



Free Methodist Historical Society

Newsletter

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HISTORY EXPLAINS

By Bishop Emeritus Gerald Bates

Recently I was given a monograph entitled "Our African Journal 1945-1950" by early missionaries to Burundi, Allen and Lillian Bilderback (pictured). In it Rev. Bilderback describes a dramatic event: "Last Sunday May 5 (1946) we drove to Muyebe for a large baptismal service. I and three other missionaries baptized 250 people by immersion in a cold river." After the baptism they went up to the church and served to the newly baptized their first Communion. He comments, "This was the most joyous communion service I have ever experienced."

As background to this event he says, "Our work in Burundi was started in 1935 but the number of converts in the early years was very few. By 1942 our total African membership was 351. But during the next four years we experienced a phenomenal growth, and in 1946 we reported 2,223.... This all came about because of great revival." He goes on to describe the effects of the beginnings of the great East African Revival movement, which spread all over the region, affecting the protestant missions and their African constituencies.

Now let me turn to an announcement in the Missions Hotline September 28, 2021: "Join us in giving praise to God for the recent Bible camps and vacation Bible School in Burundi. An estimated 59,500 youth from across the country attended these events. Approximately 14,000 made personal commitments to Christ."

When I read this, I immediately sent notes of appreciation to Bishop Deo Nshimiymana of the FMC in Burundi as well as the General Secretary of the Church, Rev. Evariste Bimenyimana. Both responded with nearly the

same words, "Give all the praise to God!" The second thing I did was to call retired missionaries Virgil (Jim) and Martha Kirkpatrick. As long as I have known them they have prayed for revival. Jim was quiet for a moment then said, "Well... Hallelujah!"

I continued my correspondence, asking for current statistics of the Burundi church. Membership is 96,959, with 865 churches. Net growth from 2020-2021 was 6,479. The total number in the Free Methodist community, 195,820, means that about 1 in every 60 people in the country is somehow related to the FMC.

Eleven years before the great baptism described by Rev. Bilderback, in the first week of construction work at the founding station, Muyebe, six little boys and one workman came and asked to be taught. Founder of the FM work in Burundi, J. W. Haley said, "Praise the Lord! He makes great oaks from small acorns and may our church be used to bring thousands and hundreds of thousands of Burundi to Christ." Many years before, Haley had written, "Foundations though hidden are very essential. When they are prepared for a great structure the work is tedious and slow. Years must pass before the wisdom of the faithful foundation builders can be fully appreciated."

Does history explain what was reported by the FMC in Burundi last year? Not entirely, of course, but without some history the outcome is incomprehensible. As the leaders say, "Give all the glory to God!" But the story's obedient servants — the Haleys, Bilderbacks, Kirkpatricks and many others — also have a part, even as Moses did in Bible times.



The Mission of the Free Methodist Historical Society is to preserve Free Methodist heritage and transmit it faithfully to each generation in order to assist the Free Methodist Church in fulfilling its mission.

ENCOUNTERING THE BREWINGTONS: EARLY FREE METHODIST EVANGELISTS

By Rev. Dr. Mindi Grieser Cromwell

Since moving to McPherson, KS, several years ago, I have had the opportunity to immerse myself in the history of Kansas and Plains States Free Methodism. Part of the story I have been learning is the role of early black Free Methodist ministers such as Rev. James Suggs. Sent as a missionary to Nicodemus, KS, from the St. Charles, IL, camp meeting, his family would eventually settle in Orleans, NE, where his daughter, Eliza Suggs, would write her parents' life stories, including their escape from slavery and later alignment with the Free Methodist Church.

One of the many lessons I learned from the Suggs family history in Free Methodism is that, unlike the Methodist Episcopal Church, early Free Methodists did not track the race of their ministers in the yearly book of reports. This meant that unless we had outside source material it was impossible to guess how many early Free Methodist elders, deacons and evangelists were Black. The only way, then, for modern Free Methodists to uncover these stories is through chance. Several years ago, such a chance discovery came my way.

