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The Saints Go Marching In

With a history steeped in racism, the Mormon church is now targeting the African American community for new members. Will it take a miracle?

By Lauren Wilcox
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AS MISSIONARIES FOR THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS IN

SOUTHEAST WASHINGTON, Eric Severson and Jed Nielsen have learned a lot about opening doors.

On an overcast afternoon in late summer, they are standing outside an apartment complex in Anacostia trying to deliver a DVD about the Mormon church to a woman who has requested it but is not answering her buzzer. Severson pulls out his cellphone and calls

the number she provided: no answer. "Try our key," Nielsen says to Severson. Severson pulls out his key ring and locates the key to the building the missionaries have been living in the past few months, a brick complex not far away, off Alabama Avenue. "Our key works in so many doors around here," he says, jiggling it in the lock.

Severson, 20, who is from Bentonville, Ark., and Nielsen, also 20, who is from Riverton, Utah, are white. Except for its missionaries, the membership of their congregation -- known as a ward -- is about 10 percent African and 90 percent African American. This is not unusual for a church serving these neighborhoods, which are predominantly African American, but it is a remarkable development for the Mormon church, which barred blacks from full membership in the church until 1978. Now the church is working in neighborhoods such as this one to try to open doors that, for most of the church's history, it had kept shut.

Assigned to the greater Washington area for the duration of their two-year stint, Severson and Nielsen are serving in Southeast Washington and part of Maryland. As neighborhoods go, the missionaries say, these are rewarding places to proselytize. "I've been in a lot of places," Severson says, "and people in this area tend to have a pretty good perspective on God's place in their lives." Compared with other D.C. and Maryland neighborhoods, they say, here they don't spend much time approaching people on the street or knocking, uninvited, on doors, generally considered the least productive use of missionary time. Instead, they can easily fill their daylight hours by responding in person to requests for informational videos titled "Finding Faith in Christ," which are advertised on local television stations, and by holding Scripture study sessions with those who are interested in joining.

Not everyone is interested, of course; the missionaries spend a lot of time talking through closed doors and showing up for missed appointments, and a day's work may include only one or two promising encounters, if any.

Severson's key doesn't work in the complex's door, but the woman they have been trying to reach finally answers her buzzer, and the missionaries climb the stairs.

"This is a DVD about the life of Jesus Christ, told through the words of someone who was close to Christ," Severson says, handing it to her. The church, which is based on the teachings of Jesus, as well as those of a man named Joseph Smith who lived in Upstate New York in the early 1800s, emphasizes its roots in

Advertisement



Christian theology. "This is an awesome DVD."

"Okay," the woman says.

"It's 29 minutes long," Severson says.

"Okay," the woman says, and they both laugh a little awkwardly.

Nielsen pulls his Book of Mormon from his backpack. "Are you familiar with the Book of Mormon?" he asks. "No?" He reads a verse by a prophet called Moroni, in which Moroni promises readers that God will reveal the truth to them, "by the power of the Holy Ghost."

"What do you think that means?" Severson asks the woman.

"A lot comes from the Holy Ghost," she says. "He'll tell you what to believe."

"I just want to tell you that I know this book is true," Severson says. Severson is soft-spoken and articulate, and his tone, as he talks to the woman, manages to be both mild and fervent. The woman watches his face. "And it's not just because I've read it," he says. "It's because I've prayed about it, and the Holy Spirit, like we talked about, spoke to me. If you pray about it, the Holy Spirit will speak to you."

Severson asks her if she will read the Book of Mormon and pray about it. There is a moment of silence in the stairwell as the missionaries wait for her reply.

THE MORMON CHURCH HAS BEEN SENDING OUT MISSIONARIES SINCE ITS INCEPTION, ever since, as Washington's North Mission president William Price puts it, founder Joseph Smith's brother Samuel "threw copies of the Book of Mormon in his satchel" and went out telling people about how John the Baptist had appeared to his brother. The missionary program today is one of the most extensive and organized of any religion; each year, the church sends about 60,000 missionaries to about 150 countries.

