

From Reaction to Proaction?: African-Americans in the History of the Reorganized Church*

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The African-American experience in the history of the Reorganized Church is a compelling story that exposes the human side of the religious movement as it has moved through the generations. The lessons present an enormous challenge for the RLDS Church of today as it moves into the next millennium.

Like all historical accounts, this story represents only a small snapshot in the panoramic human landscape that extends from the far distant past to the present.¹ I am not certain that I could ever give adequate, or even worthy, expression to the African-American experience in the RLDS Church. By my own racial makeup, I simply do not qualify. Therefore, I can only provide an accommodation. I will share the fruits of my research from primary sources in the RLDS Church Library-Archives and those I have received from many members of the church's African-American community. I have enjoyed the distinct privilege of participating in the oral histories of several participants in that experience who have brought us to this moment in time. Hopefully, these interviews will contribute to a clearer understanding of, and appreciation for, what it means to be African-American and RLDS in today's church. Numerous important secondary works have provided me with valuable background information.²

My approach to this topic is based on a series of questions: What stances did the Restored Church take on blacks in early years of the movement? During the early Reorganization years from 1860-1880, what missionary efforts were pursued to provide ministry to the freedman? Were these policies embraced equally in the field and at church headquarters? Did the church rise above social pressures of discrimination or did it accommodate them? Any one of these questions could be the focus of an entire book.

My research strategy is a two-pronged approach. First, I shall provide a historical narrative that is rooted in the events at the foundation of the RLDS Church story and progresses to 1987 and the creation of the Black Ministries Task Force. Second, to deal with the later events, I shall rely on the experiences of others through relating several oral history interviews.

The Restoration Church and the African-American Experience

The long-standing perception that the New England origins of the early Latter Day Saints meant that they opposed slavery needs to be revisited. Traditional views held that Latter Day Saint migrants to Independence in the early 1830s embraced the antislavery cause and thus created an important source of conflict with the pro-slavery gentile residents of Jackson County, Missouri. This statement is patently untrue—the Mormons did not embrace the antislavery cause and, indeed, held no great concerns for people in bondage during this era.

More accurately, the stereotyping on both sides of the conflict, based on the geographic origins of the migrant Latter Day Saint settlers—some of whom probably spoke with New England accents—carried more sway than either group's specific feelings toward slaves. Actually the two opposing camps were not as dramatically different as either believed. Willingness on either side for better communication would have eased considerably the pressure that eventually

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led to the Saints' expulsion.³ I do not argue here that the problem of race would have been completely resolved with open communication between the Saints and the gentiles. Events occurring elsewhere in the nation presented enormous obstacles to the paths of peace and adversely impacted any attempts to ease tensions.⁴

The classification of the Latter Day Saints as "abolitionist" is inconsistent with the writings of William W. Phelps in the July 1833 issue of the Independence, Missouri, *Evening and Morning Star*. The church used the *Star* to communicate with its members on crucial social and theological issues. Editor Phelps called for colonization of blacks to Africa—a position unalterably opposed by the abolitionist movement at the time.⁵

The actions of the historic General Assembly of the church in Kirtland, Ohio, in August 1835 reveal the feelings of the Saints on the slavery issue. Non-interference between owners and their slaves became the church's official stance when the conference approved the following resolution:

We believe it just to preach the gospel to the nations of the earth, and warn the righteous to save themselves from the corruption of the world; but we do not believe it right to interfere with bond-servants, neither preach the gospel to, nor baptize them, contrary to the will and wish of their masters, nor to meddle with, or influence them in the least to be dissatisfied with their situations in this life, thereby jeopardizing the lives of men: such interference we believe to be unlawful and unjust and dangerous to the peace of every government allowing human beings to be held in servitude.⁶

The decision of the Saints gathered at the General Assembly reflected the prevailing view of "non-interference" held by a large segment of white American society in that era.

Abolitionism directly conflicted with a near-paranoid Mormon fear of racial intermixture. Again, reflecting prevailing feelings, Oliver Cowdery wrote an anti-abolitionist statement in the April 1836 *Latter Day Saints Messenger and Advocate*: "And insensible to feeling must be the heart, and low indeed must be the mind, that would consent for a moment, to see his fair daughter, his sister, or perhaps, his bosom companion, in the embrace of a NEGRO!" [Capital letters in the original].⁷

When the Latter Day Saint diaspora took them to Far West, Caldwell County, Missouri, it created great concern among the few Missourians already living there. Quickly Mormon leaders were swamped with questions about who they were and their intentions. Joseph Smith Jr. found it necessary to address the questions in a pivotal 1838 Far West, Missouri, *Elder's Journal* article. In answering twenty frequently asked questions, Smith penned an interesting description of the Latter Day Saint identity. One question asked if the Latter Day Saints were abolitionist. Smith's response clearly stated: "We do not believe in setting the Negroes free."⁸

Some Early Scriptural Foundations

Joseph Smith Jr.'s interpretations in the Bible, Book of Mormon, and Book of Abraham provided the necessary scriptural foundation for the early Mormons' anti-abolitionist views. In his revision of Genesis 9:25-27 (Inspired Version) the Mormon prophet directly linked the curse of Canaan with contemporary slavery in the United States:

And he said, cursed be Canaan. A servent [sic] of servents shall he be unto his brethren.
And he said, blessed be the lord God of Shem; and Canaan shall be his Servent; *And a*

*veil of darkness shall cover him, that he shall be known among all men. God shall enlarge Japheth, & he shall dwell in the tents of Shem. And Canaan shall be his Servent. [Italics added by Joseph Smith to the King James Version in 1830]*⁹

