

391 | Cuppa Joe | Historic Sites Spring Lecture Series | William T. Blue: A Lonely Spokesman for Black Saints

Project Zion Podcast

**Josh Mangelson 00:17**

Welcome to the Project Zion Podcast. This podcast explores the unique spiritual and theological gifts Community of Christ offers for today's world.

**Karin Peter 00:33**

Welcome! This is Cuppa Joe, part of the Project Zion Podcast, where we explore restoration history. And I'm your host, Karin Peter. Today our guests are Bill Russell and Gwendolyn Hawks-Blue. Now Bill Russell is a well known figure in not just the post- Mormon, transitioning Mormon community that attends Sunstone, but also in Community of Christ. He has written widely on religion and politics with special interest in issues of prejudice and discrimination. He served for 41 years at Graceland University, which is the Community of Christ University, as a professor of history, government and religion. Bill was active in the civil rights movement in the 1960s, including being a co- founder of the Independence, Missouri chapter of the Congress on Racial Equality or CORE. He graduated from Graceland when it was Graceland College, I'm assuming that in 1960, and later received a master of divinity degree from St. Paul School of Theology in Kansas City. And a Juris Doctor from the University of Iowa, which I didn't know so I learned something new already with just our introduction. Bill has served on the Community of Christ committees on racism, peace and justice, and human rights. Gwendolyn Hawks-Blue is a member of the Community of Christ Standing High Council and co-chair of the Community of Christ Diversity and Inclusion Team. Gwen earned a BA in psychology from the University of Kansas, and a master's in guidance and counseling from the University of Missouri, Missouri in Kansas City. Gwen moved from Florida to Kansas City after graduation, and she worked there for over 25 years in the field of social services, and her last 15 years were spent, the last 15 years of her working life were spent as an independent contractor teaching business skill seminars across the USA and internationally. Gwen has been a board member of several community organizations, was on the Board of Trustees for Park University and currently serves as a board member of the Drumm Farm Center for Children and as the Secretary of the Greater Kansas City Black History Study Group. So, with that Gwen and Bill are our featured presenters/commentators in the Historic Sites Foundation's spring lecture series with their presentation, William T. Blue, a Lonely Spokesman for Black Saints. Welcome to both of you for being here on Project Zion. And thank you for your time this morning. (Glad to be here.) So we're gonna' go back and forth with our questions. When we have more than one person we're visiting with it makes it easier for our recording process. So Bill, I'm going to begin with you because this lecture is based on a paper you wrote about William Taft Blue. So, tell us what prompted you to write about his life and ministry?

**Bill Russell 03:55**

Well, I had an interesting experience that they connected me with William Blue way back in 1961. Well, back in 60, I guess would be. I became the editor of Stride Magazine and an editor at Herald House and assistant editor of the Herald so I wrote editorials and did some other things for the Herald as well.

But my first week on the job, as this editor of this youth magazine I said to Roger Harrington, the managing editor who had been the editor of Stride, I said, How do I get ideas for articles? And he said, Well just go see Carl Mesle about the guests that are persons of interest two, a week or two ago. And so I made arrangements to see Carl and we spent probably half a day and he went over there in the morning and we worked until noon or so. And he just had idea after idea because like my brother-in-law, Dick Lancaster, says, his office used to be adjoining at Carl's, at the end of almost every day, Carl's mailbox was full of outgoing mail that he's writing to people. And so he knew all, he knew all the professors at universities who were church members, and he knew all kinds of other professional people in the church. So we spent pretty much the whole morning. But the one idea he gave me that rang a bell, the most, at least led to the article that I was most happy with in looking back my four years at Herald as editor of Stride, the article I was happiest to have was his article that we published in April, 1964 issue of Stride magazine. And it's titled A Negro Pastor Looks at Brotherhood. And I read that and I was so thrilled. And also, though shocked, well, not shocked, but disappointed, felt sad, I guess sad would be the word that he had suffered so much discrimination as pastor of a segregated congregation in Pensacola, Florida. And so, and then, so his article came in, and it was wonderful. And so I told some of my friends over The Auditorium, where we're at battery block building editor, editors offices, so my friends, like Dick Lancaster, my brother-in-law, probably his brother, Jim, and Bobby Cliff Black and some others. Dick Howard wasn't there yet, so it wouldn't have been Dick, but Dick would have been, you know, thrilled with the article. And Roy Muir and Pearson and so forth. And so that, anyway, so I so thrilled with the article. And then one day, the phone rings one afternoon, and, Hello, and Hello Brother Russell, this is Arthur, Arthur Oakman (the English Apostle). He said, I understand that (. . .) you have an article coming up in Stride might be highly controversial. And I said, I wasn't thinking about church politics or didn't know much about it yet anyway. And I say, oh, Brother Oakman, yes, yes, it's a wonderful article. You'll love it when you read it. And I said, In fact, I said, I could photocopy a copy and send it over to you. And I'm glad he said, Oh, Apostles probably shouldn't get in the habit, in the practice of looking at articles before they're published. So he was declining my offer. And a few hours later, I was very happy that he declined my offer, offer because then, later in the day, I told Roger Yarrington, who was still our managing editor. He hadn't left yet. But he didn't leave another year and a half. I told him about this call from from Arthur Oakman. And he said, Oh, never, never send an article to the Presidency or to a member of the Twelve before it's published. Never, never put them in that role. Just publish it if you like it. And then if they don't like it, they can tell us about it. We're sure glad I hadn't. I mean that Oakman hadn't said, Okay, yeah, go ahead and send me a copy. So anyway, but that's how I got acquainted with William Blue. And then I wrote to him right away, I think I suspect I was about the first one to write to all these names that Carl had given me, because that's article that really sounded interesting, is it. You know, I grew up, I mean, well, I grew up all over the place. My dad was an appointee. But from the ages of 11 to high school graduation, we were in Flint, Michigan. And first time in my life, I went to school with black kids. And Northern High School was about 1/3, black, and the cross country and track teams were full of black play, runners. And so my best friends from, from Northern High School were my teammates on those teams. And so now I'm at Herald House and now it's, we're into the, we're into the heights of the civil rights movement. This is just after the, after the famous sit ins and Montgomery. Well, no Montgomery would have, had already happened (. . .) Birmingham and Selma and March on Washington were still ahead of us and so forth. So anyway, I was really, really thrilled with his article. And he was very blunt about some of the garbage he had to put up with as the pastor of the black congregation. I guess I'll go ahead and say this now. Gwen might

