

## First Responses

The word spread like lightning through official Church channels, over radio and television, and by word of mouth. In some heavily Mormon communities, the telephone circuits became so overloaded that it was nearly impossible to get a call through. Exultation, gratitude, excitement, and other emotions competed for place.

When Elder Dunn arrived at a board of directors meeting right after the temple meeting, it was obvious that he had been weeping.<sup>206</sup>

At lunchtime, Heber Wolsey went home to share the news with his wife, Fay. She said she had received a call from his office and “when you get back to your office you’re going to have a surprise.” Heber recounts:

On returning to the office, I opened the door and saw Darius Gray [a black LDS businessman and good friend] looking fondly out the window at the Salt Lake Temple. He rushed to me, and we threw our arms around each other and wept for gratitude and joy. When we regained a little composure, I whispered, “I never thought . . .”

“I always knew,” said Darius. “I just didn’t know if it would happen on this side of the veil.”

“. . . in our lifetime!”

Darius looked at me, then out the window at the temple, and then at me again. He closed his eyes, opened them slowly, and said softly, “God is good.”<sup>207</sup>

Max Pinegar, president of the Language Training Mission (later renamed the Missionary Training Center), had an appointment with Elder Packer that morning. Elder Packer arrived late for the appointment and said, “Come sit by me,” then handed him the press release. To Max’s tears, he said, “This means that you will be teaching black missionaries at the LTM.” Elder Packer bore personal witness of the correctness of the change. Knowing that the LTM would be in commotion, Max got permission to

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206. Arrington, *Diary*, June 18, 1978, quoting Bill Pulsipher.

207. Heber Wolsey, foreword to Margaret Blair Young and Darius Aidan Gray, *One More River to Cross* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 2000), xiii; Darius Gray to author, June 16, 2000; Heber G. Wolsey, interview by author, September 8, 2000. Wolsey recalls Gray saying, “I always knew,” but Gray says he thought priesthood would have to come after this life. Gray had been unwilling to believe rumors flying around the Church Office Building that announcement of a revelation was imminent until he had personally confirmed it with President Kimball’s office. Young and Gray, *Last Mile*, 418. Costanzo, “Group Marks 20 Years of Black Priesthood,” B2; Gray to author.

call a mission conference for that evening. They parted without ever having dealt with the issues of their planned meeting.<sup>208</sup>

Rick Vernon, a neighbor of the Kimballs, was working at a bank; he received an emotional call about 11:30 a.m. from Elder Hinckley's secretary, a personal friend. Now he understood why President Kimball had seemed withdrawn.

While Camilla was working in the garden in the late morning, she heard the telephone ring and came in to answer it. Her daughter, Olive Beth, asked excitedly, "Have you heard the news?"

"What news?"

"About the revelation that all worthy men can receive the priesthood!"

Camilla sat down on the floor and wept in joy and relief—joy for the revelation and relief for her husband. She understood now what had weighed so heavily on Spencer's mind. She had seen him so distraught only one other time.<sup>209</sup> Spencer had always maintained strict confidentiality where Church business was concerned. She sometimes humorously complained that he couldn't remember what was confidential and what was not, so he solved the problem by never telling her anything. She had to read about new developments in the *Church News*.<sup>210</sup>

Camilla went into the bedroom and poured out her heart in a prayer of gratitude and in desire that this development would not burden Spencer with new controversy. She worried that it might cause a schism in the Church, that there would be those who could not accept a change.<sup>211</sup> Her first thought was that Spencer's anxiety had arisen from fear of possible schism, but she later concluded that his intensity stemmed rather from his

208. Max Pinegar, interview by author, June 10, 1996.

209. Camilla, interview. The other occasion was the 1943 excommunication of Apostle Richard R. Lyman.

210. She sometimes grumbled a little, "How is it that I have to hear about things like this on the radio?" Paul H. Dunn, interview, August 8, 1996, quoting Spencer W. Kimball. Bruce McConkie had at least intimated to his wife that something significant was going to happen: "You'll be surprised." Olive Beth Kimball Mack, interview by author, March 6, 1997, quoting Amelia Smith McConkie. It was Elders Perry and McConkie, not Spencer, who later related to Camilla the intense spiritual experience in the temple. Similarly, Spencer had never talked to her about his spiritual experience on the mountain in Colorado at the time of his call. Camilla, interview. See Kimball and Kimball, *Spencer W. Kimball*, 192–95.

