

# *African Converts Without Baptism: A Unique and Inspiring Chapter in Church History*

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I wish to speak about a unique and inspiring chapter in Church history. It took place in recent years among the beautiful people of Africa. Too often we have misconceptions about Africa and its people. Africa is referred to as the Dark Continent, and the media usually portrays Africans as primitive, starving, or at war with each other. One African official observed that the darkest thing about Africa is America's ignorance of it (see James H. Robinson, in *African American Quotations*, ed. Richard Newman [Phoenix, Arizona: Oryx Press, 1998], p. 18). When I was in Africa several years ago, I was sent the following quote: "In Africa there are tribes that beat the ground with clubs while uttering spine-chilling cries. Anthropologists call this a primitive form of self-expression. In America we do the same thing—but we call it golf!"

There is much we can learn from our African brothers and sisters, who are among the great pioneers in this church. President Gordon B. Hinckley said, "The days of pioneering in the Church are still with us; they did not end with covered wagons and handcarts" (in "Many Are Still Blazing Gospel Trails," *Church News*, 24 July 1993, p. 6). Pioneers are those individuals who help establish the Church all over the world.

The pioneers that I will focus on this morning had little help from the Church, because they were not members and the Church knew very little about them. I seek your faith and prayers that we might be edified by their example and by the assurance of God's love for all of his children.

In 1853, nine years after the martyrdom of the Prophet Joseph Smith, missionaries were sent to Africa for the first time, but they only proselyted among the white people of South Africa. It was not until 125 years later, following the revelation on the priesthood in 1978, that the gospel was preached to *all* people of Africa.

However, 30 years before the revelation, Church leaders became aware of other Africans who were interested in the Church. By the 1950s, many letters were sent to Church headquarters from the West African nations of Nigeria and Ghana requesting literature and membership in the Church. The letters were written by devout Christians who had gained a testimony from the Book of Mormon or other Church literature.

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What began as a comparative trickle of requests in the early 1950s became a flood by the 1960s. More letters requesting literature were received from Nigeria and Ghana than from all the rest of the world combined (from Edwin Q. Cannon, Jr., interview with Gordon Irving, 10 January 1980, Salt Lake City, Church Historical Department). The Church responded by sending literature, but the demand for Church literature was so great that some Africans even established LDS bookstores. However, since there were no priesthood holders to preside and provide priesthood ordinances, those asking for baptism were told, “The time is not yet. You must wait.”

As they waited, they shared their knowledge and testimony of the gospel with others and organized congregations. It was reported that in the 1960s there were more than 60 congregations in Nigeria and Ghana, with more than 16,000 participants—none of whom were baptized (from interview with LaMar Williams by E. Dale LeBaron in Salt Lake City on 12 February 1988).<sup>1</sup>

This was a paradoxical situation for the Church. With an army of missionaries eager to go to the ends of the earth to teach and baptize, there were thousands in Africa pleading to join the Church whom we were not able to baptize. As far as is known, nothing like this had occurred in this or in any other dispensation.

In 1960 President David O. McKay assigned South Africa mission president Glen G. Fisher to be the first Church representative to visit some of these unbaptized converts. He met with several groups in Nigeria, one of which had more than 5,600 participants in many congregations. President Fisher told the First Presidency that he received a royal welcome; they had been preparing themselves and their congregations for baptism for years. Their continued plea was, “We want the true church” (in *Glen G. Fisher: A Man to Match the Mountains*, ed. E. Dale LeBaron [Edmonton: Fisher House, 1992], pp. 147–48). President Fisher was also

impressed with their sincerity. Even though they were extremely poor, they never mentioned financial help.

The intensity of their pleadings continued to increase, as reflected in this letter to President David O. McKay from a pastor in Nigeria who had made previous requests for baptism. He wrote:

*I have to say that my heart will not rest . . . until I achieve my objective to be a baptized member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, to receive the gift of the Holy Ghost, . . . and to be fully instructed in the gospel as restored [through the] Prophet, Joseph Smith . . . , in order to be able to preach the true gospel to my people and win for my Savior hearts that should otherwise perish in the darkness. [Letter of 29 July 1961, on file in the Church Historian’s Library; also in Williams interview]*

Such letters received President McKay’s attention and concern not only because of their fervent plea but also because of their letterhead, which read, “The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Nigeria Branch.” The prophet did not know that there were “branches” of the Church in Nigeria.

