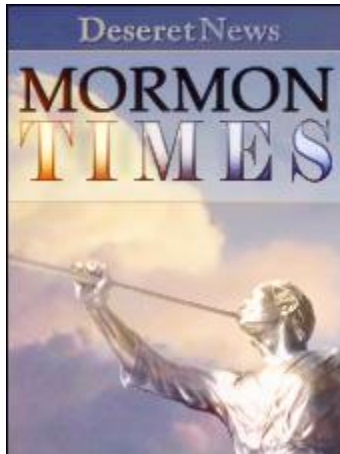
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Healing the rift between Brigham and Emma

By Michael De Groote

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He wanted an apology to Emma Smith's family.

"What?!" Brigham Young's descendants said, according to Mary Ellen Elggren. "What are they talking about?"

In 2007, Elggren was president-elect of the Brigham Young Family Association when she first heard that Michael Kennedy, president of the Joseph Smith Jr. Family Organization, wanted an apology.

"I was totally puzzled over this," Elggren said.

Kennedy, however, was not puzzled. He was baptized as a Mormon in 1973 -- the first male descendant of Joseph and Emma Smith to join the LDS Church and be ordained an elder. He knew firsthand the prejudices that kept the families of Emma and Brigham apart.

"From the LDS perspective you've got a woman who did not come West. She is living very well. Her life is set. She's financially stable. She has not had to go through near the heartaches or the troubles that the Latter-day Saints did when they were trying to cross the plains and come up here and start everything afresh. So there is a little bit of resentment there," Kennedy said. "She didn't come West. She hated Brigham Young. And she wanted her kids to be running the church -- and we learned that those things aren't true."

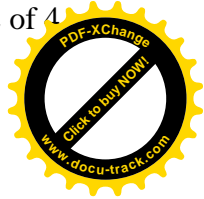
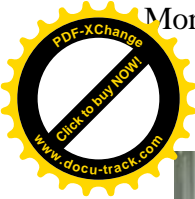
From the Latter-day Saint perspective in the 19th-century West, the whole world was against them. "Brigham Young is hearing comments of Emma stating this or that, most of which are taken out of context because he is hearing them through third parties. ... So he makes all these harsh statements about Emma -- and those harsh statements get back to Emma. And so she responds by making harsh statements back about Brigham," Kennedy said.

Historian Ronald W. Walker, who is writing a new biography on Brigham Young, also thinks that miscommunication lies at the heart of the tension between Brigham and Emma.

"It has all the classic signs of people probably doing their very best in a very unsettled and difficult time. Sometimes in those circumstances, on both sides, there's a misreading of motive. You know, if they had had an opportunity to sit down and talk it through it might have evaporated," Walker said. "Without a telephone and 1,200 miles between them, it became very hard."

Kennedy approached the Young family organization. "Brigham Young never would have said any of the things he did had he had the correct information. And so I figured that maybe, if he were alive, he would come before Emma and apologize. And that's what began this was those thoughts," he said.

The initial reaction of the group was negative to the idea. People stood up and were upset. "Brigham Young doesn't need to apologize for anything!" Kennedy recalls them saying. "And so



Kari Robinson, Mary Ellen Elggren and Peter Kennedy represented the Brigham Young Family Association at the 2007 Joseph Smith Jr. Family Organization reunion in Nauvoo, Ill. Michael Kennedy stands at the right in a blue shirt (no relation to Peter Kennedy). Elggren presented the "Healing Document" Kari is the Young family's historian and Peter is the group's webmaster. Photo courtesy Michael Kennedy

there was this stiffness that was definitely there," he said.

Then the Young family learned the prejudices that the Smith family held onto.

They had been taught that Brigham had Joseph killed, according to Kennedy. "These descendants have been raised (to think) that Brigham was part of the conspiracy, that Emma didn't want anything to do with Brigham, that they very much did not like each other."

Elggren and the rest of the group were won over. "I did not begin to know the amount of baggage that (Smith descendants) were carrying around in the way of oral tradition, father to child, about Brigham Young. I had no idea," she said. "They've got an obstacle in their path, and somehow it's Brigham Young."

The group decided to have Elggren draft the document.

