MISSIONARY SUNDAY
(MISSION WORK ABROAD)

CULTURAL RESOURCES

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Freeman L. Palmer, Guest Cultural Resource Commentator
Director, Finance and Administration, North Jersey Community Research Initiative, Newark, NJ

I. Introduction

In the Great Commission chronicled in Matthew 28:16-20, the risen Jesus left a charge and mission which is ours today. Broadly defined by Webster’s Revised Unabridged Dictionary, a “mission” is “that with which a messenger or agent is charged.”¹ It is the church’s mission to make disciples of all nations. The church is to fulfill this mission by two means: (1) performing the sacraments which mark the spiritual passage of persons into Christian community; and (2) continuing Christian community by instructing people in all that Jesus taught and we are to do it via words and deeds. Without exception, churches are charged to be active participants in fulfilling the Great Commission. We are called to spread the good news of the gospel throughout the world.

¹ Webster’s Revised Unabridged Dictionary.
II. Early History of Our Mission

Biblically speaking, one could argue that the church began its primary mission on the day of Pentecost. “Devout Jews from every nation” (Acts 2:5) including believers from North Africa, evidenced by the hearing of God’s deeds of power spoken in languages native to “Egypt and parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene” received messages about the acts of Christ (Acts 2:10b). It was these witnesses who took the message of Jesus to places such as Ethiopia, where an official of the queen is baptized by the apostle Philip on a visit to Jerusalem (Acts 8:26-40).

Although the Epistles were written to churches outside of North Africa, history beyond the biblical canon point to prolific results due to missionary work. Tertullian (160-220 CE), credited as the first person to develop the concept of the Holy Trinity, came from Carthage in what is now Tunisia. Origen (185-254 CE) was an Egyptian who developed the Catechetical School in Alexandria, which became one of two major schools of biblical interpretation and theology concerning the person of Jesus Christ. Later, St. Augustine, Bishop of Hippo (in what is now Algeria), was a major contributor to Christian theology, framing the notions of original sin and what is now known as just war theory. It was the missionary presence in Africa that produced these among other founders of “western” Christianity, as well as the faith of thousands of African Christians today.

III. America: Our Fallow and Fertile Mission Field

_The Bible did not supply the only argument for the view of slavery as a benevolent social system, but while sophisticated treatises on the nature of bondage and the political economy might have eluded the grasp of the average citizen, the Bible provided a simple, familiar depiction of the virtue of slavery._

James Evans

_Conversion_

African Guardian of Souls
Drunk with rum
Feasting on a strange cassava
Yielding to new words and a weak palabra
Of a white-faced sardonic God
Grins, cries
Amen,
Shouts Hosanna

The above words from theologian James Evans and Jean Toomer, one of the major literary figures in the Harlem Renaissance, capture succinctly and well the troubled history of missionary experiences for our people during slavery. Slave owners clearly chose to accept the Great Commission and made disciples of millions of our ancestors. However, the objective of this mission was not our ancestors’ spiritual, emotional, or physical well-being. It was to perpetuate the institution of slavery for economic profit.
Missionaries introduced a Bible to slaves that traced their inferiority to the curse of Ham in Genesis, displayed a God that had thereby bestowed favor on the slave owners, and a Jesus who would provide for our ancestors “pie in the sky in the sweet by and by” if they were faithful to their divinely appointed tasks as slaves.

In what was a miraculous revelation of God in biblical interpretation, our ancestors identified their situation with the story of the Exodus, wondered with the Psalmist “how could they sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?” (Ps. 137:4), and came to understand Jesus as the one who brought salvation from oppression. With this understanding of the gospel, a number of freed African Americans engaged in the mission of making this Jesus known to people of color inside and outside of the United States.

IV. A Pioneer in the Mission Field

*A Charge to Keep*
I have a charge to keep I have
A God to glorify
A Never dying soul to save
And fit it for the sky.6

It was this revelation of God during these times that gave birth to missions developed by our ancestors. This faith led Reverend William Coker to emigrate to Liberia with eighty-four congregants from Baltimore. In 1811, Coker became the first pastor of the African Methodist Bethel Church of Baltimore, a church that grew from a prayer group of African Americans who joined the Methodist church because of its anti-slavery stance, but who were kept from fully participating in the life of the congregation. Six years later, Reverend Coker led a delegation from Philadelphia, where the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E) Church was born. He was elected to be the denomination’s first bishop, but declined the post. Subsequently, Reverend Richard Allen of Philadelphia was elected the following day.7

