CALLED TO WITNESS, CALLED TO SERVE:
AFRICAN AMERICAN METHODIST WOMEN
IN LIBERIAN MISSIONS, 1834–1934

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African American Methodist women were among the pioneers who established a missionary presence in Liberia, the oldest mission field of American Methodism. And, throughout the first century of missionary endeavors in Liberia, 1834–1934, African American women from the Methodist Episcopal (ME), African Methodist Episcopal (AME), and African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ) Churches answered the call to witness and serve there. Yet, who they were and the contributions they made have been minimally treated by researchers.

The paucity of thorough records on these pioneers may have contributed to limited attention given them. Few autobiographical sketches exist. In many cases, reports contain names of women with little or no description of their work. Descriptive reports were typically written by men who tended to emphasize the leadership roles of men in missionary efforts. Descriptions of exemplary service of some African American Methodist women missionaries appear in reports without the names of those who gave it. In other instances, reports disclose names of women and their contributions, mostly focused on educational and domestic-oriented tasks. Still other material, mostly autobiographical, tells of women who embraced non-traditional roles. These missionaries not only went beyond typical women’s roles, but they also extended missions beyond the evangelizing and “civilizing” thrust with which it began. In at least one instance, these endeavors reflect what may be considered an early form of African American womanist theology.

The first African American missionaries in Liberia worked to build a Christian society among African American emigres, later called Americo-Liberians, who had relocated there after being freed from slavery. The missionaries sought to improve living conditions, plant churches, and build schools that could contribute to evangelized and “civilized” Americo-Liberian life. Their intent was to extend this work among indigenous African tribes beyond the Liberian settlements, using the settlements as a stepping stone.¹

The mission was "special" because the missionaries undertook it in Africa, their ancestral home. Likewise, it was "special" because they undertook it among emigrés who shared the same background of slavery and oppression in America. They also went under the influence of prevailing views in America about Africa as a "dark" and un-Christian continent in need of "civilizing."²

The "special" mission actually emerged out of a larger "special" socio-political circumstance within America that brought Liberia into being. The settlement of Liberia, "place of freedom," evolved from efforts of the American Colonization Society (ACS), formed in 1816 primarily by prominent Anglo-Americans, including some clergymen and slaveholders. Their purpose was to send freed slaves to Africa based on conditions that precluded their serving useful lives in America. They also told slaveholders that the removal of freed slaves would secure the institution of slavery.³

A group of 86 African American pro-emigrationists, joined an ACS representative and the two government officials and set sail for Liberia from New York on the ship Elizabeth on January 31, 1821. More than half of the 1821 emigrant travelers were women and children. The few survivors of the long harsh journey founded the colony of Liberia on the west coast of Africa on January 7, 1822 after the purchase of land 140 miles long and 40 miles wide from a willing chief. They established a city, situated on Providence Island at the south of the Mesurado River, and named it Monrovia after President Monroe.⁴

Some historians insist that the first settlers were themselves the first missionaries who felt called to carry Christianity to Africa, and to abolish slavery at its source. Other historians contend that the government saw the settlers as workers required to build a government station. However, history shows that Reverend Daniel Coker, a school teacher and minister of the AME Church from Baltimore, Maryland, went to Africa on the Elizabeth with a clear missionary purpose.⁵ By the work he accomplished through the Methodist Society he formed, he paved the way for future African American Methodist missionaries.

The environment of the new colony was neither comfortable nor entirely safe. The work included building places of habitation, cultivating the land for food, and dealing with tropical fevers. Attempts to make contact with indigenous tribes were also fraught with difficulty because the tribes did not welcome the Americo-Liberians and missionaries with open arms. Under such conditions, men rather than women were the more likely missionary candidates. Yet, many women made significant contributions in Liberia, including single women and wives of male clergy missionaries.

It is possible that emigrant women settlers joined Coker's African Methodist Society and, under its auspices, carried out missionary roles, but no records of this activity exist. However, there is evidence of missionary endeavors of African American Methodist women in Liberia beginning a little more than a decade after Daniel Coker's arrival there.

Documents show that in 1834, Eunice Sharp, an African American from the ME Church, sailed for service in Liberia along with Francis Burns, a Black minister. Although the records are not clear on what she did or how long she served, it is likely that Miss Sharp became associated in some way with the Monrovia Academy where Burns was appointed as principal.6 Lavinia Johnson, another African American woman, went as a missionary to Liberia in 1845. She was one of three missionaries, including an Anglo-American woman and an African American male, whom the ME Church Missionary Society sent.7 Nothing appears in the records about the nature and length of her service.

