

The perseverance of black LDS Church members

By [Patrick Mason](#)

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[“Race and the Priesthood”](#) became a sensation within the Mormon community and beyond recently. This despite it having been inconspicuously posted as the latest of dozens of alphabetically arranged entries under [Gospel Topics](#) on the website of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

It is the most straightforward official acknowledgment given by the LDS Church that “for much of its history—from the mid-1800s until [1978](#)—the Church did not ordain men of black African descent to its priesthood or allow black men or women to participate in temple endowment or sealing ordinances.” Though a handful of black men were ordained to the LDS priesthood during founding prophet Joseph Smith’s lifetime, Brigham Young announced the ban in 1852—22 years after the founding of the church, and eight years after Smith’s death. Subsequent LDS Church leaders maintained the ban by citing precedent.

The article disputes any notion that the ban was rooted in correct Christian (or Mormon) teaching, and emphasizes that, as [the Book of Mormon states](#), “all are alike unto God,” including both “black and white,” and that God “inviteth them all to come unto him and partake of his goodness.” Furthermore, the article disavowed many of the theories that had emerged over the decades to explain the ban or from where it came, including distinctively Mormon versions of the [myth of Ham](#) (and/or Cain). “Church leaders today,” the article emphatically affirms, “unequivocally condemn all racism, past and present, in any form.”

For [scholars of the subject](#), nothing in the article was new. The forthright treatment of it, however, including repudiating myths that had been used to legitimate the ban, was a matter of rejoicing for many longtime advocates of racial equality within Mormonism.

The heroes of this story are not the church leaders and historians who wrote and approved the article, though they should be commended. The heroes are not the church leaders who overturned the ban in 1978, though they were courageous

enough to listen to the voice of God's Spirit.

The real heroes are those black members of the LDS Church who refused to leave despite being afforded second-class status, whose presence testified to the inconvenient truth of the failure of leaders to conform fully to Christ's teachings of love and inclusion. The prophetic presence of black Latter-day Saints from the Church's earliest years forced a sometimes recalcitrant white leadership and membership to ask hard questions about what it means for God to be the Father and Jesus Christ the Savior of all humanity, as they had always proclaimed from the pulpit.

The real heroes of the story are women such as [Jane Elizabeth Manning James](#), a free black woman who was baptized into the LDS Church in the early 1840s and then traveled with a small group of black converts from Connecticut to Illinois in winter, the last 800 miles on foot. "We walked until our shoes were worn out, and our feet became sore and cracked open and bled until you could see the whole print of our feet with blood on the ground," James recounted in a brief autobiography several decades later. James walked to Utah with the Mormon pioneers in 1847 and remained a devoted member of the Church until her death in 1908, outliving its first five prophets. Upon her death Church leaders recognized James as a pillar of faithfulness—after having denied her access to Mormonism's most sacred temple rituals by virtue of her race.

The prophetic presence of those who persevered, who persisted, who protested, never to receive their due in their lifetimes, stands as a testimony to hope and to the long moral arc of justice, in Martin Luther King Jr.'s language. The Jane Jameses of the world embody the query of the fiery antebellum black pamphleteer [David Walker](#) to Christians of his day:

"Of what kind can your religion be? Can it be that which was preached by our Lord Jesus Christ from Heaven? I believe you cannot be so wicked as to tell him that his Gospel was that of *distinction*. What can the American preachers and people take God to be?"

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