

# HOW THE LDS CHURCH CAN FOLLOW ITS PRESCRIBED STEPS OF REPENTANCE TO REDUCE ITS SYSTEMIC RACISM

Carol Brown

Because some leaders of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have endorsed and promoted racism in their theology, practices, doctrine, curricula, and culture for much of its existence, an organized, multifaceted approach is needed to undo this bigotry. The 1978 reversal of the Church's refusal to allow Black members to receive temple blessings and the 2020 pronouncement by President Russell M. Nelson urging members to "lead out in abandoning attitudes and actions of prejudice" in General Conference has not eliminated systemic racism in the Church.<sup>1</sup> During that same year, the LDS Church distributed a manual with racist teachings to all adult members, refusing to reprint

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1. Russell M. Nelson, "Let God Prevail," *Liahona*, Oct. 2020, 92. President Nelson also joined with Derrick Johnson, NAACP president and CEO; Leon Russell, NAACP chairman of the board; and Reverend Amos C. Brown, chairman emeritus of religious affairs, NAACP in a Joint Statement, which said in part: "We likewise call on government, business, and educational leaders at every level to review processes, laws, and organizational attitudes regarding racism and root them out once and for all. It is past time for every one of us to elevate our conversations above divisive and polarizing rhetoric." See Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, "Locking Arms for Racial Harmony in America: What the NAACP and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints Are Doing Together," Medium, June 8, 2020, [https://medium.com/@Ch\\_JesusChrist/locking-arms-for-racial-harmony-in-america-2f62180abf37](https://medium.com/@Ch_JesusChrist/locking-arms-for-racial-harmony-in-america-2f62180abf37).

the manuals and remove a bigoted statement. The 2020 “Come Follow Me” manual, which LDS members were asked to study with their families each week, included this statement by then apostle and later church prophet Joseph Fielding Smith: “The dark skin was placed upon the Lamanites so that they could be distinguished from the Nephites and to keep the two peoples from mixing. The dark skin was the sign of the curse. The curse was the withdrawal of the Spirit of the Lord.” After the statement was discovered, the manuals were not revised but were mailed to members throughout the Church.<sup>2</sup> Congregational leaders were not required to make a correction or apology over the pulpit, and many members continued to feel justified in their belief that dark skin in the scriptures is—or was—a curse.

Even long after the ban, Church leaders taught forms of racial segregation and separatism. In 1995, then apostle Russell M. Nelson warned BYU students about interethnic and intercultural marriages, stating that “the commandment to love our neighbors without discrimination is certain. But it must not be misunderstood. It applies generally. Selection of a marriage partner, on the other hand, involves specific and not general criteria. After all, one person can only be married to one individual. The probabilities of a successful marriage are known to be much greater if both the husband and wife are united in their religion, language, culture, and ethnic background.”<sup>3</sup>

It is true that the Church has attempted to make some progress on this issue. In 2013, the Church released a Gospel Topics essay on “Race and the Priesthood” that clearly stated that “the Church disavows the theories advanced in the past that black skin is a sign of divine disfavor

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2. Peggy Fletcher Stack, “Error in LDS Printed Manual Could Revive Racial Criticism,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, Jan. 18, 2020, <https://www.sltrib.com/religion/2020/01/18/error-printed-lds-church/>.

3. Russell M. Nelson, “A More Excellent Hope,” *BYU Speeches*, Jan. 8, 1995.

or curse.”<sup>4</sup> This disavowal stopped short of an apology. President Dallin Oaks, then apostle, stated in 2015 that “I know that the history of the church is not to seek apologies or to give them.” He added, “We sometimes look back on issues and say, ‘Maybe that was counterproductive for what we wish to achieve,’ but we look forward and not backward.”<sup>5</sup> This decision not to apologize might be one thing if it was clear that racism had disappeared. But it has not.

