

BLACK, WHITE, OR BROWN? RACIAL PERCEPTIONS AND THE PRIESTHOOD POLICY IN LATIN AMERICA

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THE GREAT DIASPORA CAUSED BY THE SLAVE TRADE forcibly brought about 11.2 million Africans to the Americas. Less than half a million of them came to the United States. That means the remaining 95 percent of slaves went south to ports in Mexico, the Caribbean, the Atlantic coast of Central America, northwestern South America, Brazil, and Argentina.¹ Unlike the United States, where for much of the country's history strict miscegenation laws kept blacks from assimilating into society, in Latin America the intermixing of Africans, indigenous groups, and Europeans that occurred for more than five hundred years formed new peoples and cultures with ties to Africa. Today, in the nations that comprise Latin America, people of African descent make up an estimated one-quarter of the total population.²

In the twentieth century, as Mormon missionary efforts increased in Latin America, numerous Afro-Latinos joined The Church of Jesus

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¹Henry Louis Gates Jr, *Black in Latin America* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 2.

²George Reid Andrews, *Afro-Latin America, 1800–2000* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2004), 3.

Christ of Latter-day Saints. Until 1978, people of African ancestry were denied the priesthood and temple ordinances in the Mormon Church. The priesthood proscription did not always exist as such. During the 1830s and 1840s, African descendants Elijah Abel, Joseph T. Ball, and Q. Walker Lewis received the priesthood.³ Later in the 1850s, at the same time as pre-Civil War racial debates about the place of blacks in society intensified nationwide, Brigham Young, acting as both Utah territorial governor and president of the Church, determined the Church would no longer ordain black men to the priesthood. This decision came at a time when racism among white Americans was common, slavery was legal, interracial marriage was not accepted, and blacks represented the tiniest fraction of Mormon membership. Unchallenged for decades, by the time the Mormon Church expanded into Latin America, the racial priesthood policy had concretized to the point Church leaders thought it would require a revelation to reverse the restriction.⁴

For mission presidents, missionaries, and newly called local leaders, the ethnic complexity in Latin America presented serious challenges in trying to uphold the priesthood restriction. As investigators approached baptism and priesthood ordination, local leaders consistently faced the question: were those with dark skin the descendants of African slaves or the “Lamanites,” who, according to the Book of Mormon, inherited a “skin of blackness”?⁵ In Latin America, where race often incorporates socioeconomic factors in addition to skin tone, things were not entirely black and white, but overwhelmingly some shade of brown. Add to this the tendency of genetic traits to skip generations or manifest diversely even in siblings,

³Matthew L. Harris and Newell G. Bringham, *The Mormon Church and Blacks: A Documentary History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 19.

⁴“Race and the Priesthood,” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <https://www.lds.org/topics/race-and-the-priesthood?lang=eng> (accessed May 1, 2017). Following the Church’s recent statements, this article refers to the priesthood proscription as a policy. See also James Goldberg, “Witnessing the Faithfulness: Official Declaration 2,” in *Revelations in Context: The Stories Behind the Sections of the Doctrine and Covenants* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2016), 333.

⁵See 2 Nephi 5:21.

Church leaders soon discovered that the difficulties of determining race were legion.

What follows are stories of Church members and administrators who grappled with issues of priesthood eligibility in various locations throughout Latin America prior to 1978, giving voice to the experiences, struggles, and testimonies of those involved. Combined, they illustrate how perception often influenced priesthood ordination decisions among people of mixed backgrounds. While the policy was considered universal, as will be shown, implementation was local and varied. By subsuming the intricate relationship between ancestry, nationality, ethnicity, and personality into narrow racial categories, the priesthood restriction forced individuals to reimagine their complex identity in simplistic terms of black, white, or brown.

PUERTO RICO

"It is not yet for thee."

The history of blacks in Puerto Rico likely dates back to the first European contact. Almost certainly, some Africans were among crewmembers accompanying Christopher Columbus on his voyage to the island in 1493.⁶ Shortly thereafter, free black Juan Garrido joined the throng of Spanish conquistadors who invaded the island seeking out opportunities in the New World.⁷ The real influx of Africans, though, came as forced laborers after the decimation of the indigenous populations by infectious diseases spread by the Europeans and the brutality of the colonizers.⁸ Shocked at the rapid population decline of natives, the Spanish soon realized that African slaves might serve as a solution to the region's labor shortage. Conscripted mostly to toil in gold mines, tens of thousands of African slaves made their way to Puerto Rico until the late 1500s, when the ore deposits depleted and the slave trade subsided. Then, in the late 1700s, the influx of Africans spiked again when the Spanish Crown increasingly began investing in sugar plantations and the nascent coffee industry. After

⁶See Christopher C. Fennell, "Early African America: Archeological Studies of Significance and Diversity," *Journal of Archaeological Research* 19, no. 1 (2001): 8–9.

⁷Ricardo E. Alegría, *Juan Garrido: El Conquistador Negro en las Antillas, Florida, México y California* (San Juan: Centro de Estudios Avanzados de Puerto Rico y el Caribe, 1990), 29–31.

⁸Andrews, *Afro-Latin America*, 13.

Puerto Rico officially abolished slavery in 1873, the black population, often too poor to leave the island, gradually integrated into society. Today, scholars estimate that around 26 percent of Puerto Ricans have African ancestry.⁹

Puerto Rican José Ramon Díaz was baptized two weeks after meeting the LDS missionaries in Oxnard, California, in 1958. Because José had light skin and spoke Spanish, the missionaries never thought to discuss the priesthood restriction. A voracious reader of Church publications, José learned about the Church's stance on blacks and the priesthood through the talks of Church leaders but did not feel they pertained to him as a Puerto Rican.¹⁰ In March of the following year, José received his patriarchal blessing with promises to receive the priesthood "in its due time" and to have a family sealed for eternity. Shortly thereafter, José met with his bishop, who recommended him to receive the Aaronic Priesthood. José came to his ordination fasting. As the first counselor placed his hands on José's head to ordain him a priest, there was a knock at the door, and the counselor excused himself.¹¹ As the door closed, José claims the veil to the spirit world parted, and his great-grandmother stood in front of him. He had forgotten her from his early childhood. Her message was clear: she was black. Then he heard these words directed to him, "No, my son, it is not yet for thee."¹² Immediately, José realized the purpose of his great-grandmother's appearance.

When the counselor returned to the room a few moments later, tearfully José tried to explain to him that he should not be ordained. The counselor asked, "What! Why?" "Because I have black blood and I cannot receive the priesthood," José answered. The counselor replied, "How can you have black blood in your veins?" Unsure himself, but

⁹Juan C. Martinez Cruzado, "The Use of Mitochondrial DNA to Discover Pre-Columbian Migrations to the Caribbean: Results for Puerto Rico and Expectations for the Dominican Republic," *KACIKE*, Special Issue (2002): 3.