But even as the church worked to expand its membership around the world, it excluded blacks from full membership. The church was founded in 1830 on the writings of Joseph Smith, which he said were the translation of texts given to him by God, which contain "racist concepts of nonwhite racial inferiority," writes Newell Bringhurst, whose book *Saints, Slaves, and Blacks* explores the history of Mormon-black relations. Blacks were held to be descendents of Cain and as such were particularly cursed, according to Mormon texts. This lineage, the church decreed early in its history, would prevent blacks from holding the Melchizedek priesthood, the highest form of membership in the church, open to all other adult males. The priesthood ban, not originally a church practice, was formalized in part by the church's second president, Brigham Young, in the late 1840s. A notable exception was Elijah Abel, an escaped slave who was given the priesthood in 1836, reportedly by Smith himself, and went on to become a high-ranking official in the church.

Even so, Mormon missionaries largely ignored the black community, and much of the church's expansion abroad took place in countries with predominantly Anglo, Asian and Hispanic populations. But in the second half of the 20th century, the church's missionary efforts found purchase in Africa and Central and South America, which meant that the church increasingly dealt with the question of withholding the priesthood from its many black members there. There was also a fledgling black membership in the United States.

During the Civil Rights era, there were protests by the NAACP and boycotts against sports teams at Mormon-owned-and-operated Brigham Young University. In 1978, church president Spencer Kimball announced that by divine decree, all males in the church would be eligible to hold the Melchizedek priesthood. Kimball also announced that missionary efforts would begin in earnest in Africa and the "inner city" in the United States.

The reaction to the repeal within the church, among both blacks and whites domestically and abroad, was overwhelmingly positive. But converting American blacks proved, for the church, to be a difficult task, and membership growth among this demographic in the years after the ban, though difficult to assess, seems to have been comparatively slow, according to Armand Mauss, a Mormon scholar and church member.

About 12 years ago, church officials put the Washington area under the jurisdiction of a single mission president, setting up what local church official Ken Page calls "seed congregations" of a few families each, meeting in each other's homes in neighborhoods throughout the city, and began sending missionaries into those neighborhoods. In 10 years, Page says, church membership inside the Beltway grew from a handful to almost 2,000. (The ward, known in the church as the "Anacostia" ward, includes most of Southeast Washington and Maryland inside the Beltway.) Through the church's efforts, the ward has grown, over the same period, to a modestly successful 300 families. Still, the missionaries' work here is complicated by the church's history. "The most common question people have," one missionary says, "is, 'Why don't y'all like black people?'"

ON A MUGGY WEEKDAY MORNING, SEVERSON CHECKS FOR THE ADDRESS of their first appointment in his day planner. They have scheduled an hour of scripture study with a woman named Michelle Coppedge, with whom they have been meeting for several weeks. Along the way, the missionaries pass an acre or so of open field, where, Severson says, a housing complex was recently razed to clear the way for new apartments. "New houses," Nielsen says. "I don't think that's really going to cure the problem."

"You have to cleanse the inner vessel," Severson remarks,.

Like the 170 other missionaries in the greater Washington area, Severson and Nielsen prepared for their mission with a two-week stint at a missionary training center in Provo, Utah, where they learned "people skills," as one missionary put it, as well as a general approach to proselytizing. Until recently, missionaries memorized a script to use in their conversations; now they are encouraged to speak as they are moved to.

Unlike Nielsen's home town in Utah, where, Nielsen says, "you were weird if you weren't Mormon," Severson's community in Bentonville, Ark., was home to few Mormons. "Living where I did strengthened me more," Severson says. "I was used to answering questions about the church." In high school, his friends, mostly nonmembers -- "a Jew, a Buddhist, an atheist" -- defended him against the less godly aspects of high school life. "When someone who didn't know me swore," he says, "they would say, 'Hey, we've got a Mormon here.'" It wasn't hard, he says, to live according to the church's code of conduct, which includes eschewing alcohol and tobacco. "Outside of a doctrine perspective," he says, "my intellect is what I've got."

