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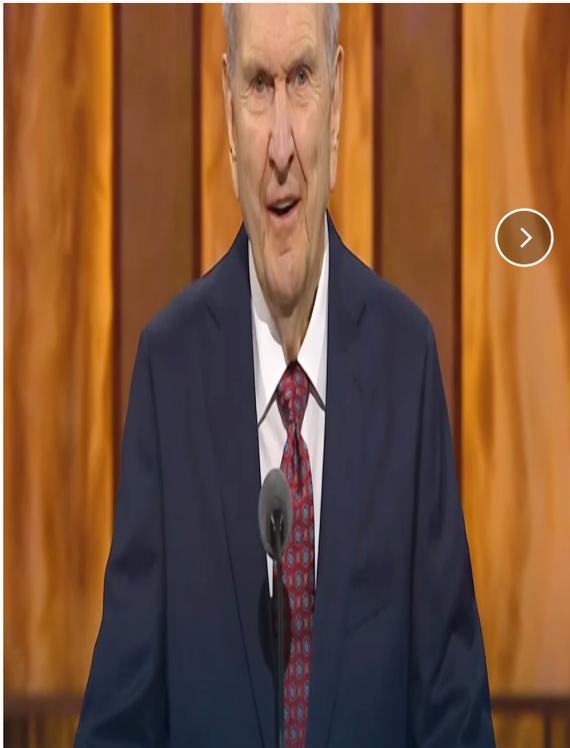
By BRADY McCOMBS October 3, 2020



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SALT LAKE CITY (AP) — Top leaders from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints urged members Saturday to root out racism and make the faith an “oasis of unity” while also decriing violence at recent racial injustice protests they said amounted to “anarchy.”

A church leader also offered guidance ahead of next month’s presidential election: Peacefully accept the results.

The election advice from Dallin H. Oaks, the second-highest-ranking leader of the faith, came



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November's results and
tries to calm doubts about

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Oaks didn't mention Trump by name, but referenced teachings from church founder Joseph Smith for members to follow laws where they live.

"It means that we obey the current law and use peaceful means to change it. It also means that we peacefully accept the results of elections," Oaks said. "We will not participate in the violence threatened by those disappointed with the outcome. In a democratic society, we always have the opportunity and the duty to persist peacefully until the next election."

In the same sweeping speech at the signature conference of the faith known widely as the Mormon church, Oaks said peaceful protests are protected by the U.S. constitution but spoke out forcefully against actions at recent rallies that he said go beyond what is protected by law.

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the government's
legitimate police powers.”

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“The constitution and laws contain no invitation to revolution or anarchy.”

The speech was delivered at a conference being held in Salt Lake City without attendees because of the pandemic and when many members are living through a reckoning over racial injustice, especially in the U.S. following the May police killing of Black man George Floyd.

Oaks tried to strike a balance between preaching unity and obedience to the faith's 16.6 million adherents worldwide. He called on members to help root out racism against people of all cultures.

“This country should be better in eliminating racism, not only against Black Americans ... but also against Latinos, Asians, and other groups,” Oaks said. “This nation’s history of racism is not a happy one and we must do better.”

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governing panel called the
Quorum of the Twelve

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become a big tent for people of all racial and cultural backgrounds.

“With our all-inclusive doctrine, we can be an oasis of unity and celebrate diversity,” Cook said.

Neither Oaks nor Cooks mentioned the church’s past ban on Black men in the lay priesthood, a prohibition rooted in the belief that black skin was a curse. The ban stood until 1978 and lingers as one of the most sensitive topics in the faith’s history.

The church disavowed the ban and the reasons behind it in a 2013 essay — explaining that it was enacted during an era of great racial divide that influenced the church’s early teachings. But the church has never issued a formal apology for the ban, a sore spot for some members.

The Utah-based religion doesn’t provide ethnic or racial breakdowns of its members, but scholars say Black members make up a small portion of followers.

Members of African descent account for at



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make up 3-5% of U.S.
members, according to

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numbers with the
nonprofit Cumorah
Foundation.

Estimating how many
members are Latino or
Asian is much more
difficult, Martinich said.

The pleas for unity echoed
messaging from church
President Russell M.
Nelson who, since taking
over in 2018, has preached
for racial harmony and
mutual respect. Nelson
has launched a formal
partnership with the
NAACP.

The church grew more
diverse in 2018 when it
selected to the previously
all-white Quorum of the
Twelve the first-ever Latin
American apostle, Ulisses
Soares, and the first-ever
apostle of Asian ancestry,
Gerrit W. Gong. There are
still no Black men on the
panel.

Saturday's conference is
the second one held this
year without an audience.
In April, a similar event
marked the first time since
World War II that the
conference was held
without attendees.

The faith's top leaders sat
six feet apart on a stage



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speaking, each sitting in
elegant dark red chairs

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the 96-year-old Nelson.

Gong was not there alongside fellow leaders because he might have been exposed to the coronavirus and stayed home, church officials said. His speech was prerecorded.

The conference normally attracts some 100,000 people to the church conference center in Salt Lake City.

Addressing the pandemic, church leaders said it will help people grow spiritually.

“We are here on earth to be tested, to see if we will choose to follow Jesus Christ, to repent regularly, to learn, and to progress,” Nelson said.

In his comments about politics, Oaks preached civility but followed long-standing precedence for church leaders to remain politically neutral.

He spoke on the same day that Kamala Harris — the running mate of Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden — toured a church history site in Salt Lake City after landing in the state ahead



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“In a democratic

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proposed candidates and policies,” Oaks said.

“However, as followers of Christ we must forego the anger and hatred with which political choices are debated or denounced in many settings.”

While church leaders sometimes weigh in about what they consider crucial moral issues, they are careful not to endorse candidates or parties.

Church members have historically leaned heavily Republican, but the GOP’s grip on the faith’s voters has slipped slightly under President Donald Trump, according to the Pew Research Center.

During the 2016 presidential election, the church defended religious liberty after Trump suggested banning Muslims from entering the U.S.

Church leader Patrick Kearon made a brief mention of the current political climate in the conference’s opening prayer when he said, “We yearn for a return to grace, dignity and civility in public life.”



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