

FATHER-DAUGHTER INTERVIEW ON BLACKS AND THE PRIESTHOOD

Interviewees: Egide Nzojibwami and
Verlyne Christensen

Interviewer: Gregory A. Prince

VERLYNE: We saw a documentary a few weeks ago and you were featured in it, with Darius Gray. I don't know when it was done, but it was on Blacks and the priesthood.

GREG: Thank you.

EGIDE: I want to thank you for all the work that you have done to clarify all of the history. That's just amazing, the things we are learning now.

GREG: What I am most interested in is your personal stories of your relationship to Mormonism, but through the eyes and through the souls of people-of-color. And particularly Africans, rather than African Americans, because those are two very different populations and they come at the subject from very different perspectives. So what I want to capture is the African voice.

VERLYNE: Sounds good.

GREG: So just lead off in whatever order you wish.

EGIDE: I should start with my story about joining the Church. Back then, after the 1978 proclamation, the Church started in different parts of Africa. It started in places like Ghana and Nigeria, but in other places it started a little bit later. It was in Europe that most of us Africans, including myself, learned about the Church and joined it. The missionaries knocked on our door in 1984. It took us nine months to get baptized. We were baptized in 1985.

We were then in Belgium, in school [the family had moved from their native country of Burundi to Belgium in 1981 for Egide to attend graduate school; they stayed there until 1988]. After that, we went back to Burundi and took the Church to Burundi. There was no Church there at that time.

GREG: Let me back you up a bit. Talk about your conversion. What was it that converted you?

EGIDE: The conversion experience was an engaging one. My wife Beatrice and I didn't know anything about the Church. We had never heard of it before. It came at a time when we were searching for a church. We belonged to the Catholic Church, but for various reasons we were not satisfied with it. We went to different churches. Verlyne was already born and was a couple of years old, and we took her with us and went every Sunday to a different church. We visited every church that we knew in the area, in Liège, Belgium, but we didn't find anything that would satisfy us. So, we decided just to stay home and take a break.

Two weeks after that, two sister missionaries knocked at the door. Beatrice was there and she opened the door and talked to them. I was not there, so she decided to ask them to come back later when I was at home. That was how it started.

So the sister missionaries came, and they really taught us everything about the Church, everything about Joseph Smith—we had never heard of Joseph Smith before, we had never heard about the Book of Mormon

before. They did a lot of work to introduce us to all those concepts. We hadn't heard anything about modern revelation. I was pretty hard on them. I was a graduate student at that time, so I had a lot of questions. I questioned everything, like Jesus coming to the Americas.

To backtrack a little bit, I had met the missionaries, without recognizing them, about two years before, sometime in 1982. It happened quickly as I was going on a bus and they were coming out, and they gave me a pamphlet. By the time the sister missionaries came in 1984, we had moved two or three times, and yet I never threw away that pamphlet. But it didn't mean anything to me, because I didn't know anything about the Church. But when the missionaries came, I was able to find the pamphlet and read it, and they were able to give me some explanations about it. It's quite interesting that I hadn't thrown it away. I always knew exactly where it was.

We went through probably three sets of missionaries before we got baptized. We had a lot of questions. At one point, the missionaries challenged me to read the Book of Mormon. When I read the Book of Mormon, I could see in it my personal history and the history of our people in Burundi. We had two groups of people fighting each other, and sometimes one group was good and the other bad. I could see the same scenarios, and I could apply that book to myself. All the time I was in discussion with the missionaries, I had never taken the time to read the Book of Mormon, until that time.

When I started to read it, it was hard in the beginning. But then I took about three days off to read it completely, and I was personally converted by the Book of Mormon. I believe that God talks to anybody he chooses to talk to, and that the Book of Mormon, which to me is the same as the Bible, is the story of people who had a special relationship with God.

So that was how I got converted. Then, from there, we got baptized.

By the time we got baptized, we were pretty familiar with the Church. We were already paying tithing. Some people didn't even know that we were not members. We joined the Church in April, 1985.

GREG: At what point did you learn that there had been an exclusionary policy?

