

MISS AMERICAN METHODIST: TWENTIETH-CENTURY BEAUTY PAGEANTS AS CHRISTIAN MISSION

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Since 1921, the Miss America pageant has become a coveted and controversial showcase of young women from locations throughout the United States and Puerto Rico.¹ Contestants have been crowned and marketed as talented, intelligent, and physically attractive. While competing definitions of beauty and sexuality have been intricately woven into the fabric of the pageant since its inception, the spectacle has also functioned as a public stage to broadcast the political, social and religious perspectives of and agendas for each contestant. Examples include Jean Bartel, who in 1943 used her Miss America victory to promote and sell war bonds to the American public. In 1998, Kate Shindle used her title as a means to bring global awareness to persons with HIV/AIDS, and in 1975 and 1995 Shirley Cothran and Heather Whitestone brokered their respective pageants as platforms to propagate their Christian faith.²

The purpose of this essay is to introduce the multiple ways in which twentieth-century beauty contests have functioned as carefully crafted venues that spotlight and promote certain forms of attractiveness alongside the winner's Christian faith—particularly through the forms of Protestant women's bodies representing the larger institutional denominational bodies of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Methodist Church and The United Methodist Church. The essay explores the origins of the Miss America pageant and highlights three specific competitions where American Methodists shaped and marketed contests to showcase ideal Methodist women who were physically appealing, vibrant in their Christian faith, and active within their local Methodist church. Women were not only selected and promoted as beautiful; they were also commissioned to represent the Methodist Church in its various forms to American audiences. Winning the contest and crown provided a platform from which to broadcast their talents and their Christian

¹ This essay was inspired by the stories shared by the author's mother who, as a member of an Evangelical United Brethren Church in Northeast Ohio, participated in the 1966 Miss Ohio pageant.

² Karen W. Tice, "The After-Life of Born-Again Beauty Queens," in *Mediating Faiths: Religion and Socio-Cultural Change in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Michael Bailey and Guy Redden (Farnham, Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2011), 105-118. Kate Shindle published an account of her experiences as Miss America titled *Being Miss America: Behind the Rhinestone Curtain* (Austin: U Texas P, 2014). Daphne Gray, mother of winner Heather Whitestone, describes her daughter's experience as Miss America in *Yes, You Can, Heather! The Story of Heather Whitestone, Miss America 1995* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996).

faith in ways that Miss America pageant winner Nancy Stafford described as balancing “mascara and the ministry.”³

Origins of the Miss America Pageant

During the early twentieth century, American women demanded political, vocational, and cultural respectability through their active participation in the passage of national Amendments on Prohibition and Suffrage. Women were also involved in the commercialization of beauty as actors in silent films, as representatives for the marketing of hair and body products, and as models of various lines of popular clothing. Motion picture stars, photographed models, and participants on the runway provide examples of alluring woman who were physically attractive, socially-daring, and overtly sexualized. Advertisements in newspapers and magazines broadcast messages to women readers regarding how to improve their physical appearance and beautify their bodies.

American men were acutely attuned to the development and propagation of these advertisements and the various expectations that developed concerning what a woman should look like and how they should dress in private or public settings.⁴ Beauty contests and pageants originated within this culture of marketing as American women were prepared and presented as objects of allurements and encouraged to display their bodies in public on the pageant stage. A wide variety of these contests and pageants have taken place over the past century including the Miss Bronze America pageant, the 100 Percent American pageant (sponsored by the Ku Klux Klan), and the Miss Christian America pageant. While many of these pageants no longer take place, the Miss America pageant continues to be held every September and embodies a 90-plus year presence promoting definitions of beauty for Americans while attracting millions of viewers on national television and in person to its Atlantic City venue.

The Miss America Pageant originated in Atlantic City, New Jersey, during the late summer of 1921. The pageant followed on the heels of earlier contests sponsored by local newspapers throughout the United States as photographs of young women were submitted by readers, published, and subsequently judged by editors and their readership. Seaside communities up and down the East Coast had sponsored similar events judging young women based on attitude and appearance, some of which had been considered “distasteful.”⁵ The Atlantic City event was originally christened the Inter-City Beauty Contest and Fall Frolic, a beachfront spectacle—carefully planned and presented by the local Hotelmen’s Association and Businessmen’s League of Atlantic City—to keep visitors in the area following the

³ Nancy Stafford, *Beauty by the Book: Seeing Yourself as God Sees You* (Multnomah, OR: Sisters, 2002), 22.

⁴ Sarah Banet-Weiser, *The Most Beautiful Girl in the World: Beauty Pageants and National Identity* (Berkeley: U California P, 1999), 35.

⁵ Kimberly A. Hamlin, “Beauty Pageants and American Politics,” accessed August 5, 2017, <https://origins.osu.edu/connecting-history/beauty-pageants-and-american-politics>.

lucrative Labor Day weekend.