211. "Conversations with Camilla," videocassette, interview by *This People*, February 27, 1985; see Edward L. Kimball, *Journal*, April 25, 1982, and February 27, 1985.

deep desire to receive some sort of manifestation confirming the decision he had arrived at.<sup>212</sup>

Spencer tried soon afterward to call Camilla with the news, but she was back in the garden and did not hear the telephone. He then called Olive Beth to ask if she knew where her mother was. Then he hesitated, as if wondering what he should tell her, so Olive Beth went on, “I just heard the wonderful news. It is marvelous!”

Spencer responded, “It is the most earthshaking thing that has happened in my lifetime.”<sup>213</sup>

That evening the story led off NBC News. That afternoon and the next morning the story ran on the front page of major newspapers across the country—the *New York Times*, *Boston Globe*, *Washington Post*. *Time* and *Newsweek* stopped their presses to include the news in their weekly runs.<sup>214</sup> Most newspapers reported neutrally: “The Mormon Church announced Friday a revelation from God will give its priesthood to all worthy male members.” Some commentators scorned the “convenience” of a “revelation” that allowed a way out of an intolerable bind, but others noted accurately that it had been some years since any significant demonstrations against BYU and the Church had occurred. External pressure was the lowest it had been for years.<sup>215</sup>

Because Church leaders declined to comment, reporters began to interview men and women on the street for reactions, NAACP officials, and leaders of other local churches. The responses were almost uniformly



President Kimball with his wife, Camilla Eyring Kimball, 1974. Courtesy Edward L. Kimball.

212. Camilla, interview.

213. 1978 Draft.

214. 1978 Draft. Stephen W. Stathis, “Mormonism and the Periodical Press: A Change Is Underway,” *Dialogue* 14 (Summer 1981): 51–52.

215. Janet Brigham, “To Every Worthy Member,” *Sunstone* 3 (July/August 1978): 14.



positive. The media next turned to black members of the Church, who proved to be articulate and devoted, fielding questions—often barbed—with tact, patience, and humility. An elderly lifetime member said, “We have all waited for this, but I didn’t think it would come in my lifetime.”<sup>216</sup> Monroe Fleming, expressing his happiness, said, “It’s like not feeling you’re a guest in your father’s house anymore.”<sup>217</sup> Robert Stevenson said, “After hearing the news, I called my wife at work and told her to come home immediately. When she was home I told her the news and she broke into tears and laughter at the same time. We are already planning our temple marriage.”<sup>218</sup> Joseph Freeman said, “This is something we’ve waited a long time for,” though he had never been primarily concerned with the question of priesthood. “I knew for sure that this was Christ’s church. . . . I felt certain that the time would come . . . when I would be able to hold the priesthood.”<sup>219</sup>

The news brought nearly universal rejoicing among members, both because of the extension of blessings to worthy families who had been denied them, but also because it illustrated in dramatic fashion the Church teaching that revelation continues to the present. As the news spread through Utah and beyond, people embraced and cried and rejoiced. As with such events as Pearl Harbor and the John F. Kennedy assassination, Latter-day Saints remember where they were and what they were doing when they heard the news.<sup>220</sup>

A reporter who came from a local television station to the press conference had been somewhat antagonistic to the Church. When he was told to cover an “extremely important announcement” at Church headquarters, he and a cameraman ran the several blocks to the Church Office Building. Breathless, he received a copy of the announcement from hands shaking in excitement.

He said later, “I felt that I was being a witness to history. I remember being emotional. I sensed a lot of happiness at the Church offices . . . a great burden being lifted. There was a sense of joy; people were genuinely thrilled.” He understood then that the Mormons had not been acting out

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216. Lucille Bankhead, quoted in “Tears Tell Feelings of Black Members,” *Deseret News*, June 10, 1978, A3.

