

Where are the African American Missionaries?

For starters, a missionary does more than preach and save souls. Missionaries do things like show efficient ways to farm so that more food can be produced, teach skills that can be used in the global marketplace, and most importantly, they embrace the language and culture of the people. Talk to anyone who has ever done missionary work and they will tell you that the experience was more for them than the people they were sent to help.

As a person who not only loves history, but has taken a great deal of time to study it, I always get very upset when I see historical events being edited. I just prefer reading the whole story myself before I make any kind of judgment. The truth is that there were also MANY missionaries that did not commit the crimes that many would like to associate with them. Another truth that we rarely hear is that at one time in our history, there were numbers of African-Americans who heeded the call to the mission field—and they did not just go to Africa!! Predominately

Here is a little history about African-American missionaries:

- I begin with a telling statistic.
- It is estimated that some 22 million African-Americans identify themselves as believers in Jesus Christ.
- Do you know how many of them serve as cross-cultural missionaries?
- Only 300! This number is so small that it even statistically significant. To understand why, it helps to know a little history.
- **LEST THAN 1% of ALL FOREIGN MISSIONARIES ARE AFRICAN AMERICAN**
- **MORE THAN 70% of ALL FOREIGN MISSIONS ARE THE PREDOMINATELY AFRICAN COUNTRIES.**

African-American missionary work is usually considered to have begun early in the 19th century, when northern missionaries including some African-Americans traveled south to evangelize slaves living on southern plantations. This missionary work was expanded at the time of the Civil War, when black chaplains in the Union army seized the opportunity to preach the gospel in the South.

But throughout the nineteenth century, the attention of black missionaries also turned overseas. In 1821 the Reverend Daniel Coker helped to found the **American Colonization Society** and took a group of missionaries to Africa. In the same year the **Baptist missionary Lott Carey** began work in Liberia, which because of its close ties to America, long remained a country of special concern for black Christians. In the middle of the century men like James Pennington and Alexander Crummell argued that **African-Americans had a special calling to reach their brothers and sisters in Africa with the gospel.** Strong connections between the two continents would regenerate Africa and, in time, also elevate the condition of blacks living in America.

Overseas missionary work accelerated in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War, when some black missionaries returned from Africa to report on their work, raise support, and recruit new workers. **By 1880 some one hundred and fifty black delegates were meeting in Montgomery, Alabama, for the first Foreign Mission Convention.** The gospel was spreading. Through the costly sacrifice of black missionaries, some of whom lost their very lives, Africans were coming to Christ. One obvious result of this evangelistic work was a noticeable decline in inter-tribal slavery on the continent. It seemed like the dawn of a new era for the gospel and for the worldwide community of African descent.

Sadly, these hopes proved to be short-lived, because by the end of century most African-American missionary agencies had disbanded. Carl Ellis has identified three traumas that all but destroyed the African-American mission to Africa.

- The first was the end of reconstruction. When the United States Government removed federal troops from the South in the late 1870s, African-Americans faced new forms of white supremacy and racial oppression, with the result that they were unable to establish strong communal institutions like missionary boards.
- The second trauma was the industrial revolution in the North. This led to prosperity for some American especially European immigrants but white unions and other forms of systematic exclusion kept blacks out of the skilled labor force. This left the African-American community with limited resources to invest in global missions.
- The third trauma was the European colonization of Africa. In the 1870s and 80s, the European powers seized control of Africa and carved it up into colonies. In addition to all the other trouble this caused, it had a harmful effect on missions.
- Most African-American missionaries were expelled from the newly formed African colonies, and any new black missionaries were denied entrance. ***Thriving missionary work suddenly came to an end, and African-American missionary organizations were forced to disband.***
- There were still missionaries to Africa, of course, but the continent lost its close and natural connection with the African-American church. ***Even worse, African-Americans began to associate missionary work with trauma and defeat. In subsequent years, the noble history of black missions was largely forgotten, which explains why it is so difficult to learn about today.***

Like so many results of our racist past, the effect of these traumas has lasted for more than one hundred years. Throughout most of the twentieth century, white missionary boards continued to reject black candidates. **Eventually black churches established their own missionary boards,** especially in the 1950s and afterwards, **but they generally lacked the resources** to carry the work forward with power and influence. All of this has led to what black theologians in the 1960s started calling “the Missing Black Missionary”

I would have to agree that there are still some denominationally-based missionary organizations out there that are not as “welcoming” to blacks as most (this assertion is based on some of my experiences with these organizations over the past few years). With that being said, I would have to also agree the reasons black churches do not get involved with global missions Dr. Ryken mentions in his piece.

Also worth noting here is that there are MANY predominately white mission organizations out there that are welcoming to blacks, but just have a difficult time recruiting blacks due to historical reasons mentioned above.