The Book of Mormon became an important medium for the expression of Latter Day Saint racist concepts that emphasized an inherent nonwhite racial inferiority.¹⁰ The association between the skin color and the curse of Cain was popular in a society slowly moving toward confrontation on this issue:

And he had caused the cursing to come upon them, yea, even a sore cursing, because of their iniquity. For behold, they had hardened their hearts against him, that they had become like unto a flint; Wherefore, as they were white, and exceeding fair and delightsome, that they might not be enticing unto my people, the Lord God did cause a skin of blackness to come upon them. And thus saith the Lord God, I will cause that they shall be loathsome unto thy people, save they shall repent of their iniquities. And cursed shall be the seed of him that mixeth with their seed: for they shall be cursed even with the same cursing. And the Lord spake it, and it was done.¹¹

For believers who upheld the "literal" word of God brought forth by their prophet as scripture, the Book of Mormon thus canonized the marginalization of minorities in American society.

Segments of the Book of Abraham also relegated the black man to a position of social inferiority. Writing in 1836, Joseph Jr.'s position on blacks in the priesthood emerged:

Pharaoh, being a righteous man, established his kingdom and judged his people wisely and justly all his days, seeking earnestly to imitate that order established by the fathers in the first generations, in the days of the first patriarchal reign, even in the reign of Adam, and also of Noah, his father, who blessed him with the blessings of the earth, and with the blessings of wisdom, but cursed him as pertaining to the Priesthood. . . notwithstanding the Pharaohs would fain claim it from Noah, through Ham, therefore my father was led away by their idolatry.¹²

Elijah Abel, a free black, joined the church in Kirtland in 1832 and was called to the priesthood office of elder. The record shows this call as the singular exception to Smith's denial of priesthood to blacks.

Although it can be claimed that the Reorganized Church did not canonize the Book of Abraham, like the Utah Latter-day Saint Church did, many within the first generation Reorganized Church embraced the book and quoted directly from it in the *True Latter Day Saints Herald* for at least the first five years of the movement. Only with time and the passing of the "Nauvoo generation" within the Reorganized Church did Joseph Smith III openly declare that the Book of Abraham was historical but not scriptural.

Not until the last years of his life did Joseph Smith Jr. begin to speak out against slavery. Several reasons account for this. The movement of the church to Illinois created an environment free from reprisal not found in Missouri. Because the posse who arrested and tried to extradite Joseph Smith Jr. to Missouri in 1841 claimed to be in search of runaway slaves, it seemed quite natural to associate "the enemy" with slavery. Elijah Abel rode with five other Mormons to liberate the extradited Smith from his captors.¹³ The bastions of slavery in the southern states wrote off Mormonism as a northern-based religion. One southern governor "laughed off"

Mormonism as a “religious Ism” whose “prophets have no honor in our country.”¹⁴ Eventually, Joseph Smith called the missionaries out of the south.¹⁵ Finally, by the 1840s, large numbers of British Mormons arrived in Nauvoo bringing with them an antislavery sentiment since Britain had outlawed slavery for decades.

Still, not even in Illinois, the home state of Abraham Lincoln, the Great Emancipator, did free blacks receive civil rights. In Nauvoo the city charter denied blacks the right to vote, nor could they hold public office or serve within the Nauvoo Legion.¹⁶ Although not considered slaves, black servants (Isaac and Jane Manning, and Cleveland [other name unknown]) worked for Emma and Joseph in the Mansion House.¹⁷

Millennialist Fervor and Its Impact

Abolitionist goals of human liberation were at variance with Mormon pre-millennial views during the New York and Ohio years. Latter Day Saints held the belief that the Second Coming was imminent; thus, they saw no need to rid society of an institution that interfered with their preparation. However, the imminent millennialism, so prevalent in the Kirtland days, began to shift by the 1840s. There emerged a popular belief that social ills such as slavery would have to be eradicated before the return of Christ.

Also, political necessity required Joseph Smith to take a stand on such controversies. His 1844 presidential platform addressed numerous social issues including strong stances against slavery and for penal reform.¹⁸ The political campaign had the potential for moving the church into socially active arenas that had been avoided previously. Smith's assassination prevented further development of Mormon doctrine in these areas.

To summarize the Latter Day Saint approach toward African-Americans in the early Restoration period, several observations can be made. As a whole, those who joined the early church reflected low-middle-class socioeconomic perceptions about the superiority of whites at the expense of marginalized populations in American society. This conclusion is consistent with the studies of Gordon W. Allport who suggested, without referring specifically to Mormons, that “white people in the lower socio-economic levels are, on the average, more bitterly anti-Negro than white people at the higher levels.”¹⁹ Mormons maintained lifestyles consistent with the tendency toward discrimination: farming, or unskilled labor, and lived on farms or in small towns. They were fundamentalist in their religious convictions which placed them among the most anti-black in American society.

Other denominations took the same approach toward the controversial issue of slavery as Mormons. The Methodists, in their 1836 National Convention, adopted a resolution asserting that their members had “no right, wish or intention to interfere with the civil and political relations as it exists between master and slave in the slave-holding states of this Union.”²⁰ Similar resolutions were passed in the Baptist, Presbyterian, and Catholic churches thus avoiding the issue of slavery. “Even the Quakers, who had earlier pushed for the gradual emancipation of slavery, withdrew from active participation in all antislavery movements and condemned abolition in general.”²¹ Several interdenominational organizations avoided involvement as well, including Bible, Home Missionary, and Tract Societies. They simply had no solutions and chose to withdraw from the debate as a no-win situation.²²

Early Latter Day Saints did not stand above the prevailing economic or social attitudes toward racial relations. The slavery issue was associated with bitter, even violent, disagreement

and their attitude was to simply not address the issue directly, at least early on. Like their Protestant contemporaries, Mormons remained aloof and offered nothing to the debate. Even Smith's prophetic statements of universalism such as "the sound must go forth from this place into all the world; and unto the uttermost parts of the earth, the gospel must be preached unto every creature, with signs following them that believe"²³ did not override Mormon fears.