In order to draw attention away from other resorts, including Brooklyn's Coney Island, Atlantic City businessmen decided to commodify beauty and promote controlled forms of public sexuality while at the same time turning a profit. During the first years of the competition the only regulation established by the Hotelmen's Association was that "all participants must positively be attired in bathing costumes." Organizers of the "bather's revue" hoped that "thousands of the most beautiful girls in the land" would trek to Atlantic City for the contest.⁶ At the inaugural event the young women ranged in age from 15 to 17 and were paraded in front of an estimated crowd of more than 100,000 people.⁷

Margaret Gorman, a sixteen-year-old rising high school junior from Washington, DC, was crowned the winner of the first pageant.⁸ Gorman was five feet one inch in height and weighed just over 100 pounds. She also looked strikingly similar to popular film actor Mary Pickford, which may have provided her with an advantage over the other young contestants. A *New York Times* article reported that American Federation of Labor President Samuel Gompers claimed pageant winner Gorman represented "the type of womanhood America needs . . . strong, red-blooded, able to shoulder the responsibilities of homemaking and motherhood. It is in her type that the hope of the country rests."⁹ The prizes for winning the inaugural Miss America pageant included one hundred dollars and a "Gold Mermaid" trophy.

Gorman's profile and Gomer's description precluded the later hallmarks embedded into the pageant: that the winners represent All-American girls (non-immigrant, middle-to-upper class, and white) who followed gender-encoded expectations of eventually becoming a mother, raising a family and managing a home. Only eight women participated in the inaugural event while the following year fifty-seven women paraded in bathing suits and donned more formal attire for the newly introduced evening gown competition.¹⁰

Early contestants were judged based on beauty and bodily construction in a manner that Sarah Banet-Weiser has called "Scoring Femininity."¹¹ A scoring system was established that gave ten points for perfect legs, ten points for the ideal torso, ten points for the arms and fifteen points for the construction of the head. Thus, women's bodies were subjectively scored against each other in order to distinguish between those determined to have more physical acumen and those judged as less beautiful. The woman with the most points in the end was set apart as the winner of the pageant. The remainder of the

⁶ Hillary Kativa, "Here She Is, Miss America," accessed August 5, 2017, <https://hsp.org/blogs/fondly-pennsylvania/here-she-is-miss-america>.

⁷ Public Broadcasting System, *American Experience* transcript, page 1. August 5, 2017, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/missamerica/filmmore/pt.html>.

⁸ Banet-Weiser, 36.

⁹ "Intercity Beauty Picked," *New York Times* (September 8, 1921), 9.

¹⁰ Banet-Weiser, 36.

¹¹ Banet-Weiser, 53.

contestants represented examples of less-than-perfect bodies. Their beauty and physical features had been compared against and deemed not as worthy as the ideal woman winner by a set of judges. The winner represented the best of the best, the ideal woman to represent all American women.

Throughout the 1920s and into the 1930s religious groups and women's organizations such as the Federated Women's Clubs of New Jersey attacked the pageant as immoral and disrespectful toward women.¹² One concerned person noted in a Public Broadcasting System documentary on the Miss America pageant, "Before the competition, the contestants were splendid examples of innocence and pure womanhood. Afterward their heads were filled with vicious ideas."¹³ Concerns over the corruption of the minds of contestants through competition and rivalry rose to the surface and public indecency on the part of contestants provided rhetorical fodder that would eventually halt the pageant between 1927 and 1933.¹⁴

By 1935, the pageant needed an overhaul and a plan was embarked upon to rework the competition for purposes of respectability. Organizers desired that the pageant shift from a bathing suit beauty contest to a competition celebrating "the young American woman as a symbol of national pride, power, and modernity." To accomplish this transition, pageant representatives hired Lenora Slaughter, a Southern Baptist, as director of the pageant. She was hired to "(re)produce the pageant as a respectable and legitimate event."¹⁵ The pageant needed a moral compass and Slaughter was intended to bring national prominence and respectability to the competition.

Slaughter barred contestants from attending night clubs and bars. Women were also given a curfew and contestants were no longer permitted to speak to or be alone with men during the competition—including their fathers and brothers. A chaperone system was established and Quaker women from the Atlantic City area served as hosts for the contestants throughout the pageant. Slaughter established the pageant "as a respectable civic ritual and paved the way for future directors to confidently embrace the pageant as an event dedicated to modest and honorable American womanhood."¹⁶ This transition reenergized the Miss America pageant and brought a host of national sponsors on board who pumped hundreds of thousands of dollars into the contest. By the 1940s and 1950s, scholarships and additional material had been incorporated into the pageant including an interview segment and a talent competition.

In 1968, the Miss America pageant drew the ire of concerned women who, in a highly publicized act caught on camera, tossed high-heeled shoes, false eyelashes and bras into a "Freedom Trash Can" to emphasize these items as oppressive devices that made women into public commodities for

¹² Banet-Weiser, 38.

¹³ *American Experience*, 2.

