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The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints will commemorate in June 2018 the fortieth anniversary of the coming forth of Official Declaration 2. This anniversary is an opportunity to reflect on the legacy of the priesthood ban and the 1978 revelation. The revelation came through the prophet of the Lord, Spencer W. Kimball, and has had critics and supporters. As a convert to the Church and especially as a black African convert, I have experienced a long journey but a worthwhile one. This essay will focus on this personal journey and how I came to understand the background history of the ban and the impact of this revelation for the Church, especially for those of African descent, and how the revelation has increased my belief in modern-day prophets.

My Early Life in KwaMashu, South Africa

I was born under the dark cloud of apartheid hanging over South Africa.[1] It was 1964, when political leaders including Nelson Mandela had been

1. Apartheid was a political, economic, and social system in South Africa during the years when the country was under the white minority rule from 1948 to 1994. Racial discrimination has been a part of how some human beings treat others, but within the South African context it took a different form in 1948, mainly because it was strict and more systematic. South Africans were divided by their race (blacks, coloureds [mixed race], Indians, and whites), and these various races were forced to live apart from each other. Laws were put in place to make sure that this happened. The system of apartheid in South Africa was banned in 1994.

sentenced to life imprisonment for planning to overthrow the apartheid regime. Apartheid laws were being introduced that were meant to suppress black people and make them pariahs in the country of their birth.

My mother did not know that she was pregnant with twins. The birth of twins shocked everyone, and there was no celebration. Two days after coming to this earth, my brother was killed. According to an African tradition, giving birth to twins is not normal and is considered a curse. The one who comes second is removed. I bet it was a difficult situation for my mother, but according to tradition it had to be done.

I was very weak from birth. I was in and out of hospital often. Witnessing the state of my health, my mother nicknamed me "Khehla," which means "an old man." This was the name I grew up with amongst my siblings and friends, even though my formal name is Khumbulani. I remember my mother reminding me when I entered school that my school name is Khumbulani. As I grew older, my dad completely dropped the name Khehla and called me Khumbulani. Later, as I was preparing to register for my first school external examination, the teacher minding the register refused to register me because I did not have a Christian name, as required by the apartheid regime. With quick thinking, I told him to add Desmond as my middle (and Christian) name. I returned home from school and told my parents what had happened. My dad congratulated me on choosing this name and added that it was a good one because it belonged to one of our great leaders, Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

My first twenty years of life were spent in the township of KwaMashu, which lies fifteen kilometres northwest of the city of Durban in South Africa. I had three older brothers who all died in their forties from HIV-related diseases. I also have three younger sisters, who all still live in KwaMashu.

Neither of my parents attended school. As a result, Dad did manual labour his entire working life. Daily he left home at 5 a.m. and returned at 6 p.m. On days when Mom found employment, she mostly worked as a domestic servant. In our home, food was scarce and precious. I remember that we ate bread for breakfast and lunch daily. Butter or jam or anything like that was made available only on some weekends or special days like Christmas. My oldest brother was the chief bread cutter. When it was time to eat, we would all stand around the table and watch with a critical eye as he cut the bread to make sure that the pieces were the same size. If there was any deviation, screams and shouts could be heard a kilometre away.

Sugar was a rare commodity and a luxury in our home. We put sugar in the water and drank it with bread or poured it on the leftover

Khumbulani as a teen in KwaMashu, circa 1980. Courtesy Khumbulani Mdletshe.

corn meal. I remember clearly that on Fridays we waited to do cooking until Dad returned from work because that was the day he was paid. Our meals were simple. It was in these conditions that Dad emphasised the importance of education. He told us that he was prepared to provide us with enough education to ensure us better jobs than he had. He wanted his sons to be clerks, and his daughters to be teachers or nurses. These were the only professions available to blacks in those days. He reminded us daily that education was the great equalizer. He was very angry when my older brothers dropped out of school. My sisters and I kept Dad's dream alive.

My parents never attended a church. The first real introduction I had to any religion was when I was in first grade. Every school assembly included a prayer. As bad as apartheid was, one good thing it did was ensure that religious education was fully implemented in all schools, hence my introduction that year. Despite inferior education for blacks under apartheid, fear of God was emphasised. When I was about eight years old, my brother and I started to visit a local African church. It was a one-man show, but we enjoyed singing, clapping hands, and beating drums. One core tenet was the belief in visions (the ability to see things before and after they happen). At the age of thirteen, I stopped going to that church. One reason for leaving was that one of their pastors had prophesied that the Mdletshe brothers stole a pair of shoes that belonged to one of the congregants. Yes, we were poor and at times we were without shoes. However, it made no sense for two young teens to steal an older woman's shoes. We were put in a circle and beaten in order to cast out the evil spirit that led us to steal the shoes. That was the last time I set my foot in that church. What I did not know when I left was that this departure would prepare me to meet the LDS missionaries. When I first met the missionaries, I wasn't really looking for religion, though I was drawn to God. I prayed often, and I tried hard to do what I understood to be right before God.

Conversion: A New Church and New Opinions of White People

In the hot summer of 1980, my friends and I were enjoying a game of soccer on the street as usual when an orange-brown Mazda 323 pulled up. Inside were two Caucasian men wearing white shirts and ties. We were about to take off running, assuming they were from the Special Branch[2] of the South African police. This branch was notorious for using violence to break up any gathering of black people. At that time, the relationship between blacks and whites was one of mistrust and hate, brought about by apartheid policies. Influx control[3] and group areas acts[4] were fully in

2. The Special Branch, also known as the Security Branch, of the South African police "had a high profile and operated with cold-blooded efficiency. In the 1960s, after the Soweto massacre, Minister of Justice B. J. Vorster granted the Security Branch wide powers to track down, detain and torture suspected activists and opponents of apartheid. Police spies infiltrated underground organizations (such as the ANC [African National Congress] and PAC [Pan Africanist Congress of Azania] that had been banned, as well as the re-formed SACP [South African Communist Party]). For the decades from 1960 to the mid-1980s, many political activists were detained without trial and subjected to strong-arm questioning. Many, notably Steve Biko in 1977, died while in police custody. Others were abducted and assassinated, or simply disappeared without trace. Spying activity also provided the Security Branch with useful information." Padraig O'Malley, "Security Branch," *O'Malley: The Heart of Hope,* https://www.nelsonmandela.org/omalley/index.php/site/q/03lv03445/04lv03446/05lv03497.htm.

