



WOMEN'S DAY

CULTURAL RESOURCES

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I. Introduction

The Queen of Sheba ruled in a region known for its spices, gems and gold. But with Solomon's ascent to the throne, she was concerned about his rule over major trade routes that were central to her country's survival. So when she set out to meet with Solomon, the Queen of Sheba was well aware of his reputation for being a wise and disciplined ruler, but she was not completely sure as to how she would be received. Their meeting reflected the cooperative nature of both rulers and, more importantly, Solomon's acknowledgment of the Queen's sovereignty. As a result, she blessed him and his kingdom with the riches of her land—the finest spices and gold.

This story speaks to the cooperative nature of men and women in leadership positions. But while the "calling" of men to service and leadership within the Church has been acknowledged and welcomed, women in similar situations have traditionally found themselves discouraged from certain areas of services, such as preaching or pastoring.



Mrs. Maria Stewart

Reverend Jarena Lee

This reflects the experience of Maria Stewart, who attempted to address publically the gender politics of the nineteenth century through public messages; Jarena Lee, who was the first woman to petition for the authority to preach in the early nineteenth century in the AME Church; and, Elmelda Ellison, whose church in Cleveland, Ohio has yet to acknowledge the calling of women preachers in the twenty-first century.

Today, Elmelda Ellison sits quietly in her pew as, one by one, dressed all in white, the members of the Emmanuel Women of Worship come down the center aisle. Their heads held high, some fifteen women step and sway, clapping and singing. For a few mesmerizing moments, the women's choir is the center of Sunday worship. It's times like this when Ellison, a religious educator, envisions herself up front leading the flock in prayer. But when the women take their seats near the pulpit, the male ministers seated on either side of Emmanuel Baptist Church's pastor take over the service. The pastor, Reverend David Cobb, Jr., started the women's choir six months ago to increase the visibility of women in the service, but he states that his congregation is not ready for women preachers.

Black women activists say change is long overdue in their struggle for equal opportunities in the black church. They can be trustees and teachers and can even be ordained as deacons in some black churches; but, like many white evangelical churches, many black congregations still ban female clergy. And even among churches that accept women ministers, it is rare for a woman to be a senior pastor. Rather than continue to fight, many women with seminary degrees have switched to predominantly white, mainline Protestant churches, to fully live out their callings.

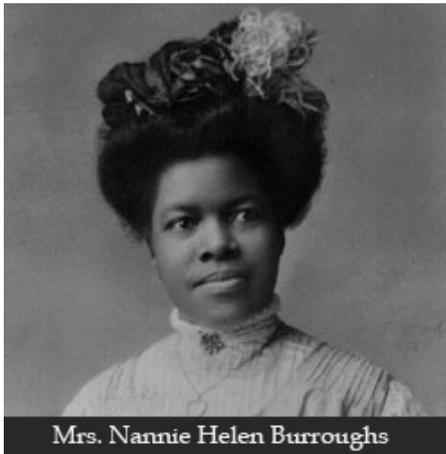
To be sure, there are success stories -- there are three women bishops in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, for example. Yet, they are the exceptions. Many black churches such as Emmanuel still have all-male deacon boards, which oversee the congregation's administrative and liturgical life. Fear, tradition and a literal interpretation of biblical texts urging women to be silent are part of the reason women have been kept from the front of the black church. There is also the confusing concern that women clergy could undermine the historic role of male pastors as important leadership models for black men. This one is really nonsensical, since women have always held majority numbers in the black church, and the historic role of men as pastors has not made women leave because of a lack of female role models.

Ellison says, "How can we say we love the Lord and we oppress women?" In the late 1950s, an Emmanuel leader informed Doris Jamieson he would nominate her to be the only woman on the board of trustees, which oversees church finances and administration. "But you got to learn to keep your mouth shut," Jamieson recalls being told. Today, a third of the twelve trustees at Emmanuel are women. Women there, unlike at many other black churches, serve communion, and visiting women ministers at least preach on Women's Day.¹

II. History

Women have traditionally been the dominant demographic within the black church, since its ascendance in the years following Reconstruction. The majority presence of women can be explained through a number of factors, but of most import is the fact that the church has represented the primary sphere through which women of all economic means and educational backgrounds found a way to improve their communities and redefine notions of respectability and morality. Although many denominations and/or individual churches refused to acknowledge the “calling” of women to preach the gospel or their ability to serve in traditional leadership roles, women found alternative ways to deliver the “good news,” insure the financial stability of and expand the core mission of these churches.

