The LDS Church and the Problem of Race: Mormonism in Nigeria, 1946–1978*

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Introduction

On 24 October 1946, the Office of the First Presidency, the executive triumvirate of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church), received a letter from an unlikely place: Nigeria, a British colony that would gain its independence in 1960.1 Written by O.J. Umondak, an Ibibio man who lived in a village outside of Uyo in the Eastern region, the letter requested missionaries and literature about teachings of the LDS Church. After discussing its obligations to preach the gospel to the world, the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, the second highest governing body within the church’s hierarchy, decided to delay responding to this letter, because the church had actively avoided proselytizing among “Africans of the black race” since around 1830.2 This long-standing policy was based on two assumptions. First, Mormons conceived of Africa as a gloomy

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1 Although the arrival of a letter from Nigeria petitioning for church affiliation may have seemed like a peculiar event to the leaders of the LDS Church, indigenous religious groups in Nigeria regularly sought out affiliation with churches from abroad following the Second World War. In this period of burgeoning nationalism, many churches rejected colonial ecclesiastical authority and paved new paths for themselves. As Robert Bruce Yoder has shown, in the 1950s, the American Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities (MBMC) also received letters from various local churches in the Uyo hinterlands, where Mormonism established itself, seeking affiliation, financial assistance, and requests for missionaries (“Mennonite Mission Theorists and Practitioners in Southeastern Nigeria: Changing Contexts and Strategy at the Dawn of the Postcolonial Era,” International Bulletin of Missionary Research 37, 3 (2013), 138; “Mennonite Missionaries and African Independent Churches: The Development of an Anabaptist Missiology in West Africa: 1958–1967” (Ph.D. thesis, Boston University, 2016), 243–246, 257).

2 Minutes of the Apostles of Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, vol. 4 (Salt Lake City, UT: Privately Published, 2010), 420, Americana Collection, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

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and forbidding continent dominated by sorrow and tyranny. Second, Mormons believed that Blacks were ill suited for conversion, because dark skin was the symbol of a divine curse in Mormon scriptures, a punishment for transgressions in a pre-mortal existence.

The Apostles’ attention, however, was called to Umundak’s letter the following year when, on 9 October 1947, a missionary in Los Angeles wrote to church headquarters in Salt Lake City to ask about the church’s attitude towards “negroes.” The council once again decided not to respond to Umundak’s letter, reasoning it still needed time to consider “the negro question.” The First Presidency separately addressed the issue of race on 17 July 1947. Lowry Nelson, a Mormon sociologist at the University of Minnesota, discouraged the Presidency from sending missionaries to Cuba because he feared that exporting American attitudes on race would do terrible harm to Cuban culture. After a long exchange of letters with Nelson, the First Presidency rebutted: “From the days of the Prophet Joseph [Smith] even until now, it has been the doctrine of the Church, never questioned by any of the Church leaders, that the Negroes are not entitled to the full blessings of the Gospel.” Four months later, the Presidency reminded him that reasoning and worldly learning cannot impress those with a testimony of the revealed word of God. Despite the Apostles’ and the First Presidency’s best efforts to forestall change, the LDS Church became increasingly international over the next three decades. Indeed, this American indigenous church garnered thousands of followers in Nigeria between 1946 and 1978, most of them living in the Cross River region where Umundak himself resided. While the previous century of Mormon growth had been bent on “gathering to Utah” new

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5 Minutes of the Apostles of Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 439, Americana Collection.

6 Ibid.


converts from the British Isles and America, the last half century of conversion to the LDS faith has occurred mainly abroad in the non-Western world.\(^\text{10}\)

This article explores the implications of this demographic shift within the church’s membership, and rethinks the importance of Africa, especially Nigeria, in shaping the contours of Mormonism. I argue that Nigerians contributed to the formation of Mormon beliefs, culminating in the 1978 Priesthood Revelation that gave church members with black skin the ability to hold the Priesthood—the power and authority that God has bestowed upon men.\(^\text{11}\) Before the Priesthood Revelation, Black men could not be fully-fledged members of the church, because men must hold the priesthood in order to perform ordinances and act as leaders within the LDS Church. Until 1978, Black men could only join the faith, receive patriarchal blessings, and enter the temple to perform baptisms for the dead.\(^\text{12}\) LDS missionaries, however, who increasingly interacted with unofficial Nigerian Mormons throughout the 1960s and 1970s, began to reject their church’s racist ideology after witnessing the piety of Nigerian converts. These missionaries then brought their enlarged worldview back to Salt Lake City, where strategic leaders of the LDS Church picked up their ideas and incorporated them into institutional policy—in many ways marking a reversal of the previous ideological diffusion from new world to old.

The research presented here is based largely on correspondence from the 1960s and 1970s—blue aerogrammes and other typed and handwritten letters that took between two weeks and one month to cross the Atlantic Ocean—located in the LDS Church History Library in Salt Lake City, Utah. Although many Nigerians corresponded with the LDS Church throughout the 1950s, the actual correspondence from this time either did not survive, or remains in collections unavailable for public research.\(^\text{13}\) Missionary journals, oral histories, and welcome addresses written by the Nigerians for the missionaries who visited their communities are also available and figure prominently in this article.

