanizing debate that made her suffering an object of public scrutiny and derision. But he also could not minister to her without first dispelling the crowd. When the scribes and Pharisees challenged Jesus to talk *about* her in that public setting (vv. 4–5), "Jesus stooped down, and with his finger wrote on the ground, as though he heard them not" (v. 6). This curious response allowed the Savior to

29. Consider, for example, Paul Bloom's case against empathy in his book *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion* (HarperCollins, 2016), 50–53; and Paul Bloom, "Empathy and Its Discontents," *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 21, no. 1 (2017): 24–31.

30. Peter M. Johnson, "The Power of Ministering to the One," *Liahona,* November 2025, 84–85.

minister to her with empathy. In the large group setting, with a variety of high-stakes emotions in the air (and one individual in crisis), Christ was compromised in his ability to ensure that individuals felt seen and heard. So he disengaged from the crowd (v. 6), calmly prompted universal self-reflection (vv. 7–9), and created space for heightened emotions to calm. Once the crowd had left (v. 9), he was able to properly minister to the woman. He offered her his undivided attention, empathic understanding, emotional coregulation, and loving counsel (vv. 10–11).

How can we learn from the Savior's example of leading with empathy? The CCLM helps leaders systematically think through the complexities of their relationships and responsibilities, including those inward (to self), upward (to God), and outward (to God's children and our stewardships). What role does empathy play in each of these? And how does empathy interact with the CCLM principles meant to guide us in these relationships and responsibilities ("express love," "honor agency," and "invite accountability")? Just as Christ led as one who is "meek and lowly of heart" (Matthew 11:29), we ought to engage in Christ-centered leadership with a willingness to emotionally resonate with others, while being humbly aware of our empathic limitations and thoughtful about how our emotional responses inform our actions. I will briefly consider how empathy shows up in each of the four dimensions of the model: "relationships with and responsibilities to God, [God's] Children, self, and our stewardships."[31]

Relationship with God

What role does empathy play in my relationship with God? God has a perfect understanding of me; this means that God has perfect empathy for me. Faith in God means trust in his ability to see me fully and understand me entirely, including my felt experience. We can trust that God sees us as wholes—sometimes more fully than we are able to see ourselves. When we believe in God's empathy, we become willing to be taught, corrected, and seen by God. Meekness before God includes trusting God's acceptance (when we think we are not worth helping) or trusting in God's grace (when we think we do not need or want help).

This kind of faith and trust in God's empathy for me can inform my understanding of how God honors my agency and invites to me to be accountable in our covenant relationship. For instance, God does not require us to "run faster than [we have] strength," but "it is expedient that

31. "What Is the Christ-Centered Leader Model?" under "Christ-Centered Leader Model," BYU Sorensen Center.

[we] should be diligent" (Mosiah 4:27). When I exercise my agency while aware of God's perfect empathic knowledge of me, I am empowered to trust his confidence in me (as he knows what I can do). His knowledge of my internal experience also helps me trust in my own self-knowledge, recognizing when I have done "all [that I] can do" (2 Ne. 25:23) and can rest in his care. Enveloping this is my trust that his love is not merely a general love for his children but a love for me specifically; I am fully seen and understood. Remembering that God has perfect empathic knowledge of me helps me recognize his individualized expressions of love.

But all this concerns God's empathy for me. What of my empathy for God? This might feel like a tall order. If my ability to empathize with other humans is limited, how can I expect to empathize with Deity? But empathic reciprocity is so important in human relationships; wouldn't it be strange if empathy were not part of our relationship with God? Moses 7 offers a remarkable example of God inviting one of his children to have empathy *for* him. He weeps in front of Enoch, who initially is too surprised to respond with empathy (vv. 28–29). But as God goes on to explain to Enoch what it is like for him as a father to watch his children hurt one another (vv. 32–40), Enoch comes to share (at least in some small part) in God's emotional experience. Enoch "wept and stretched forth his arms, and his heart swelled wide as eternity; and his bowels yearned" (v. 41). Enoch better understands the truths God reveals to him because of this reciprocal empathic engagement.

