

Black Women Preachers in America

Black **H**istory **M**onth

By Bettye Collier-Thomas

Black women who preach have not been and still are not widely recognized in mainstream Christianity as the equals of male preachers. They have continued to come forth and to pursue the prize—the pulpit. In doing so, they have been singular heroes and powerful actors in the struggle for black empowerment, especially the empowerment of black women.

Holiness Tradition Among African Americans

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. It provided them with a strategy to overcome the barriers of the Church, which contended that the Bible does not sanction women to preach. Preaching women who embraced the holiness doctrine asserted that they did not need the Church's sanction, because their ministry was authorized by a power beyond the Church, namely God, who spoke to them through the Holy Spirit. The feminist activism of most of the

Church

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"Before I'll be slave, I'll be buried in my grave and go home to my Father and be free."

Even today, one sees many examples of the Black Church's viability and importance within the African-American community. Leaders such as Jesse Jackson and Louis Farrakhan are descendants of this Judeo-Christian tradition. Andrew Young, former mayor of Atlanta, is an ordained minister. Famous singers, Mary J. Blige, Whitney Houston, and Johnny Gill are products of the Black Church, just to cite a few examples.

Closer to home, churches such as Irvington Covenant, Economic Investments; Emmanuel Temple, Social Services; and Power House Temple Church. Social Services still provide much needed resources and socially conscious leadership to the communities they serve. The Black Church remains the bastion of the Black identity in America and continues to play a crucial role in perpetuating African-American interests.



Licensed as an evangelist and missionary in 1892, and ordained to the diaconate in 1895, Mary Small was ordained an elder of the AME Zion Church in 1898. She was the first woman, black or white, to achieve this honor. Her elevation to this status precipitated a bitter debate among male clergy, many of whom questioned the propriety of granting such a status to a woman.

preaching women derived from religious inspiration, particularly their belief in the holiness doctrine of spiritual sanctification.

To be sanctified was to be free from sin. Sanctification was the result of Christian commitment after conversion. Spiritual sanctification meant that one could purify "one's inner disposition to willful sin, a liberation of the soul to follow the indwelling voice of Christ," or the Holy Spirit. Many preaching women spoke freely about the Holy Spirit's power to remove all obstacles and to speak through them. They believed that the Holy Spirit empowered them to act, think, speak, and simply be.

Struggle for Ordination

Ordination provides authorization

for a minister to pastor a church and to ascend to other positions in a religious organization's hierarchy. This was another level in women's struggle to preach.

In the nineteenth century, most black denominations were unwilling to license women to preach, even as local preachers, and with the exception of the AME Zion Church, none were inclined to ordain them. A few women were licensed to preach, and the AME Zion Church began ordaining women in 1895.

The AME Zion's granting of elder's orders to a woman — Mary Small — thundered through the nation. I was a watershed event in the struggle of preaching women, black and white;

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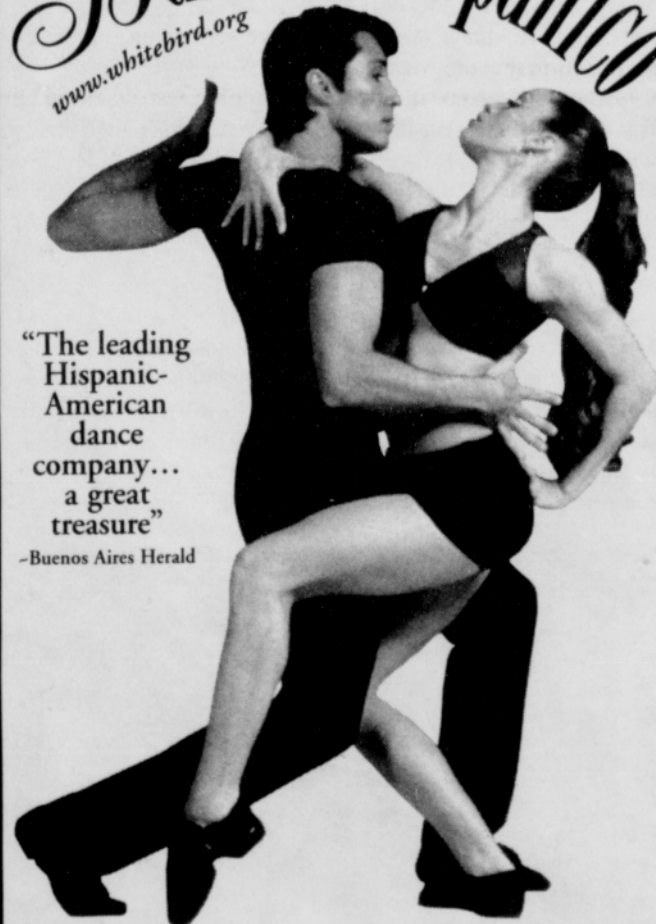
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