EGIDE: Among all those questions that I had, I went to the library. Back then, there was no internet, so I went to the public library to read about the Mormon Church. I read that all the information that was there and from different sources—some from the Church, some from sources against the Church. I realized that Black people were not allowed to have the priesthood until very recently. It was one of my questions, but interestingly, it was not my main issue.

GREG: Verlyne, it's your turn.

VERLYNE: I'll give you a little bit of background about myself and the Church. I was born in Belgium, while my parents were going to school over there. My two younger sisters were also born in Belgium.

My experience as a child and adolescent in the Church is probably different than most, because I experienced the Church on three different continents. My parents joined the Church in Belgium when I was about three years old. When I was six years old, they moved back to Burundi for five years.

So then I experienced the Church in Burundi. I say "the Church" in Burundi in quotation marks, because the Church was us. It was our family—my parents, myself, my two sisters, and later on, my two brothers. There was no actual organization in the country. I remember we used to have sacrament meetings in our home. My parents had a little upstairs area that was private, and we would all gather there as a family. We would

dress up as if we were going to church, and that's where we would take the sacrament, sing a hymn, and have our own little church meeting.

GREG: Were there missionaries there at that time?

VERLYNE: No, there were no missionaries. There was no Church at all in Burundi. We were the first ones to be members of the Church in Burundi. I believe my father had been given permission to administer sacrament to his family from home during the time that we were the only members in Burundi.

Later on, missionaries and General Authorities did come to Burundi to get the Church started. But for a few years it was just the five of us, and then later on six and seven of us, when my brothers were born. By the time my youngest brother was born, the Church had been established in the country. [The Church was officially established in Burundi in November 1992, with Egide Nzojibwami as first branch president.]

When we moved to Burundi, I remember knowing that I belonged to a different church. I knew that we didn't go to the Catholic Church like the rest of my extended family—cousins and grandparents and what-not—so I knew there was something that was different. But that's as far as it went. We did sacrament at home as a family, and we would sing a couple of hymns. That was the extent of my exposure to the Church while in Burundi and during most of my childhood, until I was about eleven years old.

When the Church came to Burundi, I was baptized when I was ten years old. I was actually the first person to be baptized in Burundi. I could have been baptized at eight, but when I was eight, the Church was not yet established. So my parents waited until the Church was established to get me baptized.

Soon after the Church was established, we went back to Belgium for a few years. The Church in Belgium is very small. It's very sparse. It was something that you did on Sunday for two hours, and that was the

extent of my involvement with the Church until we moved to Canada in my mid-teens.

EGIDE: We went back to Belgium because there was a civil war in Burundi, and our family fled at that time. That was in November 1993, just one year after the start of the Church in Burundi.

VERLYNE: My experience with the Church in Canada was very different. [The family moved from Belgium to Canada in 1996.] We came to Calgary, Alberta, which had a much larger Mormon population, compared to other places I had lived. It went from church being something that happened on Sunday mornings, to something that happened on Sunday mornings, some Sunday evenings for firesides, and every weekday morning for seminary, some weekday evenings for activities and the list goes on. It became much more involved than I had ever experienced. That was my experience from my mid-teens onward. It was all consuming. I remember reacting to that by thinking, "Wow!" That was a whole other experience of being Mormon than I had ever experienced up until that point.

GREG: At what point did you become aware that there had been a policy?

VERLYNE: I actually became aware that there was a policy when I was in seminary. We had just immigrated to Canada, in 1996. I was still learning to speak English. I remember sitting in the classroom and it was brought up. I remember it was mentioned in passing during a lesson, and then the topic moved onto something else. I remember just sitting there and thinking, "Did I understand this right? Or, is it just my English? Is it just me, not grasping something here? That can't be true." I remember very vividly leaving the classroom and getting in the car where my father was waiting for me. I asked him, "Do you know about this?" thinking he would say no. But, unfortunately, he said yes.

I remember feeling quite shocked and disappointed that I didn't know about something that was quite important. But again, when you look at my background, I didn't grow up going to Primary, because we didn't have it in Burundi. I didn't grow up going to Sunday School or having youth lessons until we moved to Calgary. I didn't grow up with that built-in instruction, so really my immersion in Church teachings and culture happened when we moved to Canada in my mid-teens. There were a lot of cultural and doctrinal aspects where I thought, "Oh, this is really what Mormons do?"

