Sisters in the Spirit: Black Women Preachers Hearing the Call
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"We may be debarred entrance to many pulpits (as some of us now are) and stand at the door or on the street corner in order to preach to men and women. No difference when or where, we must preach a whole gospel" (Julia Foote). In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries many black women preachers like Julia Foote found themselves barred from preaching the word of God in the church on the basis of their gender. They were refused the opportunity to become licensed and ordained officially licensing and ordination had been historically man's domain. Because of their unflagging belief in the Holiness Tradition (the belief that God called one to preach through the Holy Spirit, by way of visions or dreams), these pioneering black women were empowered to pursue their preaching careers in spite of the lack of support from society and the derision of their black male counterparts preaching from the pulpit.

Bettye Collier Thomas says in her book, Daughters of Thunder, that "Women imbued with the doctrine of Holiness believed that no man or institution could sanction their right to preach, that this was the sole prerogative of God" (17). The western worldview of religion has historically pigeonholed women into a sphere where their voices have been muted in the church and their status in the church polity, as compared to men, has been secondary at best. Alette Hill, in her essay "Understanding Gender Shaping Institutions", states, "Through the ages, women in western religions have been informed by male leadership, of a variety of "divine" laws that forbid them to study the scriptures, pray certain prayers, talk in church, speak to men on the street, appear in public without a veil, or have anything to do with, according to Martin Luther, "divine services, the priestly offices, or God's word" (Hill 71).

By investigating the history of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, its radical preaching women, and their autobiographies, I will demonstrate how their tenacious belief in their "call" provided the impetus to change church history, as well as societal thinking as it regards to women preachers. Though there were many black women preachers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that were certainly instrumental as pioneers, I will only focus on the "firsts" in accomplishments within the AME and AME Zion Churches. The records show, according to the census from 1870 to 1890, that the majority of African Americans were Methodists. Research by Dr. Bettye Collier Thomas, Director of Bethune Museum Archives, Inc., an institution that documents and preserves African American women's histories, shows that the first black women evangelists to appear were affiliated with the AME and AME Zion Churches.

After escaping to the north, many slaves were drawn to the teachings of John Wesley and his Methodist Church. Methodism provided the slaves with an easy to understand doctrine and one that stressed self-improvement, and the adherence to Holiness and Sanctification. Even though Wesley allowed women to evangelize, and perform as local preachers, he did not believe that women should be ordained. This is the worldview to which Richard Allen, a former slave who was converted at the age of seventeen, also subscribed to. After purchasing his own freedom for two thousand dollars Allen found himself in Philadelphia licensed to preach to the other blacks attending St. George's Methodist Church.

The already segregated black members found themselves mistreated and pushed aside by the white members while attempting to worship at St. George's. They were only permitted to worship during the early morning hours before the white members arrived for their worship period. As more and more slaves joined the congregation, the white members became resentful of their presence. After witnessing some of his followers being rudely snatched from their knees while praying, Richard Allen withdrew from St. George's along with all of the black members. In 1786, the group purchased a small blacksmith shop and moved it to a small lot on Sixth Street.

The new church, called Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church has remained in this same location, undergoing reconstruction as needed, from then until present day. It is now a registered Historical Site in Philadelphia. In 1816, Bishop Francis Asbury ordained Richard Allen the first black bishop in the Methodist Church history. Although its membership was and is all black, its doctrine and government remains Methodist. The Bethel
African Methodist Episcopal Church was the first assembly to split from the Methodist Church for reasons of racial injustice.

Unlike the black members in Philadelphia, the black Methodists in New York separated from the Methodist Church in order to worship and share their spiritual gifts among themselves. These members led by Abraham Thompson, June Scott, and Thomas Miller, all licensed black male preachers, received permission from Bishop Asbury to form their own church, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in 1800. Their new church was located on Church Street. The young congregation remained under the leadership of the white Methodist preachers, depending on them to lead their worship and license and ordain them as they saw fit. Unhappy with this arrangement, some of the black members began to grumble and complain. Soon, their leader, Thomas Simpkins, was expelled from the church. He and his followers left the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church and purchased a small lot on Elizabeth Street nearby. This new church was called the Asbury Church. Desiring to control their own government within the church, all three new churches began to hold their own General Conferences, four times a year in order to license and ordain their own men, but not their women.

