



MISSIONARY SUNDAY (MISSION WORK AT HOME)

CULTURAL RESOURCES

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I. Introduction

More than a decade ago, a short time after my fiancé (now my wife) and I joined Mt. Zion Baptist Church in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, there was a special tribute and presentation made by the pastor to a much beloved assistant minister and his family, Rev. and Mrs. Butler, during Missionary Sunday. The Butler family was being praised for their years of loving service to the Mt. Zion Church family, and then the pastor remarked that the minister's family was being sent with the full blessing and support of the congregation to toil the mission field in...Atlanta. Utterly confused, I thought "Atlanta!?" Like many other people, I had been educated to think that the only place where Christians engaged in missionary work was overseas and, even then, I was conditioned to believe that what the missionaries did was little more than the U.S. Peace Corps with bible study. In my imagination, I always thought of missionaries as digging

wells or building shelters alongside the native inhabitants of faraway lands while learning the finer points of the 27th Psalm or something. However, as I sat in my pew, as a grown man who had been both college educated and churched, I realized I should have known better and was literally embarrassed by how surprised I was that members of our church would be sent to another American city to do mission work.

Missionary Sunday (Mission Work at Home) is important as a commemoration of the ways in which our work and donations help to support our fellow church members, friends, neighbors, and even complete strangers. In accordance with the teachings of Jude 3, it is our chance to show love and solidarity with brothers and sisters by sharing our belief in “the common salvation” that is central to the Christian faith, as well as support those individuals in their (and ultimately our) collective mission of spreading God’s love to all.

II. African Americans and the American Missionary Association

During the antebellum period, the American Missionary Association (AMA), an abolitionist group, was founded on September 3, 1846. The main purposes of the AMA were to eradicate slavery, to encourage racial equality, to educate African Americans, and to endorse Christian virtues and values. Of the twelve men who served on the first board of the AMA, there were four African Americans: Theodore S. Wright, Samuel Ringgold Ward, James W. C. Pennington, and Charles Bennett Ray. Soon after, other prominent African Americans such as Samuel E. Cornish, Henry Highland Garnet, Amos N. Freeman, and J. Sella Martin also served as officers of the AMA. The AMA was founded as an interracial organization in which the leaders had much in common. For instance, all of the AMA leaders were political abolitionists, members of the Liberty and the Free Soil parties, opponents to colonization schemes seeking the return of African Americans—whether enslaved or free—to Africa, and they were church members of liberal communions. Most of the whites were Congregationalists, while the African Americans were either Congregational or Presbyterian ministers. Unlike many of the white abolitionists in other organizations, all the members of the AMA believed in the equality of the races and urged racial integration in all their activities, rather than seeing African Americans released from bondage yet still trapped in servile status. Most importantly, each black AMA member had taken full advantage of opportunities that education and first-class citizenship promised in the North and, thus, entered the struggle to secure similar blessings for all African Americans throughout America. At some period in their lives, these individuals had served as editors of free black newspapers as well as being contributors to abolitionist publications.

The aims of the AMA were best realized following the Civil War, when several institutions of higher learning, that we presently refer to as historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), came into existence due largely to the work of the AMA, including Atlanta University (1865), Fisk University (1866), and, with the aid of the Freedmen’s Bureau, Howard University (1867). Even though the American Missionary Association had garnered the support of various Protestant denominations at the outset, eventually it became most closely aligned with the Congregational Christian Churches, many of which

are now aligned with the United Church of Christ (UCC) denomination. The AMA remained a fairly distinct and independent organization until 1999 when the UCC took steps to restructure and ultimately merge the AMA into the denomination's Justice and Witness Ministries division.¹

III. Mission Work: The Balm in Gilead--Confronting HIV/AIDS



Although many churches tend to focus energy and charitable donations on faith-based initiatives to combat HIV/AIDS on the African continent, The Balm in Gilead's work as a not-for-profit, non-governmental organization dedicated to improving the health status of people of African descent here in the United States is quite laudable. Here in Fort Worth, I was blessed a couple of years ago to attend an event hosted at a local Baptist church wherein local men's and women's ministries were invited to an information panel on a Sunday afternoon to discuss the various issues surrounding sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) in the African American community. Organized by a local group known as Foolproof HIV/AIDS ministry, the session was noteworthy because it brought together representatives from the county's department of health, physicians from nearby medical clinics, nurses from local high schools, and community activists who interacted with the ministers to brainstorm ways to confront the health crises attached to STDs, especially HIV/AIDS. The Foolproof HIV/AIDS ministry came into existence as an outgrowth of The Balm in Gilead. By building the capability and aptitude of African American churches to overcome high levels of stereotypes and homophobic prejudice, The Balm in Gilead has created landmark programs to address HIV/AIDS and other life-threatening diseases. The ground-breaking efforts of The Balm in Gilead, such as Our Church Lights the Way: Black Church HIV Testing Campaign, Faith-Based HIV/AIDS National Technical Assistance Center, and the Black Church HIV/AIDS Training Institute among others, have enabled thousands of churches to take leadership by preventing the transmission of HIV/AIDS in countless communities nationwide.