To give you an example, I remember being a child in Burundi. My mother had a restaurant, and sometimes in the afternoon, right before going back to school—we would come home for lunch—and I would ask for a coffee. I went on to drink coffee for a few days before my parents told me, "No, actually we don't drink coffee." It was not a big deal. They just told me. There were a lot of little things like that I just was not particularly aware of.

So a lot of things that I would hear in lessons were not things I had grown up knowing. A lot of times the lesson would come after the fact. I knew that my parents didn't drink alcohol. That was quite obvious, especially with a lot of family members having a drink. My father always had a Coke or a tonic water. I knew that part, but not the many Church policies and cultural details you end up learning if you grow up in a strong Mormon community.

So, when I learned about the policy, it was upsetting, and quite offsetting. I didn't quite know how to take it. I remember asking my father, "Why would you join such a church? Why would you do that?" That's when I started to do some reading about it and asking questions. It was the beginning of starting to ask myself about this religion, "What is this all about?" and trying to make sense of it.

GREG: Let me take you back just a little bit. Was the off-putting part of it that there had been an exclusionary policy, or was it the explanations that people gave as to why there had been a policy?

VERLYNE: In that moment, when I was talking with my father after seminary, it was the fact that there had been a policy that Black people could not have the priesthood. Later on, as I found out more about it and as I started to hear people talking more about it in lessons and talks, then it was also the explanations and justifications that were voiced to support the policy.

And all these justifications that were always given; they never really sat true for me. I remember hearing them and thinking, “That doesn’t sound right.” I didn’t have the vocabulary for it, I didn’t have the words for it, I didn’t even think that I could say, “This doesn’t sound right.” I would be sitting there as a teenager, and as a young adult later on, and hearing the justifications and feeling like, “I don’t agree with this, but I’ll just set it on the side for now.” That’s all I felt I could do at that moment.

EGIDE: It never sounded right to me, either. When I asked the missionaries, they told me, “Yes, there is a policy that was removed in 1978. Before that, the Blacks could not have the priesthood.” I said, “OK. So why?” The only answer that was available was, “It was given by revelation to the prophet, and it was removed by revelation.” Until recently, that was the only answer that was given.

But that was not my main question. My main question was to find a good church. Here, we found a church that was really family-oriented, that had all the values that we were looking for. We learned a lot of things. In the first few years that we were in the Church, we learned more about covenants and other things than in the twenty-five years that I had been in the Catholic Church.

But the policy itself was always a problem for me. It never had a satisfactory explanation.

GREG: Did you feel fully included in the Church in Belgium?

EGIDE: Always. I always felt included in Belgium. Less than a year after I became a member, I was called to be Elders Quorum president. I was fully engaged there.

It was not the only thing that was wrong with the Church at that time. The problem was that everything that had been said by a prophet would be taken as doctrine. I remember my first time going to church. I was sitting in the class and the teacher was talking about the age of the earth. He was saying that the age of the earth was something like 8,000 years. That was my very first time. I was a graduate student in geology, and I knew better than that. I was working on a project where we had dated a rock at 2.7 billion years, just two weeks earlier. So I raised my hand and asked the teacher, “Well, there is something wrong here.” The teacher said, “Oh, the prophet said that! So you have to take it at face value, because the prophet said it.” I ended up being considered an apostate because I was asking those questions in that class. That was my very first time in a church class. So it was not only the policy on priesthood, but everything that Brigham Young or any other prophet had said, was taken as doctrine.

GREG: How did you deal with that?

EGIDE: Well, I knew that people are not perfect. I never expected anybody to be perfect. I have lots of respect for the prophet, but I was happy recently, when Elder [Dallin] Oaks stated, in an interview, “We don’t consider that the prophet is infallible. We don’t consider that anybody in this church is infallible, including the prophet.” I’m glad that people can recognize that, that anybody can make mistakes.

Before, anything that the prophet would say, even in a casual way, would be taken as doctrine, and people would just repeat it that way, because the prophet had said it.

