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A SPIRIT OF COOPERATION IN MISSION: PROFESSOR JOHN WESLEY GILBERT AND BISHOP WALTER RUSSELL LAMBUTH

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This article deals with the contribution made by John Wesley Gilbert, an African American, and a member of the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church, and Walter Russell Lambuth, a European American, and a member of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, to the establishment of the First Methodist Mission in Central Congo.

Walter R. Lambuth was primarily responsible for the establishment of the Southern Methodist Mission in the Congo. Born of missionary parents in China on November 10, 1854, Lambuth went to Nashville in 1875 to study theology and medicine at Vanderbilt University. He returned to China in 1885. However, due to the health of his family, Lambuth returned to the United States. In 1898, he was appointed Senior Missionary Secretary for the Board of Missions based in Nashville, Tennessee.[1]

As a driving force behind the Southern Methodists' interest in Africa, Lambuth did not hesitate to use the power of his office to achieve his dreams and goals. He established contacts with other American missionary organizations, such as the Board of World Missions of the southern Presbyterian Church. His office received on a regular basis magazines and journals regarding Henry Morton Stanley, an Anglo-American journalist-explorer, who was hired by King Leopold II of Belgium in 1870 to explore the vast regions between Lake Tanganyika and the Atlantic Ocean, and Robert Moffat, the first great name in African missions. Moffat was sent by the Scottish Presbyterian Church to open mission work in South Africa in 1880.

Two factors seem to have aroused Lambuth's interest in establishing a mission in Africa. During one of his visits in Nashville, Stanley talked to Lambuth for one hour, urging that "the Southern white men should undertake the work in behalf of the Negroes in Central Africa." After insisting on the need to "pour the western civilization into the barbarism of Africa," Stanley told Lambuth that Africa would be "Mohammedan" if Christian missionaries failed to win the whole continent for Christ. Lambuth wrote: "After my interview with Henry M. Stanley, I was confirmed in my views and strengthened

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[1]*Congo* (July 1958), 14–15; Alexander J. Reid, *Congo Drumbeat* (New York, 1964), 12.

in my purpose. He urged me and my church to come. He said "the field was open and ripe and that what was to be done should be done quickly."[2]

In addition, the southern Presbyterians, who had established a mission at Luebo in the Kasai Province in 1890, repeatedly urged Lambuth to join them. Kasai Province, in which the Presbyterians had established their mission, had a population of four million, made up of the Baluba, Lulua, Bosonge, Bakuba, and Atetela ethnic groups. While the southern Presbyterians had concentrated their work among the Baluba, Lulua, and Bakuba, a population of over one million people in the northern part of the province was left unevangelized. For this reason, they asked Lambuth and his church to join them on the Kasai.

The success of the southern Presbyterians in the Congo also encouraged the southern Methodists to act. The American Presbyterian Congo Mission was the first to establish a station in Africa manned by black missionaries from North America. During its entire history, black missionaries have formed part of its personnel. They had proved eminently successful and secured in an unusual degree the confidence and response of Africans, old and young. Speaking about the success of the southern Presbyterians in the Congo, Alfred Stonelake wrote: "Samuel N. Lapsley and William A. Sheppard, a black minister from Virginia, settled at Luebo in the Kasai region in 1890, and began a work probably without equal in Congo. The American Presbyterian Congo Mission was the most successful of such enterprises in Africa."[3] Besides the creation of hospitals, dispensaries, elementary, normal, nursing, and theological schools, the Presbyterian missionaries had reduced the Baluba-Lulua language to writing and compiled a grammar which remains a classic.

Although the northern Methodist Church had established missions in Liberia, Angola, Rhodesia, and the Katanga Province in the Congo in 1911, the southern Methodists had no missions in Africa at this time. Through the personal influence of Lambuth, the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, not only approved the African project but also elected him bishop in charge of the mission in Africa in 1910. Having also been appointed a fraternal messenger to the General Conference of the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church, now called Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, Lambuth established a committee or "Board of African Missions." Under the presidency of Bishop Roy S. Williams, a black, this committee was intended to cooperate with southern white Methodists in creating an interest in the mission to Africa, raising funds, and securing qualified candidates.

Lambuth undertook the challenge with enthusiasm and confidence. In a letter to one of his friends, he said that the southern whites were better fitted

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[2]Lambuth's interview with Stanley in Nashville, Tennessee on Saturday, April 4, 1890, reported in *Christian Index* (May 3, 1890), 21; *The Junaluska Conference: Report of the Second General Missionary Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South* (June 25–29, 1913), 287.
[3]Alfred R. Stonelake, *Congo: Past and Present* (London, 1937), 43–46.

and prepared by God to evangelize Africa than any other church or people in all the world because "we are born and brought up with black men. They understand us, and we understand them. We understand their good qualities and their bad qualities."[4] During a missionary conference, Lambuth said, "Singularly enough, though born in a heathen land, and having been a missionary in China and Japan for many years, my father and mother laying down their lives there, I was always drawn to darkest Africa."[5]

In deciding to join the southern Presbyterians in the Kasai Province, the southern Methodist missionaries followed the same policy of sending both black and white missionaries. Believing that missionary work in Africa should be a joint project of the American Negro Church and the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, Lambuth began a campaign among the leaders of the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church to arouse their interest in Africa. John Wesley Gilbert, a minister in the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church and professor at Paine College, was chosen to accompany Lambuth on the exploration trip.