According to History of the AME Church.org, this is the mission of the AME Church:

The mission of the African Methodist is to minister to the spiritual, intellectual, physical, emotional, and environmental needs of all people by spreading Christ’s liberating Gospel by word and deed. At every level of the connection and in every local church, the African Methodist Episcopal church shall engage in carrying out the spirit of Christ which the A.M.E. Church values, that is to seek out and save the lost and the needy.

During this period there were a few black women evangelists, none of whom were officially licensed to preach, let alone ordained in the hierarchy of the AME Church. These black women were pioneers in a field dominated by men and in a society that supported the notion that women should remain in their domestic spheres. The women I will discuss are: Elizabeth (records contain no last name), Jarena Lee, Amanda Berry Smith, Julia A.J. Foote, and Mary J. Small.

Elizabeth was the first black woman of record to receive her call from God to preach the gospel. Thanks to a tract printed by Quaker friends who were privy to her oral history, there is a small written biography for Elizabeth. She was born in 1766, a slave in Maryland; she was freed by the year 1796. Uneducated and unable to read, Elizabeth doubted her ability to follow her calling to preach. She was only twelve years old when she was converted and experienced a vision. Describing the experience she states that, “She felt sustained by an invisible power” (Collier-Thomas 42). Her attempts to follow God’s call were met with discouragement from both men and women. She was told that she wasn’t meant to preach and she wasn’t fit for the rigors of an itinerant life (traveling as an evangelist was the only alternative to preaching in the church for women during this period). Struggling with doubt and the traditional role expectations of women, she resisted the call to preach until 1808.

Elizabeth began her preaching career in Baltimore speaking to Quakers, who advocated for women who preached. Although she was denied entrance to many of their homes and church meetings because of their fear of being expelled from their church membership for allowing a former slave and a woman to preach, she continued because God had called her to do His will. When her authority to preach was questioned it is reported that Elizabeth responded thusly, “Not by the commission of men’s hands: if the Lord had ordained me, I needed nothing better” (Collier-Thomas 42). Elizabeth traveled all over the United States, even venturing into the south and risking re-enslavement, to fulfill her obligation to answer God’s call. Her preaching career spanned fifty years after which she retired to live among the Quakers until her death. Unlike Elizabeth, Jarena Lee was born free in 1783 in New Jersey. Lee has the distinction of being the first woman to initiate the discourse on woman’s licensing and ordination. Little is known of her childhood except that she was hired out at the age of seven by her parents to work for white families. While working for these families she learned skills as a domestic and also learned to read and write. This was also the period when she was introduced to the Methodist religion. At the age of twenty-one, Jarena had a religious awakening after which she moved to Philadelphia in search of a church family. Lee was working as a domestic when she went to hear Reverend Richard Allen of the African Methodist Episcopal Church preach. After his sermon she joined the black Methodists.

After receiving the call to preach from God in 1809, Lee went to Reverend Allen for permission to preach God’s word. Allen denied her permission to preach on the grounds that a woman preacher went against the Methodist
doctrine. Believing that God had called her to preach, Lee began her own ministry. In the interim, Jarena married and bore two children. In 1817, she approached the now Bishop Allen for permission to preach. He still insisted that there was no precedent for women preachers in the Methodist church, but since membership was much needed (by then Allen had been ordained as the first black bishop in the Methodist Church), he granted her permission to speak at prayer meetings only. Converted and filled with the Holy Ghost, Lee preached at as many prayer meetings as she could while ignoring the negative comments and derision from the black male preachers. Lee was a successful itinerant preacher for many years, but she never pastured a church. Collier-Thomas writes, “It is probable that once ministers discovered that she posed no threat to their ministry, they embraced her efforts. As a female itinerant minister and exhorter, she was a novelty and could be used to attract new members and financial support for the Church” (45). Lee wrote and published her spiritual autobiography in The Life and Religious Experiences of Jarena Lee, A Coloured Lady, Giving an Account of Her call to Preach the Gospel, in 1836.