In the Catholic Church, they say the same thing, that the Pope is infallible when he says something. But I knew that he was not.

VERLYNE: I think that this critical thinking my father is talking about is really important. It's not always welcomed in the LDS organization, but I think critical thinking is absolutely essential. That's what I have always used and relied on. "Is this sitting well with me? Does this make sense to me?" And not just thinking that because a bishop or stake president or apostle or president of the Church has said something, that it should be so. The critical thinking is not applied as much as it should be applied within the organization, mainly, because it has been discouraged. It's an organization that finds its security in conformity, rather than differentiation. And when you do practice critical thinking, sometimes you stand alone.

GREG: I know what you're talking about!

VERLYNE: I do want to go back to one of the explanations that my father gave me when I asked him, "Why would you join a church that did not allow Black people to have the priesthood before?" I remember him saying that his experience in the Catholic Church was not that much different. There was discrimination in the Catholic Church as well. It's difficult to find a religion that does not have some form of exclusion or racism embedded in it, in its history. That does not excuse what Mormonism has done, but I remember thinking, "Well, looks like everybody has excluded the Black race at some point or another." In the research I did, I saw that you don't have to go far back to find out that most of the religions in the world did exclude Black people. So you think, "Well, do I join nothing, because everybody has been exclusive? Do I not join

Mormonism?” You start to pick and choose what is going to serve you best and what is working for you in the present. But if you focus on the past, there has been so much exclusion of Black people, and it would be so easy to say, “I don’t want to belong to anything.”

EGIDE: Being Black in a white church came after the experience of being Black in a white culture.

GREG: In Belgium?

EGIDE: Yes. The first time I went to Belgium was 1977. I was there from 1977 to 1979 for my undergraduate work. It was a time that was really difficult, mostly because of racial profiling. At that time, there were no laws to protect anybody against racism. Trying to find housing was impossible. We would go through the listings, and they would say, “No Arabs, no Blacks, no dogs.” In the end, it was just, “No Blacks.” Everybody else was allowed, but the Black people were always the last to be allowed somewhere. By the time you would find a place to stay, it was something where you didn’t want to stay. You’d spend a day or two before you could find two or three places that would even allow you to visit. Probably half the restaurants wouldn’t let you go in. It was pretty common. So you get a few years of that, and that makes your skin a little bit tough.

By the time we joined the Church, it was 1985, when we came back to Belgium for graduate studies. At that time, the government had passed anti-racist laws, but things were still largely the same.

So going to church was really a great experience, to go into a place where they would say, “Hi,” where they would smile at you, where you would be welcome. We felt really good. We were looking forward to Sundays to go to church. If you would go to the Catholic Church next door, nobody would talk to you because of who you were. But if you would go to the Mormon Church, everybody would be excited to welcome you. It was a great, great experience.

GREG: Is it fair to say that you experienced less racism in the Belgian Mormon Church than in Belgian society in general?

EGIDE: Absolutely.

VERLYNE: I spent my early adolescence in Belgium, going to school. There are good people everywhere, but it was an environment that made your skin quite tough. What I experienced in Belgium, I have never, ever experienced in the twenty-three years we have been in Canada. Someone would call you a name on the street, for being Black. It would happen even within a school environment, and no adult would say anything. I grew up feeling, "You are Black, and people will say things that are insulting." You just kind of learn to deal with it.

Then, you walk into the Mormon Church, and people are welcoming. It is a breath of fresh air.

So our experience as Black people in a white culture, especially the general European white culture, was not always a positive one. But that being said, some of the greatest friends we have, have been from Belgium. I have very positive memories of the classmates I had in grades 7 and 8 in Belgium. It's important to remember that there are good people everywhere. But it's a very tough environment to grow up in as a Black person.

I remember my first day at school here in Calgary, wondering if I would have to relive everything that I went through when I was in Belgium. I remember kids saying hi to me. It seems so simple to say hi to somebody else, but when you've been insulted, and then somebody says hi to you, it feels like you are being treated like gold, when really it's a simple gesture.

