# *Nobody Knows: The Untold Story of Black Mormons*— Script

*Note*: This script, with punctuation, capitalization, and formatting standardized, is published here by permission of Darius Aiden Gray and Margaret Blair Young.

**Opening Sequence**

*Joshua Aker*: People can think you're an idiot, and they don't make any apologies about telling you so. "You're black and you're a Mormon? Do you realize what you believe in? Do you realize what you come from? Do you realize what that Church has done?"

*Tamu Smith*: I don't feel like I have to choose between being Mormon and being black. I will always be black. I don't mind defending the Church to black people. I do mind defending my blackness to members of the Church.

*Martin Luther King III*: The perception is that it really is not open, that it's a closed kind of community that really does not want others to be part of that tradition, and that's the perception—which hinges on exclusion.

*Natalie Sheppard*: I was angry for a very long time, but I switched that anger into a determination to be a pioneer for black members of this Church.

*Darius Gray*: I'm a proud black man. I am the son of black parents who were proud of their ethnicity, proud of the accomplishments of our race. And yet I embraced the gospel of Jesus Christ, and I've stayed in that faith for thirty-nine years. That should say something. I hope it does. I'm not stupid. I'm not a fool. And I'm not an Uncle Tom. This gospel is for all people.

**Beginnings**

*Narrator*: It was called the Second Great Awakening. Religious revivals, many of them camp meetings in leafy groves, sprang up everywhere during the early nineteenth century.

Joseph Smith, founder of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, claimed to receive a vision and further claimed that he was called to restore the Church of Christ.

(Photo of stained glass: First Vision)

*Narrator*: With the new religion came new scriptures, called the Book of Mormon. Converts were soon referred to as Mormons.

(Printing press photos of Book of Mormon pages)

*Narrator*: Mormon doctrine included a belief in life before birth. In a "preexistence," spirit children of God had claimed the privilege of mortality. There was then a war in heaven. Spirits who followed the devil were cast out, never to experience mortal birth.

(Pictures of universe)

*Paul Gill*: Where did I come from? Who am I? These were important questions. Where did I come from? What is my purpose in life? Where am I going? I certainly didn't believe in POOF!—that we come from nothing to the planet. But he said that we come from a premortal life and the light came on.

(Picture of Darius with newborn son)

*Narrator*: Church doctrine declared that mankind would be punished for individual sins, not for the fall of Adam and Eve. It even suggested that the fall was a vital element in human progress. Without it, mortals could not experience the refining power of sorrow.

*Keith Hamilton*: I believe I chose to come to earth as a black man. I don't believe God forced my spirit into a black body. I chose to. I recognized what it was going to mean to me and my family and I chose my mission. Jesus was treated the way He was on earth because of His mission. Right? He was born the way He was born, under the circumstances He was born under, and He

died the way He died because of His mission, because that's the way it had to be.

(B-roll:[1] Pictures from Keith's childhood)

*Narrator*: Joseph Smith and those who headed the Church after him were considered modern prophets by Mormon converts. Though Smith insisted he was far from perfect, his followers revered him and his successors.

*Marvin Perkins*: You have prophets and apostles all through the scriptures showing their human side.

*Joshua Aker*: I can reconcile that a man can be a prophet and be imperfect. The prophets made mistakes and did things that God didn't command them to do. But that doesn't mean that they were completely errant and that we shouldn't follow them therefore.

*Robert A. Rees*: Any church or organization you belong to will have its imperfections, and you have to make the decision whether you're going to abandon those imperfections and depart from them, or whether you're going to be one of those people that tries to change it.

*Narrator*: On April 6, 1830, six members of the new Church of Christ met in a farmhouse to organize the religion. Soon, Mormon missionaries began proselytizing. (Picture of the farmhouse at Fayette)

*Narrator*: In 1832, Elijah Abel, a man of African descent, was baptized. He would soon be a missionary himself. His full fellowship within the early church suggested a precedent. There was no apparent segregation in this new faith. But would it remain so?

*Newell Bringhurst*: Elijah Abel is one of the more interesting and in some ways one of the more tragic figures in Latter-day Saint history. I guess tragic but also courageous, I'd say he was very courageous—I guess a complex individual. He was one of the earliest members of the Church, becoming a member during the 1830s and, during that same decade of the 1830s, being ordained first [an] elder and then following that, a Seventy. He was ordained by Joseph Smith.

(Bill of sale showing Elijah Abel's "X", Elijah's monument, Elijah's patriarchal blessing)

*Narrator*: Besides being ordained into the LDS priesthood, Elijah Abel was given a patriarchal blessing.

*Margaret Young*: A patriarchal blessing in the LDS Church is very similar to what you see in the Old Testament when you have the patriarchs—Abraham, Jacob, Isaac—giving blessings to their sons, birthright blessings, blessings telling them what their assignments will be, what their possibilities will be, that their posterity can be as the sands of the sea. The first patriarch in the LDS Church was the father of the founder. It was Father Smith—we just refer to him as Father Smith. And it was he who gave Elijah Abel his patriarchal blessing, which contained these words: "Thou hast been ordained an elder and shall be protected against the power of the destroyer." "Thou hast been ordained an elder . . ." That made it very clear that he was indeed ordained into the priesthood, because that had come into question.

*Narrator*: Abel was one of the first undertakers in the Mormon settlement of Nauvoo, Illinois.

(Photo: Nauvoo)

*Narrator*: He left Nauvoo two years before the arrival of Jane Manning and her family, though Jane and Elijah would later meet.

(Footage: Nauvoo)

**Jane Manning James**

(Photo: Jane Manning James, dignified)

*Louis Duffy*: Now when Jane was a young girl, she met some missionaries. She convinced her family to go to Nauvoo, Illinois. So they all packed up. They got as far as Buffalo, New York, as the story goes.

(Photo of Jane in foliage)

*Voice-over reading Jane Manning James's journal*: They insisted on having the money at Buffalo and would not take us farther. So we left the boat and started on foot to travel a distance of over eight hundred miles.