All North American churches wrestled with the issue of slavery. Although some were unified by the issue, most remained greatly divided. At the same time that the church established the priesthood office of seventy in 1835 to preach the gospel of Mormonism, the American Anti-slavery Society created their "seventy" to proclaim the gospel of abolitionism. But it is possible that Mormon Church leaders observed the disruptive impact of the slavery issue in other denominations such as the Methodists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and Baptists.²⁴

Mormon fears of further persecution through association with the liberation of black people overcame any significant efforts to assist those in chains. The need for Mormon accommodation and toleration of slavery thus becomes more understandable. Early Mormons shared the same cultural assumptions held by others in American society during the times and did not stand above the prejudices of others either in their sacred or secular associations. That Parley P. Pratt should write: "In fact one dozen free negroes or mulattoes never have belonged to our Society in any part of the world, from its first organization to this day, 1839"²⁵ is no surprise.

The Period of Fragmentation

During the years after the death of Joseph Smith at Carthage, Illinois, the Mormon movement fragmented. Each splinter group dealt with the slavery/freedman issue in their own way. Charles B. Thompson, a theological fire-eater, blamed virtually all the evils in the world on blacks as the curse of Cain. Brigham Young tolerated slavery to the extent that he received the slave Green Flake as "human tithing" in 1847, when his master, James Flake, died in an accident. Green Flake worked for Young for two years before he received his freedom. This is a very interesting development at a time when slavery was not allowed in United States territories. Sidney Rigdon and Lyman Wight also were quite tolerant of slavery.²⁶ James J. Strang was staunchly abolitionist. The similarity of the Strang approach toward people of color with those in the newly formed Reorganized Church meant that many Strangites would find a natural home among the Josephites.

Reorganization and the Issue of Racism

In the early Reorganization years, the church presidency used a "strategy of silence" in dealing with the issue of racial relations. Although Joseph Smith III perceived discrimination as harmful to the body of the church, he knew that many within the leading quorums and councils of the church held supremacist opinions. Rather than attack the problem openly, Smith took an accommodating approach as reflected in the prophetic statement identified as Section 116 of the Doctrine and Covenants. This document gave a little to both sides of the controversy as it was presented in the Council of Twelve on 3 May 1865. When the debate finished and the vote called for, none would vote either for or against the revelation. Instead, Zenos H. Gurley appealed to the president of the church to seek further light. The next morning, Smith announced:

it is expedient in me that you ordain priests unto me, of every race who receive the teachings of my law. . . . Be not hasty in ordaining men of the Negro race to offices in my church. . . . All are not acceptable unto me as servants, nevertheless I will that all may be saved, but every man in his own order, and there are some who are chosen instruments to

be ministers to their own race.²⁷

That blacks could be ordained seemed a victory for the liberal wing of the Council. But then Smith presented a caution—a warning against haste in ordaining men of color. The prophet's language confused the matter even further when some interpreted "priests" to be taken literally, thus limiting blacks to the Aaronic, or lesser as then interpreted, priesthood. Conservatives argued this point vociferously, though Joseph III tried to explain his word usage to empower blacks to be "ordained according to the New Testament plan."²⁸ Smith's attempt to find a resolution to the issue proved unsuccessful.

With the conclusion of the United States Civil War, the Saints, caught up in the national trend for support of the freedman in the north, followed social trends. In the April 1866 gathering of the Council of Twelve, a resolution passed stating that "the Author of Life and Salvation does not discriminate among His rational creatures on account of Colour neither does the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints."²⁹ Two years later another resolution called for provisions to be "made for preaching the gospel to the negro [sic] race in the revelation of May 4, 1865."³⁰ Also, in the 15 February 1875, *True Latter Day Saints' Herald*, Joseph III strongly condemned elders who were making racial distinctions.³¹

Substantive efforts to move the church toward equality were consistent with the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments recently added to the United States Constitution. Black ministers C. D. G. Taylor and George H. Graves received church appointment in Lamoni, Iowa, but their assignments were *to their own people*. Graves went to Chicago and ministered with William H. Fuller. Their problems began when they started to minister to white people. Neither saw the need to limit their ministry to blacks in the Chicago area. In the summer of 1898, Graves wrote that Fuller "'baited his hook to catch white fish' while he 'baited his hook to catch black bass.'"³² Both came under severe criticism in their ministerial approaches, however. Eventually, both were released from their church assignments because of their preference to minister to whites instead of "to their own people."

As the church moved toward the turn of the century, the pendulum began to swing back toward segregation. In *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 1896, the United States Supreme Court announced the legality of separate but equal conditions in society. The decision made racial isolation of black and white church members not only socially acceptable, but now legally acceptable. As the nation drifted toward segregation, so did the Reorganized Church.

