

# Mormonism in Africa

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## Introduction

Generalizations about the Latter-day Saints (LDS) and their faith are frequently based on observations of Mormonism in the United States, especially in the state of Utah. This is understandable. Mormonism is often described as the quintessentially American faith, and in many ways that is true. Until the mid-twentieth century the LDS Church was largely confined to the Mountain West. But it is easy to see why generalizing from this sample creates incomplete and inaccurate portraits. As of October 2014, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints reported a worldwide membership of 15,082,028.<sup>1</sup> Within the United States, 69% of Mormons live outside Utah. More significantly, 57.6% of all Mormons live outside the United States. Thus, Utah accounted for only 13.1% of total Church membership. Mormonism is now an international faith. In most countries the LDS Church has lower retention rates than the U.S., so it may still be the case that a majority of those attending LDS chapels on any given Sunday are Americans. However, even with lower retention rates, continued growth abroad will ensure that this soon changes. It is, therefore, important for those who study Mormonism to pay increasing attention to its international manifestations. This essay will provide a brief sketch of Mormon growth in Africa and describe some of the factors that facilitate and impede that growth.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/facts-and-statistics/>. Accessed 2 October 2014.

## Historical Sketch

The story of Mormonism in Africa is, as E. Dale LeBaron observes, “one of the most unusual chapters in the history of the Mormon Church.”<sup>2</sup> Mormonism has been established on the continent for more than 160 years. Yet, it is also a latecomer in the missionary scramble for Africa. This paradoxical situation is due to the LDS Church’s racial policies between 1852 and 1978.

### *Official African Mormonism Before 1978*

The first Mormon missionaries to the African continent arrived in Cape Town on April 18, 1853. They baptized their first convert in June and organized the first branch congregation in mid-August. Three weeks later a second branch was organized, and a third the following February. Unlike Catholics and Protestants, LDS missionaries preached only to whites. People of Malay descent were seen as potential converts, but no special efforts were made to proselytize them. Indigenous black and mixed race populations were deliberately avoided because they had “too much of the blood of Cain in them, for the Gospel to have much effect on their dark spirits.”<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, several blacks were baptized in the 1850s.<sup>4</sup> LDS missionary policy in the nineteenth century encouraged converts to “gather in Zion” with the main body of Saints (cf. D&C 29:7-8; 110:11). Between 1855 and 1865 some 278 converts from South Africa emigrated to Utah, including at least four blacks.<sup>5</sup> In 1865 the South African Mission was closed, not to reopen again until 1903 (shortly after the Boer War). Around this time the Church stopped supporting emigration to the United States. Converts were instead urged to build up the Church in their homelands.

At the beginning of 1978 there were no more than 7,848 members of the LDS Church on the African continent.<sup>6</sup> All but 136 or so lived within the jurisdiction of the South African Mission (South Africa and what are now Namibia and Zimbabwe). The vast majority were whites of British descent and a sizeable minority of Afrikaners. There were a handful of members classi-

<sup>2</sup> E.D. LeBaron, “Mormonism in Black Africa,” in D. Davies, ed., *Mormon Identities in Transition* (London: Cassell, 1996), 83.

<sup>3</sup> *Latter Day Saints Millennial Star* (Liverpool, England), 7 June 1856 as quoted in N.G. Bringham, “Mormonism in Black Africa: Changing Attitudes and Practices 1830-1981,” *Sunstone* 6 (1981): 17.

<sup>4</sup> Bringham, “Mormonism in Black Africa,” 21, n. 14.

<sup>5</sup> Bringham, “Mormonism in Black Africa,” 17.

<sup>6</sup> The commonly cited membership figure for that year is 7,712, but a few sources report lower numbers. Furthermore, it is unclear whether the usually cited statistic includes 136 members who lived in countries outside the South African Mission in 1977. The latter number is reported in C.K. Jacobson, T.B. Heaton, E.D. LeBaron, and T. Hope, “Black Mormon Converts in the United States and Africa: Social Characteristics and Perceived Acceptance,” in M. Cornwall, T.B. Heaton, and L.A. Young, eds., *Contemporary Mormonism: Social Science Perspectives* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 327.

fied as ‘Colored’ under the apartheid system. The 136 members outside the South African Mission were dispersed across several countries. Some were white North Americans and Europeans whose work brought them to Africa. Others were black Africans who joined the Church while studying or working abroad. However, there were no congregations with non-white leadership nor was there even a sizable proportion of non-white membership. Missionary activity was deliberately confined to whites within the South African sphere of influence. Coloreds were avoided because of difficulties created by the apartheid system. Blacks were avoided both because of apartheid and because they were not permitted to receive the Aaronic and Melchizedek priesthoods which most Mormon men hold.