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\(^{11}\) *The Doctrine and Covenants of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2013), 132: 45.


\(^{13}\) For references to correspondence from the late 1950s and even earlier, see Bassey Daniel Udoh, 28 May 1988, Box 12, Folder 9, MSS 1937, African Oral History Project, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, 4; LaMar S. Williams Interview: Salt Lake City, Utah, 1981, OH 692, LDS Church History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah, 2, 51; Williams, Letter to Emelumadu, 23 July 1963, Box 1, Folder 1, MS 21299, Edwin Q. Cannon Papers, 1963–1986, LDS Church History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah.
Before the Priesthood Revelation

At the beginning of the 1960s, the LDS Church was no more willing to proselytize among “Africans of the black race” than it had been in 1946, when Umondak first reached out for guidance. In a letter sent to Glen G. Fisher, president of the LDS South Africa Mission, on 21 March 1960, the First Presidency doubted the motives of Nigerian converts, stating:

Some of the letters that we have received from these people lead us to question in some cases the motives of these people, that is, whether or not they’re really sincere in their desire to become members of the Church and are truly converted to the truths of the gospel, or if they merely wish to become affiliated with an American church in order that they might thereby be recipients of help in the way of contributions or otherwise, and then too, it may be that these ministers may have the idea that the church would give them an alliance of some kind to preside.¹⁴

This letter, which highlights the conservative, cautious, and racist nature of the LDS Church, permitted church leaders to again defer the issue of race.

Having decided it needed to determine the legitimacy of these spontaneous conversions to Mormonism in Nigeria, the First Presidency sent Fisher to investigate the new Nigerian Saints later that same year.¹⁵ While he was supposed to go to Uyo in the Cross River region, home of the majority of the unofficial Nigerian converts, Fisher could only reach Lagos due to the Congo Crisis that ruled out his planned itinerary through Douala, Cameroon, and he was forced to reroute through Kano in the northern part of the colony.¹⁶ This would have been considered a peculiar way to enter the country, as


¹⁵ In this article, I will use “Mormon,” “Saint,” and “Latter-day Saint” interchangeably.

indicated by two former Nigeria Peace Corps volunteers, even in the 1960s, although they could not account for the specific circumstances imposed on travel by events in the Congo. Experienced Nigeria travelers would have flown into Lagos and then caught a local flight to either Calabar, Enugu, or Port Harcourt in the southeast, where they could then get a public bus to smaller cities like Uyo. Thus, Fisher’s odd travel itinerary serves to emphasize the point that the LDS Church was in unchartered territory not just spiritually, but also logistically.

Nonetheless, Fisher safely made the journey from Kano to Lagos, where he met with a few groups of unofficial Nigerian Saints on 16 July 1960. The first group of Mormons he encountered seemed to confirm the worst suspicions of the First Presidency. Led by a “fat and lazy” Vicar Garber, Fisher claimed that Garber and his congregation were “just waiting for someone to come along and help,” but this was the only visit Fisher made in Lagos that he found unsatisfying. Indeed, he described the second group he visited in Lagos, led by a Reverend Jo Akindole, as “a remarkable group of people” who followed “the Apostolic beliefs, professed a very devout way of life, did not smoke or drink, and baptized by immersion.” The third group was equally impressive. Fisher talked to them for hours about the teachings and beliefs of the LDS Church, and they gave him the “impression that they were most sincere in this desire” to become official Mormons.

Later evidence confirms that the unofficial Mormons in Lagos persuaded Fisher during his 1960 visit that their interest in Mormonism was genuine. Looking back on his time in Nigeria following the Priesthood Revelation in 1978, Fisher expressed a sigh of relief: “for almost 20 years I have been waiting for some official word that the petitions of these numerous dark skinned people, for baptism into the church had been realized…. My visit to Nigeria in 1960 revealed that many of these congregations were preparing themselves for baptism and membership in the kingdom even at that early date.” Fisher’s reflection indicates that sustained interaction with Nigerians had changed his mind about the LDS Church’s teachings on race, and these interactions had occurred repeatedly throughout the 1960s and 1970s, at the behest of the Nigerians themselves.

After Fisher’s visit, the LDS Church ordered LaMar S. Williams, an employee of the LDS Missionary Department, to communicate with interested Nigerians, but under certain restrictions. Williams could only send literature and personal stories about the church to Nigerians, since Salt Lake City still had not decided its position on the “negro

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17 Hansen, Email to Author, 20 April 2016; Northrup, Email to Author, 27 June 2015.
18 LeBaron, Glen G. Fisher, 145.
19 Ibid.
21 “Assignment by the First Presidency to Visit Nigeria,” Glen G. Fisher Correspondence. See also LeBaron, Glen G. Fisher, 148–49.
question,” as the future president Spencer W. Kimball had called it in 1947.22 In the absence of official education, Nigerians used the scant data provided by Williams (and other correspondents at church headquarters) to build a church on their own terms. On 25 March 1960, Honesty J. Ekong, who served as both the leader and then the vice president of the unofficial LDS Church in Uyo, sent a letter to Williams that stated: “Our congregation decided to adopt the name of your Church Organisation so that I wish to know your opinion about this, and we have carefully read the constitution of your church from your two pamphlets and have gathered every information on what we can learn from the Church, and the reasons for joining the church of Jesus.”23 As Ekong requested, Williams gave his opinion on this matter. In his response, he explained the structure of the LDS Church, the purpose of General Conference, and why the Mormon Church is unique.24

