Time for African American Missionaries

James W. Sutherland

While teaching a group of Ugandan church leaders, I mentioned how few African Americans were engaged in global missions. Okiru Ezekiel jumped up and shouted, "Tell them to come!" He added, "Come to see us. See the most primitive places like Karamajang—how difficult it is. Remind them that blood is stronger than water."

1980 (Jacobs 1993, 22). Three hundred African American missionaries were identified in Africa in 1953 (Roesler 1953, 63). Robert Gordon postulated 240 total African American cross-cultural missionaries from a random survey in 1973 (Gordon 1973, 267-268). Crawford Loritts estimated about 300 African Americans serving in US parachurch organizations in 1987 (cross-cultural or otherwise [Sidey 1987, 61]).

"Tell them to come! Come to see us.
Remind them that blood is stronger than water."

How can the African American church be mobilized to answer Ezekiel's call, the call of many such Africans and the will of Christ?

An Overview

The African American church has understandably focused on home mission. Sylvia Jacobs estimated that a total of 600 African American missionaries served in Africa between 1820 and

In 1997 I located 102 who had served at least a year in intercultural missions, and extrapolated the existence of another 140 (Sutherland 1998, 4-5). It's possible there are now 300-500 such missionaries. If 500 exist, and if there are about 43,000 Protestant missionaries serving from the US (Moreau 2000, 33), this represents one percent of the missionary

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force, while blacks comprise 13 percent of the US population.

Origins of the Problem

Slavery limited response to a Macedonian call. US slavery was abolished in 1865, but determined men such as George Lisle and Lott Carey gained their freedom and then served in Jamaica (1782) and Liberia (1821), respectively. The black church has been occupied with helping African Americans survive slavery and racism. It's understandable why the African American church supported relatively few intercultural missionaries before 1970-80, being preoccupied with staggering needs within her neighborhoods (see sidebar on page 503).

White Hindrances to Mission

By 1850 African Americans were assumed to be more resistant to African diseases than whites (Harr 1945, 16), and were recruited for that supposed advantage. Experience eventually denied that assumption and a major incentive to recruit African Americans evaporated (Harr, 130). Quinine was mass-produced by the 1890s (Gordon, 272).

Colonial governments, such as the Belgium Congo, Rhodesia and Liberia, obstructed African American missionary visas. South Africa required that a white lead the mission organization before selling steamship passage to African Americans (Harr, 40, 60-61). William Sheppard's global ex-

posé of inhumane abuses on Belgian rubber plantations in the early 1900s probably hindered later African American missionaries to the Congo. He counted eighty-one hands that had been severed from the arms of Congolese judged to have been slack in their rubber production (Parsell 2002, 1). By about 1920 four American mission boards observed that Belgians specifically hindered African American missionaries from coming to the Belgian Congo (Harr, 61-62). White missions faced shrinking colonial placement opportunities for African Americans.

Some white missions found a lack of qualified African American candidates in 1945, 1953 and 1983 (Harr, 103-4, 130; Roesler, 43; Hughley 1983, 49-50)—small wonder when a slave could be whipped and imprisoned for teaching another slave to read even the Bible (Brent 1987, 401-2), and that in 1936 ten southern states spent nearly three times more educating white students than black (Bennett 1982, 257). Several white Bible colleges and seminaries prominent today refused to accept African Americans in 1953 (Sutherland, 21), while African American colleges and seminaries produced few missionaries (Roesler, 60-61).

During the 1800s and early 1900s, white missions fielded African American missionaries, but Wilbur Harr's examination of mission records uncovered racial prejudices among white missions "from the very beginning" (Harr, 35). In 1947 African Americans were not accepted by Southern Baptists because it might upset the prejudices of white missionaries forced to work with them (61). Around 1947 various mission board secretaries hesitated to openly state that their board would even "consider accepting a promising Negro candidate from their own or another denomination" (66). In 1953 several prominent evangelical missions didn't accept African American candidates, and of twenty-seven International Foreign Mission Association missions, none had an African American missionary, although some had earlier (Roesler, 39-40, 43).

