

Cuppa Joe | Historic Sites Winter Book Series | Second Class Saints: Black Mormons and the Struggle for Racial Equality | Matthew Harris

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Civil rights, racial equality, Community of Christ, Church of Jesus Christ, systemic racism, Jane Manning James, Hugh B. Brown, Bill Russell, racial justice.

SPEAKERS

Wendy Eaton, Matthew Harris

Wendy Eaton 00:28

Welcome to Cup of Joe, where we explore Restoration history. I'm your host, Wendy Eaton. Here at Cuppa Joe, we partner with the Historic Sites Foundation to interview the presenters from the Winter Book Club. Our guest today is Matthew Harris. Matt is a professor of history and Director of Legal Studies at Colorado State University. His scholarship explores the intersectionality of religion and law as well as civil rights and race relations, among other subjects. Matt's classes have been broadcast on C Span and his research has been covered by many media outlets, including NPR, the Salt Lake Tribune, and religious news services. He's written many books, including our subject for today, a book titled, *Second Class Saints: Black Mormons and the Struggle for Racial Equality*. Matt is also very involved in the John Whitmer Historical Association, particularly right now, with planning the 2025 Symposium, which is being held in Independence, Missouri this fall. He has been published in the John Whitmer Journal, most recently with an article in 2023 titled, "A Tale of Two Religions: RLDS and LDS Responses to the Civil Rights Movement." Welcome Matt.

Matthew Harris 01:55

Well, thank you, Wendy, it's a privilege to be here tonight.

Wendy Eaton 01:57

Your book *second class saints* took a long time to research for publication. You focused on the Restoration movement, specifically Community of Christ and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. Both churches have had long journeys with civil rights, full of missteps and accomplishments. With such a complex topic as civil rights, I imagine some of your difficulties you must have had in your research. Would you like to share some of those difficulties, or maybe roadblocks that you encountered?

Matthew Harris 02:38

Well, I don't know if so much difficulties, just patience, just when you, I'm a historian who likes to see everything, and I want to see the most important historical documents. And so for me, writing about the Community of Christ, or the Church of Jesus Christ, of Latter Day Saints, it would be diaries and letters of leaders and members, it would be the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve meeting minutes. I often liken source material to Thanksgiving and the meeting minutes and diaries and letters, that's like the turkey and everything else is the rolls and the stuffing, and those are important, but you need the turkey. And my experiences working with the Community of Christ archivist Rachel Killebrew, whom I'm certain that your audience knows. She's wonderful. She's so generous and gracious and helpful. And I remember a couple of years ago when I was doing my an article on civil rights and comparing RLDS to LDS traditions. So this would be focused on the 50s and 60s. And I remember reaching out to Rachel, and, of course, talking to my good friend, Bill Russell. And so I told Rachel what I was doing, and can you help? And oh, my goodness, you know, 30 minutes later, she fills up my inbox with hundreds of pages of RLDS First Presidency documents. Oh, my word. I felt like I had gone to Vegas and won the lottery. So anyway, in the in the LDS tradition, it's not that simple. You just can't call up somebody and have your inbox, you know, full of stuff you have to there's a process that one has to follow in Salt Lake when you're asking to see sensitive materials, and also working relationships with the adult children of deceased LDS leaders whose papers were in their possession and whose papers I needed to write my book. And so I had to spend a lot of time working those relationships and visiting with them, in some cases, taking them out to dinner, in some cases, going to their house for dinner. And I'm happy to report that I always passed every one of my interviews

Wendy Eaton 04:57

You mentioned in your lecture. How the family documents were pretty important, and how generous the families were in sharing those family histories. I understand if you can't share family names, but were there any stories you found that were pretty pivotal to your research among those family histories?

Matthew Harris 05:19

Oh, absolutely, and I'm happy to share names. This is the podcast where we name names. Now this is I'm very careful to guard confidences. So what I'm about to tell you is not confidential. So, I, in the LDS tradition, I I got access to the papers of the church President, a guy named Spencer W Kimball. He passed away in 1985 and some of your leaders, or your listeners know that the LDS church had a priesthood ban in place from roughly 1852 to 1978. so 126 years. And of course, to write this book, I needed to get access to President Kimball's papers, which meant that I had to form a relationship with his son, who wrote two biographies on his father's presidency, and was also the caretaker of his late father's papers. And so I spent years ago at his home in Provo Utah. I spent probably eight or nine hours just talking. At some point early on, I think I passed the interview, but, but since he was also not just the son and the confident of his late father, but he was also a biographer himself of his father's administration. And so we had a shared interest in his father and in the ban and all of that. And so there's just mutual respect and affection there. So we spent, you know, probably two meals. I mean, I was there all day. It was an eight or nine hour day. It was extraordinary. And so that's a big one. His name is Ed Kimball. He's now deceased, but I'm friends with his son, Chris Kimball is a friend of mine. In fact, I'm going to see Chris very soon. And so I got access to those papers that were housed at the church history library in Salt Lake. Ed Kimball had inherited them and then donated them to the church archives. So, he facilitated my access there, and I met with countless other general authorities and their