Williams’ letter had many consequences for the development of the unofficial LDS Church in Nigeria. In the first place, it ensured that the Nigerian church would retain the name of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Not only does the name often appear on the letterhead in the archival record from this point on, but Nigerian Mormons also incorporated the LDS Church in Nigeria on 29 September 1964 and registered it as a corporate body in 1969, without the permission of Salt Lake City.25 Second, Nigerian Mormons appointed people to administrative offices after receiving this letter, and they planned to convene a meeting to draft a local constitution and to bring their new church to the attention of the district officer.26 Third, the letter explains why Nigerian converts held their own general conference one year later.27 Using only the information provided by

22 Minutes of the Apostles of Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 439. For more information about the literature that Williams distributed to his correspondents in Nigeria, see LaMar S. Williams Interview, 4–5, 35.

23 Ekong, Letter to Williams, 25 March 1960, Folder 2, LaMar Williams Papers.

24 Williams, Letter to Ekong, 4 April 1960, Folder 2, LaMar Williams Papers.

25 Copies of the 1964 Certificate of Incorporation can be found in Folder 1, MS 6393, Edwin Q. Cannon Collection, 1965–1980, LDS Church History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah; MS 16645, Ime O. Eduok History, 2001, LDS Church History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah. The 1969 Certificate of Registration can be located in Folder 1, Edwin Q. Cannon Collection. A splinter group of Nigerian Mormons led by Daniel Ndem at Afaha Abia also incorporated the LDS Church in 1970. See David M. Kennedy, Memorandum, Folder 1, Edwin Q. Cannon Collection; “Plan A—Nigeria,” Folder 1, Edwin Q. Cannon Collection. On the difficulties of registering the LDS Church with the Nigerian government following the 1978 Priesthood Revelation, see LaMar S. Williams Interview, 59.

26 Okpon, Inyang, and Ekong, Letter to the Missionary Committee, 24 June 1960, Folder 9, LaMar Williams Papers. See also LeBaron, Glen G. Fisher, 146. Fisher similarly reported that the unofficial Saints with whom he met in Lagos “tried to organize a church patterned after the Mormon Church. The four men were holding a branch presidency meeting as I arrived. Their presidency consisted of a president, two counselors and a secretary.”

27 “The General Conference of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints held 10–12 March 1961, at Church Headquarters in Ibesit Town,” Folder 9, LaMar Williams Papers. The minutes from the 1964 General Conference held at Ikot Ebak on 17–19 April as well as the minutes from the 1965 General
Williams and their own intuition, they independently established an administrative apparatus modeled on the LDS Church in Utah. Thus, the official church unintentionally facilitated the growth of Mormonism in Nigeria by providing the Nigerian Saints with the information they needed to promote it on their own terms. The efficiency and scale on which Nigerian Mormons organized and spread their own indigenous Mormon church played a role in the LDS Church’s decision to abolish the priesthood ban and establish an official relationship with Nigerian Mormons.

While the LDS Church’s leaders limited their involvement with Nigeria as they debated their responsibility to share the gospel with Black Africa behind closed doors, Nigerian Saints were constantly challenging the church to fulfill its biblical mandate. On 28 September 1960, for instance, Ekong wrote to Williams: “come over into Macedonia, and help us.”28 He was referring to Acts 16:9, a biblical passage in which Paul received a vision of a Macedonian who appealed to him, saying “Come over to Macedonia and help us.”29 After receiving this vision, Paul sought to go to Macedonia, believing God had called him to preach the gospel in that land. Ekong was the Macedonian, hoping that Williams would recognize his divine mandate. Less than a month later, the president general of the mission field, W.A. Inyang, the secretary of the church in Uyo, E.I. Okpon, and Ekong invited Williams to come and preach Christ to them, because they knew that he was one of “the Fishers and Hunters the Lord promised to send forth in the last days to fish and hunt for souls in every mountain from every hill and out of the holes of the rocks.”30 By making a reference to Jeremiah 16:16, they were arguing that God had given Williams the responsibility of bringing the Nigerian Mormon church out of captivity and restoring it.

After months of reading these insistent letters, Williams grew frustrated by the fact that his hands were tied by church policy. On 3 May 1961, he submitted a memorandum on missionary work among “negroes” to the First Presidency, stating that “[t]hese people are getting to the point where they want to know whether or not we are interested in teaching the gospel to them.”31 While some Nigerians were aware of Williams’ memorandum, they nonetheless remained relentless in their request for missionaries. On 24 July 1961, Adewole Ogumnokun, a Yoruba convert, pleaded with Williams:

Brother, I know that our needs requires [sic] great sacrifice on the part of your dear self, those in authority and men and women of goodwill who constitute the members of the revealed Church, yet no sacrifice is too great to make, in the course of expanding the Gospel as revealed for, [sic] does not our Lord not charge the early Apostles to Go [sic] into the world and preach the Gospel? not only to

Conference held at Ikot Ebak on 20–21 March, can be found in MS 82, LaMar S. Williams Journal, 1960 December–1965 November, LDS Church History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah.