In 1820, Reverend Coker set sail on the ship *Elizabeth* from New York to Liberia. He and his congregation were unable to acquire land in that country, so they settled in Sierra Leone where he and his descendants became prominent citizens in Freetown. The following is an excerpt from Reverend Coker’s journal, the entirety of which may be found online through the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture’s *In Motion: the African American Migration Experience*, which chronicles migration experiences of African Americans. This excerpt speaks to a particularly difficult time at sea, yet Coker’s faith in God and the Great Commission emerges loud and clear, invoking the Exodus story as a source of encouragement and strength:
February 16 Thursday

This day is a trying time, difficulties on every hand, present to view; by some, both white and coloured, it is affirmed that the ship cannot possibly go to Sherbro…. Many things seem to unite to discourage us and to make us wish ourselves back in America. But this is the time to try our confidence in God. And I feel confident at this dark time that God will open the way, I know not how. “We walk by faith, and not by sight.” I rest the matter in his hands. He that divided the waters for Israel will open the way, if we hold on to our faith.⁸

Our Mission Work Continued

Reverend Coker was hardly alone during this time. He was preceded by David George, Hector Peters, and Sampson Calvert, who established the African Free Church in 1790. Twelve years earlier, Prince Williams founded the Bethel Baptist Mission in the Bahamas, establishing the beginnings of what is now the Bahamas’ largest denomination with over two hundred churches in the St John’s, Salem and Zion associations.⁹ It was these and others who, despite this dark era in American history, embraced the Great Commission in a different light and proceeded to spread the good news of the gospel to our ancestors abroad.

However, by the end of the 19th Century, interest in colonizing countries principally for economic and political gain led to the encouragement of a greater presence of white missionaries. According to Marilyn Lewis, “The common sentiment of colonial governments was that blacks from North America should not be allowed to enter into some areas - as they were ‘unduly influenced’ by democracy and the Pan African and Back to Africa movements.”¹⁰ However, this did not stop African American missionaries from experiencing a “golden age,” the Emancipation Proclamation era where African American missionaries went to the Congo, Nigeria, Ghana, and other countries in Africa.

Both men and women served with equal effectiveness as missionaries. Notable among them during this time was Amanda Smith (1837-1915). Her autobiography is titled An Autobiography: The Story of the Lord’s Dealings with Mrs. Amanda Smith, The Coloured Evangelist. She traveled to England, India, Ireland and Scotland, and worked and lived as a missionary in Sierra Leone and Liberia for eight years. Her book can be found online in documents collected by the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill. The fruit of the labors of Evangelist Smith and other missionaries of yesterday is the reason for the faith of thousands in these countries today.¹¹

V. Images (Audio Visual Material)

- Urbana.org has a timeline of missions that can be used to educate congregations about the history of missions from 1775-2000. To view the timeline, go to
VI. A Personal Testimony and Revelation

My first hearing of the word mission was in my childhood church, St. Stephen Baptist in Washington, D.C. (now in Temple Hills, MD). Near the beginning, about 20 minutes into the worship service, the ushers collected the missionary offering. My parents ensured that my sister and I had change, anywhere from a penny to, later, dimes and quarters, to contribute to the collection. While I sometimes would have preferred using the change to buy candy from the store up the street, I faithfully dropped the coins into the collection plate.

At the time, it did not appear to me that the money went very far. But indeed it did. A recent conversation with my mother, Deaconess Emma Palmer, revealed where in fact the missionary offering went. As I suspected, the offering went to help those in need in our local congregation with housing, food, utilities and other emergencies. What I did not suspect was that a portion of these funds went to the Lott Carey Foreign Mission Board. This organization’s namesake is Lott Carey (1780-1829), who led a team of missionaries to Liberia in 1921. Reverend Cary had a holistic view of the Great Commission, spreading the gospel not only by establishing the Providence Baptist Church in Monrovia, but several schools as well. Today, the Lott Carey Foreign Mission Convention (no longer board), based in Washington D.C., reaches out to the global church “Touching Lives with Transforming Love.” This includes initiatives in Africa to assist people living with HIV/AIDS.

Today, there is not a missionary offering collected at St. Stephen Baptist Church. The church utilizes a portion of their tithes and offerings to make monthly contributions to the Lott Carey Foreign Mission Convention. It is good to know that my childhood church still embraces its tradition of mission work to those in need around the corner and around the world.

VII. Our Mission Field Today

I’m Available to You
You gave me my hands, to reach out to man
To show him your love and your perfect plan.
You gave me my ears, I can hear your voice so clear

http://www.urban.org/gfx/aamission.timeline.gif

- The Freeman Institute Black History Collection has an extensive array of stories and photographs of African American missionaries as well as links to current missionary efforts and testimonies of modern missionaries. This collection can be found at http://www.freemaninstitute.com/blackcm.htm

- YouTube contains a video of Anna Knight, the first African American woman missionary to India. The video may be viewed online at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ND-kRXOiICY
I can hear the cries of sinners, but can I wipe away their tears

You gave me my voice, to speak your Word
To sing all your praises, to those who've never heard
With my eyes I see a need for more availability
I see hearts that have been broken, so many people to be free.