In 1961 President McKay assigned LaMar Williams, secretary to the Church Missionary Department, to go to Nigeria on a month-long fact-finding mission to determine if the people were sincere and willing to accept the Church without holding the priesthood (Williams interview, pp. 10–11). Although Brother Williams had been responding to the flood of letters from Africa, he was not prepared for what he found there. He was met at the airport in Lagos, Nigeria, by 10 pastors with whom he had been corresponding. He, too, was treated like royalty but was surprised to discover that not only did each pastor operate independently, they had not even been aware of each other (Williams interview, pp. 11–12).

The first official Church meeting in black Africa was held on October 22, 1961, in a small mud hut in Opobo District, Nigeria, where Brother Williams met with a pastor and 110 followers. No one came by car. Many, including eight mothers with small children, had begun their day before 4:00 A.M. and walked 25 miles or more to be there. After teaching them for two hours, Brother Williams prepared to end the meeting. He recorded:

*It was hot as blazes. . . . My suit was wringing wet. . . . When I turned the meeting back to [the pastor], I heard a murmur all through the congregation . . . and [the pastor] said to me, "They don't want to go home. They have something to say."*

*Then for three hours . . . these people were standing up bearing testimony to the truthfulness of the Church and how they believed in the prophets. I could not believe what I was hearing. [Williams interview, pp. 10–12]*

One elderly gentleman said:

*I keep hearing you say, "if we are sincere." Elder Williams, I want you to know that I am sincere. I am an old man . . . I am sick. But when I heard you were going to be here, I walked 16 miles this morning to see you and to hear what you have to say. I still have to walk 16 miles to get back home, and I am not well. I want you to know that I am sincere or I would not be here. I have not seen President McKay. I have not seen God. But I have seen you. And I will hold you personally accountable to tell President McKay that I am sincere. [Letter on file]*

Brother Williams reported to President McKay that he felt thousands were ready for baptism (Williams interview, pp. 25–27).

Three months later, President McKay called Brother and Sister Williams to preside over the first mission in black Africa, but the Nigerian government refused to issue the necessary visas. This was primarily due to media attacks against the Church because of its position in

denying blacks the priesthood, and at this time civil rights was an explosive issue. After four years of intense effort, one day Brother Williams was at the embassy in Nigeria hoping to finally obtain the visas. While there he received a telegram from the First Presidency stating, "Discontinue negotiations in Nigeria and return home immediately." Shocked and confused, but obedient, he returned home (Williams interview, pp. 4, 22–24; also Williams journal, "Nigerian Mission," Church Historical Library, p. 644).

Upon his return to Salt Lake City in November 1965, President N. Eldon Tanner assured Brother Williams that the Church would yet go to Nigeria, and they would both live to see it (see Williams journal, p. 64.1). He further said, "We don't know why we called you back. We only know it was urgent. There is a reason, and we will know [what it is someday]" (Williams journal, p. 64.4; also in Williams interview, pp. 4, 22–24).

Within three weeks Africa's most devastating civil war, the Biafran War, exploded in Nigeria, with much of the fighting in the area where the unbaptized congregations of believers were located (see *Encyclopedia of Africa South of the Sahara*, John Middleton, editor in chief [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1997], 4:357). Two ambassadors were killed on the steps of the embassy where Brother Williams received the telegram instructing him to return home. Brother and Sister Williams were released from their mission call, and in June 1966 LaMar Williams turned over 15,000 names and addresses of unbaptized African converts to Elders Spencer W. Kimball and Gordon B. Hinckley, both of whom were on the Church Missionary Committee (Williams interview, pp. 7, 20–21, 35).