In theory Mormon missionaries could have proselytized among native African peoples despite the priesthood ban. According to the Book of Mormon, the Lord “commandeth none that they shall not partake of his salvation” (2 Nephi 26:24). Moreover, “all men are privileged the one like unto the other, and none are forbidden” (26:28). The racial, social, and gender implications of this principle are stated explicitly: “he inviteth them all to come unto him and partake of his goodness; and he denieth none that come unto him, black and white, bond and free, male and female; and he remembereth the heathen; and all are alike unto God, both Jew and Gentile” (26:33).<sup>7</sup> Consistent with this, race never prevented membership in the LDS Church. Elijah Abel, a former slave, was baptized in 1832 – a mere two years after the Church’s formal founding. Prior to the Civil War, the Church adopted a policy not to baptize slaves without their owner’s permission, but free blacks and former slaves were welcome to join and some did.

If something like the principle *lex orandi, lex credendi* were applied to early Mormonism, then LDS hymnody provided warrant for why missionaries *should* have proselytized in black Africa. The LDS Church’s first hymnbook was published in 1835. The hymns were selected by Emma Smith, Joseph Smith’s wife. In light of Christ’s imminent return, Hymn 35 encouraged Mormons to take their message around the globe, including Africa:

Go pass throughout Europe, and Asia’s dark regions,  
To China’s far shores, and to Afric’s black legions,  
And proclaim to all people, as you’re passing by,

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<sup>7</sup> According to Joseph Smith’s claims for the Book of Mormon and its internal chronology, Nephi would have spoken these words sometime between 559–545 B.C. However, 2 Nephi 26:33 was written by somebody clearly familiar with Paul’s letters to the Galatians and Colossians (see Gal 3:28; Col 3:11). It also adapts Paul’s universalist statements to reflect the racial composition of antebellum America (white, black, and ‘heathen’, i.e. Native American). This kind of anachronism pervades the Book of Mormon.

The fig-trees are leaving—the summer is nigh.<sup>8</sup>

Missionaries were not sent to Africa during Joseph Smith's lifetime, but doing so was obviously envisioned in this hymn.

During Smith's lifetime some black members were given the priesthood. Joseph Smith ordained Elijah Abel as an elder in early 1836; later he was ordained as a Seventy.<sup>9</sup> However, texts "translated" by Smith lent themselves to interpretations that could supply warrant for racially exclusionary policies (2 Nephi 5:21; Moses 7:8, 22; Abraham 1:24, 26-27). Brigham Young, Smith's successor, implemented the policy withholding the priesthood from men of African descent.<sup>10</sup> In 1852, in his role as governor of Utah Territory, Young also approved laws permitting and regulating slavery.<sup>11</sup> A few Southern converts brought slaves with them to Utah, but the practice was never widespread.<sup>12</sup> According to census figures, which may not be accurate, a slight majority of blacks in the territory were free.<sup>13</sup> The priesthood policy

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<sup>8</sup> E. Smith, ed., *A Collection of Sacred Hymns for the Church of the Latter Day Saints* (Kirtland, Ohio: F.G. Williams & Co., 1835), 47. Photographs of the original can be seen on The Joseph Smith Papers Project website (<http://josephsmithpapers.org>).

<sup>9</sup> An "elder" is someone ordained to the higher of Mormonism's two orders of priesthood, the Melchizedek priesthood. The lower order is the Aaronic priesthood. Males who hold the Aaronic but not the Melchizedek priesthood are referred to as "priests." A Seventy is a General Authority of the Church ranked beneath the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles.

<sup>10</sup> Racist beliefs obviously lie at the root of this policy, but the external and internal factors that contributed to its origination and enforcement are more complex than critics usually admit. For a concise and balanced overview, see A.L. Mauss, *All Abraham's Children: Changing Conceptions of Race and Lineage* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 212-17.

<sup>11</sup> Most Mormons in Utah came from Northern states and Great Britain. They had little desire to see slavery implemented. Armand Mauss plausibly suggests that these laws were motivated more by political expediency than intent to develop a slave economy. The congressional compromises of 1820 and 1850 required states entering the union alternate between slave and free. California entered in 1850 as a free state; if Utah were to enter next, it would have to do so as a slave state, at least on paper. Statehood would have given Utah greater autonomy than territorial status did, something much desired by Mormons given their turbulent history in Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois. See Mauss, "From Galatia to Ghana: The Racial Dynamic in Mormon History," *International Journal of Mormon Studies* 6 (2013): 57-58.

<sup>12</sup> James B. Christensen, "Negro Slavery in the Utah Territory," *The Phylon Quarterly* 18/3 (1957): 298-305; Dennis L. Lythgoe, "Negro Slavery in Utah," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 39/1 (1971): 40-54.

