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# How Black Latter-day Saints reacted to Dallin Oaks' mention of Black lives matter



(Screengrab from BYUtv) Apostle Dallin H. Oaks addressed racism and Black lives matter at a Brigham Young University address on Tuesday, Oct. 27, 2020.

By Peggy Fletcher Stack | Oct. 31, 2020, 11:00 a.m. | Updated: Nov. 3, 2020, 10:59 a.m.

When the words “Black lives matter” appeared on a TV screen just below the face of Dallin H. Oaks, who is next in line to lead The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Black members let out a collective gasp of surprise, wonder and joy.

Oaks, the 88-year-old first counselor in the faith’s governing First Presidency, was [speaking virtually this week about racism](#) to students at church-owned Brigham Young University and had just declared that “Black lives matter is an eternal truth all reasonable people should support.”

He did not endorse the movement known as Black Lives Matter, but neither did he condemn it, even as some conservatives have derided it as Marxist or anti-family.

Oaks did say that not everything that is done under the banner of Black Lives Matter — including “abolishing the police or seriously reducing their effectiveness or changing our constitutional government” — commands universal backing. “All these are appropriate subjects for advocacy, but not under what we hope to be the universally acceptable message: Black lives matter.”

Black Latter-day Saints immediately began calling and texting one another with the news.

The speech was a “monumental moment,” said [Darius Gray, who joined the Utah-based faith in 1964](#), more than a decade before the church removed its priesthood and temple ban on Blacks.

Oaks “boldly emphasized the most basic of Christian truths when stating that Black lives matter,” said Gray, who co-founded the Genesis Group in 1971, a support organization



(Trent Nelson | Tribune file photo) This June 5, 2013, photo shows Darius Gray, co-founder a support organization founded in 1971 for Black Latter-day Saints called the Genesis Group.

Others shared Gray's delight.

"Praise the Lord!" exulted [Cathy Stokes](#), a former public health professional who joined the church in Chicago in 1979 and now lives in Utah. "It has been a long time coming."

Oaks' use of "Black lives matter" served two purposes, said [LaShawn Williams](#), an African American Latter-day Saint and an assistant professor of social work at Utah Valley University.

The Latter-day Saint apostle recognized the "actual movement as a series of activities," Williams said, and that it is "rooted in the eternal principle that Black lives matter."

aren't all reasonable enough to agree that Black lives matter.”

That, Williams said, “is the starting point.”

Across the globe, in South Africa, Black Latter-day Saint [Pumza Sixishe](#) was moved by Oaks' recognition of the value of those who look like her.

“Growing up in the apartheid era, surrounded by propaganda against us, I was treated as a second-class citizen, without even the right to vote,” Sixishe, who is from Johannesburg, wrote in a Facebook message. “What I liked about Pres. Oaks' talk was that we are all children of God — that God's love is fundamental.”

The criticism that critics level at the Black Lives Matter movement — that it is pushing for socialism — reminds her of what some Americans were saying about the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and what some South Africans were saying about the anti-apartheid movement.

“I'm so sick of seeing the Marxist rhetoric,” Sixishe said, “coming from people I supposedly worship with.”

Tamu Smith, a writer and activist member from Utah County, was at Costco when she got a call to listen to Oaks' talk.

“When he said ‘Black lives matter,’” Smith recalled, “I got emotional. My ears started ringing. Honestly, I didn't catch much of his talk after he said that.”

She then went to her car and read the whole speech.

Smith, of “Sistas in Zion” fame, read that Oaks objected to efforts to remove the names of slaveholders from buildings, including at least one at BYU, and his description of racial decisions in Latter-day Saint scripture. He did not mention the church's own priesthood-temple ban on Blacks, which lasted until 1978.

Sitting in the Costco parking lot, she said, she felt “a lot of sympathy” for the church leader.



(Jeremy Harmon | The Salt Lake Tribune) Tamu Smith speaks while recording the 100th episode of the “Mormon Land” podcast on Oct. 4, 2019.

“I can give him grace because I see President Oaks wrestling with racism,” she said. “In trying to make sense of it, it seems he’s having a difficult time coming to terms with the fact that, as an organization, we were wrong and, as an organization, we should probably repent.”

## **The question of history**

When it comes to efforts to take the names of slaveholders off buildings on university campuses, including at BYU, however, Oaks said that may “[accomplish nothing](#) but a

He may have been referring to a push by some BYU students to remove the name of [Abraham O. Smoot](#), a 19th-century slaveholder and school benefactor, from the administration building.

Oaks said he could not “condone our now erasing all mention and honor of prominent leaders like George Washington, who established our nation and gave us our Constitution, because they lived at a time with legal approvals and traditions that condoned slavery.”