On top of that, you go to church, and we were one of the only Black families in the area, in Calgary. So you become a novelty, and people are coming up to say hi to you. People are sometimes even overly nice.

Yes, they do ask some insensitive questions, but you go, “Well, it’s better than being mistreated.” When people ask insensitive questions and are overly nice to you, it can be perceived as a form of racism; but for me, it’s always been hard to call that racism, after the experiences that we had lived in the white European culture.

EGIDE: For sure, compared to the experiences that we had in Belgium, the experiences here in Canada have been much, much better.

GREG: At what point did you get called in Church leadership?

EGIDE: I’ve been a member of the stake presidency—I’m the second counselor—since 2015.

GREG: And prior to that?

EGIDE: Prior to that, I had different callings. I was an ordinance worker, I was stake clerk, I was ward missionary leader, I was in the high priests group leadership. I always had a calling in the Church.

VERLYNE: We might have to double-check that, but, were you the first Black person to serve in a stake presidency in Calgary? I think you might be.

EGIDE: I’m pretty sure in Calgary. That was a shock to me, and to others, too, when I was called.

It was not much different when I was called to be an ordinance worker in the temple. In this area where we live, Blacks are not common in the Church. So they were a little bit surprised at first. But now, they see us all the time, and there is no problem. It was just because they were not used to seeing Black people serving in that capacity. But if you go

in other places, like Toronto, it's completely different. There are more Black people there.

VERLYNE: But overall, the experience of being in the Church has been positive. People have been very welcoming. I would say that, at its worst, maybe someone has made an insensitive or ignorant comment during a lesson, and nobody has stood up to say, "That's not the case." It was especially hard for me to hear that in seminary or institute, and having everyone around me hearing that or participating, and there was no one to stand up and say, "Actually, this is not the way it is." As I became an adult and I was attending classes with other adults, there would be the one or two or three people who would stand up and say, "This is not how it is." But that's been the extent of it, having an insensitive or ignorant comment made. I don't want to minimize that, because it's still happening a lot, and it can be quite harmful to a young teenager, or a young child growing up, hearing those messages. When I was a teenager, there was nobody else speaking up and saying, "This is not OK. This is not right." I hope that people can now be more aware.

EGIDE: Recently, the Church published the Gospel Topics essays, where they addressed the subject of Blacks and the priesthood. That was a great thing, and I think it was long overdue. There were many remnants that were not addressed in the 1978 declaration. For example, you will see in the books that we Black people were linked to Cain and Ham and that's why we have a black skin and that's why we couldn't have the priesthood. You see that in the books of the Church. Or, that we were on the fence during the Great Council. All of that was still there for many years after. Sometimes, I had lessons where I was supposed to teach that, but I always passed it. But it is something for a young person to hear that, like Verlyne said, or anybody for that matter, and it still hits you.

VERLYNE: Yes, especially when you are young. The impact that it has on you is quite great. As an adult, you can separate things. Even as an adolescent, I was able to separate things somewhat, but it is really, really hard sitting in a classroom and hearing people saying that around you, and sometimes even having a whole lesson around that particular topic, and sitting right there in the middle and thinking, “Do they see me? Do they see that I’m Black? Do they know that I’m hearing this?”

EGIDE: They teach that in the lesson as if you were not there, because it’s part of the manual.

GREG: And we have not completely eliminated all of that from our materials. There are still some carry-overs.

EGIDE: There are some carry-overs, such as interracial marriage. President Kimball discouraged that a lot. In many manuals, you still see that. “Interracial marriage should not be encouraged.” For people like us, of the five children we have, all of them are married to white people. They are doing well, and proving the exact opposite. So there are some things that are still there, unfortunately, and the Church has not addressed them. I think most of those have now been taken away, but think about the many people who heard these things for many years, and nobody told them that this is not the case. They [the Church] just wrote one page in the Gospel Topics essay.

GREG: Yes. It’s not enough to state a new policy; you have to deconstruct what was damaging before.

EGIDE: Yes, you have to deconstruct that. You have to tell the people, not once, not twice, but repeatedly that this is not the case anymore. “You cannot say that the Black people are related to Cain or to Ham, or that they were sitting on the fence during the Great Council. You cannot say

that anymore.” But nobody says that. So today, you still find people who use an old manual and say, “OK, this is written here. I’m going to teach that in the lesson.” So those kinds of incidents happen. There is some work that still needs to be done.