3. In South Africa during the apartheid era, influx control was practiced. This consisted of a rigid limitation and control imposed upon black people, limiting their movement into urban areas. "First introduced by [Jan Smut's government], the *Native (Black) Urban Areas Act No 21 of 1923* imposed a system of segregation which allowed black Africans access to towns only to serve white labour needs. Domestic workers were allowed to live in town [but only in the back rooms or servant quarters], while the rest of the black labour force would be restricted to finding housing in townships on the outskirts." Mario Scerri, "Provincial Systems of Innovation and Globalization in South Africa," in *Local Economies and Global Competitiveness*, ed. Bruno Dallago and Chiara Guglielmetti (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 81.

4. As noted, apartheid stressed racial separation. This was done primarily to foster a belief of white superiority. "On 27 April 1950, the Apartheid government passed the Group Areas Act. This Act enforced the segregation of different races to specific areas within the urban locale. It also restricted ownership and the occupation of land to a specific statutory group. This meant that Blacks could not own or occupy land in White areas." "The South African Government Passes the Group Areas Act," March 16, 2011, *South African History Online,* http://www.sahistory.org.za/dated-event/south-african-government-passes-group-areas-act.

place and served to increase the distrust and animosity which existed between the races. These policies ensured minimum contact between different racial groups. When I was young, the only white people I saw in my community were policemen, soldiers, and work supervisors. So when the two white men got out of their car and called to us to stop, we obeyed. The tone of the voices we heard from the two men that day was different from any we had previously heard from white men. They introduced themselves as missionaries from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and politely asked if they could join in our game of soccer. We soon learned that they were lousy at soccer, and, frankly, we enjoyed easily dribbling past these white men. At least that was one thing we could defeat them at. In those days, it was generally assumed that blacks were better than whites when it came to soccer. Of course, that was a lie perpetuated by the apartheid government in their goal to keep people divided according to race. Soccer was for black people, rugby for white people who spoke Afrikaans, and cricket for English-speaking whites.

At the end of our soccer match, the two white men told us they had a message to share about Jesus Christ. Reluctantly, we agreed to listen. I remember one of my friends trying to discourage the rest of the group from talking with the missionaries, reminding us that "when these white people came to our ancestors, they introduced a Bible; and while holding the Bible, they took our land. Now, their children have come here to take what little we have." (He said this in isiZulu to prevent the missionaries from understanding what he was saying.) That comment from my friend demonstrated the kind of politically charged environment that we were living in and that the first LDS missionaries coming to the townships faced. In those days, the black youth were at the forefront in the battle for freedom.[5] Four years earlier, in 1976, many black youth had taken centre stage in the fight against apartheid as they

5. Townships are residential areas which were reserved for blacks. Blacks were permitted to live in urban areas, but they could not reside in the same neighbourhoods with whites. Whites needed labour from blacks, hence townships were built to make sure labour provided by blacks was available. Each city in South Africa is surrounded by a number of these townships. They were poorly resourced in terms of the availability of such things as clean water, electricity, road systems, schools, and clinics. Since the end of apartheid in 1994, a number of improvements have been made, but it will take a lifetime to make them as good as former white suburbs.

Khumbulani *(centre front)* with his seminary class in KwaMashu, circa 1983. Courtesy Khumbulani Mdletshe.

led the famous Soweto Uprising.[6] These missionaries were visiting our township for the first time, and not many years after one of the most significant and racially charged events in modern South African history. They were about to introduce me to the restored gospel, bringing to pass one of the most significant events in my life. Two years earlier, Official Declaration 2 had been issued by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, extending the priesthood to all worthy males regardless of race or nationality. The priesthood ban was why missionaries from the LDS Church had never before visited my township of KwaMashu, but they did not tell me so.

At first, I was the only member of the Church in my family; two of my sisters later joined. My family, especially my parents, were very supportive of my choice to join.

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6. The 1976 Soweto Uprising was an event in which protesting students held a meeting in the township of Orlando in Soweto on Sunday, June 13, 1976. During that meeting, student leaders called for a mass demonstration against the use of Afrikaans language. This was to take place on Wednesday, June 16, 1976. On that day, students assembled at different points throughout Soweto then set off to meet at Orlando West Secondary School. Police arrived to break up the illegal demonstration, and when students refused because they felt their message had not been heard, police responded with live ammunition. At least 176 students (but estimates range to 700) of the 20,000 students marching in their school uniforms were gunned down that day, their lifeless bodies lying in the streets of Soweto.

Family members surround Khumbulani Mdletshe *(centre)* as he prepares to depart for his mission, 1985. Courtesy Khumbulani Mdletshe.

Mission to London: Challenges and Blessings

Five years after my baptism, in June 1985, I reported to the mission field, called to serve in the England London South Mission. There I did as all converts must do: I prayed to receive revelation about truth. My testimony of the restored gospel was anchored as I knelt on a cold bathroom floor in England and received a confirmation that what I was teaching was true. I began to understand what it means to be a Latter-day Saint.