want to be saying it later, but I mean, things like when, whenever they would go to a white congregation, like for a district conference or something, they would have the back corner of the sanctuary roped off or in some way, sir, settled there for a place for blacks to sit. So they had to sit in the back corner of the building. One time was even worse. There was a Seventy coming and speaking at the, at the white congregation in, in Pensacola, and Bill kinda', kinda' went here, this guy and so he went to, went to the church, and the pastor or somebody says, Oh, hello, Brother Blue. Hey, this set you up with a place back behind the sanctuary because we've got people that will be coming tonight and, and, uh, they might be offended if, if you guys are in the main sanctuary. So he had to sit outside the sanctuary, behind the sanctuary to hear this Seventy from wherever, from Independence or somewhere speak. And so going in, he and his wife and, and, and a sister-in-law took a trip over to Southern, Southern Alabama. I can't tell you the name right now. But anyway, took a trip to Alabama for a priesthood and wives dinner, and along with some famous people coming in. So they went over there. And for this dinner for priesthood, he's an elder and a pastor, you know, and so they, Oh, hello, Brother Blue. We'll fix you up a place to eat. I can't remember if they ate at the same time, but in another room, or whether they ate completely afterward. But anyway, they couldn't eat with the people. And here he is, again, a priesthood member and pastor. He's got his wife and his sister-in-law with him. So there're just all kinds of things that he said, he said about a lot of such things in his. My favorite one, especially with Gwen here, Gwen was about eight years old, and we had a reunion. And the word that was announced was Okay, we're gonna go swimming in town in Cameron tomorrow afternoon at two o'clock or something like that. So at the point in time, there's, there's, there's, uh, Gwendolyn in her bathing suit ready to get on the bus. And they say, Oh, you can't get into the swimming pool, so you probably better not go. And so she was naturally devastated as, you know, a little kid angling, anxiously looking forward to the swim with his, with her friends from the church. And, uh, but anyway, Darling, John Darling and his wife, Bea, I think it is, they saw the appointees of that area, they were Northerners, I think, but anyway, they came over to, to Gwen and gave her some, tried to comfort her and so forth. Gwen then years later is preaching as a member of the Standing High Council, is preaching at the San, at the Rest Haven for the church. And she told the story about this happening and that husband and wife, the Darlings, providing comfort for her. And she didn't know that John Darling was sitting in the back of the, back of the congregation there at Rest Haven. I'd seen John Darling at Rest Haven when I'd been there visiting my mother. So, I know, I know he was there. Anyway, there's just so much about, about Bill Blue's life and just seemed so ridiculous that any pastor especially would have to endure this kind of stuff. But this was early 60s in Alabama and that's the way things were. Well, that's a ( ... ) it's really southern Alabama. It's in the panhandle there.

**Karin Peter** 13:01

I think they call it LA, lower Alabama.

**Bill Russell** 13:05

Yeah, yeah. So anyway, yeah. That's, it really encouraged me the fact that he managed to stick it out, even though it was a terrible story. Yeah. How, how could he? How could he endure this kind of rule that he did, and then finally went to Kansas City and there's whole different story?

**Karin Peter** 13:29

So, so thank you, Bill for it. I mean, all of that would have perked any writer, editor, magazine publishers interest in the life of the church at that time, especially living in Independence, which was pretty white.

**Bill Russell** 13:44

Yeah, I learned a lot about racism from the people in Independence, negative thing.

**Karin Peter** 13:49

So you're, no go ahead.

**Gwendolyn Hawks-Blue** 13:51

Since this is gonna' be edited, I do need to make a correction. It would have been my mom and my dad's Aunt Henrietta. My mom didn't have any sisters.

**Bill Russell** 14:01

Okay. Okay. I tried to create one for her, but

**Karin Peter** 14:06

Give her, give her the credit. (Yeah.) So, Gwen, that's a good example of the wonderful interaction that we're going to have through our conversation, because your contribution to this lecture comes from a different perspective. You're a family member, you're also a person of community engagement, from the introduction we learned that about you. Are there specific reasons, though, that you decided to participate in telling William Blue's story for the historic?

**Gwendolyn Hawks-Blue** 14:37

Yes, I believe my dad's story is, is one of being a pioneer in this church. As a black man born in 1910, he persevered in perilous times and in contrast to an easier road he may have taken in some other faith community. He mentioned more than once, not a lot, but more than once, that he could have been a leader in black churches. But he chose to remain with this church, which, for him, was not the easiest road. He saw himself as a bridge builder between ethnicities. And that's one of the reasons I think it's important that his story be told. Another is because he loved this church, and his actions and commitment to the cause of God's kingdom here on Earth, touched many lives. And so his contributions do need to be recognized, acknowledged, and perhaps even honored. And I also believe his story can inspire others, for any who feel marginalized, even within the context of church. His story of stalwart faith and continued witnessing is an inspiration.

**Karin Peter** 16:00

So you mentioned he was born in 1910?

**Gwendolyn Hawks-Blue** 16:03

Yes.

**Karin Peter** 16:04

So when we talk about life in the church, we sometimes separate it from community life, but the reality is in the deep south, that means Jim Crow, that means the civil rights and all that that meant in that period of time. So, perhaps we need to know a little bit more about him, and begin to understand his life in the church. So, where did he grow up? Tell us about his family.