¹⁰José and Navidad Díaz, Oral History, interviewed by Lavar Skousen and Clinton D. Christensen, 2012, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City (hereafter cited as Church History Library).

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ibid.; Richard L. Millett, "A History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the Caribbean, 1977–1980, 1992," 50, Church History Library.

pondering his grandmother's appearance, José responded, "Enough not to receive the priesthood." Still the counselor did not believe him and suggested they visit the patriarch to settle the matter. To the patriarch, his own inspired words about José receiving the priesthood "in its own due time" made sense.¹³

Following this experience, José began to view himself as black. To the outside observer, however, José remained Hispanic, as he always had. Despite repeated attempts from others to persuade him otherwise, José was convinced in his own mind that he had African heritage. José's family eventually moved back to Puerto Rico. Service in the Church was still a part of his life even without the priesthood, though his uncompromising commitment to the message of his vision severely restricted which callings he could hold. When word of the priesthood revelation reached the island on June 9, 1978, José had been waiting for twenty years. The following Sunday at a district conference, Mission President Richard L. Millett ordained José to the office of elder in the priesthood.

How easily could José have been ordained in 1959 in California? The bishopric was willing to perform the ordinance and saw no obvious indicators that José had anything more than normal Latin roots. Even José himself had never before considered the possibility that he was black. If not for the spiritual manifestation and intervention by José's great-grandmother, he likely would have received the priesthood before the revelation like other Afro-Latino Saints.¹⁴

MEXICO

"Don't let this bother you."

All told, the Atlantic slave trade brought around two hundred thousand Africans to Mexico.¹⁵ Due to the sharp decline of the indigenous population, African slaves worked in a variety of occupations throughout the country, including in silver mines, on cattle ranches, and on sugar plantations. The greatest number of slaves made their way to the highlands around Mexico City, with other large concentrations

¹³José and Navidad Díaz, Oral History.

¹⁴José mentioned that after the 1978 revelation, some ordained Puerto Ricans informed him of their own suspicions that they had African lineage, but they had refrained from disclosing this to priesthood leaders. Ibid.

¹⁵Douglas Richmond, "The Legacy of African Slavery in Colonial Mexico, 1519–1810," *Journal of Popular Culture* 35, no. 2 (2001): 3.

living in coastal export cities.¹⁶ Of all the slaves brought to Mexico, only around a third of them were women. As male slaves settled in their new home and married available native women, their offspring were freed from slavery and lost their Africanness, since according to colonial law, the children of such unions inherited the legal status of the mother.¹⁷ Intermarriage quickly assimilated slaves into Mexican society, so much so that by 1803, Alexander Von Humboldt estimated that there were “less than 6,000 Negroes” in all of Mexico.¹⁸ Only in port cities like Acapulco and Veracruz, with their constant demand for African slaves as dockhands, did distinct groups of blacks remain.¹⁹

Benigno Cobos and his wife, María de la Cruz, enthusiastically welcomed the Mormon missionaries into their home when they arrived at their door in early 1958. The Church had only recently arrived in Veracruz, and American elders administered the small branch. After joining the Church, María de la Cruz immediately began serving in the branch while missionaries informed Benigno that due to his dark skin he could not hold any callings. In the eyes of the elders, Benigno was black; they blocked his priesthood ordination and even went as far as forbidding him from saying prayers in Church. Hiding his hurt from the other members and his family, he silently suffered for years while continuing to attend meetings despite the restrictions placed on his activity. After being publically reprimanded for the simple mistake of trying to help clean the sacrament trays, he pleaded with his wife, “Don’t let this bother you.”²⁰ For Benigno, his testimony trumped the mistreatment he received.

The Cobos family eventually moved to Mexico City to work in the Church school Benemérito de las Américas. There, local Mexican leadership became aware that Benigno had never received the priesthood. Unfazed by his dark complexion, his bishop ordained him an

¹⁶David M. Davidson, “Negro Slave Control and Resistance in Colonial Mexico, 1519–1650,” in *Maroon Societies: Rebel Slave Communities in the Americas*, ed. Richard Price (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 84.

¹⁷Richmond, “The Legacy of African Slavery in Colonial Mexico,” 10.

¹⁸Alexander Von Humboldt, *Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain*, ed. Mary Maples Dunn, trans. John Black (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1972), 85.

¹⁹Andrews, *Afro-Latin America*, 5.

²⁰María de la Cruz Rios Villegas, Oral History, interviewed by Pedro and Luisa María Gómez, 2015, Church History Library.

elder in 1973. Four years later in 1977, he made the long trip to be sealed to his family in the Mesa Arizona Temple.²¹ Benigno is one of several members presumed to be of African descent who received the priesthood before the 1978 revelation. Tellingly, his experience in the Church hinged on the racial perceptions of those around him. To the American missionaries in Veracruz, he was undoubtedly black. In Mexico City, fellow members only saw him as Mexican, brown like themselves.

HONDURAS

"You do not have black blood."

Blacks took a circuitous route to the Mosquito Coast of present-day Honduras and Nicaragua. In 1675, a large group of Africans survived the sinking of their slave ship when a group of Carib Indians rescued and provided them shelter on the Caribbean island of Saint Vincent. After intermarrying with the natives, their descendants became known as the "Black Caribs." Their community on Saint Vincent flourished as it continued to attract runaway slaves, but following the island's subjugation by the British, five thousand of the darkest members were exiled to the small island of Roatán off the coast of Honduras in 1797. Mercifully, the Spanish allowed them to settle on the mainland, and the twenty-five hundred Black Caribs who survived passage gave birth to a people now known as the Garifuna.²² Today there are around three hundred thousand Garifuna spread throughout Central America, Saint Vincent, and the United States.²³

Roberto Ocampo grew up in the rural Atlantic costal region of Honduras where his ancestors had made their home for at least a hundred years. Growing to be well over six feet tall with a dark complexion and features, Roberto appeared to those around him as an African descendant. Indeed, for centuries there had been a mixing of the indigenous tribes and the Garifuna along the Honduran coast. Roberto, however, never personally identified with a specific ethnic heritage. As a young man, Roberto and his brothers decided to leave

²¹Ibid.

²²Christopher Taylor, *The Black Carib Wars: Freedom, Survival and the Making of the Garifuna* (Oxford, England: Signal Books, 2012), 220–25.