Noting the historic and monumental work of women within the Baptist denomination, in 1908, Nannie Helen Burroughs, then head of the Women’s Convention of the National Baptist Convention (NBC), introduced the concept of a National Women’s Day during the organization’s annual convention. The day would be the one instance in black church life where the contributions of women would be celebrated and commemorated by the black church. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, in her book, Righteous Discontent, says that the day was originally sanctioned to be celebrated on the last Sunday in July and was “conceived as an expression of sisterhood and a means of financial support for the Women’s Caucus.”² Over the years, the celebration of Women’s Day spread to other denominations, religious societies and white churches.



Women’s Day has involved women taking charge over the entire Sunday morning service, including a special Women’s Day choir and a guest female speaker. The women generally display their solidarity by wearing one color, such as white, or special attire, such as African garb or specially made scarves. Also included in the service is a time in which women who have contributed greatly to the church, community and lives of others are celebrated.

Today, women are usually assessed a special offering, but in years past individual auxiliaries and members engaged in various fundraising activities. The presentation of monies raised served as one of the highlights of the service. These offerings have insured the financial stability of many churches, supported missions to Africa and other countries, as well as provided financial support for pastors and delegates to denominational meetings and conventions. Many contemporary churches also have expanded the activities of Women’s Day beyond one Sunday service, with the addition of prayer breakfasts, spiritual retreats and pampering days. For over a hundred years, Women’s Day has remained a central day in the celebratory life of the black church.

III. Songs that Speak to the Moment

The traditional devotional song, “We Are Soldiers (In the Army),” speaks to the perseverance of the “Saints” in their efforts to carry out Christ’s mission to his disciples in Chapter 25 of Matthew, and win in the larger spiritual war between good and evil. The second stanza speaks directly to the role of women within the body of Christ.

We Are Soldiers (In the Army)

(Chorus)

We are soldiers in the army
We have to fight although we have to cry
We have to hold up the blood-stained banner
We have to hold it up until we die.

My mother was a soldier.
She had her hand on the gospel plow.
But when she got old she couldn’t fight on anymore.
But she said I’ll stand here and fight anyhow.³

The hymn, “On the Battlefield for My Lord,” serves as a musical “mission statement,” for many within the black church. It speaks of the service that one is drawn into at the point of salvation. At the heart of its message is the spiritual warfare that the Christian daily experiences. Women who are still struggling for equal rights within the black church can sing this song as part of their vow to never stop fighting for just treatment, because of the One who has called them to serve: “I am on the battlefield for my Lord. I’m on the battlefield for my Lord. And I promised him that I would serve him till I die. I’m on the battlefield for my Lord.”

On the Battlefield for My Lord

Verse 1

I was alone and idle. I was a sinner too.
I heard a voice from heaven, say there is work to do.
I took the Master’s hand, and I joined the Christian band.
I’m on the battlefield for my Lord.⁴

“May the Work I’ve Done Speak for Me” was first recorded by the Consolers, a Florida gospel duo that consisted of Iola Pugh on vocals and her husband Sullivan Pugh on guitar.

May the Work I’ve Done Speak for Me

Verse 1

May the work I’ve done speak for me (2x)
When I’m resting in my grave and there is nothing that can be said

Verse 2

May the life I’ve lived speak for me (2x)
When the best I’ve tried to live, my mistakes he will forgive.
May the life I’ve lived speak for me.

Verse 3

May the service I give speak for me (2x)

When I've done the best I can and my friends don't understand

May the service I've given speak for me.

Bridge

The work I've done. It seems so small. Sometimes it seems like nothing at all.

But when I stand before my God I want to hear him say, "Well done."

May the work I've done speak for me.⁵

IV. Cultural Response to Significant Aspects of the Text

The church has always been the one domain in which black folks in general could rise above the marginality and oppression that defined their everyday lives. Although many of these same churches instituted practices and policies that restricted the governing power of women congregants, women still shaped important facets of these institutions' history. Where women "called" by God were denied access to pastorates, they took on the role of evangelists, spreading the gospel from city to city in some cases. The evangelists sometimes founded new churches and congregations. Most of all, these women formed a spiritual sisterhood that sought to overcome black patriarchy in the church and white racism. It is important for us to note not only the spiritual importance of the church to black women, but also its social importance. Through Prayer and Bible Study Bands, women increased the literary skills of other women, which provided them with alternative career pathways and spheres of influence.⁶

The economic power that these women yielded in the church also enabled them to create benevolent societies that improved community and individual conditions. Where the women's club movement typically catered to educated, middle class women, through women's auxiliaries within the church, the domestic could also rise above the classism and racism that marginalized her. Titles such as "Church Mother," "Sister" and "First Lady" afforded black women new levels of respectability and provided alternative readings of the black woman's image and morality. The title Church Mother was given to the oldest women in the congregation. It symbolized their importance in guiding younger congregants and the pastor. First Lady was the title held by the pastor's wife. Like her political counterpart, the First Lady of the United States, the First Lady of the congregation was the partner and helpmate of the pastor; so, she was afforded a high level of respect. Sister was used to address any woman in the church. It reflected the notion that joining with a congregation or denomination made one a member of the family of God.