In 2021, Brigham Young University released a study that showed its BIPOC students “consistently feel isolated and unsafe, undermining their sense of belonging and interfering in their educational efforts,” explaining that they feel a lot of stress regarding the rise of alt-right movements among some students. Further, they express higher levels of distress than white students when they seek counseling, and they don’t know where to file complaints for racism on campus or where to go for support.<sup>6</sup>

The Church will not change its systemic racism until it acknowledges, apologizes for, and atones for it. Since top leaders claim that they speak to and for God, diety is implicitly blamed for past LDS racist doctrine and practices about the denial of priesthood blessings to Black males, temple blessings to Black families and their ancestors, and excluding Black members from leadership positions in the Church until 1978. In 2015, an extensive research study showed that two-thirds of Latter-day Saints still believe that the priesthood/temple marriage ban

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4. “Race and the Priesthood,” *Gospel Topics Essays*, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics-essays/race-and-the-priesthood>.

5. Al Hartmann, “No Apologies? Really? Members Question Dallin H. Oaks’ Stance,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, Jan. 30, 2015, <https://archive.sltrib.com/article.php?id=2122123&citytype=cmsid>.

6. Shane Reese et. al., *Report and Recommendations of the BYU Committee on Race, Equity, and Belonging*, Brigham Young University, February 2021, 11–12, <https://race.byu.edu/00000177-d543-dfa9-a7ff-d5cfc1dc0000/race-equity-belonging-report-feb-25-2021>.

on members of African descent was “inspired of God and was God’s will for the Church until 1978.”<sup>7</sup> Such historic racism done in God’s name includes blood atonement for interracial marriage; Brigham Young issuing an extermination order against the Timpanogos, which resulted in the Battle at Fort Utah where many Timpanogo men were killed and women and children were taken into slavery;<sup>8</sup> and the removal of Native American children from their homes to live in boarding schools or with LDS families in educational placement programs.<sup>9</sup>

During the past thirty years, other churches have apologized for the sin of racism and offered redress for it. In June 1995, the Southern

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7. See Jana Riess, “Forty Years On, Most US Mormons Still Believe the Racist Priesthood/Temple Ban Was God’s Will,” *Religion News*, June 11, 2018, <https://religionnews.com/2018/06/11/40-years-later-most-mormons-still-believe-the-racist-priesthood-temple-ban-was-gods-will/>.

8. Howard A. Christy, “Open Hand and Mailed Fist: Mormon-Indian Relations in Utah, 1847–1852,” *Utah Historical Quarterly* 46, no. 3 (1978): 221–26, 302. Militia commander Daniel Wells reported to Brigham Young that on Feb. 13, 1850, fifteen or twenty warriors surrendered to the militia unit, who were then killed. Their fifteen to twenty wives and children were taken as prisoners to the Great Salt Lake. Speaking about LDS members who “mingle their seed with the seed of Cain (Black people)” or intermarry, Brigham Young said that “it is one of the greatest blessings to some to kill them.” See “Brigham Young Address to Legislature,” Feb. 5, 1852, folder 17, box 1, Historian’s Office Reports of Speeches, Church History Library, <https://archive.org/details/CR100317B0001F0017>.

9. Apostle Spencer W. Kimball said: “The day of the Lamanites is nigh. For years they have been growing delightful, and they are now becoming white and delightful, as they were promised. In this picture of the twenty Lamanite missionaries, fifteen of the twenty were as light as Anglos; five were darker but equally delightful. The children in the home placement program in Utah are often lighter than their brothers and sisters in the hogans on the reservation.” See Report of the Semi-Annual Conference of the Church of Jesus Christ of -Latter-day Saints, October 1960 (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, semiannual). See also Matthew Garrett, *Making Lamanites: Mormons, Native Americans, and the Indian Student Placement Program, 1947–2000* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2016).

Baptist Convention, with a membership of fifteen million, apologized for “condoning” racism, stating in part: “We apologize to all African Americans for condoning and/or perpetuating individual and systemic racism in our lifetime, and we genuinely repent of racism of which we have been guilty, whether consciously or unconsciously.”<sup>10</sup> In 2000, leaders of the United Methodist Church “apologized to black United Methodists who still face racial prejudice.” Their report explained, “The churchwide mea culpa is the latest apology in an unprecedented season of repentance that has seen Pope John Paul II apologize to Jews for the Holocaust and Christians apologize to Muslims and others for the medieval Crusades.” Bishop William Boyd Grove, the ecumenical officer for the Methodist church’s Council of Bishops said: “Racism has lived like a malignancy in the bone marrow of this church for years. . . . It is high time to say we’re sorry.”<sup>11</sup>