One of the church's goals in sending missionaries is to convert people, but perhaps equally as important is the way the experience solidifies the missionaries' own membership in the church. For the two years of their mission, missionaries speak to their families only twice a year, aren't allowed to watch television or listen to music that isn't "spiritual or uplifting," and spend six days a week studying and proselytizing, with one day reserved for laundry, grocery shopping and written correspondence. "Before your mission," Nielsen says, "You're living in the world. When you go on mission, you're placed in an observer position, watching people and the decisions they're making."

"Cause and effect becomes a lot more apparent," Severson says. Still, he says, "There are a lot of people doing very well [here], and it has nothing to do with our church. We're not the only way out."

In charge of Washington North's missionaries is president Bill Price, here from Utah on a three-year placement. Price says he considers Southeast Washington a difficult place to be a missionary. Price places only elders -- male missionaries -- here, and he has a policy of rotating them through the ward more quickly here than in suburban neighborhoods. "It prevents them from becoming 'ghettoized' -- that's my term -- from beginning to think that everything is hopeless," he says.

"The missionaries for the most part are from middle-class neighborhoods in the western U.S.," he says. "The only minorities most know are from Mexico and Central America. So there's a cultural divide we hope to bridge." To a certain extent, he says, the experience bridges it. "Going in, there's a lot of black *people* there. By the time [the missionaries] come out, they're just people. Race is never a part of the conversation except before [the missionaries] get there."

"If I wasn't wearing this badge, there's no way I'd be walking these streets," Nielsen says, of his name tag identifying him as a member of the church. Still, he says, "My favorite thing is when white people come up to us and say, 'You boys better be careful! This is a rough neighborhood!' And we're like, 'We live here.'"

As they walk, Nielsen points out the lot where they play basket-ball on the weekends with kids from the neighborhood. "Most of these teenagers are real cool with us," Nielsen says. The reception they get in the neighborhoods ranges from warm to hostile. "When people say things to us, it's always from a distance or in passing. We get it all the time from adults -- 'Get out of here, you effin' white boys; you don't belong here.' Someone was yelling at us recently about how we brought slavery here. He was driving an ice cream truck."

A few days ago, Nielsen was punched in the head by a guy who ran up to him by the AutoZone on South Capitol Street SE. "It was the hardest I'd ever been hit," he says thoughtfully. "I kind of staggered. But I didn't go down. The kid was calling me on. Severson was raging, full of adrenaline." Severson smiles, a little ruefully, at the memory. "But we decided not to fight him. That's not what we do."

The guy took off down the street but, after a moment, came running back. "We thought, *Oh, now we are going to have to fight him*," Nielsen says. "But he came up to apologize. He said he didn't know what was wrong with him. He was real sincere."

"Later," Severson adds, "we noticed a video camera on the side of the AutoZone --"

"-- so we went in to see if we could get footage of it," Nielsen says. "But the camera didn't record that part of the street."

Did they want to try to identify the guy? "No," Nielsen says. "We just thought it would be cool to have the video."

The missionaries are meeting Michelle Coppedge at the apartment of another ward member, Robert Wallace. They arrive just as Wallace, wearing tuxedo pants and a white dress shirt, gets home from his night job as a security guard. Coppedge, who arrives a few minutes later, is a slight, fine-boned woman of 48 who looks much younger. Wallace arranges his guests around the dining room table, and begins dishing out bowls of strawberry ice cream.

The missionaries open the hour with a discussion of faith. "God said, If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you can move a mountain," Severson says.

"My faith is much bigger than a mustard seed," Coppedge says. "It used to be the size of a mustard seed, but now it's the size of a watermelon."

Faith also, Severson says, leads to a desire to repent.

This reminds Coppedge of a recent incident. "I need to tell you something," she says to the missionaries, and launches into a story about being hassled by Baptist proselytizers at the Eastover Shopping Center. "They started asking me if I was a child of God," she says indignantly. "I said, 'I'm a Mormon!' They said, 'Do you know where they came from? Do you know about segregation?' I said, 'You know, they used to have slaves, too, and you don't see those anywhere today. Furthermore, right now you are not a child of God, because you wouldn't be judging!' I said, 'You are the devil!'" She stomps on the floor. "'And I forgive you in the name of

Jesus Christ!' Elders, tell me, was I right or wrong?" Coppedge sits back and watches them, a smile twitching at the corners of her mouth.