The vision culminates in their shared joy in the promise of covenant between God and the human family (Moses 7:51–53): One day God's children will achieve Zion, and God promises that his children will gather "from the four quarters of the earth" (v. 62). He will bring them to the city of Enoch, which God says "shall be [his] abode" (v. 64). There, God says he and Enoch's people "will receive them into our bosom, and they shall see us; and we will fall upon their necks, and they shall fall upon our necks, and we will kiss each other" (v. 63). There is no "contraction of feeling"[32] in this tender scene of empathic reciprocity. My willingness to empathize with God's love for his children is part of cultivating the expansive feeling Joseph Smith taught was a source of unity and power.[33]

32. "Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book," 61.
33. "Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book," 60.

Responsibility to Self

Elder Matthew Holland described the story of Jonah, who was "cast off, sinking in deepest waters, with seaweed wrapped about [his] head," and quoted the following verse: "They that observe lying vanities forsake their own mercy" (Jonah 2:8). What does it mean to "forsake [our] own mercy"?[34] Elder Holland suggests that Christ offers individualized mercy, designed to heal our "individual agonies." Why do we ever turn away from the healing and growth that Christ promises?

One reason, one of the "lying vanities," might be doubt in our own worth or doubt in our ability to change and progress. It is possible to feel alienated from your sense of self, unsure of who you are, and afraid to be vulnerable to failure. Like Jonah, we may think "that relief is found in sailing away from [our] spiritual responsibilities"[35] because we fear self-knowledge and doubt our gifts and talents. What would happen if we resisted any "contraction of feeling"[36] and expanded our empathy to ourselves?

Self-empathy is a curious idea: Aren't I already experiencing my own emotions? Yet so many of us take great pains to resist actually feeling our own emotions. If empathy is a source of knowledge of other minds, perhaps we impoverish our understanding of our *own* minds when we don't allow ourselves to feel.[37] Allowing ourselves to feel requires meekly admitting what we truly feel—to God, and to ourselves.

The CCLM suggests that we have a responsibility to ourselves to "develop our distinct gifts, seek continual improvement, and root out biases."[38] These are responsibilities of self-knowledge and self-improvement, and both are benefited when we consider ourselves empathically. Choosing to feel and seeking to accept and understand our own feelings (rather than engaging in self-criticism and judgment) help us come to know ourselves as God does. Knowing myself is necessary for self-acceptance and love of self. (After all, how can I believe that someone who doesn't know me really loves me?) Loving myself must involve

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34. Matthew S. Holland, "Forsake Not Your Own Mercy," *Liahona,* November 2025, 105–6.

35. Holland, "Forsake Not Your Own Mercy," 106.

36. "Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book," 61.

37. When Nephi's brothers were "past feeling," they were unable to learn from the Spirit (1 Ne. 17:45).

38. "Self," under "Christ-Centered Leader Model," BYU Sorensen Center.

acting with self-compassion,[39] which then empowers me to accept my weaknesses and identify areas for growth. I can hold myself accountable to the potential I know I have and honor and celebrate my unique existence as an agent.

Relationship to God's Children

It isn't difficult to see that empathy is relevant to how God asks us to engage in relationships with other people. To "love thy neighbor as thyself" (Matt. 22:39) requires us to seek to understand our neighbor. To work cooperatively with others, we must both listen to and share with one another. We need to learn about one another's strengths and weaknesses, offer help when needed, and share joy in successes. Recall that Joseph Smith taught the Saints that "by union of feeling we obtain pow'r with God."[40]

Christ ministered with deep empathy (fig. 3). He also undertook the ultimate empathic experience in Gethsemane, with an atoning act of shared feeling.[41] We follow Christ's example when our expressions of love validate and make room for the feelings and experiences of others—not in a disengaged or mechanical way but with the warmth and sincerity of the expansive feeling that Joseph Smith hoped the Saints would cultivate. As we empathically engage with those around us, we better understand the perspectives from which they exercise agency. We are better able to suspend harsh or ill-informed judgment as we strive for a meek awareness of our need to defer to others as the primary source of knowledge of their own feelings and experience. Our compassion for their perspective helps us honor their agency and know how to invite their accountability with love.