<sup>13</sup> The 1850 census recorded twenty-six black slaves supposedly "on their way to California" and twenty-four free blacks. Ten years later the census reported fifty-nine blacks in the territory, twenty-nine slaves and thirty free. However, the number of blacks who are known to have immigrated or been brought to Utah between 1847 and 1850 is 100-119 (there is some confusion because of ambiguous records). Thir-

did not take away the priesthood from free blacks who already held it. They continued to receive callings within the Church and serve missions. In at least a couple instances exceptions to the priesthood ban were made for their descendants.<sup>14</sup> But race-based exclusion from the priesthood was the norm.

Popular theological and “scientific” explanations of the priesthood policy removed whatever motivation there had been previously to proselytize in black communities. Nonetheless, the Church continued to attract and receive some black converts in the United States. In the early 1970s efforts began to make black members feel more comfortable in the Church – efforts which continue to this day.<sup>15</sup> By the mid-1970s it is estimated that the LDS Church had somewhere around 2000 members of African descent. Most of them seem to have been drawn to the LDS Church through contact with white Mormons in the workplace or during military service.<sup>16</sup> Black Mormons resided in various parts of the United States as a minority within their local congregation. Their membership posed no special logistical problems for the Church because there were no predominantly black wards.<sup>17</sup> Men eligible for the priesthood could be readily found in any ward. The prospect of successfully proselytizing in black Africa, however, did pose a challenge.

Members of the LDS Church who do not have the priesthood are ineligible to preach the gospel, baptize, confer the gift of the Holy Ghost, bless the sacrament, or participate in certain Temple ceremonies. Priesthood authority is essential for various callings necessary for the functioning of an LDS congregation. If missionary success in Africa led to the establishment of exclusively or even predominantly black congregations, this would have necessi-

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ty-two were free and the rest slaves. See N.G. Bringham, *Saints, Slaves, and Blacks: The Changing Place of Black People within Mormonism* (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 1981), 218-28.

<sup>14</sup> Abel remained a Seventy after he moved to Utah Territory, but Brigham Young denied his request to receive the endowment. (Today the endowment is prerequisite for the Melchizedek priesthood and, therefore, for serving as a Seventy. The endowment had not yet been invented when Abel was ordained an elder and Seventy.) Nonetheless, Abel served as a missionary as late as 1883. In 1900 his son Elijah was ordained an elder. His grandson Elijah was ordained a priest in 1934 and elder in 1935.

<sup>15</sup> For a summary description, see A.L. Mauss, “Mormonism and Race,” in C. Mosser and R. Sherlock, eds., *The Mormon World* (London: Routledge, forthcoming).

<sup>16</sup> Mauss, *All Abraham’s Children*, 242. Mauss reports this figure from ‘informed Utah journalist’ Heidi S. Swinton’s article “Without Regard to Race,” *This People* 9/2 (1988): 19-23. I suspect this number reflects only U.S. membership, but I have been unable to secure a copy of the article to confirm. During that time the LDS Church experienced rapid growth in Brazil and many converts had mixed racial ancestry.

<sup>17</sup> A ward is a geographically defined local congregation, much like a parish in Catholic and Anglican denominations. Wards are organized into stakes, a larger geographical unit similar to a diocese.

tated that the Church send men from other ethnic backgrounds (not necessarily white Europeans) to fulfill those callings. Furthermore, bishops, stake presidents, and all others who serve in leadership roles at the ward and stake level are unpaid volunteers who are typically employed full time in secular occupations. Most missionaries are young men who save money during high school to cover the expense of their two-year mission. Black congregations would have necessitated that the Church continue to send missionaries to places in which it was already established, diverting them from new fields. Moreover, though the Melchizedek priesthood technically qualifies male missionaries to fulfill any calling, practically speaking it is preferable for some positions to be filled by individuals with more maturity and life experience. Mormon couples sometimes serve missions together after retirement, but it is questionable whether there would have been enough mature missionaries to support the needs of a black African Mormonism under the priesthood ban.

Everything changed on 8 June 1978. That day the First Presidency unexpectedly released a letter announcing a revelation that opened the priesthood to all worthy men (Official Declaration 2 in D&C). Within a few months LDS missionaries began arriving in West Africa. As the year 1980 began, there were at least 8,606 people in Africa on Church membership rolls, representing an increase in membership of over 10% in a year and a half period.<sup>18</sup> African membership now stands at 421,892, approximately 2.8% of the Church's total. The Church is established in 30 African nations (see chart). If current growth and retention trends hold, in twenty years there could easily be two million or more African Mormons, accounting for 15-20% of the LDS Church's total membership. At the beginning of 1978 all but a handful of African Mormons had predominantly European ancestry. Today at least 90% come from predominantly indigenous sub-Saharan ancestry. The non-black minority includes growing numbers of people from Indian, Malay, Chinese, and other non-European ethnic backgrounds.

These figures are impressive when one considers the fact that blacks were denied the priesthood from 1852-1978 and there were no efforts to proselytize them during this period. What is more significant than the numbers, however, is the way Mormonism gained a foothold among black Africans and the factors that affect continued growth among them.

