

SUNSTONE

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BROTHERS AND SISTERS

SUNSTONE'S RECENT REFLECTIONS
On the twenty-fifth anniversary of the 1978 priesthood revelation (Mar. and May 2003 issues) have prompted me to write about an experience I had just a few weeks ago. It fits in my heart as one of those times when I am especially grateful and really, really thank God for the blessing of my Mormon brothers and sisters.

In 1997, I moved to the Atlanta Ward of the Atlanta Stake and immediately found it a refreshing, close-knit, affectionate ward. It is an inner-city community with wide boundaries bringing together people of all incomes and educational levels, immigrants, converts and "lifers," all ages, traveling Mormons who are in downtown Atlanta on business, and a solid core of committed, believing members. An average sacrament meeting draws a hundred to a hundred fifty people; nearly half are black, nearly half are white, with a smattering of "other."

The Atlanta Ward began in 1989 as the Adams Park Branch, with the late Casby Harrison as president. In 1996, the Atlanta Ward was created in the new Atlanta Stake, combining the Adams Park, Flat Shoals, and Perkerson Park branches, along with part of the old Druid Hills Ward.

For the past several years, whenever I met Peggy Fletcher Stack, religion editor of the *Salt Lake Tribune*, I urged her to visit this corner of the Mormon universe. In May, she and photographer Rick Egan finally did come to work on a piece for the twenty-fifth anniversary of President Spencer W. Kimball's revelation extending the priesthood to all worthy male members. The finished story, "Faith, Color and the LDS Priesthood," ran on the front page of the Sunday, 8 June 2003 *Tribune*. For two days, I had the opportunity of following Peggy and Rick around and facilitating interviews with people I had arranged for them to meet. It was one of those transforming spiritual experiences that will always be with me.

On a Saturday, they met with the bishop of the Twin Oaks Ward, William Tucker; one of his counselors and his wife, Horatio and Yaa McFarland; Renee Olson of the Glenridge Ward; and my good Atlanta Ward friend, M.J. Butler, Primary president of the Atlanta Stake.

Each had a story to tell. All were articulate, thoughtful, and surprisingly open. They all fostered high hopes for their lives and the

lives of their children. Each wanted to be a better human being. And each saw the gospel as the key ingredient in being able to accomplish their spiritual goals. Some of these interviews lasted nearly three hours. As I listened to these fine people speak, all five grew ten feet tall in my eyes. It was a day-long testimony meeting—the best I'd ever been to. Had there ever been any doubt, it became clear to me that our differences were minor compared to the faith and common values we shared. These were my brothers and sisters in every way. After every interview, I came away thinking, "What impressive testimonies, what substantial people; they are all much more worthy human beings than I . . ."

Each dealt with the former "priesthood policy" differently. Its legacy remained an issue for most, but a decidedly secondary one. Each of these five people were long-term converts and totally committed to the Church and gospel.

On Sunday, we attended the Atlanta Ward. After sacrament meeting, Peggy set up in an unused office to interview more black Latter-day Saints, beginning with our former bishop and now first counselor in the stake presidency, Tony Parker. She interviewed another dozen people, but I'm sure it was hard to maintain the intensity we had all felt during the Saturday conversations. I did not sit in on any of these Sunday interviews. Rick wandered through the building, photographing adults and children in their meetings or just socializing.

At day's end, as Peggy and Rick packed up for their trip home, she began apologizing, saying there was no way her story could begin to reflect all the stories, sincerity, and intimacy we had experienced from these brothers and sisters.

Thank God for Spencer W. Kimball. . .

KEN DRIGGS
Atlanta, Georgia

A HUMAN DIMENSION

I WAS MOST moved by the articles about the missionaries who come home before the end of their two years (SUNSTONE, May 2003). Two years away from home at that period of life is quite an undertaking. There is a human dimension to religious life that does not always rise to the surface. There it did.

JACOB NEUSNER
Bard College
Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

SOUL BANQUET

I AM VERY grateful for the May issue of SUNSTONE. The letters to the editor were very enlightening. Mike Oborn's comments about the article on Peggy Fletcher's years at Sunstone especially struck a chord. People whose faith is in crisis need someone who understands. A sympathetic ear was hard to find before Sunstone. How I would have loved one, too!