There are more recent examples as well. In 2016, the Presbyterian Church in America voted to repent for its racist actions during the civil rights era, the sin of segregating worshippers by race, barring Black people from membership, and opposing interracial marriages, to name a few. They confessed to failing to “lovingly confront our brothers and sisters concerning racial sins and personal bigotry” and said they would devote the following year to focusing on racism.<sup>12</sup> In 2020, officials of the Church of England apologized for decades of racism and admitted that the church is “still deeply institutionally racist.” The Most Reverend

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10. Timothy C. Morgan, “Southern Baptists: Racist No More? Black Leaders Ask,” *Christianity Today*, Aug. 1, 1995, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1995/august1/5t9053.html>.

11. “Methodists Issue Sweeping Apology for Church’s Racism,” BeliefNet, May 5, 2000, <https://www.beliefnet.com/news/2000/05/methodists-issue-sweeping-apology-for-churchs-racism.aspx>.

12. Sarah Eekhoff Zylstra, “Presbyterian Church in America Apologizes for Old and New Racism,” *Christianity Today*, June 24, 2016, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2016/june/pca-apologizes-for-new-and-old-racism.html>.

Justin Welby, the archbishop of Canterbury, said also he was “ashamed of the history of racism.”<sup>13</sup> The church announced £100 million for an investment program, research and engagement to try to “address past wrongs” and “also appointed its first racial equality director to work alongside the Archbishops’ Commission for Racial Justice to tackle discrimination in its ranks.”<sup>14</sup> In 2022, Pope Francis issued an apology to Indigenous peoples in Canada for the “deplorable” abuses they suffered in Catholic-run residential schools, meeting with an audience of members of the Metis, Inuit, and First Nations communities. He also said he would compensate tribes with eighty million dollars in addition to the billions of dollars that Canada and the churches transferred to the Indigenous communities on behalf of ninety thousand surviving students. “Your identity and culture has been wounded, many families separated, and many children have become victims of this homogenization action, supported by the idea that progress occurs through ideological colonialization, according to ideas studied at the table rather than respecting the lives of the people,” he said.<sup>15</sup>

Some scholars have begun to study the efficacy of institutional apologies. In the *Harvard Business Review*, Maurice Schweitzer, Alison Wood Brookes, and Adam D. Galinsky explain that “in assessing whether or not to apologize, organizational leaders must also focus on the extent to which they are willing—and able—to change the company’s behavior. If they can’t or don’t want to do things differently in the

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13. Caitin O’Kane, “The Church Apologizes for Decades of Racism,” CBS News, Feb. 12, 2020, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/racism-in-church-of-england-officials-apologize-for-decades-of-racism-in-uk-against-windrush-generation/>.

14. Nadine White, “Catholic Church Unveils Black Mary and Jesus Posters in Anti-Racism Drive,” *The Independent*, Feb. 6, 2023, [https://news.yahoo.com/catholic-church-unveils-black-mary-203139630.html?fr=sycsrp\\_catchall](https://news.yahoo.com/catholic-church-unveils-black-mary-203139630.html?fr=sycsrp_catchall).

15. Nicole Winfield, “Pope Makes Historic Indigenous Apology for Canada Abuses,” AP News, Apr. 1, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/pope-francis-europe-religion-vatican-city-08a842346f2dd0ca645571d879d3124a>.

future, the case for making an apology is weak, because it will sound hollow and unconvincing.”<sup>16</sup> This provides a useful template for thinking about what to prioritize.

An LDS apology needs to include not only an acknowledgement that specific teachings and policies were wrong, but also a willingness to implement policies and practices that change the Church’s behavior. Leaders would need to admit that modern-day prophets are fallible just as biblical prophets were, and that some of their past speeches and doctrines were racist. This would include Ezra Taft Benson’s attack on Martin Luther King Jr. and the civil rights movement, Joseph Fielding Smith’s teaching that Black people were fence-sitters in heaven, and Brigham Young’s fiery rhetoric that Black people will be servants for all eternity.