adult kids who gave me access to the papers. And what's interesting about this is a couple of times, this is how I operate as a historian. I really, really want things in real time. And so I remember interviewing a woman whose husband was the mission president in Brazil in 1978, and she was a, she was there with them. Of course, they were young people, usually a little younger than the norm in the LDS tradition. And this woman was in early 30s. I think husband was maybe early to mid 30s, so pretty young. Most mission presence tend to be 50s, 60s, at the tail end of their career, or maybe even retired. So anyway, she was there, and I interviewed her in Boise, Idaho, about five years ago. And so my friend introduced us, and he said, you might want to meet my mission president's wife. He had served in the Brazil mission in late 70s. He said, you might want to meet her. She's here at the conference, and my eyes got really big, and because Brazil is, uh, it's the road to the priesthood, and the LDS church went through Brazil. That's something we can talk about in a minute, if you if you want. But so I knew she was a pivotal player, and so I interviewed her. And now, of course, she's in her 70s and very articulate. Went back to graduate school after she raised her kids and got a PhD from UCLA in English, I believe English literature. So very accomplished woman, and I interviewed her, and she started to recall stories. And I said, you know, my friends with me, he's taking notes for me as I'm focused on her. And I said, you know, I love your memory and all of this, and I don't doubt anything you're saying in terms of the vividness of it all, but I want your diaries. Did you keep a diary? And when I asked that bullet question, by that point, we've built some trust in all of that. And I said, you know, I'm not interested in I don't need to see all your diaries. I don't need to know, you know your your spousal squabbles, or the time that you chastise your kid for growing his hair too long, and I don't care about a lot, what I want to know is, who are the apostles coming into the mission home in Brazil? What were they there for? How did the priesthood ban and temple ban affect your mission? How did you and your husband feel when it was lifted? I mean, I want that kind of detail, and so I all I need is just those, those parts of your diaries that deal with that and the she was very gracious. She said, so this is an Idaho at a conference, the Mormon history Conference, which is one of the biggest in the world for Restoration studies. It's a little bit bigger than the Whitmer one, anyway. So she said, Well, when I go back to I think she was living in California. I go back to California, I'll be happy to send those to you. And so she sent me pages of her diary, and they, it, I use those diaries in Second Class Saints my book, because they were so rich, and she was a good writer and a good diarist. And so So I frequently do that. I meet with people, and I'll say, Did you keep a diary? And if so, can I have it? And I always tell people, too, I might add that I don't share these things. These are just things that for my work, and oftentimes, too, not always, but oftentimes, I'll send what I write based on their loved ones diaries to them. I'm not I'm not asking for their input. I'm not saying critique it or tell me if I got something wrong. I'm not doing that at all because I'm following the diary pretty carefully, and I've never had anyone tell me otherwise. To be honest, I'm just doing it as a courtesy. You know, this is what, I just want you to know, what what I did with your loved ones papers. And so far, I've done that, oh, I don't know, six or seven or eight times, and and, you know, everyone appreciates that they just write back, oh, thank you. That's so meaningful. And of course, I'm not writing things, of course, that's critical of their loved one. I'm just merely using their their documents to elucidate a larger story. And so people in the Latter Day Saint tradition have just really been wonderful that way, and it's just it's so meaningful. And I've had a lot of people ask me, you know, can I see this or see that? And my response is always, if it's been entrusted to be in confidence, I have to politely say, No, you know, you have to go take them out to dinner, just like I did. And but if it's, if it's something that I found in an archive, it's open collection. And somebody

asked me, you know, usually, if it's not too much trouble, if I don't have to scan some massive, some massive document, I'm always happy to share just because that's what we do in the community.

Wendy Eaton 11:49

That's really great to hear how you've formed such good relationships, and you've, you've found good ways to connect with people and have kept in contact with them it sounds like. So, one thing during your lecture, you talked about Jane Manning James, who is an incredible woman from Restoration history, yet she's not very well known within Community of Christ. A fair number of Community of Christ folk will be aware of her, but she's not near as well known within my church as it is and the LDS church. Could you just give us a brief overview of her remarkable life and how she connected with the development of civil relationships, or civil rights relationships?