²³See Tomas Alberto Avila, *Black Caribs-Garifuna, Saint Vincent's Exiled People, the Origin of the Garifuna: A Historical Compilation* (Providence, R.I.: Milenio Associates, 2009).

their village to join their father who worked in San Pedro Sula. There, missionaries first met Roberto in November 1969. Elder Ralph Dewsnup remembered, "Finding a memorable 'golden investigator' who embraced the message with uncommon eagerness. . . . His unbridled enthusiasm was rare in itself." More unusual, however, "making the contact more indelible in my memory was the fact that the young Robert Ocampo had a very dark skin color and his hair was black and kinky in appearance . . . I wondered whether the restrictions on priesthood ordination that existed at that time would extinguish his interest." Elder Dewsnup knew the issue of Roberto's race would be problematic. It would have to be addressed.²⁴

Before Roberto could be baptized, the missionaries discussed his perceived ethnicity among themselves. They eventually decided a leader should conduct the baptismal interview. Forty-year-old Milton E. Smith, son of then Church President Joseph Fielding Smith, was serving as mission president over Costa Rica and Honduras. President Smith remembered the interview: "This particular individual wanted to join the Church, but there was some question about whether he had black heritage . . . I couldn't see any reason why he shouldn't be baptized."²⁵ Roberto joined the Church in January 1970 in San Pedro Sula but soon detected that he was being treated differently. He recalled, "I noticed that all the others who had been baptized were receiving the priesthood, and I was not being ordained. So I went to ask the leaders for the reason I was not ordained to the priesthood." The missionaries and the mission president had neglected to include him in any of their previous conversations. The missionaries then explained to Roberto their belief that he was of African descent and ineligible to hold the priesthood. This troubled Roberto. He remembered, "During that time I said it was unjust that everyone else had the priesthood, and we could not have it. I thought they were making exceptions of people." Roberto prayed often. Eventually, he consulted his grandmother and she forcefully told him, "You do not have black blood."²⁶

²⁴Milton E. Smith Papers, Church History Library.

²⁵Milton E. Smith, Oral History, interviewed by Clinton D. Christensen and Wade Jewkes, 2014, Church History Library.

²⁶Roberto and Argentina Ocampo, Oral History, interviewed by Carlos Rivas and Clinton D. Christensen, 2014, Church History Library.

The missionaries again arranged an interview with the mission president. President Milton Smith described the simple meeting: "I felt comfortable with him. If more of an issue had been made, who knows, we would have lost a great leader too, if we'd been more cautious."²⁷ Roberto's simple statement that his family did not have black ancestry satisfied President Smith, and he personally ordained him an elder in February 1971. Despite the fact that Roberto's genealogical roots significantly overlapped with the Garifuna homeland, he saw himself as simply Honduran. Unlike Benigno Cobos's experience in Mexico, in this instance, leaders allowed Roberto's personal identification to take precedence over their own racial understandings.

One possible reason Church leaders determined to defer judgment on racial issues to locals in Honduras was previous imprudent attempts by American missionaries to enforce the priesthood ban. In 1962, for example, the Valladaras family in Tegucigalpa became inactive after missionaries baselessly accused them of being black. Racial tensions had been brewing in the small branch for some time as missionaries refused to approve priesthood advancements for men with questionable lineage. One missionary described the intense pressure he faced from Honduran leadership "to advance them, the men themselves are crying about it, and there are other members that don't have the priesthood for the same reason who think we should give it to them because we can't prove anything." Dismissing these voices, he concluded that at least two ordained members of the branch were black, stating in private, "They look pretty negro to me," puzzling over "how blind the elder that ordained them must have been."²⁸ When Stephen Boyden, the supervising elder and Honduras district president in 1962, learned of the departure of the Valladaras family, he informed the missionaries of the administrative nature of the matter and explained to them that it fell outside the purview of their calling. Harkening back to a personal conversation he had with Apostle Marion G. Romney when he visited Panama a year before, Elder Boyden determined to examine all such cases in detail before reaching any decision. Elder Romney admonished Elder Boyden then not to just pray about priesthood issues but also

²⁷Milton E. Smith, Oral History.

²⁸Letter, December 21, 1959, John Leon Sorenson Papers, Church History Library.

to investigate: "You remember Oliver Cowdery? He was told he had to study it out in his mind. . . . You've got to dig out the facts. The Lord isn't going to do your work for you." For Elder Boyden, this experience "ingrained in me a great respect for the process and also a respect for the individuality of every person that you just don't do it with a broad-brush stroke saying, 'You look like you're black to me.'" Immediately, Elder Boyden transferred the missionaries, and, after talking to the Valladaras family about their genealogy, discovered they were not African descendants. After an apology, the family swallowed their hurt feelings and returned to Church activity.²⁹

Another issue soon surfaced in San Pedro Sula. This time, the missionaries were accusing María Galindo Morales, the wife of the branch president, of being black. Her son, Gustavo, was turning twelve and was ready to be ordained to the Aaronic Priesthood. Elder Boyden again transferred the missionaries out of the area and asked the family for a month delay before the ordination. María was not certain of her genealogy but appeared to have African facial characteristics and very dark skin. María provided Elder Boyden with the names of her parents and her birthplace in the interior village of Juticalpa.

As Elder Boyden prepared to travel the 110 miles to the village of Juticalpa to investigate, a local judge warned him that bandits recently robbed and then murdered all the passengers of a bus traveling to that village. The judge insisted that he take his silver-plated pistol for the trip. Notwithstanding the danger, Elder Boyden realized the possible impact of his research into María's heritage. As the wife of the branch president and with many relatives in other prominent Church positions in Honduras, there was the fear that to leave the accusation of María's ethnicity unresolved would not only affect her family but could possibly unravel the leadership of other branches throughout the country. Consequently, Elder Boyden persisted in completing the trip and learned from local records that the Honduran government classified María's mother as "indigenous" and her father as a "foreigner." Questions lingered in Elder Boyden's mind about what exactly "foreigner" meant. European, Afro-Caribbean, or something else? To resolve the issue, Elder Boyden made a second long trip to another rural city where María's parents now lived. After

²⁹Stephen G. Boyden, Oral History, interviewed by Clinton D. Christensen, 2016, typescript, 20, Church History Library.

meeting with Santos and Anna Galindo, Elder Boyden provided the following description: "The mom was very, very dark, but she was total indigenous Indian, straight nose, high cheek bones, you know, just classic Indian, but dark. The dad was a little shorter and he was squatty, broad nose. He was Italian with curly hair, white skin as white as snow." He concluded that it was the confluence of these features that gave their daughter the "broad Italian nose" of her father and the "curly hair and dark skin of her mom." Elder Boyden continued, "And she was a Negro? No, she wasn't. She was Indian/Italian."³⁰

The crisis was averted. Elder Boyden's tenacity paid off and exposed the danger vigilante missionaries often presented in the implementation of the priesthood policy. In his mind, the burden of proof fell upon the Church and not the individual. Yet his diligent research would be difficult to replicate for every questioned member in Latin America. Years later for President Milton Smith, the word of Roberto Ocampo's grandmother was enough evidence. Over time, the enforcement of the priesthood restriction in Honduras evolved to the point that local leaders abstained from adjudicating ancestry, relying instead on the self-assessment of the members themselves.

