

# Mormons mark 30 years of Black embrace

SALT LAKE CITY (AP) — Thirty years have passed, but Heber G. Wolsey still cries when he recalls the day the Mormon church abandoned a policy that had kept Black men out of the priesthood.

"It was one of the greatest days of my life," said Wolsey, who was head of public affairs at The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

On June 8, 1978, Wolsey was called to a secret rendezvous with N. Eldon Tanner, a member of the church's First Presidency, in a tunnel beneath the Salt Lake City temple.

He was handed a slip of paper: "The long-promised day has come when every faithful, worthy man in the church may receive the holy priesthood... without regard for race or color."

"I started to bawl," Wolsey recalled, his eyes again welling with tears. "It's something we'd all been praying for a long, long time."

Latter-day Saints will mark the 30th anniversary Sunday with an evening celebration of words and music in the Salt Lake City Tabernacle.

Heralded as a revelation from God to the church presi-

dent, Spencer W. Kimball, the four-paragraph statement gave Blacks full membership in the church for the first time after nearly 130 years.

Some say it was the most significant change in church policy since Mormons abandoned polygamy in 1890 to gain statehood for Utah.

Unlike other religions, the Mormon priesthood is not a set of trained clerics. It is a lay status granted to virtually every Mormon male at age 12, allowing them to bestow blessings and hold certain church callings.

Until 1978, Black men could attend priesthood meetings but could not pass sacraments or give blessings, even on their own families. They could not enter Mormon temples for sacred ceremonies, including marriage.

"It left you on the outside," said Darius A. Gray, who is Black and joined the church as a young man in 1964.

Gray said he learned about the restriction the day before his baptism. He was raised to value his race, and the policy went against that. But prayer and study had left him with a belief in the church that he couldn't ignore.

"So you go forward and walk through the darkness in



The Mormon church has expanded its ranks over the years.

faith," he said. "I never knew if the restriction was of God, or if it was of man, if it was just or unjust."

Early teachings and sermons by church founder Joseph Smith don't reflect a racist stance. Blacks were not denied membership, baptism or the priesthood under his leadership. Smith ordained the former slave Elijah Able to the priesthood in 1836 and sent him on a proselytizing mission.

But after Smith's death, Brigham Young reversed the policy, declaring in 1852 that Blacks were the unworthy descendants of Cain and could not hold the priesthood, Mormon historian

Newell Bringhurst said.

"Brigham Young cites divine sanctification and that's pretty hard to refute," said Bringhurst, who is White and the co-editor of the book "Black and Mormon."

Although Young's policy was never considered doctrine, his teachings left the church so entrenched that it was unable to change, even during the Civil Rights Era of the 1960s and despite pressure from inside and outside the faith, Bringhurst said.

"It's a tragedy in a way," said Bringhurst, who left the Mormon church partly because of its stance on Blacks. "There was this missed opportunity in the 1960s where

they could have easily changed."

Labeled as racist, the church suffered years of repeated drumming in the news media and from people angered by the divisive policy, Wolsey said.

"Every day I was working with people who were highly antagonistic to the church," said Wolsey, who recalled some schools in the '60s wouldn't compete against Brigham Young University sports teams.

Prior to 1978, Wolsey and Gray spent nearly five years touring the country to answer questions about the church's position during meetings that often would spark angry, contentious words.

"I said, 'I am not a racist. I don't have any racial feelings against the Blacks at all.

I have a part of my belief that says the Blacks can't hold the priesthood,'" Wolsey said. "Women can't hold the priesthood either; children can't. But I said I believe in the church, so I accept it."

Church statisticians don't track membership by race, but scholars believe there were less than 3,000 Black Mormons in 1978.

Since then, the church has expanded its missionary work in predominantly Black nations, including the Caribbean, South America and Africa, where it now claims more than 250,000 members out of 13.1 million worldwide.