Matthew Harris 12:40

Sure. So before I get into a couple of biographical details about her, I will say to your listeners that a scholar in New York wrote a wonderful biography, a very short biography, on her called your sister in the Gospel. It's kind of the life and times of Jane Manning James and then the scholars trained in religious studies, so she's able to articulate James's life through that academic lens. And also, I want to say that scholars in general, or people in general, just didn't know much about Jane Manning James until the 1970s there was an archivist in Utah whose name escapes me at the moment, but he had gained access to some documents and letters that Jane Manning James had written the LDS First Presidency in the late 19th and early 20th century. And those letters that he somehow got access to that he published was really the first time where people learned about the intimacy of this woman and who she was. And then, subsequent to those letters being published in 1975 there was a African American scholar at the University of Utah named Ron Coleman, who's not LDS, but of course, living among Mormons in Utah developed an interest. And so he published a couple of pieces on Jane Manning James finding it interesting that a black woman would be a part of this church that was, frankly, historically, a white church. So that was a compelling story that he wrote about. And then fast forward, of course, to 2019 where Quincy Newell published her her book, and Jane Manning James was a congregational member of a congregational church in New Canaan, Connecticut, and that's where she met missionaries for the LDS church, or the Church of Jesus Christ, I guess, to be more specific, and she became baptized. Her mother and a few of her siblings also became baptized. And she was just drawn to the story, the Restoration story, almost immediately, the the saints speaking in tongues and, miraculous healings. And all of this really excited her. The fact that Joseph Smith did not segregate churches in the 19th century, when most places did that was compelling to her. And so she and her siblings, they left New Canaan Connecticut in the early 1840s and they went to the hub of church activity, which was, of course, Nauvoo. And in Nauvoo, Jane Manning, James and her family made a life there, and Jane had the Smiths, Joseph and Emma hired her to be their domestic servant, if you will. And she was a housekeeper. She was a cook. She cleaned their laundry. And she also was privy to see the Urim and Thummim, the special instrument that Smith used to translate the Book of Mormon. She held it in her hands. The point is, is that she was, you know, in this intimate relationship. I don't mean physical, but she was in this intimate space the Smith home, where she was able to forge a close relationship with the Prophet his family. And then, of course, when Smith was murdered in 1844, she, she went west with with the Saints, and she had a very, very tumultuous relationship with Brigham Young. It was kind of love/hate, as I like to think of it, you know, and he didn't have the

affection for for black members that Joseph Smith did. In fact, it's Brigham Young who established that the priesthood and temple ban, and over the course of 19th century, Wendy, in the Latter Day Saint tradition, Jane Manning James petitions successive church leaders, so Brigham Young dies in 1877 and she petitions his successor, John Taylor and his successor, Wilford Woodruff and his successor, Joseph F Smith, petitions them to have her priesthood or her temple blessings, and she also petitions them to get sealed in the temple. She was married and wanted to be sealed to her spouse, as Mormons believe, and they just said, No, you bear the curse of Cain, and because you bear this historic biblical curse, you're prevented from enjoying all the full rights and rituals of the church, and so it really crushed her, and when she died in 1908, Joseph F Smith, so this is Hyrum Smith's son, and, of course, the cousin to many RLDS high ranking leaders. It's a story for the time, right? The relationship between the Smiths and Utah and the Smiths in Independence. Anyway, Joseph F Smith spoke at her funeral, and he, he called her Aunt Jane. That was, today that would be offensive in our language today, but in those days, that was a term of endearment, and he said that she was a faithful, righteous woman, and that she would enjoy all the privileges of exaltation because of her faithfulness. And he said something controversial at her funeral. He said her dark skin will essentially revert to white, the sign of purity, and she would lose her dark skin, the sign of a curse, this biblical curse, and she'd become white again as she once was. And today, of course, we would just, would, you know, wince at that kind of language. We don't like to think that black and brown people would lose their skin. We don't like to think that it's cursed. It's black and brown and white skin, it's all beautiful. But that's how they looked at those racial tropes in those days. And so that's, that's her in a nutshell. I'll say one last thing about her. So, because she was, she was black, she was, she did petition the church leaders on one matter by which she was successful. Most everything she asked to do, to marry in the temple with her to her husband to do all kinds of things. They They said no, but they gave her one concession, and that was that she could do what are called proxy ordinances for the dead or your deceased ancestors, you can get baptized for your deceased ancestors, which I know the RLDS church didn't do, but the LDS does it, and they allowed her to go to the temple with some other African American Latter Day Saints to do that. And I'll just end the story here, that in the Latter Day Saint tradition in 1979, so long after her death, she died in 1908, that Latter Day Saints had done her temple work for her by proxy, so she was able to be sealed to her spouse by proxy and to enjoy all the rituals of the temple that she was denied during her lifetime. Remarkable.

