January 20, 2001

**Dying well**

*Putting the patient first often means just 'being there'*

Like a midwife stroking the newborn cheek of a crying baby she has just delivered, Nancy Telos soothes the anxiety of her clients' deepest fears about the future. They're preparing to die.

They just don't know how.

Even a detailed diagnosis and the best of medical treatment don't prepare them. In the end, only God or a "higher power" can do that. So Telos tries to help them find it — some for the first time and others, after a lifetime. A chaplain with Intermountain Health Care's Hospice team, she ministers to people of every faith and no faith.

The intimacy she shares with her clients is unique, she says, because it comes quickly. They don't have time to waste.

As ethical battles over physician-assisted suicide rage and talk of euthanasia swirls worldwide, Americans will celebrate Sanctity of Human Life Week Jan. 21-28. Thousands of local churches will dedicate a Sunday during that time to observe the sacredness of life.

Yet beyond the scope of the sometimes-sterile dialogue about when it is "right" to die, chaplains like Telos get in and get their hands dirty with the inevitable every day.

"Hospice patients are grieving everything. They're losing the sense of who they were as a provider, a parent. Often there's a sense of dread about financial issues. They've lost the involvement they had with their church or ward. They've lost their body image, and ultimately, they're losing their life. In that situation, even people with really deep faith often hide a pocket of doubt."

While the ultimate focus is on the person dying, much of her time is spent dealing with family members, who many times don't agree on how care should be provided or even what type of religious intervention should be offered. "That's where you see hesitation on the part of ordained ministers to 'intrude,' and they're very cautious about coming. That's the blessing and the curse of chaplaincy. You have to learn to leave your own beliefs and biases at the door and give what that patient needs."
Because there is no single "package" of religious relief to offer, Telos said she often hears the deepest emotions her clients feel because they perceive her as nonjudgmental.

"That's why it's easier for some people to talk to a chaplain, rather than (someone of) their own faith. Sometimes they just need someone they can express doubt or anger or fear to. Some are afraid to be mad at God, and others are afraid of what people will think if they are mad. I tell them if you can be mad at God, then you have a real relationship. They don't want to upset their family members any more."

As death comes closer, Telos sees patients anxious to address unresolved issues. "It's very common for someone to be carrying a secret their whole life." As she listens to the pent-up pain spill out, she wonders about the lifelong regret many have carried. "What could you have done differently with your whole life if you had unburdened yourself? What could you have done with that energy?"

Such "deathbed confessions" serve as a constant reminder that even those who profess no faith share a common desire with the rest of humanity — to somehow try to "make things right" before they die.

As patients struggle to work through their own issues, Telos believes well-meaning clergy and family members often inadvertently make the final days more difficult by misunderstanding the needs of the dying. With all of the caregiving focused on the patient, there's a painful emotional shift in focus from seeing the patient as a whole person to seeing him or her as simply dependent and weak.

"We all need to be needed. I have a need to have something to give you. That's going to be the biggest interference to finding out what that patient really needs. Sometimes the greatest thing you can do for someone is nothing. When your body is really sick, it becomes like an incredibly sensitive antenna for that. People who need you to need something from them are tiring. When you don't need them to need you, that's the gift. Just be there with them."

It's a way of looking at life that defies understanding for many, particularly well-meaning members of a congregation who insist on "doing something" even if it means intruding on the patient's or the family's own wishes.

Yet learning how to put the patient first is the truest service of all, Telos said. "People don't realize that when you are sick and tired and hurting, you only have two choices: You can go along with what everyone wants to do, or you can be rude. Since most of us don't want to be rude, we go along with it but at the detriment of our health or sleep."
"Most of us are egotistical enough that we think of course we have something to offer, and of course they want it."

After long periods of struggle, letting go, seeking peace and incorporating religious ritual move patients toward their final destination. "Most people aren't afraid of death, but they're afraid of the dying process."

That's where religious intervention can often be most comforting, Telos said. Prayers, communion, sacrament and even the last rites for Catholics all help the dying make the transition from concentrating on their physical well-being to their spiritual well-being. And that's where Telos says she sees what may be the most impressive part about leaving life behind.