As of this writing, The Balm in Gilead has mobilized "The Black Church Week of Prayer for the Healing of AIDS" for nearly twenty years, in order to keep Black churches engaged as critical centers for education, compassion, and quality care in the fight against HIV/AIDS. Recently, the national Presidents of the women's missionary society of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church and Christian Methodist Episcopal Church announced a momentous partnership with The

Balm in Gilead intended to build a sustainable health education and medical service delivery system within countless African American faith communities. By providing widespread educational programs and offering all-inclusive compassionate support to encourage those infected, as well as their loved ones, to seek and maintain treatment, The Balm in Gilead spearheads a lively response to the HIV/AIDS crisis within African American community.

IV. New Direction Christian Church and the Need for Prison Ministry

Since its founding in 2001, the express mission of New Direction Christian Church (NDCC) under the pastorate of Rev. Dr. Stacy L. Spencer is to “empower all people to know God through life changing experiences from the inside out” through constant efforts to “reach the unreached.” NDCC, located in Memphis, Tennessee, is a progressive ministry which has grown from sixty to several thousand. A primary way that NDCC has fulfilled its mission statement is by advancing one of their core values: evangelism. Most critically, NDCC has focused on strengthening, encouraging and spreading the good news of the Gospel, especially to those caught up in the criminal justice system. Whereas many churches have prison ministries, NDCC’s incarceration work is purposed to gain new life for ex-offenders and to provide hope for repeat offenders. NDCC’s vision to provide support groups, transitional living opportunities, share closets for donated clothes, and job-training programs for those seeking re-entry into the workforce demonstrates a provocative expression of missionary outreach that seeks to transform the destiny of the formerly incarcerated.

V. Lessons at Lunch with Christland Baptist Church

As I was sitting at a local car dealer, I was engaged in a delightful conversation with an older African American woman who was talking very proudly about her church’s efforts in the community. Most notably, she was talking fondly about her new pastor, Rev. Alvin Marshall, and the programs he established in the Christland Baptist Church of Fort Worth, Texas, including one called “Lessons at Lunch.” The central idea of this ministry is fairly straightforward, yet heartwarming: around lunchtime, students from a nearby high school are invited to have a home-cooked meal in the church fellowship hall and participate in a short bible study/rap session with the pastor. Beginning with roughly a dozen students visiting the Christland Baptist Church who wanted to take advantage of the free lunches, there is now a steady flow of youngsters on a weekly basis who come to the church in order to escape the confusion and stress of their lives, either at home or at school. Next, the church decided to proverbially flip the script by seeking the students rather than waiting for the students come to the church. Operating with the permission of the high school’s principal, the church pastor sought to organize other local ministers to go into the school and simply chat with the students in the cafeteria. Knowing that many of these students lack positive African American male role models in their homes or neighborhoods, male pastors have attempted to stand in the gap for those missing African American men in the hopes of making a positive impact in the lives of these teenagers. Their reception and endearing effect upon the student body has been strong enough to sustain the ongoing partnership between the school principal, and the committed pastors,

in ways that are already seeing a reduction in some obvious signs of juvenile delinquency for the school within a short period of time.

VI. Missionary Sunday at Home in Song

As a central part of the Missionary Sunday worship services, congregations should learn songs such as the African American spiritual “I’m Gonna Live So God Can Use Me,” the classic gospel song by Mahalia Jackson “If I Can Help Somebody,” or the contemporary gospel song by Yolanda Adams “I’m Gonna Be Ready.” The lyrics to the songs are as follows:

If I Can Help Somebody

If I can help somebody, as I pass along,
If I can cheer somebody, with a word or song,
If I can show somebody, how they're travelling wrong,
Then my living shall not be in vain.