Wendy Eaton 19:41

Yeah, that brings a sense of justice, even if it did take a very long time, and she didn't get to experience that herself. But when you look at the theological, big, big picture that brings some justice to her story, which otherwise would be pretty heart rendering,

Matthew Harris 20:01

Yeah, it's it really is tragic when I mentioned those letters that were first published in 1975, and I published part of them in a book that I did on black Mormons in 2015. I did a book also I've done two books on blacks and Mormons. And the book that just got published is called Second Class Saints: Black Mormons and the Struggle for Racial Equality. And then I did one in 2015 called, The Mormon Church and Blacks: A Documentary History. And we, my co-author, and I went into great detail about those, some of those letters that were published, and give context to them, and just remarkable. You could just really hear the as she's writing these letters to the church leaders asking to be treated like

everybody else. You could just hear the pain in her voice and and she she longed to be sealed into a temple. Obviously she couldn't, because she was black and bore this biblical curse. But her concession was that your listeners will think find this interesting. She said, If I can't be sealed to somebody in marriage, at least, let me be sealed to Joseph Smith, the Prophet, as one of his children. And anyway, that was interesting, because Mormons believe, Latter Day Saints in Utah believe, that the entire human family needs to be connected through these temple rituals, and that was her feeling that but being denied that connection, and that's why she as a consolation if she couldn't be connected to her husband through the temple ritual, she asked to be sealed to the Prophet and his wife and there was no evidence that that ever occurred.

Wendy Eaton 21:42

That is one of the stories I've been aware of with her life. So you you've alluded a little bit to this in our conversation, but you also spoke in the lecture some about systemic racism, and that's a bit of a triggering word in our current events. A lot of people shut down as soon as they hear those two words, but you do such a great job concisely putting things into context. I wondered if you could give us a good, quick definition of systemic racism and why we really need to be aware of it.

Matthew Harris 22:19

Yeah, I'm glad you asked that, because there's so much misinformation people listen to, you know, TikTok or a Vine or something. They think they're informed because they listen to something for 30 seconds. And, you know, nothing can substitute for reading and thinking and asking questions. And so, I teach civil rights at my university, and the way that I describe systemic racism to my students would be to think of a barrel of apples, and oftentimes, when we see one bad apple in the barrel, we could say, if we liken the one apple to racism, we could say, you know, the institution is not racist. It's just that one person that's racist, and that one bad apple, but look at the rest of the apples. Well, that's true. That's what we call individual racism, and it's real, right? We know people who think that people of color are inferior because of their background or race or ethnicity. That's a real thing. Systemic racism doesn't have, you look at the individual apples. It has you look at the barrel that produces the apples, and why are other apples in this barrel bad or racist, right? And what that means for the Community of Christ slash, RLDS and also the Latter Day Saint tradition in Utah. It means that racism is baked into the theology. And I'll give you a couple of examples from both traditions, the Community of Christ, RLDS, I should say RLDS, to keep it historically accurate, in the late 19th century, when the revelation was given to Joseph Smith, III to ordain black people, there was a little proviso, don't do that too fast. Don't move too fast. I mean, you know that really, that sort of language does affect people, right? And also our LDS leaders throughout the 20th century, and I saw this in abundance from the hundreds of documents, pages of documents that Rachel Killebrew so generously sent me. Is that they interpreted the Bible just like the Mormons in Utah did, and just like Protestants and Catholics did, which is that black people bore a biblical curse. They were frequently talking about this in these RLDS First Presidency letters that I read. And I think it's really, I'm a historian, so I contextualize things. And you know, they are the US people. They're not thinking of us on their own, nor are they. LDS in Utah, this is something that they inherit from Protestant Christianity, of which, of course, many of the people in the Restoration community are from Protestant backgrounds. Sidney Rigdon, a whole bunch of them. So they bring that sort of cultural or theory. Theological baggage into their new traditions. And obviously, when the leaders of the church, both in Utah and Independence, talk about the Bible that way, it