¹⁴ Diana Dimitrova, *Pious Women and Beauty Queens: Acceptance of the Miss America Beauty Pageant by Southern Baptists, 1900-1980*, M.A. thesis, Clemson U. (1997), 119.

¹⁵ Banet-Weiser, 37.

¹⁶ Banet-Weiser, 39-40.

men.¹⁷ Led by author Robin Morgan and sponsored by the group New York Radical Women, the demonstration drew a crowd of over 600 interested spectators.¹⁸ Today, the pageant is held in Atlantic City's Boardwalk Hall and the Miss America Organization has become "the nation's leading advocate for women's education and the largest provider of scholarship assistance to young women in the United States, awarding millions of dollars annually in cash awards and in-kind tuition waivers."¹⁹ Each year close to ten thousand women enter pageants leading up to the crowning of one, as Miss America.²⁰

American Christians and Contests of Beauty

The Miss America pageant was both controversial and alluring to US Christians. While the pageant promoted the importance of physical beauty and sexual appeal it also functioned as a location of missionary activity which authorized and empowered winners to share their belief in God with others. Using the stage as a platform for their faith, contestants adorned in one-piece (and later two-piece) bathing suits and evening gowns, showcased their talents and intellect, and spoke of their faith in Jesus. The experiences of American Baptist and Methodist women demonstrated the Miss America pageant and other beauty competitions could function as locations for missionary endeavor. Winners were provided an array of opportunities to broadcast their particular strands of Christianity in mission fields ripe for harvest such as civic events, church functions and youth rallies.

Using print media as the lens through which to propagate their faith, Miss America Baptists and Methodists shared their stories in Sunday school magazines directed toward juvenile audiences. In this way, representations of beauty and sexuality merged together with proclamations of personal faith and inner piety. The lines between beauty, morality, and Christian mission became blurred on stage in front of millions of Americans and more significantly in the Sunday school periodicals of formidable Protestant children. Their stories encouraged adolescents to think of what they might become if they took care of their bodies and used their talents for God.

A Clemson University thesis by Diana Dimitrova, titled "Pious Women and Beauty Queens: Acceptance of the Miss America Beauty Pageant by Southern Baptists, 1900-1980," examines the ways in which Southern Baptists moved from negative reactions to beauty pageantry toward a more accepting position during the twentieth century. The denominational shift took place when it became public record that women winners had been raised, converted and functioned as witnesses for the Southern Baptist Con-

¹⁷ Patrice A. Oppliger, *Girls Gone Skank: The Sexualization of Girls in American Culture* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2008), 80.

¹⁸ *American Experience*, 9.

¹⁹ Miss America, "FAQ," accessed August 5, 2017, <http://missamerica.org/faq/>.

²⁰ *American Experience*, 12.

vention.²¹ Dimitrova confirms that some Southern Baptist contest winners attributed their winning the Miss America crown to prayer and divine will. In the case of Shirley Cothran, Miss America 1975, the winner proclaimed that she had dedicated the next year to “spreading God’s Word.” Attaining the crown had placed her on a public stage that garnered the attention of thousands of interested supporters. As she traveled throughout the country representing both Southern Baptists and the Miss America pageant, Cothran was able to blend external beauty reinforced by winning the pageant with the missionizing of lost souls for Jesus. She had defeated dozens of other contestants as a result of her recognized talent and physical attraction. The win catapulted her to a position of public attention and placed her in Baptist church functions and youth rallies throughout the United States.²²

This held true for Miss America Methodists and their supporters who also attributed winning the pageant crown to the will and grace of God. Using the stage as a platform for their faith American Methodists throughout the twentieth century adorned tiaras, nursing uniforms, bathing suits and high heels. These women showcased their talents, intellectual fortitude, and humanitarian impulses. The popularity of the pageants across America and the sculpted (and expected) beauty of the contestants captured the hearts and minds of Methodists throughout the country. They also represented the ideal Methodist woman of their day and used the various contests as staging grounds to proclaim their faith in Jesus Christ. Methodist leaders imagined these women would also represent the Methodist Church to the broader American culture and local Methodist newspapers and periodicals picked up on these concerns.

Contests anchored on the physical attractiveness of women have been used by American Methodists for nearly one hundred years. One might imagine early-to-mid twentieth century Methodists as having less interest in promoting physical beauty than in condemning dancing, drinking, and gambling. Yet external beauty and physical attractiveness were expected in some contexts and will be briefly considered in the following three examples. In each case, beauty and attractive physical features played a part in the selection of the various contest winners. Most importantly, Methodist women, especially Miss America Methodists, used the pageant stage as a way to authorize their work in fields of mission by wearing a victory tiara while simultaneously broadcasting their faith to attentive audiences.

Little, if any, scholarship exists that considers a Methodist-based theory of beauty. Elwood Watson and Darcy Martin in their article, “The Miss America Pageant: Pluralism, Femininity, and Cinderella All in One,” note that “defining beauty is an elusive, if not impossible task. No single definition fits because as culture evolves, so does the definition of beauty.”²³ For

²¹ Dimitrova, 128.