The story of Amy E. Burke Robbins is representative of racial prejudice at the highest levels of church leadership and in certain locations in the church at the local level. In 1913, Amy and her husband, Bert Robbins, moved to Battle Creek, Michigan. When the Battle Creek Saints decided to meet in a member's home, Amy wanted to attend also. When they arrived, the minister in charge introduced them as their brother and sister, but then proceeded to explain that the Robbins' father had been cursed with a black skin and they still carried that curse. As a concession he stated that they were still cousins with white members of the congregation.³³

Two other incidents are quite revealing. The Robbins family's first church reunion at the Indian Lake Campground was marred when Roy M. Young, Battle Creek congregation pastor, approached Amy and expressed the concern of some white campers about Amy's children using the camp swimming beach during recreation period. Young then directed Robbins to another

site. When she surveyed the location, she stated: "It was not a fit place where we could go. My heart sank for it was muddy and full of clammy [sic] weeds."³⁴ The Robbins family did not swim the rest of the reunion.

At the same reunion, Robbins wrote with excitement of her anticipation of seeing Frederick M. Smith and hearing his sermon in person. She considered him "a little lower than an angel; a chosen representative of Christ; a man of God who was to lead us, the people of God, to Zion." Evidently an African-American chauffeured Smith to the camp causing considerable rumors to spread throughout the reunion. Her account of the church service and the prophet's sermon is quite revealing. Robbins stated:

In his opening remarks he [F.M. Smith] wanted to get the people correctly informed about some stories that had gone the rounds about him, and he mentioned several things, and then he said that he supposed they had all heard and wondered about him having a "nigger" chauffeur [sic], and he went on to explain how he came to have this "nigger" working for him. I did not remember anything more that was said in that talk. I don't think in all my life I ever had such a hurt, such a bitter disappointment, my angel, or saint, or prophet had fallen from the pedestal on which I had placed him. My eyes were filled with tears, my face burned with shame and humiliation and I at once felt like an outsider, an outcast with no part in the Zionite scheme because I was what the Prophet would call a "nigger."³⁵

Even considering these injustices and many others, Amy Robbins remained an active member of the Battle Creek congregation until her death on April 24, 1956. Her written accounts tell of the love and appreciation given her by so many other white members of the Battle Creek congregation.³⁶

During his years as prophet-president, neither Fred M. nor the church stood above the pressures of their day, particularly in the marginalization of minorities in American society. Fred M. made few official comments about the issue of segregation. When weighed against the demand for equal treatment of the races, Fred M. placed law, order, and social safety as greater social needs and as necessary preconditions for the establishment of Zion.³⁷

Racial Attitudes during the Second World War and the Postwar Era

World War II seemed to create a concern for the plight of the African-American in the church. The issue surfaced in the *Saints' Herald* throughout 1943 and 1944. Church leaders such as Presiding Patriarch Elbert A. Smith and *Saints' Herald* editor Leonard Lea elevated the issue of racial injustice as worthy of the memberships' concern.

A voice of concern could be heard from church headquarters in Independence, Missouri, but that same voice was conspicuously silent in the missionary literature of the era. For example, Elbert A. Smith authored a significant sixty-two-page booklet titled *Differences that Persist between the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints and the Utah Mormon Church*, and did not mention the different approaches toward blacks.³⁸ Silence on the race issue was a quiet acknowledgement of acts of racial prejudice within the movement.

Decision-makers faced the reality that evangelistic appeals to people of color put off segregationist whites in an American society who had accepted the legitimacy of a separate but equal philosophy. Experiences at Highland Park, Michigan, are representative. Northville

Mission Pastor Harold Osborn baptized the first African-American members in the area. In 1940, five members of the Dean family joined the church and later held worship services in their home when the mission closed. The group was not encouraged to attend, or even informed about, the nearby white Highland Park congregation. The Northville Saints' successful ministry attracted more baptisms that included two more families. But ten years had to pass before the Highland Park congregation leadership would invite the Northville Saints to join them in worship.³⁹

The postwar era coincided with the origins of the modern civil rights movement. Against the odds, Independence native Harry S Truman won the 1948 presidential election in spite of his advocacy of black rights. In the 1948 RLDS Church General Conference, the Chicago District presented a resolution calling for an acknowledgement of segregation in the church. President Israel Smith opposed the resolution stating: "There is nothing of the law of the church which creates or tends to create racial inequality or race discrimination."⁴⁰ Smith feared that legislating such a proposal would be tantamount to an admission and since the church "places no ban or bar against ordaining those of colored races, as witnessed by the fact that many have been ordained and some appointed to labor as missionaries"⁴¹ no admission was warranted. The First Presidency's view prevailed on the conference floor. The General Conference two years later reaffirmed the First Presidency's statement by passing General Conference Resolution (GCR) 976 on 8 April 1950.⁴²

By the mid-1950s, still swaying with the times, the church responded with new initiatives to find accommodation with the existence of racial prejudice within the church. In the *Brown v. Board of Education, Topeka, Kansas, 1954*, Supreme Court decision, separate but equal protection for segregation ended. Two years after the ruling, General Conference Resolution 995, offered from the conference floor, called for breaking down barriers and closer integration throughout the population, that jurisdictions should be formed by administration and not racial discrimination, and that persons of all races should be ordained freely according to their gifts and callings.⁴³

In 1957, President Israel A. Smith took a new approach to the discrimination issue in a *Saints' Herald* editorial claiming that race relations "are political in their nature." Considering the issue political offered new cover as he expressed his "natural hesitation to subject ourselves to criticism for getting into politics."⁴⁴

Ambivalence and the Civil Rights Movement

With the passing of time, the First Presidency moved toward accommodation. In their 1 August 1963, *Saints' Herald* editorial titled, "Our Position on Race and Color," church leaders affirmed the principles of GCR 995 but did not identify discrimination as a problem in the church: "The internal racial problems in our church have been very minor. Integration has been such a natural process that there would be no need to discuss it in these columns were it not for the national attention that has resulted from the tense integration question." In their closing statement, the First Presidency advised against participation in "extremist movements" either for or against segregation.⁴⁵