28 Ekong, Letter to Williams, 28 September 1960, Folder 2, LaMar Williams Papers. See also, LaMar S. Williams Interview, 42.

29 Acts 16:9 (New Revised Standard Version)

30 Inyang, Ekong, and Okpon, Letter to Williams, 12 October 1960, Folder 2, LaMar Williams Papers.

31 LaMar Williams, Memorandum to the First Presidency, 3 May 1961, Folder 7, LaMar Williams Papers.
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preach but to baptize in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost? This brother is our claim and I think it is a justified claim too, therefore sir, you must help us, you cannot afford to do otherwise, you must not refuse our plea for baptism, and the laying on of hands by those in authority for the gift of the Holy Ghost.32

Acts 16:9 and Jeremiah 16:16 made a strong case for official Mormon missionary involvement in Nigeria, but Ogunmokun made the argument more persuasively. He cited the Great Commission scene from Matthew. In this biblical episode, Jesus asked his apostles to “make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”33 If Williams did not bring the gospel to Nigeria, he was shirking his responsibility as a Christian, by failing to follow the orders of Jesus Christ himself.

After receiving Williams’ memorandum and the flood of letters from Nigerians expressing their strong convictions, the First Presidency agreed to send Williams and Marvin Reese Jones, a young nineteen-year-old missionary ultimately bound for South Africa, to Nigeria for a visit in October 1961.34 Following in the footsteps of Fisher, Williams and Jones were to find out if the Nigerians were serious about their conversion to Mormonism. On 21 October 1961, Williams questioned Reverend Matthew Andrew Udo-Ete, general superintendent of the unofficial Mormon church, on a variety of matters to determine whether he was sincere in his desire to become a part of the LDS Church. After making clear that there was no paid ministry, that the church’s welfare program could not be extended to Nigeria, and that Blacks could not hold the priesthood, Williams reported in his diary that Udo-Ete and members of his congregations were worthy of baptism.35 Like Fisher, Williams questioned the status of Blacks within the LDS Church following his personal contact with the Nigerians:

I am most concerned about the situation here and the position of the church and the stand it will take in regard to these people…. I don’t know how we can keep the church and eventually the priesthood from them and yet the problem seems insurmountable—thank goodness all things are pursuable with the Lord’s help.36

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32 Ogunmokun, Letter to Williams, 24 July 1961, Folder 3, LaMar Williams Papers. A duplicate of this letter can be found in LaMar S. Williams Journal.

33 Matt. 28:19 (NRSV).

34 In his oral history, LaMar Williams described Marvin Jones as “a young boy nineteen years of age, weight about 140 pounds, 6’3” or 6’4” tall. Marvin had false teeth at that age and contact lenses. He was kind of fragile and was not suited to the rough life of Nigeria exactly, as he had lived a rather protected life. But he was a good companion” (LaMar S. Williams Interview, 6).

35 21 October 1961, LaMar Williams Diary, Folder 1, LaMar Williams Papers; 29 October 1961, LaMar Williams Diary, Folder 1, LaMar Williams Papers. See also 21 October 1961, LaMar S. Williams Journal.

36 29 October 1961, LaMar Williams Diary, Folder 1, LaMar Williams Papers; See also 29 October 1961, LaMar S. Williams Journal.
Jones, whose diary reveals that he was always a little more skeptical of the Nigerian Saints’ commitment to Mormonism than Williams, also came to question the priesthood ban. On 22 October 1961, he mused in his diary: “if they are faithful they may get the priesthood in this life or the next.”

Three days later, Jones declared that the LDS Church would “be forced to give them the priesthood because of the pressure of the member [sic] of black skin. So [we] will have to have revelation.” Like Fisher before them, Williams and Jones found that interacting with these potential converts moved them towards identifying with the Nigerians in a way that precluded their disenfranchisement. Mormon missionaries were the first people within the official church to see that it would be impossible to truly establish Mormonism in Nigeria without giving the priesthood to Nigerians.

The First Presidency recognized the validity of its biblical mandate following Williams’ 1961 visit to Nigeria. On 26 February 1962, Williams met with President David O. McKay to discuss the situation in Nigeria, and he informed Williams that “the Gospel would be taken to the Nigerians or colored people.” At this meeting, they began to develop plans to establish a Nigerian Mission under the supervision of the Nathan Eldon Tanner, president of the West European Mission, because “Nigeria had been under Great Britain’s protectorate system for many years and they are on a friendly basis.”

The Nigerian Mission, however, also had to be placed under the supervision of another mission, because it was currently an unofficial mission. Missionaries, as Williams would acknowledge later that year, “could not be called to the Nigerian Mission since this has not officially been organized.” The LDS Church had “not made any public announcement of the work to be done among the colored people,” and it would not do so until the following year.

On 9 April 1962, however, President McKay decided that the church could not retreat from its longstanding policy prohibiting proselytization among Black communities “until after the October Conference because of the political trouble we are having regarding the colored people prior to this next election,” which was a reference to the vacancy created on the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles by the death of Apostle George Q. McKay.