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39. For an interesting paper considering the interaction between self-compassion and empathic engagement with others, see Laura R. Welp and Christina M. Brown, "Self-Compassion, Empathy, and Helping Intentions," *Journal of Positive Psychology* 9, no. 1 (2014): 54–65, https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2013.831465.

40. "Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book," 60.

41. Many take Christ to have experienced a comprehensive empathy in the Garden of Gethsemane. See, for example, Jeffrey R. Holland, "None Were with Him," *Ensign*, May 2009, 86–88. Adam Miller argues that "Christ's vicarious suffering" was not a "suffering *in place of* us" but "a suffering *with* us." See Adam Miller, *Original Grace* (Deseret Book, 2022), 55 (emphasis original). For an interesting discussion that challenges the common empathic understanding of the Atonement in Latter-day Saint thought, see Scott C. Woodward, "A Close Look at Scriptural Teachings Regarding Jesus Feeling Our Pains as Part of His Atonement," *BYU Studies* 62, no. 2 (2023): 23–41.



Figure 3. Christ's infallible empathy. *He Sits with Me* by Paige Payne, 5 × 7 inches, acrylic on paper, January 5, 2022. By permission of the artist.

While God's empathic understanding is perfect, ours is always and deeply fallible. It is easy to make assumptions about how others think or feel based on our own experiences and preferences. We may be well-meaning or even consider ourselves to be good at empathizing but nevertheless project an inaccurate internal life onto another person. When we do this from a leadership position—where we have influence and authority—we risk harming the person we claim to empathize with, especially because our false version of them has power to shape communal narratives. Our failed empathy may limit their ability to be seen and heard in shared community spaces.[42] God asks us to empathize with others, but how do we balance this with our empathic fallibility? Meekness and humility help. I will offer more on this as I suggest some responses to the empathy critic below.

42. Philosopher Janine Jones, "Disappearing Black People Through Failures of White Empathy," 95–97, argues that wrongly assuming the accuracy of our empathic understanding of another person can result in the "disappearing" of the experience of the empathic target, especially when there is a discrepancy in social power.

Responsibility Within Our Stewardships

What could it mean to engage in our stewardship responsibilities with empathy? Obviously, we can be empathically engaged with the people impacted by our stewardships. But this is captured under our relationship to God's children discussed above. Are there further specifics we can say about the way that empathy ought to inform how we fulfill the responsibilities of our stewardships?

We acquire stewardship responsibilities temporarily due to membership and specific roles in formal and informal organizations (families, congregations, schools, places of employment, and more). These responsibilities derive from the purposes of the organizations, and good organizations aim to benefit their members and broader communities. How we act in our stewardships ought to be informed by our understanding of the connections between the projects of those organizations and the people and communities that are impacted by them. I may not be able to empathize with an organization, but how I fulfill stewardship responsibilities can be shaped by my awareness of the feelings and experiences of the community that the organization seeks to serve.

We should not commit to our stewardship tasks only because it is what is expected of us in that context. Rather, we should cultivate stewardships because we love the people we serve. Just as we must obey God "out of love for Him," we serve out of love for others.[43] Serving from a place of love allows us to be "anxiously engaged in a good cause" (D&C 58:27). I will not find myself acting as a mere cog in a machine if I remain connected to the very human purposes for which the machine was built.

Answering the Empathy Skeptic

The CCLM is designed to highlight tensions that arise as individuals strive to become leaders who attend to all these dimensions of their leadership responsibilities (relationships with God, to self, to God's children, and to those within our stewardships). The model does not provide a mechanism for deciding between competing responsibilities as tensions are discovered. Rather, it invites self-reflection, assessment, and reassessment of our ongoing efforts to lead, with constant adjustments in orientation as we strive to remain Christ-centered.[44] The complexity of

43. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, "The Gift of Grace," *Ensign,* May 2015, 109.