"Willingness" to receive black missionaries has resulted in few African American missionaries. **Proactive recruitment is crucial.**

Howard O. Jones, an African American associate evangelist in the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, moved to Liberia in 1959 and found open prejudice among white missionaries and mission executives in the late 1950s and 60s. Some told him that African Americans couldn't be effective in Africa—meaning to Jones, as effective as whites were—and some shared fears of interracial marriage on the field (Jones 1966, 140). In 1983 thirty-three evangelical mission boards surveyed "expressed willingness" to accept African Americans (Hughley 1983, 51).

In 2003 at an annual meeting of evangelical mission organizations, I taught a seminar on recruiting African American missionaries (offered concurrently with four other seminars). Of about 140 conferees, six

came. Another African American mobilizer taught a similar seminar to one conferee. "Willingness" to receive black missionaries has resulted in few African American missionaries. Proactive recruitment is crucial, and has been advocated for at least thirty-seven years (Jones, 144). As for African American missionaries among black denominations, the largest among them,[1] the National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc., claims only about twenty (*World Pulse* 2003, 2), providing a fairly accurate estimate of the proportionate mission force of most smaller denominations.

Some larger parachurch organizations are intentionally recruiting African Americans, notably Campus Crusade for Christ (CCC), the US Center for World Mission, Wycliffe, and SIM.[2] Either a whole department or specific people recruit African Americans at these missions. Until recently, the International Mission Board of the Southern Baptists had personnel dedicated to recruiting among African American churches. Many mission reps with whom I've talked realize more should be done.

Why Recruit African Americans?

There are thirty-six million African Americans. Of sixty ethnic sub-groups in America, they have the highest church attendance and Bible reading, and are the most likely to discuss faith and morality (Barna 6/2003). Eighty-three percent of blacks report that their faith is "very important in their lives," compared with sixty-six percent of whites. Forty-five percent of African Americans are born-again, and a higher percentage prays in a giv-

A CHRONOLOGY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN REALITIES

Inception to 1865
Slaves and freedmen were trying to survive

1865-1890
"Black Code" and "Jim Crow" laws were passed, nullifying black civil rights (Bennett 1982, 225, 450, 255-63)

1880s-1960s
Blacks fought against segregation

1910-1950
African Americans migrated north— 5.5 million of them (Bennett, 344-346)

1930-1942
Economic depression drained blacks of financial resources

1943-1970
Civil rights lost by Jim Crow laws were restored

1970-1982
Economic recession depleted income

1982 to Present
African Americans turn from seeking to survive and gain security

en week than whites do (Barna, "African Americans").

Blacks have impressive economic resources. Check parking lots of African American churches on Sunday. Their annual median income for all households was $30,436 in 2000 (US Census, 435).

People of color are usually received initially by other people of color more readily than are whites, although they may be held to higher standards later (Pelt 1989, 32-33). Because they've endured slavery and ethnic marginality, African Americans better understand oppression and injustice. Dalit ("untouchable") activists have looked to African Americans for direction and inspiration since Booker T. Washington, who died in 1915 (Tudu 2002). African American missionaries are the Delta Force[3] of African American Christians, and perhaps of US missionaries generally. They resist the gravitational pull of their own culture to minister at home in order to obey the Great Commission.

Demonstrating Reconciliation

Multicultural mission teams "play the music," before "giving the words" of the gospel (Aldrich 1981, 36). They incarnate the gospel of reconciliation (Johnson 2003). If encouraging *koinonia* in missions is a matter of relative indifference, and if projects outweigh relationships, what kind of missionaries are we sending? If we don't embrace other cultures within our own missions culture, will we genuinely embrace them after flying over salt water? If the parachurch or denominational board cannot gain the trust of the African American church, will it be able to gain the trust of more suspicious populations?

I think we whites owe extra recruitment efforts because of our history. Whites created US slavery. While there have been fine black-white ministry teams (M. Lewis 2000, 22-23), racism and paternalism within missions is documented (Harr, 35, 61, 66). If the thirty-three mission boards in 1982 had actively recruited blacks, instead of having passively accepted them, more would have been fielded (Hughley 1983, 51). White evangelical missions generally were captive to and complicit in US racism. As late as 1945 the pertinent missiological issue was whether at least some white mission organizations should accept any African Americans for missions (Harr, 134-135).