The year 1963 was pivotal for the civil rights movement in the United States. During this year, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference organized important protest marches in Birmingham, Alabama, and Washington, D.C. *Saints' Herald* assistant editor William D. Russell, wrote about the protest by focusing on Martin Luther King Jr. In his July editorial, "Martin Luther King: Satan or Saint?", Russell rationalized the black protest and strongly supported

efforts of blacks to gain equality in American society. He encouraged the church membership to become involved in the worthy cause and dispelled the charges that King was a communist.⁴⁶ Russell's article met with a fury of protests from the membership. Many did not believe that the *Herald* was the appropriate place for the advocacy of social issues. To ease tensions, the First Presidency stated in the next issue "Our Position on Race and Color" which reiterated GCR 995 but refused to endorse King or to take a strong civil rights stance. Russell had thrust the church journal far ahead of the members where no consensus on civil rights had yet developed.

World Conference in April 1968 met during the week of King's assassination. Delegates passed two resolutions that first praised the life of King and then cautioned the church against extremism. Although no mention was made about discrimination in housing, education, or public transportation, three stakes surrounding church headquarters in Independence issued a statement endorsing fair housing in 1966.⁴⁷ This bold statement followed the political issues of the times as fair housing was an important issue in the "Great Society" of Lyndon B. Johnson. But by this time, turbulent international issues drew away attention from domestic policy initiatives.

Oral History Interviews

There has been a noticeable disparity between the official announcements from church headquarters and actual ministerial practices in the field concerning racial discrimination. Valuable insights emerge from those who experienced, and defended against, such discrimination.

William Taft Blue

The church presence in Pensacola, Florida, in the 1950s was divided between a white congregation and a black mission. Opportunities for blacks to worship in the local congregation were limited and when blacks did attend they sat behind a roped barrier in the sanctuary.⁴⁸ Appointee guest ministry in Pensacola was a special event in the life of the congregation. White congregational leaders typically used this as an opportunity to evangelize among the white community. Church members of color also grew excited about visiting preachers but were told to sit in the hallway because allowing them into the sanctuary during the service would hurt the chances for gaining new white membership.

At priesthood retreats in Mobile, Alabama, during the 1950s, banquets were a highlight of the gatherings. Retreat leaders approached priesthood member William T. Blue and stated: "Brother Blue you wait until the rest of them eat and we'll fix you a table." They did so and Blue and others ate at a table in a remote corner of the small church when everyone else finished.⁴⁹

General church officers, including Presidents Israel A. Smith and W. Wallace Smith, visited the Blues during these times. Outwardly, these visits seemed an important step forward in the church leadership as they modeled "official church policy." The enthusiasm for having the two presidents in black church members' homes diminished when they learned that the leaders accommodated white church members who did not want black church members associating with them.⁵⁰

But some church officials stood against the color barrier during this time. Appointee Warren Chelline, assigned to the Pensacola area, invited William Blue to the pulpit to give an opening prayer in one worship service in the white congregation. This momentous occasion prompted an outcry of protests from whites in the congregation: "Before the echo of my voice

died down they had wrote the headquarters. . . they wanted that young man removed."⁵¹

During the mid-1950s, some RLDS Church reunions were closed to people of color. Only by working at the reunion were African-Americans allowed onto the campgrounds. Since the Blues were employed as cooks at the Brewton, Alabama, reunion they were allowed to attend. But this did not mean that they could participate in all the reunion activities. At Brewton reunion, swimming activities were held at an in-town pool. In the afternoons, the youth were transported by bus. When it came Gwen Blue's turn to climb on the bus, she was turned away. In his oral history account, William Blue remembered the incident: " This brought tears to my eyes. She was all in her bathing suit ready to go to the pool and the youth leader came and told her she couldn't go. And that really broke my heart."⁵² One elder even admitted to his participation in Ku Klux Klan activities. When this was exposed, church officials withdrew the man's priesthood authority.⁵³

Not all Latter Day Saints took the same racist views toward people of color at Brewton. On one occasion, while the Blues were attending the reunion, camp officials learned that white thugs from a nearby town planned on attacking the family in a midnight raid. Unbeknownst to the Blues at that time, church members stood guard outside the Blues' cabin through the night to ensure their safety.⁵⁴ These accounts provide powerful insight into the differing attitudes of whites toward blacks during this era in the life of the RLDS church in the South.

Prosper William Carl

The experiences of Prosper William Carl add another perspective to the history of the African-American experience. While experiences of black leader William Blue were focused in rural areas of the South, Prosper Carl's ministerial experiences were focused in the urban heartland of East St. Louis, Illinois. As a white minister whose efforts sought to break down racial barriers, Carl's story adds significantly to the discussion. The East St. Louis, Illinois, congregation was almost totally white until the early 1970s. Heavy industrial development in the community drove down property values and prompted white flight.

Meanwhile the St. Louis Stake remained almost all white. The church leadership took note and action. Apostle Alan D. Tyree approached Carl who was living in the area and stated: "St. Louis had two thousand members and not a black soul. Not a black member. And he wondered if we couldn't do something about that . . . if we couldn't get the work started among the black people."⁵⁵ That conversation launched a thirty-year career of ministry in the East St. Louis African-American community. Carl tapped the strong demand for church fellowship in the East St. Louis community by using Bible study classes and vacation church school programs. Although the church building was vandalized occasionally, the congregation established collegial relations with the community and succeeded in baptizing large numbers of African-Americans.⁵⁶

Charles Rhinehart

Since the earliest days of the Reorganization, the Chicago, Illinois, area has been a focus of missionary outreach. The ministry of William H. Fuller and George H. Graves at the turn of the century signaled notable successes in reaching into both the black and white communities around Chicago. The recent efforts of Charles Rhinehart and Sylvester Bradshaw represent significant ministries to people of color at the Brainerd, Illinois, congregation neighborhood today.