It's the unseen world of what Telos knows is a life beyond that briefly touches the material world. In their last moments, "people come for them, even for those who don't have a belief in the afterlife. It happens with a very high percentage of people regardless of their religious practices or beliefs."

Whether they begin to have conversations that no one else in the room can hear or show it by eye movement or body motion, Telos said there is no doubt for her that the souls of dead relatives and friends come to escort the dying person into the next world.

"There's a peace that comes into the home that everyone starts to become aware of. There's a lucidity about the conversation that makes sense."
February 9, 2001

Will Games help unite or widen split over faith?

With the one-year clock to Olympic glory now ticking away, an increasingly bright media spotlight has begun to shift its focus toward Salt Lake City, magnifying both the triumphs and travails that come with hosting the world's premiere sporting extravaganza.

And as the beam becomes more intense, so does the potential for either greater cooperation among Utahns or an aggravation of the religious and cultural divisions that have bisected the state from its mid-19th-century roots. Many believe that the way residents of all faiths treat each other in dealing with the issues on which they differ could have a lasting impact on the Beehive State.

"I just have a sense that there really is a growing line of division between LDS and non-LDS in the shadow of the Olympics, though it's playing out in non-religious arenas," said Jan Shipps, a non-LDS scholar who has studied The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints for 40 years.

The international nature of the Olympics and its participants "has generated a set of concerns that (until recently) seemed to have reached a kind of stasis but seem now to me to be regenerating as public issues," said Shipps, professor emeritus of history and religious studies at Indiana University-Purdue University.

It's a perception LDS Church leaders want desperately to avoid, and as a result they have purposely reined in any public involvement that may be seen as an attempt to control or even help drive the Olympic effort. Instead, they determined early to simply "respond to requests and invitations from (the Salt Lake Organizing Committee)," LDS Church spokesman Mike Otterson said. "We have not gone to them with offers or suggestions."

In announcing the LDS Church's own efforts to recruit volunteers to help staff Temple Square and the surrounding church sites during the Games, Otterson said the church continues to encourage its members who have already volunteered with SLOC to keep their commitments.

Otterson re-emphasized Thursday that the church's efforts surrounding the Olympics will focus on its own properties in downtown Salt Lake City. "There will be no proselytizing . . . it is not our intention to have missionaries stopping people on the street
or doing anything beyond what we do now" in hosting visitors to Temple Square and other church sites, he said.

"We want to be good hosts and create a legacy of good will."

Even so, vocal skirmishes rooted in the demographics of Utah culture have been escalating for months on a variety of topics. "For years, liquor has not been a big issue," Shipps said, but has now come back on stage. Some politicians want Utah's fairly stringent liquor laws relaxed to accommodate Olympic visitors; church leaders have reaffirmed their support of controls.

Added to that have been the LDS Church's purchase and development of the Main Street Plaza; alleged discrimination against Mormons at the University of Utah; the dispute between the Deseret News and the Salt Lake Tribune over control of their jointly owned distribution, advertising and printing company; and discussion about the LDS Church's influence during the Winter Olympics, which includes everything from whether the Salt Lake Temple will be featured as the unofficial backdrop for TV broadcasts to how the church will use the Games as an opportunity to share its message.

Because the LDS Church is so dominant in Utah, Shipps said, everyone has a religious identity, whether or not they claim any belief in God. "Even people who don't claim to be anything when they come to Utah find out they are something -- they're either Mormon or not."

While such dominance actually "lends vitality to religious life generally," producing a situation where "congregations are healthier and worship is as much a part of life as working or going to school," it can create cultural division when Utah becomes a fishbowl for the world to observe, she said.

"Salt Lake City is a world unto itself. As long as people weren't paying attention, people who lived in Salt Lake were able to accommodate differences and live in a way that allowed them to respect each other. Now the spotlight comes there, and people who are not Mormon are saying, 'How do you put up with this?' and Mormons from elsewhere are saying, 'What are you doing there in Salt Lake?' It's not simply the local players.