**Gwendolyn Hawks-Blue 16:31**

Yeah, my, yeah, my dad grew up primarily in Florida, and he was reared by both his mother and his grandparents. He spent a lot of time with his grandparents. In fact, he says he learned to read more, or maybe just read by reading the Bible to his grandmother who was blind. But his dad died about a year after his birth. And I didn't find that out until going through some records on ancestry. I knew that he never spoke of a father. So I didn't know what had happened with Mr. Blue. But my dad stopped school when he was quite young, probably 10 or 11 or so. And during those times, kids didn't go to school nine months a year anyway. So Dad often shared that he probably had about between three and four years of formal education, but he read voraciously. So he went to work, though, to support the families that he was a pretty sturdy young man and he worked at the sawmill. I remember him sharing that his teacher was almost in tears when he left because she saw the potential that he had, and, and just hated to see him walk away from formal education. Dad worked in a variety of different jobs. He was a cook at the Navy Yard. I remember him coming home and making the best roast beef sandwiches, thinly sliced with salt and pepper and mayo. But he, when he was called to the ministry, because he had joined the church, quite young. His grandparents, he had great uncles who were ministers of the church. In fact, I am a, I think, fifth or sixth generation of the family in the church. So he had that heritage. And he, I remember him talking about them, having meetings in the house, house churches. And I would, I'm sure some of that was because of segregation that was there. But also they were a very small segment of the church, a Black family in the church. He, I don't think was ever a bad guy, but he did smoke. He did drink. And I remember him saying when he was called to the ministry, he actually left a job as a cook in a restaurant because he, he didn't want to be in the atmosphere, I don't know a bar or restaurant, but in that atmosphere, he thought it was inappropriate for someone who was in the ministry to be in that kind of environment. But he had married my mom prior to being called to the ministry, in fact. They had been married for at least 15 years because I have a brother who's 13 years my senior and one who was 11 years my senior, but I remember my mom saying that she told my dad, if he was going to drink then she was too. She went out got a beer. My dad said he stopped drinking. My mom had a very a very definite positive influence on my dad's life. I remember him saying he almost tore his hair out trying to quit smoking because he quit cold turkey. But, but being called all to his belief in what type of life he should live. I can tell you some anecdotes later about some of the things, but, but simply stated, his marriage to my mom was a very good step for him. I remember him saying that they had married secretly, they didn't tell anybody they were married to ( . . . ) back home. He was supposedly ill and stayed in her house for a while. But he said when they did have the reception, one of her cousins says, I'll give it a year. I think they'd been married some 70 some years before my mom passed away. But just to give you some idea of the impact she had. But as far as the church again, once he became pastor, he pastored the Belmont Street Negro Mission. And we were separated because of segregation laws. He would cut the grass. He would fix the building. On Sunday morning, he would go and pick up most of the congregation who might, who were my great aunts, and bring them to church. My great uncle would come. It would be a few others, but it was dominantly my family and maybe a few neighbors would come in periodically. And one young man, who later joined the church. And then after

service, he'd take them all back home. And then Wednesday night, we'd go back to church and he'd preside. He did that for the 20 some years that the branch existed. I grew up going to the Belmont Street Church. And as Bill has indicated, our involvement with the white branch was extremely limited. There would be sometimes someone would come over and preach. And that was not often, but periodically. I believe Wallace B. Smith, the younger Smith, preached his first sermon at our congregation He was in the Navy at that time. And so there was that kind of touching base with the church. But again, as Bill indicated, we went to the branch very few times. I think in the time that I grew up there until I went off to college, we may have been to the branch three times. And I remember sitting in the segregated seats. I remember my dad telling about an experience. When we were there, he was asked to offer a prayer by the newly designated a church appointee in the area, Brother Chalene. And my dad tells, as my dad tells it, before he had a chance to sit down someone had called World Headquarters complaining because this black man was in the pulpit. So that was the environment we were in. He moved to the Kansas City area in 1969. And part of that move was because he had had conversations with some leaders here in the Kansas City area who thought he could offer a ministry that was needed. Now at that time, both my brothers and I lived here in Kansas City. But I think the, the huge component was the fact that he would get to serve the church in a broader way by moving here. And it was after he was here, actually, I can't remember the year, but several years after he was here, he was called to the office of then Patriarch. And Brother Duane Couey offered the confirming prayer for that ordination. Yeah. And he participated in conference, even prior to our moving here, then moving here, I had remained after having gone to Graceland for two years. But in 1958, I think that was my first conference. They were still working on the building, on The Auditorium at that time. But we came up to conference each two years. We would get in my dad's car. He was the only driver. We had a big Chevrolet, I believe, because it would be me, my mom and dad in the front seat and three of my aunts in the back. And we would not stop at a hotel because you weren't sure where one would be that would allow black people to stay. So we would stop by the side of the road and sleep during the night and continue on our journey. But I remember he was an ex-officio, I think that was a title they used then for pastors. So he was able to, to attend. And he chose to speak on various occasions, and always focused on brotherhood and moving toward better relations.

**Karin Peter 25:59**

So, um, 20 years plus as pastor in the Pensacola area, and then this specific move to Kansas City to kind of broaden the picture of ministry in that area, as I understand,(I think that was the idea that he was going.) Okay. All right. So Bill, with that in mind, his years as pastor in Pensacola, and then his time in Kansas City, when you began to write what were some of the like personal accomplishments or contributions to the church that you saw that you wanted to highlight in your paper about William Blue?

**Bill Russell 26:38**

Well, I guess are one thing he, he kind of kept the black RLDS folks together in Pensacola as the pastor. It was largely his extended family, but I'm sure other people, but at least he, he, he kept them together. So, the RLDS church in Pensacola, they're only a segment in Pensacola, had a leader for quite a while. And that was very important to them and to the church, because we didn't have a lot of black folks anywhere, I mean, any section of the, of the country or the world did we have a significant portion of black saints? So, he kept, he kept that together. But then, and I understand in probably it's in his oral history, he says that it was David Bowerman, the Stake President 1968, and probably speaking