obviously works its way into the structures of the church or the barrel. So that's the systemic racism, and it's looking at structures in the church and the theology that holds that black people are inferior to other races and ethnicities. And you really see this, um, throughout the 20th century in both traditions. And you know not to say that there aren't people in both traditions, fine men and women, who don't interpret the Bible that way. But if you look at the leaders both RLDS and LDS, I mean, maybe it's the bloodline, the Smith bloodline, I don't know. I mean, because some of these are LDS leaders are Smiths, and some of the most vociferous and anti-black teachers in the LDS tradition are Smiths. Joseph Fielding Smith would be the most prominent one in the LDS tradition. So anyway, that's what we mean by systemic racism, is creating this anti Black Theology that is in the very sinew of the church, and you'll see this in both traditions well into the 20th century.

Wendy Eaton 26:19

Thank you. That's that's a good way to put that, and I hope people didn't tune out that portion. Systemic racism is something that's very real, and we need to be very aware of it.

Matthew Harris 26:30

I hope, let me say a word about that. I mean, I teach this stuff, and I realize it's easy to, we don't call names, and that's, you know, this is not what we do. It's easy to tear the barn down. And I tell my students, and I say, You know what? Don't, don't sit here and tell me the founding fathers are racist, or this person's race, or, well, of course, they're racist. It's the 18th century they own slaves. That's not very helpful. What's more helpful is, how do people change, and do their views change? How do they treat their slaves? And I find that more interesting too, with my, in my studies, the RLDS and LDS is what influenced them. I mean, why did why was Wallace B Smith? Why did he hold the views that he did? Or Joseph Fielding Smith, his cousin, and what influenced them? Did they change, and what led to that change? How did those changes affect the church? Those, those, to me, are more interesting sets of questions. And I hope that your listeners who somehow tune out when they hear systemic racism. I hope that they understand it's a real thing. And I mean, I deal with black Latter Day Saints all the time. In fact, this weekend, I'm going to the University of Utah. I'll be speaking in front of, I don't know two or 300 people, many of whom will be black Latter Day Saints. And you know, racism is a real thing, and it's not just always theological too, right, but it's a real thing. And I hope that that people, if they're tuned off by systemic racism, that they just take the time to listen to stories of people in their own faith community, and just ask them their experiences, and listen without judgment, and maybe have an open mind and maybe reassess, you know, your own views.

Wendy Eaton 28:12

So can you give us an update on where you see the two churches today in their journey with civil rights? And I'll be generous, I'll extend that 1960s and on, as in today.

Matthew Harris 28:26

Well, that's a great question. So I did. I've been thinking about race for a very long time, and mostly in the LDS tradition, but I've, like I said, I've done some work with the RLDS, and when I went in to do my comparative article on RLDS and LDS that was published in 2023 I had this hypothesis like any scholar does, you have an educated guess about what you think you'll find. And what I thought I would find was that the RLDS was just light years ahead of LDS in terms of being racially progressive, and the key