"Once you put the spotlight there, all sorts of issues are magnified. That's what a spotlight does. It magnifies and reminds people there of the differences."

Pat Shea, a local attorney who recently returned from a stint in Washington, D.C., as deputy assistant secretary of the Interior in the Clinton administration, agrees with Shipps that there is a tangible tension among Utahns as the Olympics approach. "I've never seen the community as divided as it is today."

It goes beyond his personal perception, Shea said. "Everybody I've talked to about this, from very devout Mormons to very devout Catholics and Jews to agnostics and
atheists — they all believe the level of antagonism is higher than they have ever recalled."

But he attributes it less to religious division than to a general lack of ownership among residents regarding the Games, as well as the fact that Salt Lake City has "grown up."

"I believe you're seeing the town change from being a small community to a metropolitan community." When Salt Lake City was smaller, LDS Church leaders could sit down with the publisher of the Salt Lake Tribune and a handful of local businessmen and "determine a lot of the landscape," he said. As the metro area grows to rival other major Western cities, "a lot of that small-group decision-making is lost."

Shea said the Games present a perfect opportunity for residents to unite, but they need to do so in the same spirit that grew out of the community effort to control major flooding in downtown Salt Lake City in 1983.

"Ted Wilson (then Salt Lake City mayor) called church leaders, and they called their members. As people were piling sandbags down State Street, you didn't look to the person next to you and say, 'Are you Catholic or Mormon?' "

"I don't think the Olympic leadership is getting the kind of involvement that Wilson did in '83. I truly believe that only a native Utahn will be able to do that. There are lots of people available, but they've not been effectively tapped to do that. Until the Games involve the native population more than they do now, we will be missing that opportunity."

His remedy? "Get more Utahns involved in paying and non-paying positions at SLOC." As for controversy that has been generated of late, "If you do an analysis of the Hatfield and McCoy battles, there are always people on the fringes who want to use a variety of things to lob at the other side," Shea said. "There are those who will always use things like liquor to divide the community. I've been surprised by the lack of moderates — people in the middle of the spectrum — willing to come forward to disregard the fringes and prevent the community from dividing on those issues."

Roger Keller, a faculty member at Brigham Young University and a former Protestant minister, also believes the Olympics have the potential to help overcome historic divisions in Utah.

Many Latter-day Saints are still "coming out of a bastion mentality that any group that has experienced persecution often draws into," he said. "As the realization comes that we have answers to questions that people have been asking for centuries, that we can stand in dialogue with other traditions and people, we're becoming a little less self-conscious in interacting, knowing that doesn't mean we have to be less than we are."

Keller, who is a member of the Olympic interfaith committee, also sees the non-LDS population in the Salt Lake Valley, and even to some degree in Provo, "becoming a
little less self conscious and realizing they have things to offer the community, and that they don't have to constantly be in opposition to the LDS community. They can do their own ministry and reach many people that the LDS community will never touch."

While he acknowledges that there are "still some sensitive edges with regard to living in a predominantly Mormon community," Keller said he thinks Utahns are "all growing up a little, more conscious of the good others have and not remembering some of the slights we've all received . . . I think we've all learned that God doesn't work only with one people — he works with all of his kids and draws them all to higher spiritual goals and higher ethical living and no one has a corner on those."

As world attention gravitates toward Utah, the LDS Church is being flooded with inquiries and is putting its best foot forward in a media campaign to make sure its positions are understood not only locally but internationally, Otterson said. While debate over Utah's liquor laws has played out in the past few months, he believes the availability of liquor "will be a non-issue" by the time the Games arrive as journalists and visitors find they can get a drink in Utah.

"We want to be working in support of SLOC as part of the community," Otterson said. "The Olympic Games were not awarded to the church, they were awarded to the community. We're a part of the community, yes, but only one part of the community."
August 12, 2001

**Links to the past:**
Efforts enhancing black history: Ex-slaves' bank data now on CD

When Kunta Kinte first appeared on network television almost a quarter-century ago, his story and that of his African slave descendants kindled a flame of interest in family history that swept the country and has been growing ever since.