to him at conference, said, You ought to come, you oughta' move, you oughta' move to Kansas City. That'd be a really, really important ministry that you could perform in Kansas City. And so that question, I think what Gwen mentioned, all three of the kids were in Kansas City, you know, they'd all gone through college right now and you're settling in the Kansas City area. At least, you know, you probably run into this before, too, there's a pretty big movement. Follow the grandkids, you know, but you know, there's, there's gonna' be some grandkids emerging here so let's be around. So, I, but I had no idea whether that had any role at all in Bill's thinking, or his wife's thinking about moving to Kansas City. But certainly, as far as his ability to work with the church it was extremely important. Like, I guess I think this is Mark Scherer's oral history, he says, The first, my first week, I'm sorry, my first month in Kansas City, I have four different preaching engagements. And he is, he was wanted everywhere. So here ( . . . ), as, as Gwen said recently here, there's probably not more than three or four times they're in the, the white church in Pensacola that'd be for district president, district conference and stuff. But here in Kansas City, everybody wants him, in fact, I think, I think Gwen has mentioned, or maybe it's in that, in that oral history, after a while he wasn't getting invited, you know, every day, every Sunday. And he thought maybe he lost his influence or whatever. And I think maybe Gwen had to tell him, Well, you know, you don't, you know, you, you've ever, if the congregation has invited you, there's so many priesthood, they're not gonna' invite you again, even if they liked you, probably, probably for a year or something, and then have you back again. So, it was thought by somebody, and I think it was Gwen, that he, un, unfairly to himself, kind of thought that while you kind of, he wasn't asked so much. But anyway, I think another really important thing, two, couple other important things, I think he had a profound influence on the black cang, on the black saints in Michigan, and maybe especially Detroit because there's Detroit and, and, uh, in Battle Creek, we had a congregation that with a, reasonably integrated congregation, it was probably still majority of white, but I recall, Larry, Larry Pool and I, another future appointee, he and I and a friend were working, were painting utility towers across the state of Michigan during summers, during our college years. So, Wednesday night, we decided to go to, go to prayer meeting at Battle Creek. And the man in charge was, was a black man. And I thought, Well, this is really cool. I mean, he's, he must be fairly important in the congregation to be presiding at prayer meetings and so forth. And, and I kind of knew there, that there, there, I guess there are a few other blacks at the congregation. So anyway, Brother Blue, I believe made occasional trips to Michigan, I think, I think there's some references in there. And Mark's, Mark's oral history is very valuable for, for his life. And Gwen was there at that oral history, and she occasionally offers some things that, additional things about her dad. And so, but then I think maybe, maybe really valuable was he made a trip to Hawaii, I'm sorry, Haiti. Start over. He made a trip to Haiti. And I think they estimate that he gave 50 patriarchal blessings in the time he spent in Haiti, in Haiti. And, so, that was probably pretty important for the Haiti saints. So I think and, and, and just, just having lived in Kansas City, well I lived in Independence for six years, and having a lot of contact with Independence since then, I would imagine that the places that he preached was very important because he was very good preacher. One time at Peace Colloquy, he was, had been in a worship service and he read the Scripture from I, I think it was from Isaiah. And, I kid you not, I mean, just seem to me like it was the voice of Isaiah for the saints in Kansas City. And it was really, really moving the way, just to, just his voice hearing him read Scripture. And so, I think, wherever he went, I, I think probably only the most hardened bigots would not be moved by, by his ministry. And so I think, you know, he, he sort of abandoned his congregation in Pensacola, but it was just a little, a little tiny congregation anyway. Coming to Kansas City, I think, was very valuable for the church in that area where an awful lot of the saints are living. So, I don't know, it'd

be nice if somebody had kept a record of all the places he preached and see how many, how many churches in the Kansas City area he spoke at. And it'd be quite a figure. And how many different churches he spoke at, it'd be quite a figure, I think.

**Karin Peter 31:20**

I would think so. So the experience in Kansas City was very different than the experience in Florida. Having been assigned to the deep South, I, I think I get some of that. What that's like, just because of the, the culture currently still in the South. And Bill, when you wrote about, when you wrote about his ministry in the South, and you both have shared some of the challenges, is there anything specific that stood out to you as a challenge that, that most people in the life of the church would not assume to be challenging? So most people in the USA life of the church are white, middle class Americans? So, what does that say about the challenges that the Blue family faced in the South?

**Bill Russell 33:33**

I, I think maybe I'd assume that white folks like us probably would not have endured all that, all that the family, and, and, and especially Bill endured, because we too easily can just say, Well, okay, I think I'll just go join the Quakers or the United Church of Christ seems to be a fairly good attraction. That's where my sister's at. My brother, my gay brother, was gay in the church way too early; knew he really didn't have a home in the church. He went to every non-, non-, non-, non-fundamentalist Protestant church that he knew of. But none of them finally worked out. And he finally just became a Unitarian. And that was a wonderful experience for my brother, David. When he died, we went out there for the funeral to the Unitarian Church, and, and we also have a copy of the sermon he gave at the Unitarian Church. It was ( . . . ) about being gay and in the church and so forth. So, anyway, I just think, I just, I was really impressed that Bill Blue kept the faith and remained so long in, in Pensacola and, of course, it was a, it was a much better experience up North. However, he was frustrated by some things up, up North, one of which was the selling of the church that most blacks went to in Kansas City. Was at Malvern Hill or something? I got, I don't have it quite right and Gwen can, no doubt, correct me, but it's a church that I preached at once. And I was, I was thrilled to go there and there's Bill Blue. And there's younger Bill, there's young Bill, Bill Blue, Bill, senior and junior. And in a reasonable, I would, I would say the congregation was probably still two thirds white. But there were several blacks there including two members of the family. So, I just and then, and then, and then one of them is hanging, hanging on continuing in there, you know. That's just, I don't know whether Bill, Jr. continued or not, but he was still active in 1971 when I was preaching at the, that church, which the new family only very recently had, had moved into. So, just the perseverance, I think that's the name of a book just published by Senator Elizabeth Warren. I think that perseverance really is what sticks out in my mind is, how could he persevere like he did?

**Karin Peter 36:13**

Well, that must be a family trait, because I think Gwen's life is a whole podcast on its own that we'll, we'll look at when we do our women of influence on our culture. (Oh, yeah, definitely.) Definitely. So, Gwen, what do you say about these challenges? What was it about your father that strengthened him, that guided him, navigated him through life in a segregated church, and then life in, in the Greater Kansas City area?