(Footage: Mannings on foot)

(Footage: Nauvoo by the lake, daytime. Colors dim to black and white as Mansion House appears.)

*Louis*: They were welcomed by the founder, Joseph Smith, and his wife Emma and they were invited into their home to stay with them and live in their house.

(Photo: Mansion House, black and white)

*Voice-over (Jane)*: Soon after, they broke up the mansion. It was during this time that the Prophet Joseph and his brother Hyrum were martyred.

(Picture: Martyrdom)

I went to live in the family of Brother Brigham Young. I stayed there until he was ready to immigrate to this valley.

(Footage: Pioneers)

*Narrator*: One event in Jane's life is known only through the journal of a white pioneer, Eliza Partridge Lyman.

(Painting of Jane James and Eliza Lyman)

*Voice-over from Eliza's journal*: April 8, 1849: we baked the last of our flour today, and have no prospect of getting more till after harvest.

(B-roll: Eliza seeing that there is no flour)

April 13th: Brother Lyman started on a mission to California with O. P. Rockwell and others. May the Lord bless and prosper them and return them in safety. He left us without anything to make bread, it not being in his power to get any.

(Jane preparing her gift of flour)

(Eliza on her knees)

April 25: Jane James, the colored woman, brought me two pounds of flour, it being about half she had.

(B-roll: Jane getting flour, presenting it at the door, the scene becomes the monument as Tamu Smith speaks.)

*Tamu Smith*: Here you have this black woman who was a pio-

neer, who walked across the plains just like everyone else, who didn't have the same opportunity to go through the temple just like everyone else did, whose testimony was signed and sealed with her own blood and the blood of Christ in this gospel. She had gifts—beyond giving the flour. The flour is not the gift. Her charity is the gift. We have gifts to offer also.

(Monument close-up)

**Slavery**

*Narrator*: The issue of slavery was a fiery one in 1844. Not long before his death, Joseph Smith challenged the nation to "break off the shackles from the poor black man."

(Photos of slaves)

(Photo: Young Brigham Young)

*Narrator*: Brigham Young, the man whom most Latter-day Saints followed west after Smith's death, had once indicated an acceptance of black Church members, even the ordination of blacks into the priesthood.

(Another picture of Brigham Young)

*Voice-over, Brigham Young, 1847*: It's nothing to do with the blood, for of one blood has God made all flesh. . . . We have one of the best Elders, an African, in Lowell, Massachusetts.

*Narrator*: But he soon faced a dilemma. Many Southerners brought their slaves with them on the Mormon migration.

(Photo of John Brown)

(Brown's journal, focusing on "African servant girl" offered as tithing)

(Photo of Betsy Flewellen—the "African servant girl")

*Narrator*: These slaves represented Southern wealth and brought strong bodies to the trek—but not always strong enough.

(Journal: John Brown)

*Voice-over of John Brown, January 1847*: It finally turned cold and we had the severest kind of time. It was too severe for the Ne-

groes. My boy whose name was Henry took cold and finally the winter fever, which caused his death.

*Narrator*: As territorial governor in Utah, Young had weighty questions before him. How would Utah respond to slavery? How would the Mormons, now isolated from the rest of the nation, regard those of African descent?

*Armand Mauss*: As territorial governor, Brigham Young opens the legislative session and kind of lays out the agenda for the session and addresses the question of slavery. He was advocating that slavery be permitted for those who were already in Utah or came to Utah with slaves of their own.

*Ronald Coleman*: Young is perhaps more pronounced than others, in that he accepted the so-called biblical rationale that was employed by Southern defenders of slavery, that is—black bondage was based on sin and disobedience, as Noah had placed a curse on one of his sons. And also there was the Cain and Abel bit. These were not unique to the LDS denial of blacks' full participation in the priesthood; it was also used to justify slavery.

*Voice-over, Reverend Samuel Seabury, 1861, New York*: For justly was the burden of servitude laid upon the back of transgression. . . . Noah laid it as a curse upon his offending son.

(Photo: title page of Seabury's book)

*Voice-over, Reverend Benjamin Morgan Palmer, 1863*: I teach mankind that the allotment of God, in the original distribution of destinies to the sons of Noah, must continue.

(Photo of Benjamin Morgan Palmer]

*Voice-over, Brigham Young, 1852*: The seed of Canaan will inevitably carry the curse which was placed upon them.

(Another photo of Brigham Young)

*Armand Mauss*: Brigham Young made the first known official statement about the role of black people in the Church as part of his discussion about the role of black people in the state, and his statement in 1852 was that the descendants of Cain were not permitted to hold the priesthood, and he added that he was basically saying this on his own lights. He said, "If no other prophet said it

before now, I say it. The seed of Cain are not entitled to the blessings of the priesthood."

*Narrator*: Most denominations stated that children were born in sin, condemned because of the fall of Adam and Eve. Mormon doctrine, however, proclaimed that all children were born innocent.

(Reenactment B-roll footage of Eliza Lyman with baby)

*Narrator*: How could Mormons view blacks as cursed because of Cain or Canaan, and yet believe that humans were born sinless? How could Mormons condemn a man for his lineage and yet believe that mortals would be punished for their own sins, not for Adam's transgression?

(B-roll footage of Jane with Syl)

*Narrator*: Many tried to fit their old view of blacks into their new faith. Since Mormons believed in a pre-mortal war, a few speculated that some spirits had been "less valiant" in that war than others. Perhaps they had even been neutral. Fence-sitters.

(Picture of Orson Hyde)

*Voice-over Apostle Orson Hyde, 1845*: At the time the devil was cast out of heaven, there were some spirits who did not take a very active part on either side. They were required to come into the world and take bodies in the accursed lineage of Canaan; and hence the Negro or African race.