Granting primacy to personal identification in questions about ancestry, however, only complicated priesthood eligibility. Roberto Ocampo, soon after becoming a bishop in 1977, began to reenvision his racial makeup. Now, "not so sure if what my grandmother told me was true," Roberto wrote to the First Presidency of the Church expressing his personal doubts about whether "he had no blood."³¹ The First Presidency instructed William R. Bradford, a Seventy overseeing the Church in Central America, to travel to Honduras, inform Roberto that his priesthood would be restricted, and call a new bishop in his stead. Bradford, dreading this "challenging assignment," purchased plane tickets but received an emergency phone call before he left. Elder Boyd K. Packer informed him "that day in the temple the Lord had ratified the pleading of the Prophet and the Twelve to allow all men, regardless of their race, to hold the priesthood" and if he had any outstanding cases to forget about them. Roberto Ocampo's blackness, real or imagined, no longer mattered.³²

³⁰Ibid, 40.

³¹Ocampo, Oral History; William R. Bradford, Oral History, interviewed by Justin R. Bray and Jared Feller, 2013, typescript, 31, Church History Library.

³²Bradford, Oral History, 31.

ECUADOR

"The Lord wants this brother to receive the priesthood."

Blacks first arrived in Ecuador in 1553 when a slave ship carrying a group of twenty-three Africans en route to Peru from Panama became shipwrecked along the northern coast of Ecuador. Fleeing into the jungle, this small black community expanded through intermarriage and a series of alliances with native communities. Coming to dominate the entire region, by 1599 this group had established the independent Republic of the Zambos (a term used to describe someone of mixed Native American and black ancestry), claiming to represent more than one hundred thousand citizens.³³ Other blacks came into Ecuador to work in agriculture and textile production primarily imported by Jesuits who believed importations of Africans would solve the local conflict between indigenous groups and the Spanish.³⁴ Manumission was officially granted in 1854, though slavery persisted in some regions until the 1880s. Though it is difficult to measure exact numbers of blacks living in the country today, somewhere in the neighborhood of one million African descendants call Ecuador home.³⁵

When Mormon missionaries arrived in Guayaquil, Ecuador, in 1966, the first thing they did after securing a place to worship was post a notice of their meetings in the local paper. That Sunday, when they arrived to open the building, to their surprise, a man was already waiting outside of the gate. In his hands was a well-used copy of the Book of Mormon. After greeting him, Guillermo Cuesta shared how he first discovered the Church as a young man in the United States. On the cusp of being baptized, family matters had forced him to

³³Norman E. Whitten Jr. and Diego Quiroga, "To Rescue National Dignity': Blackness as a Quality of Nationalist Creativity in Ecuador," in *Blackness in Latin America and the Caribbean: Social Dynamics and Cultural Transformations*, ed. Norman E. Whitten Jr. and Arlene Torres (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 1:79–80.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 81; Camilla Townsend, "In Search of Liberty: The Effort of the Enslaved to Attain Abolition in Ecuador, 1822–1852," in *Beyond Slavery: The Multilayered Legacy of Africans in Latin America and the Caribbean*, ed. Darién J. Davis (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 41 and 51.

³⁵Diego Quiroga, "Ecuador: Afro-Ecuadorians," in *Encyclopedia of the African Diaspora: Origins, Experiences and Culture*, ed. Carole Boyce Davies (Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, 2008), 2:412.

return to Ecuador. Though not a member, he had patiently waited for the Church to come to Ecuador and had taught the gospel to his wife and children. The only problem was that Guillermo looked black.³⁶

As part of the missionary discussions, the elders presented a special lesson prepared by the mission on the priesthood restriction and shared their concern with Guillermo that he appeared African.³⁷ Guillermo protested. He was not black, but rather of Lebanese descent. Satisfied by this answer, he was baptized, becoming one of the first members of the Church in Guayaquil. Around the same time, the missionaries came across another promising family while tracting who had initially expressed interest but who quickly became offended after learning about the priesthood restriction.³⁸ Proud of their African heritage, they refused to join a church that believed something they felt was so wrong. In the process of teaching this family, however, the missionaries learned they were Guillermo's immediate relatives and, at least in the eyes of the elders, undeniably African descendants. By this point, the missionaries had already recommended to their superiors that Guillermo receive the priesthood and be called as a counselor in the branch presidency. As "far and away" the member "best prepared spiritually, intellectually" to take over leadership of

³⁶Gilbert Wilburn, Oral History, interviewed by Jeremy Talmage, 2017, Church History Library.

³⁷See "Andes Mission: The Negroes," Church History Library.

³⁸Gilbert Wilburn, Oral History. The first missionaries encountered numerous problems with the priesthood restriction in Guayaquil. The branch pianist, Ingrid Miranda, refused to be baptized for some time over the issue. This was not entirely unexpected. In a 1946 report to the First Presidency about the possibility of sending missionaries to Ecuador, Frederick S. Williams, former mission president of the Argentine Mission who had travelled throughout South America, noted "the large percentage of Negroes being mixed with the Indians and whites" in Ecuador. See Proposed Plan for Activating and Extending the Missionary Work in Latin America, September 28, 1946, 4, Church History Library. Years later, J. Vernon Sharp, the original president of the Andes Mission, in a letter to the First Presidency about the possibility of opening missionary work specifically in Guayaquil mentioned, "Here the negro problem would be terrific since the great preponderance of the people seem to have negro blood." Andes Mission president's correspondence, 1960, J. Vernon Sharp, Letter to the First Presidency, September 21, 1960, Church History Library.

the branch, this new information jeopardized that plan.³⁹ Were the missionaries supposed to trust Guillermo or his family?

In a predicament, the elders asked Apostle Spencer W. Kimball who was visiting Guayaquil to interview Guillermo. On the morning of May 8, 1966, Elder Kimball met with Guillermo at the rented home that served as the church building. After what seemed like an eternity to the missionaries waiting outside, Elder Kimball emerged and told them simply, "I am satisfied that the Lord wants this brother to receive the priesthood."⁴⁰ Later that same day in the sacrament meeting, Kimball himself ordained Guillermo a deacon.⁴¹

Guillermo's ordination never solved the question of whether he was black. Had Elder Kimball exercised his prophetic gift to see in Guillermo's family tree and discern his true ancestry? At least as likely, the missionaries speculated, was the possibility that as an apostle Elder Kimball had received a special dispensation to bestow the priesthood regardless of race.⁴² The missionaries, grateful but surprised, struggled to make sense out of the fact that Elder Kimball had ordained a seemingly black man to the priesthood more than twelve years before the priesthood revelation. Since an apostle had personally given Guillermo the priesthood, missionaries and local leaders never questioned the validity of his ordination.

