

AFRICAN AMERICANS IN MISSIONS: SETTING THE HISTORICAL RECORD STRAIGHT

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Originally Written 5/23/96; Statistics Updated 1/17/2002

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In American historical studies the black church has traditionally been recognized as the leading black social, political, economic, and spiritual force. With the exception of the black church, however, the contributions that black Americans have made in our land have often been overlooked and ignored. Particularly unrecognized and often little investigated is the story of the many unsung black American heroes who risked their lives to take the Gospel across cultural barriers in obedience to Christ's Great Commission. These men and women who dared to step out by faith onto foreign mission fields have written their pages into the annals of world history. Yet sadly few American Christians – white or black – have read and appreciated their remarkable stories. This amazing reservoir of achievements in missionary endeavor, usually under harsh and unfavorable circumstances, should become a rich heritage of courage, faith, and self-sacrifice valued by every member of the body of Christ today. It is a lasting testimony that, by the sovereign grace of God, the missionary cause of Christ can be advanced in any generation under any condition.

Eighteenth Century Missions

A careful and unbiased look at the historical record reveals that American blacks did not wait until Emancipation before attempting to carry the Gospel to others. It is nothing short of incredible that as early as the late eighteenth century blacks were active

in cross-cultural missions. Amazingly, with one exception, their first efforts were all aimed overseas. Among black believers the foreign missions motif seems to have generally predated the home missions motif.

During the 1770s John Marrant, a free black from New York City, was already ministering the Word of God cross-culturally, preaching to native Americans. By 1775 he had carried the gospel to the Cherokee, Creek, Catawar, and Housaw Indians (Walker, 4: 514-516). This was not quite thirty years after the death of the famed Indian missionary David Brainerd.

The foreign missions involvement of American blacks began in the West Indies about this same time. Rev. George Liele (or Lisle) is considered by some to be American's first foreign missionary, certainly our first black overseas missionary. Though technically not officially "sent out" by any local church, he was an early "tentmaker." It was in July of 1782 that this freed slave departed for Jamaica where he later established the first Baptist church on the island. This was eleven years before William Carey left England for India and thirty years before Adoniram Judson left America for Burma! And Liele's work was years before English Baptists even sent their first missionary to Jamaica.

Liele actually holds several remarkable "firsts." Born in Virginia about the year 1750, converted to Christ in Georgia about 1773, he became the first ordained black (1775) in the Baptist ministry helping to establish what is believed to be the first black Baptist congregation in America, the Silver Bluff church in Aiken County, South Carolina around 1775 (Sobel 1979; Wilson 1976; Gordon 1992, 27-28). About three years later, he established (or helped to?) the First African Baptist Church of Savannah,

Georgia. When Liele's former master died during the Revolutionary War, fearing re-enslavement, he indentured himself to a British officer and with borrowed funds, moved his family to Jamaica. After two years he had paid back his indenture and was able to devote all his energy to preaching. With four other former American slaves, he soon formed the First African Baptist Church of Kingston. In ten years, the church grew to over 500 baptized converts. One of his converts, named Moses Baker, founded the second Jamaican Baptist church at Crooked Spring. Thus this successful early American church planter helped establish at least three new congregations – a remarkable achievement for a largely self-taught preacher! Interestingly, his letters reveal that Liele was a man of solid evangelical faith who also taught the doctrines of election and eternal security (Sibley 1965, 1-3; Gordon 1992, 23-28).

Seven years after George Liele sailed to Jamaica, another freed slave from South Carolina, Prince Williams, went to the Bahama Islands. Sailing in an open boat from Saint Augustine, Florida he arrived in Nassau where he faithfully preached the Gospel. He soon baptized a number of locals and organized the Bethel Baptist Meeting House about the year 1791. Williams was ably assisted by Samuel (Sambo) Scriver and Sharper Morris, also recent American immigrants. Again this was before the first white missionary arrived from England. In 1801, Williams and other blacks organized the Society of Anabaptists (among other things, they corresponded with Liele in Kingston and with the Silver Bluff Church). At the age of 70, Williams founded the Saint John Baptist Church in Nassau where he remained faithfully as pastor until his death at the age of 104. Other former slaves such as Brother Amos, from the Savannah church, settled in

New Providence planting other growing churches. Subsequently, over 160 Baptist churches were planted in the Bahamas (Fitts 1985, 110; Symonette and Canzoneri)

Another former slave involved in the early leadership of the Silver Bluff Baptist Church in South Carolina was David George (1743-1810). Like other black Loyalists during the American Revolution, after the war he looked for a safer place to re-establish his family, and eventually moved to cold Nova Scotia, Canada. For nine years he tirelessly ministered as an itinerant evangelist and pastor among exiled blacks there. Overcoming many obstacles, including outright racism, abuse, religious opposition and severe frostbite, which left him somewhat handicapped, he persevered and established several churches. When white Canadians continued to treat them poorly, George, in 1792, led a majority of his congregation to join with a party of about 1200 black settlers emigrating to Sierra Leone, West Africa. In Freetown he organized 60 immigrants into a struggling congregation and developed a close relationship with the English governor. In 1792, a year before William Carey sailed for India, he visited England, preached in white churches and became somewhat of a celebrity. He also met Particular Baptist leaders such as Dr. John Ryland and Dr. John Rippon, and had good fellowship with Rev. John Newton, the converted slave trader who had visited Sierra Leone years before. The visit to England reinforced his earlier Calvinistic doctrinal leanings but had an even more notable impact on the Baptists in England, influencing them to later send two British missionaries to Sierra Leone to assist George. His moving testimony no doubt alerted many Christians in England of the evils of racial prejudice and slavery (Gordon, 1992 , 43-141).

David George's life stands as a testimony of the grace of God. According to his biographer, he never allowed "his slavery, lack of formal education, displacement during wars or physical attacks to deter him Though he was a victim of many unfortunate circumstances . . . he did not fall into self pity or give up." *From Slavery to Freedom*, summarizes several "notable milestones" in George's lifetime:

[He was] the first black Baptist pastor in the United States and Canada, and the first Baptist pastor (white or black) in Africa; planter of the first black Baptist church (white or black) in Africa; planter of the first black Baptist churches in the [Canadian] Maritimes and the first Baptist church (white or black) in Africa. These achievements alone are significant (Gordon 1992, 163).

In summary, the eighteenth century was characterized by sporadic unsponsored missionary efforts on the part of impoverished and uneducated black preachers reacting to their unique circumstances. Rather than return to bondage these men, often with a price still on their heads, courageously pioneered in new areas. They became the first unofficial African American missionaries before the American foreign missions movement had been solidly launched. They organized and led congregations many years before the first white missionary arrived from England or America. No doubt they helped to bring an end to slavery and awakened interest in missions on both sides of the Atlantic among whites and blacks.

Early Nineteenth Century Missions

It was not until the early nineteenth century that black Americans developed a more structured approach to foreign missions. In 1820 Rev. Lott Carey and another preacher, Colin Teague, together with their wives, were sponsored by the black Baptists of Virginia to go to Liberia. These men became our nations' first official "sent ones" to

Africa. Both men had earlier bought their freedom. White Bible teachers had planted the seed of missionary desire in Carey's heart by while he attended William Crane's "Colored" tri-weekly school. There he learned about William Carey's work in India. Later Lott Carey pastored the 800-member African Baptist Church in Richmond and in 1815 led in the formation of the Richmond African Baptist Missionary Society. Sensing God's call he was able to convince the newly organized (1816) American Colonization Society and white Baptists to contribute to his support (Williams 1982, 34; Fitts 1985, 110).

When asked why he chose to leave the comforts of home to brave the unknown dangers of West Africa, Carey answered:

"I am an African, and in this country, however meritorious my conduct and respectable my character, I cannot receive the credit due to either. I wish to go to a country where I shall be estimated by my merits not by my complexion; and I feel bound to labor for my suffering race" (cited in Fitts 1978, 18-19).

Initially Carey's team worked among the Mandigoes in Sierre Leone. In 1822 he moved to Liberia, became an agent for the Colonization Society, and later acting governor of the newly organized colony. Finding work among the indigenous Africans to be most difficult, he focused on the Americo-Liberian settlers. He served at various times as a medical officer, soldier, educator, teacher and preacher. Rev. Carey organized the Providence Baptist Church, probably the second Baptist congregation on the continent. By 1826 he had formed a missionary society out of his church in Monrovia. Unfortunately Carey's missionary career was cut short by this untimely death in 1828 from a gunpowder explosion while making cartridges to use against hostile Africans. But Carey's legacy of untiring sacrificial devotion inspired many blacks to later volunteer for African service (Williams 1982, 34; Fitts 1985, 111).

The same year Lott Carey's team sailed for Africa another group of eighty-eight blacks went out. Daniel Coker, one of the early bishops of the African Methodist Episcopal denomination (A.M.E.), felt so strongly about missions he resigned his Baltimore pastorate to lead this first group sent out by the American Colonization Society (A.C.S.). On board the *Elizabeth* he organized an A.M.E. congregation and then replanted it in Liberia. This work is recognized as the first foreign branch of the A.M.E. church. Because the unpopular A.C.S. was disliked by A.M.E. founder Richard Allen, Coker's work was not officially sponsored by the denominations until 1859 (Williams 1982, 35). From 1820 to 1860 the primary sending group to Liberia was the A.C.S. which repatriated hundreds of American blacks (Jacobs 1982, 10, 48-50).