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37 22 October 1961, MS 1, Marvin Reese Jones Diary, LDS Church History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah.


39 26 February 1962, LaMar S. Williams Journal.

40 Ibid.; see also 2 November 1962, LaMar S. Williams Journal. In his oral history, however, Williams suggests that Nigeria was placed under the supervision of Nathan Eldon Tanner and the West European Mission, because it “had no other place to fit in, really. And if I’m not mistaken, he probably also had South Africa as part of his jurisdiction, which would just naturally bring Nigeria and Ghana into scope” (LaMar S. Williams Interview, 33). According to Gregory A. Prince and Wm. Robert Wright, President McKay placed the Nigerian Mission under the control of the West European Mission instead of the South African Mission, because the South African government was opposed to “proselytizing among blacks” (David O. McKay and the Rise of Modern Mormonism [Salt Lake City, UT: University of Utah Press, 2005], 84).

41 2 November 1962, LaMar S. Williams Journal.

42 Ibid.
In the early 1960s, the LDS Church received a great deal of bad press coverage about the status of Black men and women within the church, and church leaders were worried about how it might look if they were caught working among Black communities on the African continent. President McKay also thought it would be advantageous for the church’s work in Nigeria, if the church waited to open the Nigerian Mission until the empty seat on the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles was filled. He may have anticipated that Nathan Eldon Tanner, one of the advocates for Williams’ work in Nigeria, would be chosen to replace Morris on the Quorum. Williams himself actually spent September and October wondering this very thing. Tanner joined the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles on 6 October 1962.

The church named Williams as a missionary to the unofficial Nigerian Mission on 21 November 1962, placing him under the supervision of Apostle Tanner, president of the West European Mission. As President McKay told Williams, “[t]his Gospel is to be preached to ‘every nation, kindred, tongue and people.’ You are fulfilling this to a marked degree.” By assigning a missionary to Nigeria, the LDS Church took an important step.

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44 Two of the articles that prompted the LDS Church’s “political trouble,” include Ambrose Chukwu, “They’re Importing Ungodliness,” Nigerian Outlook (Enugu, Nigeria), 5 March 1963, and “Mormon Church Grows, But So Do Its Problems,” The National Observer, 17 June 1963. Copies of both of these articles can be found in the LaMar S. Williams Journal. See also Majorie M. Lawson, Memorandum to John F. Kennedy, Ted Sorensen, and Steve Smith, 23 September 1959, Series 13.1: Campaigns by State: Pre-Convention Political Files, 1960, Box 930, Folder 15: District of Columbia: Lawson, Majorie: NAACP, 1959: September–October, Papers of John F. Kennedy, Pre-Presidential Papers, Presidential Campaign Files, 1960, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, Boston, Massachusetts. On page three of this memorandum on “Negro Leadership in Utah,” Majorie states: “Utah has a very bad name in race relations. Its attitude is generally traced to the influence of the Mormon religion, which holds that not only are Mormons God’s chose people, but that darker races cannot enter the kingdom.”


46 19 December 1962, LaMar S. Williams Journal. See also “Church to Open Missionary Work in Nigeria,” Deseret News (Salt Lake City, Utah), 1 November 1963. Copies of this article can be found in the LaMar S. Williams Journal. As Gregory A. Prince and Wm. Robert Wright point out, Tanner’s role within the church changed frequently during these years: “He became an Assistant to the Quorum of the Twelve, October 8, 1960; served as president of the West German Mission April 9, 1961, to December 26, 1962, was called to the Quorum of the Twelve on October 6, 1962, and ordained five days later, and became second counselor in McKay’s First Presidency on October 4, 1963” (David O. McKay and the Rise of Modern Mormonism, 421). On N. Eldon Tanner, see Flake, Prophets and Apostles of the Last Dispensation, 223–228; Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, “The Uncommon Touch: Brief Moments with N. Eldon Tanner,” Dialogue 15, 4 (1982), 11–13; Leonard Arrington, “N. Eldon Tanner, Man of Integrity,” Dialogue 15, 4 (1982), 8–10.

47 “A Blessing upon the Head of Elder LaMar Stevenson Williams Setting Him Apart as a Missionary to the Nigerian Mission to Labor under the Direction of President Nathan Eldon Tanner of the West European Mission, President McKay Being Voice Assisted by Presidents Henry D. Moyle and Hugh H. Brown,” Folder 8, LaMar Williams Papers. See also James B. Allen, “Would-Be Saints: West Africa Before
towards abolishing the priesthood ban, but the Priesthood Revelation would have to wait for Spencer Kimball’s presidency. While President McKay firmly believed that the decision to open a mission in Nigeria was comparable to the ancient church’s decision to proselytize among the gentiles, he also maintained that only God could give the priesthood to Nigerian converts.48

Williams made two more visits to Nigeria in the 1960s—one in January 1964, and another in October 1965. During the 1965 visit, the First Presidency called Williams back to Salt Lake City prematurely. Upon his arrival, Williams learned that the First Presidency had added Joseph Fielding Smith and Thorpe B. Isaacson to its ranks, thereby expanding the traditionally two counselors of the Presidency into four counselors.49 These two conservative-minded leaders put an end to Williams’ ministry in Nigeria as well as the LDS Church’s official engagement with Nigeria until the 1978 Priesthood Revelation. According to Isaacson, the church was “just asking for a lot of problems” by interacting with Nigerian converts.50 Thus, the nascent Nigerian church still had not been officially established by the end of the decade.