Since Charles Rhinehart's baptism in 1978, he has been active, particularly at Brainerd. Only rarely has Rhinehart seen any traces of racism in the Chicago District. At one district conference a small white girl did laugh at him after he gave a prayer. But according to Rhinehart, the incident was isolated as the small girl simply did not understand her actions. However, in his oral history Rhinehart did express his regret at the absence of African-Americans in the leading quorums of the church.⁵⁷

Sylvester Bradshaw

Sylvester Bradshaw has ministered in the Chicago area for many years. In the early days in Chicago, Bradshaw recalled having separate services for blacks at the Old Central Chicago congregation. Also, he remembered in 1975 an invitation for the youth of the Chicago District to attend an activity after a Chicago District conference. An elder from Gary, Indiana, invited the youth to his home, but when the African-American youth from Brainerd arrived at the home, they were told that they were not invited.⁵⁸

Decision-making in opening and closing African-American congregations has always been a difficult test for the World Church leadership. The closing of the Meyer Boulevard congregation in Kansas City Stake in the mid-1980s is an example of the struggle between congregational and World Church leaders. In this south Kansas City congregation, attendance and financial reports showed a decline since the early 1980s.⁵⁹

World Church and local leaders called for the development of a program of ministry to find outside community agencies and organizations that might be willing to utilize the building space for offices and programs. If none were found, then another denominational group would be sought to share the building in a cooperative arrangement. If this failed, then a joint ownership arrangement would be sought. Finally, if all these efforts failed, the building and ground would be sold and the membership merged with other congregations in the stake. By 1991, the agreed time limits expired without success.⁶⁰ The decision to close Meyer Boulevard seemed inevitable to some but strongly opposed by others.

Weighed against the realities of a declining membership and income, some found the needed church presence in the Meyer-Prospect neighborhood of Kansas City far more important than dollars and cents. They pursued this argument with church leaders but their passionate pleas met with rejection.⁶¹ The decision to sell the Meyer Boulevard building stood, and an important opportunity to minister in the Kansas City African-American community was lost, at least until recently.

Conclusion

In conclusion, four important observations can be made about the early Saints' dealings with people of color. First, the early Latter Day Saints found the slavery issue to be outside their immediate millennialist aspirations, and they offered nothing to the debate. Second, scriptural foundations supported an acknowledgement of popular attitudes of inferiority toward blacks as having inherited the curse of God's wrath. Third, following the lead of other denominations, the early Saints simply chose not to engage in abolitionist activities. Fourth, antislavery statements by Joseph Smith Jr. late in his life reflected political and social expedience and remained inconsequential.

In the early Reorganization, Joseph Smith III's "strategy of silence" on the race issue

accommodated the divided opinions of those who surrounded him and certainly the attitudes within the church membership. Progressing through the first half of the twentieth century, the church swayed with the moods of American society on the issue of racial discrimination. Not until the 1960s did more aggressive stances against discrimination emerge, but the disparity between laudable church goals and actual practices of local congregations revealed a huge disconnect. World Conference resolutions were not observed in many North American congregations resulting in the discriminatory practices that promoted the marginalization of people of color. To summarize, through the generations, neither the church leadership nor membership stood above the prevailing socio-economic climate toward the issue of slavery and racial discrimination.

Today, membership registration practices make it impossible to determine accurate statistics on the number of African-Americans in the North American or World Church. This masks a determination of either success or failure of the church to address the problems of outreach into the African-American community. Leading quorums of the church continue to explore the needs of minority communities and to discover the important contributions that the African-American community can offer the World Church. The Black Ministries Task Force, created in 1987, and now called the African-American Ministries Task Force, identifies resources for leadership, advocates needed ministries, explores theological relevancy of the Restoration gospel to black culture, expands membership to people of color, and preserves RLDS African-American history and culture.⁶² But it remains to be seen if the RLDS Church in general will move away from its reaction to social trends and toward proactive racial harmony as it moves into the new millennium.