There is a pause. Severson and Nielsen appear to be biting back grins. "Well, let's break this down," says Severson, with an effort at solemnity. "You can take literature from others, but it's important to behave in a Christlike manner."

"I told her she was not a child of God," Coppedge says. She narrows her eyes at them. "You look like you're laughing. Elders, what did I do?"

"That might be a little far to go," Severson says, "because everyone is a child of God. And we shouldn't call anyone the devil."

"You know how I deal with it?" asks Wallace, from the kitchen door. "I just say, 'I love you' and walk away."

Next, Severson moves into a discussion of baptism, which, he says, is a form of repentance. Baptism into the Mormon church, he tells the group, is different from baptism in other churches, because the Mormon church is the one true church. To Coppedge, however, there are other important distinctions between her new church and the old ones. "When I got baptized," she says hotly, "they didn't teach me anything. No lessons, nothing like this. I went to Baptist, Muslim, Catholic, Jehovah, but never to a church where they didn't pass the offering around. I went to the Mormon church with my last \$2.10 in my pocket, and I said, 'Lord, if I get to church, you can get me home.' And I got home. And more than that, I got Bible study, I got these guys coming over here to help me learn."

MALCOLM JORDAN, 33, A BIG, AFFABLE MAN WITH A DEEP VOICE, converted three years ago with his wife, Charlita, and their four children. Malcolm says he had been "in and out of trouble" since he was 12, supporting himself and his family in part, over the years, by dealing PCP.

"I was looking for something," he says, of the days in which he first made contact with the church. In 2000, he called to request an informational video about the church after seeing a commercial for it. The missionaries, when they delivered the video, persuaded Malcolm to come with them to a service at a ward in Northwest Washington, which happened to be predominantly white. For Malcolm, the feeling of belonging was immediate. "When I walked into the church," he says, "the spirit just hit me so hard. You know when you've been away from home for so long? I felt at home, despite the race of the people sitting there.

"When I decided to join the church, I thought I'd go out one last time, call up my boys and retire my ghetto pass. I had my brother's gun, which I was going to take down to the police station and turn in; we hid that on top of the engine." When one of the group attempted to rob someone, he says, the car was searched by the police, and Malcolm spent the next four years in and out of jail and court. Although the missionaries told Malcolm they could not allow him to be baptized until his legal troubles were resolved -- and his lifestyle was clean -- they continued to visit, studying the Bible and the Book of Mormon with him. Learning more about the church, Malcolm says, only spurred his desire to join. Among the people who worked with Malcolm and his wife was mission president Price, who, Malcolm says, encouraged him to get his high school diploma and to pursue a degree in public administration, and helped clear up Malcolm's lingering legal problems after he joined the church.

One Monday, Malcolm and wife Charlita have two of the missionaries over for family Bible study at their apartment in a public housing development called Benning Terrace. The point of the Bible study is to have some family time and to introduce the children to the basic concepts of the church. The missionaries plop down on one arm of the deep L-shaped sofa in the Jordans' living room, which also houses the backdrops and tripods of Malcolm's freelance photography business.

While Charlita passes around glasses of ice water, the missionaries talk with Malcolm about an elderly member of the church who recently, as the missionaries say, "got offended," a phrase that seems to be a catchall for any number of ways in which members may object to the policies of the church. The woman got offended, says one of the missionaries, a dark-haired young man from California named Jared Shillingburg, when then-bishop Joseph Forson prohibited her from "praise-dancing in Sunday School class" and giving the kids candy.

Malcolm shakes his head. "If I become bishop," he says, "she'll be the first person I go see." This reminds him of something. "I was going to tell you guys," he says, "I got a call from the elders quorum." There are no paid clergy in the Mormon church, and the daily work of every ward is performed, more so than in any other denomination, by both its missionaries and its members. The elders quorum, which hands out "callings" in the ward, has called Malcolm to be president of the Sunday school. Malcolm is currently a "first counselor of young men," which means he works with teenagers in the ward; being president of the Sunday school would give him responsibility over all the ward's classes, including adult classes, but take him away from the young men he currently works with.