Chorus:

My living shall not be in vain,
Then my living shall not be in vain
If I can help somebody, as I pass along,
Then my living shall not be in vain.

If I can do my duty, as a good man ought,
If I can bring back beauty, to a world up wrought,
If I can spread love's message, as the Master taught,
Then my living shall not be in vain.²

I’m Gonna Live So God Can Use Me

I’m gonna live so God can use me
I’m gonna work so God can use me
I’m gonna pray so God can use me
I’m gonna sing so God can use me
Anywhere Lord, Anytime!³

I’m Gonna Be Ready

I say a prayer every night, whatever I do, I'll get it right
With no regret, no guilt or shame this time, no not this time
Once I surrender, I won't dare look back, cause if I do, I'll get off track
Move ahead in faith, and patiently await your answer, what will it be

Chorus

Sight beyond what I see
You know what's best for me
Prepare my mind, prepare my heart
For whatever comes, I'm gone' be ready.

Strength to pass any test
I feel like I'm so blessed
With you in control, I can't go wrong
'Cause I always know, I'm gonna be ready.

I was free to do, what I wanted to, lost everything, but I still had you
You showed me your grace, now my life's renewed and I thank you,
yes... I thank You
So I'll tell anyone who'll listen, I'll testify
about how good you were to me, when so call friends passed me by
The fact that you would show somebody so broke down, so much mercy...

Chorus

Sight beyond what I see BEYOND WHAT I SEE
You know what's best I KNOW YOU KNOW WHAT'S BEST FOR ME
Prepare my mind...PREPARE MY MIND AND PREPARE MY HEART
For whatever comes...FOR WHATEVER COMES I'M GONNA BE READY.

Strength to pass any test GIVE ME THE STRENGTH TO PASS ANY TEST
I feel like I'm so blessed I KNOW THAT I'M SO BLESSED
With you in control...YOU'RE IN CONTROL LORD, CAN'T GO WRONG NO
'Cause I always know...CAUSE I KNOW THAT I'M GONNA BE READY.

So use me as you will, I'll pay the price
'Cause you made the ultimate sacrifice
It's all because of you, that I even have life
And I'll give my love, as a tribute, to how great you are...

Chorus

Sight beyond what I see BEYOND WHAT I SEE
You know what's best I KNOW YOU KNOW WHAT'S BEST FOR ME
Prepare my mind...PREPARE MY HEART AND PREPARE MY MIND
For whatever ...FOR WHATEVER COMES I'M GONNA BE READY.

Strength to pass any test I WANNA PASS THIS TEST
I feel like...I KNOW THAT I AM, KNOW THAT I AM, KNOW THAT I'M SO
BLESSED
With you in...YOU'RE IN CONTROL OF MY LIFE LORD, I CAN'T GO WRONG NO
'Cause I always know...AND I KNOW IT I'M GONNA BE I'M GONNA BE READY.

I'm gonna be ready THIS TIME I'M GONNA BE
I'm gonna be ready CAUSE YOU LIVE DEEP INSIDE OF ME
I'm gonna be ready AND I KNOW IT'S IN YOUR WILL FOR ME TO BE READY
I'M GONNA BE READY.⁴

In each of these songs, there is a very empowering word of faith to the people of God in terms of having Christians make the choices necessary to live up to the “Great Commission” in the gospel of Matthew. As such, in order to sing songs such as “I’m Gonna Be Ready,” “If I Can Help Somebody,” and “I’m Gonna Live So God Can Use Me,” among others, churchgoers take the lyrical meaning of these songs to heart, so that they will reach out to friends and enemies alike. By having younger church members learn these songs the church keeps the idea of sacrificial thinking alive within the black church tradition. Whether singing a traditional or more contemporary song, worshippers often find solace and strength in the belief that, as suggested in the lyrics of these songs, God has created, and ultimately uses, each of us in order to improve the lives of one another in the hopes of making the world an altogether better place.

Notes

1. DeBoer, Clara Merritt. “Blacks and the American Missionary Association.” United Church of Christ. <http://www.ucc.org/about-us/hidden-histories/blacks-and-the-american.html>
2. Jackson, Mahalia. “If I Can Help Somebody.” Mahalia Jackson in Concert Easter Sunday, 1967. New York: Sony Music Entertainment/Columbia Records, 2001.
3. “I’m Gonna Live So God Can Use Me.” Traditional African American Spiritual.
4. Adams, Yolanda. “I’m Gonna Be Ready.” Believe. New York: Elektra Entertainment Group, 2001.