Not all early Methodist efforts were overseas. John Stewart, a free-born black from Virginia, was instrumental in stirring up concern for native American missions. Converted at a camp meeting, John soon felt God's call to preach. By 1816 he traveled to the Wyandot Indian reservation in Ohio where he was well received. To his surprise he met Jonathan Painter, a runaway black slave from Kentucky who had been taken prisoner in his youth by the Wyandot. Painter knew their language and so, after being converted, agreed to interpret for Stewart. In 1818 his successful ministry came to the attention of Ohio Methodists, who soon licensed him to preach. Even though the Methodist (Episcopal) Missionary Society was not officially organized until the following year, John Stewart's ministry among the Indians is considered to be the actual beginning of American Methodist missions. (Tucker 1983, 96).

Not all these early black missionaries were men. In 1823 Betsey Stockton went to Hawaii to serve as an overseas worker under the auspices of the American Board of

Missions. She is recognized as the “first single American woman (not widowed) to serve as a foreign missionary.” Sadly, she was initially allowed only to serve as a domestic servant for another missionary couple. However, because she was well “qualified to teach,” Betsey was soon permitted to conduct a school. Formerly Betsey had lived in the household of the president of Princeton College and while there had read extensively in his library. Upon her return to the mainland in 1826, Miss Stockton conducted a school for Indian children in Canada (Beaver 1968, 67).

Rev Scipio Beanes was appointed by the African Methodist Episcopal Church to go to Haiti in 1827. He was their first officially sent missionary. His commission included “making the Hytian nationality and government strong” (Payne 1969, 477).

The growing concern to take the Gospel to Africa in the mid-1830s led black Baptists to begin organizing numerous mission societies and regional associations. The Providence Missionary Baptist District Association was formed in 1836. The first black Baptist convention with a national purpose, the American Baptist Missionary Convention, was organized in 1840 by a group of churches in New England and the Middle Atlantic States in response to the many requests for missionaries and means to continue Lott Carey’s work. It continued for twenty-six years and sent several missionaries to Africa as well as Canada. Limited finances, however, forced the convention to cooperate with white missionary associations. As black American churches were being organized across this country, other missionary groups sprang up. For example, the Baptist African Missionary Convention of Western States and Territories was organized in 1873 primarily with the goal of helping local churches send out their own missionaries to Africa. Unfortunately little is now known of their efforts (Fitts 1985, 111-13).

The nation's second black missionary convention, the African and Foreign Home Missionary Society was formed in 1841 in Hartford, Connecticut. Leaders from six northeast states and six denominations, with whites also in attendance, came together in what is recognized as the earliest effort at black ecumenism. Though the common concern was once again African missions, some were seeing missions as a way to also oppose the slave trade at its source (Wilmore 1986, 99).

White Sponsored Black Mission Efforts

Rationale

Towards the middle of the nineteenth century major white denominations began to see the value of sending black missionaries overseas particularly to tropical Africa. Their motives were not always the purest for recruiting blacks. For a number of different reasons blacks were being sought. Black Americans, it was felt, could be sent out much more cheaply, requiring smaller salaries and no expensive European furloughs. Second, mission societies never could find enough white volunteers. Third, there was reluctance on the part of some to sacrifice more white lives. Probably though the primary reason that blacks were now being recruited was the mistaken perception that African-Americans were better suited to withstand the rigors of the inhospitable African climate. It was by now well recognized that tropical diseases were killing many white missionaries. In particular, the continent of Africa was becoming known as a "white man's grave." As early as 1847 leaders of the Southern Baptist Convention had concluded:

The history of the mission exertions has demonstrated the white missionaries, as a general thing, cannot succeed in laboring long as missionaries in Africa. Nearly every white missionary has either fallen a victim on the field, or has been compelled to return to America [because of disease]. If Africa is evangelized,

colored men must be the agents of that great work Young colored brethren should be encouraged to prepare for the work of preaching the gospel to people of the same color in Africa. At present they are our only hope of success (cited in Williams 1982, 6).

Thus white missionaries and mission leaders were dispatched to preach and recruit in black colleges, articles were sent to black religious publications, and whites helped sponsor promising black adults in their schools. Separate black training colleges were also established, often financially supported by white denominations and foundations. At the 1893 Chicago World's Fair white mission agencies organized a "Congress on Africa." All of these efforts were for the purpose of arousing not only interest in overseas missions but inculcating in blacks a sense of "duty" to reach their own.

To provide a theological rationale for this growing back-to-Africa movement, some mission advocates began to promote a modified version of the "Theory of Providential Design" first originated by supporters of colonization. The basic thrust of this theory was that a sovereign God had permitted slaves to be brought to America so that eventually they could hear the truth of the Gospel of Christ and be saved and civilized. Once God caused slavery to be ended and Africa to be opened it was clearly His purpose to send them back in order to "bring Africa to Christ." Clearly many blacks were moved by this persuasion. In an age of colonialism and imperialism this call for black Christian involvement was a type of Christianized "Manifest Destiny."

Inherent in this argument, and seemingly accepted by many black believers, was the belief that *all* progress for Africa must come from outside the "dark continent." Africans sorely needed not only redemption but also civilization -- Western civilization.

And only civilized whites and blacks from the West could bring these dual blessings. In fact it was the particular “duty” of black Americans to take the leadership in this great enterprise. Hypocritically, some whites even suggested that missionaries could help end the slave trade. By opening the continent to the products and trade of the West, Africans around the globe could be elevated and developed into full manhood. Many black Americans were no doubt swayed by these idealistic appeals to their own self-interest (Williams 1982, 6-7).

We must of course be careful not to implicate and judge all white and black Christians in this era. No doubt there were some who preached missions or volunteered to go simply out of obedience to Christ’s Great Commission command and their compassionate concern for the salvation of the lost. But probably many were responding to the African call because they were being sucked in to the ethos of their time.

It is a historical fact that much of the power behind the push for the expansion of the Christian faith throughout Africa came from The American Colonization Society. The A.C.S. was the real spearhead of the early back-to-Africa movement, laying the groundwork for black Americans to be sent to Africa as missionaries. Many of the leaders of this society were white American Christians and clergyman who saw the colonization of the continent as an excellent opportunity to spread the Gospel. The original 37 American blacks dispatched to colonize Liberia were not considered missionaries but the society did pay the passage of black ministers who volunteered to go. The record shows that 15,000 African Americans were resettled in Liberia between 1822 and the beginning of the American Civil War in 1863. It is also true that many blacks passionately desired to return to the fatherland, some to escape white oppression, others to gain the respect of

whites or acceptance from fellow blacks. Africa was obviously looked upon as offering more freedom.

For various reasons then, white church groups sent out African Americans as their representatives to Africa. The number who went out under white sponsorship is indeed surprising.

White Denominational Sending

In 1835 the first white denomination turned over its African mission work to blacks. The *Protestant Episcopal Church* sent out Mr. and Mrs. James M. Thompson to open up its first mission in Liberia where they faithfully served until 1865. Liberia remained the only African field of the American Episcopal Church. By 1854 it had six black clergymen and four stations had been opened. A renowned Episcopalian missionary was Rev. Alexander Crummell, a New York-born but Cambridge University-educated black, who labored for twenty years in Liberia, despite numerous health problems and personality conflicts. After returning to the States in 1873, personally disillusioned, he continued to encourage African missions through his scholarly writings. One of his Liberian students, originally a South Carolinian, Samuel David Ferguson, became an effective evangelist among the Grebo people in southern Liberia and was later selected as the “first black bishop in the Episcopal Church.” The Protestant Episcopal work among the Grebo is considered the most successful missionary work among indigenous Africans in the nineteenth century. By 1876 blacks serving under the Protestant Episcopal Church outnumbered whites 21 to 5 (Williams 1982, 10-11; Jacobs 1982, 56-57).

The *Presbyterian Church*, another major white denomination using black missionaries in Liberia, sent out James M. Priest in 1843. Priest served faithfully for the next 40 years, reinforcing white beliefs that black missionaries could better adapt to the tropical climate. When four of the six black graduates of the denominationally sponsored Lincoln University sent out to aid Priest soon died, this theory was severely challenged. However, by 1868, 12 of the 13 Presbyterian staff in Liberia were blacks

The most controversial Presbyterian leader in Liberia was Edward Blyden. He served from 1851 to 1886, periodically holding important government positions and becoming internationally known as a leading West African thinker, writer, and speaker. When Blyden became increasingly tolerant of Islam, moved theologically toward “universalistic deism,” and began urging African Christians to secede from their white sponsored churches, American Presbyterians were shocked. Disillusioned, they did not appoint another black missionary for Liberia until 1895 (Williams 1982, 12-13).