It is important to note that the Church made every effort to establish itself in West Africa but was prevented from doing so. However, the Lord has promised that his eternal blessings will come "in his own time, and

in his own way, and according to his own will” (D&C 88:68). The Lord’s “own time” for black Africa came in June 1978. “His own way” was a revelation given to his prophet, President Spencer W. Kimball, making all gospel blessings available to all worthy members. The Lord’s “own will” regarding the priesthood restriction and the removal of it has been stated by prophets, seers, and revelators.

In 1949 the First Presidency stated that the priesthood restriction was “not a matter of the declaration of a policy but of direct commandment from the Lord” (statement of the First Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 17 August 1949; copy on file in Church Archives). Twenty years later, Presidents Hugh B. Brown and N. Eldon Tanner said:

*From the beginning of this dispensation, Joseph Smith and all succeeding presidents of the Church have taught that [blacks] were not to receive the priesthood for reasons which we believe are known to God, but which He has not made fully known to man. [Statement of the First Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 15 December 1969; copy on file in Church Archives]*

President Spencer W. Kimball—whose clarion call during his ministry was to take the gospel to every nation, kindred, tongue and people—was particularly aware of many under priesthood restriction throughout the world, and he pleaded long and earnestly with the Lord in their behalf (see D&C Official Declaration—2). Also, in numerous temple meetings, President Kimball met with his counselors and the Twelve to discuss this issue. In such a meeting on June 1, 1978, President Kimball asked his Brethren to express their feelings regarding this matter. Elder David B. Haight recalled that as each one spoke, there was “an outpouring of the Spirit which bonded our souls together in perfect unity” (in Lucile

C. Tate, *David B. Haight: The Life Story of a Disciple* [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1987], pp. 279–80). Then President Kimball suggested that they have prayer at the altar. President Gordon B. Hinckley recalled:

*There was a hallowed and sanctified atmosphere in the room. For me, it felt as if a conduit opened between the heavenly throne and the kneeling, pleading prophet of God who was joined by his Brethren. . . .*

*Every man in that circle, by the power of the Holy Ghost, knew the same thing. . . .*

*. . . Not one of us . . . was ever quite the same after that. Nor has the Church been quite the same. . . .*

*Tremendous, eternal consequences for millions over the earth are flowing from that manifestation.*

*. . .*

*. . . This has opened great areas of the world to the teaching of the everlasting gospel. . . .*

*We have cause to rejoice . . . that we have seen this glorious day. [“Speaking Today: Priesthood Restoration,” *Ensign*, October 1988, pp. 70–71]*

One tender moment of rejoicing was shared by David M. Kennedy, who had served for years as President Kimball’s special ambassador in helping the Church enter new countries. Previous to the revelation, as they would study a large map of the world, Brother Kennedy would place one hand over the continent of Africa, saying, “We can’t go there unless they have the priesthood.” On June 8, 1978, a subdued President Kimball returned from the temple prior to announcing to the world the revelation that had been received. He stopped at Brother Kennedy’s office, opened the door, and, with deep emotion, said, “David, now you can take your hand off Africa” (David M. Kennedy, lecture to Religious Education faculty, BYU, 2 October 1992; see also Martin Berkeley Hickman, *David Matthew Kennedy: Banker, Statesman, Churchman*

[Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1987], pp. 343–44).

How important was this revelation? It has been said that “the greatest events of history are those which affect the largest numbers for the longest periods” (“The First Presidency Easter Message,” *Church News*, 26 March 1994, p. 1). By this criteria, when we consider those affected by this revelation—which includes millions on the earth and billions on the other side of the veil—we can see why President Kimball said that it brought “one of the greatest changes and blessings that has ever been known” (*TSWK*, p. 451). Floodgates were now open for the gospel to go to Africa and to African ancestors (see Bruce R. McConkie, “All Are Alike unto God,” CES Symposium, BYU, 18 August 1978).

When this revelation was announced, my wife and I were presiding over the only mission on the continent of Africa. The announcement brought feelings and stirrings impossible to describe. As inspiring as it was, I felt a great concern because Africans do not traditionally keep written histories, and I felt their unique experiences needed to be preserved. The desire to help preserve that history was later realized. Since coming to BYU I have been blessed by the Lord and helped by others in obtaining oral histories from more than 600 African pioneers, from which I will now share some insights.