The first area where I served was the little town of Havant, located in southeast Hampshire. This town was very different from my township of KwaMashu. KwaMashu was 100 percent black, and Havant was 100 percent white. I remember getting on the bus and hearing an English boy of about five years old saying, "Mom, there is a chocolate man on the bus." I had only been in England about two months at that point. I was quite shocked by his comment. I found myself having to interact with white people twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. My companions were white, my investigators were white, and the bus driver and the garbage collectors were white. As these interactions with white people became normal, my negative opinions of white people began to change.

Shortly thereafter I was transferred to the city of London, where I spent the remainder of my mission working primarily in the nearly all-black suburbs, including Brixton. Our primary means of finding people to teach was the traditional knocking on doors. One day, not too far into my mission, my companion and I approached a door, and it was my turn

to give the door approach. When the door opened, a tall black man stood there. I said, "I am Elder Mdletshe and this is my companion." I told him that we were missionaries from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, sometimes referred to as Mormons. As soon as I said that, his countenance changed and he rhetorically asked, "You are a Mormon?" Before I could say a word, he continued, "And you are black!" I looked at my hand to see if I was still black, and indeed I was. I was shocked as to why this man was saying this. Finally, I said to him, "Yes, I am black, and I am a Mormon." He continued, "You are lost, Brother! How can you be a member of a racist church? Mormons do not accept blacks in their church." I was shocked and alarmed by those words, as he continued, "Mormons are racists!" I was stunned and alarmed by those words. I did not know what to say, but I wondered how he had arrived at such a distorted view of my religion. I asked him why he was accusing our church of racism. Of course, I was trying my best to defend the church that I loved. He responded, "Mormons do not give blacks the priesthood because they believe black people are cursed." The man then slammed the door. My companion had been standing there quietly during the exchange, and so I asked if the things the man had been saying were true. I was quite shocked when he responded, without hesitation, "Yes, it is true." He was surprised that I was not aware that black people had been extended the opportunity to be ordained to the priesthood only in 1978. I asked him to elaborate because this was something I had *never* heard before. He began to open the scriptures and explain what he understood to be the reasons why the Church had denied the priesthood to the blacks. He tried hard to explain what he referred to as "the curse" that blacks had "inherited from Cain and Ham." The more I listened to his explanation, the more frustrated I became, and the more he used the scriptures to support his views, the angrier I became. I have always loved and respected the scriptures as the word of God, but I refused to believe that they could be used to perpetuate racism and inequality. Something was wrong with my companion's explanation. Something didn't ring true!

After stewing over this for some time, I eventually decided that if what I had been told was true, I had no business representing a racist church. I had been raised in a very racist country, and now, it appeared, I was a member of a racist church. What added more to my anger was that my companion believed the things he was telling me. I knew that he was not a racist, but somewhere at some point he had been taught these racist ideas and he had come to believe them.

As I noted, this was absolutely the first time I had ever heard that blacks had been denied the priesthood by the Church. It would seem that my religious education, consisting of Sunday School and seminary classes, had completely avoided the issue. I must admit, when I entered the mission field, my knowledge of the restored gospel was limited, even though I had been a member of the Church for five years. Of course, being the only member of my family to join the Church did not help the situation. I simply was not taught things in the home. So what I did know about LDS Church history and doctrine I gleaned from various classes here and there.

Listening to my companion give his explanation, I felt that something was very wrong. Despite my fledgling background in the Church, I was beginning to understand and appreciate the role of the infinite Atonement of Jesus Christ and the reality that it covers *all people* (see D&C 18:11; D&C 19:16; 3 Ne. 27:15 and John 12:32). So I wondered why there was an implication that the sins of black Africans and of their forebears were apparently not covered by the Atonement of Jesus Christ. I felt that the practice of denying blacks the priesthood seemed to go contrary to Moses 6:54: "The Son of God hath atoned for original guilt, wherein the sins of the parents cannot be answered upon the heads of the children, for they are whole from the foundation of the world." In addition to my thoughts on the infinite Atonement of Jesus Christ, I was also reminded of one of the prophecies of Joseph Smith, wherein he stated, "Brothering [brethren] we are laying the foundation of a great work and you know it not, you comprehend it not. The work we are engaged in will grow, spread, and increas[e] untill it will fill the land: it will go from sea to sea it will fill the Rocky Mountains: *all nations* will hear it: it will fill its destiny; It is the work of Almighty God, and he will maintain and defend it."[7] The Prophet spoke of "all nations" which, to my mind, implied "all races." Another comment attributed to the Prophet Joseph Smith (by Wilford Woodruff) states, "It is only a little handful of Priesthood you see here tonight, but this Church will fill North and South America—*it*

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7. Wilford Woodruff, Diary, April 27, 1834, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, cited in Alexander L. Baugh, "1834: Joseph Smith and the Redemption of Zion," in *Joseph Smith, the Prophet and Seer,* ed. Richard Neitzel Holzapfel and Kent P. Jackson (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2010), 161; italics added.

will fill the world."[8] Did the world that Joseph Smith saw exclude Africa and its people?

Again I asked, why had I not known about this? I had attended church faithfully and participated in seminary. Why had the white members of the Church in South Africa kept this information from me? Was it intentionally not discussed, or was this simply a fact that was inadvertently forgotten? The white members had been good to me. They had helped prepare me to come on a mission. How in the world had I arrived in the mission field a member of the Church for five years at that point and without an awareness of this piece of Church history?

Part of me wondered if the politics of South Africa at that time had discouraged Church leaders and teachers from openly discussing this issue in classrooms and from the pulpit. In the early 1980s, the revolt against apartheid had intensified. International pressure was mounting against the white minority government to change its policy of racial discrimination. The internal revolt was not only a black struggle, but some white people also disagreed with the racial policies of the government. It is quite possible that some white members of the Church in South Africa simply made an individual decision not to discuss this issue with their new black converts. While I do not know their thinking, it is possible that they may have taken a position of silence on the matter simply to ensure that the Church was not perceived as having been in agreement with the country's discriminatory laws.