Another white denomination sending out black American missionaries to labor among indigenous Africans was the northern *Methodist Church*. Evangelist Amanda Smith, labored in both Liberia and Sierra Leone from 1882 until 1890. She became especially known for her vigorous campaign against alcohol abuse. Miss Susan Collins, a graduate of the Chicago Missionary Training School, ministered in Angola from 1887 to 1993, often by herself. Before the end of the century ten more black Methodist missionaries had been sent out to Liberia, all college-educated and well received by the Africans. The team included Mr. and Mrs. Alexander Camphor, Mr. and Mrs. J.A. Simpson, Rev. and Mrs. Joseph Sherill and F.M. Allen. With a seminary training 140

students and an influential African newspaper, the Methodist mission was, by 1900, one of the most successful white-financed black missions in Liberia (Williams 1982, 13-15).

In 1880 the *United Brethren in Christ* (U.B.C.) churches had sent two American black missionaries, Mr. and Mrs. Kelly M. Kemp, to Sierra Leone. There they labored effectively for five years until they both died of the “fever.” The most famous U.B.C. black missionaries, however, were Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Gomer. The Gomers zealously served in Sierra Leone from 1870 until 1892. They were highly esteemed by both whites and blacks, and saw more converts than any other U.B.C. missionary. The Gomers developed a remarkable rapport with the Mendi tribal people. Brother Gomer was known as a skillful arbitrator of disputes among the Africans and was looked upon as a beloved “father” to them. Another successful U.B.C. black missionary couple was Mr. and Mrs. James A. Evans who diligently labored from 1870-1873 and from 1880 until his death in 1899 (Williams 1982, 15-17).

All of these Methodists and United Brethren were deeply committed to evangelism, were grateful for white financial support and, unlike Blyden, had excellent mutually respected relations with their sending churches back home.

Not all U.S. church groups focused on Liberia and Sierra Leone. Baptists in particular began to expand into other African regions. White *Southern Baptists*, having “seceded” over the question of slavery and formed their own convention in 1845, were the first to use black workers in Nigeria. In 1849 they sent out Robert Hill along with two white co-workers. Unfortunately Rev. Hill never reached Nigeria, remaining in Liberia. It was Rev. William W. Colley, a Virginian mulatto trained at Richmond Theological Seminary, who was to leave an imprint in “Yorubaland.” In the absence of

the ill white superintendent, Colley actually directed the Abeokuta mission station during most of his tenure, 1875-1979. Gradually, however, he became discouraged with the lower salary, white prejudice, his own poor health and the slowness of the work among the Africans. He decided to return to America. On his way home a fruitful stop-over in Liberia, however, rejuvenated his missionary zeal. Later, as we shall see, he was to play a key role in organizing independent black Baptist mission work (Williams 1982, 17-18). Hill and Colley were the first of a long line of dedicated black Southern Baptists. To its credit, the Southern Baptist Convention, during its first 30 years, appointed more than 40 black missionaries through its Foreign Mission Board.

Another African American who had great impact arousing black concern for Baptist missions in Africa was Thomas L. Johnson. Rev. Johnson, born a slave in Virginia, later a Chicago pastor, received a year of missionary training in England with the Y.M.C.A. In 1878 he and his wife arrived in the Cameroons sponsored by the Baptist Missionary Society of Great Britain. They labored among the Bakwalli Kpe'people. In the providence of God their good work was cut short because of ill health. When Mrs. Johnson died of malaria in 1879, he returned to America where he became a strong advocate of missions. Though doctors advised him not to return to Africa, he was used of God to recruit many others. Johnson had a notable ministry encouraging "interracial partnership between white and black churches in the late nineteenth century" (Williams 1982, 18-19).

White *Northern Baptists* began their African work in the Congo in 1881. Their first black missionary in the Congo was Theophilus E. Samuel Scholes, an English-trained Jamaican who became an effective medical missionary. Scholes strongly

emphasized training both missionaries and Africans in practical skills. The second black missionary in the Congo was John E. Ricketts who labored from 1887-1893. Later joined by his wife, Brother Ricketts was well respected by the Africans. The American Baptist Foreign Mission Board's Congo mission was one of its largest and most effective.

Historian Walter Williams notes:

Despite heavy rates of sickness and death among the missionaries, by 1894 the American mission had grown to ten stations, forty-six missionaries, and over 1,200 converts. Among these missionaries, fourteen were black. Supported by white Baptists but coordinated by Thomas Johnson, these Afro-Americans had few problems with the dual organizational arrangement (Williams 1982, 19).

It should be noted that these two black missionaries were sent to the Congo supported by funds also raised through the General Association of Western States and Territories, a black Baptist group with which Johnson worked.

White *Congregationalists*, organized under the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (A.B.C.F.M.), sponsored four black American missionaries in three African nations during the last quarter of the 19th century. Samuel T. Miller, a graduate of Hampton Institute and a trained teacher, was sent to Portuguese Angola in 1880. With two white co-workers, he served impressively among the Ovimbundu people. Because he learned the language quicker than the whites, he was considered by the Africans to be the leader, causing friction with his coworkers. Miller wrote an accurate grammar book and insisted no new mission station should be started without the local chief's invitation (Williams 1982, 20-21).

Benjamin and Henrietta Ousley, both born in Mississippi and graduates of Fisk University, were sent out by the A.B.C.F.M. in 1884 to a newly established work in

Inhambane in Portuguese Mozambique. Rev. Ousley, also a graduate of Oberlin College Theology School, studied the local Sheetswa language hoping to translate the Bible. Miss Nancy Jones, also a graduate of Fisk, joined them in Mozambique in 1888, later being transferred to eastern Rhodesia. Unfortunately by the end of the century, all four of these capable black missionaries under the American Board felt compelled to resign because of racism and other conflicts they experienced with white missionaries (Williams 1982, 21-22).

By contrast, a white denominational mission board that had a remarkably successful record partnering with black American missionaries was the southern *Presbyterian Church*. Despite a good track record, denominational leaders' motives were at times paternalistic. Ironically, while they were seeking continuing control over the declining number of blacks in their churches in America, it was their first African American missionary who had such great influence on the Church's future mission efforts. William Henry Sheppard, a graduate of the denomination's Stillman College and an ordained evangelical preacher, pressured the mission board to send him to Africa. The board reluctantly consented but only after finding a white missionary to accompany him. Sheppard and Sam Lapsley arrived in the Congo in 1890. Sheppard spent the next twenty years in Africa building up an enviable record (Williams 1982, 22-23).

Selecting the Kosai Valley, a densely populated but hitherto unreached region 900 miles into the interior, the team pioneered work among the BaKuba people. Respected by the Africans, he was called "Shoppit Monine" or the "Great Sheppard." The two Americans worked well together as equals. Sheppard, with some medical skills and a gift for learning the local languages was also a good teacher/preacher. He became the chief

contact with the Africans. Lapsley worked well with the finances and white colonial officials. Sheppard, in particular, showed a cultural respect and sensitivity for things Africans seldom saw among missionaries of his day. Yet he was willing to stand on the truth above native culture if it violated Scripture. He openly resisted the custom of killing a slave to accompany a recently deceased master. He protested against the practice of trial by poison and against cannibalism. He even helped to ransom slaves. When the Belgian colonial government imposed a heavy food tax on the people, he protested and got the attention of King Leopold in Belgium (Williams 1982, 23-25).

On furlough in 1893, Sheppard's energetic efforts traveling through the South and speaking to black groups of several denominations greatly impacted many to give and others to volunteer to go. The first volunteer was Lucy Gantt, a recent graduate of Talladega College and a gifted teacher and musician. Lonely Sheppard soon married her! Three other missionary volunteers joined them: Henry P. Hawkins, a newly ordained Stillman graduate, and two single ladies, Lillian Thomas and Mary Fearing, both gifted Talladega graduates. This team of five departed for the Congo in 1894 and was later joined by another well-educated black missionary, Joseph E. Phipps from Moody Bible Institute. Together they led the Presbyterian Luebo mission station until 1897 when two white missionaries came to take over the leadership. Despite this affront, good race relations at the integrated mission were maintained, mostly due to Sheppard's gracious spirit and hard work. The mission's willingness to give blacks equal pay, mutual respect and an influential voice in mission affairs also helped (Williams 1982, 25-27).

By 1899 Sheppard had established a branch mission on the BaKuba frontier and soon the two stations had about 350 converts. Strained relations with the colonial

government and eventually even with his mission finally caused him to retire in 1910.

While not evangelistically very successful, Sheppard nonetheless ranks among the most significant of early African American missionaries because of his tireless efforts on behalf of his beloved African friends and his impact on black Americans back home (Williams 1982, 27-29).

One of Sheppard's co-workers evidenced unswerving determination to get to the field. Born a slave, Miss Mary Fearing was 56 years old when she left America for the Congo. Because of her age, the mission would not accept her for financial support, so she sold her house, collected her savings, and on her own raised \$100 per month support from local church women. Miss Fearing was instrumental in starting homes for girls and young women. Her work was so exceptional that within two years the Presbyterian board decided to fully support her (Williams 1982, 27).

