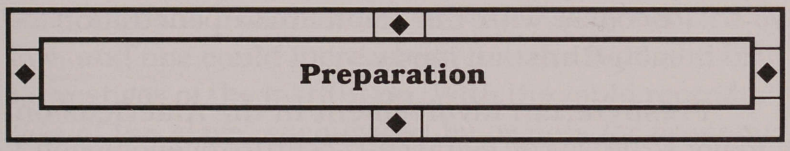
A Tale of Two Countries*



This lecture is not related to Charles Dickens' memorable novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*. It does, however, describe the missionary history of Black Presbyterians as they labored in two countries, Liberia and the Congo Free State of Africa, now Zaire.

The impulse of Christians to be involved in missionary activity is as old as the church itself. The Great Commission in Matthew mandates that Christians go throughout the world to preach, teach and heal. Then, too, the Book of Acts gives evidence of the early Christian response to the epochal events on the Day of Pentecost. Paul and Barnabas, under the influence and commission of the Church at Antioch, were the first missionaries, traveling primarily through Greek cities.

Lefferts A. Loetscher, professor of Church History at Princeton Theological Seminary, writes of three great missionary periods:

- The evangelization of the Roman Empire by the original apostles and the witness of ordinary Christians during the first three centuries.
- The Christianization of the "barbarians" from the fifth to the eleventh centuries.

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- The modern Roman Catholic and Protestant missionary movement occurring simultaneously with the commercial penetration of non-Christian lands.[1]

Presbyterian involvement in the Americas on a major scale was an eighteenth-century phenomenon.[2] A similar development occurred in Europe at about the same time. This missionary thrust, called the Pietist Movement, passionately involved Europeans and white North Americans in winning the souls of Africans, Asians, Pacific Islanders, and Caribbean Blacks.[3] Europe and North America, according to Donald Black, "were the Christian parts of the world and . . . all other areas were populated by 'the heathen.' "[4] The white race "carried responsibility for civilizing the rest of the world."[5]

Slavery in the American colonies, especially in the South, was an economic institution occasioned by an almost unlimited labor supply. Planters and large landholders saw Africans as ideal for their economic needs. They could care for the emerging cotton industry and perform domestic chores in the fields as well as in the plantation house. Additionally, the slaves with their increased market value, served their masters well as a hedge against current inflation.

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[1]Lefferts A. Loetscher, *A Brief History of the Presbyterians*, 4th ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1978), 15.

[2]Donald Black, *Merging Mission and Unity* (Philadelphia: Geneva Press, 1986), 13.

[3]Ibid.

[4]Ibid.

[5]Ibid.

The most heinous features of slavery, both in the North and in the South, began about 1683.[6] At about this time, the institution of slavery was recognized by law, and one could increasingly see the rigid and brutal vestiges of the institution. With the rapid reproduction of the slave, encouraged by owners for economic reasons, their numbers soon multiplied greatly until in South Carolina in 1765 the Negro population outnumbered whites two to one.[7] While these demographic realities held great hope for the economic well-being of the plantation owners and the economy as a whole, they brought fear of insurrections.

Presbyterian involvement in slave holding and the official stance of the church were varied. However, according to Andrew Murray, "[m]ost colonial Presbyterians accepted the institution of slavery as permitted by God, and tended to accept the customs of the areas in which they settled."[8] As early as 1774 in the Synods of New York and Pennsylvania, efforts were made to free two Negroes so that they might return to Africa as missionaries. The American Revolution intervened, thus making this matter logistically impossible. What did happen, however, was a series of personal and corporate attempts by Presbyterians to abolish slavery.[9]

Various meetings of Synods and General Assemblies were overruled regarding abolishing slavery as an official stance of the Presbyterian Church. Consid-

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[6]See Andrew E. Murray, *Presbyterians and the Negro—A History* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Historical Society, 1966), chapter 1, "The Formative Period (1683-1818)," 3-28.