### *Unofficial Black African Mormonism Emerges*

Beginning in 1946 and increasing through the 1950s, the LDS Church began receiving letters from black Africans, mostly in Nigeria and Ghana.

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<sup>18</sup> This figure comes from the "Summary of Church Membership," *Deseret News Church Almanac* (Salt Lake City, 1981), 229-32 as reported in Bringhurst, *Saints, Slaves, and Blacks*, 212. The number of baptisms sometimes reported for Nigeria and Ghana through November 1979 is sometimes listed at 1700 or more. If accurate, that would necessitate a higher total African membership than recorded in the *Church Almanac*.

Many requested literature or visits from missionaries. Inquirers had learned about the LDS Church through friends, pamphlets, a story in the *Reader's Digest*, and in other sundry ways.<sup>19</sup> Some people said they were already convinced of the Church's claims about Joseph Smith, the Book of Mormon, and its status as "the one true church" on earth. They identified themselves as Mormons and wanted to formally become members. Most surprising were letters informing leaders in Salt Lake City about several self-identified Mormon or Latter-day Saint congregations and study groups. It is estimated that in the 1960s there were more than sixty such groups in Nigeria and Ghana. Most of these groups were unaware of the others and none of their participants were officially baptized members of the LDS Church. These unofficial Mormon groups desired to merge with the official Church and come under its oversight.

Without the knowledge of the LDS Church, Mormonism, of a sort, spontaneously emerged in West Africa, the most unlikely of locations. That created a theological, moral, and logistical conundrum for the Church's leadership. For more than ten years Church leaders debated how to respond to the persistent requests from African "Mormons." Initially there was concern about the motives of these individuals. Did they wish to identify with the Church to legitimize their activities with local officials or add the prestige of being associated with an American denomination? Were they hoping the Church would send money to support their activities? Responses to their letters made it clear that if the LDS Church sent missionaries and was officially established in their countries, black members would not be permitted to hold the priesthood. Convinced that Joseph Smith was a prophet and the Book of Mormon authentic scripture, they were unfazed. Letter writers persisted in their request for the Church to send missionaries with priesthood authority who could baptize and instruct them further about the faith. They were also informed that anyone currently serving as a minister would no longer be permitted to receive financial support. Mormonism has an entirely lay clergy that serves on a volunteer basis. The Africans said they would gladly comply with Church policy once missionaries were sent. No matter what obstacles were presented in the Church's replies, African inquirers were undeterred. They were convinced that Mormonism is true and insisted the Church fulfill its mandate to take the restored Gospel to all nations and peoples, including black Africa. Nigerians were especially insistent.

In a meeting on 22 June 1962, David O. McKay, then President of the LDS Church, expressed his feeling that the Church had an obligation to permit the baptism of worthy Nigerians who wanted to convert. The logistical hurdles this presented were discussed in a meeting eight days later. McKay was willing to respond to the pleading of Africa's would-be Saints despite

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<sup>19</sup> These fascinating stories are recounted in detail by J.B. Allen, "Would-Be Saints: West Africa Before the 1978 Priesthood Revelation," *Journal of Mormon History* 17 (1991): 207-47.

the considerable problems it would cause in order to “give them whatever blessings the Church could provide, short of the priesthood.”<sup>20</sup> Two months later the decision was made to send LaMar Williams and a young missionary to Africa in order to “unofficially” (but at the Church’s expense) investigate the situation on the ground. Williams was an employee of the Missionary Department who served as chief correspondent with African inquirers. Williams reported his findings to the First Presidency and other Church leaders. Three months later he was informed by President McKay that missionary work would commence in Nigeria and the Church’s auxiliary organizations established among existing groups.<sup>21</sup> The decision was publicly announced in the 11 January 1963 edition of the *Deseret News*.

The announcement that missionary work would begin in Nigeria proved premature. In early 1963 a Nigerian student named Ambrose Chukwa attending college in San Louis Obispo, California visited the local LDS Institute of Religion.<sup>22</sup> He was invited to a Sunday service and in the course of conversation learned about the priesthood policy. In an attempt to address his concern, somebody apparently gave Chukwa a copy of John J. Stewart’s booklet *Mormonism and the Negro*. Angered by the explanation Stewart gave for the priesthood ban, Chukwa sent a long letter to the *Nigerian Outlook* denouncing Mormonism as a “religion of race hate and race superiority and discrimination.”<sup>23</sup> Chukwa insisted that the LDS Church should not be allowed into the country. Other Nigerian students began a letter-writing campaign to university and government officials throughout Nigeria urging the same thing. The letters were effective and the Nigerian government denied the LDS Church permission to begin work in the country. Despite the efforts of LaMar Williams and others, the government would not be persuaded to change its position as long as the priesthood policy remained in place. Unofficial black Mormon groups would continue to operate in Nigeria and Ghana without assistance or oversight from Salt Lake City until 1978.