African American Church Hindrances

The black church is culpable at least since the early eighties. As one black missionary quipped, all you really need is a Bible and a map. There is no biblical excuse for disobeying the Great Commission. The infrastructure specifically for intercultural missions is nonexistent in probably more than ninety-five percent of all black churches.

The problem isn't simply a lack of global missions education in the black church. It is resistance to transferring human and financial resources outside its community. Leslie Pelt, African American missionary to Nigeria with SIM, observed:

A principal reason why so few blacks serve as missionaries is because all too often we still consider ourselves to be a mission field. "Come over to the inner city and help us," many black churches have

called for a good part of this century, and for valid reasons. (Pelt 1989, 29)

During slavery the church helped slaves survive. Since then she has brought healing and security. Keeping her resources home is logical, given that blacks live five years less than the general population, that forty-three percent of families are female, single-parent, and that the unemployment rate is almost double the US average (A. Lewis 2003, 7A). But this use of resources ignores God's command to go

African American denominations reflect this giving pattern. For example, the AME Zion denomination gave twenty cents per member for global missions in 1994, representing an eighty-two percent decline in giving, adjusted for inflation, since 1951. AME Zion churches averaged giving a total of $81.00 for global missions in 1994 (Sutherland, 114-116). These figures are only slightly on the low end for various African American denominations in that period. In recent years such figures for the largest Afri-

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into the entire world. Thirty-five percent of black missionary respondents (eighty-five of them) were criticized by blacks for serving cross-culturally (Sutherland, 228). Just six of 102 missionaries were motivated toward missions by their pastor and only five by someone from their church, although fifty African American missionaries received a call to missions under pastors preaching in-depth expository sermons (203-4, 208).

Not a few African American churches focus on their members' well-being. The prosperity gospel is received well by the black community (and promoted by many whites), which has long been denied the American Dream. One African American church gave one-half of one percent of its income to evangelical outreach, in this case to African American college students, and zero to global missions. It spent more on the copy machine.

can American churches are remarkably unavailable in the *Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches*.

A 1997 random national survey of 400 pastors of predominantly African Americans by the Barna Research Group, found that forty percent of them described their own churches as "theologically liberal" (Barna 1997, 7).[4] Despite high levels of Bible reading, prayer and born-again blacks, liberalism is a significant and generally unrecognized force preventing global missions in the black community. Liberalism is largely a legacy that results from evangelicals of the first half of the twentieth century and later not accepting blacks into their schools.

Obviously liberals are less interested than evangelicals in promoting a salvation exclusive to faith in Jesus Christ. The less literal authority is given to the biblical text, the less motivation there is to pursue global

missions, particularly in the face of desperate needs in the black community.

This same survey found that only eight percent of black pastors had any annual missions priority, although fifty percent of them indicated that evangelism was a priority (Barna, 9-10). This is why I've stressed the importance of developing relationships with evangelical pastors, some of whom minister within significantly liberal black denominations. One evangelical black pastor protested my statement that "not a few" African American pastors were liberal. He asserted that at least sixty to seventy percent of pastors in his denomination were conservative.

Two-thirds of African American missionaries responding to my questionnaire came from independent churches (Sutherland, 192). Experience indicates that the most missions-minded black churches are independent, new "wine skins," founded and filled by missions-minded pastors. Here you are likely to find your best contacts.

Seven Strategies for Gaining African American Missionaries

Of course, prayer is imperative (Luke 10:2). Please join me in praying for 5,000 African American missionaries. Recruiting blacks will absorb more human and financial resources. The best strategy isn't the recruitment interview, it's discipleship. After acceptance, the strategy becomes mentoring rather than managing.

1. *Approach African Americans Uniquely.* Blacks are among the four groups most divergent in lifestyle and perspective, of over sixty subgroups in the US population. According to Barna:

Ministries seeking to serve those segments would do well to study them closely to avoid reliance upon unwarranted assumptions that reduce meaningful connections and impact. (Barna 2003)

African American missionaries similarly advise white mission recruiters to use their intercultural skills to relate to African Americans as a people group (Sutherland, 304).