Based on Alex Haley's search for his ancestors, "Roots" was more than a television miniseries and best-selling book. The chronicle of one black man's quest to uncover his ancestry became an acknowledged milestone that fueled the quest by many to answer some of life's most basic questions: Who am I? Where did I come from?

Latter-day Saints had long been working to answer such questions and were developing what has become the world's most comprehensive family history library. Yet when "Roots" aired in 1977, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints still barred black men from holding the faith's priesthood, and few African-Americans saw the church and its resources as friendly to them.

Now 25 years later, as a network television special exploring the legacy of "Roots" is in production, many believe the frigid climate of suspicion the priesthood ban (rescinded in 1978) engendered among African-Americans toward Latter-day Saints looks to be warming considerably, due in large measure to production of a black family history database released by the church earlier this year.

The new Freedman Bank Records CD, the first searchable database ever produced from records of the long-defunct bank used by former slaves, has been so popular that it has spawned a variety of spin-off initiatives in various parts of the country to help African-Americans search for their roots. To date almost 24,000 copies of the Freedman CD have been sold or distributed by the LDS Church.

The database has also caught the attention of producers for the "Roots" anniversary special, who filmed an interview recently at the church's Los Angeles Family History Center with one of Alex Haley's former research assistants, Nancy Carlburg, who now works there full time.

"When the CD first came out, we couldn't keep it in stock. We were just swamped with people coming in to get them," said Carlburg, who remembers taking Haley on a tour of Salt Lake City shortly after the "Roots" miniseries aired. "People would just flock
around him" in their excitement over his story, not only in Utah but "everywhere," she said.

"I think they saw him as an average Joe who traced his roots all the way back to Africa. It gave them some hope that maybe they could do the same."

That quest to know who you are, Carlburg believes, is driven by many different motivations, not the least of which is the belief that the ancestry truly can be traced.

Haley, who had access to aunts who really knew the past and liked to talk about it, knew he had more information than most, said Carlburg.

"They had been born during the 1800s, had lots of family stories and knew the name of the ancestor who had come over from Africa. Kunta Kinte had been passed down through oral tradition. Most families don't have that, and they're lucky if they know two or three generations. We have lots of kids come in who don't even know their grandparents."

It's that type of "disconnection" that several influential black leaders want to help the next generation overcome, and the Freedman's Bank CD has apparently spurred some to action.

After the Civil War, some 70,000 depositors — mostly former slaves — provided detailed information on themselves, their spouses, children, parents and siblings on signature cards used to open accounts at the bank. Information included a depositor's name, age, birthplace, residence, "complexion," occupation, employer and military service.

More than 480,000 names are indexed on the records, which until now were searchable only via smaller compilations of indexes or individually on microfilm.

LDS Church representatives say the simultaneous press conferences held in several major cities Feb. 26 generated the proverbial ripple in the pond and noted that interest in black family history is spreading.

Inner-city youths in Los Angeles may be among the first to directly benefit from the interest the CD has created, said LeAnne Hull, public affairs director for the church in Southern California.

Earlier this summer, Los Angeles County Supervisor Yvonne Braithwaite Burke, whose district includes several million people, and several of her senior staffers attended a Freedman CD presentation in Burke's office. The scheduled 30-minute presentation lasted two hours.

Burke now wants to see a black family history program featuring the CD developed for elementary school children "because it would heighten the self-esteem of these young kids growing up in the inner city with all of these terrible problems." "She wants them to
have a sense of connectedness and history, and to see how blessed they are when compared to the lives of those who came before them," Hull said.

Congresswoman Juanita Millender-McDonald has also expressed interest in a similar program for children in her district after attending the debut of the database, Hull said.

The growing interest in the CD has Hull and other LDS volunteers working to put something together for the University of Southern California's annual Black History Month. They hope their efforts will encourage both students and adults to look for their ancestors using the database.

On the East Coast, several public school teachers who saw news reports about the CD searched out the church's local public affairs offices and requested copies for classroom use according to staffer Megan Jones. As a result, her office is sending out press kits to public schools throughout the area explaining how the CD works and offering a starter kit for African-American genealogy. The database has also been distributed to area public libraries, and several copies are now available at the National Archives.