²² Dimitrova, ix.

²³ Ellwood Watson and Darcy Martin, “The Miss America Pageant: Pluralism, Femininity, and Cinderella all in One,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 34.1 (2000): 115.

American Methodists, no specific framework had been set to determine a definition of beauty, especially external beauty. Throughout the twentieth century the various Methodist *Books of Discipline* did not mention or identify issues pertaining to what denotes physical attraction or to the physical body itself, other than what one could not indulge in such as drinking alcohol or using tobacco in its various forms. What constituted beauty or physical attractiveness had not been codified in the official rules and regulations handbook of the Methodist Episcopal Church or Methodist Church. This left open subjective interpretations regarding who was considered “beautiful” or how one determined, in a selection process such as a pageant, which woman was more physically attractive than another.

The construction of what constituted Methodist forms of beauty, or led to the pronouncement of one Methodist woman as more attractive than another, begs for further research and analysis. Requiring or expecting Methodist women to be physically attractive for certain contests and pageants indicates that standards, expectations, or cultural norms did exist regarding who was considered externally beautiful and who was not. A limited selection of articles from twentieth-century Methodist children’s magazines highlight how editors were emphasizing the importance of physical fitness, external beauty and various ways that young women might go about becoming more physically appealing.

In a 1963 article for the children’s Sunday school magazine *Classmate*, Gene Davenport examined “The Christian View of the Body” by relating attractiveness to physical fitness and ultimately to Christian mission. He noted, “I have a responsibility to God to keep myself as physically fit as is necessary to perform the particular tasks that God calls me to do.”²⁴ In another *Classmate* article from 1961 author Ann Witherspoon declared, “Use the physical attributes God has blessed you with to their best advantage.” Witherspoon commented, “people are just naturally attracted to those who are well-groomed” and that “its not so much the physical attributes God has blessed you with as how you use what you have to [the] best advantage.”²⁵ Earlier examples of Methodist children’s papers highlight ways to keep one’s self beautiful. The anonymous author of a piece published in a 1934 issue of *The Portal: A Paper for Girls* explained that hairstyles for Methodist girls must be “soft and shining” and “kept scrupulously clean.” Face creams and lotions are also discussed so that Methodist young women could look their best in public.²⁶

These examples provide some literary evidence that American Methodists were concerned about the importance of beauty and physical attractiveness. The following three competitions, partly based on the physical attractiveness of the contestants, provide additional insight into how Methodists blended beauty and attractiveness with Christian mission. Not only were

²⁴ Gene Davenport, “The Christian View of the Body,” *Classmate* (August, 1963): 8.

²⁵ Ann Witherspoon, “Put Your Best Looks Forward,” *Classmate* (May, 1961): 6.

²⁶ “A Few Beauty Hints for Fall,” *The Portal: A Paper for Girls* (September 29, 1934), 4.

these women selected for their physical appearance, they were positioned by leaders the Church (ultimately by the men of the Church) to represent the ideal Methodist woman to a broader American culture. The organizers of the contests used these opportunities to select carefully vetted women who, in turn, used their position as pageant winners to promote their Christian faith.

Miss Centenary

An example of an early twentieth-century Methodist pageant was the Miss Centenary competition held in 1919—two years before the first Miss America pageant took place in Atlantic City. Miss Centenary was a contest to select a Methodist woman as “the most beautiful girl” in Columbus, Ohio. The winner would then represent the women of Methodism at the Methodist World’s Fair by pulling on a ribbon that unfurled several large American flags at the gated entrance to the Centenary Celebration of American Methodist Missions exposition.²⁷ Miss Centenary publicly represented the ideal Methodist woman to the over one million visitors who walked through the gates of the Ohio State fairgrounds during June and July, 1919.

The three-week event was a staging ground for world missions as Methodist women participated as speakers at large public rallies, as missionaries reporting on their work for the Woman’s Foreign Missionary Society, and as attendants at information booths throughout the fairgrounds.²⁸ In the weeks before the Methodist exposition, organizers searched for a young woman to play the part of “Miss Centenary” who would join a male actor portraying “Christopher Columbus” in opening the first day of the fair. James A. Maddox, a local Columbus Methodist and General Chairman of the first day events at the exposition, was commissioned to find “the most beautiful girl in Columbus” for the role of Miss Centenary. Since local Methodist women were not permitted to submit their own names for the competition, Church executives asked for personal referrals from husbands and male friends of contestants, encouraging them to contribute the names and photographs of women to the local Columbus area Chamber of Commerce. Methodist men affiliated with the Chamber of Commerce were given the task of selecting a winner who they thought would not only be physically attractive but also educated, actively involved in a Columbus-area Methodist church, and evidencing an active Christian faith.