44. See Benjamin M. Ogles, Anthony B. Bates, John B. Bingham, Elizabeth J. Darger, Melinda Garrard, and Jeffery A. Thompson, "A Christ-Centered Leader Model for the BYU Community and Beyond," *BYU Studies* 65, no. 3 (2026): 25–53, in this issue.

this approach requires emulating the Savior's example of humility and meekness as we make evaluations and choices with care. The requirement to continually engage in this project of discipleship, with the various elements of the model in mind, can help us answer some of the concerns of the empathy skeptic.

Projecting Self onto Others

Take the problem of projecting self onto other. When we attempt to enter a place of empathy, we can easily project our own perspective onto the life of another. Built into the CCLM is the requirement to reflect on the difference between my relationship to self and my relationships to others. In order to carefully attend to each of these relationships, I need to understand the self as distinct from others. This will not guarantee that I do not project my experience onto others, but it invites me to continually consider the differences in these relationships. The model intends to draw our attention to the ways that various relationships and responsibilities can be in tension with each other—and this includes tensions that arise from differences between how people feel and experience the world. Revisiting our level of meekness in our leadership practice will help us resist the pitfalls of egocentric biases as we love other people for who they are at that time, honor their capacity to act, and invite them to make the unique contributions that can only come from their distinct perspectives.

Limited Experience

What about the problem of our empathic fallibility due to limitations in our own experience? The CCLM does not support overconfidence about our understanding of a situation. Leadership is meant to be a process and should invite ongoing examination of all a situation's moving parts. This may feel frustrating if we hope to have a clear and settled answer. But accepting and admitting that most of our beliefs need to be revisable is what it is to have humility and meekness. We must continually ask questions and be curious about another's experience if the truth of their experience matters to us. This includes the truth of our own assumptions about how other people think and feel.

But what if we remain limited in the knowledge we can gain empathically? What if it is true that some people have experiences that we are not equipped to fully understand? The Book of Mormon prophet Jacob is an excellent example of a leader with just this anxiety. Jacob is tasked with giving a sermon that addresses both the people's neglect of the poor and

afflicted as well as the harms to the women and children caused by the sexual sins of the men (Jacob 2:2, 9–10). His language in the sermon demonstrates that he is a deeply empathic person. He wishes he could speak healing words to those who have been harmed (v. 8), but instead, he must "admonish" those who have caused the harm (v. 9). He laments that this will "enlarge the wounds of those who are already wounded" (v. 9).

Jacob is aware that his sermon involves making assertions about the hearts and minds of the guilty parties (Jacob 2:13, 20, 23)—accusations that should not be made lightly. He is faced with a complex web of human relationships as well. Jacob is trying to minister to the men "concerning the wickedness of [their] hearts" (v. 6) but also to "the broken heart[s]" of the women and the children who are present (v. 10). There are also economic differences between members of his community that are creating distinct social groups. He needs to empathize with all, while attending to how his leadership will impact the unity of families and the community. As both a religious and community leader, he also has stewardship responsibilities. In the face of this complicated social situation, Jacob does not choose to make empathy his only source of knowledge of the minds and feelings of the diverse people listening to him. Instead, he tells them, "By the help of the all-powerful Creator of heaven and earth I can tell you concerning your thoughts" (v. 5).

Jacob is anxious to do right by the people, and when the stakes of properly understanding their hearts and minds are high, he meekly decides to "trust in the Lord . . . and lean not unto [his] own understanding" (Prov. 3:5). Like Jacob, we can take seriously our responsibility to self, cultivating a sensitivity to our empathic limitations as we apply empathy in our relationships with God's children. In both efforts, we show meekness when we take time in prayer and meditation to ask God to help us understand and find ways to minister appropriately to those within our spheres of influence—particularly when they are dealing with experiences that we have not had ourselves. After all, at the core of the CCLM is Christ, who pleads, "Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart" (Matt. 11:29–30).