The end of the Nigerian Civil War in 1970, however, ushered in a new phase of engagement with Nigerian converts, who immediately wrote to Salt Lake City to report that they had survived the war and to express their outrage with the LDS Church for not providing “words of congratulations.”51 Nigerian Mormons were disappointed with the LDS Church’s apparent ambivalence regarding its Nigerian branches—a consequence of Smith and Isaacson’s addition to the First Presidency—but they remained determined to become official members of the LDS Church.

Developments similar to those that occurred in the previous decade occurred in the 1970s. During his unofficial visits to Nigeria in 1975, missionary Lorry Rytting found the 1978 Priesthood Revelation,” Journal of Mormon History 17 (1991), 227–28; Prince and Wright, David O. McKay and the Rise of Modern Mormonism, 85.


50 LaMar S. Williams Interview, 20. See also Allen, “Would-Be Saints,” 236; Prince and Wright, David O. McKay and the Rise of Modern Mormonism, 93.

51 “A Welcome Address Presented to Dr. and Mrs. L.E. Rytting on the Occasion of Their Visit to the Leadership Conference of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, Nigeria, Held at Aba (East Central State of Nigeria) on the 14th June, 1975,” Box 1, Folder 1, Edwin Q. Cannon Papers. Duplicates of this welcome address can be found in Folder 2, Edwin Q. Cannon Collection, and Ime O. Eduok History.
Nigerian converts to be hospitable and dedicated Christians, who possessed a high regard for family values, initiative, and freedom. Writing to William Bangerter, president of the International Mission, on 4 August 1975, Rytting confessed: “our warm experience with the ‘Mormons’ in Nigeria’s South Eastern State make us hopeful that the time may be at hand for the world-wide expansion of missionary work to include the wonderful people of Nigeria…. We pray the blessings of membership will not be withheld from those truly converted and worthy.” After the LDS Church abolished the priesthood ban, Rytting told Edwin Q. Cannon, who also arrived as a missionary in Nigeria in the late 1970s, that “[w]e were especially gratified to know that the blessing[s] of the priesthood are now available.” Rytting sensed “great faith and dedication” in the Nigerian Mormons and found that he had personal difficulty with the church’s racist policy.

By the end of the 1970s, Nigerian Mormons had become even more sophisticated in their knowledge of Mormonism. In the 1960s, Ekong and Ogunmokun used the Bible to justify an official relationship between Salt Lake City and Nigeria, but by 1978, Nigerians also delved into Mormon scriptures to make their case for official involvement. In a letter written to LaMar Williams on 30 June 1978, G.S. Assam, a Nigerian from Ede Obuk Eket who was still unaware of the Priesthood Revelation, quoted a vision that the Prophet Joseph Smith had received at the Kirtland Temple in Ohio on 21 January 1836:

[“I saw the twelve apostle[s] of the lamb, who are now upon the earth, who hold the keys of this last ministry in foreign lands standing together in a circle, much fatigued with their clothes tattered and feet swollen with their eyes cost downward, and Jesus standing in their midst, and they did not behold him. The Saviour looked upon them and wept.”] Why did He weep? He wept because Nigeria is left out.

The apostles’ work, according to Assam, would not be completed until the gospel had been taken to every corner of the earth, including Nigeria.

Mormon missionaries who visited Nigeria during the 1960s and 1970s uniformly agreed that the LDS conversion movement was not going to fade away. In an undated document produced between 1975 and 1978, missionary William Bartholomew wrote a summary of possible responses to Nigerian Mormons. In this report, Bartholomew declared that the LDS Church could no longer ignore the emergence of Mormonism in Nigeria:

[A] policy of “benign neglect” has some serious implications. Any hope that this movement would disappear if left alone seems to have little foundation. There is vitality and strong leadership which commands serious consideration…. Some carefully considered policy decision seems appropriate…. For the present, it may

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52 Rytting, Letter to Bangerter, 4 August 1975, Folder 2, Edwin Q. Cannon Collection. See also Mr. and Mrs. Rytting, Letter to [?], 12 August 1975, Box 1, Folder 1, Edwin Q. Cannon Papers.

53 Rytting, Letter to Cannon, 28 February 1979, Box 1, Folder 2, Edwin Q. Cannon Papers.

54 Ibid.

55 Assam, Letter to Williams, 30 June 1978, Folder 1, Edwin Q. Cannon Collection. Joseph Smith’s vision can be found in George Albert Smith, ed., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book Company, 1948), 2: 381.
be possible to exercise subtle control through Brother Ime Eduok, an experienced and dedicated church member who is now in a position of leadership. But that is unlikely to continue without official liaison from church headquarters.\footnote{Responses to Nigerian Mormons—Options,” Folder 1, MS 7516, William V. Bartholomew Papers, 1975–1981, LDS Church History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah. A duplicate of this document can be found in Folder 2, Edwin Q. Cannon Collection.}

Nigerian Mormons would continue to practice their new religion regardless of whether the LDS Church approved of their actions, and Bartholomew believed that to best shape the nascent Nigerian church, the leaders of the LDS Church would have to recognize this fact. While the LDS Church could not indefinitely avoid interacting with the Nigerian church in an official capacity, acting in that official capacity required a policy change.

