

The contribution of women in Baptist Churches in the Caribbean

An Overview

The Caribbean is a very diverse region with a unique intermingling of races, languages, customs and cultures. Baptist witness entered the Caribbean in the 18th century and owes its origin to the exodus of formerly enslaved persons of faith from the southern coast of the United States. “The oldest work in the region is found in the Bahamas, Jamaica and Trinidad (Russell, H).

The records dating back to these earliest years is a record of the contribution of men. This is typical of most historical records with women more often than not being written out of history. Admittedly some work needs to be done to uncover the contribution of women during these earlier periods, my focus today will be on the 20th century.

Women make up the majority of membership of Baptist Churches in the Caribbean, it would be true to say that in most contexts the ratio of women to men is about 70:30. This overwhelming ratio of women to men in membership bears no resemblance to the number of women in leadership. Like many other places, our region is patriarchal resulting in women been denied the opportunity to occupy leadership roles in some conventions and Unions.

In some churches however, there is space for women to serve in different levels of leadership such as Deacons, Deaconesses, Christian Educators, Leaders of Women’s Groups, Church Secretaries and Worship leaders. Pastoral leadership has, however been a male preserve for the most part, as the church has not escaped the structural and systemic biases against women resulting in the sexual division of labour found in the wider society, with women concentrated in areas traditionally regarded as softer areas of service while men serve as pastors and administrative heads/leaders.

In fact, it was through involvement in and leadership of women’s groups that many women were able to carve out a space for service within the church with the status quo remaining securely in place.

On the other hand, the sterling leadership offered by many of these women, even if within traditionally accepted norms, paved the way for their involvement in other areas of leadership within the church. This by way of being named in representative capacities, as well as, being asked to serve in other ways. It should be noted that many of them have received national recognition for their contribution to church and their society.

To date, women have been able to contribute to the church as ordained ministers in the Bahamas, the Guyana Missionary Baptist Church-Lott Carey, and the Jamaica Baptist Union. The Baptist Union of Trinidad and Tobago has recently made a decision to ordain women and we look forward to being able to celebrate the ordination of women through this Union. These Unions and Conventions which practice the ordination of women represent a fraction of Caribbean Baptist Churches in terms of countries within the Caribbean, although, interestingly, these are among the largest Unions & Conventions.

Notwithstanding the challenges and struggles, we have a lot to celebrate and be proud of as it relates to the contribution of women to Baptist Churches in the region.

It would be true to say that without the strength, fortitude and faithfulness of Caribbean women the kind of vibrancy existing in many of our churches would not exist. They form the bedrock of our churches and without their dedicated service the doors of many congregations would perhaps be closed. The nurturing and character formation which take place every Sunday morning are done mainly by women and the most vibrant auxiliary in most churches are the women's groups.

I will be highlighting the contribution of a few of these women. It must be noted that I am not in any way claiming to highlight those who have made the most contribution or even the most distinguished contribution.

In highlighting the contribution of these women I have assigned a descriptor by way of a word or phrase that I believe in large measure, could characterize their work or capture the essence of their ministry.

REV. DR. MARINA SANDS JP- LEADER & CHAMPION FOR THE MARGINALIZED

Rev. Dr Marina Sands is Bahamian. She has been a deacon and lay leader since 1972. She went into full time Christian Ministry in 1986 and was ordained in 1987. She received her theological training at the Bahamas Baptist Institute and later a Doctor of Divinity Degree by the Louisiana Baptist University for her outstanding contribution in the fields of Christian Leadership and Evangelism.

Dr Sands left the New Bethlehem Baptist Church where she served in various capacity for over 40 years and in 1997 in response to God's call organized the Judaea Baptist Church situated on Marina Sands Drive in Nassau, Bahamas.

She has served as

- President of the Bahamas National Baptist Missionary & Educational Women's Convention Auxiliary.

- Representative for the Bahamas Baptist Convention on the Bahamas Christian Council
- Advisory Council of the Women's Bureau to the Minister for Women's Affairs for over twenty (20) years.
- President of the Bahamas Baptist Association Women's Department for 30 years.
- Vice President of the National Organization of Women in The Bahamas.

Regional & International

- President of the of the Caribbean Baptist Women's Union for 10 years
- Continental Union President
- Vice President of the Baptist World Alliance Women's Department
- Platinum Member of the Foreign Mission Work for National Baptist USA Inc.
- Vice President of the North American Baptist Women's Union and as an Executive Board Member for eight (8) years.
- Vice President of the Worship Committee of the National Baptist USA Inc. Women's Convention (served for over 20 years).
- President Emeritus of the Women's Department of the Bahamas Baptist Association and the Caribbean Baptist Women's Union.
- She is President Emeritus of the Bahamas National Baptist Missionary and Educational Convention Women's Department

She has represented Baptist Women at various forums across all continents.