Chorus
Lord, I'm available to you. My will I give to you, I'll do what you say do
Use me Lord, to show someone the way and enable me to say
my storage is empty and I am available to you.\(^{13}\)

The song, “I’m available to You,” made famous by Milton Brunson and the Thompson Community Singers, is a song which speaks to the heart of the mission work to which we are called. There are a number of ways our congregations can participate actively in the Great Commission. We may do so by following the above example of St. Stephen’s Baptist Church and its support of the Lott Carey Mission fund. We may also follow the example of my current church, the Riverside Church in New York, which has the Riverside Sharing Fund. This fund pledges a tithe of ten percent of its annual offering to local, national, and international organizations consistent with the church’s mission to “serve God through word and witness, to treat all human beings as sisters and brothers, and to foster responsible stewardship of all of God’s creation.”\(^{14}\) Among the projects funded in 2007 were tuition for financially poor students, transportation and school supplies for twelve students in an HIV orphanage in Haiti, a training program to prepare fifty students for university study in rural villages in Cameroon, and free interest loans to women for micro-businesses in organic gardening in India.\(^{15}\) Included in several international missions of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago is the Caribbean Connection, which seeks to increase awareness in its congregation of issues affecting the Caribbean as well as establishing partnerships with churches and organizations consistent with this focus.\(^{16}\) The Crenshaw Christian Center in Los Angeles has the Frederick KC Price Institute Missions Training Institute and sponsors an annual Conference on World Missions.

The above are just a few of the ways in which the lives of our congregations may be enriched by participating in missions well beyond the doors of the sanctuary. Jesus said to his disciples that “the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few” (Mt. 9:37). For African American churches, these words ring particularly true. According to Mission Frontiers magazine, there were 242 African American missionaries in 1998, less than one percent of the US mission force to the world.\(^{17}\) While this number is likely a bit higher than counted, there is an argument, with substantial validity, that for our congregations “charity begins at home,” as the saying goes. It is difficult to prioritize church energy and resources to the needs of people around the world when around there are major social, political, and economic challenges just outside the doors of our sanctuaries. However, our congregations are not exempt from being part of the mission that Jesus charged to his disciples before he ascended to heaven. Moreover, our congregations can bring the same liberating message of Jesus Christ as our ancestors
did more than a century ago. Our ancestors had very little financially and were also living through the hell of slavery.

The introduction to the African American Missions Manifesto, which can be signed and affirmed by congregations, speaks to the importance of the gospel to which we as African Americans bring our unique history:

We do humbly acknowledge that God has called the African American church to a unique role in helping to fulfill the Great Commission. We acknowledge that God has endowed the African American church with its own cultural distinctive, uniqueness and giftedness, borne out of a history of slavery, Jim Crow segregation and oppression. In the furnace of affliction, God has given us a word of redemption for and special sensitivity towards the oppressed and disadvantaged.18

This manifesto not only can be read to our congregations, the website The African American Missions Mobilization Manifesto (http://www.afammissionmanifesto.org), also contains resources to assist congregations in coordinating mission activities from conferences to ways that churches can adopt or partner with cross cultural congregations. What may be of particular interest to our congregations is what is called the “10/40 window,” the region of the world between 10 degrees and 40 degrees latitude. This area not only contains the majority of those not reached by the gospel, but the majority are also people of color who may resonate with the gospel preached in our pulpits.19 Filling the Great Commission can occur at any level. And it is our mission, at all levels, to bring the good news of Jesus Christ to the world in any way we can.

Marilyn Lewis, quoted earlier in this unit, was a teacher at John Muir high school in Pasadena, California. She also worked with the US Center for World Mission. She was organizing the African American Mobilization Division for the Center when she suddenly died of a heart attack at age 49. Just before her death, she edited a special issue of Mission Frontiers Magazine devoted to African American missions. In an article, she states, “Mission is not one of the programs of the African American church. Nor is it a group of women dressed in white for the fifth Sunday of the month. Mission is the purpose of the church.”20

With this purpose in mind for our churches, may we, as African American believers, embrace both our rich history and rich possibilities by participating in the Great Commission.

VIII. Books to Enhance Understanding of Missions

Notes

18. African American Missions Manifesto. Online location:  
http://www.afammissionmanifesto.org/background.html  
19. “African American Church Intercultural Missions.” Online location:  