In 1836, two years after Eunice Sharp's arrival, the ME Church established the Liberian Missionary Conference. In 1847, two years after Lavinia Johnson's arrival, the ratification of a constitution brought about the independent Republic of Liberia, and the election of the first president in the early 1850s. Approval of the evangelizing role of the missionaries is contained in the words of the Republic's Declaration of Independence, "From us, feeble as we are, the light of Christianity has gone forth."8

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From the late 1850s until 1900, African Americans may have constituted the greatest number of the mission force. But, extant documents do not show the missionary service of another African American Methodist woman until 1876 when Anna Cartwright came to Liberia with her clergy husband, the Reverend Andrew Cartwright, from Elizabeth City, North Carolina. From 1878 until 1903, Anna Cartwright carried out a mission of education through supervision of a Day School at Brewerville, sixty miles in the interior of Liberia. Although the Cartwrights went to Liberia under ACS support, their service actually marked the beginning of the Liberian missions initiative of the AMEZ Church.

In 1884 the General Conference of the ME Church elected Reverend William Taylor as missionary Bishop of Africa. Bishop Taylor reportedly recruited 88 missionaries, most of them women, to serve and plant mission stations on the Kru Coast and the Cavalla River. However, it is difficult to confirm their names and ethnicity. It is known that around 1884, Sarah Simpson, an African American teacher, went to Liberia.

Amanda Berry Smith is among the most celebrated African American Methodist women missionaries who served in Africa. She served from 1882 to 1891, most of the time in Liberia. Her missionary sojourn is chronicled in *An Autobiography: The Story of the Lord's Dealings With Mrs. Amanda Smith, The Colored Evangelist.* Indeed, there is no fuller account of missionary service in Liberia by an African American woman missionary than that of Mrs. Smith. She is important because of her itinerant ministry of preaching, teaching, visitation, pastoral care, and temperance work that exceeded, but did not exclude, gender designated roles. Her emphasis on women's leadership and her pietism marked by her personal relation with God through disciplines of prayer and scripture study are of equal importance.

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9. Walter Williams cited a decline in the number of missionaries sent during the Civil War. But the number began to increase again in the decade following the War. He also stated that missions boards increased recruitment efforts among African Americans and decreased recruitment of Anglo-Americans. The reason was that Anglo-American missionaries showed little resistance to the climate and tropical diseases and it was thought that African Americans could better adjust. Walter L. Williams, *Black Americans and the Evangelization of Africa, 1877–1900* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1982), 5–6. See also: Barclay, *History of Methodist Missions,* 876n; and *To a Higher Glory,* 36.


In the way she combined her spirituality with her work on behalf of women as well as men and children, Amanda Smith also exemplified an early form of African American womanist theology. She took women's experience seriously and she made sure women had a voice and leadership. In addition, she valued extended family kinships intrinsic to African and African American cultures. Her life was dedicated to improving life in the communities she served.

Amanda Smith came to Africa on her own from New York, with financial support from individual contributors who appreciated her evangelistic efforts at camp meetings in America. She first began to think of Africa at a camp meeting missions emphasis day. She noted that the speakers did not mention Africa. She remembered her parents' talk about Africa and the pictures of Africans they showed her when she was a child. She was later impressed by accounts of the brief missionary sojourn of Melville Cox, a young Anglo-American Methodist preacher whose dying plea was that Africa not be forgotten. Plans for her missionary journey began to unfold following a time when she "got on her knees and prayed."14

Prior to her missionary journey to Africa, Mrs. Smith had been one of several noted African American women evangelists engaged in intense religious activism during the Holiness Movement (1835–1930s).15 Her reputation as an evangelist followed her from America to Liberia. As a result, she travelled the Republic in response to invitations by male pastors, mostly Methodists, to preach in local churches. Although she met opposition upon being considered for an appointment to a local church, she maintained that God had a ministry for her and held to the scripture. "Behold, I have set before you an open door, and no man shall shut it."16

Although she was AME, Mrs. Smith became affiliated with the ME Bishop Taylor. She was one of several missionaries who, with Bishop Taylor, opened a station in the interior at Baraka, Liberia. She considered it her "duty" to do whatever she could in support of Bishop Taylor's establishment of missions and schools.17

Amanda Smith also became extremely interested in the education of the young. She became increasingly aware of the government's dilatoriness in providing adequate educational opportunities particularly in the interior. In fact, she was concerned about the presence of "grade and caste" in Liberia and about a recent war caused, in part, by the failure of the government to fulfill its promise of schools and teachers to indigenous people.