Both in 1865, Gilbert, who held B.A., M.A., and D.D., was the "first" student, first graduate, and first African American member of the faculty of Paine College founded in 1882. A graduate of both Paine College in Augusta, Georgia, and Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island, Gilbert won a scholarship to study Greek at the American School of Classics in Athens, Greece. A gifted linguist and very able classical scholar, Gilbert was appointed chair of Greek and Modern Languages at Paine College in 1903. Though he had repeatedly had more lucrative offers, Gilbert had taught in or been connected with Paine College until his death in 1923. He saw in Paine College his best opportunity to aid in the uplift of African Americans and he continued his work there for one more year prior to his taking up his duties in his new field of the African Mission.

Gilbert spoke and wrote several languages very well. In later years, Lambuth paid him this tribute: "I know John Wesley Gilbert as few men do. For sincerity of purpose, high character, and noble ideas, he has few equals and surely no superior."[6]

Gilbert and Lambuth prepared carefully for the mission they were about to undertake. Before leaving the United States, Gilbert had sought out Sheppard to learn from him all he could about the work in the Congo.[7] After purchasing outfits for African travel in London, Gilbert and Lambuth went to Antwerp in Belgium, from where they sailed on October 14, 1911, for the port of Matadi on the Lower Congo, a voyage of twenty-one days. They then

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[4]Lambuth to Mrs. John Turner, October 31, 1910, Lambuth Correspondence, Methodist Historical Society Archives, Lake Junaluska, North Carolina.

[5]The *Junaluska Conference*, 289.

[6]Paine College—Augusta, GA. "An Account of Its Beginnings (1882–1903)" by George E. Clary, Jr. in 1975.

[7]Charles P. M. Sheffey (Mrs.), *Congo Tides* (Nashville, 1939), 12.

proceeded two days' journey by rail to Stanley Pool, above the cataracts. From this point they traveled by small river trading boats on the Congo, the Kasai, and the Lulua Rivers in a southeasterly direction for nearly nine hundred miles to Luebo, the headquarters of the Southern Presbyterian Mission. It was at Luebo that the Congolese gave African names to their American guests. While Bishop Lambuth was named *Kabengele*, Gilbert received the name of *Mutombo Katshi.*

Lambuth wrote, "Here we were given a royal welcome by Dr. William M. Morrison, leader of the Presbyterian Mission, and seven other missionaries. Nothing could have exceeded the hospitality of these good people, who opened to us their hearts, their homes, and their storehouse. They were from Virginia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Arkansas."[8]

For fifteen days Lambuth and Gilbert remained at Luebo, securing more supplies and recruiting the carriers necessary to take them on the long journey into the Sankuru area. On December 22, 1911, they started on foot with sixty carriers who bore their tent, hammocks, boxes, provisions, cloth, salt, barter goods, and medicine chest. Besides securing the carriers, Morrison gave to Bishop Lambuth three of their best evangelists and eleven of their church members, all belonging to and speaking the language of the Atetela, the ethnic group among whom their work was to be established.[9] Lambuth wrote:

> Our caravan stretched half a mile along the trail; Professor Gilbert at the head of the column, and I myself, bringing up the rear to prevent stragglers from running away or falling into the hands of the savages. There were sections through which our men would not go alone, and we passed through two villages at war with each other, thirty-four had been killed on one side and nine on the other.[10]

On February 1, 1912, Lambuth and Gilbert reached Ewangu, the village of Chief Wembo-Nyama and received an enthusiastic welcome. One of the members of the caravan, Mudimbi, had been a boyhood friend of the chief, and while they had not met for many years, they immediately recognized each other. It was largely through the influence of Mudimbi, who was an evangelist in the Presbyterian Church at Luebo, that Chief Wembo-Nyama received the southern Methodists so cordially. After consulting with his headmen, Chief Wembo-Nyama declared his entire kingdom open to the Methodist mission and invited Lambuth and Gilbert to establish a station in his own capital. Wembo-Nyama, who was the "biggest man" Lambuth and Gilbert had seen in Africa, ruled over forty-seven villages and 250,000 people.[11]

Having obtained Wembo-Nyama's consent to open a mission in Central Congo, Lambuth applied for a concession to the Colonial Office in Brussels

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[8]*Christian Index* (October 5, 1911), 10.

[9]Lambuth to Mrs. John Turner, December 10, 1911, Lambuth Correspondence.

[10]Sheffey, *Congo Tides*, 22.