Empathy in Moral Reasoning

The third worry of the empathy critic, that empathy might not be the best guide for our moral lives, is answered in a similar way. The CCLM offers a variety of tools to think through moral dilemmas. Empathizing with those who are impacted by our actions can help us navigate the multiple perspectives and subsequent tensions in our social world.

Empathy builds a necessary sense of community and interpersonal care. Its role in our moral lives ought to be robust, as empathy is often key to expressions of love—one of the guiding principles of the CCLM. But the CCLM also prompts us to honor agency and invite accountability—principles that we may lose sight of in our relationships when we only respond to shared feeling. The CCLM invites us to take seriously the responsibilities we have to God and our stewardships. All these elements are put into conversation with one another. Our empathy, therefore, informs a complex moral reasoning process, but it does not direct it. As we emulate the meekness that Christ showed in his own leadership, we reason carefully and with humility in the face of moral complexity and the intense empathic responses that often accompany it.

The CCLM is not a theoretical mechanism into which we insert a moral dilemma and out pops a solution. All the tools it provides are meant to point us to important questions and considerations that will assist us in cultivating Christ-centered leadership practice. The human circumstances in which we cultivate this leadership practice are live and changing, and this requires us to consciously adopt an attitude of meekness. Empathy is an essential and ongoing source of understanding in our socially complex world, but it must be paired with a substantial dose of humility regarding our ability to fully understand others. As Christ-centered leaders strive to appropriately integrate empathy into leadership practice, they will soon recognize that engaging empathic capacities with meekness includes a perpetual dependence on the guidance of the Spirit.

Conclusion

The goal of this paper was to explore the role of empathy in Christ-centered leadership. As may be evident at this point, there is one idea that can unify the analysis I have provided: Meekness is key to being an empathically engaged Christ-centered leader.[45] Elder David A. Bednar

45. I choose to emphasize meekness because of its clear application to some of the epistemic concerns that have been raised in this paper in relation to empathy. But I could also have drawn this discussion together with an examination of charity as a lens for understanding how Christ-centered leadership ought to involve empathy. Consider Paul's sermon on charity in 1 Corinthians 13:1–8, 13:

> Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am

taught, "Meekness is a defining attribute of the Redeemer and is distinguished by righteous responsiveness, willing submissiveness, and strong self-restraint."[46]

"Righteous responsiveness" requires us to respond to our neighbor, whom God has commanded us to love. It means that we cannot allow pride or fear to cause in us a "contraction of feeling"[47]—an emotional pulling away from others, alienating our hearts and minds from theirs. Being responsive in our meekness allows us to remain emotionally available and softhearted, or open to expressing love. We mourn with those who mourn and rejoice with those who rejoice. We are then blessed by the divine power that comes from the unity of feeling in a Zion-like society.

The "willing submissiveness" of the meek helps us remember that others know things we do not; we honor agency when we defer to another's self-knowledge. We should listen to those around us, defer to others when appropriate, assume that we do not know, and above all, prioritize our covenant relationship with a God who invites us to engage in empathic reciprocity with all.

Finally, the "strong self-restraint" of the meek helps us resist self-orientation in our emotional responses and refrain from projecting ourselves onto others as we strive to achieve an empathic understanding of them. We can resist the urge to run from discomfort and instead make space for others to feel and be seen. We can be open to a broad range

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> nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing. Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things. Charity never faileth: but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away. . . . And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.

This sermon emphasizes the necessity of a kind of other-centered affective engagement with others while giving acts of service, prophesying, and acquiring knowledge. Exploring the connections between empathy and charity would be a paper in itself, so I will just suggest to the reader that the connections between empathy, charity, and Christ-centered leadership are worth thinking about.

46. David A. Bednar, "Meek and Lowly of Heart," *Ensign,* May 2018, 30–33.

47. "Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book," 61.

of empathic experiences from different sources and still invite accountability as we discern what we owe to self, God, God's children, and the stewardships that we are granted. And when we meekly acknowledge that our efforts to be empathic leaders are fallible and limited, that same meekness allows us to turn easily to God for support, guidance, and forgiveness.

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