word is light years ahead. And what I found was that wasn't true at all, that the First Presidency in the 1950s and 60s, they held racial views. If you didn't know any better, if you looked at the bottom of the letterhead that they would write and just you can take out Independence Missouri and put Salt Lake City in there, they were indistinguishable. They held the same views about biblical curses and all of this stuff, and with civil rights, both, both traditions were really, really leery of civil rights. And the reason why they were leery, in part, was their own racial views that were not progressive at the time, but also that they're, they're running large churches. And there's always a little adage that says that if you offend your flock, you better reconsider. And so, the RLDS First Presidency, they started to publish some things by a very young editor, one of my good buddies, Bill Russell, and Bill made him uncomfortable. Yeah, he wrote a little piece in August of 1963 that was published in the Saints Herald. And he said that he called, basically Martin Luther King a saint. And oh, my goodness, I was just shocked at the flood of letters, mostly from Southern RLDS, that is people in the South. They wrote the First Presidency letters. And they said, you know, who is that Russell guy, that scoundrel. And, you know, I had some fun with my friend, Bill, you know, bringing him back all these years. And I would, you know, I remember calling him, and I'd say, Bill, I just got all this stuff from Rachel, and this one member is calling you the Antichrist. Do you remember her name? And then, of course, Bill, thanks for, oh, yes, I remember her. Well, she doesn't have very nice things to say about you. Anyway, but Bill was progressive with race. He was a member of the NAACP, a black civil rights group, racial justice. We didn't call it those things in those days, what we call today. But Bill was a racial justice warrior, and to the RLDS First Presidency and to their credit, they allowed him to publish stuff, but then they told, they told him to tone it down. When the letters came pouring in, they said, You Can you just back off a tiny bit Bill, you know, put a little bit of a filter in there. You got to take some of the heat off of us and the LDS church. So let me just recap the RLDS, they're fearful of being too progressive with with civil rights, because the members aren't there, at least the ones in the south. And William Blue, one of the great leaders in the RLDS tradition, his daughter, you mentioned that I'm in charge of the JWH, the John Whitmer program this year, which is true, and gratefully, his daughter is going to be on the program, and she's going to talk about her experiences as a black woman, but her father experienced all kinds of racism, and I wanted to capture his voice in my article. But anyway, so the RLDS First Presidency, they were very careful about offending their members in the South, and the LDS tradition was the same way. The LDS tradition, they had a rule or a doctrine that essentially said that black and white people can't marry. Interracial marriage is of the devil, don't do it. And the reason is, one of the reasons is because of the ban that if a black person and a white person marry, the bloodlines become tainted. And the RLDS tradition never had that. They didn't have those, you know, strictures against interracial marriage, like their LDS cousins did. So that wasn't what was driving their anti-civil rights in the 60s. It was just simply complaints from the church body. Whereas the LDS had complaints too, but theirs was they just didn't publish anything that was pro-civil rights. They wouldn't tolerate it because of the the interracial marriage fears. And I've often said to Bill, my friend Bill Russell that I said, Bill, you are the Hugh Brown of the RLDS tradition. And he laughs because he knows who Hugh Brown is. Hugh Brown was a member of the LDS First Presidency, and he was very liberal. He called himself essentially a socialist. He's from Canada, and most of the LDS leadership in the 50s and 60s were from Utah, Arizona, Idaho, and they were very conservative Republicans, both politically and theologically. And so they they invite this Canadian socialist into the First Presidency in 1961 and I always, I told Bill this, and I've told others this, you know, what could go wrong? A socialist from Canada who sees the world so differently than his fellow brethren, from Utah, Arizona, Idaho. So anyway, Hugh Brown was a one man wrecking cruise

I write about in my book, to get the church to see the wisdom and lifting the ban and to support civil rights. And that's something that Bill Russell was trying to do. Bill didn't have the ecclesiastical title that Hugh Brown had, but certainly Bill and Hugh Brown were on the same wavelength, and I suspect that's one of the reasons why Bill Russell knew Hugh Brown, or at least knew of him, is because Brown was trying to do the same thing in Utah that Bill Russell was trying to do in Independence.

Wendy Eaton 34:19

Glad you've brought up Bill Russell multiple times. I have been very fortunate to know Bill, and he's just one of my favorite people. I love just getting to listen to him tell stories. And he could go for hours just telling you the most random story. He's a great guy.

Speaker 1 34:37

He is a wonderful guy. I always tell Bill. I said Bill, you know, you walk on water, but you drag your left foot a little bit. And he's, he's just a great human being. I've so enjoyed him.

Wendy Eaton 34:49

He really is. So, so, you've touched on a lot of things that I think are so important. And I just want to reiterate that I can. Sympathize with the church leaders of both churches on how difficult this progress through, especially the 1960s time period with everything that was going on. They're dealing with large groups of people who are all over the place in their views on civil rights and race racial issues. And it makes sense to me that you've got some people that are saying, No, you're moving too fast, and others who are saying you're not moving fast enough. That's, that's something that you hear over and over again through history with our leaders, not just church, but other leaders, and so I just kind of want to touch on this again. Do, do you think the leaders of the two churches during the 1960s Do you think that they were moving at good paces for their respective churches?

Matthew Harris 35:57

You know, that's a good question. RLDS, yes. LDS, no. The I'll give you an example, and I talked about this in my article. A pivotal point is April of 1968 when Dr King dies, and the RLDS First Presidency, they had been telling Bill and some other folks who are writing these pro civil rights pieces. You know, I already mentioned a minute ago that, you know, cool it and or at least tone them down. Well, by 1968 with Dr King his death, there were literally hundreds of protests throughout the country in that fateful year, or that fateful month and year. And at the World Conference that year, the First Presidency has a change of heart, and they start to say publicly positive things about Dr King. And they, I mean, they were glowing, irrefusive. It wasn't just like, oh, we honor his death. And, you know, two sentences later, they move on. I mean, they stopped and paused about what he was doing and what his life meant and and I think they recognize the moment that the church leader, the church body, needed to hear this and it was okay to honor him and to recognize what he had done, not just for black people, but for white people too. Which ones people often forget. I teach my students, not just black people he's protesting for. He's also protesting white people, particularly dealing with economic issues, because early on in his life, Doctor King was focused on desegregation. He was focused on voting rights. But toward the end of his life, he was focused on poverty, and that was for black, brown and white people. And we typically don't think about that kind of, that side of Dr King. And so the RLDS First Presidency recognized all of that at the World Conference. And I wanted to capture that my article. And I did, I quote from there this