BRAZIL

"In this moment . . . I understood I had the lineage."

Portuguese sailors first discovered Brazil by accident in 1500 while attempting to catch favorable winds they hoped would swing their ships around the continent of Africa. Soon, after realizing Brazil's

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Ibid. Another missionary, Gregory Larson, remembers Elder Kimball's interaction with Guillermo very differently. According to Larson, Guillermo had already been ordained to the office of a teacher in the Aaronic Priesthood and Elder Kimball instead suspended his priesthood at their meeting. See Gregory R. Larson, *Mission Experiences*, circa 2008, Church History Library. Working against this version of the events is the fact that Kimball ordained Guillermo a deacon and, shortly thereafter, he did become first counselor in the branch presidency as planned.

⁴¹Guayaquil Branch General Minutes, 1966–1975, May 8, 1966, Church History Library.

⁴²Wilburn, Oral History.

suitability for sugar cane production, the Portuguese began to ship immense numbers of slaves to plantations along the northeastern coast. Over the course of time, slaves slowly made their way south as the economy shifted away from the sugar zones in the north to the gold mining and coffee plantations of central Brazil.⁴⁵ Finally, in 1888, Brazil outlawed the slave trade, the last nation in the Western Hemisphere to do so. In total, nearly five million slaves came to Brazil—around 43 percent of all slaves brought to the Americas.⁴⁴

Conditions for slaves in Brazil were particularly harsh. Due to Brazil's relative proximity to Africa, plantation owners often worked slaves to death, as it was cheaper to import replacements than it was to care for them.⁴⁵ The Portuguese Crown also initially balked at comprehensive colonization by forbidding whole families from emigrating, resulting in an overwhelmingly male European presence. Such unbalanced sex ratios led to social indifference toward slave rape, and the Portuguese mated with black and indigenous women at rates not seen elsewhere in Latin America.⁴⁶ This long and complicated history of racial mixing makes determining ethnicity today in Brazil especially difficult, evidenced by the fact that Brazilians have at least 134 different terms for gradations of skin color.⁴⁷

Unlike some other Latin American countries where the race issue caught Church leaders by surprise, they were acutely aware of the potential problems the priesthood policy presented in Brazil and expressed pessimism about the opportunities for growth with the restriction in place.⁴⁸ After the First Presidency called Rulon Howells to open up the Brazilian Mission in 1935, President J. Reuben Clark,

⁴⁵See Herbert S. Klein, *African Slavery in Latin America and the Caribbean* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1986), 60; Andrews, *Afro-Latin America*, 39.

⁴⁴Gates, *Black in Latin America*, 15.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 20.

⁴⁶Edward E. Telles, *Race in Another America: The Significance of Skin Color in Brazil* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006), 25.

⁴⁷Gates, *Black in Latin America*, 10, 223–24.

⁴⁸David O. McKay admitted to Rulon S. Howells in 1935 that the First Presidency had “been somewhat concerned about the negro problem as we shall have to face it there in South America. It is not an easy problem to handle.” See David O. McKay, Letter to Rulon S. Howells, June 29, 1935, Dorothy H. Ipsen Collection of Rulon S. Howells Missionary Papers, 1934–1949, Church History Library.

in a private conversation, told him, shaking his head, "You know, I'm quite concerned over the problems that you will have with the Negro in Brazil, because they are so dominant . . . the problem you'll have with the gospel and the Negro race . . . I don't know what you'll do."⁴⁹ At the time, there existed very little official instruction on how the policy should be enforced. As President Howells noted, "The Church leaders, in general, when they send a mission president out, leave him on his own. They bless him with help from the Holy Ghost and let him direct the affairs of that mission."⁵⁰ In fact, when Howells left to oversee the Church in Brazil, he received absolutely no training concerning what to do about the racial restriction.

For the first decade of the Church's existence in Brazil, leaders purposefully confined missionary efforts to German immigrants in the south of the country, knowing that northern expansion while the priesthood restriction was in place would be challenging.⁵¹ However, after nationalist enthusiasm during the Second World War swept the country and the government outlawed the use of all non-Portuguese languages in public, it became apparent that the Church would have to seek out converts from the Portuguese-speaking majority to survive. President Howells, who returned as mission president in 1949, recalled extensively examining the priesthood issue at that time: "We read up as much as we could about it and studied and prayed about it and I thought that it would be better not to teach the Negro the gospel." As a result of this decision, President Howells instituted a concerted program to avoid contacting Afro-Brazilians. He explained, "So whenever the missionaries would go tracting and a Negro person would answer the door they would just ask a question as to where someone else lived so that they wouldn't offend them and try to avoid teaching the gospel to them."⁵² His successor as president of the Brazilian Mission, Asael Sorenson, apparently followed this decision lockstep. Speaking about missionary efforts, he commented, "So when they

⁴⁹Rulon S. Howells, Oral History, interviewed by Gordon Irving, 1973, typescript, 19, Church History Library.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 82.

⁵¹Mark L. Grover, "Religious Accommodation in the Land of Racial Democracy: Mormon Priesthood and Black Brazilians," *Dialogue* 17, no. 3 (1984): 25–26.

⁵²Howells, Oral History, 62.

find a Negro family they just encourage them to study the Bible and to be good Christians, and then they go on to the next house."⁵³ The administrative fear of teaching blacks morphed into a policy that crippled missionary efforts and instilled indifference in missionaries and members toward proselytizing those of mixed descent.

In theory, avoiding blacks eliminated the need to enforce the ban. In practice, however, this was impossible. A simplistic binary of black and white proved woefully insufficient for determining racial purity as almost every Brazilian fell somewhere in the middle of the color spectrum. Skin color could also be deceptive. As President Howells noted, "After you live among the Brazilians so long the darker people look lighter than they do at first."⁵⁴ To prevent assimilation, missionaries developed a specific lesson about the priesthood restriction in which they interrogated potential converts about whether they knew if "one of [their] ancestors was negro or a descendent of the negro?" If the response was negative, the missionary would follow up by asking, "If in the future you discover that one of your ancestors was negro will you notify the branch president?"⁵⁵ In essence, this amounted to a transfer of partial responsibility of enforcing the priesthood ban onto the individual. The Church would assume the role of teaching the principles, and members and converts would police themselves. Adoption of this bottom up approach, though, was far from absolute. Many times missionaries surreptitiously vetted investigators without their knowledge by asking to see family photos in order to search for evidence of African ancestry without disclosing their reason.⁵⁶

The other avenue of entrance into the Church that greatly concerned leaders was intermarriage. To prevent further racial mixing, missionaries warned members "by marrying a descendent of Cain, we would not only curse ourselves, but all of our posterity which follows us." Members were further advised to "think twice" before making "an inferior choice" that "will rob him of the greatest blessings of the

⁵³Asael T. Sorensen, Oral History, interviewed by Gordon Irving, 1973, typescript, 61, Church History Library.

