

## Leading the Fight against Racism: A Prophetic Command

*President Russell M. Nelson has called on all members to “lead out in abandoning attitudes and actions of prejudice.”*

by Thomas B. Griffith

HERE’S A BOLD claim that defies conventional wisdom: Latter-day Saints are uniquely qualified to help bridge the racial divides that beset us. Of course, that is what we have been called to do. Remember how President Russell M. Nelson grabbed our attention in a recent general conference. “Brothers and sisters, please listen carefully to what I am about to say,” he implored. We sat up and put down our iPhones. He continued. “I grieve that our Black brothers and sisters the world over are enduring the pains of racism and prejudice. Today I call upon our members everywhere to *lead out* in abandoning attitudes and actions of prejudice”<sup>1</sup> (emphasis added). At that same general conference, and again only a few weeks later in a BYU devotional, President Dallin H. Oaks likewise called upon us to “root out” racism in our own lives and where it has infected our laws and systems.<sup>2</sup> President Kevin Worthen convened the Committee on Race, Equity, and Belonging, which created a powerful report intended to do just that at BYU.<sup>3</sup> The Book of Mormon, the scripture that kicked off the Restoration and gives it continuing energy and insight, points us to a society without racial divides. Indeed, the way racism divides us and distorts our view of others is a metanarrative of the Book of Mormon and the Bible. And the revelation that inspired the first Latter-day Saints who tried to build Zion describes a people who found a way to overcome societal divides to create community.<sup>4</sup>

**This gives us a good start** in the fight against racism, but we have something even more fundamental going for us. Latter-day Saints don’t use much iconography, but if any symbol expresses who we are and what we are about, it’s the beehive, because the paramount form of religious expression among us is building community. It’s part of our spiritual DNA. Richard Bushman once told me that he thought our experience building community might be our greatest gift to the world.

I’ve seen this sense of community heal racial divides. I served a full-time mission in South Africa and Zimbabwe from 1973 to 1975. I loved my mission and the wonderful people I met, but those were unhappy years for the region. Apartheid was still the law in South Africa, Nelson Mandela was still imprisoned on Robben Island, and Zimbabwe was caught up in civil war. But in the last few weeks of my mission, I caught a glimpse of how the restored gospel can give us the hearts we need to answer the call to lead the fight against racism.

Ella Baatjies was a wonderful woman of mixed race who had recently come to work at the mission home after a lifetime in virtual slavery as a maid at a boarding house. Missionaries who lived at the boarding house had befriended Ella and arranged for her escape. I was among the happy group that welcomed Ella to her new life in the mission home hundreds of miles away. Upon arriving at the mission home, Ella immediately asked to learn about the restored gospel, and my companion and I had the honor of teaching her.

**In truth, Ella taught us.** She was a woman of profound and exuberant faith. There was, however, a problem. The owner of the boarding house had kept Ella from learning to read. That posed a challenge because a fair amount of reading is required of those considering whether to join the Church. The chef in the mission home—the person who brought us together every day for our common meals—came to our aid. Dorothea Storey was White and had little experience interacting with people of color in any way other than in the master-servant relationship that her culture had taught her. Still, because she loved and respected the missionaries, Dorothea accepted our request to be Ella’s reader. In doing so, she showed all of us how to break bread across a racial divide and around a larger table than we had ever known.

One night as I walked past Dorothea’s room in the mission home, her door was open, and I glimpsed a scene that I shall never forget. Dorothea and Ella were sitting side by side on the bed, Ella listening carefully while Dorothea read aloud from the Book of Mormon. Soon thereafter, Ella joined the Church.

That image of Ella and Dorothea sitting side by side on the bed captures what we can do with the restored gospel when we are at our best. We can bring together people who have been separated by cultural falsehoods about race, gender, nationality, sexual orientation, and other fault lines that too often keep us from fully embracing each other the way Ella and Dorothea did, as children of God. ■

*Thomas B. Griffith is a BYU College of Humanities graduate and former judge on the US Court of Appeals for the D.C. Circuit. He has served as BYU general counsel and as the nonpartisan legal counsel to the US Senate.*