Today, many churches in the black community are without excuse when it comes to fulfilling the Great Commission as described in Matthew 28:19

” Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost:”

Although many black churches are doing great things in their surrounding communities, when it comes to reaching internationally, many have settled for just sending a radio or TV signal to other countries than actual people who are willing to embrace a culture other than their own (this mindset can also be seen in other areas in our culture—something that I will address in a later piece). On the other hand, many White churches regularly send people on a regular basis who are more than willing to do the work of the ministry in this capacity to all continents including Africa. This trend has very little to do with the lack of resources. Black denominations have the money to send people overseas, they just choose in many cases not to encourage international missions as explained by Vaughn Walston of Mission Frontiers:

Some African-American pastors will discourage and even rebuke anyone who endorses sending resources outside of the community. The needs of the community overshadow missions. They cannot see the needs of the world, because they are focused on the needs next door. The church is correct in concern for the needs of the community, but with almost two billion people outside of the reach of the Gospel, we are not released from the responsibility to reach the world!

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I cannot weep with you brothers as I have already spent my emotion.

While home in the US for a few weeks, I continued to make appeals to my kinsmen of the African Diaspora. The responses I got are amazingly disappointing.

The complaints are myriad. Malpractice is too high, office expenses must be met, no one to cover me. It goes on and on. Your complaints are real and legitimate.

It is difficult for me to get broken up emotionally over these issues which confront you, my brothers and sisters, as I have already spent my emotion on the young boys and girls who have no one to help them swallow their AIDS medicines. They have no one to treat them for the chronic osteomyelitis, or the chronic otitis media with the draining pus from their ears.

You see, my list goes on and on too. I cannot weep for you as my emotions are already spent.

I take care of women suffering from tuberculosis, and malnutrition, who cannot find anyone to perform a simple pap smear and come in with aggressively invasive carcinoma of the cervix, infiltrating both bowel and bladder.

Opportunity vs. Need

- You see, in contrast to the US where there is **one doctor for every 450 people**,
- Kenya it is **one for 100,000!**
- That one doctor in Kenya has very little of the technology available to definitively diagnose and effectively treat most illnesses encountered. It is most often a guessing game.

I care for men whose prostate cancer is discovered most often after it has infiltrated beyond any margin for cure and who cannot think of spending money on something like a PSA, or they may not eat that day.

I wish I could say something less biting. I wish there was some real light at the end of this tunnel.

I see German, Australian, Korean, British, Japanese, and American white doctors, nurses, and dentists here. I don't see daughters and sons of Africa serving Africa.

I watch these dedicated non-African-descendant professionals as they care for wards full of people dying with AIDS, vomiting, diarrhea, seizures or a coma. These are the typical sorts of symptoms on ward rounds, where half to often three-quarters of a ward of 50-80 people are HIV positive and are dying by the dozens every month. I weep for them and with them as they suffer burnout and loneliness in an environment that does not allow them to both show emotions and think rationally at the same time.

My emotions are already spent on these non-African doctors who have not come to get rich in Africa, nor to see the beautiful wildlife. They have come to serve people who don't look like, talk like, or have any history in common with them.

I cannot weep for you as I witness these same professionals go into the worst slums of the world, with open sewage, homes made of mud and sticks, and rodents and insects which pass disease and suffering. They go into these slums so they can make life a little better, and dying a little easier. They go into the remote, desert-like, malaria-ridden regions of Kenya to offer help to areas that not even Kenyan doctors are willing to serve.

While home speaking with my African American professional colleagues, only one of those with whom I spoke wanted to personally involve, or invest in the work of relieving the suffering here in Africa. I get equipment donated, but I have to meet the cost of shipment. I get promises of visits to help, but only if I can find a way to help meet the expense of travel. I get a lot of smiles and warm handshakes and a quick visit to the back door with a pat on the back. I can't even get a significant gift of money.

That is why I say, I cannot weep with you brothers and sisters as I have already spent my emotion. You take the time to weep for yourselves. Weep for yourselves as there will come a day at the end of your own career when you will really wonder if you should have invested more in relieving the suffering of which I am speaking. Weep for yourselves, because the people of this continent don't have the time to weep with you. They are too busy burying their own dead.

Life expectancy for nine sub-Saharan African countries is now below 40 years. Infant, maternal and first-year mortality statistics show no sign of decline and are rising in many countries. When I explain to the Africans whom I meet in Sudan, Congo, Tanzania, and Uganda that the African American doctors can't come because they can't meet their expenses, they really don't understand that. They can't weep with you, and I must admit, neither can I.

Please get involved. Please invest. Please take some time to do more than emote over your brothers and sisters here in Africa. **DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT!**