In an interview with Peggy Fletcher Stack, historian Patrick Mason says, “Prophets make not just little mistakes on inconsequential matters; they can be deeply wrong and for a very long time, yet they retain their authority as prophets and apostles.” He continued, “The Bible provides plenty of examples of prophets and other religious heroes who were profoundly flawed (Moses, Abraham, Jacob, Isaac, Jonah, David and Peter, to name a few), but that’s part of the mystery that the Bible wants us to grapple with. So far, Latter-day Saints haven’t leaned into that theology. But embracing a richer scriptural theology of flawed but chosen prophets, God’s fallen people and the ongoing perfection of the body of Christ, both individually and collectively, could help change that.” He continued by saying that it would help Latter-day Saints “be even more moral and ethical, and produce better repenters and apologizers.”<sup>17</sup>

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16. Maurice Schweitzer, Alison Wood Brooks, and Adam D. Galinsky, “The Organizational Apology,” *Harvard Business Review*, Sept. 2015, <https://hbr.org/2015/09/the-organizational-apology>.

17. Peggy Fletcher Stack, “Dallin Oaks Says the Church Doesn’t Apologize, but It Hasn’t Stopped the Question of Whether It Should,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, Mar. 31, 2022.

The Church expects and exhorts its members to practice daily repentance and it should do the same. To atone for its racism, the Church needs to include more people of color in all levels of leadership to speak up for minorities in the Church. No Black woman has served in any general leadership calling until Sister Tracy Y. Browning was called to serve as the second counselor in the General Primary Presidency in 2022.

The Church also needs to create and implement a curriculum that teaches members how to respect, include, and value people of all races, ethnic groups, and minorities groups. Lessons for every age group could help to undo the Church's past messages regarding the superiority of whites, God's preferential treatment of his white children, and the assumption of white privilege that is found in scripture and past prophets' teachings. A review of the "Come Follow Me" lessons shows that nothing about cultural sensitivity or inclusivity is included in the lessons or manuals.<sup>18</sup> The training manual for teachers has no cultural competency training nor does it specify ways teachers can respect and include those who are marginalized. Church leaders, teachers, members, and missionaries also need regular training in cultural sensitivity that focuses on conscious and unconscious bias, recognizing and understanding what racism is, and ways to avoid macroaggressions that make the Church intolerable for too many BIPOC members.

Church leaders must also address the verses in the Book of Mormon and Pearl of Great Price that some use to justify bigotry, including scriptures in the Book of Mormon that teach that dark skin is a curse from God and those in the Pearl of Great Price that state that the seed

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18. The Primary children's "Come Follow Me" lesson about "love one another" includes the question "How can we show love for our family and friends?" but mentions nothing about showing kindness or respect to people of other religions or races. "May 29–June 4, Matthew 26; Mark 14; John 13, 'Come Follow Me,'" *Primary*, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/come-follow-me-for-primary-new-testament-2023/23?lang=eng>.



of Cain was denied the priesthood because of their black skin.<sup>19</sup> These should be corrected with the teachings such as God is “no respecter of persons” (Acts 10:34) and that “[The Lord] denieth none that cometh unto him, black and white, bond and free, male and female; . . . all are alike unto God, both Jew and Gentile” (2 Nephi 26:33). Because leaders teach that the Book of Mormon is the most correct book on earth, some members might assume that the racism found in too many of its pages is ordained by God and that dark skin is a consequence of sin.<sup>20</sup>

Church history lessons should include the fact that “during the first two decades of the Church’s existence, a few Black men were ordained to the priesthood,” including Elijah Abel and Q. Walker Lewis, who Brigham Young described as “one of the best Elders, an African.”<sup>21</sup>

The curriculum writers can also include scriptures that promote ways to become more accepting and respectful of others with differing racial and ethnic backgrounds.<sup>22</sup> Jesus’ conversion of the Samaritan woman, Paul’s revelation that the gospel should be extended to the gentiles as well as the Jews, and the references in 4 Nephi and the Book of

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19. These might include: 2 Nephi 5:21, 23; Alma 3:6; Mormon 5:15; Moses 7:8, 12, 22; Abraham 1:21, 27).