Search committee leader Maddox believed that finding an attractive, educated, and church-going Methodist for the role of Miss Centenary would not be particularly difficult. *The Columbus Sunday Dispatch* quoted Maddox who quipped, “Many attractive girls in the city would not hesitate to enter their own names” for the position. As a result Maddox tempered his request and required admirers to submit the names of local Methodist girls “as a

²⁷ *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* (June 21, 1919), 4.

²⁸ Christopher Anderson, *The Centenary Celebration of American Methodist Missions: The 1919 World’s Fair of Evangelical Americanism* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 2012), 138-142.

better line can thus be obtained on beautiful Columbus young women.”²⁹ Maddox, Methodist organizers, and the Columbus Chamber of Commerce desired attractive and educated young woman to represent Miss Centenary and they focused their energies on finding a Methodist who would best represent the city of Columbus and ultimately the Methodist Episcopal Church.

To eliminate anxieties that unattractive or unsuitable contestants might win the competition, Maddox and Methodist organizers created a judging committee composed of three local Methodist businessmen whose task was to filter through the over 100 applications and photographs of young women whose names had been submitted for Miss Centenary.³⁰ The three-man committee then set out to personally interview and “inspect” each candidate to determine which one, in their opinion, was really the most attractive woman in Columbus.³¹ As a result, the men carefully and systematically reviewed each application and traveled from home to home in order to find the perfect representative of Methodist womanhood.

Following a thorough investigation, the committee selected Gladys Amlin, a nineteen-year-old sophomore at Ohio State University and a member of the Columbus Broad Street Methodist Episcopal Church, for the role of Miss Centenary. Local newspapers noted that Amlin had been subjected to a “good-natured cross-examination” and indicated that psychologically and physically she was a “normal American girl, with brown eyes and black hair. Her height is about five feet and four inches.”³² According to several newspaper accounts, Amlin was not selected “for her beauty alone” but also because the selection committee concluded she exhibited a vivacious personality that might “typify the spirit of Columbus in welcoming the world to her gates.”³³

On Opening Day at the exposition, fair organizers adorned Amlin in an attractive outfit designed by New York clothier Livingston Platt. Amlin was brought into the fairgrounds by a dirigible airship and dropped off near the entrance to the fairgrounds. She was also recorded on film by camera operators assigned by Hollywood director David Wark Griffith who had sent his California-based staff to Columbus to make a motion picture of the missionary festival in memory of his Southern Methodist mother.³⁴

The staging of Gladys Amlin as Miss Centenary revealed the importance

²⁹ “Seek Prettiest Girl,” *Columbus Sunday Dispatch* (June 8, 1919), 7.

³⁰ “Methodist Centenary Opens at Columbus at 11:30 Friday,” *Coshocton Tribune* (June 20, 1919), 1.

³¹ “Most Attractive Girl in Columbus to Be Honored at the Opening of Centenary,” *Columbus Evening Dispatch* (June 9, 1919), 3.

³² “Miss Gladys M. Amlin to Appear as ‘Miss Centenary’ on First Day of Exposition,” *Columbus Evening Dispatch* (June 17, 1919), 1.

³³ Anderson, 141. See “This East Side Girl Chosen for the Role of ‘Miss Centenary,’” *The Columbus Citizen* (June 17, 1919), 8; *Columbus Evening Dispatch* (June 14, 1919), 3.

³⁴ Griffith visited Columbus several weeks prior to the Centenary exposition to prepare for the filming. His camera operators were present June 20, 1919, when Amlin was present to officially open the fair. A film *The World at Columbus* was made of the three-week event and marketed for several years following the exposition. The author has not been able to locate a copy of the film.

placed upon beauty, education, and Christian faith within American Methodism. The names of applicants were gathered and submitted by admirers of local Methodist women and newspapers quoted Church organizers as purposefully seeking “attractive” women. Not only was the winner chosen based on her physical characteristics, Amlin was also selected because she was encoded with normality. She represented for the judging committee and for visitors of the exposition what constituted “beauty” and a “normal” American Methodist girl.

The selection of Amlin also presented fairgoers with an attractive, educated, churchgoing Christian woman. These characteristics reflected her status as a student at Ohio State University and her active membership in a local Methodist Church. As a result, Miss Centenary was an example of what Methodist leadership typified as the all-American girl—both alluring physically and active in her Christian faith. Amlin’s early twentieth-century “All-American” presence placed in the context of a Methodist event meant she was beautiful, educated, displayed a vivacious personality, and perhaps most importantly had been raised in a Methodist home and attended a Methodist Church.