[7]Ibid., 8.

[8]Ibid., 12.

[9]Ibid., 16-17.

erable waffling occurred on the subject as it spread like wildfire through the governing bodies. In 1818 the General Assembly passed a resolution from the Presbytery of Lexington in Virginia, condemning slavery in a forceful manner. However, this condemnation failed to criticize individual Presbyterians who might own and control slaves. The action also urged Presbyterians in the free states to be understanding of the complexities of their Southern brothers and sisters.[10]

The early years of the nineteenth century saw activity surrounding slavery. Increasingly, it was becoming an embarrassment to both North and South. Families were divided over the issue; sections of the nation were embroiled in bitter debate; and churches and denominations were on different sides of this ever-present social problem. In 1817 a Presbyterian minister, Robert Finley, advanced the idea of colonization of the slave in West Africa.[11] This idea, which had first been conceived by the Reverend Samuel Hopkins in 1759,[12] gained momentum throughout the nation. It was Hopkins' view that "remuneration was due Africa. [He] devised a plan to educate some free blacks and send them back to bring the blessings of Christian religion and civilization to their unfortunate sisters and brothers."[13] This concept was largely responsible for

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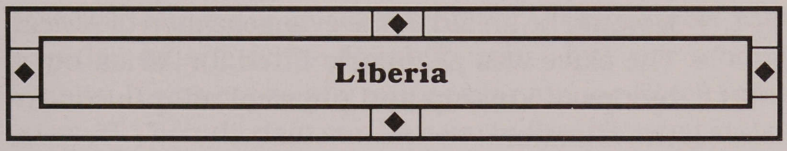
[10]Ibid., 26-27.

[11]Ibid., 76. See also Henry N. Sherwood, "The Formation of the American Colonization Society," *Journal of Negro History* 2 (July 1917): 209-228.

[12]Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of Afro-American People*, 2d ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books,1983), 101.

[13]Ibid. Also see Edwin S. Redkey, *Black Exodus: Black Nationalist and Back-to-Africa Movements, 1890-1910* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), 17.

the founding of the American Colonization Society some fifty years later.



The colonization movement emerged as the best way to deal with a vexing problem that was growing more severe. To manumit the slaves and return them to Liberia, a colony on the West Coast of Africa, would address the concerns of North, South, Black, white, conservative, liberal, nationalist and regionalist.

Many reasons were advanced in favor of the colonization of the slave to Africa:

- It was a solution to the vexing problem of slavery.[14]
- It assuaged the slaveholder's feeling of guilt.[15]
- It would solve the problem of slavery without disturbing the basic domestic institutions of southern society or fragmenting the political institutions of the nation.[16]
- It fanned the flames of the missionary impulse which stirred American Protestantism in the early nineteenth century.[17]
- It held out the millennial vision of a regenerated Negro race, of suppressing the hated slave trade, and of transforming the African continent into an earthly Eden.[18]

[14]Andrew E. Murray, "The Founding of Lincoln University," *Journal of Presbyterian History* 51 (Winter 1973): 392.

[15]Ibid., 393.

[16]Ibid.

[17]Ibid.

[18]Ibid.

- It appealed to those who were shocked by growing sectional bitterness. It presented something of a platform to solve a national problem.[19]
- It would be an aid in the evangelization of Africa.
- The slave was peculiarly fitted for Africa both by ties of kinship and physical adaptation to the climate.

It had been wrongly assumed that the African-American slave would have no problems adjusting to the more rigorous climate of West Africa. This problem, which had plagued any number of white missionaries and settlers, was also decimating to the Black returnee. The following statistics reflect the severity of this situation:

> By 1867 the [American Colonization Society] had transported to Africa about 12,000 American blacks . . . .Of the African immigrants, 4,541 had been born free in the United States, 5,957 had been emancipated by masters on the condition that they go to Africa, 753 had been manumitted for other reasons . . . .In addition, 5,722 Africans captured from slavetraders were sent by the U.S. Navy to Liberia.[20]

The climate and other conditions proved to be just as problematic for Blacks as well as whites. "Of 4,454 arrivals between 1820 and 1843 . . . 2,198 died and only 645 Liberian-born children survived."[21]

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[19]Ibid.