⁵⁴Howells, Oral History, 61.

⁵⁵Brazil North Mission Lineage Lesson, December 1970, Church History Library.

⁵⁶Sebastião L. and María Cintra, Oral History, interviewed by Celso Sanches and Clinton D. Christensen, 2012, Church History Library.

Lord" in this life and the next.⁵⁷ Racial mixing threatened not only to cut off the parent's access to priesthood and temple ordinances but also countless generations of their descendants.

Despite all the institutional efforts to keep blacks out of the Church in Brazil, they inevitably found their way in. Demographic realities dictated that as the Church moved out of the southern colonies, darker members would join. Leadership's concerns about opening the work in Brazil were coming true. Still, some held an optimistic outlook that the "Negro question" was avoidable. As President Howells admitted, "They were negroids, but it seemed like the real black people didn't come out to our meetings."⁵⁸ This false sense of security that no blacks joined the Church was to be short lived.

A descendent of European immigrants, Eduardo Contieri first became aware of the LDS Church in 1963 while recuperating from a terrible traffic accident that required multiple surgeries. After his initial recovery, the situation became quite dire when an infection began spreading throughout his body. Between stints in the hospital where he would undergo painful treatments, he would listen to the missionary discussions, and shortly thereafter, Eduardo and his family were baptized. The week following his baptism, the doctors were unable to find any hemorrhaging during his weekly visit. Within three weeks, his doctors pronounced him cured though they accused him of secretly undergoing outside treatments, as the medical staff was unable to explain his miraculous recovery.⁵⁹ All of this convinced Eduardo of the great power of the Mormon priesthood and the restored gospel.

Only three months later in September 1963, the recent convert became the president of the São Paulo Ipiranga Branch. Meeting with his counselors to evaluate the progress of his congregation, he determined the only area in which the branch was not progressing was genealogy. Deciding to set the example by completing his own family history, Eduardo reached out to a cousin who had important family

⁵⁷Lesson—9 Intermarriage between the Descendants of Cain and Israelites, 7–8, F. LaMond Tullis Papers, Priesthood Lineage, 1908–1969, Church History Library.

⁵⁸Howells, Oral History, 62.

⁵⁹Eduardo Alfieri Soares Contieri, Oral History, interviewed by F. LaMond Tullis, 1976, typescript, 6–7, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah (hereafter cited as Perry Special Collections).

documents. What he found was both shocking and disheartening. In his own words he recalled, "At a determined point, I encountered a datum, a document, that demonstrated that I had [African] lineage. I looked at that thing and said, 'Ok, this is not good.'"⁶⁰ Eduardo had discovered a photo on his maternal side of a grandmother who he never knew, suggesting he had African ancestors.

In that moment, Eduardo's self-perception was radically altered. Though to everyone else he looked white, he suddenly identified as black. He remarked, "Naturally I understood that I had [African] lineage . . . and in my heart I sensed that force of the gospel that I had embraced and in that moment I felt the most blessed of men for if I remained faithful until the end, especially if the priesthood I had received remained, one day, at some time, I could use it and be counted as the seed of Abraham."⁶¹ As heartbreaking as this news must have been to him, he actually referred to that moment of discovery as a personal revelation from heaven when his heart was unexpectedly "filled with happiness."⁶²

Heeding the directions he learned in missionary lessons, he straightway sought out the mission president to explain the situation. Wayne Beck recalled, "One particular case where we had a branch president who was an excellent man, one of the best branch presidents we had. He came to my office one day very upset. He had received some information from his family and had some pictures where he claimed his grandmother was black." According to President Beck, "We told him maybe the wise thing to do was to withdraw his hand. 'Withdrawing his hand' meant that he wouldn't ordain people and that we would release him as branch president so that he wouldn't be embarrassed as a result of it. And so that's what he did. He withdrew his hand and he was released as branch president."⁶³

Despite the mission president's desire to avoid humiliating Eduardo, his hurried ouster was difficult to hide even though he continued to sit on the stand in meetings to keep up pretense. Released and his priesthood suspended, Eduardo's difficulties soon multiplied. Coinciding closely with the embarrassment of his removal from a visible

⁶⁰Ibid., 7. See also *História de Eduardo Alfieri Soares Contieri e Família*, xii, F. LaMond Tullis Papers, Priesthood Lineage, 1908–1969.

⁶¹*História de Eduardo Alfieri Soares Contieri e Família*, xiii.

⁶²Ibid., xii.

⁶³Wayne M. and Evelyn M. Beck, Oral History, interviewed by Gordon Irving, 1974, typescript, 64, Church History Library.

position in the Church, he also suffered financial failure due to the unethical actions of a fellow member. Naively, he signed documents transferring legal responsibility for an insolvent business to his name. It was during this dark time he had the feeling that, in his words, "my world had ended."⁶⁴ While these events were no doubt difficult for this new member to fully comprehend, Eduardo was convinced in his own miraculous healing and continued to express his faith in the Church and its leaders. His unfailing commitment went so far as to finance the mission expenses for the son of the man who bankrupted him.

The ramifications of Eduardo's dismissal reached far beyond himself. Most intimately affected was his family. Each time his teenage daughters brought a date home, he sat down with the young man and apologetically explained the Mormon position on race mixing and counseled him that he should not jeopardize his own priesthood.⁶⁵ While Eduardo reported that his daughters understood, his actions all but destroyed their marriage prospects. The wider membership was also upset about Eduardo's removal as branch president. Evelyn Beck, the wife of the mission president, was particularly exercised and commented, "So help me, he looks as Italian to me as any Italian we've got in the Church."⁶⁶ Various LDS General Authorities also became aware of his situation, including Spencer W. Kimball, who requested that the Church Translation Department commence work on Eduardo's autobiographical history since Kimball estimated that the document "might be very important."⁶⁷ Later, he wrote to fellow Apostle Gordon B. Hinckley about Eduardo in 1969. He penned,

Dear Gordon:

On May 1, 1966, when we organized the Sao Paulo Stake, there came to my attention the fact that one of our most faithful members

⁶⁴Contieri, *Oral History*, 7.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, 9.

⁶⁶Wayne M. and Evelyn M. Beck, *Oral History*, 64.