The unbaptized converts in Africa were guided and strengthened by the Lord according to their faith in him. The Lord used two types of disciples to help accomplish this.

First, the Lord guided many LDS expatriates from North America to Africa on professional assignments, many of whom provided much-needed support and encouragement for these pioneers. Elder Alexander B. Morrison of the First Quorum of the Seventy said in general conference:

*In every corner of Africa, there are faithful expatriate members of the Church. . . .*

*I testify they are not there by chance. As part of God's great and grand design for growth, they have been placed on the frontiers of the Church by divine providence. . . . They are the right people at the right place and at the right time in history. [“The Dawning of a New Day in Africa,” *Ensign*, November 1987, p. 26]*

Two expatriates who were especially praised and remembered by the African pioneers in West Africa were Professor Virginia Cutler (former BYU dean of the College of Family Living) and President Merrill J. Bateman. President Bateman worked in West Africa for 15 years, then, following the revelation on the priesthood, the First Presidency assigned him to escort Brother Ted Cannon, counselor in the Church International Mission, to prepare the people of Nigeria and Ghana for the arrival of the first missionaries.

Second, the Lord raised up Eliases to prepare people for the gospel so the infant church could grow quickly and withstand Satan's fury. John the Baptist was the Elias who prepared people at the Savior's time. In this dispensation the Lord raised up various Eliases. For example, Sidney Rigdon, a Campbellite preacher in Ohio, prepared many for the gospel, including future counselors in the First Presidency, apostles, and presiding bishops. To Sidney Rigdon the Lord said, “Thou was sent forth, even as John, to prepare the way before me . . . , and thou knewest it not” (D&C 35:4). In black Africa, where the revelation on the priesthood was, in effect, the restoration of the gospel for them, a loving Heavenly Father raised up many Eliases. Let me share some examples.

The first missionaries sent to Africa were Rendell and Rachel Mabey and Ted and Janath Cannon. They arrived in Nigeria just five months after the revelation. Their first baptism was an Elias named Anthony Obinna, who had waited and pleaded for membership for 13 years. In 1965 he had a dream that he did not

understand but that impressed him deeply. He said:

*One night I was sleeping and a tall man came to me . . . and took me to one of the most beautiful buildings and showed me all the rooms. At the end he showed himself in the crucified form. Then in 1970 I found [a] Reader's Digest article titled "The March of the Mormons," with a picture of the Salt Lake Temple. It was exactly the same building that I had seen in my dreams. [Interview with Anthony Obinna in Mbaise, Nigeria, 4 June 1988]*

Immediately Brother Obinna wrote to Church headquarters requesting literature and baptism. He received literature, organized a congregation, and continued writing letters requesting baptism. Finally, after years of pleading, he wrote directly to the Council of Twelve, saying, "Your long silence about the establishment of the Church in Nigeria is very embarrassing. . . . Did Christ not say, 'Go ye and teach all nations?'" (Obinna interview).

It is not often that the Brethren are chastised by a nonmember of the Church for not baptizing converts. However, when Brother Obinna learned that the revelation had been received, he wrote the following to President Kimball:

*We are happy for the many hours in the upper room of the temple you spent supplicating the Lord to bring us into the fold. We thank our Heavenly Father for hearing your prayers and ours and by revelation [confirming] the long promised day . . . to receive every blessing of the gospel. [Letter on file]*

On the day Brother Obinna was baptized, he was ordained to the priesthood and set apart as the first black African branch president, and Sister Obinna became the first Relief Society president. Soon after his baptism Brother Obinna prophesied, "The seed of the gospel will grow into a giant tree. The Church

in Nigeria will surprise the world in its growth" (letter on file). And so it has.

Growth has been a continuing and major challenge to the Church in Africa. Limiting baptisms, so membership did not outgrow leadership, was like trying to contain an explosion. The spiritual hunger of the people and the dedicated efforts of the Eliases brought such rapid growth that Presiding Bishop Victor L. Brown said to Elder Mabey, "I think you are on the frontier of one of the greatest historical events in Church history as far as growth is concerned" (in Rendell N. Mabey and Gordon T. Allred, *Brother to Brother* [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1984], p. 140).