Miss Methodist Student Nurse of America

A second Methodist-sponsored pageant that interlaced beauty and Christian mission was the Miss Methodist Student Nurse of America. The competition originated in 1957 and was sponsored by the National Association of Methodist Hospitals and Homes in conjunction with the Methodist Board of Hospitals and Homes for the Methodist Church. The purpose of the pageant was “to select a student nurse who will be representative of the caliber of young persons who follow a Christian vocation in a church-related institution.”³⁵ Ultimately, the Church was on a “search for the queen of the Methodist nurses.”³⁶

Methodist women who were training to become nurses were eligible for the pageant and faced a set of rules that regulated who was permitted (and not permitted) to enter the competition. Each contestant was to be a single woman of “high moral character”; academically rigorous; exude a “pleasing personality”; and, perhaps most importantly, “physically attractive.” To be fully considered, contestants were required to submit an application, personal references, and a full-body photograph while adorned in a nursing uniform along with an informal snapshot. The first-place winner was chosen by a panel of “well-qualified, impartial judges” to represent the ideal Methodist woman as a professional caregiver.³⁷ The winner, in similar ways as Miss America, traveled the country while appearing on various Methodist

³⁵ The Methodist Church, Commission on Public Relations and Methodist Information, *The General News Service of the Methodist Church* (February 18, 1957), 30.

³⁶ “Board Seeks Miss Methodist Nurse,” *Together* (November, 1956): 77.

³⁷ The Methodist Church Board of Homes and Hospitals, *1958 Miss Methodist Student Nurse Rules and Regulations*.

Church-sponsored television and radio programs. Miss Methodist Nurse visited Methodist hospitals and attended the annual convention of the Board of Hospitals and Homes.

The inaugural winner was Marjorie Brasfield of Birmingham, Alabama. Brasfield was 20-year-old senior at Carraway Methodist Hospital School of Nursing and was an active member of Fairview Methodist Church. Brasfield had been selected from a group of contestants from fifty-two Methodist nursing schools.³⁸ News of Brasfield's crowning as the 1957 Miss Methodist Nurse was noted across the United States, including Ohio, where the *Cincinnati Enquirer* announced her selection.³⁹ The following year, Barbara Bowman of McAllen, Texas, won the competition and in her essay, "Why I Chose Nursing as a Career," wrote, "In nursing I am building a foundation for lasting religious feelings. Because a nurse is in service to mankind, she faces situations that must be met in a Christian spirit. Being a nurse makes the scripture, 'Whosoever shall lose his life shall find it,' mean so much more to me than when it was taught in my church."⁴⁰

Bowman's notion of service functioned as a calling card for Christian mission—to serve the world as caregiver and as a witness for Jesus. Service for Christ was essential for the student nurses in the competition. The 1964 winner, Sara Lou Newbauer of Gettysburg, Ohio, claimed to have prayed as a child, "God please make me a nurse. And make me a good one!"⁴¹ In this case, the local Methodist hospital was the mission field and the Miss Methodist Student Nurse competition became the vehicle for Christian mission. Ultimately, if Brasfield and Bowman had not been single, had not had a high moral character, and had not been physically attractive, neither would not have won the competition and ultimately could not have functioned as a missionary caregiver under the title Miss Methodist Student Nurse.

From 1957 until the mid-1960s Methodist young women won the coveted Miss Methodist Student Nurse of America award. Church literature championed each winner as "our Church's national representative to publicly represent the Spirit of Christian Service." Each woman's personal qualifications, enthusiastic zeal for the care of others, and dedication to a "calling" meant they could serve as winner of the Miss Student Nurse competition. The fact that they were qualified because it was determined they were externally beautiful meant they could travel and represent Methodist hospitals and the Methodist Church. This "calling" was to serve others through Christian service and ultimately proclaim to others their faith in Jesus.

Miss America

The Miss America pageant continues to attract women from large cities and small towns across the United States and Puerto Rico. In 2017, contes-

³⁸ "Alabama Girl Miss Methodist Nurse," *Together* (March, 1957): 73.

³⁹ "Dixie Nurse Wins," *Cincinnati Enquirer* (February 19, 1957), 7.

⁴⁰ Barbara Bowman, "Why I Chose Nursing as a Career," Application Materials, 1958.

⁴¹ "Miss Methodist Nurse," *Florida Methodist* (February 1, 1964), 12.

tants must be between the ages of 17 and 24, be a citizen of the United States, and must be “in reasonably good health to meet the job requirements” while the purpose of the competition is to provide “opportunities for young women to promote their voices in culture, politics and the community.”⁴²

The pageant has functioned as a public platform for women of faith to share their religious affiliations and to ruminate on politics from the perspective of a Christian. Contestants including Debbye Turner (Miss America 1989), Tara Christensen (Miss America 1990), and Erika Harold (Miss America 2003) have used the pageant stage provided by winning the competition as opportunities to share their faith. For example, “Christian mission and passion” drove Erika Harold to propagate a message of Christian chastity and even resulted in her pastor describing his Miss America congregant as “reaching more lost people in a year than the average preacher will in a lifetime.”⁴³

Methodist young women have been involved in the Miss America pageant as early as the 1940s. These women represented their respective cities, states, and the country. But they also presented Americans with an ideal Methodist woman who was physically attractive, dedicated to her Christian faith, and active in a local Methodist Church. The author has discovered that since 1947 at least five contestants have competed as Methodists in the Miss America pageant. Donning evening gowns and modeling bathing suits with high heels, these Methodists competed with dozens of other women for the coveted crown of Miss America. In this way they used their crown to promote both church and their Christian faith. Woven into this dynamic was a call to mission that winning the pageant provided these contestants.