She adopted two indigenous children, a male and a female. Although her intent was to educate both of them in England for their return to help others, only the male completed the full course of study. In addition to her commitment to educate her adopted children, she carried out educational ministry in the interior, using Bibles, ABC cards, primers, and other materials sent by friends from America. Her ministry included Bible reading, the organizing of Sunday schools and prayer bands, sharing her own conversion story, and forming a system of basic education. She held meetings on personal holiness and, in one location, organized a “Holiness Association.” She also became the leader of the Temperance Movement in Liberia and helped to revive temperance societies that had begun and waned prior to her arrival.18

The kinship Amanda Berry Smith held with Africa and the people with whom she ministered became vividly evident in her ministry of visitation. She carried to Africa an understanding of extended family not based purely on blood relations that had originated in her ancestral African homeland and was maintained throughout slavery in America. Thus, she addressed those she visited as “Sister,” “Brother,” “Aunt,” and “Uncle,” and she, in turn, was called “Auntie Smith” and “Sister Smith.”19 In her visits, she cared for the sick and dying, administered Holy Communion, listened to persons’ testimonies and stories, helped settle new emigres, advised people on agricultural matters, prayed and sang, and worked to improve family relations.20

Mrs. Smith was in the pietistic tradition. As such, she was unyielding in her reliance on God and believed God “had sent me to Africa Himself and I must trust Him to see me through.”21 She received insight and direction from scripture. She maintained an avid prayer life, including intercessory prayer for persons she tended along her missionary sojourn, believing that “the more one prays and trusts in God, the better he can get on.”22 In all she did during her missionary sojourn of nine years, Amanda Berry Smith held to her conviction that God had ordained her to go and bring forth fruit. She recognized that God’s power made it possible.

The Annual Conference of the AME Church, known as the Liberia Conference, was organized at Muhlenberg by Bishop Henry M. Turner in November 1891. Mrs. S. J. Campbell, and her clergy husband from South Carolina, belonged to the conference, and began missionary service together in that year. Her husband served as the chief conference

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represented. As narrated by Bishop Turner in a letter to the AME Church in America, Mrs. Campbell rendered service as a wife, and she did so “as a perfect lady [who] fills her sphere with all the grace that her position demands.” Bishop Turner’s letter shows the priority given to the domestic sphere of married women on the missionary field. While he did not state it in clearest terms, his words point to a key feature known in missions circles as “domestic evangelism.” It was the woman missionary’s engagement in evangelizing and “civilizing” mission, “teaching” domestic roles by how she lived them in everyday life.

Records show three additional AME missionaries served in Liberia in the last decade of the 19th Century, including Miss Emily C. Kinch and Miss Irene Johnson (between 1891 and 1913); and Miss Fannie M. Worthington (beginning in 1894). Worthington had prior service in the Soudan. While in Monrovia, she married missionary Alfred Lee Ridgel. Her service continued beyond 1896.

In 1896 ME Bishop Taylor retired and the Reverend Joseph C. Hartzell was appointed as the ME missionary Bishop of Africa. Before the end of the century, ten African American missionaries had been sent to Liberia under his direction. Among these missionaries was Mrs. Mamie Weather Camphor, who with her clergy husband, Alexander Priestley Camphor, became the first regular appointees to Africa by the ME Board of Foreign Missions. Commissioned by the Board in 1896, she and her husband were sent to serve at Monrovia Seminary, later called the College of West Africa. Together, the Camphors built within a period of twelve months, an enrollment of 140 students, including 30 indigenous Africans.

Alexander Camphor was elected missionary bishop in Liberia in 1916. Records do not show how long Mamie Camphor stayed in Liberia after her husband’s death in 1918. It is known, however, that she later became the first secretary of foreign work of the ME Church Central Jurisdiction Women’s Society of Christian Service (WSCS).

In the waning decade of the 19th Century, other African American ME women who served as missionaries in Liberia included Mrs. Joseph C. Sherill, wife of the Rev. J. C. Sherill from Arkansas to Cape Palmas.