"Wow," Shillingburg says.

"What do you guys think about that?" Malcolm asks, curious.

"Well," Shillingburg says, "with a lot of responsibility comes a lot of blessings."

They discuss the new position for a few minutes. Finally, Shillingburg says, "As Nephi said --"

" 'Let me serve where I am needed,'" Malcolm choruses with him.

"IN THE BLACK COMMUNITY, THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CHURCHES AND NEIGHBORHOODS has fundamentally transformed over the last few decades," says Eddie Glaude Jr., an associate professor of religion and African American studies at Princeton. Many who moved to the suburbs during the '80s and '90s retained their membership in their old churches, which means that today, neighborhood churches can have the often-difficult task of serving a constituency with disparate needs.

Many churches in Southeast Washington are active in larger community groups, such as the East of the River Clergy-Police Community Partnership, an association of dozens of faith-based organizations, law enforcement agencies and community organizations that targets the area's youth. Churches also provide community outreach such as AIDS ministries and soup kitchens.

Still, some residents believe that the role of churches here is not what it should be. Tendani Mpulubusi, an artist involved in youth outreach for the Far Southeast Family Strengthening Collaborative, says he has had no luck trying to collaborate with churches. "You have youth hanging out within five blocks of a church," he says, "and you don't have pastors going out and talking to them . . . When you have so many churches, they become forms of divisions, just concerned with maintaining their own spheres."

Hannah Hawkins runs the youth center Children of Mine in Anacostia, which provides tutoring and meals to an average of 50 to 80 kids daily, and runs on donations and an all-volunteer staff. "It used to be," she says, "that churches knew when you weren't in church, when you were down on your luck, if somebody had been incarcerated, if you were pregnant, and on and on. They do absolutely nothing now."

Glaude says that "the changing demographics of an area, the competitive religious marketplace and the complexity of the social problems surrounding these institutions" all have affected how churches work in neighborhoods that may need them most. By expecting that the black church is the answer to all of a neighborhood's issues, he says, "we're asking an institution to be at the center of a problem when it has been de-centered in the community."

So what does the presence of the Mormon church look like in these neighborhoods? Price said the missionaries put in thousands of hours a year on citywide projects, such as picking up trash and distributing gifts to the poor at Christmas, for which the church partners mainly with the city. But the ward on Southern Avenue itself is not deeply involved at a community level. It is not a part of the network of neighborhood groups working here, and it does not currently provide services to the neighborhood, says its bishop, John Russell.

Within the ward, however, the picture is somewhat different. As in every Mormon ward, missionaries provide a gamut of services for members, whether active or lapsed. In addition to leading scripture study sessions, missionaries drive ward members to and from prayer meetings and doctors' appointments, and do odd jobs for the elderly and shut-ins. They take them to the Mormon church's regional job resource center, in Upper Marlboro, for job counseling, and help them with their r?sum?s. They take them to a warehouse of foodstuffs produced mostly by the church, also in Upper Marlboro, called the bishop's storehouse, where ward members in need can get free groceries.

"The Mormon church takes care of their own," says Russell Adams, emeritus professor of Afro-American studies at Howard University, "and that is an organizing and attractive element." Some residents of the neighborhood, though, are drawn to the church for other reasons. "For some folks, there is an old-fashioned rectitude" in Mormonism, Adams says. "It's about discipline, duty, respect and belief . . ."

Among the reasons new converts give is that they relate to the historical persecution of Mormons, who journeyed to Utah because they were attacked and run out of Illinois. Twenty-one-year-old Kendra Fowler, who recently joined, says: "The way I think of it is, for most of history, black people were like nothing. And that's how Mormons were treated, too."

Once in the church, the path may not always be smooth. "I've been called an Uncle Tom," says Malcolm Jordan, who says he has friends who left the church because of racial issues. As for the issues of discrimination in the church's history, those seem to be present, if not always openly discussed. Malcolm tells the story of when he and Charlita and their children were joined together as a family, for eternity, in a ceremony in the temple. On a mural in the temple, Jesus was standing with his arms outstretched; on one side of Him were wretched souls in darkness, on the other side, happy-looking people washed in light. "We were joking around," Malcolm says. "We said, 'Look and see if . . . black people are on the side of the sinners.'"