### **Mormonism in Africa Today**

Hard demographic data on African Mormons is hard to come by. However, the available evidence suggests that Mormonism appeals most to high-status subgroups and is associated with upward mobility and high socioeconomic expectations.<sup>24</sup> African Mormons appear to have much higher educational attainment than the general populations of their countries. Converts in North America often respond to distinctive LDS doctrines about preexistence

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<sup>20</sup> Allen, “Would-Be Saints,” 216.

<sup>21</sup> Allen, “Would-Be Saints,” 227.

<sup>22</sup> Institutes are typically located near college or university campuses. They provide religious instruction for Mormon students pursuing degrees at non-LDS institutions. Non-members are welcome to take classes as well.

<sup>23</sup> As quoted in Allen, “Would-Be Saints,” 230.

<sup>24</sup> Jacobson, *et al.*, “Black Mormon Converts,” 333.

and the nature of the family by having larger than average families. In Africa Mormon families tend to be somewhat smaller than local averages.<sup>25</sup>

In most parts of the world LDS Church's rapid growth is accompanied by low rates of retention and participation. Africa is different. Rick Phillips observes:

Africa is an anomalous case. LDS growth in Africa is brisk, and African Mormons have high levels of religious participation. In addition, the church's ability to staff lay clergy callings in African congregations is enhanced by the fact that male converts outnumber females in this region. These participation rates and sex ratios are correlates of convert retention. Hence, Africa may countermand the rule that rapid LDS growth attends low retention rates.<sup>26</sup>

Weekly church attendance of members varies between 20-30% in Southern Africa and 50-55% in West Africa.<sup>27</sup>

LDS chapels are consistently well-maintained and attractive. Services are orderly, consisting of hymn singing, prayers, the sacrament (i.e. communion),<sup>28</sup> and two or three assigned speakers. Before and after the sacrament meeting there are a variety of Sunday school classes and other meetings for LDS men, women, and youth. The full block of Sunday meetings lasts around three hours. Numerous individuals actively participate in conducting the service and teaching classes.

Most Christian denominations in Africa accommodate local customs, musical styles, and other culturally adapted expressions of faith. Mormon churches do not. Hymns and teaching materials are standardized or "correlated" at Church headquarters in Salt Lake City. Each week African Mormons discuss the exact same topics and scriptures as Mormons everywhere else. In the broad context of religious development in Africa, Philip Jenkins, observes, the LDS Church is "extraordinarily unusual, and probably unique." Why? "It is one of the very last churches of Western origin that still enforces Euro-American norms so strictly and that refuses to make any accommodation to local customs. Missionaries have resolutely refused to draw on the

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<sup>25</sup> Jacobson, *et al.*, "Black Mormon Converts," 334-35.

<sup>26</sup> R. Phillips, "Rethinking the International Expansion of Mormonism," *Nova Religio* 10/1 (2006): 59-60.

<sup>27</sup> S.L. Bryant, H. Gooren, R. Phillips, and D. G. Stewart, Jr., "Conversion and Retention in Mormonism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*, ed. L.R. Rambo and C.E. Farhadian (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 768.

<sup>28</sup> An unusual feature of the Mormon sacrament is that it is served with water instead of wine or grape juice.

historical lessons offered by any other church.”<sup>29</sup> Ironically, given Mormonism’s history, refusal to accommodate local culture extends to polygamy. Polygamous men who wish to be baptized are required to divorce all but one wife.

Given Mormonism’s refusal to accommodate local customs, what is its appeal to Africans? To begin, the Book of Mormon has always set the LDS message apart from competing Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox, and indigenous churches wherever it has gone. Early converts saw the very existence of the Book of Mormon as prophetic proof that the final dispensation had arrived.<sup>30</sup> What was most significant was its ‘artifactual reality’ rather than its theological or historical content.<sup>31</sup> Terryl Givens explains:

The Book of Mormon has had a tremendous role to play in the establishment of the Latter-day Saint church, a role grounded largely in its obtrusiveness as miraculous artifact, portent of the last days, and sign of prophetic power. This role appears to have little or nothing to do with particular doctrines that are explicitly taught in the revealed record.<sup>32</sup>

The Book of Mormon continues to function this way wherever Mormon missionaries take their message. Potential converts are given copies and asked to pray about whether it is in fact from God. This gives them a tangible reason to consider the Church’s claims.