I was helping the Marston Center save some materials recently discovered in Kansas. In preparing the documents, I was continually sidetracked by interesting bits and bobs I would read in the primary source material. A newspaper from around 1886, published in Hutchinson, KS, and entitled *Law and Gospel*, caught my attention. While skimming through this paper published by Bro. W. H. Bauser, I noticed the following in an article where he describes visiting the Toledo District Camp-meeting:

A goodly company of preachers and workers were present; the principal ones were present; the principal ones were, J. H. Keys, H. F. Ashcraft, M. N. Huston, W. S. Morrow, Ella Mouser, Dora Ogburn, and Bro. and Sister Brewington (colored.)

While I had not heard of all of the names before, two that stood out in particular were Bro. and Sister Brewington and the appellation Bauser used to describe them, "colored."

In the 19th century, there were a variety of reasons a white Christian might use that descriptor of another brother and sister in Christ, and many of those reasons were not positive. In this case, Bro. Bauser was including the Brewingtons in a list that gave them top billing along with other holiness and Free Methodist preachers. This indicates a positive view of the Brewingtons' preaching abilities. However, as American 19th century history would tell us, we cannot immediately assume that Bro. Bauser believed the Brewingtons, as formerly enslaved people, shared equal humanity. Their inclusion in his published report left unanswered questions. The fact that he included other information about the Brewingtons in the same edition would help narrow our questions. Later in the same edition Bauser refers to the Brewingtons again. He writes:

Bro. and Sister Brewington of Litchfield, IL, feel the

call to go to Africa. To help them meet their call we open our columns to receive subscriptions, and would urge our readers to 'help (them) a little.' They propose to go out on the faith-line, only asking for means to pay their transit. They offered themselves to go with Robert L. Harris, but he objected to them, at least in part, on account of their color. Having met this brother and sister at the Toledo camp-meeting, and seen their usefulness in the work of the Lord, we can heartily recommend them as worthy of your confidence and help this matter...

There is crucial information within these few sentences. First, it situates Brother and Sister Brewington in the early days of Free Methodist missions to Africa, which, for a variety of reasons, had not yet organized. Second, the connection to Robert Lee Harris is interesting because Harris was also a licensed evangelist within the Free Methodist Church but later left to found the New Testament Church of Christ. He did not go to Africa as missionary. Lastly, that Brother Bauser mentions in print Harris' objection to the Brewingtons' partnership "in part, on account of their color" reveals some degree of the post-Civil War racial prejudice rife in holiness circles.

The Brewingtons preaching at a camp meeting in Toledo did not necessarily mean they were aligned with the FMC in an official capacity. Official relationships would be tracked in the Book of Reports that listed evangelists, deacons and elders. A search through the minutes found the Brewingtons not in Ohio but in the Indiana/Central Illinois conference. From 1886-1888, J. H. and E. A. Brewington were listed as evangelists and as residing in Litchfield, IL.

The couple wrote in again to Bro. Bauser's *Law and Gospel* in October 1886 reporting some meetings that were held in Herrick, IL:



My pre-cious Sav-ior
My blood is shed,
In Cal-v'ry's crims
He'll wash your soul

at the hal-lowed cross.
hal-lowed cross.
hal-lowed cross.
hal-lowed cross.

Dear Bro. Bauser: We are here holding meeting. The Lord is saving and sanctifying souls and the devil is stirred from the very bottom. We got egged last week but thank God who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Glory to God! J.H. & E. A. Brewington. Herrick, Ill
Being egged, having tent meetings attacked, and various other attempts to disrupt holiness preaching are recorded by many early Free Methodists and holiness folk in the pages of The Free Methodist, published memoirs, and personal journals. In fact, some early camp meetings needed their own security. The Brewingtons appeared to have their own experience in this area.

Such focused information helped to track the Brewingtons outside of Free Methodist circles. While their official relationship with the Indiana/Central Illinois conference appears to end in 1888, newspaper records, including some holiness newspapers and magazines, show the name Mrs. E. A. Brewington. In fact, on July 25, 1888, Mrs. Brewington is mentioned in the Chicago Tribune:

Mrs. E. A. Brewington, a colored woman from Litchfield, apparently well educated, said she was cured in an instant of an illness that had kept her in bed for over a year. She declares she will begin a faith cure evangelization among the colored people.