Notes

1. I would like to thank William Taft Blue, Gwendolyn Blue Hawks, Pastor Charles Rhinehart, Sylvester Bradshaw, Prosper W. Carl, Derrick Williams, Richard Hawks, Lynn Stubblefield, Larry McGuire, Steve Veazey, Cathi Cackler-Veazey, and the other members of the African-American Ministries Advisory Council for access to their personal papers and personal remembrances. Their challenge for me to prepare this paper has allowed me to join them in their journey across the well-traveled cultural frontier of the World Church experience in minority ministries. Also, I want to extend special appreciation to my colleagues on the Church Heritage Team—Ronald Romig, Bob Gunderson, Barbara Bernauer, Leonard Garlick, and especially Terrie Buckmaster, who responded so well to the pressures of transcribing the oral histories. Our team quickly recognized the historical significance of this seminar. Team members have contributed an extraordinary amount of time, both personally and professionally, to the preparation of this paper. Without their valuable advice and their collegiality, this presentation would have been impossible. Thanks also goes to Pam Robison for her editorial recommendations. Any mistakes found in this presentation, either of commission or omission, are solely my own.
2. Representative influential secondary resources include Roger D. Launius, *Invisible Saints: A History of Black Americans in the Reorganized Church* (Independence, Missouri: Herald Publishing House, 1988); Newell G. Bringhurst, *Saints, Slaves, and Blacks: The Changing Place of Black People Within Mormonism* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1981); and William D. Russell, "Priestly Role for a Prophetic Church: The RLDS Church and Black Americans," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 12 (Summer 1979): 37-49.
3. Census statistics for 1830 show that 5,071 lived in Jackson County, Missouri. Only 360 were slaves or approximately 7 percent of the county population. Of the 25,091 slaves in Missouri in 1830, less than 2 percent lived in Jackson County. No free blacks lived in Jackson County in 1830. Although it is true that Jackson County was "lily white" and proslavery, it is also true that few Jackson Countians actually owned slaves at the time the Saints lived there. An excellent population analysis of this region at the time of the Latter Day Saint migration is Michael Fellman, *Inside War: The Guerrilla Conflict in Missouri during the American Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).
4. Slave rebellions occurring in 1822 and 1831 suggested the possibility of a slave revolt was ever present. For an excellent discussion of Denmark Vesey's Rebellion and the Southampton County, Virginia, slave rebellion of

- Nat Turner, see Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South* (New York: Vintage Books, 1956) and John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans*, Third Edition, (New York: Vintage Books, 1967).
5. Two years earlier the abolitionist movement led by its most popular leaders, William Lloyd Garrison, Gerrit Smith, Arthur Tappan, and James G. Birney, had strongly denounced colonization efforts. After its first decade of great successes, that included the establishment of a colony of transported slaves to Monrovia, Liberia (named after President James Monroe), the American Colonization Society limped toward mid-century without great impact on the slavery debate. For further information on this, see Franklin, 237-41.
 6. "General Assembly," *Latter Day Saint Messenger and Advocate*, 1 (August 1835): 164. These statements from a crucial general conference represent what would be tantamount to an epitome of beliefs in the relationship between governments and laws for the early church. The language leaves no doubt about the mind and will of the delegates in the conference, as each paragraph in this section of President Cowdery's written text begins with "We believe. . ." The section immediately following this lengthy statement is titled "Faith of the Church," a statement on theological issues. There is no doubt in this historian's mind as to the authoritative nature of both statements.
 7. *Latter Day Saint Messenger and Advocate*, 2 (April 1836): 300.
 8. Joseph Smith, jr. [sic], ed., *Elder's Journal*, (July 1838): 42-44.
 9. The best statement on the scriptural foundations supporting Smith's statement of non-interference with the institution of slavery can be found in Richard P. Howard, *Restoration Scriptures: A Study of their Textual Development* (Independence, Missouri: Herald Publishing House, 1995), 200-4. The information here directly reflects Howard's scholarly work in this arena.
 10. Newell G. Bringhurst, *Saints, Slaves, and Blacks: The Changing Place of Black People Within Mormonism* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1981), 10.
 11. Book of Mormon, II Nephi 4:33-38. All Book of Mormon references in RLDS version.
 12. Abraham 1:26-27.
 13. Four years later this capable minister was ordained to the office of seventy. About the same time as his ordination to the office of seventy, Abel received his patriarchal blessing from then Presiding Patriarch Joseph Smith Sr. In these years it was a common practice for a recipient to receive knowledge of his biblical lineage (i.e., Manasseh, Joseph, Ephraim). Joseph Smith Sr. pronounced that Abel's lineage was that of "orphan." By 1840, Abel was in such close confidence with the Smith family that the black priesthood member stood at the side of Joseph Sr.'s deathbed with other members of the family. Bringhurst, 88.
 14. Bringhurst, 60, note 47.
 15. Lyman Wight's journey into Texas, late in Smith's life, was more an exploration of future settlement than a common missionary foray.
 16. Roger D. Launius, *Invisible Saints: A History of Black Americans in the Reorganized Church* (Independence, Missouri: Herald Publishing House, 1988), 59.
 17. On Thursday, 8 February 1844, Mayor Joseph Smith Jr. held court and fined two black men for attempting to marry a white woman. One man paid \$25 and the other paid \$5. Joseph Smith Jr., *History of the Church*, vol. 6 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1965), 210.
 18. For a discussion of Joseph Smith's political campaign, see Richard D. Poll, "Joseph Smith and the Presidency, 1844," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 3 (Autumn 1968): 17-21. Also see Mark A. Scherer, "Joseph Smith, Jr.: Presidential Candidate," *Saints' Herald* (June 1977): 338-40ff.
 19. Gordon W. Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1964), 211, as quoted in Bringhurst, 215.
 20. Donald G. Mathews, *Slavery and Methodism* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1965), 142, as quoted in Bringhurst, 21.
 21. Thomas E. Drake, *Quakers and Slavery in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950), 132-33, 144-45, as quoted in Bringhurst, 21.
 22. An excellent study of the Mennonite approach, quite similar to the Mormon one, is found in Jody Miller Shearer, *Enter the River: Healing Steps from White Privilege toward Racial Reconciliation* (Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1994), 124-26.
 23. Doctrine and Covenants 58:15d. Also see Sections 16:5b, 68:1f, 79:1b, 83:10a, and 105:11b. All Doctrine and Covenants references in RLDS version.
 24. A dated but useful discussion of this issue can be found in Alice Felt Tyler, *Freedom's Ferment: Phases of American Social History from the Colonial Period to the Outbreak of the Civil War* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1962), 519-20.
 25. Parley P. Pratt, *Late Persecutions of the Church of Latter Day Saints* (New York: J.W. Harrison Printers, 1840), 28, Vault Collection. RLDS Library-Archives, Independence, Missouri. In this historic book, Pratt