It came to her in a quick burst of inspiration, she said. In July 2007, she flew to Nauvoo, Ill., to present what is called "The Healing Document" to the Joseph Smith Jr. Family Organization meeting.

There were representatives from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and from the Community of Christ. There were descendants of the Smith family from the LDS Church, Community of Christ, Church of Christ (Temple Lot) and those who did not belong to any church.



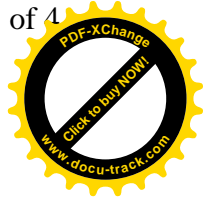
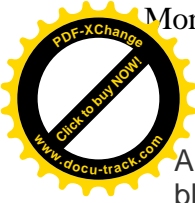
Mary Ellen Elggren, president of the Brigham Young Family Association, sits in front of the Lion House in Salt Lake City. Photo: Kristin Murphy, Deseret News

Elggren read the document aloud to a quiet room. "For a century and a half we have grieved over the loss of the fellowship of our dear Emma Hale Smith, her children and her descendants. We feel in our hearts an abiding longing to join once again these two families in a common celebration of their ancestors," she began.

The document spoke of a commitment to correct false traditions and to honor Emma's "noble life." It ended with a desire to "rebuild that bridge of friendship between our two families that existed not so long ago."

"There was no one, including the leaders, after that presentation was over that was not emotional," Kennedy said.

Many of the descendants who were not LDS came up to Kennedy and told him, "This should have been done a long time ago."



A friend of Elggren's in the Community of Christ later told her the statement wasn't really a full-blown apology. "I know," Elggren said. "But it is a bridge of friendship."



Michael Kennedy stands in front of a statue of his ancestor, Joseph Smith Jr. Photo: Kristin Murphy, Deseret News

"The apology is not for things that Brigham Young did not do," Elggren said. "The apology is for the time we've lost. It really is for our not understanding what they were dealing with. It is reaching our hand out and saying, 'You know, we love you. Our families (were once) close and they need to be close again.'"

In the two years since the healing document was presented, Kennedy produced a movie titled "Emma Smith: My Story" as part of his ongoing efforts to correct the record, end prejudice and promote healing. A sequel to the movie that deals with Emma's life after the martyrdom of her husband is in the works.

But much remains to be done.

"But even when I sent (the movie "Emma Smith: My Story") out, we had stake presidents and bishops who refused to have anything to do with the movie because they assumed that the fact that it was sponsored by the (Joseph Smith Jr. & Emma Hale Smith Historical Society) and Emma's name is part of that society therefore it must be anti-Mormon," Kennedy said. "The harder attitudes are more of my grandmother's generation who had it well-instilled inside of them. Their children and grandchildren, they're a lot more receptive and open, and they want to know what really did happen."

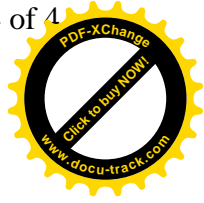
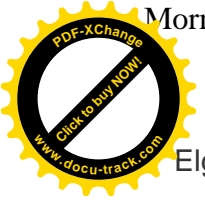
Elggren also notices a generational difference.

"The Lord says that things will be visited on families for three or four generations," Elggren said. "Is there a possibility that that means that at four generations you are far enough away from the pain that now you can bring your family back together and you can heal those wounds and bind up those injuries and bridge those breaches and bring those families back? Because these families loved each other."

One sentence of Elggren's original draft of the healing document was taken out of the final printed version. For her, it was her favorite part. The phrase was, "Please accept our regrets for things past and things lost and our hand in love and fellowship for the future where all is to be gained."

"It was actually that sentence that made me cry when I received it because I think that was the apology," she said.

When Emma was old, she may have sensed that the rift could be healed if she could just meet face-to-face with Brigham. According to Kennedy, she contemplated taking the three-day train ride to Salt Lake City. But Brigham died before she had the opportunity to speak with him.



Elggren believes they had that face-to-face after they had both died.

"The last words out of Emma's mouth when she died were 'Joseph.' And the last words out of Brigham's mouth, and he died before Emma, were 'Joseph,'" Elggren said. "Joseph came and got each of them. They have settled their differences."

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