Evaluation

In assessing the ministries of the many nineteenth century African American missionaries working under white societies, one is impressed with their hard work and loyalty. Many factors contributed to the popularity of using black missionaries. Some white churches were initially attracted to blacks to fulfill their denominational or colonization goals; others because blacks were supposedly better suited for Africa's harsh climates; still others because they sensed black American missionaries could better identify with Africans; and others because of lower support costs or reluctance to lose more white lives. Of course there never were enough white volunteers willing and ready to go, especially to the "dark continent."

White sponsors, however, saw mixed results. Williams makes this evaluation:

About 40 percent of the black missionaries had fairly good relations with their churches and probably did average longer periods in Africa than white missionaries. But a majority of the Afro-Americans lasted only a few years. Some died of tropical diseases, and most others left the field for health reasons. A significant minority broke with their sponsors over personal and policy matters. (Williams 1982, 30)

The major influence these fine white-sponsored black missionaries had was upon fellow African Americans. Evangelical men like William Colley, Thomas Johnson, Alexander Camphor and William Sheppard were greatly used of God to arouse missions interest cross-denominationally among blacks and whites. Their stirring witness and capable leadership not only greatly affected black attitudes toward Africa but soon gave rise to a full-fledged mission movement among independent black denominations in America.

Black Denominational Mission Efforts

Initial Obstacles to be Overcome

The early independent black missionary work of men like Daniel Coker, Lott Carey, and Colin Teague, despite promising beginnings, did not advance for half a century. It was not until the late 1870's that the glowing embers of mission involvement began to steadily increase with organized black groups. A number of factors, as we have seen, contributed to this slow beginning. One was the association of missionary endeavor with the unpopular American Colonization Society. Another factor was the relative lack of African Americans willing to forgo the material comforts of this country to be overseas

missionaries. Some blacks saw themselves as totally assimilated American citizens and were thus unconcerned about Africa. Many black leaders argued that a dual involvement with Africa would ultimately weaken their struggle for rights and citizenship in American society. A few even believed the white lie that Africans were inferior and degraded beings. Some objected on the grounds that black missionary involvement might even harm Africans through “imperialistic” policies (Williams 1982, 35-38).

The most important obstacle to mission work among independent black churches, however, was insufficient funds. The poverty of the people, many fresh out of slavery, left congregations ill-prepared to finance large-scale missionary efforts. At first many felt that partnership with wealthier white churches was the only solution. Even with the membership base of the newly organized black church groups steadily growing in the South, many were struggling to consolidate their fledging new churches as well as to build denominational publishing houses and educational ministries.

New Reasons for Missions Interest

Sentiment began to change however after the late 1870's. Again God used a number of factors. One was the revival of back-to-Africa emigration, a non-religious movement. Interestingly, both black Baptists and the A.M.E. Church began missionary work in Liberia as a result of South Carolina emigration fervor. On July 26, 1877, an emotional mass meeting in Charleston, South Carolina, celebrating the Liberian Independence Day, led local black church people to organize the Liberian Exodus Joint Stock Steamship Company. With the recent withdrawal of federal troops, increasing white violence, and governmental promises unfulfilled, many freed slaves were beginning

to believe that African emigration was the only way to survive. In April 1878 the *Azor* sailed for Liberia with more than 200 emigrants on board. The black Baptist state convention sent Rev. Harrison N. Bouey, and the Charleston A.M.E.s sent the Rev. Samuel F. Flegler to work with the emigrants and hopefully with the Africans. This was the first official post-war effort to establish black missionary presence in West Africa (Williams 1982, 39-40).

Bouey pastored in Monrovia and then labored seven years among the Gola people in western Liberia. After starting two churches, he organized the Liberian Baptist Convention. When he returned to the U.S. in 1881 Rev. Bouey so aroused missionary spirit that it subsequently led to the formation of the black National Baptist Convention (Fitts 1985, 115).

Rev. Flegler transplanted an A.M.E. congregation from Charleston to Brewerville, Liberia where it continued to grow under the leadership of Clement Irons, another emigrant. This was the formal beginning of A.M.E. work in Africa.

Two years before Bouey and Flegler sailed from Charleston, an African Methodist Episcopal Zion (A.M.E.Z.) minister, Andrew Cartwright, a former North Carolina slave, had emigrated to Liberia with the aid of the A.C.S. Though he initially had no financial support from his denomination, he organized several A.M.E.Z. congregations among Americo-Liberians. Seven years later (1883) his church officially agreed to support his efforts (Williams 1982, 39).

Thus all three major independent black denominations were drawn into African mission involvement due to either individual emigrants or local churches supporting missionaries. Church leaders had to be pushed into action by their own members!

There were other contributing factors to the rise of black church missions involvement in the late nineteenth century. Many believers were of course affected by the strong encouragement coming from their white sister denominations. Southern Baptists, for example, assured their black Baptists brothers that “the cultivation of a benevolent missionary spirit is one of the surest methods of securing spiritual prosperity in the home churches” (cited by Williams 1982, 40). These calls were being heard about the same time white church leaders were losing interest in using black missionaries themselves. Improved Western medicine was now enabling whites to survival overseas and the supposed greater adaptability of blacks to tropical climates had proven to be false. Racial conflicts between missionaries on the field were increasingly occurring. Then too, European colonial governments began viewing African American missionaries as potential troublemakers and so placed restrictions on them. European leaders even encouraged Americans churches to send only white missionaries to Africa. For all these reasons most white churches, with the exception of the Presbyterian Congo missions, moved towards a “whites only” policy (Williams 1982, 41-42).

Leaders of black churches had their own reasons for launching mission programs. Seeking to overcome second-class status in America, many were motivated to try to compete on a level with counterpart white churches. It was also felt that a strong missions participation abroad would encourage black pride of accomplishment and self-respect. Black leaders preached sermons from Psalm 68:31 (KJV) predicting, “Ethiopia stretching forth her hands unto God” not only for African spiritual salvation, but for political liberation as well. Of course the driving passion of some was simple obedience to the Lord’s command and a desire to spread the Christian faith. With missionary desire

steadily growing it is not surprising that during the late nineteenth century the majority of black foreign missionaries were now being sponsored by black denominations.

Early Methodist Missions

The best-organized black American denomination by the late 1870s was the *African Methodist Episcopal Church*. Though it organized a Home and Foreign Missionary Society as early as 1844, most of its initial efforts were focused on home missions and expansion in the South. These were so successful (membership surpassed 200,000 by 1876), A.M.E.s were soon ready to go abroad. Work in Africa began to be promoted by newly appointed mission secretary James Townsend. He urged Easter missions collections to be taken up in the churches. Articles were published in the denominational paper (Williams 1982, 45-47).

Finally by 1886 A.M.E.s sent out John Frederick to serve in Sierra Leone. Frederick first worked with an already Christian group of westernized “creoles,” but soon turned to indigenous Africans. Historian Williams notes, “Frederick thus became the first A.M.E. missionary in Africa to work among non-Christians, and he got along very well with Africans.” Coker and Flegler both worked among emigrants. Showing a keen understanding of missionary strategy, Frederick wisely focused on training Africans as missionaries. In 1889 he was joined by Sarah E. Gorham, “the first female A.M.E. missionary in Africa.” Though her efforts were hindered by constant illnesses, she established a mission school in the interior, before succumbing to malaria in 1894 (Williams 1982, 40-47).

One A.M.E. bishop who had tremendous impact in leading the denomination into greater missions involvement, was Henry McNeal Turner. Though somewhat abrasive and controversial, Turner, more than any other, stirred up black Methodists from their apathy for Africa. His organizing ability, forceful personality, strong convictions, articulateness, writing skills, political savvy, and several overseas trips all led to his being appointed as “Bishop of Africa.” Turner personally recruited many new missionaries for West Africa. Among them were Mr. and Mrs. Alfred Ridgel (he headed up A.M.E. Liberian church work from 1893-1896), Rev. Floyd Snelson (leader of A.M.E. work in Sierra Leone) and William H. Heard (Liberia) (Williams 1982, 48-51).

Bishop Turner founded and edited the influential *Voice of Missions*, “the first missionary periodical sponsored by an Afro-American denomination,” and organized the A.M.E. women into missionary societies to raise funds. He got the A.M.E.-sponsored Wilberforce University to teach a course on Africa. In 1895 the bishop successfully wooed a South African secessionist “Ethiopian Church” to unite and affiliate with the American A.M.E. Church (Williams 1982, 51-57).

Clearly one of the secrets of rapid A.M.E. growth abroad was missionary zeal being diffused from the top down. Bishops and clergy, enthused about missions, spread the flame of passion to the people in the pews.

By the end of the century the missionary movement among black Americans was most established in the A.M.E. Church. There were between 1880 and 1900 at least sixty A.M.E. missionaries in Africa: twenty-four serving in Sierra Leone and thirty-six in Liberia (even though many of these were restricted to the black American emigrant population). The denomination was also affiliated with a strong black church of over ten thousand members in South Africa. In addition, the A.M.E. Church had supported at least sixteen African students in black American schools (Williams 1982, 58).