*Marguerite Driessen*: How can you have the second article of Faith—"We believe that man [sic] will be punished for their own sins and not for Adam's transgression"—and then believe that black people can't have the priesthood because they're all being cursed for the sins of Cain? And that clearly wasn't satisfactory to a lot of people, which is why somebody had to invent "fence-sitters in the preexistence."

(Pictures of slaves)

*Paul Gill* (1968): When I first joined the Church, this cat said to me, "Paul, you can't hold the priesthood because you're cursed." And bam, I get this thing—I can't hold the priesthood because I'm cursed.

*Paul Gill* (2007): When I first joined the Church, for the sake of argument and convenience, I went along with the theory that maybe it was something bad that I did in the pre-existence.

*Newell Bringhurst*: When I first became aware of the priesthood proscription, and it was the traditional explanations—that they were less valiant in the preexistence, that they were marked with the curse of Cain or the curse of Canaan, and because of that, they couldn't hold the priesthood. And when I got a little bit older, there was reference to the scriptural proof-texts. And so I became increasingly bothered by what the LDS Church was doing, especially as I became aware that there wasn't this same type of priesthood proscription in other white-dominated churches. And it contributed, ultimately—I'll be honest with you—it contributed ultimately to my alienation from the Church. There were other factors. I can't say it was all because of the black issue. When I went into the army, my disaffection was so deep, that—when I went through, they always ask you a bunch of personal questions, including your religious preference. It was a black NCO who was asking me this and he says, "What's your religious preference?" I impulsively burst out, "No preference. I have no preference." I was too embarrassed and too ashamed to tell him that I belonged to a church that discriminated against his members of his race.

*Pastor Cecil Murray*: And in my barracks were two Mormons, white, young adult males, and they were telling me how blacks are under a curse, the curse of Canaan. That is a part of the dogma of their faith. I, of course, would never accept that.

*Narrator*: There were few blacks in the Mormon settlements, and the nation already accommodated segregation. Given the way America regarded its black citizens, it is no surprise that the LDS priesthood restriction was a non-issue for over a century—though it affected not only men but women of African lineage. None were permitted to enter the Mormon temples to receive the most sacred ordinances of the faith. Jane Manning James requested these ordinances repeatedly, but she was denied. Her first request was made to Church President John Taylor. She visited him on Christmas day, 1884—the day Elijah Abel died. On the day of Abel's funeral, she dictated a letter to President Taylor.

*Voice-over*: Dear Brother: I called on your house last Thursday to have conversation with you concerning my future salvation. I realize my race and color and can't expect my endowments as others who are white. Yet God promised Abraham that in his seed all the nations of the earth should be blessed. Is there no blessing for me?

Your sister in the gospel, Jane E. James

**Divisions**

*Narrator*: Since race has been a divisive issue in most religions, nobody paid much attention to the Mormons.

*Martin Luther King III*: One of the things my father often stated was that the most segregated hour in America was the hour where we got our religious orientation, which was on Sunday morning at 11:00.

*Ted Whiters*: Racism is not new. Obviously, it existed in the Church, but every other church that I knew of–I mentioned the AME Church earlier. The AME Church was born out of the fact that blacks were at St. George's Episcopal Church in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. At prayer time–in the AME Church, you go to the altar and kneel down to pray. Blacks went to the altar and knelt to pray and they were literally dragged physically on their knees from the altar and told, "You have to wait until the white people pray. Then you can pray." Out of that came the AME Church by Richard Allen and some other people who just said, "We won't deal with this."

*Pastor Murray*: So to find a religious organization that does not have a dark corner when it comes to diversity is indeed to find a very unusual one, because our challenge is to have diversity without adversity.

*Narrator*: Before long, no Latter-day Saint recalled a time when the priesthood restriction *hadn't* been in place. Given the Mormons' lay ministry, every twelve-year-old boy was ordained into the LDS priesthood–unless he had African ancestry.

*Armand Mauss*: A family moved into our ward who had a boy about my age and an older sister. And when all of us [boys] reached age twelve, we all were given the priesthood except that boy. His name was Richard. We never could understand why that was. The bishop explained to us that it was, well, that he had some

taint from the seed of Cain. Of course, I had no idea what that meant. As we got into it further, we got more of an explanation that this boy's family had been converted to the Church a few years ago and through their genealogical research had discovered they had a remote black ancestor, so nobody in that family could hold the priesthood or go to the temple. Since this boy had blond hair and blue eyes, we found it difficult to understand how this could be.

*Narrator*: Since Latter-day Saints believed in a modern prophet, most assumed that God had established the priesthood ban from the Church's beginnings. But there were questions. What about Polynesians? Filipino Negritos? Was the priesthood restriction a policy or a doctrine? The ninth president of the Church, David O. McKay, faced the issue early in his ministry.

*Gregory A. Prince*: It was not an issue at all to him by his own account for fifteen years after he became a member of the Quorum of the Twelve. He went on this trip around the globe and one of the first stops was in Hawaii. He reported later at a missionary conference in South Africa in 1954 that, on this trip in Hawaii, he met a Polynesian woman, an active, faithful member of the Church, whose husband, also an active, faithful member, was part African ancestry. And it was at that time that he really became aware of the fact that there was a policy that did not allow this man to be ordained to the priesthood—which is really an astounding admission on his part that [since] he's been an apostle for fifteen years. It tells you that this was not a front-burner issue restriction. He wrote to Heber J. Grant, then the president of the Church, asking if an exception could be made to that rule, because this was such an exceptional man. The response was that President Grant also wished that an exception could be made but that the policy—and he did call it a policy and not a doctrine—would have to stay in place until a revelation changed it.

(Photos of David O. McKay: (1) in Hawaii, (2) archival footage of President McKay reading papers)

*Narrator*: By mid-century, with the missionary effort so widespread, leaders had to address the restriction directly. They often relied on old speculation. They almost always assumed that God had put the priesthood ban into place.

(Footage of President McKay, Swiss Temple)

*Stan Watts* (1968): Church doctrine cannot be changed by man. It comes from God through revelation, which most people do not understand. They think because of pressures that we can change it overnight.