Such an important policy reversal required the backing of divine revelation, which President Kimball received after much praying on 8 June 1978.\footnote{The First Presidency, Letter to All General and Local Priesthood Officers of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 8 June 1978, Folder 1, Edwin Q. Cannon Collection. This letter was incorporated into Doctrine and Covenants as “Official Declaration 2.” On Spencer Kimball and the Priesthood Revelation, see Edward L. Kimball, “Spencer W. Kimball and the Revelation on Priesthood,” BYU Studies 47, 2 (2008), 5–78. Kimball has indicated that his father, President Kimball, had “obtained a number of letters exchanged between Williams of the missionary committee and black correspondents in Nigeria and Ghana” in 1970, the year that he became acting president of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles (“Spencer W. Kimball and the Revelation on Priesthood,” 39, fn. 94). Although his collection currently remains closed for research, the finding aid for Edward Kimball’s papers also indicates that President Kimball personally interacted with Lorry Ryting about the issue of race and the priesthood less than one week after he had announced the Priesthood Revelation (Box 1, Folder 6, MS 24040, Edward L. Kimball Papers, 1956–2007, LDS Church History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah). It seems likely that Ryting and Kimball must have had similar conversations in the years leading up to the Priesthood Revelation.} Leaders of the LDS Church had “pleaded long and earnestly on behalf of these, our faithful brethren, spending many hours in the Upper Room of the Temple supplicating the Lord for divine guidance,” wrote President Kimball, in the letter announcing the Priesthood Revelation.\footnote{“Official Declaration 2.”} Kimball stated with great joy that every worthy man in the church could now receive the priesthood. Nigerian Mormons had played a role in making the status quo untenable by insisting they become members of the LDS Church with all of the benefits that membership entailed.

**After the Priesthood Revelation**

Historians and church members alike laud the Priesthood Revelation as a landmark moment in Mormon history, but the LDS Church still had to confront many issues regarding religious worship in Nigeria after the Priesthood Revelation.\footnote{Max Mueller Perry, “Introduction: Beyond ‘Race and the Priesthood’—Toward a New History of Race and Mormonism,” Journal of Mormon History 41, 3 (2015), 1–10.} In the archival materials on which I have based this article, two issues stand out—polygamy and the question of translation.
Between the 1960s and 1970s, the LDS Church’s stance on polygamy shifted from one of acceptance to one of rejection. When President McKay assigned Williams to be a missionary in Nigeria in 1962, he established a policy of tolerance towards Nigerians with multiple wives. In a memorandum composed on 21 November 1962, President McKay told Williams “to baptize and admit them into the Church. They could keep their wives and families that they had at the time of baptism but were not to engage further into this practice,” because the LDS Church was not in the business of breaking up families. By 1979, however, church leaders had reversed this policy. In a letter dated 5 March 1979, Carlos E. Assay, president of the International Mission, informed Edwin Cannon and Rendell Mabey, two missionaries who had asked him about the issue of polygamy, that “[i]t would not be appropriate to baptize any persons who have more than one wife. This is a policy matter, and can be changed only by the First Presidency and the Twelve. When and if there is any change in this policy, you will be properly notified.”

While Cannon did not baptize any more polygamists after receiving this letter, Assay did not indicate why the LDS Church’s position on polygamy had been changed. As Cannon wrote to James E. Faust, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, on 30 June 1980, “[n]ow that individuals living in polygamy are refused baptism, an important question needs to be resolved: what to do with those members living in polygamy that are a.) members of the Church only; b.) holding the priesthood; c.) holding internal leadership positions.” This last situation was especially troubling for Cannon, because Nigerians to whom the LDS Church denied baptism on account of having multiple wives “will see inconsistency especially if the leader of the branch is living in polygamy. The longer leaders living in polygamy are allowed to remain in place, the more people who are denied baptism on the basis of polygamy will realize the inconsistency.” Although the LDS Church had taken a stance on polygamy, it still needed to decide whether it would accommodate those who became members before the policy change. The polygamy question would plague the LDS Church for years to come.

The LDS Church also did not effectively address the issue of translation of religious materials into the vernacular following the Priesthood Revelation. Before 1978, the need for vernacular literature was apparent to many Nigerian Mormons and missionaries alike. On 3 November 1975, Kalu Oku, the leader of the Lagos-Bariga Group, told a church official that worship materials still needed to be translated into local dialects. In a document composed sometime between 1975 and 1981, LDS missionary William Barholomew similarly observed that religious services

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60 Memorandum, 21 November 1962, Folder 8, LaMar Williams Papers. See also 19 December 1962, LaMar S. Williams Journal; LaMar S. Williams Interview, 24.