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27To A Higher Glory, 37.
(1899–post-1908), Mrs. Ruby Williams Allen, wife of the Rev. F. M. Allen from Arkansas to Monrovia (1899–unknown), Miss Amanda Davis from Arkansas State Normal College to Liberia (1899–unknown), Mrs. J. A. Simpson, wife of Rev. J. A. Simpson from Georgia to Greenville (1899 to 1908 and perhaps 1921), and Susan Collins.28

Efforts of two unidentified women missionaries appear in the autobiographical sketch of Bishop Camphor. In one instance, Bishop Camphor wrote about the intentionality with which a woman missionary fulfilled her educational task. Assigned in Cape Palmas under ME Bishop Taylor’s direction, she led a young boy to Christ, gave him an elementary education in the mission school, and sent him on to the Basle Mission for an industrial education. Through her efforts, the young boy mastered his trade and returned to use it among his people. Of her service, Bishop Camphor said:

If this faithful missionary did nothing else than to give this boy his start in life and put him in the path of usefulness and industry, she wrought nobly and well. Many such fruits of the self-sacrificing labors of American missionaries lie scattered here and there on the African continent. It is impossible to estimate the far-reaching good such labors yield in the spread of practical Christianity and the development of character.29

Bishop Camphor also included in his sketches the story of a missionary who showed sensitivity to the mother of a little boy who had been separated from her for three years as the result of the ravages of war. The boy had been given refuge at the mission school where the missionary taught. He had been mourned as lost by his mother. His mother was among a crowd of people from the interior who came to the school. When the mother recognized and reached for the boy, the boy recoiled and seemed not to recognize her. In a caring and nurturing way, the missionary guided the boy toward his mother and succeeded in bringing about a reunion.30

The work of the 19th Century missionaries included in this section provides a lens for viewing the important leadership of African American women from the beginning of Methodist missionary endeavors in Liberia. Their goal was to carry out an evangelizing and “civilizing” mission. They offered lifestyle options from which Americo-Liberians and indigenous Africans could choose. In reality, the differing groups inhabiting the Republic neither benefitted equally from, nor equally saw as beneficial, evangelizing and “civilizing” activities. By the turn of the 20th Century, cultural, regional, and economic differences prevailed. Indigenous Africans continued revolts resulting from anger about the intrusion of people with differing cultural experiences. They were also indignant about the superior attitude of the “new people.”

28To A Higher Glory, 37–38; and Grant Shockley, Heritage and Hope, 67.
30Alexander Priestley Camphor, Missionary Story Sketches, 311–313.
The climate of disharmony and danger in Liberia did not deter African American Methodist women missionaries from acting on their call to witness and serve there. They brought an orientation to missions that shifted from the primary focus on evangelizing and "civilizing" efforts to an emphasis on education and self-help.

The establishment of the AME Liberian Conference in late 1891 paved the way for expanding AME missionary efforts after the turn of the 20th Century. The ME Church also intensified efforts to send African American missionaries to Africa.

In 1908, the AME Church elected the Reverend W. H. Heard as the resident bishop in Liberia. Mrs. Heard joined her husband in a 12 year residency. Their goal was to plant common schools to prepare an intelligent citizenry and to provide tools for self-help. Although he did not identify women missionaries by name, Bishop I. B. Scott of the AME Church lauded them for publishing two little hymnbooks in native dialect during the 1904-1908 quadrennium and for work underway on a third one. The missionaries used the books along with translators at the Garraway Mission, at Krootown and Wissika so that the people could sing hymns in their native tongue and hear the English translation. In addition to the hymnbooks, the missionaries placed on cardboard the Lord's Prayer, the Apostles Creed, and the Ten Commandments. These cards were hung in the native cabins and used as teaching materials.

Among the first 20th Century African American women commissioned by the ME Church for service in Liberia was Miss Anna E. Hall, known as "Mama Hall." Born in 1870 in Bainbridge, Georgia and raised in Jessup, Georgia, she received a normal certificate from Clark College in Atlanta in 1892, and in 1901, she graduated from the New England Deaconess Training School in Boston, Massachusetts. In 1906 at the age of 36, she was consecrated a deaconess and went to Liberia as principal of the Krootown School. She also served at the Garraway Mission. Her assignment fulfilled her dream of going to Africa.