[20]Robert S. Starobin, ed., *Blacks in Bondage: Letters of American Slaves* (New York: New Viewpoints, 1974), 167.

[21]Ibid., 168.

Liberia was settled in 1822[22] and representatives of the American Colonization Society negotiated with Africans to purchase a section of land near the Mesurado River. For reasons cited, colonization was popular among white Presbyterians, but not among Blacks. It was especially unpopular among Black ministers.[23] Their disdain can be seen in the following statement: "Here we were born, here we fight for the independence of this country, and here we intend to die and be buried in the soil hallowed by the blood of our fathers, shed in defense of this country."[24]

Princeton Theological Seminary in New Jersey was one of the strong centers of the colonization movement. Here, men such as John Miller Dickey, Archibald Alexander, Charles Hodge and other Old School Presbyterians were strongly entrenched and unswervingly committed to colonization. It is not clear, however, whether their zeal was on moral or pragmatic grounds—to free the African American because of its basic rightness or to remove a perplexing and persistent problem from both the church and society.[25]

General Assemblies of the Presbyterian Church as early as 1831 and 1834 took actions urging Presbyterians to receive offerings in their churches in July of each year for the work of the American Colonization Society.[26] However, it was not until 1842 that the Presbyterian Church committed itself to sending only "col-

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[22]Ibid., 167.

[23]Carter G. Woodson, *The History of the Negro Church*, 3d ed. (Washington, DC: Associated Publishers, 1972), 149.

[24]Ibid.

[25]Murray, "Founding of Lincoln University," 396.

[26]Murray, *Presbyterians and the Negro*, 76.

ored missionaries" to Liberia. Two brothers, Washington and David McDonogh from New Orleans, were the fourth and fifth black missionaries sent to Liberia in 1842.[27] The first, James Temple of Philadelphia, a recruit of the Western Foreign Missionary Society, had accompanied three white missionaries, John B. Pinney, Matthew Laird and John Cloud, as early as 1833.[28]

The passion that consumed the Presbyterian Church with the sending of its first missionary to Africa in 1833 was not strictly a white, or even a Presbyterian phenomenon. African-American Baptists were engaged in such endeavors as early as 1782 when there was a movement on the part of some ministers to relocate their churches to Nova Scotia, Sierra Leone, Jamaica and the Bahamas.[29] Then, too, prominent Black Presbyterians were part of the ecumenical African and Foreign Home Missionary Society which had as its purpose missionary involvements in Africa. Theodore Wright, a bitter opponent of the colonization movement, and Charles Gardner, two Black Presbyterian ministers, were elected officers in this organization.[30]

Princeton Seminary admitted its first Black student in 1826.[31] However, as in most institutions during that period, it could hardly be categorized as a bastion of openness. John M. Dickey is credited with the founding of Ashmun Institute, the forerunner of Lincoln University in Pennsylvania. While essentially a

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[27]Murray, "Founding of Lincoln University," 399.

[28]Ibid., 398.

[29]Gayraud S. Wilmore, "Black Americans in Mission: Setting the Record Straight," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 10 (July 1986): 98.

[30]Ibid., 99.