(Footage of Darius Gray)

*Darius Gray*: The year was 1964 when I finally started meeting with the missionaries. We met at our home—at Mom's home—and after the missionaries had been there once or twice, I think only once, Mom called me into her room and said, "I don't want those two young men back here. They're not welcome in my home." I pressed her for an answer as to why, and finally she told me a story. Years before we kids had been born, two young men came to the door, wanted to know if they could talk to her about their religion, and she said yes and invited them in. And they had been talking for just a brief period when one of them said, "Excuse me, Mrs. Gray, are you Negro or do you have Negroid blood?" Mom said, "Yes, of course." But when she said, "Yes, of course," those two men got up and made a hasty exit—the object being that they were members of the LDS Church—full-time missionaries. Mom did not want me involved with what she considered a racist church.

(Photos of his family)

I was starting to develop what we call a testimony about the gospel being restored, and I wanted to know more. It was the day before my scheduled baptism. It was on Christmas night, and I was having my exit interview with the missionaries at their apartment; and after they had asked their questions, they said, "Well, Brother Gray, do you have any questions?" And there was one. I had asked it earlier and they had said, "We'll get to that later." Well, this night, "later" arrived, because I asked it again. That is, in the Book of Mormon, there are a number of groups, but primarily two—the Nephites and the Lamanites. Oftentimes, the Lamanites are darker skinned and out of favor with God, while the Nephites are portrayed as being white and the good guys. And I wanted to know how, if in any way, that related to me. One

of the missionaries got up and went to the corner, leaving his companion there to respond, and he said, "Well, Brother Gray, the primary implication is that you won't be able to hold the priesthood" and went on to explain that it was because of my race.

And I just thought how foolish I had been, how my mother's warning should have been heeded, and here were two young men—supposedly representatives of God and of the Savior, serving missions, and yet they were telling me that I could not be equal to other men because of my skin, my race. I thought, "These are two of the biggest hypocrites on God's green earth." So I made up my mind at that point—they didn't know it—but there was no way in hell that I was going to be baptized the next day. I was really troubled with it, and I had my nightly prayers and I entered into prayer a second time. And that night, I received personal revelation instructing me that this was the restored gospel and I was to join. There was no mention of the priesthood restriction, whether it was just or unjust, whether it was of God or of man, simply, "This is the restored gospel and you are to join."

*Narrator*: Like many Mormon converts in America, Darius Gray came to Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah.

*Margaret Young*: You have to understand that I was in all-white Provo. At that time, I suspect that the only black families were Nigerian families who were studying at BYU, and we periodically would see them doing janitorial service.

(Footage of janitor)

*Darius*: I was accepted into the university, arrived in Provo in June of 1965. There was a lot of tension in this country; and as I walked down the street, I noticed that people were stopping and staring at something, and I thought it was in back of me, because they were staring in my direction. Had to be behind me, so I kept turning around to see what it was. There was nothing there. And finally I realized that they were staring at me. I checked to make sure I was zipped up, and finally it struck me: I was the darkest thing going down the street. For the first time in my life, I started consciously looking for another dark face. I looked down the street and saw a car with two black people in it. I ran out to the car, knocked on the window (they hadn't seen me coming up)—and startled them. The woman was on the passenger side where I was,

and I motioned to roll the window down, and I said, "I'm sorry, I've been in town for"—however long it had been—"and geez, you're the first black people I've seen and it's so good to see you!" She looked at me, then looked at her husband, and they said, "We're just passing through."

**The Movement**

(Music: "Woke Up This Morning with my Mind Set on Freedom")

*Narrator*: As the civil rights movement forced the nation to confront its ugliest secrets, the LDS priesthood restriction was no longer ignored. The Mormon Church and Brigham Young University came under scrutiny, and then under fiery condemnation.

*Newell Bringhurst*: The Church seemed clearly out of step with where the larger American society was moving as far as black rights and empowerment of African Americans and people of color.

*Protestor*: Go on and do your thing in Utah. Go on and do your thing wherever it suits you. But don't expect me to endorse it, cooperate with it, or be a part of it.

*Protestor*: We simply can no longer endorse any kind of discrimination whether it comes from a Church or a state, and so no matter where we find prejudice and discrimination, we have to fight it.

*Protestor*: The issue of BYU and the Mormon Church is such an important issue to black students, that Len, myself, and other black students risked our education to prevent Brigham Young from wrestling here—that's how strong we felt about it.

*Protestor*: The gripe is, the Church, which sits back in its position and does not admit blacks to the priesthood, does not marry blacks—and you can go down the line on things that people can't do simply because they're black.

*Darius Gray* (1968): The official position is that we have right now a temporary restriction, a restriction not allowing us to hold the priesthood.

*Protestor*: It's not just one little church with one little set of beliefs. It is a representative of a general psychological condition. Now, in your case, you say you believe. You have a set of revelatory beliefs to support you. The black doesn't know that. But even if he

did know it, the fact of the matter is that your beliefs, from his objective point of view, contribute to his condition.

*Protestor*: It's all aspects of the black community that condemn the Mormon position.

*Darius Gray*: I couldn't speak to the priesthood restriction, but I could say that there were black LDS and there had been black LDS and that I was a proud black man; I was proud of my race and I was proud of my faith, and there was no conflict between the two.

*Narrator*: For Church president David O. McKay, the race issue became more and more difficult.

*Gregory Prince*: Marion D. Hanks had been the Church's military representative in Vietnam. He told me that, when he visited President McKay prior to one of his trips, he recounted to him an incident that had occurred the prior trip, where he was at a field hospital, and some soldiers were medivaced in from a firefight. One of them was a black soldier who was LDS, who'd had part of his leg blown off. He said, "I was trying to comfort him at his bedside as they were preparing him for surgery." He said, "As I told President McKay this story, tears started to come down his cheeks. President McKay said, 'I have prayed and prayed over this issue, but there has been no reply.'"