The nation's second largest black Methodist denomination, the *African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church* (A.M.E.Z.), formed its General Home and Foreign Mission Board and its Ladies Mission Society in 1880. But it was Andrew Cartwright's 1884 visit to their national conference and his moving description of his two Liberian church planting efforts which inspired the A.M.E.Z. to begin financially supporting African outreach and Cartwright's work in particular. Sadly, Cartwright's meager progress in the work caused the Church to soon drop financial support. Mission interest almost died. It took a timely address by A.M.E. Bishop Henry Turner and denominational rivalry with the A.M.E.s to revive A.M.E.Z. concern. In 1896 John Bryan Small was appointed the A.M.E.Z.'s first Bishop for Africa. Small, who had earlier traveled with the British Army from Sierra Leone to Nigeria, began to visit West Africa. Rather than send more black Americans to Africa to fail as he believed Cartwright had, Bishop Small concentrated on bringing bright young Africans to America to be trained in A.M.E.Z. schools. He also successfully negotiated with Gold Coast (Ghana today) ministers from the British Methodist Church to bring their churches into the A.M.E.Z. group. Williams notes, "By the end of the century the A.M.E.Z. Church had established itself in the Gold Coast, with two churches, one school, seventy-one full members, and forty-five students." It should be noted that A.M.E.Z. early success was largely due to Bishop Small's missionary skills (Williams 1982, 58-62).

Other independent black Methodist groups, such as the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church (today known as the *Christian M.E. Church*), were too small and lacking in funds to support missions overseas in the late nineteenth century.

In summary, African American Methodists began their official overseas ministries by focusing on adding African members from previously evangelized areas of the continent such as Liberia, Sierra Leone, Gold Coast, and South Africa. Their basic approach was to reach out to African Christians who were reacting to white racial discrimination, and enfold them into their organizations. This was a technique quite similar to their expansion in the U.S. South in the 1860s. Few efforts were made by black Methodists to evangelize unreached indigenous Africans.

Early Baptist Missions

The post-Civil War increase in the number of Baptist churches among blacks in America is most remarkable. This was facilitated by the ease of ministerial ordination among Baptists and the independence of their local churches, allowing more black control after slavery ended.

In the late nineteenth century black Baptists recorded the largest growth rate of any American church group. By 1894 black Baptist church membership had grown to almost 1,350,000, three times the size of the next largest black denomination, the A.M.E. Baptists were now better equipped spiritually, emotionally, and financially to launch their own cross-cultural outreaches. Unfortunately, the lack of centralized organization among black Baptists diluted their potential strength and often led to fragmentation, disunity, and at times insufficient missionary support.

Early Baptist missionary efforts, as we have noted, were largely supported through regional associations and state conventions. Outreach was also somewhat confined to Americo-Liberian settlers on the coast of West Africa. For example by 1878, the

Consolidated American Baptist Missionary Convention was supporting Rev. C.H. Richardson in the Cameroons; Rev. Solomon Crosby, working in Nigeria, was being fully sponsored by the Virginia Colored Baptist Convention. Richardson established a school for youth and a preaching station at Bakunda. Crosby worked with Rev. Colley and helped white Southern Baptists in Lagos. Unfortunately his good work was cut short when he died in 1881 of “tropical fever.” The following year black Virginia Baptists sent J.O. Hayes to Liberia where he labored fruitfully for eighteen years. The Virginia Baptist convention was by far the most active black state convention raising much money for missions (Fitts 1985, 114; Williams 1982, 65-66).

It was Thomas Johnson, returning in 1880 from service in the Cameroons under British Baptist sponsorship, and W.W. Colley, returning in 1879 from service in Liberia under Southern Baptist sponsorship, who were the chief catalysts to stir up and organize formal black Baptist interests in America. Johnson traveled extensively working with black associations all over the Midwest. He called them to commit to the evangelization of Africa, “teaming with millions in the grossest darkness of heathenism.” He even helped them set up funds to give toward African missions (Williams 1982, 65).

Fresh from the field, in 1880 W.W. Colley issued a call to black pastors to join him in Montgomery, Alabama to organize their own national mission. One hundred and fifty Baptist pastors from all over the South and church leaders from eleven states came together and formed the Baptist Foreign Mission Convention (B.F.M.C.) – the forerunner or seedling of the National Baptist Convention, Inc. (N.B.C.) which came into existence with over a million members and more than 10,000 ordained preachers in 1895. Gayraud Wilmore, Professor of Afro-American Religious Studies at New York Theological

Seminary, calls the founding of the B.F.M.C. “the most significant event in Black Baptist history.” He notes, “It was the case of a mission in search of a denomination and finding one among the restive sons and daughters of former slaves who were waiting for a Black church to claim their loyalty . . .” (Wilmore 1986, 100). The primary concern of the new convention was to facilitate aggressive home and foreign missions. Actually the black Baptist church in America was *born* a missionary movement!

Missionary Colley was elected Secretary of the new Convention which immediately collected \$478 for missions. By 1881, at its second meeting in Knoxville, delegates had raised \$1,911 and J.O. Hayes, the Virginia-sponsored missionary in Liberia, was transferred to the B.F.M.C. But the newly formed group took its largest step of faith in 1883 when it voted to support six new missionaries to Liberia. Leading this first team to be sent out was none other than William Colley. He was joined by his wife, Rev. and Mrs. J.H. Presley, John J. Coles, and Hense McKinney, both recent seminary graduates. By the following year the team of six had begun a work among the Vai people in western Liberia. Before long three mission stations were established and converts numbered seventy-five. The most effective missionary in the group was young Coles, a graduate of Richmond Theological Seminary; he was able to master the Vai language and preach without an interpreter (Williams 1982, 67-68).

Unfortunately this “Bendoo mission” work in Liberia struggled due to inadequate financial support and the ill health of the missionaries. Colley was soon compelled to appeal to the white A.C.S. for funding assistance. Mrs. Presley died almost immediately of fever and her husband and Colley were often sick. In 1885 Texas Baptists sent Lewis G. Jordan to join the team but he and Presley soon had to return to America in broken

health. McKinney died in 1887 and two other recent black recruits from the States also left. By 1893 all the missionaries had returned to the States and the work among the Vai ended. Williams notes, “The Bendo mission was the earliest comprehensive effort by an independent Afro-American denomination to support a whole corps of missionaries to non-Westernized Africans” (Williams 1982, 67-69).

Though the failure of its first effort severely dampened the Baptists’ spirit – they would not sponsor missionaries in Liberia until the twentieth century – one encouraging result was the election of Lewis G. Jordan to head the Foreign Mission Board of the newly organized National Baptist Convention. Jordan, through his speaking tours and writing, was able to restore Baptist confidence in and commitment to African missions. Under Jordan’s leadership the N.B.C. expanded its work into South Africa (Fitts 1985, 117).

This new outreach was actually initiated by R.A. Jackson, an independent Baptist minister from Mississippi, who had paid his own way to go to South Africa. Rev. Jackson planted an independent Baptist church in Capetown. Later he was joined by a Baltimore black sailor, Joseph I. Buchanan, who also became an effective church planter and baptized many in the interior. Partly due to denominational rivalry with the A.M.E. (who had earlier expanded into South Africa) and gentle chiding from A.M.E. Bishop Turner, the N.B.C. agreed in 1896 to sponsor Jackson’s growing work. Soon the Capetown church had over 400 members and moved to establish a daughter congregation in Queenstown. One of Jackson’s first baptized converts, John Tule, was taken on for support in 1897. That same year the N.B.C. sent out Mr. and Mrs. G.F. Johns to assist in South Africa; both, however, died of disease within one year. Baptist growth in South

Africa increased dramatically in 1899 when seventeen Baptist preachers and their congregations (a total of 1200 members) broke away from their British mission and affiliated with the N.B.C. This was remarkably similar to the A.M.E. experience a few years earlier (Williams 1982, 69-71).

The growth of National Baptist missions abroad continued. By 1900 they were able to report nineteen ordained missionaries in western and southern Africa. Nine African students were also being sponsored in the States. During its first 16 years following its reorganization in 1895, the N.B.C. Foreign Mission Board sent 26 Americans overseas. Among these were Rev. Harrison N. Bouey (earlier sent out by South Carolina Baptists) to Liberia in 1902, and Rev. and Mrs. A.W. Anderson to South Africa also in 1902 (Fitts 1985, 117-118; Williams 1982,73).

Another black Baptist missionary of note was Rev. James E. East, a graduate of Missionary Training Institute in Nyack, New York and later Virginia Seminary in Lynchburg, Virginia. The Easts, with their seven children, served faithfully in South Africa from 1909 until 1920. East planted a church with 600 members in Rabula. Upon his return to the States he became the corresponding secretary of the N.B.C. Foreign Mission Board (Fitts 1985, 118).

Even with this modest progress not all was well. Black American Baptists remained disunited. Again Walter Williams, a careful black historian, notes:

Some of the church's more activist mission supporters, especially in Virginia and North Carolina, felt that their organization should be doing even more in Africa. They were angered by the insistence of National Baptist leaders upon separate black organization, by their refusal to cooperate with the white American Baptist Missionary Union, and by the transfer of N.B.C. mission headquarters out of Virginia. These activists set up a new organization in 1897, named after Lott Cary, the pioneer black Baptist missionary in Liberia. This development signified an

increasing interest in Africa by the late 1890s, but it also typified the factionalism that hindered Baptist efforts (Williams, 1982,70).