⁶⁷Spencer W. Kimball, Memorandum to Thomas Fyans, April 17, 1967, F. LaMond Tullis Papers, Priesthood Lineage, 1908–1969. Kimball became aware of the situation in May 1966 during the Brazil Area Conference when he organized the first stake in Latin America. Kimball was unable to learn more as he was undoubtedly busy. The May 1, 1966, conference was the largest ever held to date in South America with more than 1,400 people in attendance. See *Brazil São Paulo North Mission Manuscript History and Historical Reports, 1935–1972*, Church History Library.

possibly was negroid . . . Brother' Contieri's story is interesting and faith promoting and heart breaking as are most of the others. After he found that he was negroid, he seems to have accepted the case without bitterness. . . . Inasmuch as that is your area now, I thought you would want to know about Brother Contieri.⁶⁸

The Church policy on blacks and the priesthood had changed dramatically since the commencement of missionary work in Brazil from an uneasy uncertainty into a worldwide reality. Numerous African Americans had joined the Church in the United States and throngs of believers in West Africa had begun petitioning Church headquarters for more information. During Church President David O. McKay's 1954 worldwide mission tour, he not only reversed cumbersome local Church procedures and requirements for priesthood ordination in South Africa, but he also became the first prophet to visit South America. There, he recognized the impact the priesthood policy was having on missionary efforts in Brazil.⁶⁹ Unlike Jim Crow laws in the United States and apartheid in South Africa that assisted in difficult determinations of race, in Brazil local leaders had to rely on their own interpretations. To provide more direction, President McKay subsequently directed the Twelve that they should visit South America yearly. Elder Kimball and other members of the Twelve soon became personally acquainted with several members of African descent. Their continued faithfulness in the face of the priesthood ban engendered within Elder Kimball a sense of profound admiration.⁷⁰

Beyond the emotional impact of Eduardo's story, his priesthood situation remained complicated for Church leaders. Acting as the presiding minister, he baptized, confirmed, ordained, and blessed the sick. Not only did he officiate in the ordinances, he could sense

⁶⁸Spencer W. Kimball, Memorandum to Gordon B. Hinckley, December 16, 1969, F. LaMond Tullis Papers, Priesthood Lineage, 1908–1969.

⁶⁹For contextual information about the priesthood restriction in South Africa, see Richard E. Turley Jr. and Jeffrey G. Cannon, "A Faithful Band: Moses Mahlangu and the First Soweto Saints," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 55, no. 1 (2016).

⁷⁰Elder Kimball's experiences living in Arizona among Native Americans had imbued in him deep distain for prejudice and racism that spilled over to the black Brazilians he encountered. See Spencer W. Kimball, "The Evil of Intolerance," *Conference Report*, April 1954, 103–8.

the priesthood that flowed through him. He wrote, "I could feel with great force the powers and keys that were given and ministering in these ordinances I felt the powers of heaven that were given to me."⁷¹ Should these ordinances be invalidated? If Eduardo had African blood, could he really wield the priesthood irrespective of his ordination? The conclusion LDS leaders apparently reached was yes, he could. Instead of nullifying his priesthood, they simply suspended his public performance of the rituals. In private, he continued to utilize the priesthood. As President Beck explained, "I can remember when we visited him and his wife was ill. . . . We came to the problem of administering to his wife and of course he participated in the administration to his wife because he held the Melchizedek Priesthood. And he functioned that way."⁷²

Finally, in November 1971, Apostle Howard W. Hunter learned of Eduardo and this time brought his case before the First Presidency.⁷³ After deliberation, the First Presidency determined he could use his priesthood and consequently removed the suspension.⁷⁴ From then

⁷¹História de Eduardo Alfieri Soares Contieri e Família, xii.

⁷²Beck, Oral History, 65.

⁷³Eduardo's daughter broached the subject with Elder Hunter on November 27 or 28 of 1971 when he was visiting to reorganize the São Paulo East Stake. Elder Hunter most likely relayed the First Presidency's decision orally to Contieri's stake president on another trip to São Paulo in late February 1972. See Contieri, Oral History, 9–10; Brazil São Paulo North Mission Manuscript History and Historical Reports.

⁷⁴The exact reason for his clearance is uncertain. D. Arthur Haycock, secretary to the First Presidency, reported that Joseph Fielding Smith, the president of the Church at the time, "was one of those most amenable that [individuals] presumed to have Negro blood . . . should only prove that they were worthy." He also recalled a similar situation where an Afro-Hawaiian received the priesthood, had it suspended, and then reinstated by the First Presidency prior to the 1978 revelation. See D. Arthur Haycock, Oral History, interviewed by Brian D. Reeves, 1992, typescript, 30–31, Church History Library. Jim Hicks, a missionary in São Paulo at the time, referencing Eduardo said, "The whole thing went to the First Presidency and the letter came back and essentially stated that they did not feel he had lineage in his blood." See Jim Hicks, Oral History, interviewed by Mark Grover, 1981, typescript, 12, Perry Special Collections. It is doubtful that even if such a letter existed it would have laid out the First Presidency's reasoning or that Hicks would have been privy to their deliberations.

on, as a matter of local policy, members in the Brazilian Mission who discovered they had African lineage after ordination remained active priesthood holders.⁷⁵ Asked if it was a common thing for members to discover they had African ancestry, Mission President Wayne Beck responded, "Yes. Yes, that happened on numerous occasions. . . . If he's an active man. . . doing the best he can and he's already received the Melchizedek Priesthood, he goes ahead and functions." Pressed if this meant if their priesthood would not be suspended or rejected, Beck continued, "That's correct. Not anymore. Not after the clearance of this particular case."⁷⁶ A little over a year later in the spring of 1973, Elder Hunter returned to Brazil and personally ordained Eduardo as the bishop of the São Paulo I Ward. This means that in 1973, five years prior to the priesthood revelation, a member who thought he had demonstrable African lineage was holding an important ecclesiastical office.

COLOMBIA

"That good man has the priesthood."

The Spanish primarily imported slaves to Colombia as laborers in gold mines, although many also served as domestics and agricultural workers.⁷⁷ Simón Bolívar, revolutionary leader and first president of Gran Colombia, promised freedom for all Colombians, though, independence in 1819 failed to bring abolition. Since the fragile new government relied heavily on the support of elites, slavery persisted in Colombia until 1854.⁷⁸ Over time, blacks made their way into the larger cities as well as establishing small settlements along the Pacific coast where they account for up to 83 percent of the regional population.⁷⁹

⁷⁵There is no evidence that this policy of allowing ordained blacks to continue in the priesthood was passed on to his successor as mission president. See Lloyd R. Hicken, *Oral History*, 2015, Church History Library.