In 1947, twenty-one year-old Sunday school teacher Barbara Jo Walker won the coveted crown and toured the country speaking at civic meetings, town halls, and youth conventions. Walker was the last contestant to receive the crown in her bathing suit and the last contestant to represent a city (Memphis, Tennessee) rather than an entire state. Walker made an important cameo visit to the Methodist Youth Conference held in Cleveland, Ohio, between December 30, 1947, and January 2, 1948. A January, 1948, article in *Time* magazine reported that attendees, primarily made up of Methodist young people, “hung on her every word” as she discussed social issues and her Christian faith.⁴⁴ She spoke to approximately 10,000 youth and also posed for photo opportunities in front of a large image of Jesus painted for the Crusade for Christ program of the Methodist Church.

Her presence at a youth conference suggested a link between Walker and the ongoing missional work of the Methodist Church. Representing Miss America, Walker was a mission-minded Methodist who used her crown to

⁴² “FAQ,” accessed August 5, 2017, <http://missamerica.org/faq/>.

⁴³ Karen Tice, “The After-Life of Born-Again Beauty Queens,” 109. Gary Grogan quoted by Tice from John Kennedy’s “Miss (Christian) America,” *Christianity Today International* 41.3 (2003): 6.

⁴⁴ “Young Methodists,” *Time* (January 12, 1948).

talk about her faith. Standing in front of the Crusade for Christ mural she represented what other Methodist young women might become—a physically attractive Sunday school teacher who represented the women of America and used large public venues as a means to broadcast her Christian faith. The Methodist Church was on a crusade for Christ, and Walker's presence reinforced her commitment to the ongoing mission of the Methodist Church.

The headline of the September 10, 1958, issue of the *Mississippi Methodist Advocate* proclaimed, "A Mississippi Methodist is 1959 Miss America." Miss Mississippi, Mary Ann Mobley, was a member of the Brandon (MS) Methodist Church, taught weekly Sunday school classes for children, and was an active participant in the church choir. This was confirmed by Methodist Bishop Marvin A. Franklin, who wrote: "All Mississippi rejoices in the selection of Miss Mobley as Miss America. She grew up in Brandon and from childhood has been a faithful member of our church there. She will be a worthy representative of the best in young womanhood in America and the world."⁴⁵ The Methodist Sunday school children's magazine *Classmate* continued the printed praises of Mobley by noting in April, 1959, that "The dream of almost every American girl—to one day be chosen Miss America—came true early last September for the very pretty and talented Miss Mississippi."⁴⁶

Mobley represented the ideal domesticated Methodist woman who cooked, sewed, and performed household chores. She was in good health and participated in athletic activities including tennis and water skiing. She was also commissioned by her minister and her church to share her faith across the United States. Her minister, the Reverend John Speed, presented Mobley with a white-covered Bible as a gift from the church on which was embossed in gold letters "Miss Ann Mobley, 1959 Miss America."⁴⁷ A prayer service and program was also held in honor of Mobley's ascension to the Miss America crown. In that service Reverend Speed prayed:

Almighty God, our Heavenly Father, Author of life, Source of truth, Creator of beauty; we praise Thee for the honor which has come to Thy daughter, Mary Ann, and through her to her town and state. Above the loveliness of face and form, beyond the manifold talents which Thou hast bestowed upon her, we see the beauty of spirit, deep humility and the sincere understanding which make her a very great lady. Preserve her from danger and temptation, we beseech Thee. Grant her such a measure of Thy grace that wherever she goes, she will represent not the average American girl but the finest that her land knows; through Jesus Christ, her Lord and ours. Amen.⁴⁸

Bringing attention to Mobley's beauty and physical appearance through public prayers the Rev. Speed publicly validated that God had blessed her

⁴⁵ "Miss America Coming Home," *Mississippi Methodist Advocate* (October 1, 1958), 7.

⁴⁶ "Miss America 1959," *Classmate* (April 19, 1958), 6-7.

⁴⁷ "Miss America Sings in Her Home Church," *Mississippi Methodist Advocate* (October 8, 1958), 2.