**Gwendolyn Hawks-Blue 36:44**

Yeah, my first comment has more to do about what I observed rather than what he said. And that was the limitation of his voice. I mean, he had been called to preach, he had been called as a minister. And through the actions of the church, whether that was totally due to the laws of the land in Florida is extremely questionable. But he, his voice was limited. He only could speak to this group of people, you know, my, my ethnicity. I know that he had firsthand knowledge of what prejudice and bigotry can do to distort thinking. But in spite of that, he continued to share what he believed was God's call to creation. And I truly believe what strengthened him was his faith in God. He believed that he had a role to play. And because of his family's heritage in the church, he had witnessed their ability to hang in there, their ability to minister even with all these shackles attached, and that gave him inspiration and courage. He would tell us stories about, you know, reading to his grandma. I heard firsthand the story of how our family became a part of the church when his great, great, I think was his great-, great- grandma's, some greats back there, had observed an administration to the sick for the young boy of a family she had been enslaved by or been released from slavery. I mean, it was like shortly after the emancipation, so I imagine they were still, you know, that entanglement was very present. But based on her experience, she wanted to become a part of this church having observed that administration and the healing of this young man. And although her husband was hesitant, didn't want her to join this white man's church, later, he had an experience and all of those experiences that they believe came through the influence of the Holy Spirit, assured them that this was a path they could follow. And that gave him a background reservoir of hope to dip into that allowed him to, to persevere, and my dad believed that this church had or has a unique calling. Now, I used to go with you When he would do slide presentations of the Go Ye and Teach, and then he believed in those which, you know, the one true church ideology. (Oh, yeah.) I think, I'm pretty sure he evolved from that to a broader perspective. However, he continued to have the belief that there is a unique role for now Community of Christ and that he wanted to be a part of that. He saw the church as bringing healing to the world, you know, and he very much wanted to have a role in that. So, I believe all of those things helped him persevere,

**Karin Peter 40:49**

Helped him navigate what was the life in the church at that time. (Yeah.) It sounds like the depth of the faith, not just his faith, but the faith of his family stayed with him and has stayed as, as part of his gift. So I want to ask both of you, what do you think are some of his lasting contributions to the church that we can still recognize, or that precipitated some of the changes we've made to our community life together? So, Gwen, I'll start with you with that. What do you see in the life of the church that you would say are partly based on your father's contributions?

**Gwendolyn Hawks-Blue 41:36**

I think he witnessed the fact that we each must bear the cross. He was, he was very poetic in his ministry. He would read poems or he'd quote, you know, songs. And there was one that said, am I a soldier of the cross, a follower of the lamb? And shall I, no, is that the right one? Yeah. And shall I fear to own his cause or blush to speak his name? Must Jesus bear the cross alone? That was his, one of his messages, that it is not an easy ride. And he would often speak about some concern that we continue to focus on the joy and never talk about the challenge. And he was about letting people know that we have burdens we must bear if we continue to follow Christ. So, I think, just awareness of that and acknowledgement and embracing that as a part of our discipleship is something he would want to

continue. The fact that one person can make a difference. He knew his humble beginnings. He knew that he did not have formal education. But he knew that God had blessed him with abilities and he used those to the utmost. He read everything he could put his hands on. And I observed once a gathering, I think it was a leadership gathering, where he and Wayne Ham were in like dialogue and my dad was his match. I mean, there, there was nothing lacking in his ability to share in that dialogue insightful understandings of gospel and Christ and faith. I think one of his contributions is the ability to love God's creation. In spite of ill treatment, harshness, injustice, he believed that people could love each other. And that was his testimony throughout life, that we can experience brotherhood and sisterhood. He never stepped back from talking about injustice, but he was not embittered. Dad would say, you know, I never stay angry longer than five minutes. Nice to go blow that off. But you know, as I think back on his life, he was not an embittered man. And during the time that he lived and the things that he had to endure, for many that would be cause enough to say, Forget it, you know. But he didn't. And I think he really, he really did have that ability to look beyond to talk about change and stopping injustice, but not to become a hater.

**Karin Peter 45:02**

Which I'm sure blessed his ministry as a Patriarch, but we would now call an evangelist, (Oh, yes, yes.) a minister of blessing. Yes, absolutely. So Bill, what would you say to that? Some of William Blue's lasting contributions that we can recognize in the church today?

**Bill Russell 45:19**

Well, I think virtually every time he went into a congregation to preach, again, I'd have no first hand evidence of this, but this is my speculation. But every time you went into a congregation to preach, he would really impress the people, you know, his voice for not, no other reason. But I mean, his, I can say, like, like Gwen said, he read everything you get his hands on. He, although not formally educated, he really became well educated in an informal sense. Wayne Ham was probably the most widely educated member of the church. He's got degrees out the ears. I mean, you know, I just amazed when I hear somebody introduce him and just go through all the, all the degrees he's got. And so he would, there he was, a man with a third or fourth grade education, having a dialogue or whatever with a man, just extremely well educated. And, you know, he holds his own with Wayne Ham. But anyway, my, see I look at, I look at the history of the church, and that's my field, you know, the history of religion in Am, America was my major field at the University of Iowa. And the church made radical change. One thing about the change we made in, in, and on race, that didn't come from W. Wallace Smith. That didn't come from the First Presidency. That came from the men and women in their, in the pews and then on the, in the streets, and so forth. Because W. Wallace Smith was not friendly to the civil rights movement. Not at all. And in fact, he, he, he was basically a segregationist. That's not very well known. He thought Martin Luther King was a communist. But so anyway, I think, by the end of the 60s, this 19, 1960 World, 68 World Conference might be a key time. King died, was killed during this, during conference. We, we passed a resolution that was prepared before conference and we also passed a special resolution during conference relating, relating to King's death. The way, anyway, my point is, when any, whenever, whenever Bill Blue, or any other black minister, went to a predominantly white congregation, I know Bill Blue would have made a good impression. And people who were, you know, didn't think there's any need for us to change on race, you know, probably, they probably have valuable effect of whatever racist things you might have said in the past, were pretty well put by the side and