61 Assay, Letter to Mr. and Mrs. Mabey and Mr. and Mrs. Cannon, 5 March 1979, Box 1, Folder 2, Edwin Q. Cannon Papers; see also Mabey, Letter to Assay, 21 May 1979, Box 1, Folder 2, Edwin Q. Cannon Papers.


63 Ibid.

64 Oku, Letter to Woodland, 3 November 1975, Box 1, Folder 1, Edwin Q. Cannon Papers.
are conducted in native language (Igbo, Ibibio, Efik). Few of the congregation members understand English, and only a few of the Church leaders can communicate in English. They use primarily the Efik bible in the South East, or the Igbo or Hausa [sic] Bibles in the northern and western branches. The only translation done so far are the Articles of Faith, which have been printed in Efik.65

The absence of vernacular materials hindered the development and spread of Mormonism in Nigeria, but many believed the Priesthood Revelation would change this. On 10 June 1978, Lorry Ryting wrote to Ime Eduok, the future president of the LDS Church’s Cross River district: “I do not know how soon it will be possible to begin work in Africa. It will probably be sometime and will begin carefully, slowly. There will be a need to translate materials into Igbo, Efik, and other languages, and to teach some church leaders those languages.”66

Ryting turned out to be wrong in his belief that the LDS Church would begin to pursue translation projects in Nigeria after 1978. LDS missionaries Mabey and Cannon spoke out against translation, because the government believed that “translation activities were hurtful to … unification.”67 The leaders of Nigeria feared that “showing favoritism toward one tribal language over another … could lead to resentment among other ethnic groups.”68 In what was likely an effort to curry favor with the Nigerian government, Mabey and Cannon backed this position. They argued that Efik was a “relatively minor language,” despite the fact that the majority of Nigerian Mormons lived in the Efik-speaking region.69 Thus, the decision of Mabey and Cannon highlights the tenuous status of missionaries in post-colonial Africa. Gaining permission from the government to reside in Nigeria was a problem that plagued LDS missionaries from Williams to Cannon, as their correspondence, oral histories, and journal entries frequently revealed references to visa problems.70 Missionaries and their motivations were now more highly suspect than they

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65 “Summary—Mormon Church of Nigeria,” Folder 1, William V. Bartholomew Papers. The minutes from the “12 Districts Conference” held at Okukuk Asang in Uyo on 23–25 October 1964, similarly indicates that more people could read the Efik Bible than the English Bible. These minutes can be found in the LaMar S. Williams Journal. See also LaMar S. Williams Interview, 7, 17, 47, 93, 94.


67 Mabey, Letter and Cannon to Davis, 15 May 1979, Box 1, Folder 2, Edwin Q. Cannon Papers.

68 Ibid.


had ever been in the past. They were also no longer united in a civilizing mission with the government, as they had been in the colonial period. Instead, western missionaries were now outsiders, and their actions, if perceived in a negative light by the government of the postcolonial nation, could get them expelled from the country without the opportunity to return. The Priesthood Revelation, then, did not eliminate all of the problems of establishing the LDS Church in Africa. As this brief survey of the problems of polygamy and translation illustrate, many challenges still confronted the LDS Church on its bumpy journey to becoming a global faith.

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that the 1978 Priesthood Revelation was in part a response to the emergence of an unofficial LDS church in Nigeria. In the 1960s, Nigerians established an indigenous Mormon church in their country, with limited assistance from the parent church in Utah. By the late 1970s, this unofficial church had thousands of followers under the name of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. During these years, missionaries, through sustained contact with Nigerian Mormons, actively questioned the status of Black Africans within the LDS Church. They brought their attitudes and opinions regarding the Nigerian converts back to the United States with them, where they influenced the thinking of church leaders like Presidents David O. McKay and Spencer W. Kimball, who played important roles in developing the LDS Church’s relationship with Africa. The Priesthood Revelation, however, was not the final step in a long and reluctant journey to becoming a global faith. The LDS Church still had to address many issues regarding religious worship in Nigeria, especially those of polygamy and translation.

Put another way, the process of becoming a truly global faith for Mormonism began with the story of the neglected Nigerian Latter-day Saints. Their struggle to become fully-fledged members of the LDS Church is crucial to understanding how the widespread southward shift in the membership of Christianity as a whole has had enduring consequences for Mormonism that are only now becoming apparent.

missionaries had trouble getting travel visas from the Nigerian government. In his dissertation on Mennonite missionary activities in Uyo, Yoder describes how the MBMC missionaries also experienced difficulty in acquiring long-term resident visas and how this shaped Mennonite missionary strategy (“Mennonite Missionaries and African Independent Churches,” 34, 217, 267, 302–32).

71 This is not to say that missionaries and colonial administrators did not ever disagree about the nature of the civilizing mission, or how it should be carried out. See, for instance, Andrew Porter, Religion Versus Empire? British Protestant Missionaries and Overseas Expansion, 1710–1914 (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2004). The late anthropologist J.D.Y. Peel has similarly observed that “[t]he close association of mission and empire has become such a banality that more nuanced views are badly needed” (Christianity, Islam, and Oriṣa Religion: Three Traditions in Comparison and Interaction [Oakland: University of California Press, 2016], 257).