⁷⁶Beck, *Oral History*, 65.

⁷⁷Avina Chomsky, "The Logic of Displacement: Afro-Colombians and the War in Colombia," in *Beyond Slavery: The Multilayered Legacy of Africans in Latin America and the Caribbean*, ed. Darién J. Davis (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 171.

⁷⁸John Lynch, *Simón Bolívar: A Life* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2006), 151–53.

⁷⁹Michael J. LaRosa and Germán R. Mejía, *Colombia: A Concise Contemporary History* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013), 26.

In all, around one-third of Colombians are of African descent, making Colombia home to the third largest population of Afro-descendants in the Western Hemisphere.⁸⁰

Just a few months before the 1978 priesthood revelation, a branch president in Bucaramanga, Colombia, ordained a man of apparent African descent to the Aaronic Priesthood. The branch president's justification: Horacio Insignares was the most faithful, diligent man in the branch. Sensing it was unfair to treat him differently, the branch president took matters into his own hands and bestowed the priesthood on Horacio. Disturbed by this action, the young American missionaries assigned to the branch, supposing some misdeed had been committed, intervened. Calling their mission president, they demanded that he immediately excommunicate the branch president. Mission President Kirt Olson was not as certain about the correct course of action. He recalled, "I knew the branch president was a good man, and I certainly had respect and appreciation for the black member who was given the priesthood. I could see that a terrible rift could occur in Bucaramanga over this matter." If not handled correctly, the Church "could lose both the branch president, the fine member involved, and perhaps many others." Not knowing how to proceed, President Olson phoned Church President Spencer W. Kimball.

President Olson remembered that "President Kimball was calm, kind, and quick in his response." "President Olson," President Kimball instructed, "that good man has the priesthood. Just tell him that he can't use his priesthood right now." Following this instruction, President Olson restricted Horacio's priesthood for the time being. Like Eduardo Contieri in Brazil, Horacio's ordination was not invalidated, but instead his priesthood was suspended. As for the branch president, President Kimball told him to "kindly instruct the branch president that in the future, he must follow church policy." President Olson followed these instructions and once again, "All was well in Bucaramanga—no problems whatsoever."⁸¹

Following the June announcement of the priesthood revelation, President Olson wondered what to do with Horacio. A few days after

⁸⁰Aline Helg, *Liberty & Equality in Caribbean Colombia, 1770–1835* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 2.

⁸¹Kirt M. Olson Mission History, 1977–1980, 8–9, Church History Library.

the news arrived, he again phoned President Kimball and “asked if we should now ordain him again or what procedure we should follow in the case of this black man’s priesthood.” President Kimball’s answer was, “President Olson, just phone that man and tell him that he can now start using his priesthood—he already has the priesthood so no additional ordination is needed. Inform the branch president to that effect as well.”⁸² A little over three years later in 1981, when the Bucaramanga District became a stake, Horacio Insignares became the stake president, likely the first stake president of African descent in the world.

CONCLUSION

As the first point of contact between the public and the Church, young Mormon missionaries frequently became the *de facto* enforcers of the priesthood ban in Latin America. In Honduras, Stephen Boyden had to go to great lengths to undo the damage American missionaries created by suggesting some members were black. In Colombia, following the ordination of Horacio Insignares, missionaries stepped in and tried to not only remove Horacio from the priesthood, but also to excommunicate the branch president who ordained him. Most troublesome, missionaries at times used the priesthood ban to support their own racial vision of which members should have the right to participate in Church, as seen in the case of Benigno Cobos in Mexico.

At the local level, enforcement of the priesthood restriction could often be more lax. Latin American Church leaders, while certainly not immune from racial prejudice, were not familiar with the strict black/white dichotomy inherent in the racial policy. In Mexico City, for example, Benigno Cobos’s priesthood leaders ignored his dark skin. His brownness was perceived to be a sign of his Indian/Lamanite heritage, and his possible African ancestry likely never crossed their minds. Horacio Insignares’s branch president in Colombia was racially colorblind and failed to see why the exclusion should apply to Horacio. In California, the mere fact that José Ramon Díaz spoke Spanish and looked Hispanic ruled out the possibility of him being black. Leaders there enjoined him to receive the priesthood, despite his protestations.

Mission presidents, often tasked with adjudicating difficult priesthood eligibility questions, received minimal training on how the

⁸²Ibid, 9.

restriction was to be enforced. Some, like the Brazilian and Andes missions, developed their own special lessons and protocols meant to ensure black men were not ordained. Other mission presidents simply confronted the issue when it arose. Decisions in these cases often depended entirely on the perspective of mission leaders at the time. Worried about being overly cautious, President Milton Smith in Honduras approved the ordination of Roberto Ocampo despite concerns he was black. In Brazil, President Wayne Beck restricted Eduardo Contieri's priesthood though he looked white. Due to turnover and the short overlap in service between mission presidents, outcomes in priesthood eligibility cases varied greatly at the mission level.

General Authorities of the Church also struggled with how to apply the priesthood proscription. On May 1, 1966, Elder Spencer W. Kimball met with Eduardo Contieri in Brazil and determined to uphold his priesthood restriction. Exactly one week later, on May 8, he personally ordained Guillermo Cuesta a deacon in Ecuador. Why? It appears that Elder Kimball had recognized the impossibility of making precise racial determinations and instead deferred to self-identification. Guillermo, who looked black but claimed he was not, received the priesthood. Eduardo, on the other hand, had his priesthood restricted since he had convinced himself of a hidden African heritage even though there were no physical signs he was black. Situations like these problematized the racial preconceptions of American administrators, and Church leaders came to recognize the impossibility of enforcement in Latin America, though as shown by the suspension of Horacio Insignares's priesthood in Colombia, implementation of the ban persisted until June 1978. Elder Kimball's personal experiences with these men likely prompted, at least in part, the conversations between himself and his fellow apostles that ultimately culminated in seeking the priesthood revelation.⁸³

In Latin America, dark skin could either connect individuals to covenants contained within the Book of Mormon or imply descent from African ancestors that entailed the withholding of priesthood promises. In practice, the priesthood policy related to African

⁸³For other factors that might have prompted the priesthood revelation, see Armand L. Mauss, "The Fading of the Pharaohs' Curse: The Decline and Fall of the Priesthood Ban against Blacks in the Mormon Church," *Dialogue* 14, no. 3 (1981): 10–45.

descendants saw some ordained and others restricted. The result often depended entirely on the complex interplay between the racial perceptions of members and leaders. This inconsistency made the arrival of the 1978 revelation such a watershed moment for Saints in Latin America, as the ethnic distinctions of black, white, or brown no longer mattered, severing any connection between race and the priesthood.

AUTHORS' NOTE

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