Did her decision to promote "a faith cure evangelization among the colored people" indicate a break with the Free Methodist Church? After 1888, E. A. and J. H.'s names are not found together. However, Mrs. E. A. Brewington appears to have had an ongoing ministry singing and preaching in churches in central Illinois. By the early 1900s she is mentioned in papers as being based in Springfield, IL, and traveling to nearby communities to conduct services. In 1903 we find her leading revival services along with an unnamed white



woman in Gibson City, IL an A.M.E. Church. The local paper reports: Revival meetings continue each night at the A. M. E. church with a colored lady evangelist, Mrs. E. A. Brewington, of Springfield, and a white lady singer from that city. The house is crowded each night, with many white people as well as colored people with a deep interest among both races and with both races at the altar. Mrs. Brewington is a highly cultured colored evangelist and a sweet singer. The colored lady evangelist with the white lady are pronounced by the citizens of Gibson two of the most beautiful singers who have ever sung in any of its churches, as their sweet voices, together with the earnestness

in the songs, have made a lasting impression upon the white race as well as the colored race.

This article and several others make clear Emma has joined the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

Mrs. Brewington appears to have maintained connections in white holiness spaces even as she was serving and worshipping within the AME church. In 1908, her hymn "Down at the Hallowed Cross" was published in Rev. Frank M. Graham's camp meeting hymnal Songs for Jesus: Old and New. Rev. Graham was a preacher and district superintendent in the Wesleyan Church.

The chance encounter of finding the Law and Gospel newspaper and therefore early evangelists J. H. and E. A. Brewington has helped us uncover more of our early Free Methodist story. I pray their story will continue to unfold as we learn more about the early Black Free Methodists and their role in the history of our denomination.



Recordings of FM pastors and lay people singing "Down at the Hallowed Cross" are linked at the Marston Memorial Center Facebook page.

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FIRST WINNER OF BISHOP L. R. MARSTON BOOK PRIZE ANNOUNCED

The Committee on Free Methodist History and Archives has authorized the Marston Memorial Historical Center to award a book prize annually in honor of Free Methodist Historian and Bishop Leslie R. Marston. We are pleased to announce Dr. Kevin M. Watson as the first recipient for his book *Old or New School Methodism? The Fragmentation of a Theological Tradition* (Oxford University Press, 2019).

Reflecting on receiving the prize Dr. Watson said, "This award is particularly meaningful to me because the book itself prominently features B. T. Roberts and the events leading to the founding of the Free Methodist Church. The beginnings of Free Methodism mark a crucial turning point in the Wesleyan theological tradition in the United States. As a result, understanding the beginnings of Free Methodism is essential to understanding the history of the entire Wesleyan/Methodist family in the United States."

Dr. Watson, currently pastor of discipleship at First Methodist Church of Waco, has taught at a variety of schools including Seattle Pacific University. His area of study is Wesleyan Studies and History of Christianity.

In *Old or New School Methodism?* Dr. Watson's scholarly and pastoral pursuits focus on engaging and restoring the spiritual vitality of Methodism. His other published works demonstrate his desire to be of service to the wider Methodist church as both scholar and pastor: *Pursuing*

Social Holiness: The Band Meeting in Wesley's Thought and Popular Methodist Experience, The Class Meeting: Reclaiming a Forgotten (and Essential) Small Group Experience. For more about his work, visit www.kevinmwatson.com.



John Wesley famously described himself as a "man of one book," but he did not mean that he only read the Bible. Rather, he meant that all other books were compared to the Holy Scriptures. And Wesley certainly had exposure to many other writings. From his journal and letters we can readily tell that he was one of the most widely read persons of his time in all of England.

The Book Prize continues this legacy of promoting good books that edify the spirit, inspire the soul, and motivate the servant to be the hands and feet of Jesus in the world, following the Free Methodist Way and boldly proclaiming and practicing Wesleyan/Arminian theology. As entries for the 2022 Book Prize open, we want to identify and publicize books that significantly help readers understand the history and mission of the Free Methodist Church. This can include books grounded in that heritage that are addressing important issues today.



Dr. Watson was recently interviewed for the *Light and Life* Podcast. Listen at www.lightandlife.fm/old-or-new-school-methodism.