(Photos of Marion D. Hanks in Vietnam)

**Hints of Change**

*Narrator*: Yet even when the policy seemed set in stone, many Mormons had a sense that change was coming.

*Joshua Aker*: My father is not a normal person. Not a lot of black people could have come into the Church under those circumstances. That requires tremendous faith, maybe foresight. However, I know my father didn't think he'd see it in his lifetime. However, my mother—who also was baptized before the proclamation, I remember hearing her speak at my missionary farewell—said that when she was baptized, she had the faith that someday blacks would receive the blessings of the priesthood.

*Joan Aker:* Even before blacks could hold the priesthood—Josh was just a little kid then—it was not anything I ever worried about,

that someday he wouldn't be able to hold the priesthood. I knew that some day it would happen. I just knew.

**Genesis Group**

*Narrator*: President David Oman McKay died in 1970 and was succeeded by ninety-four-year-old Joseph Fielding Smith. In the spring of 1971, three black Mormon converts met to talk about their past and their future. They knew there had been black pioneers. Where were these pioneers' descendants?

*Louis Duffy*: We have six generations. Jane has six generations. None of them are Mormon.

*Tamu Smith*: I think about Jane Manning James and I think about her children, and I think about Green Flake and his posterity, and this is what's hard for me—is when I think about families and legacies which have been left is that some of the black people who stayed so strong and so true to this—it came at such a high cost to them.

*Narrator*: Black Mormons had personal concerns. How could their families stay in the LDS faith with the priesthood restriction and its supporting folklore intact?

*Darius Gray*: Three black male converts to the LDS Church—Eugene Orr, Ruffin Bridgeforth, and myself—met to talk about what can we do to hold on to the limited number of blacks in the Church? There were few, and some were falling away and others had already fallen away. As we met at the University of Utah in the Marriott Library—I remember the room—we knelt in prayer. That might not seem like much to most people. But to have three black, male converts there asking God for guidance was a major step, a major day. We felt led to approach the senior brethren of the Church requesting a meeting, and ultimately that happened.

*Eugene Orr:* These were negotiating meetings. Yes, we did have an agenda that we had concocted together. The president and prophet of the Church at the time was Joseph Fielding Smith. He was from the old school and had himself said some harsh and unkind things about people of color. But he assigned three young apostles to work with us three black converts: Gordon B. Hinckley, President [Thomas S.] Monson, and President [Boyd K.] Packer. So we met over a period of time to talk about the issues. What can we do? One of our members, Gene Orr, was really

pressing hard for the priesthood being made available to blacks. Gene was the young firebrand.

*Eugene Orr*: Yes, we did ask for the priesthood. We asked for it then, to be among the brethren. And then that was going back and forth. And we were trying to see how we were going to structure this fellowshipping group without it seeming like we were being segregated from the white congregation.

*Darius Gray*: As we met with the apostles, they said that, after prayer and consideration, the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve had been led to establish an organization to support black Latter-day Saints and that we three had been called to serve in its presidency.

*Narrator*: When Joseph Fielding Smith died, Harold B. Lee, relatively young at age seventy-three, became the Church president. Only eighteen months later, he suddenly died. Next in seniority was seventy-eight-year-old Spencer Woolley Kimball, a short, humble man from Thatcher, Arizona. President Kimball had already made bold statements against racism.

(B-roll footage of Spencer Kimball in 1950s)

*Voice-over*: When the Lord has made of all flesh equal, when he finds no difference between them, who are we to find a difference and to exclude? What a monster is prejudice!

*Narrator*: In the years between his call as an apostle and his ascension to the presidency, Spencer Kimball had undergone life-threatening illnesses. Surgery for throat cancer had removed one and one-half of his vocal cords, leaving his voice distinctively raw and deep. It was this voice which responded to the inevitable question: Would there be a change in policy?

*President Kimball*: I anticipate no major changes in the immediate future.

*Narrator*: The vast majority of the black pioneers' descendants had joined other churches. In the 1960s there were very few black Mormons in Utah, and no more than three or four hundred worldwide. Those few faced hard questions.

*Paul Gill* (1968): Is this thing all right? Is it okay not to have the priesthood? Are these white folks denying me the right to the priesthood because black is evil, because I'm inferior to them?

*Narrator*: Nobody knew how earnestly Spencer Kimball was

wrestling with the questions which weighed so heavy on the Church: Could those of African descent be ordained into the priesthood? Could blacks participate in temple rituals?

(Footage of black family, 1968)

*Voice-over of President Kimball*: I remember very vividly the day after day that I had gone to the temple after everybody had gone out of the temple. I knelt and prayed, and I prayed with such fervency, I tell you. I knew that something was before us that was extremely important to many of the children of God.

*Paul Gill*: If I had any hopes or aspirations–natural–in coming into the Church–because I didn't have the priesthood, those hopes, dreams were sort of muted. If my role in the Church was limited to being a prospective elder for ten years–from 1968 to 1978, to maybe a teacher, Boy Scouts, limited callings. So it puts a damper on your hopes and aspirations. But once the revelation on priesthood came, then the ability to broaden your dreams becomes a hundredfold.

**Revelation**

*Narrator*: June 8th, 1978, is known to Mormons as "the long promised day"–the day when the priesthood restriction was lifted.

(Archival footage of President Kimball and footage photos of newspaper headlines from around the world)

*President Kimball*: And with great solemnity and seriousness, alone in the upper rooms of the temple, and there I offered my soul, and offered our efforts to go forward with the program and as we talked about it to Him, we said, "Lord, we want only what is right. We're not making any plans to be spectacularly moving. We want what thou dost want and we want it when you want it and not until." And finally, we had the feeling, the impressions, from the Lord–who made them very clear to us–that this is the thing to do, to make the gospel universal to all worthy people.

*Ruffin Bridgeforth*: It's going to change my life. I'm going to try to be a better person.

