

# Telling the Stories of Blacks in the Church

**Presenter: Tarienne Mitchell**

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**Tarienne Mitchell:** Hello, thank you so much for giving me the opportunity to speak with you today. I'm very excited to have this chance to talk about something that I'm inspired by and I will, I want more people to feel inspired along with me about this. For those who don't know me, my name is Tarienne Mitchell. I am an archivist at the Church history library.

I'm a subject matter expert in history of blacks in the Church, and I do what I can to try to find records and collect oral histories to help tell the experiences of black members in the Church.

I have created a PowerPoint for my presentation, and I am going to share that with you. Bear with me for one second. Okay. Okay.

During the 1920s, author and historian Carl G. Woodson lobbied for a week to celebrate the stories of black history. And this week, as you know, has become a month, which we now celebrate as Black History Month in February.

Woodson, who wrote *The Miseducation of the Negro* and is also known as the father of Black History, argued, "Those who have no record of what their forebears have accomplished lose inspiration which comes from the teaching from the teaching of biography and history." By sharing the stories of black members, all members benefit in their experience in their examples of faith.

We can do, we can also combat the spread of misinformation about the Church's history as well as uplift a community who struggles and still feels the impact of its history as black members of the Church. I think Woodson would also argue that Black History Month, as it has, as it's become was created as a stepping stone to help encourage people to have conversations about

black people and their history, but we've expanded beyond that and black stories should be told all the time, not just during February. I think many historians and I would argue that black history is history as well as black Church history is Church history and should be shared.

We have done much with trying to tell more stories of blacks. They're included in the Saints volumes that are coming out. We should be telling stories of black members as regularly as we do in Sunday school, or across the pulpit, or in manuals, and other discussions that are held within the Church about the history of the Church.

The first known black to join the church was baptized in Ohio in 1830. This illustrates that Africans and their diaspora, on which I commonly call black, have a rich history in the church and have wonderful stories which need to be told. Blacks have also contributed and influenced Church members and the Church, and those efforts should be recognized. For example, this first member of the Church, Pete Kerr, who was also known as Black Pete has been attributed to bring the practice of the gift of tongues to the church by historians. This gift of the Spirit, as many of you know continues to be celebrated and practiced today, particularly when missionaries receive their calls to serve a mission, especially, when it's in another language that is not their native languages. Pete, although he didn't stay in the Church. This just shows that he did have an impact during the short time that he was an active member of the Church.

However, it seems like no matter how inspiring and awesome black stories and stories of people with color are, it often feels like we are sidelined or an afterthought in the discussion of the history of the Church.

Much like the positioning of the black pioneer, Jane Manning James, and her son Sylvester in this picture, among all a large group of other pioneers, Church pioneers, stories such as hers seem to be, like I said, an afterthought.

It also seems to be they're only discussed, or they tend to be discussed, especially in story projects when we're trying to check off boxes of diversity. Often, it feels like when it comes to history, it seems to fail the analyzing and discussing the complexities of black lives. Often, it seems that the history of blacks is simplified into the struggles that they were faced, especially when it comes to the Church, and whether they endured those struggles and stayed faithful member of the Church, and, or left the Church. And, for the ones that left the Church it sometimes feels like they left, their contribution or the time that they spend in the Church is not valued. I think we will, there could be a change in that in the discussion of black history.

Just to give you a little backstory on Jane. Jane Manning James was a freed woman who joined the Church despite the asking of her pastor who said don't go. Don't go talk to those elders. But she did it anyway. She was her own woman, and she made her own decisions. She also encouraged her family members to join the Church, and they picked up and moved to Nauvoo to be a part of the Church membership out there. They ended up walking there because the ferry and such would not carry them as passengers, they would only carry black people that were enslaved at the time and traveling with their with their enslavers.

As we know, Jane Manning James stayed faithful with the Church until the end of her days. She traveled from Nauvoo to Salt Lake with the rest of the pioneers as pictured in this picture to escape religious persecution.

So I, along with her story, I wanted to add some other stories to consider about telling when we discuss the complex history of black members in the Church. For example, Q. Walker Lewis fought for his freedom from Nathaniel Jensen after filing two court cases against him. The first one in 1781 and the second one in 1783.

Lewis, as I said, went on to win those court battles. His cases are often referred to the cases that help in or abolished slavery in the State of Massachusetts.