- emotionally challenged those who claimed that Missouri Mormons were luring blacks into the state during W.W. Phelps's "Free People of Color" editorial in the July 1833 *Evening and Morning Star*. Pratt also wrote: "The statement concerning our invitation to them [free blacks and mulattoes] to become Mormons, and remove to this state, and settle among us, is a wicked fabrication. . . .", p. 28.
26. Launius, 101-5.
 27. Doctrine and Covenants 116:1, 4.
 28. Joseph Smith III, *Joseph Smith III and the Restoration*, Mary Audentia Smith Anderson, editor, (Independence, MO: Herald Publishing House, 1952), 607.
 29. Council of Twelve Minutes, 3 April 1866, 22. Vault Collection. RLDS Library-Archives, Independence, Missouri.
 30. *History of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints*, vol. 3 (Independence, Missouri: Herald Publishing House, 1951), 495.
 31. "All One in Christ," *True Latter Day Saints' Herald*, 22 (15 February 1875): 112.
 32. F. Henry Edwards, *History of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints*, vol. 5 (Independence, Missouri: Herald Publishing House, 1969), 507. The best monograph on George H. Graves is Roger D. Launius, "George H. Graves: First Black Missionary," *Saints' Heritage: A Journal of the Restoration Trail Foundation*, (Independence, MO: Restoration Trail Foundation, 1988), 11-31.
 33. Amy E. Robbins, "My Experience as a Negro in the Battle Creek Branch of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints," Miscellaneous Collection, P101, f88, p. 3-4. RLDS Library-Archives, Independence, Missouri.
 34. Robbins, 2.
 35. Robbins, 4.
 36. Robbins, 4.
 37. See Larry E. Hunt, *F. M. Smith: Saint as Reformer*, two volumes (Independence, Missouri: Herald Publishing House, 1982), 2:436-38.
 38. William D. Russell, "A Priestly Role for a Prophetic Church: The RLDS Church and Black Americans," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, 12 (Summer 1979): 43. Russell's conclusion that the omission "suggests a lack of interest in the issue by the RLDS Church during that period" seems inaccurate. Church leaders determined that the best approach was to conveniently ignore the issue.
 39. Lynn Stubblefield to Mark A. Scherer, "Black History," electronic mail message, 9 January 2000. Through the years, Highland Park has become predominantly African-American. Most of the original black families remain active participants in the life of the congregation.
 40. *Saints' Herald Conference Daily Bulletin, 1948*, RLDS Library-Archives, Independence, Missouri, 105.
 41. Ibid.
 42. "Racial Equality," General Conference Resolution (GCR) 976, *Rules and Resolutions* (Independence, Missouri: Herald House 1980), 126-27. Hereinafter all Conference Resolutions taken from this source.
 43. "Racial Integration," GCR 995, 137-38.
 44. Israel A. Smith, "Race Relations," *Saints' Herald*, 104 (8 July 1957): 636.
 45. "Our Position on Race and Color," *Saints' Herald*, 110 (1 August 1963): 506.
 46. William D. Russell, "Martin Luther King: Satan or Saint?" *Saints' Herald*, vol. 110 (15 July 1963): 434.
 47. "Stake Presidents Endorse Fair Housing Objectives," *Saints' Herald*, 113 (15 March 1996): 211.
 48. William T. Blue, Oral History, interviewed by Mark A. Scherer, Kansas City, Missouri, 28 October 1999, RLDS Library-Archives, Independence, Missouri, 29.
 49. Ibid.
 50. Ibid., 31.
 51. Ibid.
 52. Ibid., 32.
 53. Ibid., 56.
 54. Ibid., 39.
 55. Prosper W. Carl, Oral History, interviewed by Mark A. Scherer, Independence, Missouri, 6 October 1999, RLDS Library-Archives, Independence, Missouri, 6.
 56. Ibid., 9. Between 1972 and 1975, Carl and his colleagues baptized seventy-eight people of color in one of the toughest neighborhoods in the St. Louis area.
 57. Charles Rhinehart, Oral History, interviewed by Mark A. Scherer, Brainerd, Illinois, 18 November 1999, in the RLDS Library-Archives, Independence, Missouri, 11.
 58. Sylvester Bradshaw, Oral History, interviewed by Mark A. Scherer, Chicago, Illinois, 19 November 1999, in the RLDS Library-Archives, Independence, Missouri, 15.
 59. On Wednesday evening, 3 October 1990, members of the Meyer Boulevard congregation met with Kansas

City leaders to discuss the congregation's future. The current attendance was averaging twenty-five with a monthly income of \$220. Expenses averaged \$1,250 per month with an indebtedness to the stake of approximately \$30,000. The average attendance numbers had dropped to fifteen and monthly income to \$200 while the indebtedness to the stake increased to \$38,000. Meyer Boulevard Congregation History, Jurisdictional History Files, Stake Conference Bulletin, 28 June 1991, 34-35. RLDS Library-Archives, Independence, Missouri.

60. Meyer Boulevard Congregation History, Jurisdictional History Files, Stake Conference Bulletin, 28 June 1991, 34-35. RLDS Library-Archives, Independence, Missouri.
61. Blue Oral History Interview, 51.
62. Richard Hawks to Black Ministries Task Force, 1 September 1988, Council of Twelve Office file; Lynn Stubblefield, "Black Ministries Task Force History," an undated African-American Ministry and Mission Center draft paper, in possession of the author.