

African Americans and Global Missions: The Great Omission

Why So Few ?

Of 35 million African Americans, perhaps as many as 400 are cross-cultural missionaries today. The Great Commission has been the Great Omission in the Black Church for particularly the last 20 years. Until 1980 there may have been 700+ “foreign” African American missionaries, mostly to Africa, so presently more are serving now than ever before¹. Still 400 is far less than 1 percent of the North American Protestant missionary force, while Blacks are 12 percent of US population². Why?

Give the Black Church a Break !

First, American slavery didn't end until 1865. It's difficult to go to another country with the Gospel when a pass was sometimes required for a slave to travel in his own county. Slaves had to gain access to the Gospel, then gain freedom. Even so, men such as Lott Carey gained Christ, freedom and the mission field—of Liberia.

Most black denominational mission structures were not in place until about the 1870s³. About half of black missionaries served with black denominations⁴. During the Reconstruction Period, after Emancipation of the slaves, gaining simple civil rights was high on the black agenda. The right to vote and use public facilities was temporarily gained. White “Jim Crow” backlash against black emancipation took the form of lynchings by the hundreds, rescinding of voter rights and segregation by states⁵. As if dodging the KKK wasn't enough, the Great Migration of 5,600,000 blacks from rural South to industrial North occurred between 1910 and 1950, during which families and churches were disrupted⁶. Violence was returned with riots in the 1943-1969 period. The Civil Rights movement, which retrieved at tremendous price the rights taken away after Reconstruction, lasted until the late 60s⁷. Racism existed in the white evangelical Christian community in the forms of denying blacks entrance into many evangelical mission organizations and colleges. Between 1920 and 1960, few blacks were accepted by white missions, due in part to colonial powers and dominions in Africa (such as the Congo and South Africa) refusing entrance to African American missionaries to keep their hegemony over Africans⁸.

Economically, the Depression hit the black community powerfully from 1930 until the start of WWII. Recessions also hit the community in the 70s until 1983. Since that time median black household income has risen sharply to \$30,436⁹. If the above periods are layered over one another, the strong impression emerges that, in all fairness, the black church did well to send even the few it did send until 1983.

This is Now

Since 1983 there appears little justification for the failure of most of the black church to engage the Great Commission. The past twenty years contain the

widest and best opportunities blacks have ever had to enjoy economic prosperity, and they are. Household giving has declined from 1.9% in 1998 to 1.3% in 2000, despite an income increase of 103 billion¹⁰. Vast numbers of black churches ignore global missions entirely. Outstanding exceptions exist, generally among independent churches. A Disciples Of Christ church in Memphis gives \$125,000/year to missions. The inner city Rock of Our Salvation Church in Chicago has given \$1,000,000 for missions over the past ten years.

The messages I hear in black churches usually underscore God's blessings and provision, not personal service to God or to others. Is God the Servant, to bless us? One church budget analyzed spent more on the copy machine and the annual men's breakfast than upon any evangelistic activity, confined to local ministry to black college students. Now is the time for the black church, the "sleeping giant," to take her part as a full sister church to evangelize and disciple to the "uttermost" parts of the earth. Not to help the white church—it's not her idea, but to obey God.

The "African Americans and Global Missions" seminar is at <http://www.rmni.org/afam/home.asp> for downloading and use in local churches. Also a "Biblical Financial Principles" seminar is available at http://www.rmni.org/teaching_papers/pp/home.asp Please contact us to arrange for any of these PowerPoint seminars, or you are free to show them yourself. We try to provide research useful to others with similar goals.

¹ Marilyn Lewis, www.urbana.org/_articles.dfm?Recordid=230; Sylvia Jacobs, "African Missions and the Af-Am Christian Churches," p. 22, *Encyclopedia of Af-Am Religions*, 1993.

² U.S. Census Bureau, table DP-1 "Profile of General Demographic Characteristics:2000

³ Jacobs, p. 10

⁴ Jacobs, 22

⁵ Lerone Bennett, Jr., *Before the Mayflower*, 5th ed., p. 275, 349-353

⁶ Bennett, p. 344.

⁷ Bennett, p. 416

⁸ Jacobs, p. 22

⁹ www.census.gov/hhes/income/histinc/ho5.html, accessed 3/8/02

¹⁰ www.targetmarketnews.com/numbers/index.htm, accessed 10/23/01

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