As a free man, Lewis fought for the freedom of others along abolitionists like William Lloyd Garrison. He and his family also ran one of the stops of the underground railroad while he was living in Massachusetts.

In 1843, Walker was baptized by Parley P Pratt and ordained to the priesthood by Joseph Smith's brother William Smith in 1844.

Like many pioneers, Walker moved with his family out west arriving a little bit later than some. But he ended up in the Utah Valley in 1851.

However, as he saw that things were beginning to change for blacks under the leadership of Brigham Young, Walker moved back to Massachusetts in 1852.

Incidentally, this is the same year that slavery was made legal in the Utah territory through the law known as An Act in Relation to Service.

In 1916, shortly after his baptism, William P. Daniels and his wife, Clara Daniels began hosting a scripture study meeting in his house in Cape Town, South Africa.

Daniels invited friends, family members, missionaries, mission presidents and even visiting Church members to study of the scriptures in great detail with him and his wife and his children.

The Daniels family became a very beloved part of the South African mission. Their examples inspired missionaries and local leadership. During a visit to the United States, William had the opportunity to sit down with then-Church President, Joseph F. Smith, where he described his experiences as a black member of the Church and as a black member in South Africa.

And argued that for the priesthood ban and temple privilege to be dropped from the Church's policy.

Back in South Africa, another mission president, Jeff Wyley Sessions, who was also impressed by the Daniels and their contributions to the Church in the area, instated this meeting, the scripture study meeting as a regular official Church meeting in that area, with William serving as the leader of that meeting. So he conducted the meeting. And there was another priesthood holder there to support him. But, Williams was the one that was in charge of the meeting. There's also records to indicate that Clara, his wife, served in a role similar to early Relief Society President during these meetings.

This meeting was given the nickname, "The Branch of Love," or "The Love Branch," and continued until Williams death in 1963—I'm sorry, 1936. Imagine the impact of knowing the stories of Daniel and Walker could have on general Church membership.

While both did what they could as black men in the Church, Walker officially held the priesthood. Even though Daniels did not, he did have a position of leadership as a member in South Africa.

I believe that there is some hesitation in sharing black stories. Particularly of those in the United States, because this, more often than not, requires having difficult discussions of racism and oppression.

Yes, and this may be uncomfortable but however these open discussions about our past are extremely beneficial, particularly to the people who experienced these or come from a community where their ancestors experienced these difficult situations. As Carl Watson, put it that sharing black history helps combat the Miseducation of the church and its membership.

If more members knew that black men like Q. Walker Lewis, Elijah Aprils, and Joseph T ball Jr. all held the priesthood in the early years of the church.

I'm sure we could have more productive conversation about the role of race in the church and also provide more opportunities of discussion and healing about these topics.

Lonnie Bunch the third, who's currently serves as the Secretary of the Smithsonian and the former director of the African American Museum in Washington, DC. Once commented, it helps to have conversations about difficult subjects such as blacks in the church. Because it helps us to remember that there is no more powerful force than, that then a people steeped in their history. And, there is no higher cause that honoring our struggle than honoring our struggle and ancestors by remembering.

So in essence, we draw power from our history, whether it was a difficult history or not. And we also by not ignoring the issues or the experiences of others, we celebrate them even through their struggles. This is something that I think is highly needed in among the African American community, especially in the United States, and members of the church worldwide.

Also think that having an historical perspective helps while discussing these difficult subjects. Um, I believe that members of the church, often forget that we are not alone in the struggle of race and in religious institution and other religious institutions. For example, use scripture and other means to uphold slavery in the United States.

Also, as a personal example what you're seeing here on the screen is called The Gospel Oak. My parents did not are not members of the church and they grew up in the Baptist tradition in in the south.

Every time I went to go visit my grandparents, they used to live down this road where you see this tree. My mother would always point out this tree.

My ancestors on my mother's side, in Bertie, North Carolina, were not allowed to worship with whites in their church. Nor were they permitted to use white church buildings, when they were not being used by the white congregations.

So in the 1870s. Shortly after the emancipation of slaves in this area. The black folk in Bertie would meet underneath this oak. that's where they would hold their church services. They remained there until they were able to raise enough money to erect a building of their own.

And this tree stood as a symbol of history on of this history until 2011 when it was blown down on a hurricane. You can see in the picture that of that house right behind the tree is a former

slave plantation home. And so, there's history glaring right there as you are as the, the members of this congregation, were worshipping, their history was standing right behind them.