"It's been the best project I've ever been involved with. It's had a great impact on a community we haven't done a whole lot of reaching out to" in the past, Jones said.

Anticipation over the database release generated enough interest in North Carolina that Raleigh Mayor Paul Coble proclaimed Feb. 26 Black Family History Day in his city. At least one attempt to better document local African-American family history resulted from the release, said public affairs director Randolyn Emerson.

What began as a clean-up project at an African-American cemetery involving young women from a local LDS ward in October 1999 has now become an effort to preserve and transcribe the birth and death records contained on the tombstones. In Atlanta, African American representatives gathered at the church's February press conference were "literally in tears" when they saw what the CD could do, according to Karen Opp, director of the church's Family History Center in Roswell, Ga.

She's seen the same reaction in others as people who hear about the database come into the library looking for information, some of them after having spent years in a futile search for other connections. "They would come in before (the CD was released) and search the slave records, but without an index, they went through thousands of records and didn't find anything."

Publicity from the, announcement has boosted the number of people coming to the library to look for information, Opp said. There has also been a surge in interest in classes she teaches on African American family history.

Dubbed by Alex Haley's son, William, as the "Rosetta Stone" of African-American family history research, the database contains information not only on former
slaves but on their plantation owners and a sizable group of Irish immigrants. LDS Church officials estimate between 8 million and 10 million living black Americans have ancestors who deposited money in the bank. The records have been available to researchers by individual bank branches for years, but the new CD is the first viable program to offer comprehensive access to the entire database. Those watching the burgeoning interest say the church's reputation among some segments of the black community has markedly improved as a result.

Hull said her Los Angeles office has sent dozens of "very high-profile" African American celebrities copies of the CD packaged with a new book by LDS historians Darius Gray and Margaret Young that describes the challenges African American converts faced in the early years of the church's history.

"We know of at least one who has called us back and said how great the interest was in learning more about the church. That's also tied to their relationship and acquaintance with (recording artist) Gladys Knight, with comments about how her life had changed since she has become a member of the church," Hull said.

Congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee, vice chair of the Congressional Black Caucus, attended the database press conference in Washington D.C., along with Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton, a third-generation D.C. resident who found her great grandfather by doing a computer search on the CD. "Both of them asked to be invited to everything we do in the area," Jones said. "To have those two people interested in coming to more events we host is a big plus for us."

Other African Americans, interested in family history but frustrated by various roadblocks, have found using the database to be an emotional, personal experience. Emerson said during a recent family history class she was teaching, she found she wasn't the only one in tears.

"Not only was I crying, but the members of the class were weeping — all seven women and three men." On a computer screen, the woman was able to pull up records of a slave family that had been in Raleigh since 1818. The record "had his parents, children and siblings, three generations of one family even though they were all located in different parts of the South.

"You have no idea what this means to us," one woman told Emerson through her tears. "I have felt my mind has been in the dark for 49 years, and today I feel like I'm in the light."
August 18, 2001

**Good neighbors**

*Religious differences no barrier to friendships*

Christians know the philosophy, if not the exact wording, behind the commandment to "love thy neighbor as thyself." Yet many find that it's difficult to really love people you don't even know.

So one Salt Lake area neighborhood has been working on transforming the ethereal "good will toward men" type of wave as you drive by, love-is-a-noun, into the "good Samaritan" type of love-is-a-verb that says, "I'm here to help." Because this particular group of neighbors tries so hard, Realtors don't find much work in the area.

Just ask Theresa Smith. Years ago, she fell in love after coming to Utah for a visit. The Vermont native had a good life and came with no intention of remaining for anything other than a short stay.

More than 15 years and three children later, Smith remembers well falling in love with her future husband, Howard, a man with a big heart and an open mind. Orphaned by the time he graduated from high school, he had come from Mexico City to live with his sister in the shadow of Mt. Olympus, a nice neighborhood he had grown fond of.