beautiful article or tribute that they wrote to him. And the LDS church is, disappointingly, one of their apostles was a member of the John Birch Society, and guy named Ezra Taft Benson, I've written two books on him, so I know him well. And he just for your listeners, he was also in the Eisenhower administration. So, he had two hats he wore. He was a cabinet official for President Eisenhower for two terms, and he also was an apostle, and so he took a leave of absence from his apostolic duties when he was in Washington. Anyway. So, Benson was a member, became a member of the or affiliated with the John burst society. This, this radical anti communist fringe group. And they, they just really supported a lot of conspiracy theories like, Dr King's a communist, and all of this nonsense, it's not true, and the United Nations is communist, and again, not true. So all of these, these kind of fringy ideas. And when King died in April of 68, Apostle Benson circulated this very scary this memo to all of his colleagues, and he said, don't honor this guy's life. He's a communist, he's an adulterer, he's this. He's that. I mean, just really, just slandering the man. And Hugh Brown, who was the bet noir to Benson, they hated each other. I don't use that word lightly. They did not like each other, and brown took it upon himself to honor Dr King, his life in ministry. And I think that Brown probably all he felt he could do knowing that the church still thought that King was controversial, all he could probably squeeze out was just a few sentences, whereas the RLDS, you know, gave a couple of three paragraphs. And, but that was a kind of a watershed moment for the Mormons as well, because after 1968 that's when the leadership they start to put the clamp on Apostle Benson, and they just basically say, quit denigrating Dr King and the civil rights movement and and the reason why you need to stop denigrating all of this is because we're trying to spread the gospel globally, including African nations. And as long as you're saying these horrible things about civil rights, you're going to make it very difficult for us to proselytize in predominant black regions of the world. And so what you see is, after 1968-69 you don't see Benson talking about black people in the way that he once did. So I think Dr King's death shaped and affected both traditions in different ways.

Wendy Eaton 40:27

Both traditions kept moving at different paces, but they kept moving. And I think that's that's crucial, that they did keep moving, and that ties right back into that systemic racism that we keep moving we keep building on the history that has been before us. So now that your book has been published, what's next on your research docket or are you too caught up with John Whitmer, right now.

Matthew Harris 41:02

No, I don't sleep. You can sleep when you're dead. I'm a workaholic. I am. I am halfway through a biography on Hugh B Brown.

Wendy Eaton 41:15

Oh, how exciting.

Matthew Harris 41:16

So, I write about him in my second class saints. And I thought I was asked to write this biography. And I thought, Oh, I admire this guy so much. I I just can't not do it. So I got access to all of his papers, his family, they were so gracious to give me all of these incredible documents. And so anyway, I've been really consumed with his life and thinking about who he was and what he stood for in matters of racial justice. He was just really an incredible guy, gifted speaker, Franklin Roosevelt, who heard Hubie

brown speak once, he said he's the second greatest speaker that I've ever heard, and the first was Winston Churchill, so and you can listen to his sermons today, there's some of them are on YouTube, and he really has a gift to speak. And so I wanted to capture that in my book, is this wonderful gift.

Wendy Eaton 42:09

Keep our eyes out for that one. So any closing thoughts on the journey of civil rights within the two churches or the restoration movement as a whole?