VERLYNE: There is a lot of work that needs to be done. There are still patriarchal blessings that have been given to Black people that lack a lineage declaration. So no tribal lineage, which is a big part of the blessing, is given. That needs to be rectified.

The reason why I think some documents have been printed, as of late, is that there has been a push coming from the outside on many issues, not just the racial issue. They include feminist issues, the LGBTQ community—there has been so much push from the outside that it has forced the Church to review some of these documents.

But not enough has been done to try to deconstruct the past, and the past is still very much instructing the present. Something more tangible needs to be done. A page on the internet is not enough to say what has been taught in the past is no longer OK. And it was never OK.

GREG: The only time I am aware of, where racism has been specifically and strongly condemned at a general conference was in 2006, by President Hinckley.

EGIDE: Yes.

GREG: And that was in response to a correspondence with Darius Gray. But it was a one-off, and we haven’t heard it since then. And as you say, you can’t do this once. You have to send the message repeatedly, for years, because it is so deeply engrained in the opposite direction.

VERLYNE: Yes, very much.

EGIDE: The only reference that is really strong enough is the one from President Hinckley.

VERLYNE: I remember that one vividly. And you are right, it stood out.

EGIDE: Recently, Elder Ballard said something, but not as elaborative as President Hinckley. That's the main reference that we have about Church authorities condemning racism in the Church.

But on a personal level, members of the Church have been doing pretty well. The Church has the capacity—when they hear something from the pulpit at general conference, the members are really the best people who, when they are asked to do something, they will do it in the best way they can. I must say that something like the policy that was rescinded in 1978, when we came into the Church only a few years after, you wouldn't have been able to tell that the policy had been in place before. That's just amazing. But what they need to do more is to remove those remnants, like Cain, or Blacks who are still sitting on the fence. All those appendages to explain that policy, the Church needs to strongly say something about them. Otherwise, as we said, the Church has been really good to us when it comes to inclusiveness.

When we were in Africa, for the sake of keeping the members informed so that they could know what happened before—I was the first branch president in Burundi—I told the members about the policy. The members asked a few questions, “So what happened then?” “The policy was stopped in 1978.” “OK. That's it. No further questions.” I realized that everywhere in Africa, you don't see too many questions about that. For me, the main reason is that they didn't live at the time when the policy was applied to them, as opposed to the African Americans who were members of the Church at the time when they were not allowed to have the priesthood. The Church came to us in Africa only after the policy was taken away.

VERLYNE: I have a different understanding, in terms of why people in Africa might not be as shocked by the fact that Black people could not have the priesthood. If I was to go to an orthodox church and I was told that, as a woman, I couldn't participate in certain aspects of the religion, just simply because I am a woman, I'm going to say, "Oh, OK." That's what happens in Mormonism. I might ask a couple of questions about it, and not be OK with it, but go along with it, because that's what I grew up with. I think there is a bit of that playing out. It's hard to find a place in history where Black people have not been excluded or ostracized in some form or another. If you grew up in such an environment or had that experience, you don't accept it, but you do kind of go, "OK, that's what it is." It's a sad way of taking it in, but I think that's how it plays out.

GREG: Even in Africa?

VERLYNE: I would say that there is certainly an element of that even in Africa, especially due to colonization. It's not that people are OK with it; I think it's just that people have been told, at one point or another, that they couldn't have this or that choice because they were Black.

As a woman in the Mormon Church, you are told that you can't have the priesthood. If you go to another church where they don't give the priesthood to women, you're not going to fight it much, because that's what you grew up with. That has been your experience. So there is an element of why should you fight to have something that you never really had from the beginning? It's a very sad way to look at it, but there is some aspect of that. This is how Black people have been treated, and this is how women have been treated. It shouldn't be that way, and people have fought it. We see it with the feminist movement within the Church, as well as the LGBTQ community. Things have been said to be more inclusive. But changes are not coming. I almost want to compare it to how long it took Blacks to get the priesthood. It's taking a long time for these other groups to be heard, and I feel like it's history repeating itself.