[31]Murray, "Founding of Lincoln University," 400.

conservative Old School Presbyterian, Dickey was convinced of the need to establish a school for African Americans. This resulted from the rebuffs experienced by James R. Amos, a Black Pennsylvanian, in his attempts to be admitted to a Presbyterian school in Philadelphia and Princeton. This event, and a number of other occurrences, were the compelling forces which led Dickey to establish Ashmun Institute. The primary purpose of his involvement was to train missionaries for service in Africa.[32] Dickey's reasons for proposing the school were:

- The supply of white missionaries for Africa was inadequate.
- The climate of Africa had proved to be unsuitable for the white man.
- The colored people of the United States had been sent by Providence to be missionaries to Africa.
- It was the duty of Christians to prepare men for this work.[33]

The General Assembly of 1853 affixed its *imprimatur* on this development.[34] Dr. Cortlandt Van Rensselaer, popular chairperson of the Board of Education, gave his report stating the need for the establishment of Ashmun Institute:

- The need of supplying ministers for Negro churches in the United States.

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[32]Ibid.

[33]Ibid., 401.

[34]See Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., *Minutes of the General Assembly* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1853): 454, for Resolution 4 which gave the authority to endorse the founding of Ashmun Institute.

- The need for trained leaders in Liberia to carry out the work of colonization.
- Education for "the general elevation of the African character."[35]

Receiving the endorsement of the New Castle Presbytery, interpreting the school broadly and raising the necessary funds, John Pym Carter was the first teacher employed in 1856.[36] Care was taken to avoid the Presbytery's involvement in the school's funding needs.

It is interesting to note that an institution of such present stature originated with men whose understanding was warped. Dr. Van Rensselaer, the very man who argued for the school's establishment on the floor of the General Assembly, believed that it was not possible for white and Black Americans to live together.[37] In his speech at the opening of Ashmun, "God Glorified by Africa," Van Rensselaer states: "Gospel culture will convert Central Africa into a garden of the Lord."[38] Ashmun struggled until after the Civil War, carrying out its original intention--training men as missionaries to Liberia. The Emancipation Proclamation removed the colonization movement's greatest support, i.e., slavery.

Gayraud S. Wilmore, noted scholar and professor at Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta, gives an appropriate summary of the issue of colonization:

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[35]Murray, "Founding of Lincoln University," 402.
[36]Ibid., 405.
[37]Ibid., 406.
[38]Ibid., 407.

> It was the arrogance of the whites, their miscalculation of the self-esteem of free blacks and their feeling of solidarity with the slaves, rather than aversion to the idea of emigration that made black leaders repudiate the American Colonization Society. It was the talk of 'Negro inferiority' and 'degradation,' the obvious attempt by the colonizationists to dodge the question of the immorality of slavery, and the overenthusiastic participation of the slaveholders themselves in what purported to be a benevolent scheme, that turned the free communities in the North against the colonization proposal. They were well aware of the illogic of whites wanting to do a 'great good' for a people they despised while continuing to hold their relatives and friends in chains.[39]

In 1892, Rev. Adolphus C. Good, white missionary to the Gaboon and Corisco Mission, was commissioned by the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions and sent to Liberia to assess the work of missionaries.[40] His report indicated that the work started in 1833 should be continued, especially as a "base for operations" in the interior of the continent and as a training school.[41] The Board, however, chose to gradually phase out Liberia for the following reasons:

- [Ever increasing] expenses.
- Better situated and more productive work being done by the Methodist, Episcopal and Lutheran missions.

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[39]Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 102.
[40]Presbyterian Church, *General Assembly Minutes*, 1892, 28.
[41]Presbyterian Church, *General Minutes*, 1893, 27.

- Handicap of the English language, given the fact that French must be used in surrounding areas.[42]

Presbyterian disengagement from its first beachhead in Africa also parallels developments in other areas. Coming at the end of Reconstruction and the "separate but equal" doctrine of the Plessy vs. Ferguson Supreme Court Case,[43] one speculates that the issue of race became important. Dr. Robert E. Speer, the influential leader of Presbyterian missionary endeavors, expresses the sentiment of the era with these caustic remarks:

> The Negroes from America have neither proved immune from disease and fever, nor shown those qualities of enterprise, stability and solidity of work without which a mission cannot be counted as satisfactory. Therefore, while there have been not a few zealous and capable Christian men among them, and the Republic has been far in advance of the native African communities in intelligence, morality and order, the colonization enterprise died long ago and the hope that the American Negro would evangelize the continent of his fathers has been abandoned, at least until he shall have been brought by education and long discipline to a tenacity and directness of character he does not yet possess.[44]

Mrs. G. C. Payne was the last Black missionary sent to Liberia by the Board of Foreign Missions in 1893.[45] Even though denied by the Board, the records indicate

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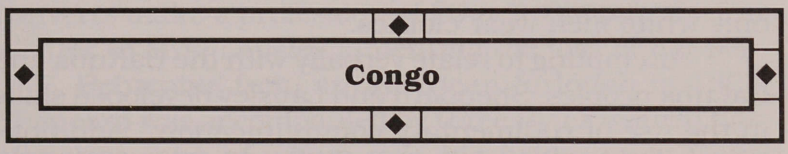
[42]Arthur Judson Brown, *One Hundred Years, Book I*, 2d ed. (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1936), 208.

[43]See 163 U.S. 537 (1896).

[44]Brown, *One Hundred Years*, 210.

[45]Although Mrs. Payne is usually considered the last Black missionary sent to Liberia, Arthur Brown, *One Hundred Years*, 1128, indicates that the last Black person to serve there was Rev. G. B. Peabody in 1895.

that no other Black person was commissioned to serve anywhere in the world until 1928 when Dr. and Mrs. Irwin Underhill were sent as missionaries to the Cameroun[46]—thirty-five years of self-imposed silence. Thus, the tale of one country ends!



The tale of the second country describes the missionary labors of other Presbyterians in the Congo Free State, now Zaire. A rather remarkable man burst upon the church scene in 1890 when William H. Sheppard became the first Black Southern Presbyterian to be commissioned a missionary to the Congo.[47] After some difficulty being approved by the Executive Committee of the Presbyterian Church (US), Sheppard, an early graduate of Stillman Institute, Tuscaloosa, Alabama, along with Samuel N. Lapsley also of Alabama, the white son of a former slaveholder, embarked upon one of the truly legendary stories in all mission history.

Sheppard and Lapsley in 1891 established the first Presbyterian mission station at Luebo. It was located near the confluence of the Kasai and Lulua Rivers, a tributary of the great Congo River. The Congolese gave Lapsley and Sheppard distinctive names:

[46]J. Oscar McCloud, "Black Presbyterians in Overseas Mission," *Periscope II* (1983): 36.

[47]William H. Sheppard, *Pioneers in Congo* (Louisville, KY: Pentecostal Publishing Company, n. d.), 15. Also William E. Phipps, *The Sheppards and Lapsley: Pioneer Presbyterians in the Congo* (Louisville, KY: The Presbyterian Church (USA), 1991), 8-10.

Lapsley was known as "Ntomanjela,"[48] which means "a pathfinder, for he had found his way into their country, their homes, their language, and into their hearts."[49] Sheppard's name was "Mundele Ndombe," "ndombe" means black, and "mundele" means man with clothes, but "mundele" is the usual word for white men, since only white men wear clothes.[50]

Attempting to relate verbally with the BaKuba and BaLuba peoples, Sheppard and Lapsley developed skills in the use of rudimentary communication. Additionally, Lapsley acquired a command of the BaLuba's language (widely used in the Luebo area), while Sheppard concentrated on learning the Bakuba tongue, the language of visiting traders.[51]

Having acquired the necessary linguistic skills, they were able to express the thrust of their ministry—Jesus' example of preaching, teaching and healing. These activities, although important, were often superseded by the need to survive, e.g., making treaties with rulers and groups; traveling either by arduous walking or by wood-burning steamer, or procuring food. It was not until 1895—five years after the founding of the Luebo mission—that the first conversion occurred.[52]

The Sheppard-Lapsley team ended in 1892 when Mr. Lapsley died of bilious hematuric fever.[53] Sheppard,

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[48]Sheppard, *Pioneers in Congo*, 66.