I think that knowing this perspective has given me a greater outlook on the history of the church and provides a little bit wider perspective on that.

That you know we are a church full of humans and we have human faults and we make mistakes, but it's something that we can learn from, especially through conversation and the telling of these types of stories. I think that's one of the reasons why my mother always pointed out this tree as we drove by it on my way to my grandparents house.

So as I said, as I've been saying, well, topics such as priesthood, the temple band, and slavery and Mt. Meadows massacre and the Bear River massacre and other difficult subjects arise. They are still a part of our history. And discussing them is a form of healing, especially to those in the communities that are affected by these events.

As we see today, by the protests and marches that are in the street, those who do not learn from history are often doomed to repeat it.

I strongly believe that one of the reasons we are still seeing on marching in the streets for black rights in the United States. and most recently, all over the world, is because these conversations have been avoided, particularly in the classroom.

Children and in the homes of people outside of the black community. So, because of this change has been slow and hard to come. In some ways, we're still fighting the same battles that Martin Luther King was fighting, Frederick Douglass was fighting right after emancipation and such.

In 2017 I asked my director, if I could put together an exhibit to honor the 40th anniversary of the priesthood ban being lifted. At the time of our discussion. it ended up not being a feasible project. But, we sat together and we planned a different way that I could contribute to this commemoration.

So I ended up putting together a research guide, which highlights different members of the black community within the church from the beginning of the church, up until today and it highlights stories from all over the United States, and different countries, such as Africa, Brazil, Jamaica, the United Kingdom. I connected those stories with the records that we have in the church

history library. As a way for people who are interested, have one space to find all this information.

Around 20 the march of 2018 however plans that change and my department was asked to put together an exhibit and we use my research guide to find the materials. It took no, almost no time, to set up the exhibit because of the research guide. And in fact, most of the time was spent preparing the documents to be displayed.

In conjunction with the Be One Celebration and on our exhibit, we hosted history nights in collaboration with the Relief Society of the Genesis Group Alice Birch.

Where we invited members, particularly members of the black community, to come and discuss the history of the church and to see the documents that we have With permission from the director one night we, on the opening night of our history nights, we even opened up the exhibit so that our patrons, could look at the artifacts without having the glass in between them and the items.

So, for example, patrons were able to see a Elijah Able's ordination document. Which you see it in front of here, which shows where he received the priesthood and who conferred the priesthood upon him.

They were also able to see Jay Manning James picture and her autobiography which was what she dictated to Elizabeth Sorry, Jay de Rowling wrote Wrong Rounding.

She created this document with the intentions of having bring being read at her funeral, which we understand it was. in this document, she talks about her experiences as a black member of the church and her reasoning for staying in the church until the her passing.

This That'd be one experience and having the exhibit and having people come in and look at their records was a powerful experience.

I, as the only member of the church in my family, I recently showed my parents the View On Program.

With the cultural celebrations and the music and Gladys Knight and The, the telling of the histories of and the pictures of members that were from our collection that were put up.

During the program, my, my parents found inspiring, and thought it was so such a powerful and unique way to celebrate a culture.

And with that it exists within the church and it's people who have a difficult history. But, they're extremely impressed by the efforts of the church to celebrate this and educate and address on the history of the church.

So another experience that I had while showing the exhibit, a lady came up to me and she wanted me to tell more of the story of Elijah Angels. And so as I was finishing up telling her how he passed a few days after returning from a mission and he still had the priesthood. She explained why am I hearing this just now? She was crying the whole time that I was telling her the story of this exhibit.

With the help of the publications department came the one of the most successful exhibits that we posted today in the church history library.

Because it was made available online. We received comments and emails and communications from members all over the world who are excited to this to see this exhibit they wanted—They asked us to hold it up even longer. We were going to keep it up for. I think it was two weeks, then we ended up ended up keeping it up even longer because there were such a demand from the church membership to have the documents out longer for people to see it more.

I received a call from a black member of the church in the UK who had given his records to us and he was asking us to put his records into the cases, because he wanted people to know his story as well as a black man in in England, and his experiences in the church. Unfortunately, we didn't have the space for it. I'm hoping for the next celebration or another event. We can have a bigger, a bigger space, and have more time of planning, and really create an opportunity to celebrate more than just some of the first of the black history in the church, which was, which was, which was what was shown in this exhibit.