Theresa stayed to be near him, and when his sister moved out of her home, Howard wanted his new bride to move into the neighborhood where he had found a place to belong.

Yet it wasn't Theresa's idea of belonging. In fact, she confesses through tears, it was anything but.

A young Catholic woman without children, she saw the neighborhood as "a bunch of yakking housewives" with whom she had nothing in common.

"I absolutely did not want to live here. . . . I was told at one point in time that other people wouldn't allow their kids to play with mine, and I didn't think I'd ever fit in. A lot of bitter people had said that's how I would be treated."

Fast forward a few years. Now Smith attends all kinds of religious and social events, many of which have nothing to do with her own Catholic parish. Because so many of her neighbors are Latter-day Saints, she has a constant variety of baby blessings, baptisms.
missionary farewells, Primary programs, Relief Society meetings and service projects on her calendar. "A lot of my neighbors probably don't even realize I'm not LDS."

Smith hasn't drawn her circle of friends from an artificial boundary line that includes only those of her own faith. As one of several "catalysts" in her neighborhood, her neighbors agree, she determined long ago to buck the tendency to allow religious categorization to frame her as an outsider.

"Anytime I'm invited to go to something, I absolutely go. I've missed my church to go, because it's important that I let them know they are important to me. They've done the same thing attending my sons' first communion."

Dan and Christine Balderas, who have also become catalysts for "everyone's invited" gatherings that include everything from summertime productions put on by neighborhood children to Christmas caroling, say they can't imagine life any other way.

In the 24 years they've lived in the neighborhood, a tradition of inclusion has developed that, for most residents, wipes away religious and social stereotypes.

"This seems so normal to us," says Christine, whose lushly landscaped back yard has hosted more social gatherings than many churches. But when she talks about neighborhood events with co-workers, "some say they're too busy to get to know their neighbors, while others say they're angry because they feel excluded."

That's how Jed Woolley expected to feel when he arrived nine years ago, he said.

Raised in Utah, Woolley attended First Presbyterian Church as a boy and has lived in several neighborhoods in Utah and elsewhere. "This is a wonderfully unique situation" where everyone is included on the invitation list, he said, describing how neighbors didn't ask what church he belonged to before accepting him into their circle.

When his wife became bedridden, neighbors arranged a rotation schedule to stay with her when he was hospitalized, caring for her around the clock in his absence.

Val and Janae Christiansen say they would be "gone in a minute" if it weren't for their neighbors. With horse property on the Bear River just waiting for them to build a new house, they've agreed that they just can't sell their home in the neighborhood.

Their son became best friends with a handicapped boy down the street after Christine called Janae one day to suggest that maybe each of them could use a new friend. "I would never have seen it if she hadn't called."

"They got a carpool set up to get that relationship going," Christine remembers. "They've given him another house in the neighborhood to call home."

In fact, the area has become known as being so "kid-friendly" that it draws youths from the surrounding area. "They play football on a lot of our front lawns," Christine says.

Visitors often pause when they see teenagers happily chatting with widows and widowers who find their way outside to observe the day's happenings, according to
Renee Adams. She and two other widows on the street get together each week for a "family home evening" together, and they enjoy the friendship of teens who mow lawns and help in other ways.

"We've talked about how it might be better to sell our homes and move so we wouldn't have to worry about yard work and things, but we're all reluctant to leave what we have felt here," she said. "It wouldn't be hard to leave a place if you didn't know anybody."

Tom Green, a former LDS bishop for the ward that encompasses the neighborhood, says the residents who serve as catalysts for inclusion made his job of caring for those in need considerably easier. He's worked with a lot of residents from various faiths who have pulled together to make the Scouting program successful, including Smith, who was worried about the interview he wanted to have with her before she was asked to volunteer.

Thinking Green would ask her the same questions he did of devout Latter-day Saints who are seeking church approval to attend the faith's temples, she remembered the incident with a laugh. "I knew I had the smoking and drinking thing down, but I told my husband I couldn't lie to him when he asked me about the coffee -- I would have to say yes, but it's decaf."