I think that the Church needs to start addressing some of these major issues from a place of consideration, compassion and logic.

GREG: What is your relationship to the Church now?

VERLYNE: I no longer participate.

GREG: At what point in your life did you withdraw, and why?

VERLYNE: It's not something that happened at one point in time. I got to a point where I had to ask myself, if I was to operate from a place of integrity, what speaks to me? What is it that I can stand by? And what is it that I cannot stand by? It's a question that I have been asking myself, unconsciously, for many years, since being a teenager; and more consciously since my late 20s and early 30s. I continue to ask myself on a consistent basis. What can I stand by and still maintain my sense of integrity?

I am not un-choosing. I am choosing my path of integrity. I have often said to my parents that they chose, and they chose well based on their experiences. I think that moving from one continent to another continent—three continental moves—and not having the support of family and a culture, and being able to find that in the Mormon Church is something that has been good for my parents and for our family. For them, joining the Church was their differentiation, when everybody else was Catholic. It was their way of standing on their own two feet. It was their way of choosing, and being in a place of integrity.

EGIDE: My stand, in spite of everything we have been talking about, is that the Church has been a good place for us. We have five children—Verlyne is the eldest—and all five children are now married and they have good families. They have good values. As a parent, I think that with everything that happened, with our moving from Burundi to Belgium

to Canada, to a completely foreign environment, the Church has been the place of stability. We didn't have to adapt to a different culture, because the Church itself is the culture that took over and made the link between all those places. Our children are doing well, I would say. So we are blessed, and I am grateful for that.

Having lived the life I have lived—for example, my father was in a place where he was not allowed to go further in school. During the colonial years, my grandparents were forced into the Catholic Church because they had to do that, otherwise their land and cattle would have been taken away. I am personally grateful to live in these times when I can have all the benefits that they didn't have at that time, that I can be part of a church I choose and be fully part of it. I'm just grateful to be able to live in this time, because of them living in a time when all those things were not possible. Sometimes you have to recognize history. You have to recognize the way things were, and there is not too much you can do about it most of the time. You happen to be part of the change, and the change is mostly first for yourself before you can change anybody else. I am mostly grateful for the change that happened in our family because of the Church, despite everything else, all the imperfections.

VERLYNE: It has been good for our family. That is something that cannot be denied. It has been good. My father used to tell me it was huge for him to leave the Catholic Church to join the Mormon Church.

EGIDE: It was not an easy thing to do. We lost many of our friends. They would come over, for five or ten years, and ridicule us, until they finally realized that we were who we were. But they wouldn't take no for an answer for many years. So it's something that we took very seriously. When you talk about integrity, we felt like we were members of this church and we were not going to do it part-ways. When we were in Burundi, we were by ourselves. There were no other members there. We could just have disappeared. But from a place of integrity we said,

“We are Mormons, and we are going to stay Mormons until we can get more support.” That support took four years to get there, and the Church was finally accepted in Burundi and we were part of it. And we have been blessed for that.

VERLYNE: I think that that experience my parents had, in terms of being able to choose their religion, has given them the wisdom and the space for us to have the conversation of where I am at and where my family is at right now in the Church. They have been respectful of the choice. My father always says, “You are a great person, and you are a person with great values. And you are my daughter.” For me to be able to hear that, when I hear that so many people who leave the Church have issues with families and friends, I have been very fortunate to have their understanding. We are working, as a family, where people are differentiating; but we still are able to be a unit. We still are able to have a genuine connection. But that unit is not based on fear or conformity. It is based on—you are who you are, and I am who I am, and I am comfortable with where I am at, and therefore I can support you as the person that you are, even though it is different, and we are going to create space for one another. At this point we are moving forward with that understanding.

EGIDE: So, Verlyne, can I ask you a question?

VERLYNE: Yes.

EGIDE: What aspect of the Church influenced you?