Between the years 1836 and 1849, almost three thousand copies of her book had been printed and distributed. This is key to the scholarship of black women preachers. The writing and publication of Jarena Lee’s autobiography opened the floodgate for other black women preachers to document their struggle for equality in the Church. In his book, Sisters in the Spirit, William Andrews states that Lee’s book “launched black women’s autobiography in America with an argument for women’s spiritual authority that plainly challenged traditional female roles as defined in both free and the slave states, among whites as well as blacks” (16). One black woman who asserted her spiritual authority with her flamboyant preaching style and her own autobiography was Amanda Berry Smith. She was the first black woman preacher to gain international acclaim as a leader in the Holiness Movement.

Smith was born a slave in 1837 in Maryland. She was one of thirteen children and taught herself to read and write. Like the black women preachers before her, she was exposed to the Methodist religion as a domestic for white families. Amanda wasn’t called to preach until after her marriage to a black minister. Her husband was abusive during their marriage and Amanda found solace in prayer. During a serious illness, she had a vision in which an Angel showed her preaching to thousands of people. After surviving her illness and struggling for months over the validity of her vision and her ability to fulfill God’s call, she was converted.

Living in New York in 1870, and affiliated with the Sullivan Street AME Church, Smith began her career as an evangelist (the only avenue open for a woman preacher). Her fame as a Holiness leader spread throughout the country. In Women of Thunder, Collier-Thomas explains the belief in the Holiness Tradition thusly, “The Holiness Movement embraced six essential tenets. Its doctrine

Centered around experience,
Had roots in scripture,
Emphasized the work of the Holy Spirit,
Created an aura of freedom that encouraged experimentalism,
Had a reformist and even revolutionary nature, and
Encouraged the formation of sects” (13).

She also states, “The Holiness Tradition played a central part in the struggle of women, particularly black women, to preach. Believing in holiness was the basic source of these women’s empowerment” (12). Amanda Berry Smith spent the rest of her life evangelizing throughout England, Africa, India, as well as the United States; she risked reenslavement many times traveling in the south. By the 1890’s, she was much sought after by the white feminist reformers. She was aware of her attraction as an exotic novelty in white circles, but she was also aware of the validity for her ministry that accompanied her association with these women. Some of the women referred to her as “washerwoman” instead of evangelist. It is reported that when they were around her, they felt none of the discomfort as with other more intelligent black reformers of the time. Since Amanda was uneducated they didn’t feel threatened by her. This information, discovered in her spiritual autobiography, establishes the fact that these black preaching women not only had to contend with sexism in the Church, but also racism, and classism. Amanda caused quite a stir when she was the first woman to attend an AME annual conference in 1872; the black clergymen felt threatened by her presence because they believed she was there to push for the ordination of women, which was a threat to their jobs.

In 1893, Amanda retired to Chicago where she founded an orphanage for black children and wrote her spiritual autobiography, An Autobiography: A Testimony of the Lord’s Dealing With Mrs. Amanda Berry Smith. By the time of her death in 1915, Amanda was known as a noted preacher, social reformer for her missionary work in Af-
rica, and role model for other black women preachers. She has been compared to noted anti-slavery activist and publisher, Frederick Douglass. By the time Julia Foote and Mary Smalls were called to preach, the path had already been paved for their success in the AME Church polity.

Although Amanda Berry Smith wasn’t concerned with ordination, the next two black women pioneers were. On the subject of ordination, Berry wrote, “God knew that the thought of ordination had never once entered my mind, for I had received my ordination from Him, Who had said, ‘Ye have not chosen Me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that you might go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit might remain’” (37). The fruit of her struggle did indeed remain and provide empowerment for others who came after her like Julia A.J. Foote and Mary Smalls. The ordinations of Julia Foote and Mary Small in the latter half of the nineteenth century created a break in the AME Church history as well as causing bitter debates that crossed all denominational lines on the issue of women’s place in the Church.