There are no Blacks in the senior leadership tiers of the Salt Lake City-based church. A Black Brazilian, Helvecio (See Mormon, Page 4)

## Group of farmers file suit vs. USDA

WASHINGTON (AP) — More than 800 Black farmers filed a new lawsuit against the Agriculture Department just three weeks after Congress reopened a 1999 settlement over past discrimination.

The plaintiffs wasted little time in taking advantage of a provision in the recently enacted farm bill that allows fresh claims from those who were denied damages after missing earlier deadlines.

Some 75,000 people could fall into that group. If their suits are successful, the case could cost the government several billion dollars on top of the \$980 million in damages already paid under the original settlement.

The lawsuit, organized by the Virginia-based National Black Farmers Association, was filed Monday in U.S. District Court in Washington. Nearly all the 823 farmers who

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## Candidates

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about how the economy is affecting their lives. But, Spriggs and activist Al Sharpton agree that both candidates must somehow deal with the race discrimination issues that cause Blacks to lag.

"As much as we have great pride in Obama being the first Black head of a major ticket, the whole Black media rhetoric that we're beyond race is not true," said Sharpton.

"If you look at the educational disparities, the health disparities, the employment disparities — we're doubly unemployed — and the incarceration rate, we're way far from being beyond race in terms of everyday life. And we need to hear more about what they're going to do to bring equality to the continued racial disparities in life. A life for a person [not] Black and a life for a person Black is still measurably different for a person in the United States."

Regardless of the issue, it will be improved or impacted

by the state of America's education system, says Thomas N. Todd, a former U. S. attorney from Chicago.

"With millions of public school children in schools with parents who vote, as well as teachers and educators, not a single candidate has mentioned education as the number one item on their agenda," says Todd, whose academic achievements led him to graduate early from high school. Todd says high stakes standardized testing, which students must take for promotion to certain grade levels, are not the answer "are short cuts and quick fixes," he says.

"Young people, they don't see the value in education related to their overall lives. The nation needs to shift into that kind of mode. Especially Black people in the South, we saw education as a value. So, we got the education to improve our lives."

Julia Hare, a San Francisco psychologist who is co-founder of the Black Think Tank, agrees that education must be the priority issue.

"That's the major thing they need to look at. That's what most Blacks are hoping that we will look at."

Hare says the Obama campaign, which has particularly inspired young people, should also motivate them to stand for themselves on what they want from a president. "I have never seen so many Blacks so motivated," Hare says. "We will start from the bottom, making the changes moving up."

That's not just in the cities, but in the countryside as well, says Harvard Law School professor Charles Ogletree.

"The key issue for the candidates is how to make every American, particularly the rural poor, believe that their issues and votes count. This is an unprecedented election with the first African-American candidate and developing an agenda for jobs and stability in rural America is key."

Spriggs says the candidates must also begin strongly addressing the foreclosure crisis, which he de-

scribed as the "greatest loss of Black wealth since the farm crisis of World War II," when African-Americans lost millions of acres of land.

There has not been an accurate calculation of how much money African-Americans have specifically lost, he said, "But, half of the foreclosures are subprime loans," usually marketed to African-Americans. He adds that 3 million foreclosures are slated for this year alone and that number will likely increase next year.

"That means, for Black people who are left owning their homes, they're going to be in neighborhoods with abandoned homes and the values of their homes are going to decline."

Sharpton and his National Action Network was set to launch a major initiative this week declaring that "the civil rights issue of the 21st century is education."

He adds that voters should not wait to hear what the candidates will say on these issues. "It will happen if we make it happen."



## PAT TOBIN TRIBUTE

Patricia Tobin, left, founder of Tobin & Associates and co-founder of the National Black Public Relations Society, in this file photo, presented an award to Las Vegas Strip entertainer George Wallace during one of her many charitable events in Las Vegas. Tobin, a public relations icon succumbed to her battle with cancer on Tuesday, funeral arrangements have yet to be confirmed.