[49]Ibid.

[50]Samuel N. Lapsley, *Life and Letters of Samuel Norvell Lapsley: Missionary to the Congo Valley, West Africa* (Richmond, VA: Whittet & Shepperson, 1893), 108.

[51]Phipps, *Sheppards and Lapsley*, 36, 42.

[52]Samuel N. Lapsley, *Life and Letters of Samuel Norvell Lapsley, Missionary to the Congo Valley*, enlarged edition by Sarah Cater and Mrs. Roy M. Williams (Richmond, VA: Whittet & Shepperson, 1893), 150. The first convert in the Kasai region was Lukusa, who thus became the first member of the Luebo Presbyterian Church in 1895.

[53]Lapsley, *Life and Letters*, 229-231.

stricken with grief, "sought a quiet spot in the forest to pour out [his] soul's great grief to Almighty God."[54] Although Lapsley had expressed disappointment with the spiritual progress made during the six months at Luebo, scholars note that between four and seven years generally pass in a new mission station before the first converts make a profession of faith.[55] Sheppard wrote a letter to Mrs. Lapsley lamenting the loss of her son.

Returning from an American furlough in 1894, Sheppard was accompanied by three Black women missionaries, one of whom was his bride, Lucy Gantt Sheppard. The others were single women—Maria Fearing and Lillian Thomas. These women, along with Sheppard, revitalized the mission station at Luebo.

Lucy Gantt Sheppard, because of her former training and experience, had oversight of the educational work of the station and was responsible for opening the first school. She was also instrumental in the publishing the first book, a hymnal in the BaLuba language.[56]

Maria Fearing, often referred to as "a mother to African girls," became one of the most outstanding missionaries to serve the Presbyterian Church in the Congo. It is interesting to note that Miss Fearing's application for missionary service was first rejected by the Executive Committee of Foreign Missions due to her advanced age (fifty-six years). Being persistent, including the sale of her home in Talladega, Alabama, and promising to assume responsibility for her expenses, she was finally permitted to accompany the

[54]Sheppard, *Pioneers in Congo*, 88.

[55]E. M. Braekman, *Histoire du Protestantisme au Congo* (Bruxelles: Librairie des Eclaireurs Unionistes, 1961), 336.

[56]Julia Kellersberger, *Lucy Gantt Sheppard* (Atlanta: PCUS Committee on Women's Work, n. d.), 28.

Sheppards to Africa. At Luebo, Fearing used her personal funds to build and care for a girls' resident home named Pantops.[57]

As the result of an ever-expanding enterprise, a second mission station was established at Ibaanc where the Sheppards took up residence. Mrs. Sheppard, the first foreigner to enter the area, did not see another American woman for two years. Here, at Ibaanc, she formed "the first Woman's Society in the Congo mission['s]"[58] work. The Sheppards were assisted in their labors with the arrival of a new missionary, Althea Brown. At this time there were 100 members in the Ibaanc Church.[59]

William Sheppard, because of his eminent success as a missionary in the Congo, is recognized as one of the greatest African–American missionaries in Africa. He was named a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society of London and his work became one of the outstanding stories in the annals of missionary service. He planted the seeds of Presbyterian Christianity in the BaKuba Kingdom of the Congo, an area that today boasts over 500,000 Presbyterians.[60] This brings to closure the remarkably successful tale of the second country.

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[57]Althea Brown Edmiston, "Maria Fearing," in *Four Presbyterian Pioneers in Congo*, ed. Sarah Cater and Mrs. Roy M. Williams (Anniston, AL: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1965), 22.

[58]Ibid., 24.

[59]Phipps, *Sheppard and Lapsley*, 72.

[60]William Bynum, "William Henry Sheppard: Pioneer in the Congo," *Presbyterian Heritage: The Newsletter of the Office of History of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)* 2 (Winter 1989): 2.