Looking back, I realize that, had this policy of denying the priesthood to blacks been brought to my attention when the missionaries were teaching me, I most likely would not have accepted the invitation to be baptised. Perhaps the Lord, knowing my heart at that time, delayed the coming forth of this knowledge because I would not have been able to accept it then. Ultimately, it came at a time when I could resolve it without jeopardising my membership in his church.

Well, when the man at the door first "revealed" this bit of new knowledge to me and when my companion confirmed it, I decided I needed to see my mission president, Ed J. Pinegar. I trusted him, and I was sure that he would help me get back home to South Africa. By the time I decided to reach out to President Pinegar, I had already decided that I was going home. I could not represent a racist church. I called the mission president on the phone and, realising the depth of my concern, he invited my companion and me to the mission office. When we arrived, President

8. Baugh, "1834: Joseph Smith and the Redemption of Zion," 162; italics added.

President Pinegar, Elder Mdletshe, Sister Pinegar, and Elder Kevin G. Fenn, 1987. Courtesy Khumbulani Mdletshe.

Pinegar had me come to his office. I rehearsed what had happened that day and voiced my decision to return home to South Africa. I frankly told him that I could not be a member of a racist church. I had been raised with racism. As a young boy, I fought it by marching in the streets and, at times, throwing stones at everything we considered to be apartheid structures. Going back home, I had decided, was the best way to show how I felt about racism.

After listening patiently to me, my mission president said, "Elder Mdletshe, it is true that black people were once denied the priesthood by the Church. No one knows the reasons. All I know right now is that all worthy men can be ordained to the priesthood." I trusted my mission president. He always treated me like his own son. I believed him. Somehow, the Spirit bade me to accept his explanation, and I decided to stay on my mission. That decision was life changing. The answer I received from my mission president that day has sustained for more than three decades. I will ever be grateful to that man of God for his inspired words that day.

That being said, the discussion with my mission president did not completely put an end to the issue of blacks and the priesthood. While I was still on my mission, the topic was raised with some frequency in Church meetings and by my fellow missionaries. After my mission, I heard about it again as a student at BYU–Hawaii and also during my time at BYU in Provo. Whenever the subject was raised, I felt a great deal of anger because on each of these occasions, erroneous reasons

were given as to why blacks were denied the priesthood. No one gave the response of my mission president. Rather, I had to listen to fallacious explanations, ideas ranging from black people having been neutral in the pre-earth life to blacks having inherited a curse from Ham and Cain. I dreaded classes on the Pearl of Great Price and Old Testament because the story of Cain and Ham is contained in those books, and I knew someone would make a comment as to why blacks had been cursed.

Doors Opened for My Education

The importance of education and the possibility of achieving a diploma was a major aspect of my life. In those days, black African missionaries were few in number. I remember that all the North American missionaries spoke about going to college following their mission. The more I heard those plans of going to college after the mission, the more I started to say the same thing. I also started to believe that following my mission, the next step would be college. This belief grew despite my family background. A high school education was all the education my parents could afford; further education was very costly and an impossible wish. But my companions encouraged me and made me believe that I could achieve this lofty goal.

Two months before the end of my mission, I was seated at the back of a chapel waiting for a member missionary fireside to start when Dr. Wayne Shute, a BYU professor and a visiting professor in London, sat down next to me. We talked about a number of things, including my life after the mission. He asked me what kind of a life I was returning to, with South Africa at the brink of civil war. In the mid-1980s the apartheid state had declared a state of emergency, and South Africa was in the news daily for the wrong reasons.

School youths who had taken upon themselves to continue with the struggle for freedom in South Africa were shown being taken to prison or lying dead on the street. It was with this background that Dr. Shute asked a question that was to change my life: "What if you were given an opportunity to attend BYU in America?" I did not have words to respond. Just before the fireside started, he said, "Let me talk to a few people and see what we can do." The following day I received a call from my mission president, Ed J. Pinegar, with information confirming his discussion with Dr. Shute. Shortly thereafter I began to make preparations to attend BYU–Hawaii.

I knew my parents would be in total agreement with this plan, even though the decision meant I was going to be away from them for another

five years after the two-year mission. Seven years later, I returned home with a bachelor's degree from BYU–H and a master's degree from BYU in Provo. Thus I became the first person in the family to graduate from high school and college. Five years later, I completed a PhD at the University of Johannesburg.

Obtaining higher education blessed my life directly, but that blessing has spread to my extended family. My sisters, who had already completed high school but were staying at home because there were no funds to get a post–high school education, were the first people to benefit from education. Once I was settled back in South Africa, I assisted them in getting their qualifications.

Marriage and Employment

Coming home meant that I could continue to move to different stages of life. At that stage, the next big step was marriage. I returned home at the age of twenty-eight and single. To be that age and not married was very old by Latter-day Saint standards. I fell in love while at BYU, but my commitment to return to South Africa proved to be stronger than love. I felt a sense of responsibility to the Church in Africa. Knowing the status of my family, I knew that both the family and the Church needed me to contribute. I could have helped them living abroad, but I felt that my physical presence was important as a future leader of the clan and the family. These feelings made it easy for me to decide to return to South Africa.

On my first Sunday back home, I was at Church when I first laid eyes on the woman that would be my future wife. For me it was love at first sight. Whether it was the same for her, she can speak for herself. I quickly learned that she was investigating the Church with her family. She was the first one to be baptised in her family. Her exemplary life as a Latter-day Saint had such an impact on her family that one by one all her siblings joined the Church. We were both in love, and the Church and its activities provided a base for our relationship to grow and mature. A year later we were ready for marriage. Shortly after our marriage, we started a family and now have four children.