Julia Foote was born in Schenectady, New York in 1823. After moving from New York, she became a member of the AME Zion Church in Boston. Not unlike some of the other pioneering black women preachers, Julia was at first opposed to women preachers. When she received her call to preach after her marriage, Julia did not relish the idea of preaching in such a hostile environment. But, she knew the call to preach came from God, so she began her preaching career despite the objections and conflict that arose between her and her family members. She traveled much as the women preachers before her had out of necessity. Her preaching career spanned over fifty years and she preached in California, the Midwest, the Northeast, and Canada. She spoke to thousands both white and black who filled the camp meetings in anticipation of her preaching the Gospel. Her autobiography, *A Brand Plucked From the Fire*, written in 1879, speaks to the feminist argument for the inclusion of women in the Church polity.

Her ordination in 1895, as the first woman to be ordained as a deacon in the AME Church and the second woman to be ordained as an elder, in 1899 gives her the honor of being the most forceful advocate for participatory equality and ordination of women in the AME Church. More importantly, the ordination of both Julia Foote and Mary Smalls was to change not only AME Church history, but also the history of all religious organizations withholding licensing and ordination from its women.

Upon hearing the common patriarchal argument against women preachers that “Women’s supposed spiritual, mental, and physical weaknesses made them inadequate and even dangerous religious leaders” Foote replied that “God will provide ‘supernatural’ aid to the faithful that they might perform for Him those services for which their own feeble and unassisted powers were totally inadequate” (Collier-Thomas 60). Foote never pastured a church on her own, but she did assist Bishop Alexander Walters in the Stockton Street AME Zion church in San Francisco until her death in 1901. Julia Foote and Mary J. Small both benefited from the ecumenical gains of the black preaching women who came before them.

Unlike Julia Foote, Mary Smalls enjoyed the privilege and power that accompanied the wife of an AME Bishop. Born in 1850 in Tennessee, not much is known of her background or her father. Her mother was Agnes Blair. It is known that she married Reverend John Small in 1873. Soon after their marriage, he became a well-known bishop in the AME Zion Church. Mary labored in the pastoral field alongside her husband until his death in 1905. Mary Small was licensed as an evangelist and missionary in 1892. She was ordained as a deacon in 1895, and made AME Church history as the first woman to be ordained as an elder. Small’s ordination as an elder created critical dialogue among the black male clergy. The AME Zion Church was the first religious organization to bestow such an elevated position on a woman. Bitter debates raged throughout the country as a result of Mary Small’s ordination as elder. The difference between Julia Foote’s ordination and Mary Small’s was Foote’s ordination was given to her at the age of seventy-one; at the end of her activity as a preacher. It was more honorary than anything else. She posed no threat. Small, on the other hand was still in her prime and the odds of her actually pasturing a church was a real threat.

The position of elder was the highest of holy orders, which is just one-step away from the bishopric. As an elder, Mary Small would have authority over the male clergy in the AME Zion Church. This fact sent panic throughout the religious communities. The debate over women’s rights in the church spilled out over into society as well. Collier-Thomas says, “In many ways, women’s gaining access to the male religious hierarchy was comparable to Black’s advancement in a white world. In other words, under pressure, token equality could be granted, but there was no expectation that the minority group would receive open access based upon objective criteria” (25).

In 1884, the AME Zion Church granted suffrage to its women members, which meant that they could vote at
conferences on legislative matters. But it was understood among the male clergy that even though some women were ordained as deacons, none would be ordained as an elder nor would they be assigned to any major churches; those very few who did receive an assignment to a church would find themselves with very small memberships in remote areas. They could only serve as conference evangelists and missionaries. Mary Small’s ordination jerked the ecumenical rug out from under the black male clergy. Small’s ordination and its resulting debate came right after the 1896 organization of the National Association of Colored Women.