217. Monroe Fleming, quoted in “Tears Tell Feelings,” A3.

218. Robert L. Stevenson, quoted in David Liggett, “Former Black ASBYU Executive Excited about New Opportunities,” (BYU) *Daily Universe*, June 9, 1978, 4.

219. Freeman, *In the Lord’s Due Time*, 67.

220. Lester E. Bush Jr., “Introduction,” *Dialogue* 12 (Summer 1979): 9; Brigham, “To Every Worthy Member,” 12.

of bigotry, as he supposed, but out of principle. “I experienced a change in feelings toward the Church that day.” The exultant reactions of the Public Communications staff members and others he interviewed on the street persuaded him, as years of explanation and protestation had not. He rushed back to his station and personally read on the air the bulletin: “God has spoken to the prophet of the Mormon Church.”<sup>221</sup>

Mary Frances Sturlaugson, a young black woman, recorded that in a downtown office a friend told her the news. She said, “Please don’t joke with me about something like that.”

At that instant a young man who had been talking on the phone stood up and, with his fists stretched above his head, shouted, “All right!”

Cold chills went completely through my body. All I could say was, “I don’t believe it’s happened.” An older man beside me kept repeating, “I’ll be darned, I’ll be darned.”

As I walked outside, crying like a happy kid at Christmastime, horns were honking like crazy. I stopped for a red light and a car pulled up. The driver asked me if I had heard what he had just heard. I half mumbled and half nodded a disbelieving yes. He whooped and started blowing his horn as he drove off. When I arrived at my apartment my roommates ran out to meet me, and we jumped up and down screaming with joy. Finally we went inside and each said a prayer, sobs punctuating every one.<sup>222</sup>

In Brazil, Helvécio Martins returned home from work to find his wife Rudá extremely excited. “I have news, amazing news!” Her friend had received a telephone call from the United States about the announcement. Helvécio could not respond. Could it be true? A rumor? Then the telephone, which had been out of service because of nearby construction, suddenly rang and a call from a friend in Salt Lake City confirmed the news.<sup>223</sup>

The wedding invitations for the Martinses’ son, Marcus, had already been distributed when the announcement came. But he and his fiancée,

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221. Lorry E. Rytting to author, April 18, 1990, and June 12, 1990, from reporting his March 4, 1990, interview with Bill Brown, then a Dallas TV reporter, and Rytting’s own observations in the Public Communications Department; Brigham, “To Every Worthy Member,” 12.

222. Sturlaugson, *A Soul So Rebellious*, 65–68.

223. Martins, *Autobiography*, 68; Hart, “Eager to Serve on Lord’s Timetable,” 6, 12; Gibbons, *Spencer W. Kimball*, 293. Brother Martins became the first black mission president (Brazil Fortaleza Mission) in 1987, and the first black General Authority in 1990. “Elder Helvécio Martins of the Seventy,” 106; Martins, *Autobiography*, 115. The first stake where all the priesthood leaders were black was organized in Nigeria in 1988. *1989–1990 Church Almanac* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1988), 323 (May 15, 1988).



This photograph was taken in the Martins living room in Rio de Janeiro the day Marcus left for his mission. Among the family and friends shown are Marcus (*standing, left*); his future wife, Mirian Barbosa (*seated, next to Marcus*); Mirian's mother, Gloria Barbosa (*also seated*); Marcus's father, Helvécio (*standing, center*); and Mirian's father, Manoel Barbosa Filho (*standing, right*). Courtesy Marcus H. Martins.

Mirian Abelin Barbosa, decided to postpone the wedding because he now could serve a mission. He became the first black missionary to be called after the revelation and served in the Brazil Porto Alegre Mission.<sup>224</sup>

Twenty-six-year-old Joseph Freeman, a black member of the Church for five years, rose the morning of June 9 knowing that the lawn of his home in Salt Lake Valley needed watering and weeding. The insistent ringing of the telephone brought him in from the yard, and a white friend asked, "Have you heard? Well, listen! President Kimball has had a revelation—about your people, the blacks."

Waiting for the punch line of what he assumed was a bad joke, Joseph kept calm.

"Turn on the TV and see for yourself," the friend insisted.