The existence of the Book of Mormon is presented as evidence that God continues to work through living prophets and apostles just as he did in the Bible. The Mormon message is peppered by stories about visions of God, visitations from angels, and miracles. Various charismatic groups make these sorts of claims, too, of course. But Mormonism is distinctive in that its stories have the patina of age while current prophets and apostles can trace their offices back to predecessors in the early nineteenth century who claimed to have been visited and ordained by John the Baptist and the apostles Peter, James, and John (D&C 13; 27:12; 128:20; Joseph Smith – History 1:68-70). New revelations have become rare (the last one was the 1978 priesthood revelation) and General Authorities are generally conservative. Because of this, affirming continuing revelation poses little risk that radical innovations will be introduced. Mormonism simultaneously presents charismatic evidence

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<sup>29</sup> P. Jenkins, “Letting Go: Understanding Mormon Growth in Africa,” *Journal of Mormon History* 35/2 (2009): 23. Responsibility for this should be assigned to Church leaders in Salt Lake City rather than missionaries. Unlike their Protestant and Catholic counterparts, Mormon missionaries have no discretion in such matters.

<sup>30</sup> T.L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture that Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 67.

<sup>31</sup> *By the Hand of Mormon*, 12, 80.

<sup>32</sup> *By the Hand of Mormon*, 196.

that God is active in the world and offers the comforts of stability and predictability.

Mormonism's fundamental truth claim is that it is a restoration of earliest Christianity. It alone possesses priesthood authority to act in God's name. Other churches have truth in various degrees, but only the LDS Church possesses the fullness of the gospel. In the religious marketplace churches make numerous contradictory claims for which they claim perspicuous biblical support. How is the typical layperson to adjudicate these claims? Furthermore, many churches are led by men and women who seem more concerned with financial gain and personal fame than serving God. Mormon missionaries offer an alternative solution to Christianity's chaos. Potential converts are encouraged to pray and ask God which is the only true church led by prophets authorized by God and whose congregations have no paid clergy. All of this can be very attractive to people looking for assurance and certainty. The LDS Church claims authority that can settle doctrinal disputes and converts don't need to fear that they are being targeted by charlatan preachers who hope to enrich themselves.

Finally, among other things that could be mentioned, Mormon teachings about family and ancestors seem to be especially attractive. Stable family life is actively encouraged and practically promoted by Church activities and the Family Home Evening program. Many indigenous African societies have religious rites in which ancestors are venerated or customs designed to provide for their needs in the afterlife. Catholic and Orthodox prayers for the departed excepted, traditional forms of Christianity have little room to accommodate concern for dead ancestors. Furthermore, Christian teaching about the necessity of faith in Christ for salvation and the traditional doctrine of hell raise worries about the fate of relatives who died without an opportunity to hear the gospel. According to Mormon teaching, however, the dead can be redeemed. In a postmortal spirit world everyone is given opportunity to hear and respond to the gospel. Baptism is not possible in a disembodied state, so the living must be baptized by proxy on behalf of the dead. This teaching motivates Mormons to conduct genealogical research and submit themselves to proxy baptism in a Temple and thereby facilitate the salvation of their dead relatives.

Some of the theological beliefs that attract African converts also help to explain their relatively high retention rates. More mundane considerations can also be mentioned. At the sociological level, there seems to be some prestige associated with being a Latter-day Saint that appeals to upwardly mobile individuals. These same converts tend to appreciate the orderliness of services and the Church's clear hierarchy. Mormons are expected to follow the Word of Wisdom (D&C 89) which prohibits alcohol, hot drinks, and tobacco. Many converts appreciate the social and health benefits that accrue to their families from this. The Church Welfare Plan provides food and sometimes financial assistance to members facing difficult times while promoting

self-reliance. The Perpetual Education Fund provides a means for African students to pursue university education who may not otherwise afford to do so. Not only does this help with convert retention, it ensures that there will continue to be many well-educated African Mormons capable of filling leadership positions. Finally, if someone stops attending the sacrament meeting, somebody will be sent to visit to make sure the person is okay and encourage him or her to be in church the following Sunday.

### **Mormonism's Challenge to Traditional Christianity in Africa**

Currently Mormons account for a little less than .04% of the continent's population. From a purely statistical perspective, African Mormonism is insignificant. Philip Jenkins predicts that over the next quarter century the African share of the LDS Church's worldwide membership will rise to perhaps 15%, likely more.<sup>33</sup> However, even with high growth rates, he sees "no likelihood that Mormons will account for as much as 1 percent of the continental population, at least in the next century."<sup>34</sup> He may be right about this; time will tell. Regardless, orthodox Christian educators and church leaders in Africa should not dismiss Mormonism as insignificant.

Every academic article on the history or sociology of Mormonism in Africa observes that the vast majority of converts come from Christian churches. For example, Allen states,

the fact that Christianity was a major religious tradition was essential to the ultimate success of the Latter-day Saints in black Africa.... [P]ractically all the new converts already worshipped Christ and saw in Mormonism the greater fullness of the gospel they already knew and loved.<sup>35</sup>

Mormonism's ability to gain a foothold in Africa also depended on the prior work of Protestant and Catholic missionaries who engaged in the meticulous work of translating the Bible into indigenous languages. The fact is, Mormonism's restorationist message simply doesn't make much sense or hold much appeal to people coming from non-Christian religious backgrounds. It can only gain a foothold in places where it is preceded by orthodox forms of Christianity. Mormon growth then comes primarily at the expense of traditional Christian churches.