Even neighbors who have left the neighborhood remember it fondly, according to Melanie Offermann, who said when her family moved in years ago they worried about how their choice to have no religious tradition would affect their relationships with the neighbors.

Noting Green and the Balderases, Offermann said, "They didn't give us a sales pitch. . . . I've had some serious depression, and when I went into the hospital, Christine had everyone feeding my family." When an early fall snow caught the family in the middle of putting a roof on the house, "the whole neighborhood came over and finished putting the roof on the house before we were snowed in. . . . There's a real humanness here."

So tangible is the warmth that Smith said she won't be moving anywhere else, though her husband died unexpectedly several weeks ago, leaving her a single mother with children at home.

"We don't have any family here, but we have everything we need," she said. When her husband died, the neighbors wrapped their arms around her and her three boys in a way she says only families normally do.

The neighbor who is a car dealer provided a spare vehicle. The Balderases housed two of Smith's brothers who came for the funeral. Other neighbors brought food, helped
the boys through their father's viewing and cared for the details Smith didn't have time to think about.

"That's the kind of people we have here. I'm not the only person who has had a tragedy like that, but every time it happens, the whole neighborhood jumps in and says, 'Here we are, tell us what to do.'

"I'm not from Utah and I have no family here. Most people in my situation would probably say, we're going to move because there's no reason to stay. But this is our home, and these people have made it our home."
November 17, 2001

**LDS blacks seek inclusion among Utahns**

*Group promotes cultural pride and fellowship*

To live comfortably within one's own skin, looking every day into the mirror and feeling fully included in one's chosen community of faith. That is Darius Gray's hope for every Latter-day Saint.

It gets him up each morning, sits down to breakfast with him, pushes him out the door when weariness would keep him at home. It inspires his writing, undergirds his leadership, informs his speaking assignments. And occasionally, it discourages him.

As the president of Genesis, a group of black Latter-day Saints, he has the literal blessing of top church leadership in having been "set apart" by apostles to preside over a group that is unique in the history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Designed to help blacks feel included within LDS culture while taking pride in their own ethnic background, the group meets monthly on a Sunday evening for fellowship, music and sharing their feelings about God.

Looking back on the 30 years since Genesis was formed on Oct. 19, 1971, Gray and other blacks say they're standing in the "middle of the road."

"We've come a long way since 1978," says Gray, remembering the exultation that came in June of that year, when then-church President Spencer W. Kimball announced that a revelation from God directed that the faith's priesthood should thenceforth be available to all worthy males. Previously, black men could not hold the priesthood.

"The revelation," as it has since been called, did more than open the way for blacks to serve in church leadership positions. It effectively opened the doors of the faith's temples to them, allowing participation in sacred ordinances that Latter-day Saints believe binds them together as families in the afterlife.

Twenty-three years later, one LDS temple is operating in South Africa, and others are planned for Nigeria and Ghana. The numbers of African Latter-day Saints there are exploding, and white missionaries are regularly paired with black missionaries to spread the gospel in select African nations.

While Gray has rejoiced at such progress, he emphasizes the vast difference between Africans living together in their own culture
while accepting the gospel, and African-Americans, whose long quest for civil rights amid a white majority still informs the striving they feel for full acceptance in LDS culture, particularly in Utah.

While their spiritual privileges are now on par with all church members, a sense of distinct "otherness" remains, he said.

"June of 1978 changed so many things and left unchanged too many things. We are far more tolerant of African-Americans in our presence, and while we are, the lack of comfort with ethnic and racial diversity affects the reception that blacks receive. While we've progressed greatly, we have yet a long way to go."

The road ahead is blocked in some measure with outdated notions among a majority of non-LDS blacks that the church has "negative attitudes toward blacks," Gray said. "I still encounter that everywhere I go, though I find the attitudes can be moderated and even modified" with explanation. Though some have heard of a policy change in years past, the attitudes remain in part, he believes, because there has not been enough "candid discussion about our past, our present and where we're headed for the future."

Margaret Young, who is working with Gray to finish their second co-authored fictionalized book on early black Latter-day Saints, also sees the lack of real dialogue about blacks within the church. Having researched black LDS history in depth, she's troubled by the stagnancy of discussion surrounding modern blacks within the church and how the past affects their present reality.