For instance, Elder Mabey tells of traveling a great distance through a rain forest in Nigeria to find a particular congregation. They arrived on a Saturday just as people were leaving a little village church, attached to which was a sign that read, "The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints." Elder Mabey reported:

*The pastor was very happy and excited to see us and ran out and rang the assembly bell. All the people came back and we held a meeting. The first thing this pastor did after [the meeting concluded], was to stand up with tears in his eyes and thank the Lord for answering their prayers. He said, "You know, today we were assembled here on Saturday because we were breaking a twenty-four hour fast, asking the Lord to send us missionaries. . . . We've listened to you for an hour and we all believe what you tell us is true and we want to be baptized!" [Rendell Mabey interview, p. 217]*

In both Nigeria and Ghana the missionaries found hundreds who had testimonies of the Book of Mormon, the Prophet Joseph Smith, and the restoration of the gospel. All they needed was baptism. And so they were baptized! In one 24-hour period, 149 converts were baptized (see Mabey and Allred, *Brother to Brother*, p. 143). Within one year there were more than 1,700 members in 35 branches in

West Africa (see Mabey and Allred, *Brother to Brother*, p. vii).

After only nine and a half years of missionary work, Elder Neal A. Maxwell organized the Aba Nigeria Stake on May 15, 1988—the first stake in which all priesthood leaders were black—and he noted that this was “a historic day in the Church in this dispensation, and in any dispensation” (in “Nigerian Stake,” *Church News*, 21 May 1988, p. 7).

As Elder Maxwell created this first black African stake, he said to those present:

*I was present in the upper room of the temple that early June day in 1978 when all the General Authorities gathered to receive the revelation and decision from President Spencer W. Kimball. I wept with joy that day. The handkerchief I wiped my tears with I took home and told my wife not to wash it. I put it in my book of remembrance, still bearing the marks of my tears of joy.*

*On this Sunday, I have a second handkerchief that [has] wiped more tears of joy. I will take it home and place it in my book of remembrance next to the other handkerchief. [In “Nigerian Stake,” p. 7]*

In Ghana the field was also already to harvest, due mainly to another Elias, Joseph William Billy Johnson, a preacher who obtained a Book of Mormon in 1964. He said:

*As I read the Book of Mormon I became convinced that it was really the word of God, and sometimes while reading I would burst into tears. I felt the Spirit as I read. . . .*

*I have a strong testimony [of] the Book of Mormon. It is a very powerful book! [Interview with Joseph William Billy Johnson by E. Dale LeBaron in Cape Coast, Ghana, 23 May 1988]*

Brother Johnson also knew that the Lord called him to be an Elias. He said:

*One early morning . . . I saw the heavens open and angels with trumpets singing songs of praise unto God. . . . In the course of this I heard my name mentioned thrice, “Johnson, Johnson, Johnson. If you will take up my work as I will command you, I will bless you and bless your land.” Trembling and in tears I replied, “Lord, with thy help I will do whatsoever you will command me.”*

*From that day onward, I was constrained by that Spirit to go from street to street . . . to deliver the message which we had read from the Book of Mormon. . . . I did exactly as the Lord commanded me . . . and immediately our persecutions started. [Johnson interview; also a letter from Brother Johnson to the First Presidency, 9 September 1978, and a handwritten document on the history of the Church in Ghana. These are on file with the author. See also E. Dale LeBaron, “All Are Alike unto God” (Orem, Utah: Granite Publishing, 1998), pp. 16–17]*

Brother Johnson also reported that at a time of great trial early in his ministry, his deceased brother appeared to him in a dream and said:

*“Don’t worry. . . you have chosen the only true church on earth . . . and I am now investigating your church.” I was surprised. I never knew that the Church extended to another world. It was my brother who brought that knowledge to me. He said that if I didn’t believe him, he would sing a song from my church, and he sang “Come, Come, Ye Saints.” That was the first time I had heard that hymn. He said, “Don’t leave the church, my brother. . . . Please see that I am baptized.”*