*Mary Sturlogsen*: The news about the priesthood being given

to my people—it's a feeling that I don't think I'll ever be able to express to people.

*Darius Gray*: It was great news. It was something totally unexpected. It did not come as a result of political pressure, because there was none in 1978.

*Ron Coleman*: The impact was important for men and women of African descent who were members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. But it also was important for the Church of Jesus Christ of LDS as a whole. I think it took a heavy weight off the Church. No longer could those who wanted to maintain the narrowness of race bigotry hide behind membership in the Church.

*Darius Gray*: A woman from the credit department, Dixie Baker, worked outside my office. She was a credit assistant. Dixie was very straightforward, not a shy retiring type. She stuck her head into my office. "Hey, Darius, they're going to give Negroes the priesthood." It wasn't something to be joked about, and I thought it was in poor taste for her to say that, and I said, "Get out of here, Dixie. That's not funny." She continued: "No, I think they're going to give Negroes the priesthood." This time I swore. "Damn it, Dixie, that's not funny. Get the hell out." She told me she had been on the phone to the Church Office Building. The rumor was going around that that was going to occur. So I turned on the television and radio in my office. Nothing was on the media yet. So I did the only logical thing. I picked up the phone and called President Kimball. He wasn't there, but his secretary knew me, and I identified myself and I was told yes, it is true. It was a marvelous day.

**Challenges Remain**

*Narrator*: The priesthood revelation did extend priesthood but did nothing to repudiate the racist folklore—the idea of a curse, and the concept that blacks had been less valiant than others in a pre-mortal life.

*Marguerite Driessen*: The fact of the matter is, it's still in print, and a whole generation of new people can pick that up and read it as if it were truth—as if it were Mormon doctrine, instead of just a person's opinion of what this is. The Church doesn't sponsor the book, in fact I think there's now a disclaimer that these are the

views of Bruce R. McConkie and that it is not actually Mormon doctrine, but heck, that's the title. I would think that the disclaimer could be a lot stronger and should be prefaced with his big disclaimer in 1978.

*Marvin Perkins*: Elder McConkie said: "Forget everything I said or what Brigham Young said or what George Q. Cannon or whoever else has said that is contrary to today's revelation. We spoke with a limited understanding and without the light and knowledge which has now come into the world. We get our light and knowledge line upon line, precept upon precept, and there has now been added a flood of light and intelligence on this issue—that's key—that erases all the darkness and the views of the past."

*Martin Luther King III*: This reading material is still being embraced. So even though people may say, "Well, we can have a black priest," there's something different, something unique about black people. Really, when it comes to black people, there's something about black people that's so different that they have a curse. There are problems. There are issues.

*Marguerite Dreissen*: Realize that there are these ideas out there, that there are these ideas among people in the Church about curses, about different races. Acknowledge it first, and don't sweep it under the rug. Then having acknowledged it, acknowledge that it's not right. God is no respecter of persons. God wants you to love everyone like He does, and so you have to get over it. So how do we help people get over it? You give them correct information. There is no such thing as, say, fence-sitters in the preexistence. Or we've not found some curse that came upon these people so that their lineage would be this, or that everybody would be denied the priesthood. Teach correct information. Debunk the myths and just say flat out, "This isn't true."

*Narrator*: Nor did the change of policy swoop away any discomfort with diversity.

*Tamu Smith*: The first time I was ever called a nigger was in the Salt Lake Temple. People come up to me, and they think they're being nice and generous, but it's really offensive, because they'll say things like, "You're so sweet, but I don't know how I'm going to recognize you in the celestial kingdom, because I just can't visual-

ize you white, but I just don't see that. So you'll recognize me. So you'll have to come find me."

*Mamarine Clark*: There's this huge philosophy of: "When we die, we'll be the same. Everything will be the same." I had a friend who said that all the men will look like Jesus. I don't know what all the women will look like, but all the men will look like Jesus."

*Tamu Smith*: You should've said, "All the women will look like me!"

*Mamarene Clark*: Yes!

*Robert A. Rees*: Toby Pingree put together a Sunstone panel of former African mission presidents to talk about the Church in Africa. I was very touched by one of these men who said, "The Church called me to go to Africa, and I was not spiritually prepared to do that. I did not want to go minister to blacks. I did not see them as people who were equal. And I had to go home and get down on my knees and ask the Lord to forgive me and to change my heart so that I could go to Africa and minister to his children. And I did and it was one of the greatest things of my life."

*Ron Coleman*: I think the Church itself—not just in Utah—has the ability to impact dramatically bringing the people in the state of Utah, the majority of whom are members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—some of them kicking and screaming and not really fully embracing it—but into the twenty-first century in a way which is truly inclusive, and they're not threatened by living in and being part of a multi-cultural world.

*Narrator*: Even as the Mormon Church moves forward as one of the fastest-growing religions in the world, it is still tainted by a reputation for being racist. Retention of African American converts is difficult.

*Marvin Perkins:* Every African American—I didn't say black, I meant African American, because those in Africa aren't dealing with the same situation—but every African American is going to have to deal with that black issue at some point: why blacks couldn't hold the priesthood. Is this a racist church? Is it true? Can the Church be racist and true?

*James Sheppard*: I came to Utah and I decided, Well, I'd better learn about these people. Before I got here, I did hear a lot of rumors about the Mormon Church—some good and some bad, but

mostly bad. And a lot of the rumors I heard was from people that actually had been members of the Church and for some reason or another was no longer members of the Church. That's where I heard most of my bad rumors.

*Paul Gill*: If you go to any black Baptist Church, anywhere in the world, they're going to welcome you with open arms, extend the right hand of fellowship. They're going to make you feel welcome. You're going to get a warm fuzzy. Not so in all the stakes of Zion. You don't get a warm fuzzy. It's pitiful—if this scenario exists, if I'm bringing a black investigator to my ward; and I have to say, "I forewarn you that you can expect this."