Thank you for the roundtable discussion, "Speak the Truth, and Shame the Devil." It is extremely important to hear from black Latter-day Saints. Living reality is what counts!

"If You Have Desires to Serve God," by Richard Ferre, is the most compassionate and inspiring message for youth willing to serve in the Lord's work that has been my privilege to read during my eighty-eight years on this earth! This issue of SUNSTONE has truly been a wonderful banquet for my soul.

RHODA THURSTON
St. George, Utah

SENSITIVE COVERAGE

I APPRECIATE THE four essays in SUNSTONE's May 2003 issue on problems facing early-return missionaries and congratulate you for addressing this sensitive subject. The articles are all informative and sensitive to the needs of individuals who often are stigmatized because they do not complete missions. I am especially impressed by the expressions of the two therapists, Louis Moench and Richard Ferre. Their compassion and wisdom are a model for those called to minister to the needs of young people who often face enormous physical, emotional, and spiritual challenges in the mission field.

While the new standards for missionaries should diminish the problems these articles discuss, there will always be those who for physical or emotional reasons come home early. This presents challenges for the missionaries themselves, their companions, mission presidents, families, and congregations. Even the most careful screening will not uncover all the vulnerabilities that surface when missionaries encounter very difficult conditions and situations in the field.

I am surprised none of your authors spoke of one serious reason some missionaries return early—same-sex attraction. Homosexual missionaries face a much higher threshold of accommodation to missionary experience if only because most live with a secret they feel they cannot disclose to anyone. They must be constantly vigilant lest

anyone discover they are homosexual, and they often are tortured by being attracted to their companions. One missionary wrote me not long ago: "As part of my assignment as district leader, I visited several missionaries this week. One is someone I have had a crush on for several months. When it came time for us to sleep, I assumed that I would just sleep on the ground, but this missionary invited me to sleep in his bed. We talked until midnight. Then he fell asleep, but I just lay there. I couldn't sleep with him just inches away from me. Around 3:00 a.m., he turned over and put his arm around me. It was such a difficult night because I lay there looking at this gorgeous boy only four inches away from me." This missionary had thoughts to return home early and also some self-destructive impulses, but he completed an honorable mission and is now doing well. Sadly, others are not as fortunate.

ROBERT A. REES
Brookdale, California

BEHIND THE SCENES

THE RECENT UPDATE article on unconditional love (SUNSTONE, Mar. 2003) reminds me of a story Elder Hartman Rector Jr. told in 1997 at a fireside in St. Louis. Elder Rector said he had shown to Elder Bruce R. McConkie a manuscript for a book he was writing in which he'd noted that "God loves all his children equally." When Elder McConkie returned the manuscript, he had struck out Elder Rector's sentence and added instead, "God loves his children who keep his commandments more than those who don't." Elder Rector had responded by drawing a line through Elder McConkie's sentence

and appending six or eight scriptures defending his view that God loves everyone equally. Elder McConkie returned that version with a list of about fifty passages he felt supported his interpretation.

Soon after, while working on a project with President Gordon B. Hinckley, then in the First Presidency, Elder Rector was surprised by President Hinckley's asking him, "Is there anything I can do for you?" Elder Rector replied, "Now that you ask, yes! First of all, 'Do you believe God loves all his children equally and not those who keep his commandments more?'" He reported that President Hinckley immediately answered, "Yes." Elder Rector then asked him if he would tell that to Elder McConkie. President Hinckley smiled and said, "No, you go ahead and tell him," as if he did not want to get into a debate on doctrinal issues with Elder McConkie.

In his fireside message, Elder Rector continued, "Now that Brother McConkie has passed on, I am sure he knows that God loves all his children equally and not just those who keep his commandments." He then added, "I told this story once, and right afterward, a big burst of thunder crashed noisily outside the church building. My wife turned to me and said that the thunder was probably Elder McConkie agreeing with me from the other side."

Elder Rector also mentioned that he had been given one more opportunity to speak in general conference before being granted emeritus status. He spoke after Elder McConkie had died. And in his address, he talked about how God loves everyone equally—"and no one took it out!"

NEIL ANDERSEN
Centerville, Utah



"But enough of my unique Mormon theology. Tell me about yours."