became welcoming. So I, you know, again, I can't prove anything, because I don't document this stuff. But just knowing the man and the kinds of influence he had, and listening to that Isaiah himself speaking to the, to the folks of the congregation at a peace conference. You know, I just think you must have had a very valuable effect. Because I think by the end of the 60s, which is just the very beginning of Bill Blue's ministry in Kansas City, the church has become fairly pro-civil rights. I can't say anything more than fairly, so fairly, fairly, but I think that's true. And, and Bill Blue's location in Kansas City was very valuable. Now, sometimes he was used as a token. I'll give you one example. I had a, I, the Christian Century was going to use my, I was going to present, submit to them my Report on the 1960, 1970 World Conference which turned out to be really not a peace conference where the two sides really battled at that conference. And, so, anyway, the, uh, Roy Muir, director of PR at Graceland, an old friend of mine, I was gonna' ride down with him to the First Presidency's typical dinner for the media before the conference. And so they invite all the media in the Kansas City area to come in and seemed might, seemed like quite a few came. But Roy is on the phone with the director of PR for the church. He calls Roy and he says, Now Hawks, the future head, for future appointee and Seventy, Richard Hawks, is he coming down with your Roy? So Roy said, Well, no, no, Mr. Hawks is not coming. And anyway, the director of PR for the church was hoping that Richard Hawks would be coming because I would add another, another colored face and other more man of color here to archive it. But I got there and there was Bill Blue sitting there to, he was there to give the invocation on the food or whatever. And I thought, Yeah, I always love to see Bill Blue. But I thought he's a token, you know, he's the black man that they trot out so the Kansas City press, will think that we're pretty open church. And they, you know, and the director of PR was hoping that Richard Hawks would be coming, too. But anyway, there's times he was just seen as the token and that's very unfortunate. But I guess the point I want to make is that the, on, on, on women and on gays, the church only moved as fast as the First Presidency wanted them to move. But on segregation, there was the men, the men, the men and the women in the street. Yeah, I went through the Heralds and, and Stride and University Bulletins and had like 50 footnotes of articles in those publications by the Saints during the 50s and 60s. And there's no contribution of W. Wallace Smith. In fact, his editorial in 1962 was basically a segregationist editorial. You go back and read it some time you'll say, What? This, that's really an argument for segregation. So, anyway, again, I can only speculate, but I think Bill Blue had a very valuable influence on the late 60s and early 70s when, when his presence, his ministry was very valuable for the church as it tried to make this tran, transition from racism to basically a relatively open church.

**Karin Peter 51:51**

So, I'm, I appreciate you sharing that from kind of a historical perspective. It gives us pause to think we sometimes want to remember all church leaders of the past in the best light possible. It helps us to remember that we all struggle at different times with change. So, Gwen, what do you think that your father would say about the role of people of color in the church today?

**Gwendolyn Hawks-Blue 52:21**

I think he would encourage us to remain with the church, and to share our thoughts, to be bridges. And to help others primarily non-blacks understand the impact of their words and their actions on us. We are as much a part of this church as anyone else. But I think we have not always, well, I know we've not always been invited to the table as equal participants in this, in this faith movement. He chose not to walk away. And I think he would encourage us to not walk away because we bring to the church an

opportunity to live out your message. I mean, you can live it outside of the church, and you can live it inside the church. And by that I mean the message of all persons of worth, the message that God calls each and, and for that reason, he would say, Don't forsake this movement, to be, to be there, to bear whatever your cross is, if it comes to that, but to be present.

**Karin Peter 53:48**

So, still that message of perseverance coming from a deep well of faith. So this Historic Sites lecture came out of your writings, Bill, that you, that you had participated in bringing to the life of the church. We've talked about the different aspects of William Blue's life, but for you personally, as a, as a human being, as an historian, as a person of faith, what stood out to you, personally, from his life?

**Bill Russell 54:25**

What stood out to me about Bill Blue's life? Yeah. Well, again, just that perseverance, and Gwen was hitting on just now really well, and that is, you know, he, he recognized that, well, maybe a good example here is when he realized he could go be a valuable member of some of the African American churches in Pensacola because, you know, he's got a lot of ability as a minister, and he probably humbly recognized that, but he recognized that he had a ministry in this, in this church. And so I think, you know, he had a, he had a contribution beyond ability to, to, beyond our ability to assess this, an exact amount, exactly how much he's affected the church. But his effect, his effect was pretty obvious from when he, well down there, but as well as when he, especially when he got up North, that he had a lot to do, I think with the church changing. And if he hadn't have that, if he didn't have that attitude that Gwen was talking about, you know, let's, let's stay with this movement and make contribution to this movement and don't let it die as far as black involvement in the movement. And in his oral history, he is very, he's very disappointed that the church sold that congregation that most of the blacks were attending in Kansas City. So he, so he fought for the change, for not, for not changing, but he failed by fairly close vote I think at stake conference. So, any, anyway, I just, I just think that he, he, he made a right choice for him to stay with the church and, and have more effect, have more Christian effect on a group of people than he would have had being a prominent member, a prominent lay member of some African American church in Pensacola, Florida, or in Kansas City.

**Karin Peter 56:33**

So change from within.

**Bill Russell 56:34**

Yeah, yeah. And that's the way the church changed on civil rights with, with, within, because W. Wallace was not a leader in that. Neither was Israel A. We didn't get a leader in that area till, till Wally B.

**Karin Peter 56:49**

So, I get that's, I'm, (I guess I should listen.), listing future podcasts here, Bill, as we go along. So we have Gwen's life and we have leadership in the Civil Rights whole period of time. So, Gwen, what influenced you most of your father's life? What do you think as a disciple, as a minister, as a person of community action, and what's been most meaningful to your discipleship from your father's life and influence?