Matthew Harris 42:21

Yeah, I would say yes, yes, the Community of Christ and the Church of Jesus, Christ, of Latter Day Saints, they're both thinking about racial issues today And but they're following on different but parallel tracks. And what I mean by that is the Community of Christ. They're looking at their hymns, and they're focusing on racial justice songs, LGBTQ, songs that express support. They're also looking at contextualizing the section of the Doctrine and Covenants where Joseph, or Joseph Smith, III received that revelation, and so they're really trying to focus on racial justice. And that's a word that I know, you know this Wendy, that your tradition uses a lot -- racial justice and social justice. And let me just pause real quick, those of you listening, President Stassi Cramm will be our main speaker, one of our main speakers, at the Whitmer Conference at the Truman presidential library in September of 2025 and I've had extensive email correspondences with Stassi over the last couple of months, and I'm just oh, I'm thrilled. I'm just so delighted. She's such a lovely person. And so anyway, she'll be our main speaker, and she's going to talk about social and racial justice issues. And I'm really, I'm just just thrilled for that. The LDS tradition is also focused on race, and they're not, I mean, you'll never see a racial justice song in they're hymn hymnal. I mean, they're very conservative that way, but they're starting to put things on their web page about what it means to think about racism and what it means to really believe that all people are children of the same Heavenly Father. And of course, the theological implication would be, if that's true, then why do we treat people differently? And I sometimes think that, you know, that's always helpful, but reminding people that we're children of the same Heavenly Father is is good theology, but it's not going to change things. I mean, you really need racial sensitivity, because most people, and this isn't just true of the LDS tradition, if it's true of any tradition that most people who are racist don't think they're racist, I mean, that is racism usually is born out of ignorance and habit and hard to break old habits. But when people say things, oftentimes they're not even aware of what they said that could be considered racially offensive, at least to a person of color. So, I've often said to the LDS tradition that that lessons and manuals and just need training sessions about how to be an anti-racist and to not think that you in the ways that you typically thought. Let me give you one example -- in the LDS tradition, as I mentioned, that black people were deemed to be the inheritors of this biblical curse of Cain. And so, when they lifted the ban in 1978 there were black people who wrote into the First Presidency, and this would have been in the 1990s and I write about one of these people in my book. His name is David Jackson, and he wrote church President Gordon Hinckley, and he said, he said, does the church still teach that I bear this curse? And President Hinckley wrote back, and he said, Brother Jackson, you can go to the temple now. Now this is the 1990s and the ban was lifted 1978 and Jackson wrote back, and he said, I know I can go to the temple. You didn't answer my question. And I want to know, am I cursed? And then the response is, well, you know, hey, don't worry about it. God lifted the curse in 1978 and you know, President Hinckley, of course, didn't mean to be offensive. Think I know enough about him to say that stuff I've read and studied written about him, but that's still

offensive to think that your your black skin, was cursed, and that somehow God had to lift that curse. And that's the kind of sensitivity training that people need to hear. And I'm certain if President Hinckley knew that. And I, you know, I can say, I can say this authoritatively, that I know Hinckley did not think that way. He just didn't think that through, because he's done so many other things in his ministry where that was not the case, and he really showed empathy and understanding when it came to racial issues. But nonetheless, I think people are better off when they go through this sensitivity training. And also, too, the LDS church has done a wonderful job, as has the Community of Christ as putting black people in magazines and in their literature. And so black people, if you want to attract black people or brown people, or any group of people, they've got to see themselves reflected in the literature and the Community of Christ did this, you know, earlier than the Latter Day Saints did. But in the last 10 or 15 years, the Latter Day Saints had put Jane Manning James from the Atlanta, Georgia temple. There's a big picture of her. My mother worships in that temple. So I know this for a fact because she's told me this, and they put pictures of of a black man or gaining his son to the priesthood. And I mean, that's, that's huge. And the next step, of course, would be ordaining a black apostle. And that's, that'll, that'll come. But the important thing is, is that black people feel represented in the church, and that people, white people in particular, need to understand, you know, it's, it's, it's just not always a safe space if you just see somebody of a different race everywhere, you want to see your own reflection, and I think the LDS church has done a good job with that. And I'll say this finally, that the LDS church has formed a partnership with the NAACP, which is just, I mean, for your listeners who may not know this, that is extraordinary, because it was the same Apostle Benson I've been referring to who was calling the NAACP a communist front group back in the 60s. But here we have now in the 21st Century, Benson died in 1994 but here we have now in the 21st Century, we have LDS church President Russell Nelson and his associates forming partnerships and donating money to racial justice causes. And I mean, you know that just cannot be understated how significant and important that is as a as a motive to really show where your heart is with racial justice. And I applaud the LDS church for that, and I applaud the RLDS, or the Community of Christ Church for the things they're doing today with racial justice issues, including discussing how to contextualize better that section of the Doctrine and Covenants where Joseph Smith III received a revelation to grant black people the priesthood.

Wendy Eaton 49:13

Thank you so much, Matt for joining us. For our listeners, I encourage you to read his book. Again, that title is, Second Class Saints: Black Mormons and the Struggle for Racial Equality. You can also view the lecture in our archives at www.historicsitesfoundation.org. This has been Cuppa Joe, part of Project Zion Podcast. I'm Wendy Eaton, thanks for listening.