*James Sheppard*: I'd walk in there and it was like, "Man, is this church? Is it a funeral or what?" 'Cause everyone's—when they're singing, it's just dead. When they're talking, somebody's up front and everybody's just dead. I was used to church when you clap your hands, you stomp your feet, you say amen to the preacher, the preacher's preaching, and everyone's having a joyous time. I walk in here and I think, Oh man, this is different.

*Keith Hamilton*: It's difficult to remain faithful as a black member because there's not a lot to keep you coming back—and I mean that sincerely. I've often posed the question: If things were reversed and the Lord had come to a religion out of Africa and the true gospel took on African cultural connotations and there were drums and the charismatic preacher—how many Mormons could make that same adjustment if the same doctrines were true? Once people see it from that perspective, they start to understand what the black experience in the Church is about.

*Alan Cherry*: Culture is like a coat. It keeps you warm. It keeps you comfortable. It becomes your friend. You may become enamored of it, but it is not who you are. It is indeed an earthly coat. It is not the heart of who you are that God relates to and talks to. So even the people who may be the most difficult to enjoy—the blatant bigot—was someone I could welcome and embrace, even if he wouldn't embrace me, but I could think, "Your problem is not my problem, but I can understand it as a problem."

## Truth and Reconciliation

*Narrator*: From the time Elijah Abel became the first Mormon missionary of African descent, the stage was set for future mission-

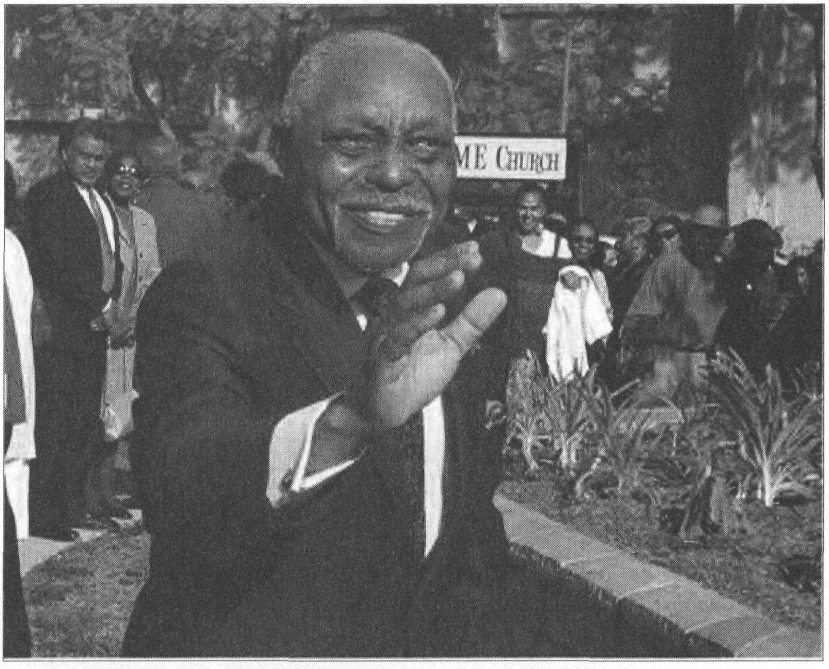
aries—of any lineage. Just as every twelve-year-old Mormon boy is generally ordained to the priesthood, every nineteen-year-old man—and many women—are expected to become missionaries. It is not the privilege of a few, but the duty of the majority.

*Ted Whiters*: I saw young, white missionaries from Utah, from Idaho, and a few from California come into that ward. At that particular time, we had three sets of elders, two sets of sisters. This was an inner-city ward near the airport. People who come to Atlanta to do business, they'll come to that ward. But when I saw these youngsters coming shift after shift, going into neighborhoods that I felt uncomfortable going in, it certified in my mind again: Here's the truthfulness of the gospel—for these young people to take two years out of their lives and put their lives in jeopardy—and some of them were robbed or mugged at gunpoint and at knifepoint, and yet they kept coming. I was blessed. I was retired, I didn't have a job, and I had a good-running automobile, and I put a lot of miles on that automobile with the missionaries. I had some of the best times of my life, going into the ghetto, where the winos hung out, the drunks, the pimps and the prostitutes hung out. Before the missionaries came, I wouldn't have gone. I would have been scared to death. But when I saw them go, I had to go. That entrenched me into the Church; and by the grace of God, nothing can take me out of the Church because of their commitment.

*Armand Mauss*: Whatever lineage—ostensible or real—a certain people might have, if they're accepting of the gospel, then they're with us, and we want missionaries to go there and bring them into the fold. Lineage differences, in the bigger picture, make no difference. If we accept the gospel as the Apostle Paul told us, we all become the children of Abraham, no matter our lineage. That's the gift of the world's people to the LDS Church.

*Narrator*: Mormons believe that God still reveals truth and will yet reveal more. Hence, Mormons believe in the possibility—even the inevitability—of change. This creates a space for growth, and for repentance.

*Ted Whiters*: It would be good if the Church could do something in a repentance sense to say that "Yes, the issue did exist." I think the Church is doing a wonderful job in terms of welcoming people of all races and color and creed. The Church is doing a




*Pastor Cecil ("Chip") Murray, African Methodist Episcopalian Church in Los Angeles.*

wonderful job in Africa and down in the Caribbean. I meet a lot in the Atlanta Temple. I'm sure that the Brethren have it in their mind that they will do something at the appropriate time to propel us forward towards being the kind of Church our Savior would be pleased with.

*Footage of President Hinckley, April 2006*: I remind you that no man who makes disparaging remarks concerning those of another race can consider himself a true disciple of Christ, nor can he consider himself to be in harmony with the teachings of Christ.

How can any man holding the Melchizedek Priesthood arrogantly assume that he is eligible for the priesthood whereas another who lives a righteous life but whose skin is of a different color is ineligible?