I had returned home after a seven-year absence armed with a quality education, and I was ready to make a contribution. It would appear that at first South Africa was not as ready for me. I found it difficult to re-enter my culture and workplace. For example, I struggled to find employment that matched my qualifications. I resorted to teaching at a private high school. I found our four-room house to be too small, and it did not have electricity and indoor plumbing. With the little money I

had saved while a student at BYU, I installed electricity and built a two-room structure next to our four-room family home.

At the end of 1993, I found employment in Johannesburg at a non-governmental organization as a researcher and program evaluator. This position gave me a lot of satisfaction because I could put to use the skills learned at BYU. In two years, I found myself working for the department of education. It was then that I felt at home. I was deeply involved with educational issues, which meant I was making a contribution towards the advancement of our people. Everything was exciting in government. The country had just held its first democratic elections. Nelson Mandela had been elected as the first black president. Black people were now full citizens in the country of their birth. Government employment was giving us as black people a new sense of hope. A new black middle class was created, and I was in the middle of it. I found myself a beneficiary of this new hope. Opportunities for qualified black people were everywhere. Government employment was not the ultimate career, but it was a good start.

In 1997, while I participated in a stake high council, a fellow council member put a note in front of me which read, "We have an employment opportunity for you in CES." At first I was very reluctant to consider this offer. I was working in government, and I enjoyed participating in the reconstruction of South Africa. I felt that my skills were needed there, and I did not fully understand what the Church Educational System is and does. How could Church employment create excitement and help me to utilise my skills and make the contribution I felt compelled to make? With all these questions presenting a "stupor of thought" in my mind, I turned to my spiritually attuned wife. As we were discussing this opportunity, she recommended that we make this decision a matter of prayer, which we did, and we went to the temple. We were quickly reminded that our talents and skills have been given to us to assist in building of the kingdom of God on earth. Following that temple visit and without hesitation, we accepted the offer to join Church employment. Over the years, that proved to be the best decision we have ever made.

Struggling with Views of the Restrictions on Blacks

When I returned to South Africa in 1992, the LDS Church there was still very much a white church. From time to time, the issue of blacks and the priesthood would come up, and the same reasons would always be given. On one such occasion, a very close friend of mine got up during a Sunday School class and never returned to church. Thankfully, as the 1990s came to an end, the narrative regarding blacks and the priesthood

started to change in South Africa. The numbers of those who continued to hold these outdated and erroneous ideas began to decrease. Also, the political dialog in South Africa was shifting. As blacks began to take leadership roles in public and private institutions as well as in the Church, they were seen as being intelligent and capable. Thus many of the old views began to be perceived as antiquated and naïve.

Unfortunately, the "I do not know why" answer, as helpful as it was coming from my mission president and a few senior Church leaders, did not completely end the question in my mind and heart. That answer seemed insufficient because the restriction seemed to go contrary to the Church's core teachings on forgiveness and taking the gospel to all nations. If the practice of limiting the blessing of the priesthood and temple did not come to us a revelation, what are some of the factors that may have influenced how it started and lingered for 125 years?[9]

It would appear that the Church, as a social structure, found itself being influenced by folklore and traditions of the day. Practices and policies do not take place in a vacuum. Indeed, the 2013 introduction of the Official Declaration 2 informs us, "Early in its history, Church leaders stopped conferring the priesthood on black males of African descent. Church records offer no clear insights into the origins of this practice." The fact that there are "no clear insights" has led many Saints to look at social, economic, and political issues of the day to find the origin of the practice. As J. Spencer Fluhman, a BYU assistant professor of Church history and doctrine, noted, "We should expect the processes that brought us the modern Church to be more dynamic, more rooted in human agency, and more drawn out than we sometimes imagine."[10] As the new Seminary and Institute of Religion Doctrinal Mastery document put it, "It may also help to examine historical questions in the proper historical context by considering the culture and norms of the time period."[11] "The rhetoric of Church leaders was lamentably within the mainstream

9. My 125-year calculation is based on the time between 1852, when Brigham Young first issued the ban, and 1978, when Official Declaration 2 was issued. I am aware that Elijah Abel's son and grandson were ordained to the priesthood even after Brigham Young had made the statement in 1852. I am also aware that David O. MacKay lifted the ban on Fijians in the 1950s.

10. J. Spencer Fluhman, "1835: Authority, Power, and the 'Government of the Church of Christ,'" in Holzapfel and Jackson, *Joseph Smith, the Prophet and Seer,* 205.

11. "Acquiring Spiritual Knowledge," in *Doctrinal Mastery: Core Document* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2016), 2.

of white American opinion [of the day]," explained John Turner.[12] The policy of denying blacks the priesthood and the temple was instituted in an era when blacks in the United States and South Africa did not enjoy the same economic, social, and political status as their white counterparts. In the U.S., blacks had been enslaved for centuries. Terms such as "nigger" (in the U.S.) and "kaffir" (in South Africa) were commonly used when referring to black people.[13] Steven C. Harper, a historian in the LDS Church History Department, noted, "As in American culture generally, early Latter-day Saints possessed a variety of opinions, assumptions, and prejudices. Then, as now, these did not always align with the Lord's view."[14]

The variety of LDS opinions seems to have been influenced by how non-LDS clergy of the day interpreted the Old Testament stories of Ham and Cain (see Gen. 9). Societies that enslaved, discriminated against, and mistreated black Africans willingly embraced "the Biblical Hamitic hypothesis, which viewed blacks as the descendants of Ham who were cursed for life."[15] Also, any achievement by black Africans was viewed as a result of their interaction with whites. Harper explained, "Enslaving Africans required an explanation, and on both sides of the Atlantic whites searched for and found in the Bible a justification."[16] Another researcher, Edith R. Sanders, observed, "The Western world, which was growing increasingly rich on the institution of slavery, grew increasingly reluctant to look at the Negro slave and see him as a brother under the skin."[17] Blacks were thus viewed

12. John G. Turner, "Why Race Is Still a Problem for Mormons," *New York Times,* August 18, 2012, http:/nyti.ms/NMQZ6G.

13. Today such terms are considered by many as crass and inappropriate, and if used while committing an act of violence, such terms can constitute a hate crime and add stiffer penalties to the punishment.