Brother Johnson then noted:

*It was my brother who enlightened me about baptism for the dead and brought it to my knowledge. . . . Most of my relatives appeared to me in dreams [saying,] “Reverend Johnson, do you know you have a work to do for us? Our great grandsons and daughters will be in your church soon. See that we are baptized.” . . . I learned these doctrines before*

*the missionaries arrived. Nothing they taught us seemed strange. They simply confirmed what we had heard. . . . Each time the Lord addressed us in dreams, He addressed us as Latter-day Saints, even though we had not yet become members. [Johnson interview; see also LeBaron, "All Are Alike," pp. 19–20]*

Brother Johnson felt very close to the prophets Joseph Smith and Brigham Young, who reportedly also appeared to him in visions and dreams to strengthen him. A son was born during these trying times, and he is probably the only young man in Ghana today named Brigham.

For 14 years Brother Johnson helped organize 10 congregations. To strengthen his people against trials and persecution, he focused on the early history of the Church. He said:

*We felt the spirit of the pioneers. . . . We gained our strength from the pioneers. We were inspired by their works. . . . I would see tears falling from the eyes of my members, especially when we sang, "Come, Come, Ye Saints." That hymn is wonderful. It is my favorite hymn in the Church. [Johnson interview; see also LeBaron, "All Are Alike," p. 19]*

One night at midnight, after many lonely years of struggle, Brother Johnson heard a shortwave news broadcast from England in which he heard President Kimball's announcement that all worthy males could receive the priesthood. He burst into tears of joy, knowing that the Church would now come to Africa.

Following Brother Johnson's baptism he served as Ghana's first branch president, after which he served several missions. Twelve years after his baptism he was ordained a patriarch, when Elders Boyd K. Packer and James E. Faust created the first two stakes in Ghana. Last February President Hinckley announced the first temple in black Africa to be built in Accra, Ghana, where Brother Johnson

first preached. Soon he and tens of thousands of others can receive temple ordinances and perform them for their kindred dead.

A wonderful sister who performed an Elias-like mission to her people in Ghana was Priscilla Sampson-Davis. She obtained a Book of Mormon in 1963, then studied, prepared, and waited for 15 years. Soon after her baptism she had a vision that she described as follows:

*I wasn't asleep. I saw myself at a sacrament meeting and we were singing when I saw a personage in very bright apparel standing in front of the congregation. The Personage called me by name and requested that I come and stand by Him. . . . He then asked me why some were not singing with the others. I told him that they could not read English. . . . He asked me if I wouldn't like to help my sisters and brothers sing praises to our Heavenly Father. I said that I would do my best. Then the vision passed away.*

*Immediately I . . . started translating the hymn Redeemer of Israel into Fanti [the major dialect in Ghana]. [From interview with Priscilla Sampson-Davis by E. Dale LeBaron in Cape Coast, Ghana, 19 May 1988; see also LeBaron, "All Are Alike," pp. 48–50]*

Sister Sampson-Davis translated the hymns, the missionary pamphlets, and *Gospel Principles*. Then, under assignment, she translated the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price into Fanti. She said, "It was the Lord Himself who commissioned me to do the translation. . . . By translating these things, my brothers and sisters who can't understand English will be able to see and read the true gospel for themselves" (LeBaron, "All Are Alike," pp. 49–50).

Moses Mahlangu, yet another Elias, was a preacher from Soweto, South Africa. He found a copy of the Book of Mormon, but because the bottom of the title page was torn off, he did not know what church had published it.

As he read the book, he was filled with light and understanding. He said, "I had had desires to find God and to receive revelation, but I was never satisfied until I got the Book of Mormon." He told his fellow pastors:

*We fight every day over what the Bible says about baptism. We fight about the name of the church. The Book of Mormon is very clear on these points. . . . People will have no need to fight if they read both the Bible and the Book of Mormon. [In LeBaron, "All Are Alike," p. 191]*

Fluent in nine languages, Moses taught from the Book of Mormon and gathered many followers before he ever learned the name of the Church and made contact with it. Then, for more than 14 years he waited, preparing himself and others for baptism. During this time he frequently came to the mission office in Johannesburg to obtain copies of the Book of Mormon and other literature, and I was therefore privileged to know him.