It is often only on Mother's Day or Women's Day that we take into consideration the contributions of women to our churches and communities. Even within the body of our churches, we forget to acknowledge the many things that our Church Mothers, aunts, play grandmothers, cousins and "Miss Marys" do to further our maturation and

development. But every day of life should be one of celebration of the women who birth us, love us, and invest in our dreams.

V. Making it a Memorable Learning Moment

Audio Visual Aids

To aid in helping listeners remember the morning sermon and the message of the text, one may want to put into the bulletin or present in a PowerPoint presentation:

- Images of historic women such as Harriet Tubman, Mary McLeod Bethune, Barbara Jordan, etc., who were significant in changing the lives of black people in America.
- Images of women from the local church who have been significant in the life of the church. Include images from the early history of the church, to major leaders, to contemporary women who contribute. Also include images of women working within the body of the church (i.e. the kitchen committee, choir directors, ushers, etc.).

Stories and Illustrations

On Women's Day, a variety of material is available for use in various ways. For example, the following is Nannie Helen Burrough's speech from the 1908 National Baptist Convention annual meeting, where she advocates for a National Women's Day. This speech provides the most primary historic documentation of the day of observance;

A Million women praying! A million singing! A million women desiring! A million women laboring for the coming of the kingdom in the hearts of all men, would be a power that would move God on his throne to immediately answer the petitions. It would mean spiritual dynamite that would blast Satan's greatest stronghold and drive sin to its native heath. Can we have such a day? God grant that we may and thus hasten the coming of His kingdom. Let us, therefore, make the last Sunday in July National Women's Day and call on all women's organizations in our local churches to cooperate with us in making this a day of awakening and consecration for the cause of Foreign Missions.⁷

A Web Resource

The American Baptist Women's Mission at www.abwministries.org/ is a web resource that will aid in understanding the historical significance of Women's Day. Mission work, domestic and abroad, has always been one of the hallmarks of women's work in the church. Denominations have long created their own women's divisions, auxiliaries and conventions that serve as the nexus of these causes. This website surveys the history of some of this work and contemporary efforts as it relates to the American Baptist Women's Mission.

VI. Books to Enhance Your Understanding of Women's Day

1. Gilkes, Cheryl Townsend. If It Wasn't for the Women--: Black Women's Experience and Womanist Culture in Church and Community. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001.
2. Higginbotham, Evelyn Brooks. Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993.
3. Lee, Jarena. The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee, a Coloured Lady, Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel. Philadelphia: Pub. for the author, 1836; and Lee, Jarena. Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel. Philadelphia, PA: Printed and published for the author, 1849.
4. Wiggins, Daphne. Righteous Content: Black Women's Perspectives of Church and Faith (Religion, Race, and Ethnicity). New York, NY: NYU Press, 2003.

Notes

1. Briggs, David. "Leading the Black Church: Can It Be a Woman's Place?" Religion News Service: Scripps Howard News Service. Miamisburg, OH: LEXIS-NEXIS, Division of Reed Elsevier, 20 November 2008.
2. Higginbotham, Evelyn Brooks. Righteous Discontent, The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993. p. 161
3. "We Are Soldiers." African American Heritage Hymnal. Chicago, IL: GIA Publications, 2001. #488
4. "I am On the Battlefield For My Lord." By Sylvana Bell and E.V. Banks. African American Heritage Hymnal. #480
5. "May the Work I've Done Speak for Me." Written by Sullivan S. Pugh
6. See, Gilkes, Cheryl Townsend. If It Wasn't for the Women--: Black Women's Experience and Womanist Culture in Church and Community. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001.
7. The excerpt of Burrough's statement to the National Convention in 1908 was quoted from Dodson, Jualyne E. and Cheryl Townsend Gilkes. "Something Within: Sound Change and Collective Endurance in the Sacred World of Black Christian Women." Women and Religion in America: vol. 3: 1900-1968. Ed., Rosemary Radford Ruether and Rosemary Skinner Keller. San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row Publishers, 1986. p. 123

