

upon them, which no doubt it is, we are facing a very serious problem. President Clark said that his heart bleeds for the negroes, that he had had them in his home and some of them were very fine people, that he felt we should give them every right and blessing to which they are entitled. *He said he was wondering whether we could not work out a plan, while not conferring the Priesthood as such upon them, we could give them opportunity to participate in the work certainly of the Aaronic Priesthood grades.*<sup>245</sup>

The statement about having “had them in his home” referred to his pre-presidency, live-in “colored” maid, Evelyn Hall.

Only on one known occasion did Reuben ever publicly mention an African American by name. In a meeting with mission presidents, he said: “We have baptized Negroes. Brother [Monroe] Fleming in the Hotel Utah was baptized. He said that he understands our doctrine, but he wanted to join the Church. We have never refused to baptize a Negro but they had better understand it [the priesthood restriction] first.”<sup>246</sup>

Although not unprecedented, it was a significant institutional innovation when President Clark proposed in 1947 to allow African Americans to do Aaronic priesthood “work.” As an unordained African American, Samuel D. Chambers was called to be an “assistant deacon,” or acting deacon, in his Salt Lake City ward from 1873 onward.<sup>247</sup> However, this was not a widespread practice nor an official program of LDS headquarters.

By contrast, after the 1947 temple meeting, Reuben outlined a plan in a document titled “The Afrikan Branches of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.” In it, he recommended that blacks preside over and conduct the auxiliary organizations and be authorized to “preside and conduct” all branch meetings when no ordained priesthood member was present. He further recommended that Negro men be organized into “Preparatory Deacons Groups, Preparatory Teacher Groups, Preparatory Priests Groups.”<sup>248</sup> Even those titles implied a not-too-distant ordination for men of black African ancestry.

Nearly eight years later, the apostles accepted Reuben’s innovative proposal—at least in part. Without referring specifically to him, their letter mentioned “the survey made some time ago” and concluded:

After much consideration, it is our recommendation that a program

be developed which will give to them such blessings as they may properly enjoy—that all of the Negro members in the [Salt Lake] area be organized into a unit which would function somewhat the same as the Deaf Branch or the Spanish-American Branch. Leadership could be brought from elsewhere in the city if felt proper and if needed. Auxiliary organizations could be conducted and the Sacrament could be administered to them in a Sacrament meeting by members of the priesthood from elsewhere in the stake.

In this letter of 30 March 1955, the Quorum of Twelve “respectfully submit the matter for your consideration,” assuring the First Presidency that “all of this can be done without danger of intermarriage.” It was signed by Joseph Fielding Smith, the Twelve’s president.<sup>249</sup>

It does not seem coincidental that the apostles submitted this only a few months after President McKay prevented Elder Clark from giving his talk on this matter at the October 1954 conference. As his biographer, I conclude that Reuben privately urged his allies in the Twelve to promote the proposal he made during the presidency of George Albert Smith. The timing of this letter indicates that the Twelve, with Reuben as their silent partner, hoped that President McKay would agree to such an announcement at the April 1955 conference.

Such would not be the case. An African-American branch was not established during the presidency of David O. McKay. After his death, his successor Joseph Fielding Smith authorized such a congregation, the Genesis Group, involving 200 black Mormons. It began officially in October 1971, ten years after the death of the man who first proposed the idea.<sup>250</sup> In view of the unsuccessful recommendations from Clark since 1947 and the Twelve since 1955, the inescapable conclusion is that President McKay opposed allowing any independence to black Mormons.

Aside from maintaining the priesthood restriction, McKay resisted any liberalization of Mormon culture’s social relationships with African Americans during his presidency (1951–70). This was certainly true at the Hotel Utah, over which McKay was president and chairman of the board.<sup>251</sup>

For his part, Reuben continued his practice of not trying to “over-persuade” the LDS president.<sup>252</sup> He repeatedly asked the First Presidency