Actually four issues were paramount in the formation of the Lott Carey Baptist Foreign Mission Convention (L.C.B.F.M.C.). In addition to concern for an eastern site for missions headquarters and desire to actively cooperate with white Baptists, organizers desired to have world missions as their sole agenda and have more financial accountability. The Carey “convention” never considered itself a denomination. Seeking to major on missions, it refused to involve itself in national social and political affairs (as the N.B.C. did in Liberia). Regarding the issue of money, the current executive director of the L.C.B.F.M.C. explains, “The Lott Carey Convention came into existence in reaction to a report by a secretary for a foreign mission board [the N.B.C] who admitted that 75 percent of its income had been used for operating expenses, and only 25 percent ever got overseas” (cited in Tinney). Despite its intense interest in Africa and its willingness to work with white Baptists, the Lott Carey convention was not able to send its first missionaries, Rev. and Mrs. W.H. Thomas, to Liberia until 1907.

Black Baptist Women in Missions

There seems to have always been a shortage of committed men to volunteer for foreign missions. This has been true in both black and white mission circles. The black Baptist missionary enterprise, in particular, has been quite dependent on women with tremendous strength of character. Often these have been courageous single women.

Three dedicated women, going out in the last part of the nineteenth century, deserve special citation. Miss Louise C. Fleming was “the first black woman missionary from America to be sent to the Congo.” She went out during the 1870s under the

auspices of the Women's Baptist Foreign Missionary Society, one of the first of many women's missionary societies organized to support Baptist women going overseas. Nora Gordon, trained at Spellman Seminary to be a teacher, worked in the Congo from 1889-1893 under the American Baptist Missionary Union. Upon her marriage to Rev. S.C. Gordon in 1895, the two returned to the Congo. In 1898, Miss Mamie Branton went to South Africa under the N.B.C. She later married the South African John Tule (Fitts 1985, 121-124).

In the early 1900s the N.B.C., in order to keep its works alive, sent out a number of outstanding women. Miss E.B. Delaney, sent by Baptist women of Florida after training at Spellman Seminary, served faithfully in Nyasaland (Malawi today) from 1900 to 1905. She is reported to have walked 600 miles inland and founded several schools. One of her African converts and students, Daniel Malekebu, became a famous medical missionary in Malawi. In 1912 Miss Delaney returned to Africa and labored eight more years in Liberia, founding the N.B.C. Suehn Industrial Mission. A coworker of Delaney was Miss Susie Taylor (1912-1913), founder of the Baptist Industrial Academy (Fitts 1985, 124-125).

Miss Eliza Davis zealously served at this academy from 1913-1917 under the N.B.C. She and Taylor actually worked with their own hands to clear land for the new school! After the nasty split within the N.B.C. Miss Davis continued to serve faithfully in Liberia under the newly formed National Baptist Convention of America, Unincorporated. When she retired at the age of 90 she had labored a total of almost 60 years in one nation! In the bush, where she often preached, thousands were reportedly saved (Fitts 1985, 126-127).

In 1920, the Lott Carey convention sent Mrs. Francis B. Watson to Liberia where she had a fruitful ministry among the Bassa, Gola, and Pessa tribes. Scores of Baptist churches reportedly grew out of her labor. She helped several Liberians receive an education in America, supported women's suffrage in the republic, and impacted Liberian social change. Upon her return to the States in 1936 her writings and travels aroused much mission interest among black church women (Fitts 1985, 128-130).

In 1925, the N.B.C. sent a group of seven Baptist women, accompanied by several clergymen, to West Africa. One of these, Hattie Mae Davis, gave 45 years to missionary work! (Fitts 1985, 131).

The first missionary hospital constructed in Liberia was actually financed and erected by black Baptist women. Several medical nurses were sent out by the N.B.C. to run the much-needed clinic; among those were Miss Ruth Occomy (1928), Miss Naomi Crawford (1934), and Miss Susan Harris (1938) (Fitts 1985, 131-134).

Black Baptist women also labored in other areas of the world besides Africa. Mrs. Janie Morris went out under the N.B.C. board in the 1930s to do pioneer work in the Bahama Islands (Fitts 1985, 134). Other Baptist women also served well overseas but further research needs to be done in order to bring their stories to the present generation.

Evaluating Early Black Church Efforts

In retrospect, the post-Civil War development of a strong black denominational missions movement in America is indeed a remarkable story, due in part to a combination of factors. These included renewed interest in Africa, sincere desire to spread the Christian faith, racial identification, desire to bring Western civilization, emigration

sentiment, the decline of white church use of black missionaries, and the organization of growing new black denominations independent of white control. At the dawn of the twentieth century black Americans dominated the African mission field. Between 1877 and 1900 three black church groups, the A.M.E., the A.M.E. Zion, and the National Baptist Convention (N.B.C.), sponsored seventy-six missionaries in Africa, educated thirty African students for missionary work among their own people, and generally raised ecclesiastical eyebrows with slogans like “Africa for the Africans” (Williams 1982, 44). This was without a doubt the “Golden Era” of black missions.

With meager resources and often inadequate training of their missionaries, these rising black denominations made valiant efforts to keep their people on the field. Some of their leaders sometimes made overly zealous predictions of denominational conquest of the continent. But the realities of missionary work and the hardships soon brought them to recognize that commitment to responsibility for Africa was no guarantee of an ability to carry it out. Wilmore explains,

The Black churches may not have had the wealth, administrative skill, and theological sophistication of other churches, but their concerns were always practical as well as pious, nationalistic as well as evangelistic. Their missionaries, for the most part, related to the Africans as less fortunate cousins, if not as blood brothers and sisters. They did not ridicule the Africans in their letters to sending agencies back home, segregate them in the mission compounds, or treat them as ‘ignorant native boys’ and rank inferiors as they attempted to civilize them through an acculturated gospel (Wilmore 1986, 102).

One of the distinctive features of African American missionary work overseas has been its emphasis, from its early beginnings, on self-help and industrial education. Dr.

William J. Harvey III, the current executive of the N.B.C. F.M.B. notes:

We Baptists reestablished our missions back in 1882 with a completely different philosophy and motivation than the white churches. The Protestant missions of

that time were mainly concerned with the salvation of the souls of the Africans. Not so with us. The very names of our first projects are indicative of our concept – the Bendo Industrial Mission and the Suehn Industrial Mission of Liberia, the Providence Industrial Mission of Nyasaland, now Malawi. Black Americans were concerned with the material as well as the spiritual welfare of the people. That is why we were the first to introduce industrial missions to Africa (cited by Wilmore 1986, 101).

Interestingly, it was the model of Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute in Alabama which black mission leaders followed in setting up their industrial training programs.

Washington and his successor at Tuskegee, Robert R. Moton, had considerable influence on black churches and their evolving missionary ideas. Washington, in fact, was a member of the N.B.C.F.M.B. (see Martin 1982, 77-90).

Twentieth Century Decline

Black church support of missions gradually began to decline toward the beginning of World War I. What had begun so auspiciously during the last quarter of the nineteenth century now fell into disarray. Again there was no single explanation. It was an era of racial hatred and violence at home; black Americans were struggling to survive. There was, of course, the distraction of a world war and the Great Depression. Funds were increasingly short. No influential dominant denominational leaders emerged to raise the missions standard as in the past. In fact, many church leaders now immersed themselves in ecclesiastical politics. Social issues at home became a growing priority. Then too, the Student Volunteer Movement, the chief recruiter of missionaries, worked primarily at colleges and universities where blacks were least likely to be found. Finally, increasing white paternalism and prejudice on the mission field caused less interest by blacks in

working under white missionaries. At times there was, of course, outright discrimination of white mission agencies that refused to take black candidates.

Independent black denominations were growing rapidly from 30,000 members in the late 1800s to over four million in 1916. This cut off many blacks from mainline sending agencies. And blacks who became interested in the ministry were increasingly needed at home to serve this growth.

Sadly, even those predominately white missions that had used black missionaries so effectively in the late nineteenth century, used them with rare exception in the twentieth. Clearly one major cause of this change of attitude was the growing opposition of European colonial governments in Africa against black Americans. These governments were now pressuring American church groups to use only white missionaries. Visa restrictions upon black Americans became more common, even in previously friendly British areas. Some black missionaries were even detained as “undesirable aliens.” Portuguese governments began to require minimal educational attainments of potential missionaries or forbade use of indigenous African languages (Johnson 1982, 201-207).

Tremendous sociopolitical changes were occurring on the African continent. Black church groups first sent their own missionaries to the “dark continent” before the formal establishment of colonial rule. Now the partitioning of Africa by European powers had reached its apex. This was becoming a growing obstacle to black American outreach. By 1925 Europeans were feeling the pressure of African nationalism and their fear was that further African American presence would only aggravate the situation. With the exception of Liberia, much of the continent was becoming practically closed to black missionaries from abroad.