**Gwendolyn Hawks-Blue 57:18**

I think his staunch commitment to his beliefs, to his belief in the message of Jesus Christ, to his belief in the church having a particular role to play, his unwavering belief that each of us have a role to play. I know one of his scriptures has to do with what was the woman who said, I'm here for such a time as this, Queen Esther? Was it Esther? But he saw himself being here for a particular role. And that has influenced my discipleship. I don't want to sound like some martyr. I mean, people have gone through a lot of things, you know, people of color, people who are not people of color. But I do believe I am here for this time because of the message that I have and that sometimes can even appear, should I say, burdensome, but when I look back and see what others have experienced, and endured, who am I to quibble? You know. So, it's, it's that kind of situation, but his example of that has made a difference. And, and I mentioned her before, I know this is not my mom's story, but I think my mom's willingness to, to marry this man who seemed, didn't quite have it all together in some ways, but I think she saw in him, too, a particular essence of integrity and, and staunch belief in God that, that said, Okay, I'm going to join with this person. You know. So, I think those things. He, he did engage with communities I was growing up he engaged with PTA. He and my mom did. And even at a time when our membership in this church was looked at a bit askance by other black members of the community. You know, Why are you a part of that church? You know. And, and continuing to, to persevere and to reach out to folks in the black community. Children would come. My mom and dad would pick them up. In fact, I had went to my 50 year high school reunion a couple of years ago, already, more than a couple. I graduated in 1964. And I was 16, but I did graduate. But, but one of the young women there who had been a good buddy of mine during that time, talked about how much she loved my parents. So my dad would come and pick her up when we have places to go, but she didn't have a dad in the home. And, and, and it was just natural for my folks to go do that. And I didn't know what a lasting impact that had on her, you know. So, those kinds of things have influenced and inspired how I see my walk can be.

**Karin Peter 1:00:55**

Yeah. Yeah, absolutely. They do make a lasting impression. So I'm gonna ask both of you, but I'm going to start with you, Gwen, what do you think your father would want us to remember most about his life and ministry?

**Gwendolyn Hawks-Blue 1:01:10**

I think he would want us to remember that he was a bridge builder. There was a family whose heritage was Booker? Well, Booker was the name of the people who enslaved my ancestors. So, they both knew there, there was that relationship. And my dad would celebrate the woman that we knew was Peggy Michael. But my dad would celebrate the fact that former enslaved people's children and former slave holders', children, children's children were at the table together. And they celebrated the fact that we have come, we have joined together. We are doing justice. We are embracing each other. And he saw his paramount role for him was to be that bridge builder, between ethnicities, even within his family and beyond. I think he would want to be remembered as someone who used the God-given abilities he had to nurture them, and develop them, as I said, through reading or conversations with others, so that he could contribute as best he could. And, and wanted us all, wanted all people to be able to do that and to choose to do that.

**Karin Peter** 1:02:47

So the All are Called before we had All are Called. So, Bill, what would you say to that? What do you think William Blue would want remembered most about his life?

**Bill Russell** 1:03:01

Well, again, that he persevered. I mean that he went through great suffering, great discrimination in the church, especially in Florida, but also in Kansas City. And, but he saw beyond that, that he saw that there was a ministry that he could bring. There's people's, he could help people's lives in this particular way by research, his service in his particular church. And so I think that probably be a very important thing that he would remember, as he recalled the positive things about his life and what, what, what would have made it, what would have, that which would have made his life whole are valuable, that he would be a black life that does matter.

**Karin Peter** 1:03:54

So speaking of Black Lives Matter, that is an excellent segue bill. We've all been affected in the past year and a half by the growing incidents that have contributed to the national and international Black Lives Matter. So what, what, what might we learn from William Blue's life and ministry as we try to respond to the racism in our own communities and to the racism that still exists within the church?

**Bill Russell** 1:04:31

Well, we, we ought to be willing to take a, to take a role in that movement to recognize black lives do matter and that police, when they are dealing with black people, should treat them the same as they would a white person with the same facts, you know, in the case. You know, so many of these killings of black men in the last couple of years or so are situations where, as I look at it, I think, you know, if, if, if George Floyd had been white with the same, exactly the same characteristics and, you know, ( . . . ) drugs, ( . . . ) drugs and so forth, but he was a valuable high school athlete, you know. But anyway, as a white man just like him, they would have treated him a lot differently. You know, I've been treated nicely by police who didn't know me. I've been treated nicely in Lamoni by police who did, and I've seen times when they benefited me.

**Karin Peter** 1:05:37

But a police stop in rural Iowa, if you're black could be a very different experience.

**Bill Russell** 1:05:41

That's right. That's right. Yeah. And, and as a student, the Republican county chairperson in the county, north of our county told me one time, there was a, there's a carload of us Graceland students stopped by this particular deputy sheriff. And he said, but they had long hair and they looked like hippies. And, you know, some Graceland students did look like hippies. But anyway, they were stopped. He, this particular deputy sheriff stopped them and he managed to, well, I know, he managed to get in the car and find marijuana or something. And so he's now, now he was able to charge them, get, but he really didn't have any probable cause to get in the car. But he got in the car 'cause they're, they're hippies from Graceland. And so, and then, and then in court, he lied in order, the cop lied in order to create popular a probable cause to go in. So I just think, I think we should all be appreciative of the Black Lives Matter Movement and realize it doesn't mean you've got to quickly say white lives matter, too.

You know us white folks has been in control of this, of this country forever. And so we don't have to affirm the matter that we that we matter. We do need to affirm that black lives matter because with those cameras that people have now we're seeing what's probably been going on for years. I mean, it's a, it's a, it's a new Jim Crow. And it's really a survival of lynching. This is the new lynching that's going on with George Floyd and all these other people who have been been murdered and usually have gotten away with it, maybe 97% of the time they, they get away with it. George Floyd is just a case of such a terrible, such a extensive photograph of nine minutes or more of a guy being tortured. So, it, it, it took a case like this to actually go to court and win. We're probably still gonna' end up losing a lot of cases that we should be winning just because the advantage police have. So, police need to be reforming themselves. And it's gonna' be a tough ride to get them to do that.

**Karin Peter** 1:08:11

So, Gwen, I'll turn to you. What do you think we would learn about your father's, from your father's life and ministry as we seek to respond to racism in our communities, and to the racism that still exists in the church?