From the scant information about her service, she appeared to have followed in the nontraditional footsteps of Amanda Berry Smith. Indeed,

she identified her missionary roles as teacher, farmer, preacher, doctor, dentist, nurse and evangelist. She ended her 25 years of missionary service in Liberia in 1931. As a result of her work, a mission was named for her and dedicated in her honor. In 1956, Liberian President William Tubman appointed her Knight Commander of the Liberian Humane Order and invited her as guest to his inauguration. After her return from missionary service, Mama Hall remained active in Central United Methodist Church, Atlanta, Georgia where she was teacher of a class of young mothers called the Loyal Daughters of Central. At the funeral subsequent to her death March 9, 1964, she was remembered as the missionary who served whenever and wherever she could on the basis of her motto, “Not for ourselves but for others.”

Other African American women began as missionaries in Liberia before the first 100 years of African American missionary presence in Liberia ended. ME women who began service between 1900 and 1920 included Mrs. James A. T. Foust, who taught in the College of West Africa at the turn of the Century, Mrs. Frederick A. Price, who served with her husband from 1905-1946, Mrs. R. G. Embree, who served with her husband from 1914-1944, and Miss Hattie T. Hooks, who served from 1920-1937. ME women who began serving in Liberia in the 1920s included Miss Celestine King, Maude L. Starks, Bessie Garrison, Mrs. John H. Peters, who was assigned with her husband; and Mrs. W. L. Turner, who taught in the College of West Africa.

From 1905-1908, Mrs. H. T. Wright served in Liberia with her husband Elder Wright, who presided over the Brewerville District of the AMEZ Church in Liberia. They were successors of Anna and Andrew Cartwright. On March 10, 1910, the AMEZ Church Liberian Annual Conference was organized under Bishop Alexander Walters. Mrs. Carrie Chesson and several day-care teachers served in this conference. The intent was to offer educational opportunities and improve Americo-Liberian and indigenous African relations.

Nora F. Taylor was among the most revered AME missionaries in Liberia in the early decades of the 20th Century. She had been a leader in the AME Women’s Mite Missionary Society and the Parent Women’s Mite Missionary Society. She is credited with establishing the Episcopal Residence in Monrovia for the AME Bishop in West Africa. Reports likened her to Amanda Smith and because of her evangelistic efforts,

34 "Funeral Service Bulletin of Miss Anna E. Hall."
36 "Eulogy," from the “Funeral Service Bulletin of Miss Anna E. Hall."
37 To A Higher Glory, 37-38.
38 Walter Ladell Yates, The History of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in West Africa, Liberia, Gold Coast (Ghana) and Nigeria, 117.
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Mrs. Taylor was called Amanda Smith's "legitimate successor in her day and generation."39

The 1920s saw increased interest in the emigration of African Americans to Liberia as the result of Marcus Garvey's race pride emphasis and Back-To-Africa Movement. This interest resulted from African Americans' growing intolerance of continuing oppression and Ku Klux Klan activity. At the same time, hostility toward foreign missionaries increased in Liberia and was reflected in a 1922 message of Liberian President King to the Liberian Congress urging a native church and adding that "every Liberian should find God for himself."40 The Garvey Movement was short-lived. Also by 1934, the number of missionaries leaving for Liberia had decreased.

Nonetheless, the African American Methodist women's presence continued and in 1934, Mrs. Minnie S. Pearson of the AME Church set a new agenda for them in her Missionary Address. Her position was that Christian women in Africa constitute the modern miracles of Christ and that "no nation can rise higher than its womanhood and no church can be established in any land if women are not ready to take their places and assume their responsibilities."41 She identified the need for liberating action because of her awareness that the word "freedom" had entered the vocabulary of Africa's womanhood. She called for missionaries who would seek to equip schools for girls and organize women's societies "where women may learn of Christ and give expression to the faith that is in her."42

The African American Methodist women missionaries who helped to open the first American Methodist missionary field looked upon Africa as their ancestral home. They went to spread the gospel and contribute to the quality of life among those whom they considered their own people. They gave of themselves out of their prescribed roles as women. They also proved to be pathfinders who created new ways of serving as women. They engaged in initiatives, maintained a spiritual presence, and proposed new liberating methodologies that paved the way for African American womanist thought in the midst of difficult circumstances and conflict. They stand today as exemplars of what it means to respond to the call to witness and serve as missionaries.

40 L. L. Berry, A Century of Missions of the A.M.E. Church, 128.
42 Minnie S. Pearson, "Missionary Address," 75.