Mormon teaching about the nature of God, the universe, Christ, humanity, and salvation significantly diverges from all forms of orthodox Christianity. Without awareness of these differences, Mormonism can easily be mistaken for a somewhat idiosyncratic Protestant or even evangelical denomination. The need to make clear distinctions is perhaps greatest in countries where Islam has a significant presence. For example, "In a society like Nigeria, the

<sup>33</sup> Jenkins, "Letting Go," 2.

<sup>34</sup> Jenkins, "Letting Go," 18.

<sup>35</sup> Allen, "Would-Be Saints," 210.

issue is not whether one is an Anglican or a Catholic or a Mormon, but whether one is a Muslim or a Christian.”<sup>36</sup> In the face of Islam, denominational identities are insignificant compared with basic Christian identity. This can be a very good thing when it promotes cooperation among orthodox Christian bodies. It is problematic when differences are minimized so much that heterodoxy is tolerated with respect to fundamental doctrinal issues.

Christian universities, theological institutes, and churches in areas where Mormonism is present would be prudent to periodically teach about the significant worldview differences that exist between Mormonism and all forms of orthodox Christianity. However, this should be done by people who have charitably studied Mormon history and theology for the sake of understanding its appeal and internal logic. Too often Christian critics present caricatured versions of Mormon doctrine and highlight the most salacious elements of the movement’s history. Presentations designed to shock may inoculate some people from converting to Mormonism, but through omission or commission, they can also bear false witness against their theological neighbor.

One apparently popular approach to educating people about Mormonism in an African context focuses on the Church’s past racial policies. For example, a tract produced by the Africa Center for Apologetics Research titled “The Mormon Church and the African”<sup>37</sup> consists almost entirely of quotations from LDS General Authorities that predate the 1978 revelation. These quotations attempt to explain why the priesthood was withheld from men of African ancestry or otherwise express racist sentiments. These quotations are undoubtedly shocking to many black Africans who are considering joining or have joined the LDS Church. Mormonism’s history on racial issues is certainly something potential converts should consider. However, it is inappropriate to quote these statements without frankly acknowledging that the sentiments they express have been roundly repudiated. For example, two months after the 1978 revelation Bruce R. McConkie, a prominent member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, gave a speech at Brigham Young University making this point.

It doesn’t make a particle of difference what anybody ever said about the Negro matter before the first day of June of this year, 1978. It is a new day and a new arrangement, and the Lord has now given the revelation that sheds light out into the world on this sub-

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<sup>36</sup> Jenkins, “Letting Go,” 7.

<sup>37</sup> Available online at <http://www.acfar.org/pdflibrary/ACFAR-Mormon-Church-African.pdf>.

ject. As to any slivers of light or any particles of darkness of the past, we forget about them.<sup>38</sup>

Prior to 1978 McConkie himself had offered explanations of the priesthood ban that would strike anyone of African ancestry as demeaning and even racist. After June 1978, however, McConkie distanced himself from those explanations<sup>39</sup>. Today the LDS Church's position is unambiguous:

[The] Church disavows the theories advanced in the past that black skin is a sign of divine disfavor or curse, or that it reflects unrighteous actions in a premortal life; that mixed-race marriages are a sin; or that blacks or people of any other race or ethnicity are inferior in any way to anyone else. Church leaders today unequivocally condemn all racism, past and present, in any form.<sup>40</sup>

Approaches like the one represented in the tract mentioned above highlight the fact that theories disavowed in this statement were uttered by Mormon prophets and apostles. The idea seems to be that these statements somehow prove these men could not have been genuine prophets and apostles. Perhaps. But Mormonism does not claim infallibility for its prophets or apostles. So, from an LDS perspective, racist statements by past leaders can be dismissed for what they are without undermining their calling as prophets and apostles.

Over the last year the LDS Church has begun publishing statements about controversial issues on its website designed to counter expose-style criticism by presenting the relevant information itself. These statements sometimes minimize or sidestep issues, but they are also refreshing for the degree to which they acknowledge the Church's history and mistakes. Reviewing a statement about the Church's past practice of polygamy, dissident Gary James Bergera observes that the statement leaves something to be desired but "the essays' candor is sometimes jarring, like a splash of ice-cold water. Clearly, the authors believe that 'hard facts' are a more effective palliative

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<sup>38</sup> "All Are Alike Unto God," Church Education System Religious Educators Symposium, Brigham Young University, 18 August 1978. Online: <http://speeches.byu.edu/?act=viewitem&id=1570>.