Go where African Americans are. Meet evangelical pastors—perhaps ask your constituents for names. Visit evangelical African American ministerial associations. Contact black colleges and seminaries and meet with chaplains and directors of student unions. Set up displays at black church mission conferences, such as at Christian Stronghold Church of Philadelphia, and at black denominational meetings.[5] Develop an African American section on your website, including bios and photos of African Americans who have served and are serving with your mission.[6]

Because of large-scale African American family breakdown, be prepared to work with unusual family situations. Consider the circumstances of single women with children or divorced persons. I found that generally the younger the African American missionary, the less stable the missionary's family-of-origin has been (Sutherland, 199). Missions may also need to assist with further training since African Americans are still behind the general population's percentage of high school and college graduates (A. Lewis, 7A).

2. *Build Trust.* Probably the biggest issue, especially among older African Americans, is "What is the real deal?" Mission agencies pay on the

historic debt of documented racism within at least some white missions.[7] Building trust isn't recruitment strategy, it's essential to organizational integrity, and takes time. Confess failures. As you earn trust, African Americans will spread the word.

Black mission executives speak credibility to black prospects. For example, Crawford Loritts, an African American, is associate director of US ministries for Campus Crusade for Christ (CCC). Ethnic diversity in the mission and in graduate degree and did well academically (Sutherland, 201). Seventy-five to eighty-three percent of CCC missionaries come from campus ministries, and half of these from the Impact Movement, which targets African Americans, according to Charles Gilmer, CCC's national director of ethnic student ministry. Students who are already being discipled are excellent prospects. One Campus Crusade missionary wrote: "I know what attracted me [to CCC] was that

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recruiters attracts minorities. Forty-six percent of missionaries I surveyed were motivated by a missionary, most probably black, to become missionaries (Sutherland, 207). Use African American missionary recruiters. Phil Bowling-Dyer, national director of black campus ministries for InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, finds that African American staff have an advantage in recruiting African American students for international summer projects (Bowling-Dyer 2003).

The more racially diverse an organization's media is, the more African Americans are attracted to that organization (Perkins 2000, 240, 246). Wycliffe recently produced a twelve-minute video, *The Time is Now*, narrated by and focused on black Wycliffe missionaries.

3. Network with Campus Ministries. Work with campus ministers serving African American students. I found that younger African American missionaries have at least an under-

people pursued me and were interested, really interested in my walk with the Lord" (Thompson 1997).

4. Promote Short-term Trips. Short-term trips motivated fifty-seven percent of African American missionaries surveyed in 1998 (Sutherland, 205). Follow up with those expressing a desire to go full-time. Their home churches have probably provided trip support, and may be more ready to give further assistance. Avoid observation trips—instead offer ministry opportunities related to spiritual gifting. Showing a PowerPoint presentation of the trip in supporting churches may help recruit others. Shalom Outreach, directed by Julian Dangerfield, took about 125 African Americans on global short-term trips in 2002. He's open to networking with other mission organizations to assist those called to vocational missions (Dangerfield 2003).[8]

5. Recruit the Church. Brian Johnson, director of COMINAD (Cooper-

ative Mission Network of the African Dispersion), advises "recruiting the whole church" (Johnson 2003). He listens to black pastors and explains how missions can help them reach their goals. If the pastor wants to grow the church, Johnson points out that missions will develop church infrastructure and that "the light that shines farthest, shines brightest at home." If the pastor backs missions, mission organizations will not be competitors, taking away the best church talent, Johnson says.

Dangerfield also finds that a personal meeting to recruit the pastor for a short-term trip is the most effective Missionary Baptist church in Chattanooga, Tenn., started a global missions committee and included missions in its budget as a result of Bertha Lloyd, a church member who took eight short-term ministry trips to Uganda and one to the Caribbean island of Dominica.

6. *Provide Temporary Financial Assistance.* Because relatively few black churches fund global missions, consider initial financial assistance. Funding was the second greatest hindrance to missions mentioned by African American missionaries in 1998 (Sutherland, 166-170). Although the theology of providence is the black church's central doctrine, there is a disconnect

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strategy to recruit short-termers, as well as to expose the church to missions. "It's his vision that will work," Dangerfield said.