The church leader does not seem to understand, Smith said, what it feels like for Black Latter-day Saints to see Smoot’s name on the building.

“Black members would be more inclined to listen and follow if we saw the same mercy/forgiveness being applied on their end. When BYU has a building on their campus that is named for [Missouri] Gov. Lilburn Boggs [who infamously declared an extermination order against the Latter-day Saints in the 19th century] or when Mormons have to go into a courthouse to fight trials in a building that is named for their oppressors,” she said, “then [they] could better understand.”

Taran Trinnaman, who attended BYU from 2013 until this year when he left after incidents of racism in February, rejects the idea that taking down statues or removing names from buildings is “erasing history.”

“The history most Americans and Latter-day Saints know, understand, and teach has been and continues to be heavily whitewashed and colonized,” said Trinnaman, who is completing his education at Utah Valley University online.

Some national heroes and figures are celebrated despite contributing to the pain of African Americans, he said, while the works of so many Black, Indigenous, people of color who have dedicated “decades — if not centuries — of research, activism, and grassroots work into abolitionism and redesigning the current systems of oppression”

The social and theological significance of Oaks' use of “Black lives matter,” said [Janan Graham-Russell](#), “cannot be overstated.”

To call it “an eternal truth,” said the doctoral candidate at Harvard, implies that Blackness itself “is eternal, which has larger implications in terms of the church’s history with Black people of African descent and discussions on race, for better or for worse.”

There’s no doubt that “Mormonism is rich with allusions to lineage and blood (genealogy) in its theology and practices,” said the Black Latter-day Saint. “However, early in the church’s history, some church leaders combined ideas about lineage with ideas about race. ... Nods to lineage and blood were used by pro-slavery advocates over pulpits to justify slavery and segregationists to justify white supremacy. Especially references to Black people supposedly of Cainian lineage.”

The [church has disavowed](#) that black skin is a sign of divine disfavor or that Black people are descended from the biblical Cain. But, Graham-Russell said, the faith “has yet to reckon publicly” with its historical relationship to white supremacy.

In his speech, Oaks offered biblical examples of racial divisions but defended them, saying, “some might call such divine actions and prophet-taught principles racist, but God, who is the loving father of all nations, tribes and ethnicities, cannot be branded as racist for his dealings with his children.”



(Photo courtesy of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints) President Dallin H. Oaks, first counselor in the First Presidency, speaks during the Saturday morning session of the 190th Semiannual General Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints on Oct. 3, 2020.

To Graham-Russell, that contradicted his earlier statements about Blackness.

To say that “Black lives matter,” and then to reinforce the narrative that religious restrictions “were of divine origins,” she said, “misses the mark by a lot.”

The church’s former priesthood-temple exclusion limited “the physical and spiritual spaces where Black people could occupy, compromising their ability to be exalted,” she said. “ ‘Black lives matter’ means holding systems that have reinforced white supremacy and racism... accountable.”

Black lives may matter in the sight of God, Graham-Russell said, “but for a hundred at



## Actions beyond words

Melodie Jackson, who is pursuing a doctorate at the University of Maryland, studying Afro Brazilians in the LDS Church, would like Oaks to be held accountable for his words.

“If his theology and actions do not now, from this point on, affirm and reinforce that Black lives matter and that all Black lives matter,” said Jackson, who founded [Black Lives Matter to Christ](#), “Oaks is either a liar, manipulator, or a hypocrite and cannot expect any integrity and sincerity from members which he does not give himself.”

She never expected these words from Oaks, she said, “but now that he has said them and no matter his intentions behind them, they are on the record for remembrance and for accountability before Black members, himself, the church, and before God.”

Examining the church’s past, present and future relating to its global Black members “is essential,” she said. “This is Zion. This is the gospel of Christ, and anything less is not.”

[Kimberly Applewhite](#), a psychologist with the Utah Center for Evidence Based Treatment, finds Oaks' statement that “Black lives matter is an eternal truth” to be “remarkable.”

He is a lawyer, a former Utah Supreme Court justice and “careful with his words,” she noted, “... his intent is as direct and unmistakable as his statement here.”

Latter-day Saints are “beginning to see some of Oaks' heart in his words,” Applewhite said, “and the transformation that happens when we see God’s children the way he wants us to see them.”

Oaks' concluding words — “only the gospel of Jesus Christ can unite and bring peace to people of all races and nationalities” — “encapsulate much of why I remain in the church,” she said. “The call for my church family to be Christlike and to be better is imperative to my survival as a Black woman in the gospel,” rather than leaving “more

“At last, [Latter-day Saint leaders] have spoken with their hearts,” she said. “I think it has been in their hearts all along, so now their hearts and their words are the same.”



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