⁴⁸ "Program Honoring 'Miss America' Begins with Prayer," *Mississippi Methodist Advocate* (October 8, 1958), 2.

with certain physical attributes. He had also prayed for a blessing for mission—"wherever she goes" echoed the Matthew 28 Great Commission passage that would have been familiar to many Methodists in attendance and to readers of the *Mississippi Methodist Advocate*. Mobley's commission to mission also echoed contemporary language concerning missionary endeavors for the Methodist Church. Rev. Speed reported that "Mary Ann has a wonderful Christian spirit . . . [S]he makes anyone she meets on the street feel that she has been looking just for them all day."⁴⁹

In a late fall, 1958, *Mississippi Methodist Advocate* article titled "What's ahead in Christian Missions?" author W. W. Reid asked Methodists: "Are we able to get into new channels of operation and new patterns of thought without unnecessarily wrecking the good work which is at present being carried on? Are we able to find meaningful terms in which to discuss these matters with one another and to inspire the young people in the church today?"⁵⁰ Reid suggested that mission-minded Methodists should recast the image of going forth to proclaim the Gospel message of the Bible. These "new channels of operation" could include the ministry of a Miss America Methodist who had been commissioned by her church and was at work promoting both her role as pageant winner and as a Methodist missionary sent out into the public halls and high schools of the United States.

According to the *Advocate*, Mobley had also brought positive attention to the state, Mississippi Methodism and her local Birmingham church. One writer noted, "Miss America has done what our legislature could not do. She has achieved what the capital of our corporations and citizens could not buy. She has implanted in the hearts and minds of million of American people a delightful picture of Mississippi—a wholesome, a friendly picture, and an altogether nice picture." The same article noted, "Mississippi Methodists, and in fact all Mississippians, are proud of our Mary Ann. She has been an honor to her church, her home, her city and all Mississippi."⁵¹

In 2007, Miss Oklahoma Lauren Nelson was crowned Miss America. Nelson was a member of the Lawton Centenary United Methodist Church and was active as a youth leader in her congregation. Her ascension to the pageant throne publicized by Methodist newspapers reporting her success suggests that there remains an interest (or at least a curiosity) in the Miss America pageant on the part of some Methodists. Nelson continues the line of Methodist pageant winners who believed they had been called by God to proclaim their Christian faith. This was evidenced in a February, 2007, article for the *Methodist Reporter* when Nelson proclaimed, "You have to use your talents that God gives you. He doesn't give them to you in vain. You need to use those to spread a message, to set an example, to glorify

⁴⁹ "A Mississippi Methodist is 1959 Miss America," *Mississippi Methodist Advocate* (September 10, 1958), 1.

⁵⁰ W. W. Reid, "What's Ahead in Christian Missions?" *Mississippi Methodist Advocate* (November 26, 1958), 15.

⁵¹ "1959 Miss America," *Mississippi Methodist Advocate* (September 23, 1958), 7.

him, because that's why he gave them to you: for a purpose."⁵² This sense of purpose, this mission to "spread a message" was confirmed before she spoke at a local youth event. Nelson noted, "I remember praying to God, right before I started speaking: Fill my mouth with the words that You want me to give them; let Your light shine on me to impact these kids." Nelson concluded the interview by confirming, "If I'm not the winner, I'm at peace, because then there's another purpose for me. In the end, it comes down to God's plan for you."

Conclusion

More recently there has been an interest on the part of Christian organizations to plan, promote and host their own beauty pageants. The Miss Christian International Pageant and the Miss Christian America competition have been used as "a pulpit for Christian beauties seeking to use tiaras for evangelical outreach and testimony." Each contestant is required to have a personal relationship with Jesus, expected to share their faith, encouraged to teach Sunday School, and ultimately become a missionary.⁵³ The Miss Christian International website boldly states on its homepage that the organization promotes "Fresh Faith + Beauty on a Mission" and is "the perfect pageant for Christian women wanting to break into the modeling world or develop ministry skills."⁵⁴

"God's plan" or "purpose" for Christian mission for some Methodist women was folded into the success of winning various beauty pageants. Panels of judges had analyzed contestants and determined who would win the Miss Centenary, Miss Student Nurse of America, and Miss America pageants. A key component to winning these competitions was the expectation of having attractive physical attributes judged by the examination of photographs and observable Methodist women walking onstage in evening gowns and swimsuits.

To successfully win each competition meant American Methodist women needed to possess personal beauty that would entice judges to select them as winner. Being physically attractive meant that one could serve as a representative or missionary for the Church and ultimately guaranteed them opportunities to speak at church events, missionary rallies and youth services. The various Methodist pageants functioned as springboards for Christian mission and those chosen based on physical attraction were thought to not only be divinely chosen by God but also representative of the Methodist Church. Pageants such as Miss Centenary, Miss Student Nurse of America, and Miss America brought attention to Methodist women in new ways and signaled the Church was attuned to the body and believed the body, if beautiful and physically appealing, could be used in service for Christian mission.

⁵² Holly McCray, "God's Promises Guide Miss America," *United Methodist Reporter* (February 23, 2007), 4B.

⁵³ Karen W. Tice, *Queens of Academe: Beauty Pageantry, Student Bodies, and College Life* (New York: Oxford UP, 2012), 184.

⁵⁴ <https://www.misschristianinternational.com/faq>, accessed August 6, 2017.