She noted that the church's new Web site -- www.mormon.org -- was designed specifically to answer questions that those not familiar with church doctrine have. While it addresses sensitive subjects like polygamy, women and the priesthood, and homosexuality, "it has nothing about race. There seems to be something about it that is so scary. Whether it's that we haven't dealt with it because we're afraid it will become fodder for anti-Mormonism, I don't know."

As an instructor at Brigham Young University, Young, who is white, said she often encounters students who have been taught wrong concepts about race or who are troubled deeply by the lack of discussion about how race is viewed from a doctrinal standpoint. In fact, a quest for understanding in that realm is present among Latter-day Saints of all colors, Gray believes. Scriptural references to skin color, particularly in the Book of Mormon, are often interpreted in ways that view those whose skin is not white as "less than."

During a recent presentation she did for a women's group, Young said one woman of color in the audience talked of how "she just kept getting whiter and whiter" over time.
"That whole concept that whiteness equals righteousness is just inculcated into the church."

Gray said he witnessed that discomfort within the past month as he attended an LDS sacrament meeting in Chicago while there to address the African American Genealogical and Historical Society about the church's recent release of the Freedman Bank records, composed mostly of black slave information from the Civil War era.

During the church service, a new bishopric was sustained by the congregation. One of the new counselors, a Hispanic man, was called on to speak and began his address expressing gratitude for God's confidence in him "despite this skin of mine."

Gray is concerned about "the folklore and misinformation (about race) that has existed for 160 years." And, he says, a few statements made by early church leaders dealing with race -- statements never codified as LDS doctrine -- have yet to be openly discussed, leaving many black members with lingering questions.

The resulting lack of closure on the issue continues to provide obstacles for people who find truth in a faith they want to embrace but wonder whether they can retain personal identity by doing so, he said.

Rainey Boadeng, a 20-year-old student at the University of Utah, is now experiencing what it means to become a black Latter-day Saint. Formerly a Southern Baptist, she wasn't looking for a new faith when she visited Temple Square several months ago. But what she saw and heard there has changed her life dramatically.

As an employee of the National Conference for Community and Justice, she has a broad basis of understanding about how various faiths relate to — and separate themselves from — each other. But she admits she wasn't totally prepared for how her religious conversion has affected everything from relationships with family and friends to suddenly feeling that she is, in many ways, alone. She attends Calvary Baptist Church in Salt Lake periodically to "sing the hymns and feel a part of my culture."

A native of Idaho, she lost every black friend she had when she joined the church, she said. They accused her of "selling out." While she has white friends in Utah that are supportive, she has no blacks her own age to share feelings and frustrations with. Genesis has been her lifeline, she said.

"I really feel like a pioneer," particularly as she has visited LDS historic sites throughout the Salt Lake area. "I'm looking at all these artifacts left by pioneers, and the biggest thing that separated me and them was the glass between us and the time they lived. I feel I really am pioneering new ground."

Gray said he and the leadership of Genesis will continue to support church doctrine and leadership in their activities as they have always done, along with continuing
their outreach efforts. Genesis group members often present firesides for church groups, sharing their faith and answering questions. They always emphasize the brotherhood and sisterhood of all people.

Their message has always been well-accepted, Gray said, and is now being more widely sought out as many white Latter-day Saints adopt black babies and seek ways to help them feel accepted as they grow up.

"We are not a punch-and-cookies organization. We're very different from anything else in the church, and at times we're viewed with uncertainty because of that. I also think we're one of the best-kept secrets in the church. We have a separate culture here as blacks in the U.S. Those needs need to be addressed and supported, as are the needs of others of God's children."

And while he often hears talk of "assimilation," Gray said his goal doesn't involve becoming something he is not.

"There is no way I'm ever going to look Nordic," he smiles. "It just ain't going to happen. I'm proud of my race, proud of my culture, and I don't wish to assimilate. I'm an African-American Latter-day Saint, and I'm proud of each of the groups represented in that title."