These women who founded the NACW were strong AME Church women who advocated for woman’s rights within the laity, such as Hallie Q. Brown and Katherine Davis Tillman. Using their National Association of Colored Woman as a platform they created a national black female agenda for equality. The stained glass ceiling of the Church was finally beginning to crack. As empowering as the ordinations of Julia Foote and May Small were, women’s status in the AME Church wouldn’t come until later in the twentieth century. One black woman who benefited from the legacy of the aforementioned pioneering black women preachers is the Reverend Larsey Frazier of Canton, Ohio.

Reverend Frazier was born on January 25, 1925 in Alabama. She has recently retired as an AME Church itinerant elder. Her preaching career has spanned forty-five years. She is a widow and mother of five children, two of whom are deceased. She has this to say about her career as a black woman AME preacher:

I received the call from God to preach His word in 1941, at the age of sixteen. An Angel came to me one night as I slept. There was a bright light that formed in the corner of my bedroom and I could make out the form of an Angel. He spoke to me and said that, “God wanted me to go out and preach the Gospel to the lost”. I replied, “I didn’t know how.” The angel told me not to worry that God would show me how. I struggled with the vision and what it implied for me for a long time. I was afraid to tell my parents, as they were strict Baptists who didn’t believe in women preachers. My study of the Bible consumed me and I was eventually led by the Spirit to leave my family and travel to Ohio.

After arriving in Ohio, I met and married my husband and we had five children together. I didn’t begin my official preaching career until 1954 when my youngest child was a year old. I was allowed to preach unlicensed, not in a Baptist church, but the Asbury Church in Waynesburg, Ohio. I preached there for a year and a half before I was admitted to the General conference in 1955 where I was licensed to preach and offered a small church in Massillon, Second Bethel AME. I was ordained as an itinerant elder in 1960. For many years I was the only woman attending our church conferences in the third district.

During my career as an itinerant preacher, I met many male preachers who didn’t like the idea of women in the pulpit. They used to say to me, “you’re too good looking to be in the pulpit, you’ll distract the men in the congregation.” My belief, though in God’s call kept me going gave me the strength to face many challenges in my life as a woman preacher. Now that I am retired, I plan to spend my time sharing God’s love with as many people as I can on an informal basis.

When asked if she has seen the Church’s attitude about women preachers changing over the years she replied, The Church has gone from being very skeptical about women preaching in the pulpit, to an almost full acceptance of us. There are still a few churches in the AME family that don’t accept women as leaders of their church, but not many. Today, women are the majority being licensed at General Conferences compared to being the minority when I was ordained. For instance, when I was ordained as an elder in 1960, there were only three women out of nine ministers being licensed to preach and pastor a church. Just this past year, there were five ministers to be licensed and four of them were women.

As Reverend Frazier has attested to, there have indeed been changes in the AME Church. In 2000, at the General Conference held in Cincinnati, Ohio Reverend, Vashti M. McKenzie of Baltimore, Maryland was the first black woman to be ordained to the highest ecclesiastical office in the African Methodist Episcopal Church—she now
holds the historical distinction of being the first black women addressed as the Right Reverend Bishop Vashti M. McKenzie! It has taken 213 years to arrive at this point in the AME history.

Born in May 1947, the now fifty three year old wife and mother of three received her call to preach after her marriage to professional basketball player, Stan McKenzie. Having grown up worshipping at St. James Episcopal Church, God’s will has always been paramount in her life. After her husband retired from basketball, they returned to Baltimore where McKenzie felt the call of God on her life to preach. After a long period of fasting and prayer, she joined Bethel AME Church.

To prepare herself she attended Howard University in Washington, D.C., where she obtained a Master of Divinity Degree, and a Doctor of Ministry Degree from Union theological Seminary in Dayton, Ohio. In 1984 she was ordained as a deacon; in 1985 McKenzie was fully ordained and appointed pastor of Oak Street AME Church in midtown Baltimore. In 1988 she was the first woman to become pastor of Payne Memorial AME Church in its one hundred and eight year history. She held this position for ten years during which her skills as a community advocate and social reformer had many positive impacts on the surrounding community.