20. *History of the Church*, 4:461, instructions given by Joseph Smith on Nov. 28, 1841, in Nauvoo, Illinois, as reported by Wilford Woodruff. See also Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 194. Joseph Smith said, “I told the brethren that the Booi of Mormon was the most correct of any book on earth, and the keystone of our religion, and a man would get near to God by abiding by its precepts, than by any other book.”

21. “Race and the Priesthood”; Historian’s Office General Church Minutes, Mar. 26, 1847, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, spelling and punctuation modernized.

22. These might include: 2 Nephi 26:27–28, 33, 29:7; Mosiah 4:15, 18:21, 23:7; Mormon 9:13; D&C 38:25; Moses 7:18; Genesis 1:26; 1 Samuel 16:7; Matthew 22: 37–39; John 7: 24, 13: 34–35; 1 Corinthians 12: 12–26; 1 John 2:11, 4:21; Acts 10: 34–35; Romans 2:11, Revelations 7:9

Moses being of one heart and one mind and becoming a Zion people teach powerful principles about inclusivity and compassion.

Darius Gray, a founding member and the former president of Genesis, a group established in October 1971 by the First Presidency of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints that helps serve the needs of African American members, wrote an article, “Healing the Wounds of Racism,” that said in part, “The first step toward healing is the realization that the problem exists. We cannot fix that which we overlook or deny. Our attitudes toward others of a different race or of a different culture should not be considered a minor matter. Viewing them as such only affirms a willingness to stay unchanged.” Gray focused on how individuals can change racist attitudes by acknowledging the problem, recognizing it in ourselves, learning a new approach to look beyond racial differences, and truly listening to those that we consider as “the other.”<sup>23</sup> In a 2014 interview, Gray said, “There are kind, loving people in the church, but there are those who are less kind and those downright hostile to people of color.”<sup>24</sup>

It is clear that there is a strong need for such corrective action in our faith. In a 2022 interview, Gray said that in the past five or so years he has seen a “resurgence of insensitive comments and attitudes the likes of which I have never experienced before. He added that he has heard fellow Black Latter-day Saints across the United States say, “I can’t do this anymore. I don’t feel safe in my home ward [congregation].”<sup>25</sup>

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23. Darius Gray, “Healing the Wounds of Racism,” *Gospel Living*, June 7, 2020, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/inspiration/healing-the-wounds-of-racism?lang=eng>.

24. Tad Walch, “Black LDS Leader Darius Gray Makes, Contributes to Mormon History,” *Deseret News*, June 16, 2014, <https://www.deseret.com/2014/6/16/20543422/black-lds-leader-darius-gray-makes-contributes-to-mormon-history>.

25. Peggy Fletcher Stack, “Racism is ‘Endemic’ in U.S., Utah and LDS Church, Panelists Say,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, June 9, 2022, <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/us/racism-is-endemic-in-u-s-utah-and-lds-church-panelists-say/ar-AAyfWb2>.

Others have noticed a similar trend. At a 2022 Mormon History Conference at Utah State University, Ross Peterson, an emeritus Utah State University history professor who also taught African American history, echoed the others' statements about growing "anger and prejudice." A Latter-day Saint, Peterson would like to see Church leaders "use the pulpit more than every six months [at General Conference]" to talk less about "Old Testament topics" and more about "what they strongly believe the people need to do." Grace Soelberg, a Black woman in the audience at the conference who grew up in Davis County, Utah, said, "It was Mormon kids who bullied me the worst and the most. I would sit in Sunday school with them, and then they would call me the N-word at school."<sup>26</sup>

Several years ago, I was teaching a Primary class where I showed a picture from the manual showing children of differing racial backgrounds to a group of five-year-olds when one of the children, pointing to the fair-skinned children replied, "But God loves those kids the most." The other children agreed. Having no training in anti-racism or inclusion and shocked at the young person's response, I moved on to the next part of the lesson.