14. Steven C. Harper, *Making Sense of the Doctrine and Covenants: A Guided Tour through Modern Revelation* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2008), 521–22.

15. "White Supremacy," in *International Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences* (Farmington Hills, Mich.: Macmillan Reference USA, 2008), 9:85, available online at Encyclopaedia.com, http://www.encyclopedia.com/history/united-states-and-canada/us-history/white-supremacy; Stirling Adams, review of *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam,* by David M. Goldenberg, and *Noah's Curse: The Biblical Justification of American Slavery,* by Stephen R. Haynes, *BYU Studies* 44, no. 1 (2005): 157–69.

16. Harper, *Making Sense of the Doctrine and Covenants*, 521.

17. Edith R. Sanders, "The Hamitic Hypothesis: Its Origin and Functions in Time Perspective," *Journal of African History* 10, no. 4 (1969): 524.

as commodities, rather than as human beings. This common nineteenth-century view influenced Christian exegesis of people of various races and certainly made its way into the thinking of some Latter-day Saints; the Church was restored in the very era in which such beliefs were commonplace. The nagging question is, then, to what extent did these prevailing ideas contribute to the priesthood ban on the people of African descent?

The interpretation that Ham and Cain were cursed may have influenced how some Latter-day Saints have understood passages of LDS scripture such as Moses 7:7–22 and Abraham 1:21. "LDS scriptures were used to justify race-based slavery" and other racist attitudes, noted Harper.[18] He observed that "the book of Abraham does not mention the race of the Canaanites, but readers have assumed a link between Enoch's prophecy in the book of Moses about Canaanites acquiring black skin and Abraham's description that Pharaoh could not have the priesthood as 'a partaker of the blood of the Canaanites by birth.'"[19]

In the middle of the twentieth century, the Hamitic hypothesis began to lose its appeal; the philosophes of the Enlightenment were not satisfied with biblical explanations of differences between races and called for a scientific explanation for the origin of the race. What was puzzling to many scholars of the day was that nowhere in Genesis is the curse on Ham and his descendants associated with race. In the opinion of one scholar, this myth was kept alive by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century clergy because they "tried to keep their hold on the laity by discrediting the savants [men of the Enlightenment] as infidels."[20]

The ban on priesthood for blacks continued in the Church. In 1940, the First Presidency appointed a subcommittee to investigate "whether or not one drop of negro blood deprives a man of the right to receive the priesthood."[21] For the next couple of decades in South Africa, whites were expected to "trace their genealogies outside Africa before they

18. Harper, *Making Sense of Doctrine and Covenants*, 521.

19. Harper, *Making Sense of Doctrine and Covenants*, 523.

20. Sanders, "Hamitic Hypothesis," 524.

21. Minutes, January 25, 1940, in Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, Excerpts from the Weekly Council Meetings Dealing with the Rights of African Americans in the Church, 1849–1940, p. 1, George Albert Smith Papers, George A. Smith Family Papers, Special Collections, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah, Salt Lake City.

could be ordained."[22] Many theories arose implying that blacks were less valiant in the premortal life as justification for the restriction.

It was at this time that the "We do not know" explanation began to be the only plausible one being used by those who were questioning this practice in the Church. President David O. McKay began to question this practice. One consideration was that as far back as 1946, blacks in West Africa were requesting baptism into the Church. David O. McKay and his counsellors in the First Presidency were concerned for the would-be Latter-day Saints in Africa but were uncertain how they should proceed. Richard Turley, an LDS Church Historian, reported that their discussion "lasted years as they considered the universality of the gospel message and the constraints placed upon them by the restrictions regarding priesthood and temple ordinances for the people of black African descent."[23] In 1949, the First Presidency issued a statement that quoted Wilford Woodruff as having said, "The day will come when all that race will be redeemed and possess all the blessings which we now have."[24] One cannot ignore Woodruff's statement or the statement issued by the 1954 special committee of the Twelve, which concluded that "the priesthood ban had no clear basis in scripture but that Church members were not prepared for change."[25] In 1969, the First Presidency wrote to priesthood leaders all over the world, expressing their belief that the reasons for the ban were "known to God, but which He has not made fully known to man."[26] These developments paved the way for the Lord to reveal to President Spencer W. Kimball the change

22. Evan P. Wright, *A History of the South African Mission, Period III, 1944–1970* (n.p., ca. 1987) 419–20, copy at Church History Library, cited in Richard E. Turley Jr. and Jeffrey G. Cannon, "A Faithful Band: Moses Mahlangu and the First Soweto Saints," *BYU Studies Quarterly* vol. 55, no. 1 (2016): 16.

23. Turley and Cannon, "Faithful Band," 22.

24. Wilford Woodruff, cited in Statement of the First Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, August 17, 1949, Church History Library; and in *Neither White nor Black: Mormon Scholars Confront the Race Issue in a Universal Church,* ed. Lester E. Bush Jr. and Armand L. Mauss (Midvale, Utah: Signature Books, 1984), 221, available online at http://signaturebookslibrary.org/neither-white-nor-black-appendix/.

25. Terryl L. Givens and Phillip L. Barlow, *The Oxford Handbook of Mormonism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 373.