224. Martins, *Autobiography*, 68–73. 1979 *Church Almanac* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1979), 6. Soon afterward Jacques M. G. Jonassaint, of Haiti, was called to the Florida Spanish Mission, and Mary Sturlaugson, of Provo, Utah, went to the Texas San Antonio Mission as the first African American woman missionary. Golden A. Buchmiller, "3 Black Members Called on Missions," *Church News*, September 16, 1978, 5.



Joseph telephoned the Church switchboard, and the operator put him through to the First Presidency's office. A secretary told him, "Yes, Brother Freeman, what you've heard is true." On Sunday, June 11, Joseph Freeman became the first black man in Utah to be ordained to the priesthood.<sup>225</sup> Being first made him an instant celebrity, and he was deluged with interview requests from *Time*, *Ebony*, *People*, writers, television news commentators, national television shows, and disk jockeys with call-in shows. Church meetings and firesides booked him six months in advance. Sometimes he had three or four appointments in a single Sunday.<sup>226</sup>

New York lawyer George H. Mortimer recalled:

I was working in the public search room at the Patent Office in Washington, D.C. . . . The clerk had a radio playing and as I walked past the little office I heard the announcer say, "The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has just made public a revelation that Negroes may now hold the Priesthood." I will always remember the thrill. . . . The following Sunday I was in Manhattan . . . [and] every black member over 12 years of age [was ordained] to an appropriate office in the Priesthood. The joy expressed in the faces . . . is indescribable.<sup>227</sup>

A week after the announcement, Ruffin Bridgeforth, leader of Genesis, had still not been ordained because his local leader with that responsibility was out of town. Elder Packer, discussing the situation with President Kimball, asked whether Brother Bridgeforth might properly be ordained a high priest rather than an elder in light of his long and faithful service. After pondering the question, President Kimball said, "Yes, that's right. You do that." After Brother Bridgeforth was ordained, he asked Elder Packer to give his wheelchair-bound wife, Helena, a priesthood blessing. Elder Packer later recalled, "I laid my hands on her head and just as I was to speak, I thought, 'Ruffin, you can now give this blessing.' And when he

225. It may be that another man was ordained to the Aaronic priesthood in Guam sooner than Joseph Freeman, because in Guam, on the other side of the international dateline, it was Sunday while it was still Saturday in Utah. L. Brent Goates to author, March 17, 1998, referring to William W. Cannon, *Beachheads in Micronesia* (Salt Lake City: Privately published, 1997), 102–3.

226. Freeman, *In the Lord's Due Time*, 1–2, 106–10. Within two weeks, he and his wife went to the temple for their endowments. Elder Monson sealed them and their two sons. Others also ordained that first Sunday were Jose Ramon Diaz of the San Juan (Puerto Rico) Branch and Robert Lang of Los Angeles. Brother Lang and his wife were reportedly the first to be sealed in the temple. "Blacks Talk about Membership in the LDS Church," *Provo Daily Herald*, June 5, 1988, 22.

227. George H. Mortimer, interview by author, undated but after Spencer W. Kimball's death.



President Kimball with the first two Ghanaian missionaries, Samuel Bainson and Crosby Sampson-Davis. Both missionaries served in the England Manchester Mission. Courtesy Emmanuel Abu Kissi.

began that blessing—and he needed no coaching—by the authority of the Melchizedek Priesthood, that . . . was a moment in Church history.”<sup>228</sup>

Spencer attended Helena’s funeral in 1980. Ruffin said of him, “What manner of man is this who can take away my sadness?”<sup>229</sup>

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228. Tate, *Boyd K. Packer*, 227–28; Young and Gray, *Last Mile*, 417, 422; R. Scott Lloyd, “Ruffin Bridgeforth, First Black High Priest, Eulogized as a Pioneer,” *Church News*, April 5, 1997, 7; Lloyd, “Revelation Rewarded Those Who Waited,” 4–5, quoting Elder Packer’s remarks at Ruffin Bridgeforth’s funeral, March 26, 1997.

229. Margaret Young to author, July 29, 2002, quoting taped interview with Ruffin Bridgeforth in 1996.