This essay is, in part, an attempt to atone for that mistake. The Church missed an opportunity to include in that lesson a statement that all children are precious and beloved to God and that our heavenly parents love each of their children perfectly without regard to their skin tones. Questions could have been included in the lesson, such as "How can we show kindness to others who may look or seem different than us?" "What can we do to be a better friend to others who may not look like you do?" "Jesus said, 'Love one another.' What does that mean to you?"

The Church cannot undo nearly two hundred years of systemic racism without a robust effort to train students, children, teachers, leaders, and members about the signs and symptoms of racism and the

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26. Stack, "Racism is 'Endemic.'"

specific attitudes, words, and actions that must be adopted and enacted to overcome bigotry. The Church could produce short films that focus on loving all of our neighbors regardless of their skin color or differences and encourage members to view the videos in their homes, at Church firesides, and during Sunday classes or youth activities. These films could focus on specific ways children, youth, and adults can listen to, respect, and befriend people of varying races and ethnic groups. They could also teach viewers how to identify and correct words, actions, and images that marginalize others, including people of differing abilities, economic, racial, and ethnic backgrounds.<sup>27</sup> Viewers could also learn how to avoid and diffuse bullying, belittling, and badgering of those who are different and could learn how Christ reached out with love to everyone of differing religions, ethnic groups, and social classes. The Church could also occasionally portray Jesus as an olive-skinned Middle Eastern man, which some scholars believe he was, instead of depicting him with white European features.<sup>28</sup> The Catholic Church has created a portrait of a black Madonna and baby Jesus in an effort to tackle racism.<sup>29</sup>

Overcoming systemic racism will not happen overnight, but will take years of hard work, curriculum development, leadership and teacher training, and general instruction from every level of the Church, including stake and general meeting talks, Sunday lesson manuals,

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27. There are some existing models, including one video entitled “The Good Samaritan: A Bible Story for Children,” Media Library, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/media/video/2016-05-0007-the-good-samaritan?lang=eng>. See also, “Parable of the Good Samaritan,” Media Library, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/media/video/2011-10-0010-parable-of-the-good-samaritan?lang=eng>.

28. See Joan Taylor, “What Did Jesus Really Look Like?,” *BBC News Magazine*, Dec. 24, 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-35120965>.

29. Nadine White, “Catholic Church Unveils Black Mary and Jesus Posters in Anti-Racism Drive,” *The Independent*, Feb. 6, 2023, <https://www.msn.com/en-gb/news/uknews/catholic-church-unveils-black-mary-and-jesus-posters-in-anti-racism-drive/ar-AA17baO0>.

and seminary and institute lessons. As the Church seeks to overcome racism, it needs to include training that helps members identify and overcome prejudice of any kind and teaches them how to better love, respect, and include all in the body of Christ.

We cannot correct nearly two centuries of racism in the Church by ignoring that it existed or by speaking a sentence or two about it. Racism will continue to be a systemic problem in the LDS Church until the Church creates an extensive plan to replace racism with respect, bigotry with benevolence, and unfairness with unity. The Church needs to focus on overcoming racism and prejudice with the same energy it devotes to tithing, temples, and testimonies so that it can become a Zion society filled with kindness, goodness, and the pure love of Christ.

Two years before the march of Washington, Martin Luther King Jr. gave a sermon in which he said, “The church also has the responsibility of getting to the ideational roots of racial prejudice. Racial prejudice is always derived from or based on fears, and suspicions, and misunderstandings that are usually groundless. The church can do a great deal to direct the popular mind at this point and to clear up these misunderstandings and these false ideas. . . . The God that we worship is not merely a self-knowing God, but he is an ever-loving God, working through history for the salvation of man. So with this faith we can move on.”<sup>30</sup>

Let us move on.

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30. Martin Luther King Jr., “The Church on the Frontier of Racial Tension” (address given at the South Baptist Theological Seminary, Apr. 19, 1961), <https://repository.sbts.edu/bitstream/handle/10392/2751/King-ChurchOnFrontier.pdf>.

CAROL BROWN {cbrown4488@gmail.com} graduated magna cum laude with a master’s degree in curriculum and instruction. A mother and grandmother, she has published articles in several periodicals and books. A former teacher and school administrator, she has volunteered extensively in church, civic, educational, and humanitarian organizations. She loves to hike, read, research, play tennis, and travel.