Missions mobilizing agencies can provide help for missions conferences and seminars and offer missions development resources to committees of local churches.[9] Copies of Walston and Stevens' *The African American Experience in World Mission* (2002) could be provided.

Women, particularly those with missions experience, can help mobilize a church for missions. Of thirty-one short-term trips taken by African Americans through our ministry, twenty-four were taken by women. Their churches have contributed to their support and have sent Bibles, funds and hundreds of pounds of gifts to mission fields. Greater Friendship between understanding that God provides for me, and that God also desires to provide for his global work through me and my church.

At CCC, ethnic staff are assisted by other CCC staff who voluntarily give one percent of support donations, according to Gilmer (2001). In 2001 this totaled about $100,000. CCC also has a one-year internship, for which only twenty-five percent of an ethnic staffer's support needs to be raised. Fifty percent of candidates stay on and they raise full support in the following two or three years. Later if an ethnic staffer needs at least $800 a month, he or she suspends normal ministry for three months to focus on support-raising. CCC matches all but large gifts during this period to provide a buffer.

IVCF staff help African American students raise funds for internation-

al ministry trips and provide partial scholarships for African American students to serve.

7. *Provide Internships and Mentoring.* Internships bridge to missionary service. Veterans may disdain "testing the waters," but for a historically oppressed people for whom fear and rejection have been atmospheric, it makes sense. Collaterally, a survey of one hundred Fortune 500 companies found that internships resulted in eighty-three percent of minority interns accepting employment, compared with sixty-six percent of nonminorities (Smith 1994, 7).

CCC's Intercultural Resources Department assists minority adjustment. Through annual meetings, but particularly by informal problem solving, mentoring and encouragement, missionaries deal with "the cultural and organizational confusion," according to Gilmer. He attributes most of CCC's success with minorities to this. Whatever a mission can do to lower risk will help.[10] African American missionary to Kenya, Hebron Morris Jr., wrote:

African American missionaries need a strong, assured support base. First time assignments need to be in areas where there is a support team from many African American CC [cross cultural] recruits. Many are not going to be eager to venture into areas where they think the hardship may be too great. The change is too radical for most… The African American…recruit requires assurance from the agency that he/she will be supported not only financially throughout but also in the work that he/she is assigned to do. (Morris 1997)

The Bottom Line

It is past time to mobilize the African American church. Most historic hindrances are gone. The African American church is a full partner with other ethnic churches, and we may be privileged to work together with them, by and for the love of Christ. We may find rejection and distrust, but this is about advancing the gospel globally, and is worth the price that our history and our calling cost us.

Endnotes

1. The NBC, USA, Inc. apparently doesn't have accurate membership numbers—it may have six million members. See http://religiousmovements.lib.virginia.edu/nrms/nbc_usa.html, accessed 10/14/03.

2. Others include ACMC, Africa Inland Mission, TEAM and Operation Mobilization. See www.RMNI.org/afam/list.asp for more such missions.

3. The Delta Force was the US army's elite counterterrorist unit in the twentieth century.

4. The other options were: "evangelical," "theologically conservative," "Charismatic or Pentecostal" and "fundamentalistic."

5. Visit www.blackandchristian.com/pulpit/denominations.shtml for links to African American denomination websites (accessed 11/5/03).

6. See www.urbana.org/feat.aamission.cfm for an example (accessed 11/5/03).

7. To feel the pathos of distrust fostered by evangelical missions, read the article by Howard O. Jones (1966).

8. He refers Baptists to the International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention. See: <www.shalomoutreach.org>.

9. A *Global Missions Team Handbook* for African American churches is available free at <www.rmni.org/afam/AfAmMissions Team.pdf>, and a download of the "African Americans and Global Missions" Power- Point missions seminar for black churches is at <www.rmni.org/afam/Missions-Seminar_files/frame.htm>.

10. African American missionaries are exceptional risk-takers, but a case can be made that African Americans have a higher perception of risk than the general population (Sutherland, 209-213).

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