The Rise of Faith Missions

While black mainline denominational missions have languished in this century, one hopeful sign has been the beginnings of black nondenominational faith missions. One sterling example of this slowly growing movement is Rev. Montrose Waite (1891-1977), the acknowledged founder of black Christian faith missions in America. Waite was born in Jamaica but educated in A.B. Simpson's new school, Nyack Missionary Training Institute. After several delays, he was finally accepted by the Christian Missionary Alliance and under their auspices served from 1923-1937 in Sierra Leone and Guinea. Though he faced many obstacles, hardships, and much discrimination, he had a very fruitful ministry. Then he served as an independent missionary raising funds and stirring up missionary vision for eight years in the States. In 1947 when no white agency would accept him after the War (No one wanted to send a large family of ten!), he founded the Afro American Missionary Crusade in Philadelphia. This is thought to be the first black faith mission in America. Waite became its first missionary and faithfully served from 1948-1961 in Liberia. Walking inland he established a church in Bopolu Town. Some of the lumber for the mission building was actually carried 50 miles on his head! His life and ministry is filled with scores of examples of God's marvelous provision for the physical and financial needs of his family (well documented in his posthumously published biography, *Waite: A Man Who Could Not Wait*). In 1957 he co-founded the Carver Foreign Missions, the second major faith foreign mission under black leadership. From 1957-1976 Rev. Waite made many other trips to West Africa and East Africa ministering to missionaries and missions, preaching the Gospel and working as an

independent missionary, before becoming the candidate secretary for Carver Foreign Missions in Atlanta. In 1975 he helped the Revival Church of Tanzania in its church planting ministry and worked with them until 1977 (Seals and McNeal 1988, 6-160).

Current Foreign Missions Involvement

Black churches today have mission work that they support in Africa, the Caribbean, South America, and Asia. The major denominational bodies all conduct their mission outreaches under their denominational mission boards, often in close cooperation with affiliated national church bodies overseas. The structure of mission work in most black denominations differs somewhat from most white denominations in terms of who they define as “missionaries,” how they are supported at home, how they are deployed on the field, and the importance of women’s missionary societies.

Black Baptists in the United States were the first to reach out to Africa. The National Baptist Convention U.S.A., Inc. (N.B.C.), with today more than 7.5 million members in over 30,000 churches, continues to maintain the largest overseas operation among black denominations. According to the 1998-2000 edition of the authoritative *Mission Handbook*, it supports Christian works in eleven countries: eight African nations (Guinea, Lesotho, Liberia, Malawi, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Swaziland, and Zambia), and three nations in tropical America (Bahamas, Barbados, and Nicaragua). The N.B.C. “sponsors” approximately 850 churches in 10 overseas nations along with elementary and secondary schools, hospitals (clinics?) and a seminary in Lesotho. It continues to emphasize industrial education and self-help. Though it evidently supports scores of national pastors and overseas workers, according to the 1997 M.A.R.C. survey, the

N.B.C. fully supports a meager twelve American career (serving more than four years) missionaries overseas. The 1998 *Handbook* records that about 1.7 million dollars was received from N.B.C. churches in the previous reported year for the Foreign Mission Board causes. Most of the money sent overseas seems to go to help N.B.C. affiliated established churches in the previously mentioned countries. At their home office in Philadelphia, ten supported staff, under Executive Secretary Dr. William J. Harvey III, serve the missionaries and workers overseas (Siewert and Valdez, 1997, 211). How much of the money given by its constituency for “missions” is used for home office salaries and administrative expenses is still a disputed issue.

The National Baptist Convention of America (“Unincorporated” originally, but incorporated since 1988), claims over 11,000 churches and more than 3.5 million members. Its mission program supports national workers, church construction, Christian education and relief efforts in three countries: Ghana, Haiti, Jamaica. In the MARC 1998 *Handbook*, the N.B.C.A. reported no American career missionaries overseas. It was receiving about \$390,000 from churches to support its various overseas causes. Its Foreign Mission Board, headquartered in Dallas and led by Rev. N. Andrew Allen, had four home office staff (Siewert and Valdez, 1997, 210-11).

The Progressive National Baptist Convention, USA was founded in 1961 because of tensions over presidential term limits in the N.B.C. and a desire for more civil rights involvement (Fitts 1985, 155-157). With approximately one million members and possibly 500 churches, the P.N.B.C. in 1992 supported causes in five countries: Barbados, Haiti, Liberia, the Virgin Islands, and Zaire (Siewert and Kenyon 1993, 210). It reports that its overseas work involves support of Bible distribution, church construction

and childrens programs. In the 1998 *Handbook* their Global Mission Bureau also reported no American career personnel serving overseas and no financial support received from its churches for its various causes. At its mission headquarters in Philadelphia three home office staff, under the direction of Dr. Ronald K. Hills, served the public (Siewert and Valdez, 1997, 210-11).

The Lott Carey Baptist Foreign Mission Convention, a service agency to black Baptist churches from all three of the above denominations, in 1992 reported to be supporting missionary activity in five countries: Guyana, India, Kenya, Liberia, and Nigeria (Siewert and Kenyon 1993, 178). It is primarily engaged in providing medical supplies, Christian education, and support of overseas (national) workers. Though it sponsors about 85 national “missionaries,” the 1998 *Handbook* reported no American personnel being supported as career cross-cultural laborers. The L.C.B.F.M.C. received about \$790,000 in 1992 from over 3800 churches (80% belonging to other national Baptist bodies). Its mission headquarters in Washington D.C. is currently directed by Dr. David E. Goatley. It prides itself in its policy that at least 75% of its receipts must be spent on the foreign field. The Lott Carrey convention claims to have the lowest operating overhead among all black missions-sending organizations. (Fitts 1985, 153-154; Siewert and Valdez 1997, 194; Tinney).

The youngest (fourth?) black Baptist convention, the National Missionary Baptist Convention of America, organized in 1988 (again over the issue of control of publishing activities!), already reports some 2,140,000 members. At this writing, statistics are unavailable as to its missions activities (Mead 1995, 70).

And what about current black Methodists' mission efforts? The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, with over a million members and more than 6,000 churches (1984 figures), does missions under its Department of Overseas Missions. Their primary focus is on literature distribution, evangelism and support of national workers. The latest available data (from 1992) reveals that the AMEZ denomination received from its constituency about \$250,000 for work in four countries (Ghana, Guyana, Jamaica and Liberia). To their credit, they do support four American missionaries overseas. The African Episcopal Church (approximately 6,200 churches with a membership of over 2.2 million), though receiving some \$500,000 from its churches, reported no American overseas career missionaries serving under its auspices (Siewert and Valdez 1997, 111). The Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, with 800,000 U.S. members and reportedly 3,000 churches, supports Christian activity in three nations: Haiti, Jamaica, and Nigeria. Its Board of Missions received approximately \$50,000 in 1997 to support its overseas works, primarily Christian educational. One American missionary was being supported in Nigeria (Mead 1995, 200-201; Siewert and Valdez 1997, 139).

Little known to many until recently, is the Church of God in Christ (COGIC), the largest Pentecostal denomination in the world today. This predominately black group has a reported 6.75 million U.S. members and over 8000 congregations. It is America's fastest growing and fifth largest denomination. By 1995 COGIC missionaries were found in South Africa, Thailand, Jamaica, Haiti, and Liberia, and on the west coast (Mead 1995, 114; Maxwell, 1996, 22-23). Though this writer has not been able to document the number of American missionaries the COGIC support overseas, some estimate there are

about ten. Further research also needs to be done to discover how much the COGIC gives to missions.

If these figures are still correct, we can conclude that these eight black groups, our nation's largest, with a total claimed membership of about 25 million Americans, support a meager 25 overseas missionaries today. This translates into one black American career overseas missionary being sponsored for every million church members. Unbelievably, it takes one million professed believers to support and send one missionary! Taking the latest missions giving figures provided by these black denominations (and estimating about two million dollars being given for missions annually by the COGIC) it appears that a total approximately six million dollars are given by all eight groups each year. In other words, each year about twenty-five cents is given per church member to missions through these denominational programs!

Rev. Donald Canty, veteran black missionary to Liberia under Carver Foreign Missions, believes that in America there are actually "about 40 mission organizations controlled by black leaders." He points out that most of them are quite small and nondenominational "faith missions" (Canty 1984, 39). For example Carver Foreign Mission, which he once directed, had five overseas missionaries in 1992 all of them working in Liberia (Siewert and Kenyon 1993, 107). Another example is Have Christ Will Travel Ministries, directed by African American Rev. Joseph C. Jeter out of his Philadelphia office. Jeter reported that in 1992 they had five fully supported national workers, one full time U.S. worker in Liberia, and twenty American blacks serving in mission assignments for two months or less (Siewert and Kenyon 1993, 156). Other black independent faith missions started in the mid-1900s, such as Voice of Africa Mission,

Afro-American Missionary Crusade, and the Evangelical Negro Industrial Mission, are no longer listed in the current issues of the *Mission Handbook* (published by MARC).

Whether they are still operative missions today needs to be determined.

