

Indigenous Mormons struggle to balance pride in the faith with LDS history

by [Diana Kruzman](#) in the [February 9, 2022](#) issue



A man walks past the Salt Lake Temple at Temple Square in Salt Lake City on September 14, 2016. (AP Photo/Rick Bowmer)

When Sarah Newcomb was in third grade, she and her classmates got their choice of roles in the Thanksgiving play: a Pilgrim with a buckled hat or a Native American wearing a feathered headband.

Growing up in Virginia as an ethnic Tsimshian, a Native Alaskan people, Newcomb was the only Indigenous person in her class, and she was proud of it. She went straight for the headband but was surprised to see every other child pick the Pilgrim hat.

When she got home, she asked why there weren't more brown girls like her with long, dark hair.

Her parents gave her a religious lesson about how their ancestors had turned away from God, which resulted in a lot of trauma. “We were lucky, because a lot of us survived, but many didn’t.”

Newcomb was raised in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which has traditionally taught that Indigenous Americans are descended from a group called the Lamanites, who were cursed by God after rebelling against their more righteous neighbors, the Nephites.

In the wake of a national reckoning over race and justice, more Indigenous members of the faith and ex-members, like Newcomb, are taking issue with this theology and historical injustices the church has carried out against Native Americans.

Other LDS members are listening. Newcomb will share her perspective in August at Indigenous Perspectives on the Meanings of Lamanite, a workshop hosted by the University of Utah.

One of the workshop’s organizers, Farina King, a professor of history at Northeastern State University in Oklahoma and a citizen of the Navajo Nation, says it is intended to raise up Indigenous voices in a historically White-dominated church and to highlight the diversity of perspectives even among Indigenous members of the faith.

The LDS Church has said that the primary purpose of the Book of Mormon is more spiritual than historical. However, many LDS Church members believe their scriptures to be based in history, telling the stories of an ancient people who migrated to America from the Middle East around 600 BC.

The Book of Mormon holds that the members of one of these groups, the Lamanites, were marked with a “skin of blackness” so that they could be distinguished from the more righteous Nephites.

For most of church history, dark skin was seen as a sign of the curse, although the church’s official curriculum now states that “the nature and appearance of this mark are not fully understood” and that skin color later “became irrelevant as an indicator of the Lamanites’ standing before God.”

But for Newcomb, the church’s associations with skin color go beyond morality. The Book of Mormon teaches that because the Lamanites turned away from God, they were cursed to lose their lands and become “scattered and smitten,” although their

lands would be restored if they accepted Christianity.

“It’s like laying that genocide at their own feet. Like it’s your own fault,” Newcomb said.

As a child, Newcomb had a difficult time reconciling her faith and her heritage. After leaving the church six years ago, however, Newcomb reached out to her Tsimshian family in Alaska, building connections she’d been afraid to explore. Her parents didn’t speak to her for months.

King said other church members have found a source of strength in their Lamanite identity, particularly a prophecy that the Lamanites will “blossom as a rose.” Many Native American members of the LDS Church take pride in the belief that Jesus Christ came to the Americas. Others may not identify as descendants of Lamanites but still relate to them, King said, or use the term in an endearing way.

King also pointed out that the LDS Church played a major role in providing educational opportunities for Native Americans, who in the 1970s and ’80s attended Brigham Young University in larger numbers than any other major institution of higher learning. (At the same time, church-led placement programs for Native American children have been criticized for their assimilationist policies, while revelations of sexual abuse have led to lawsuits.)

But criticism of the church has ramped up since the racial justice protests of 2020, and Newcomb said she’s seen an uptick in interest in her blog, Lamanite Truth, since the discovery last summer of more than 1,200 unmarked graves at former residential schools for Indigenous children in Canada.

Newcomb believes the LDS Church should step away from its assertions about Lamanites, even if it means presenting the Book of Mormon as a spiritual rather than a historical text. She supports Indigenous members of the faith who decide to stay in the church and see the Book of Mormon as empowering, but she says they need to be fully informed before making that choice.

“I want Indigenous people to have religious freedom . . . but it doesn’t have to come at the cost of Indigenous history,” Newcomb said. “No more gaslighting, no more plausible deniability. Let’s just go straight for honesty.” —Religion News Service