<sup>39</sup> The 1966 revision of McConkie's *Mormon Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, [orig. 1958]) said "negroes" were denied the priesthood in this life because they were "less valiant" in the preexistence and were "not equal to other races where the receipt of certain spiritual blessings are concerned" (s.v. *Negroes*). This was removed after 1978 and replaced with an explanation of the 1978 revelation and the full text of the First Presidency's letter. However, until it went out of print in 2010, *Mormon Doctrine* continued to state that negroes are descendants of the cursed line of Cain and Ham, that black skin is a mark of this curse, and that other races should not intermarry with them (s.v. *Cain, Egyptus, Ham, Caste System*).

<sup>40</sup> Statement on Race and the Priesthood, online at <https://www.lds.org/topics/race-and-the-priesthood?lang=eng>.

than spin.”<sup>41</sup> Bergera’s assessment could be applied to the statement on Race and the Priesthood from which I quoted above.

The expose approach also fails to reckon with the fact that there have always been black Mormons who have been able to reconcile their faith with the priesthood ban and, prior to 1978, explanations justifying it. The ways in which black Mormons in the United States negotiated their identity prior to 1978 makes for a fascinating study. Here I will simply report three findings from Jessie L. Embry’s research.<sup>42</sup>

- 1) They had a high level of tolerance of ambiguity, manifest as a willingness to suspend demands for explanation on racial matters.
- 2) They placed an emphasis on meeting spiritual needs, rather than social needs, through engagement with Mormonism.
- 3) They had a sense of personal peace that, however phrased, derives from faith that God has guided them to Mormonism and approves their individual choice to remain Mormon. This final reason is by far the most important.

If black Mormons in America who lived while the priesthood policy was in place could maintain their faith, black Mormons in Africa who have never lived under that policy will readily find ways to reconcile their faith with the Church’s record. Those who wish to give African Mormons reason to reconsider their faith in favor of orthodox forms of Christianity would do well to focus on issues other than (or at least in addition to) the LDS Church’s record on race. They should be mindful of the fact that many Christian denominations also have a poor record in this area. The key to reaching Mormons in Africa is clear, loving, consistent Biblical teaching that will graciously but boldly challenge false teaching and by the grace of God, through the power of the Holy Spirit, draw many to Christ.

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<sup>41</sup> G.J. Bergera, “Smith polygamy essays commendable, but still not the full story,” op-ed, *Salt Lake Tribune* 2 Nov. 2014. Online: <http://www.sltrib.com/opinion/1764594-155/essays-church-smith-polygamy-plural-mormon>.

<sup>42</sup> J.L. Embry, “Spanning the Priesthood Revelation (1978): Two Multigenerational Case Studies,” in *Black and Mormon*, ed. N.G. Bringham and D.T. Smith (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 63.

**Chart: Mormonism in Africa (2014)**

Country	Establishment <sup>1</sup>	Members	Congregations	Missions	Family History Centers	Temples <sup>3</sup>
Angola	1985	1,436	8	1		
Benin	1998	1,439	11	1	1	
Botswana	1990	3,021	8	1	2	
Cameroon	1993	1,359	6			
Cape Verde	1988	10,796	31	1	2	
Central African Republic	1991	187	1			
Cote d'Ivoire	1988	22,576	72	2	9	
Democratic Republic of the Congo	1986	37,909	130	2	11	(1)
Ethiopia	1992	1,807	6		1	
Ghana	1978 <sup>2</sup>	57,748	168	4	34	1
Kenya	1980	12,184	41	1	2	
Lesotho	1988	838	2		1	
Liberia	1987	8,081	22	1	2	
Madagascar	1989	9,826	38	1	1	
Malawi	1992	1,653	8			
Mauritius	1982	442	2			
Mozambique	1999	6,900	20	1	2	
Namibia	1972	775	2		1	
Nigeria	1978 <sup>2</sup>	118,139	378	5	45	1
Republic of the Congo	1991	5,787	16	1	2	
Reunion	1979	903	4		2	
Rwanda	NA	221	3			
Sierra Leone	1988	13,078	30	1	2	
South Africa	1853	59,385	154	3	61	1 (+1)
Swaziland	1985	1,693	4		2	
Tanzania	1992	1,263	6		1	
Togo	1997	2,307	12		1	
Uganda	1990	12,380	26	1	2	
Zambia	1992	2,758	12	1	2	
Zimbabwe	1930s	25,001	60	1	4	
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>421,892</b>	<b>1,281</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>193</b>	<b>3 (+2)</b>

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**Data Source:** <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/facts-and-statistics/> (Oct. 2, 2014)

<sup>1</sup> The date of establishment is the year in which fulltime LDS missionaries arrived in the country or a local congregation was established.

<sup>2</sup> Beginning in the 1950s, locals in Nigeria and Ghana founded numerous unofficial Mormon churches whose members were not incorporated into the Church until 1978.

<sup>3</sup> Active temples: Johannesburg, RSA (1985); Accra, Ghana (2004); Aba, Nigeria (2005). Announced for construction: Kinshasa, DRC and Durban, RSA.