Of course, a growing number of African Americans today serve under racially “mixed” faith missions and denominational boards. The Southern Baptist Convention’s Foreign Mission Board has sent out over 3500 overseas career personnel. It recently published a brochure entitled, “Where Are the Black Missionaries?” in which they acknowledged they have but five black Southern Baptist missionaries. With more than 1,100 predominately black S.B.C. churches in America, they have reason to be concerned.

Independent fundamental Baptists, I estimate, have about sixty supported black missionaries but the majority are in “home missions.” (Footnote: In recent years, Baptist Mid-Missions has had three black couples planting churches in urban America. Evangelical Baptist Mission had five couples in U. S. church planting and two couples overseas. Baptist Church Planters had nine couples in stateside ministry. The Association of Baptists for World Evangelism recently had one single African American lady in Peru [a graduate of Baptist (now Crossroads) Bible College of Indianapolis, where the author formerly taught missions!] Baptist International Mission, Inc. (B.I.M.I.) has blacks involved in both home and overseas work but the number is unavailable at this writing.

Other nondenominational parachurch groups and missions such as Child Evangelism Fellowship, Ambassadors Fellowship, New Tribes Missions, SIM, United World Mission and Arab World Ministries have black workers serving overseas. Campus

Crusade for Christ reportedly has over fifty missionaries. Again further research needs to be done.

The current under-representation of African American missionaries serving in cross-cultural missions has been confirmed by two recent research studies. A thorough 18-month study of denominations and missionary organizations by Jim Sutherland, director of Reconciliation Network Ministries, counted (in 1997) a total of 242 full-time African American missionaries. [Jim Sutherland, “African American Under-Representation in Intercultural Missions: Perceptions of Black Missionaries and the Theory of Survival/ Security” (Ph.D. diss., Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1998). To obtain a copy of the entire dissertation or to download the first 25 pages for free, go to www.lib.umi.com/dissertations/main and enter # 9826892. Jim can be also reached at jims@vei.net or 423-822-1091.] His findings agree with a study done by the Cooperative Missions Network of the African Dispersion (COMINAD), which concluded that there were only about 300 African American missionaries sent out from black churches to participate in cross-cultural missions. [Reported by Andy Butcher, “Cross-Cultural Missions the ‘Great Omission’ of the Black Church, Study Says,” *Missions Frontiers* (April, 2000): 15. COMINAD’s 300 count also agrees with a 1973 report by Robert Gordon, “Black Man’s Burden,” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* (Fall, 1973): 273.] These latest statistics paint a sad picture indeed. Since there are about 45,000 American missionaries today, this means that the proportion of African Americans is less than one percent of the overall U.S. mission force to the world. This is despite the fact that the 34 million blacks in our nation make up about twelve percent on our U.S. population.

Conclusion

The amazing story chronicled in this study shows the historical involvement of black American missionaries in spreading the Gospel of Christ. As one looks at the exciting record of past outreach and achievements and compare it to current participation, one might ask, “Where are the African American missionaries today?” This question is certainly a valid one because there does appear to have been a decline in black involvement in world missions in the past few decades. It is the observation of this author, confirmed by conversation with numerous conservative black leaders, that the average black church today equates missions with food distribution to the needy and nursing home visitations here at home. This 20th Century redefinition of missions seems to be one of the main obstacles and has resulted in the few African Americans going across culture with the Gospel in our day. [This observation seems to be validated by a fine historical overview recently done by Marilyn Lewis, “Overcoming Obstacles” *Mission Frontiers* (April 2000): 23-28. She feels that the 1935 to Present should be properly called “The Period of Redefinition.” Her explanation needs to be heeded by all concerned with this issue: “Maybe in part a response to racism and discrimination, the leadership of the [black] church developed a “protective mechanism” for missionary participation. The church changed the definition of missionary. Missionaries were no longer those who journeyed to another country or culture to take out the Gospel. Now, a missionary was defined, essentially, as “a woman who did good works and who taught the Bible in small women-led groups.” Missionary work included all of the things that women did in the [established] church---visiting the sick, cleaning the church and feeding the homeless. However, none of those activities involved taking out the Gospel . . . What

happened in the African American church? The change in definition allowed it to demonstrate that it still had “missionaries”---though they were home-based. Cross-cultural foreign missionaries vanished completely.” *Mission Frontiers*, 27-8]

Further reasons will need to be analyzed by discerning black church leaders. Many of the hindrances to black missions during the first part of this century, cited above, are certainly no longer valid. For example, this author is unaware of any white mission agency today turning down black applicants. In fact many are aggressively seeking to recruit them. Others need to take the initiative and better seize the opportunities to mobilize blacks for missions. The reservoir of potential black missionaries has never been fuller – and it seems virtually untapped!

There are a number of possible explanations for the apparent missions apathy of many black churches. Concerned evangelical pastors and church leaders need to deal with these issues regularly in their congregations – if deemed applicable. Could it be that prosperity and materialism, which seem to be growing problems in all American churches, are also choking off missions concern in many African American churches? Could it be that some black believers have not been taught what true biblical missions is all about? (It is not “benevolence”!) Could it be that with so much energy and resources directed to civil rights causes, fighting racism and discrimination in America, that the Great Commission priorities of evangelism and church planting – both here and abroad – have been severely minimized? Has, perhaps, the liberal social gospel invaded and impacted some churches? Might the growing influence of “Afrocentrism” in some urban churches have caused them to turn from the Christo-centric, supremacy-of-God focus of the Word of God? (Afrocentrism, in its most extreme form, is really a type of

ethnocentrism, long a problem with many white missionaries/churches). Could there be a lack of exposure to real-life missionaries speaking at the local church level? Are people in the churches today hearing about the great spiritual needs in the “10-40 Window”? Is there confusion over the “call” of God? (It appears that many are only hearing about the call to preach and to be a “minister”.) [Researcher Jim Sutherland received responses from over 100 African American missionaries as to the reasons for few blacks in missions. Not surprisingly, most of his respondents placed the responsibility primarily upon the African American churches and their leaders. For example 81% said black churches neglected teaching on world evangelization; 29% said they had been criticized for serving outside the black community; and 31% said they had actually been discouraged by back pastors! Sutherland’s basic thesis is that the lack of African American involvement in cross-cultural missions can be traced ultimately to a “security and survival” mentality on the part of many black churches and leaders. For a more detailed summary of his important research findings, go to http://www.ReconciliationNetwork.org/sum_research.htm.]

There are some encouraging indications that this trend of noninvolvement is being slowly reversed. A 1987 Urbana-style mission conference, Destiny '87, held in Atlanta, drew approximately 1,600 African Americans to focus on the contributions that blacks can make to reach the world for Christ. This was a black-inspired event. Chairman Crawford Loritts reminded participants that the Great Commission mandate is an inescapable obligation and responsibility. Loritts challenged his fellow black leaders in the churches to review what he called their commonly-held “theology of survival”. He observed, “Their excuse, ‘We have to handle our own problems first,’ is not in harmony

with God's global purpose." Of course, his diagnosis could very well be applied to non-black churches as well. Loritts was encouraged, as all evangelical and fundamental mission leaders should be, that some black churches have started to support and send missionaries, but he observes, "We're still a generation away." (cited by Reapsome 1987, 296).

An evangelical coalition of black churches and mission organizations, called COMINAD (the Coperative Mission Network of the African Dispersion), was organized in 1998 to better mobilize black Christians for missions, particularly to the truly unreached peoples of the world. They have since held yearly "global impact summits" to identify and address contemporary obstacles to black missionary involvement. [Contact COMINAD through its National Coordinator, Brian Johnson, at IAAMM@aol.com or at (757) 420-9490. For a brief overview of some of the obstacles they have identified, see Vaughn Walston, "Ignite the Passion," *Mission Frontiers* (April 2000), 15-16.]

The fact that many black churches see *themselves* as a mission field certainly is a hindrance to sending out their best. Some believe that their own needs are so great that they are not in a position to support foreign missions. Why go overseas when problems are so great at home in our own cities? This is an invalid reason (excuse) for not supporting foreign missions. Our Lord reminds us all, "For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake *and the gospel's* (emphasis added) shall save it" (Mark 10:35).

What should be the response of white mission agencies to this critical issue of mobilizing minority manpower for missions? Certainly agencies need to be more aggressive in recruiting new missionaries among all minorities. In the future, more of our

missionaries must come from African American, Hispanic, and Asian American communities. To prepare for this, agency leaders need to be working diligently now to provide models of racially integrated missions. Minorities need to be placed into visible home office staff and recruitment positions. The call is for “partnership not polarity.” White mission leaders need to assist black leaders, consulting with them as requested and needed, showing them how to better recruit, train, and prepare their people for missions (Reapsome 1987, 296-297).

Our world needs black missionaries today because they are often more sensitive to cultural and racial issues; they also instinctively understand the need for biblical faith to stand up for real justice in the real world. [For an eye-opening discussion of the spiritual legacy and impact that African American missionaries have left the mainstream white church, see Paul Grant, “A Legacy of Honor: Mission Innovations from African Americans” at http://www.urbana.org/_articles.cfm?RecordId=238] Many doors will be opened to black missionaries that are not always available to other others. The bottom line is, black churches need to send out more black missionaries and white agencies need them as never before.

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