Ida B. Wells explains the way to right wrongs is to turn the light of truth upon them. I feel like this exhibit does this, and also the telling of black history does this as well.

We shouldn't shy away from telling black stories as shown by this, The Be One event and the exhibit. They, these are points of healing for the community.

So, one may ask, where can I start when I want to tell stories of black people? How can I find resources? There's this wonderful site online called [ourblackpast.com](http://ourblackpast.com). It is not exclusively to the



church but it highlights the experiences, the firsts. the accomplishments of blacks in the United States and includes stories of LDS black members within their own database. This is not something that's created by the church, but I think it's very powerful that other members of the black community feel passionate enough about black history that they include members of the church in that history and want to share that story of the black experiences of members and a church in which they don't participate.

And there's also this wonderful database hit spearheaded by Paul Reeve. It's up at the university and sponsored by the University of Utah.

It's called A Century of Black Mormons. They've spent years now looking through our records, particularly in the census records of the church to try to find names and experiences of members that we've never heard about before, and in different areas all over the world, so they are compiling a list of church members that were black church members that were part of the church during its first 100 years. You're also welcome to take a look at my research guide I am always adding on to it and improving it, and I think it's also a good place to start if you are looking for primary sources, because they are linked to those stories or that the highlights of those individual stories. Okay.

Lastly, I would like to leave you with some tips about working with the black community.

It's helpful to understand the needs and the wants and the wishes of a community, especially when we're talking about representation and our history.

But it's also on also helpful to remember that each person that is a part of Community is also an individual, and they also have their own wallets and wishes and sometimes they're not in line with the community as a whole.

And so those stories and ideas should be reflected within the stories as you're telling them and it goes into the complexity of what black history is. As is all People's History. We're all individuals. We all have our own wants and desires and we would love to have those reflected when people are talking about us.

And for a couple of examples within the church. There are many reasons why a Q. Walker Lewis left the church. I think a lot of it had to do with the acceptance of slavery in the Utah territorial when he fought so hard to be free himself and fought for the freedom of others, but in the same thought his contemporary Jane Manning, James, who was also a member of the church was living through the same time and stayed faithful in the church until her dying day,

and they both come from the same community, but they both had their individual ideas and goals and thoughts about what their membership in the church meant to them.

And so this should be reflected in and sharing and writing their stories.

Frederick Douglass argued that his autobiography wasn't complete without a picture of him. He believed that his image and not drawings, because during his lifetime drawings of black men and women tended to be offensive and used as ways of making fun of them and belittling their character.

He thought that his picture would allow readers to see him as an individual. And not only that, to humanize him and his experience as a runaway or escaped slave and rally them around him and his cause to free other people like him who are all human and were worthy of their freedom.

And this is why are one of the reasons why Frederick Douglass was became the most photographed person during the 1800s. He was photographed throughout his lifetime, and he wanted people to see him for who he was and like, like I said earlier, to see him as a human.

And not part of his identity and storytelling was very important to him. Lastly, I would also suggest don't hesitate to ask for help, especially if you are telling stories from a community or telling the story of a person that comes from a community, from which you don't participate For example, David life. He's a historian and a professor from Harvard. He wrote a second biography about Frederick Douglass, which was published last year.

In 2019 he sought counsel from black historians such as Lonnie bunch and Henry Louis Gates throughout the writing process of his biography, to ensure that he was doing, not only justice to Frederick Douglass' identity, but also to the African American community Of Douglass time and of today, of course, and he credits them and their work to help him write his biography within the front covers of his book.

Also when asking for help or even remember that not everybody is willing to help. Some people are burned out. They've helped on other projects before and they and they need a break. Some people Also don't want to even engage in that kind of thing. It's not for everyone, but there are people out there that want to help you in your pursuits of telling black stories and don't hesitate to ask. They also might be a resource of finding new black stories that haven't been told, or haven't been collected by either the database or the archive. So, they could be a good resource in and finding new stories that that needs to be told.

So please, please use them as a resource if they are willing to help. I like to thank you for once again for taking the time to listen to my presentation, I'm looking forward to answering your questions. I'm as always I am available if you need a resource or some suggestions on finding and looking and discovering records and stories of black Latter Day Saints for the telling. Thank you so much again and I hope you have a good one.