Soon after the revelation was announced, I sought out Moses. As we embraced I asked him if he had heard about the revelation. He said, "Yes. Does this mean that I can now be baptized?"

I asked, "Moses, would you like to be baptized?"

His eyes welled up with tears as he said softly, "I have waited for 14 years."

I conducted a baptismal interview that I shall never forget. To every question I received the same answer: "I have been keeping that commandment for 14 years." I was deeply humbled in the presence of this great pioneer. His son, who as a boy accompanied Moses in his ministry, is now serving as Moses' bishop in the Soweto Ward, near Johannesburg.

Presidents Harold B. Lee and Gordon B. Hinckley have said that the strength of the Church is not in our numbers, our buildings, or the amount of tithes and offerings. Our strength is in the testimonies that burn in the

hearts of the members (see Harold B. Lee, "Strengthen the Stakes of Zion," p. 6, and Gordon B. Hinckley, "The True Strength of the Church," p. 49; both in *Ensign*, July 1973).

It has been my privilege to hear hundreds of testimonies from African converts. I share but one. It was spoken by a nine-year-old boy in a fast and testimony meeting in Aba, Nigeria, two weeks after he was baptized. This was his message:

*Good morning, brothers and sisters. I am happy to bear my testimony because I was baptized on conference day. Since I joined The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, God has been guiding me both in the school and at home. Now that I am baptized, I promise to continue obeying God's commandments. I testify that The Church of Jesus Christ is true. I testify that the Prophet Ezra Taft Benson is true. I know that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. I say all these things in Jesus' name. Amen. [Taped recording]*

The significance of this unique chapter of Church history was summed up by Brother Jude Inmpey from Nigeria. At a social gathering with mission couples, the mission president called on him to share his feelings about the gospel coming to his people. He related a dream that he had not understood until that moment. He had dreamed that he was in a gathering where an organ was playing background music. It sounded terrible, and people were complaining. They discovered that the organist was playing only on the white keys. Brother Inmpey then observed, "For many, many years the Church has been playing only the white keys, but now we are playing on the white and the black keys, and the music is much, much sweeter" (in LeBaron, *All Are Alike unto God*, p. 123).

The sweetness of this music was experienced last February when President Hinckley became the first president of the Church to visit black Africa. A member of the Twelve observed

that not only did the prophet have a great impact on the Saints in Africa, but the Saints in Africa also had a great impact on the prophet.

While in Africa, President Hinckley compared Peter's revelation that opened the door for the gospel to go to the Gentiles nearly 2,000 years ago to the revelation allowing the gospel to go to black Africa. He quoted Peter's statement to Cornelius: "God is no respecter of persons: But in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him" (Acts 10:34–35). Then the prophet said:

*That, my beloved brethren and sisters, describes you. I've had that testimony reconfirmed in my heart on this trip, as I have met with you and many others, that all are alike unto God. We are . . . all of a great family, a marvelous family, the family of the living Christ, worshipping Him together.*  
["Zimbabwe Pioneers Take Front Row Seats," *Church News*, 28 February 1998, p. 4]

And, referring to the revelation of June 1978, President Hinckley said, "I want to give testimony here that that was inspired, that that was a revelation from God. I was there. I was an eyewitness to it in the House of the Lord. . . . How grateful we are" ("Zimbabwe Pioneers," p. 4).

I also testify that this work is divine, and so are our spiritual roots. We are truly brothers and sisters through our spirit's birth and through our spiritual rebirth. May we always radiate pure love toward others—regardless of race, culture, or gender—as our Heavenly Father and the Savior do. Indeed, as the prophet Nephi (2 Nephi 26:33) and President Hinckley have testified: "All are alike unto God," to which I testify in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

#### **Note**

1. All interviews, letters, and tapes are on file with the author unless otherwise noted.