26. Statement of the First Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, August 17, 1949.

that was reported as Official Declaration 2 in June 1978.[27] It extended the opportunity for the ordination to the priesthood to all worthy male members of the Church and extended an invitation for all worthy men and women to receive temple endowments and participate in sealings.

It should be pointed out that there is ample evidence to suggest that the LDS Church in the early 1800s did not support slavery, racism, and inequality as then practiced by a significant segment of the Christian population in the United States. For example, as W. Paul Reeve, a Mormon historian at the University of Utah, observed, "Black Saints were among the first to arrive in the Salt Lake Valley in 1847 and have been a part of the Mormon experience from its beginnings. The first documented black person to join this American-born faith was Black Pete, a former slave who was baptized in 1830, when the fledgling movement was less than a year old. Other blacks trickled in over the course of the nineteenth century and are woven into the Mormon story. At least two men were ordained to the faith's highest priesthood in its first two decades."[28] Mormons recognised the precarious status of blacks in the U.S.; articles published in 1833 in the *Evening and the Morning Star* cautioned "free people of color" about the danger of immigrating to Missouri, and the articles ignited a powder keg between the Saints and slave-holding Missourians. Missourians "interpreted the passage as clear evidence that the Mormons were encouraging and facilitating the settling of free blacks in Jackson County; Phelps [the author] immediately protested that his intent was actually to discourage that very thing."[29] But a few blacks were already a part of the LDS population and enjoyed freedom in their midst. Harper confirmed this when he noted that the few free blacks in the Church were well received. Elijah Abel, a black priesthood holder in the early days of Church, served multiple missions and remained faithful until his death.[30]

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27. See Edward L. Kimball, "Spencer W. Kimball and the Revelation on Priesthood," *BYU Studies* 47, no. 2 (2008): 4–78.

28. W. Paul Reeve. "Are There Black Mormons?" Oxford University Press blog, July 14, 2012, http://blog.oup.com/2015/07/history-black-mormonism/.

29. T. Ward Frampton, "'Some Savage Tribe': Race, Legal Violence, and the Mormon War of 1838," *Journal of Mormon History* 40, no. 1 (2014): 184; "Free People of Color," and "The Elders Stationed in Zion to the Churches Abroad, in Love, Greeting," *Evening and the Morning Star,* 2 (July 1833): 109, 110–11; Grant Underwood, "1833: Expulsion from Zion," in Holzapfel and Jackson, *Joseph Smith, the Prophet and Seer,* 139.

30. Harper, *Making Sense of the Doctrine and Covenants,* 522.

In summary, historians warn that one cannot tell the Mormon racial story outside of the American racial story. The American story is "a chronicle fraught with cautionary tales regarding whiteness, religious freedom, and racial genesis."[31] While it was certainly not the practice of members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to abuse blacks as others had done, nevertheless the Church continued to state that the time had not yet come to extend priesthood to all worthy male members and they needed to wait on the Lord to reveal his will. Eventually, questions started to emerge within the Church as to why Africans were being denied priesthood and why the Lord was treating Africans differently from his other children. Theories about blacks having been fence-sitters or lukewarm in the pre-earth life were being questioned by some inside the Church. It appeared that "'a contradictory and confusing legacy of racist religious folklore' had grown up among the Saints to explain banning blacks from the priesthood."[32]

On December 6, 2013, the Church issued a landmark document titled "Race and the Priesthood."[33] The history of the priesthood ban is discussed in this document, and the Church confirmed that it "disavows the theories advanced in the past" and it further declared that "Church leaders today unequivocally condemn all racism, past and present, in any form."

Finding My Way despite Struggles

As a young man, I had received my patriarchal blessing. It states that there are many souls in my home country who are seeking for the truth and that I had been chosen by the Lord to bear his name. I looked forward to a day when this blessing was to come to pass. With the CES position, I have seen the fulfilment of this prophetic blessing. Six years after joining CES, I was asked to be the area director. In that assignment, I found myself standing in many congregations in those thirty countries over which I supervised the Church educational program and testifying of the message of the restored gospel. I found myself standing beside

31. W. Paul Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color: Race and the Mormon Struggle for Whiteness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 3.

32. Harper, *Making Sense of the Doctrine and Covenants,* 523–24. For a more detailed discussion of the development of this religious folklore, see Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color,* 140–214.

33. "Race and the Priesthood," The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, https://www.lds.org/topics/race-and-the-priesthood?lang=eng.

priesthood leaders and General Authorities as new countries were opened for the preaching of the gospel. For eleven years, I served two stake presidents as a counsellor. We built a new stake in a predominantly black location. I also served two mission presidents as counsellor, and again I found myself in the middle of assisting in the building of the kingdom. Slowly the prophetic words of a patriarch were being fulfilled before my very own eyes.

Elder Mdletshe as a member of the Third Quorum of the Seventy, 2014. Courtesy Khumbulani Mdletshe.

To have been born in South Africa in the 1960s and to have lived the first thirty years of my life under the yoke of apartheid taught me to have little tolerance for white people. As a young man, I participated in many discussions on how to drive the whites to the ocean. Joining the Church changed that hatred. As a member of the Church, I met white people who acted differently than those I met in larger South African society. The white Church members were not perfect, but they were different. Clearly the Holy Ghost played its role in teaching me the truth.

It is unfortunate that I first learned that blacks had been denied the priesthood when I was a missionary on the streets of London, rather than in an official church or a family setting. However, my children have been blessed to be taught about this issue in the safe atmosphere of our home. I recall that one day, one of our children asked, "Why was a revelation needed when there was no revelation that started the practice of denying the priesthood to blacks?" That was a fair question when we consider plural marriage in the Church. It was practiced because God revealed it to Joseph Smith (see D&C 132). It was discontinued through another revelation (see Official Declaration 1). Many of my LDS Institute students have asked a similar question about the restrictions on blacks. The answer I have always given is that a revelation was needed to enlighten Church members regarding this doctrine and to assist local Church leaders who needed a doctrinal tool to teach those who would

question or reject the change in policy. We know that some members left the Church when this revelation was received. Yet this revelation was needed as the Church matured in order that it might reach out to all people of the world, offering them the restored gospel.