*Pastor Cecil Murray*: I was in Salt Lake City, a guest of the Mor-

mon Church. I met the president and all. As we sat around the conference table, he apologized for the role the Church had played in participating in slavery. He says, "I have learned of the background of your church and the founding of your church, and I want to apologize for whatever role the Mormon Church has played–not only there–but has played in racism in America." I said, "I thank you very much for making that statement. It is certainly true that the Mormon Church has been a factor in discrimination, but you've done so much good–and now to hear these words–I would certainly say that your hearts are right."

**Let Us Break Bread Together**

(Photos of Denise Cutliff and Tamu Smith portraying Jane Manning James)

*Narrator*: As the LDS Church moves into a new century, its converts of color pioneer forward, adding their many stories and voices to those of the earlier pioneers.

*Tamu Smith*: When I was eleven, my family joined the Church. We were very strong Pentecostal. I grew up knowing that God existed. I grew up knowing that I had a Savior. Being Pentecostal, you're going to heaven or you're going to hell–period. The whole concept of heaven and hell never set well with me. I knew that there had to be something more. I knew that I didn't want to go to hell, because I knew that hell was hot and eternity was long. I knew that from church. In my prayer, I would say, "Heavenly Father, if you really love me, then why do I have to go to hell?" Because I was bad, and I knew I was going to hell.

The missionaries tracted our family out. My grandmother invited them in. She said, "We don't have to listen to what they're saying, but it's hot outside and they have on those hot suits. Let's invite them in and give them something cold to drink and pretend like we're listening." I don't really know if I paid attention, but I do know that the first time we went to the LDS Church, I felt like the Savior was standing in the doorway. When I walked in–I knew to recognize the Spirit–and it felt like I was at home, where I belonged. I felt the Spirit so clearly that it testified that I was where I needed to be.

*Paul Gill*: I didn't join the Church because of what you said.

You didn't join because of what I said and so on. Each person has to find out for himself, doing the same formula, getting on your knees, asking God.

*Darius Gray*: It's the crux of who I am. It defines what I do, and maybe more importantly, what I don't do. And that's been a key in life, and I'm grateful for that. It's affected everything in my life path. Everything.

*Renee Olsen:* So I attended my own ward twice. One happened to be a testimony Sunday, and it was the week before I got baptized. I gave my testimony and said, "I'm not a member yet, but I will be next week. I'm getting baptized next Sunday. I'm a former Anti. I was certified in Mormonism." Everyone showed up at my baptism. I didn't have a clue who these people were. But all of these people wanted to see the former anti hit the water.

*Keith Hamilton*: I was the one chosen—and I really believe I was chosen—to be in a position where, when the missionaries came, I would accept it so I could bring the blessings to my posterity and to my ancestors. It's real to me. I've had personal experiences where I've had deceased ancestors communicate that to me—that I'm the link and that I have to remain strong during my periods of doubt, because there are people who haven't even come down to earth, and there are people who have come here and left that are dependent on me to continue to be that link, because right now, I'm the only link; and if I fall away--game over!

*Renee Olsen*: I like to think that we were God's chosen people of the latter days. Of all the races on the face of the Earth, He entrusted that honor to us, not to white people. He entrusted that honor of purging His Church to us. Our people were tried, proven. We've come through slavery, whips, masters, beatings, the selling of our children—and we persevered. Taken from our homeland—and we're still here, still strong. Faith in God has always preserved the black race.

*Tamu Smith*: I know who I am; and because I know what the gospel is about, I have a responsibility as a member of this Church to find out what is true for me. People are mean and ignorant, and they say mean and ignorant things. However, because the Spirit testified to me of the truthfulness of the gospel, I could not go and look my Savior in his eyes and say, "I couldn't do it because people were mean. They said mean things."

*Natalie Sheppard*: What we want to instill in our children is a sense of pride in who they are—being a child of God, but being a black child of God in a beautiful garden, where if He had wanted to make everyone the same, He would have done that. But instead, He made us all different for a reason, and part of that reason is so we could teach each other.

*Ted Whiters*: The ward that I joined—probably four or five hundred attendance on Sunday. I'm a former pastor. I pastored in the Baptist Church and then in the AME Church. But I had never felt more at home in this congregation—an extreme minority. It was just one of the most genuine feelings, maybe it was southern hospitality, I don't know. In the book of Revelation, it talks about twelve tribes. It talks twelve thousand from each tribe [Rev. 7:4]. This is after the resurrection. After he talks about the 144,000, he says, "I saw another number that nobody could number. They were all races, all creeds, and all colors."[2] I think the Mormon Church is implementing this.

I think it'll come about in our Church, that all races will be embraced. I think they'll be in all positions from the very top of the Church down to the very lowest—if there is such a thing as a low position in the Church. I think of the words of David in the Psalms. David says, "I had rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God, than to dwell in the tents of wickedness" [Ps. 84:10]. That paints a picture in my mind, that everything in the Church of Jesus Christ is important. When I clean the chandeliers in the temple during cleaning time, that's important work. I feel special. That's the house of my God, and I know the spirit of my Savior is there, so it's a special time.

*Darius Gray to Paul Gill*: If you had the power to do any one thing, to make one change, what would that one change be?

*Paul Gill*: I've thought about this a lot. I admire Paul the apostle and his ability to convince others that the gospel is true. If I could have that ability to speak to someone and have them understand the way I feel and why I feel the way I feel, and have that ability to convince others of the power of Christ, the message he brought—his broad yet simple message—if I had that ability and could change the world in that aspect, I would be a happy camper.

That's all I can say about that. (*Weeping–takes a tissue from his pocket*)

*Darius Gray*: Here, I'll give you a fresh one.

*Paul Gill*: I'm sorry.

*Darius Gray*: And then I'm going to give you a hug. Wipe that face off first. Love you, Brother.

*Paul*: Love you. Thank you.

## Notes

1. B-roll refers to footage or photos which run under the "talking heads" to add interest or dimension.

2. "After this I beheld, and, lo, a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stood before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands" (Rev. 7:9).