Though current Mormon church president Gordon Hinckley has made comments denouncing racism that were widely interpreted as an indirect comment on the ban, the church has not issued an apology for the priesthood ban or directly discussed it, which church members both black and white have said limits the church's ability to move forward. Darron Smith, who with Bringhurst edited the anthology *Black and Mormon*, says, "You have to be honest about the representation of history, and most Mormons have tried to put it on a spoon and sprinkle sugar on it." What progress has been made, Smith calls "rhetorical progress. Blacks were treated as cursed . . . and they are left to bear the burden of that view themselves."

For many black members, the issue is now one of "finding our voice," as Malcolm Jordan puts it, in an institution that still has few African Americans in positions above the ward level. There are few black missionaries, and Malcolm says he has been encouraging his sons to go on a mission when they are old enough. He also says he has been thinking recently about something that Charlita, as well as Price and a missionary couple, have pointed out to him, that there are rarely any nonwhite faces in the church's publications. In any event, he says, "Part of growing in the Gospel is asking questions."

THE SUNDAY MORNING THAT MICHELLE COPPEDGE IS CONFIRMED A MEMBER OF THE CHURCH happens to be the day before missionaries receive their assignments for the next six weeks. Severson is certain to be transferred, having served his maximum of six months with the ward, and several church members pull him aside before services begin to have their pictures taken with him.

Services are held in a Baptist church of late-modern vintage, converted for use by the Mormons. Sunlight streams in, the stained-glass windows having been replaced with clear glass. The Jordans' four children sit quietly with Charlita while their father, imposing in a suit and tie, offers one of the opening prayers, an unscripted but heartfelt delivery in which he asks God to "remove anything that would hinder us receiving your message." In addition to the six young missionaries placed with the ward, there are two senior missionaries, Bill and Jan Vasas, a married couple from Blackfoot, Idaho, sitting in a pew toward the front.

Senior missionaries go on mission after their children are grown; unlike the young missionaries, they are allowed to choose their destinations. The Vasases had requested positions at the visitor's center in the Maryland temple but were placed with the ward in Southeast Washington instead. Upon receiving the assignment, "our feelings were those of nervousness because of the danger," says Jan, 58, who has cropped brown hair and a habit of squinting through her glasses. "We had talked to a few people who had been there."

Bill, 64, says that someone they knew had a car stolen in the area. "This is not Idaho," he says. But after one day in the ward, Jan says, they "fell in love with the people."

When Michelle Coppedge is given the Holy Spirit, it is in the center of a circle of priesthood holders, including Robert Wallace, Malcolm Jordan, Forson, Severson and Nielsen, who stand with one hand on each others' shoulders and one hand on her head. Coppedge sits motionless under their hands and, at the conclusion of the ceremony, moves slowly back to her seat looking dazed.

After church, the Vasases give Coppedge a ride back to her apartment. A few days ago, the Vasases took Coppedge on a tour of the visitor's center at the temple in Kensington, and she and Jan resume the thread of an earlier conversation about area restaurants. Coppedge pulls out a picture of her 12-year-old grandson, in his soccer uniform, and passes it around the car. Jan, who is organizing a meeting of the Ladies Relief Society, as the women's Sunday school group is called, asks Coppedge if she would like to attend.

"I want to do everything," Coppedge says. "What do you want me to make, mac and cheese?"

"Yes, please," Bill says hopefully.

"I make a really good mac and cheese," Coppedge says. "Also banana pudding. What are you going to make?" she asks Jan.

"I could make a taco soup," Jan suggests.

Coppedge looks faintly alarmed. "That won't go with mac and cheese," she says. "You need a meat."

"A meat," says Jan, as her husband pulls up to the curb at Coppedge's apartment building. "Well, I don't know."

Coppedge opens the car door and puts a hand on the back of Jan's seat. "Okay," she says. "We'll talk about it."

Lauren Wilcox is a writer who lives in Jersey City, N.J. She last wrote for the Magazine about Branson, Mo. She can be reached at 20071@washpost.com.

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