**Gwendolyn Hawks-Blue** 1:08:23

I think we will learn that we need to continue to speak up, need to continue to call for justice, even when you may not be accepted when you say those things, even when you may be, being overlooked as you make that stance that it is to all of our benefit. It's not just for those who are being marginalized, but for the soul of those who are doing the mortalizing, that everyone benefits when God's justice prevails. And I think that was a part of his message. You cannot be all that you can be if you bear hatred or hostility toward another of God's creation. He was speaking to the church, but that article that Bill suggests, referenced at the beginning, I read it again and it, it is pretty bold, but just one paragraph he says, To the youth of the church, especially I would like to say this, the time has come for us to realize the kingdom of God, placing his will and purposes ahead of outmoded customs and traditions and even immoral laws. Let us not be satisfied with things as they are, but continue to grow up into him who is the head of our church, Jesus Christ. And so I think that in a nutshell talks about living up to going beyond what the law would allow or what traditions would manifest, that the truer calling is to be on the forefront of justice,

**Karin Peter** 1:10:20

Which we hear in our inspired Council of the past few years about being involved in those things.

**Gwendolyn Hawks-Blue** 1:10:29

And I think Black Lives Matter, the message of it is about justice.

**Karin Peter** 1:10:37

So as we bring our conversation to a close, any last thoughts or last anecdotal kind of story or anything else that you'd like to share before we end our conversation? Bill, I'll start with you.

**Bill Russell** 1:10:52

Well, I think one helpful thing would be if we got, talked Gwen into writing an article about the whole family, you know, because we know so much about Bill, but Gwen is very important in this whole story.

And her mother, I mean, I forgotten your mother's name, (Carrie), who? Carrie. Okay, okay. Yeah, that's right. And can remember that. But then the story that goes all the way back to the former slave holder, who the story your, your family history, I believe, starts with that woman who heard, heard the administration to the sick and said, I'd like to join that church. I think that's where your heritage comes. Be nice to have you do an article in which you trace that heritage at, but then also talk a decent amount about yourself and your mother, who was pretty much left out of the story. So, that's your assign, that's your assignment, Gwen. I've always tried to get Gwen to write articles for ( . . . ) journal or something. But I think that would be a valuable contribution. Maybe, maybe the focus on your, yourself more than anybody else.

**Karin Peter 1:12:05**

So, Gwen, what about you? Last thoughts?

**Gwendolyn Hawks-Blue 1:12:07**

Last couple of things. One, attitudinal change. I remember when Dr. King first began being prominent in, in the movement, my dad was not a staunch supporter. He was, the tension between the church being a part of political arena. He changed, my dad changed his attitude. And he acknowledged that change later, which I thought was very, very good of him to do. He acknowledged that I was not always on board. But he began to see the connection. And, and, and the rationale for Dr. King's leadership. My dad loved to barbecue. He was known for his barbecue and his barbecue sauce.

**Karin Peter 1:13:01**

So, Kansas City was indeed the place for him.

**Gwendolyn Hawks-Blue 1:13:03**

Well, this was in Florida, though, when I was growing up, and my folks would have white church members over. Now, looking back, we never got the reverse of that. We never got invited to their homes. But they would have them come over. We had barbecues and people would engage with each other on a social level. So, he was a very social being in that sense, and he had a great sense of humor. My, my kids talk about enjoying listening to grandpa talk about when he rode the rails. He hoboed for a little while in his younger life, and told story, tell the story once about jumping off this car, this rail car and being scarred and scratched and he was running away from home. And he said he went to this house and knocked on the door and this woman looked at him, and said, You get in here. Another black home. He was all, you know, scratched up and everything. Said she doctored on him and said, Now you go home. (Did he?) Yes, he did. He didn't want to run away after all. Yeah. But he dressed up for a party. They had a woman-less wedding in one congregation we went to and he had all the regalia on. He was, he was acting the part. Oh, Flip Wilson thing. But, but my dad, as I said had a very positive, you know, we've been, we've been talking about the serious and commitment. And that was all true and he was a well rounded human being. So, I wish I'd, wish I'd watched him, watched him make the barbecue better so I'd know how to do it myself.

**Bill Russell 1:15:04**

One of the first things I noticed about, about your father was his name. And the thing I noticed firsthand was Taft. Yes, I can check. He was born in the second year of the Taft administration and the, and the



black vote until at least Roosevelt and Ken( . . . ) the black vote was very Republican. And so (He was named after William Howard Taft.) Yeah, I would imagine that was consciously, the consciousness. But anyway, you know, lots of people, black and white, have a reason to relate to a leading political figure. And so there's a lot of Franklins, and there's a lot of John Kennedy ones, and so forth, but not too surprised that he's named after William Howard Taft.

**Gwendolyn Hawks-Blue** 1:15:53

Oh, a couple other things. He, I took him to Barnes and Noble when he was in his 90s. And he warned me not to take him again, because I think he walked away with about five books. He would have, my mom would ask, Well, how many books can you read at one time? He had this nice big chair, and he would have several books laying around him because he wanted to read. And I also remember him complaining when he, when he was in his 90s that he didn't know how to use a computer and he needed to know how to use a computer. So he had a very open mind to, to learning and trying new things throughout his life.

**Karin Peter** 1:16:41

Well, I want to thank you both, Gwendolyn Hawks Blue and Bill Russell, for joining us today to talk about the life of William Taft Blue. We've learned a lot about his contributions, not just during his life, but that have continued whether it's through bridge building, whether it's through perseverance in life and in faith, or whether it's a commitment and discipleship to lifelong learning, I think they are aspects of his character that we can celebrate together. So, for our listeners here at Project Zion, we encourage you to go to the [historicsitesfoundation.org](https://www.historicsitesfoundation.org) website where you can view the lecture that Bill and Gwen offer as part of the spring lecture series, as well as the other lectures. This has been Cuppa Joe, which is our restoration history thread at Project Zion. I'm the host, Karin Peter, and we thank you so much for listening.

**Josh Mangelson** 1:17:52

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