Some of her achievements include: an increase of membership from 440 to over 1500, the Payne Memorial Outreach Inc-a million dollar faith-based non-profit agency, computer labs in AME high schools, entrepreneurial business projects, USA & Africa teacher workshops & summits, and scholarships for clergy and students. In 1997 Ebony magazine chose her as one of the greatest fifteen black women preachers in the US. Vashti’s campaign for the bishopric has been compared to one running for the presidential office. In her acceptance speech she stated that, “I stand here tonight on the shoulders of the unordained, women who serve without affirmation or appointment. I don’t stand here alone, but there is a cloud of witnesses who sacrificed, died and gave their best” (McGill 3).

McKenzie says that during her career as a black woman preacher she has met with resistance from women as well as men. But, she says that she doesn’t have nearly as many scars as the women who came before her. She says, “It can be a scary thing to be called to preach” (Ebony). Bishop McKenzie is the author of three books: Not Without a Struggle: Leadership Development For African American Woman In Ministry, Strength within the Struggle, and Journey to the Well.

Bishop Vinton R. Anderson says about her historically significant ordination, “It makes a significant statement. It’s a signal that if it can happen in one situation, it can happen in other situations…Vashti McKenzie is an excellent role model of what women can achieve” (Ebony). As all of the AME Church’s newly appointed Bishops are assigned to areas in South Africa, Bishop McKenzie’s new appointment will take her to the eighteenth district, which encompasses the areas of Mozambique, Lesotho, Botswana, and Swaziland. McKenzie has been a world traveler and has an affinity for these areas. Her goals for the eighteenth district will include economic development, human rights, church growth, and the fight against aids, as well as addressing the social, medical, and educational needs of the area. Though her ordination has cracked the stained glass ceiling of the Church, McKenzie’s new appointment leaves the door open for more intense discourse on the history and the future of black women who answer the call of God on their lives.

By providing more scholarship on the history of black women preachers, an important literary gap will be filled and another dimension to the discourse on what has been traditionally recognized as black male history. The stories of black women, who not only challenged patriarchy in the church on the strength of their belief in the Holiness Tradition, but who also took feminist steps to eradicate inequality and sexism in religion through their preaching, teaching, and autobiographical writings is an essential piece in the fabric of black women’s literature. Sylvia Bryant in her essay, “Speaking Into Being”, attests to the value and validity of women’s writing in our culture she states,

The writing of one woman’s life…indeed remains exemplary within the traditions of American autobiography: revising conventional boundaries and expectations, making a historical place of agency within the continuum of American women’s experiences; giving us a way to name, to know, to make of use those experiences that outstrip theory, outstretch explanation, and overreach expectation, social convention, generic boundaries.
Certainly, the initial intent of these spiritual autobiographies was to encourage and draw lost souls to God by divulging the road traveled from sin to salvation. The result though, is that we now have to include in the history of the black Church, the integral part played by black women as well as black men. Equally important is the literary contribution of these black women preachers to the scholarship devoted to black women writers. Through their autobiographical writings, we are also privy to issues of sexism within the Church, during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as well as in society at large.

Alette Hill says in her essay, “Understanding Gender Shaping Institutions” that, “The religious tradition of western society as it applies to women has had a greater influence than any other on the development of American society to date... it is the basic structure from which people in our society build the concept of the social self and define our identity in the world” (71)

Since the inception of the African Methodist Episcopal Church by Richard Allen in 1786, there has been major ecclesiastical and social progress achieved by the struggles of black preaching women. But there is still much work to be done. Since Bishop Vashti McKenzie’s ordination in July, 2000, there have been two more black women ordained as Bishops, but when you consider that the AME Church’s membership is over three million, 70% of whom are women, and out of twenty six bishops only three are women, as well as nearly six thousand ministers with only 1% of their senior ministers being women, you can see how much labor is still needed in the fields. Bishop McKenzie has this to say on the Church’s strides for its women, “The African American Church has handled civil rights and social injustice very effectively. The African American church has been able to deal with racism, but the Church is just starting to deal with the issues of sexism and classism” (Feltz 2).

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