[11]Lambuth to Joseph D. Hammond, December 23, 1911, Lambuth Correspondence.

in March 1912. In his letter to Joseph A. Martin, an Atlanta layman and businessman, Lambuth said that Gilbert had been very helpful in securing the concession of a site for the mission. Gilbert had written letters to the Belgian authorities and the work was so well done that the Colonial Minister, upon Lambuth's subsequent visit to Brussels, inquired who wrote the letters and remarked that they were the most correct and elegantly expressed among those received at his office from one who was not a native of either France or Belgium.[12] A grant of twenty-two acres of land was subsequently secured from the Belgian government.

Lambuth and Gilbert returned to the United States on March 13, 1912, to seek recruits to begin work. The first group of missionaries included Daniel L. Mumpower, a physician, and his wife, a registered nurse, both of Missouri; Charles C. Bush, preacher, and his wife, a teacher, both from West Virginia; and Mr. and Mrs. John Stockwell, from Louisiana. John Stockwell was to be in charge of the industrial department. On his second visit to Africa, Bishop Lambuth officially inaugurated the first Methodist Mission in Central Congo on February 12, 1914. Chief Wembo-Nyama and all the members of his council attended the opening ceremony.

Before leaving Central Congo on February 13, 1914, Lambuth met with Chief Wembo-Nyama and his council to ask them to take care of the missionaries while he was gone. The Chief told his council: "The white chief says he must go home. Be it so. He has many things to do. He can leave his people with me. They shall be my people, for I trust him. He need not fear for them."[13] Turning to Bishop Lambuth, Chief Wembo-Nyama said: "Kabengele, when I have finished the construction of the church, my workmen shall go to your concession and help in the building of your houses there; and when all is done we will build a high strong fence of cane and palm around the mission to protect your people from the leopards."[14]

On his way to the United States, Lambuth stopped at Luebo, where he appointed William Morrison of the Presbyterian Congo Mission to act as counselor to the newly established mission in the Central Congo. The spirit of unity and cooperation between these two missions was due largely to the intimate friendship that sprang up between these two missionary leaders.

When Dr. John Wesley Gilbert died in 1923, and despite Bishop Lambuth's efforts to maintain a close cooperation between black and white church leaders, no black person was sent to Central Congo as missionary. Inspired undoubtedly by the southern Presbyterians who had a fifty-fifty plan of black and white missionaries, Lambuth had proposed in 1913 that both black and white missionaries be sent to the Congo Mission. Some influential southern Methodist officials refused to go along with the idea, however. In a

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[12]Paul S. Djemba, "Luya la Ntundu la Uwandji Kabengele," *Dikendji* (Janvier, 1934), 14–16; Lorena Kelly, *I Saw It Happen* (Ashville, 1977), 6.

[13]Lambuth to Joseph D. Hammond, December 23, 1911, Lambuth Correspondence.

[14]Lambuth *Diary*, quoted in Reeve, *Wembo-Nyama's Land*, 119.

confidential letter to Lambuth in June 1913, Andrew B. Johnson, Chairman of the Georgia Conference Committee on Missions, revealed that several wealthy families in Macon, Atlanta, and Columbus had threatened to leave the southern Methodist Church if their money was going to be used to "support unsaved and uneducated Negroes who want to go to Africa to represent our church as missionaries."[15] A former missionary to Central Congo indicated that the possibility of bringing black missionaries to the Congo was never discussed among the southern Methodist leaders in the 1920s and 1930s. He pointed out, however, that most missionaries would have felt uncomfortable working side by side with Negroes, because it was difficult to "find enough saved souls" among them.[16]

The ruling of the Belgian government against the Garvey movement may help to explain the absence of black missionaries in the Congo in the 1930s. Marcus A. Garvey, a Jamaica-born black, founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association. An exponent of Negro nationalism, Garvey advocated a "Back to Africa" program and self-determination for the Negro in a country of his own. In 1921, Garvey proposed that American Negroes emigrate to the Congo and take over the government under American auspices.[17] Belgian colonial officials saw the Garvey movement as a threat to the establishment of European colonial rule in Africa, and they reacted accordingly.

In February 1935, the Belgian government informed the American Missionary Societies that black missionaries would no longer be welcomed to the Congo. Belgian officials believed that the ideas of Pan-Africanism found in Garvey's movement had influenced Kimbanguism, Vandism, and other messianic sects that sprang up in the Congo during the 1920s and 1930s. They also thought the Congolese would become discontented upon seeing educated Negroes living on a higher level.[18] Consequently, no African American missionary had served in Central Congo Conference before the independence of the Congo on June 30, 1960.

Eighty-five years have passed since the visit of Bishop Lambuth and Professor Gilbert to Wembo-Nyama. They were pioneers in important mission work.

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[15]Paul S. Djemba, "Luya la Ntundu la Uwandji Kabengele," *Dikendji* (Janvier, 1934), 14–16; Lorena Kelly, *I Saw It Happen* (Ashville, 1977), 6.

[16]Johnson to Lambuth, June 6, 1913, Lambuth Correspondence.

[17]A former missionary to the Central Congo, 1920–1946, to author, March 10, 1979.

[18]Edmund David Cronon, *Black Moses: The Story of Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association* (Madison, 1969), 183–188.

[19]Joseph Davis, ed., *Congo Profile* (New York, 1965), 126.