Apartheid South Africa didn't open opportunities for me to have the education that was going to bless my future family and my siblings. The Church did. There were no resources in my family to provide those opportunities. Joining the Church and being around high-achieving individuals raised my sights to realise my potential. Later, as a highly qualified black person, I could have walked into any job, but Church employment gave me more satisfaction and proved to be the only way I could fulfil the prophesy of my patriarchal blessing. I learned to move forward despite my struggles with the history of restrictions on blacks in the Church.

Confirmation: My Experience with President Monson

In April 2014, I attended my first general leadership conference for General Authorities and Area Seventies. I was sustained at that time as a member of the Third Quorum of the Seventy. As new members of the Seventies quorums, our seats were reserved in the second row of the auditorium. I was seated on the aisle, and next to me were Elders Makasi and Chatora, who were also newly called Area Seventies from Africa. President Thomas S. Monson spoke to us. He concluded his remarks and immediately started to walk towards the exit. As a sign of respect to our President, we all stood and watched as he walked away. Just as he was about to leave the room, it appeared that he had forgotten something. He turned and started to walk back to where we were standing. The room remained quiet. We could tell that what was happening had not been planned. There was great anticipation in the room. He came straight to where we were standing. President Monson is not a small man. He towered over us. He came and stood where we were and then rested his arms on all three of us, like a coach giving some last instructions to his team. The room remained dead quiet. Of course everyone wanted to hear what the prophet would tell these new members of the Seventy. But the message was for us. He whispered, "Brethren, I would like to tell you that I worked with the man who gave the priesthood to all men." He paused for a moment and then looked at our heads and said, "I love your haircuts." As he walked away, you could hear a pin drop. Many came up to us later and wanted to know what the Prophet had whispered in our ears.

As President Monson walked away, we looked at each other and nodded in approval. I was very impressed! A prophet of the Lord had taken time to come and whisper a profound message in our ears. As Seventies, we are called and set apart to be witnesses (see D&C 124:34). Now we would be even stronger witnesses of the coming forth of Official Declaration 2. Any concerns or questions that any one of us might have had regarding race and the priesthood were no longer relevant. They were now resolved.

In 2018, the Church will celebrate the forty-year anniversary of Official Declaration 2. At that time, the Church in Africa will have close to half a million members, three African General Authorities,[34] many African Area Seventies and mission presidents, seven temples (operating or announced), and almost thirty missions. Great and sacred things have happened on the continent of Africa since and because of the 1978 revelation on the priesthood.

No doubt, not every member or truth seeker will be as fortunate as I was to have had a mission president, in my hour of need, who could give me a reason to believe when no clear answers were readily apparent. Additionally, most will not have an opportunity as I did to have a modern-day prophet whisper words of assurance in their ears regarding the reality of what happened in June 1978. Perhaps President Dieter F. Utchdorf was speaking to those who struggled with this issue when he said in his October 2013 General Conference talk:

> Some struggle with unanswered questions about things that have been done or said in the past. We openly acknowledge that in nearly 200 years of Church history—along with an uninterrupted line of inspired, honourable, and divine events—there have been some things said and done that could cause people to question.
>
> Sometimes questions arise because we simply don't have all the information and we just need a bit more patience. When the entire truth is eventually known, things that didn't make sense to us before will be resolved to our satisfaction.[35]

I am a living witness of this.

Sometimes there are those who wonder why it took 125 years for the priesthood ban to be removed. The uncovering of truth sometimes is like peeling an onion; it has many layers. Those seeking truth might

34. Edward Dube, Christoffel Golden, and Joseph W. Sitati.

35. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, "Come, Join with Us," *Ensign* 43 (November 2013): 22.

feel that they are running through a maze that twists and turns with no end. Again, President Utchdorf provided an answer as to how we can each uncover the truth when he said, "But eventually all of our questions will be answered. All of our doubts will be replaced by certainty. And that is because there is one source of truth that is complete, correct, and incorruptible. That source is our infinitely wise and all-knowing Heavenly Father. He knows truth as it was, as it is, and as it yet will be. 'He comprehended all things, . . . and he is above all things, . . . and all things are by him, and of him.'"[36] My journey in trying to understand the truth behind the priesthood ban and the eventual coming forth of Official Declaration 2 took too many turns and twists. But I did finally find the truth. It came through God's earthly representatives, first while I sat across the desk from my mission president and then later when the modern-day prophet whispered in my ear. Elder Neal A. Maxwell summarized well the principle I long sought to uncover when he said, "The answers to the *why* questions are obtainable only by revelations given by God the Creator."[37]

Khumbulani D. Mdletshe is a member of the Third Quorum of Seventy of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. He earned a bachelor's degree in history and political science at Brigham Young University–Hawaii, a master's degree in instructional science from Brigham Young University, a PhD in educational management at the University of Johannesburg, and an advanced management diploma from the Management College of Southern Africa. He worked in education and government until he joined the Church Educational System in 1997. He has worked as both a regional and area CES director. He is currently the director at the Roodepoort South Africa CES Institute.

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36. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, "What Is Truth?" Broadcast (PD50045368 000), 2013, citing Doctrine and Covenants 88:6, 41, available online at The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, https://www.lds.org/broadcasts/article/ces-devotionals/2013/01/what-is-truth?lang=eng.

37. Neal A. Maxwell, "Our Creator's Cosmos," *Religious Educator* 3, no. 2 (2002): 1–17.