VERLYNE: It’s a good question. The Church became a big influence when I was about fifteen years old, when we moved to Canada. Before that, much the guidance I had received was from my parents. So the values that I learned and the way that I am today, I really attribute a great part of it to my parents and personal experiences than I do to the Church. I

didn't learn to be the person that I am today at fifteen years old. They taught me before that, at a time when we were alone in Burundi, without the Church, or even in Belgium. I saw you living your life of integrity. I saw integrity and resilience.

The Church and my parents taught me much about personal spiritual development, the importance of family and prayer. I don't think that praying belongs to Mormonism. Prayer was an important part of our life when we were growing up. I knew from a very young age that I could converse with a higher being and that's powerful. I have seen and heard my parents' most heartfelt and sincere prayers. Prayer has always been and will always be a powerful part of my life. And singing—I sometimes find myself humming the odd church hymn as I go about the day, and I absolutely love it. This is still evolving. I really do feel like this is still evolving. There is no one answer at one time, and I am still evolving. But it takes a lot of strength to be who you need to be, in an organization that focuses on conformity. It takes a lot of courage to do that, especially when that courage is very quickly demeaned as apostasy, defiance, or cluelessness. It's a process.

EGIDE: OK, thank you.

VERLYNE: You're welcome.

What I just mentioned earlier is very much at the basis of the work I do as a psychologist in my private practice, working with couples and families. And it extends to communities: Can you be you, and can I be me, and can we still create an environment where both people can co-exist in their differences? Although my father and I see things differently, there is space for that difference. I have often been asked, "How can you maintain an organization if everybody is doing their own thing?" There is a fear that if somebody went in one direction and somebody else went in a different direction, that you could not have an organization, you could not have a unit. But I have seen it over and over that the strength

in an organization doesn't come because everybody is being, thinking, and acting the same; it comes because people are able to do their own thing while creating space for the other.

I recently read an article about the late Barbara Bush and how she supported her husband in a lot of the work that he had done in his political career, but there were two issues she disagreed with him on: she supported legal abortion and opposed the sale of assault weapons. She completely disagreed with her husband on those issues, but even though they disagreed, they were still in a genuine and supportive relationship. As long as there is space for both people to express their differences, that's what matters. People often equate disagreement or difference with division but it does not have to be that way. It doesn't need to break the relationship; it actually makes it stronger if both people are able to find space and express themselves.

One last point I would like to add: it has been more difficult for me to be a feminist in the Church than it has been to be a Black person in the Church. My questions around being Black in the Church have had more sympathy than my questions around being a feminist in the Church. I can't even imagine what it would have been like if a Black person had been excommunicated from the Mormon Church for asking to have the priesthood, which is what happened to Kate Kelly. When she asked for women to have the priesthood, she was excommunicated. That was really hard to see. I didn't want to believe it. It's the same feeling I had when I came out of that seminary lesson. "Did I really hear that right? Did she do something else to be excommunicated?" "No, she simply advocated for women to have the priesthood." It was really heartbreaking.

EGIDE: There will always be hard questions in an organization like this, but as far as I know it is a great organization. Is it perfect? People are not perfect. But personally, from the blessings that I have received, I can act based on those so that I can have more blessings. That's what I can do. But there definitely will be questions, and I will not agree with

everything that happens in the Church. I have some doubts and some pains, but we have a prophet of God, and so I stand pretty good with all that. Some people may do some things that are different. Some may have stronger influence than others, but I have lots of respect for the doctrine of the Church.

VERLYNE: If we look at an organization being a circle, there are a lot of people who are trying really, really hard to stay right there, just on the edge. They are working really hard, and I think that requires a lot of courage.

EGIDE: That's what we strive to do, and it's not always easy.

VERLYNE: But there are also people who are standing just on the outside of the circle. We often hear about people who are trying so hard to change things from within, but you can also change things from the outside. If it becomes so painful to be just on the inside, then it's OK to be on the outside and just live that life, especially if it's a life of integrity and a life that makes you happy.

GREG: I think that you both have very compelling stories that need to be out there. I hope they will be read by a lot of members. They are good stories, and they are authentic.

EGIDE: Thank you.

VERLYNE: Thank you.

GREG: I see the whole purpose of the Church as providing a framework for people to act out their faith life. That can take many different forms.