Dr Sands has a passion for those in need and as a result she has:

- Led many mission trips
- Organized numerous outreach Ministries at the Sandilands Rehabilitation Center Geriatric Ward, the Girls and Boys Industrial Schools, The Children's Emergency Hostel, the AIDS Camp, Persis Rodgers Home for the Aged, Morris House Home for The Aged and the Good Samaritan Home for the Aged
- She is especially known for her popular and very effective "24-hour Telephone Prayer Hot Line",

Dr Sands has been described as warm and compassionate; ready to help those in need, a comforter, friend, counselor and confidant. In 2014, she was awarded the Title of "Mother of Baptist" by Rev. Dr. William Thompson, President, Bahamas National Baptist Missionary & Educational Convention and subsequently the 2014 Annual Baptist Day Parade was named in her honour. Dr. Marina Sands and continues to engage in ministry in the Bahamas in various ways.

REV ERMA MCKENZIE MILLER - CHURCH PLANTER

Rev. Erma McKenzie Miller as she was affectionately called was born in Nieuw Nickerie Suriname on June 19, 1924. She lived in British Guiana (Now Guyana) from the age of two. She was a nurse and child psychologist by training and later received theological training and was ordained to the Gospel Ministry in the Guyana Missionary Baptist Church-Lott Carey (1984) making her the first in Guyana and among the first women in the region to be ordained. For many years she worked, first along- side Rev. Dr. Carlyle Miller who was a medical doctor and ordained minister who was to later become her husband but continued much of the work on her own as a lay leader who was called to lead the Guyana Missionary Baptist Church from 1979.

Founding of Mt Zion Baptist Church:

In the mid-1950s with the support of her pastor Rev. Miller, Ms. McKenzie, led a church planting team into Campbellville, a newly developing community in Georgetown. She started with a Sunday School which grew rapidly and soon outgrew the location. The group hosted several open-air crusades and many persons came to Christ thus forming the membership of this church. On April 12, 1962, the church plant in Campbellville was organized into a church and they became the Mount Zion Baptist Church. She later went on to plant the following, some with her husband, others after his passing in 1979:

Long Creek Church - (1973)

Camp Somerville - 1973

ML Wilson (named after a friend and ally in ministry) Kuru-Kurusu, Newtown - 1974

Lonnie A. Simon School Feeding Centre - 1977

Hospital and Health Centre -completed in 1977

Yarrowkabra Baptist Church -1984

The Abrams Creek Baptist Church-1989

Rev. Erma also led expansion projects in all congregations which included new church buildings at Long Creek, Calvary and Mount Zion and the expansion of Camp Somerville.

Other Engagements

Medical Missions

The couple traveled weekly to various communities rendering medical services to people under trees. Eventually they were able to secure land at Long Creek on which they built a log cabin and served their patients from there. It was then they established a church in Long Creek and also Camp Somerville which I mentioned earlier (1973).

Radio Ministry

Under her leadership GMBC launched a weekly radio ministry that was broadcast throughout Guyana, Suriname, and in other Caribbean Countries.

Leadership Development

Rev. Erma Miller also played a significant role in developing GMBC leadership capacity. She facilitated this by providing scholarships for clergy and lay leaders training. Consequently, under her leadership GMBC moved from being a circuit of churches with one pastor to a network of congregations with multiple trained clergy leaders.

National Recognition:

Rev Erma Miller was awarded the National Medal of Service Award in 1990 by the His Excellency Hugh Desmond Hoyte, President of Republic Guyana. In recognition of her outstanding Service to God and humanity.

She retired from active ministry in May 2012 and moved to Durham North Carolina to live with her daughter, Rev. Brenda Harewood, and her family. In recognition of her outstanding Service to the GMBC community the GMBC Board of Trustees unanimously appointed her Superintendent Emeritus. She passed away a few years ago.

EDNA MCKOY - PIONEER & REGIONAL WORKER

Edna McKoy was born in St James, Jamaica. She was an educator with a Bachelor of Arts in History, French and Latin and a Master of Science in Library Studies.

She was the first woman to serve in the top leadership of the Jamaica Baptist Union, by becoming a Vice President of the JBU between 1982-1985 after almost 200 years of Baptist witness in the country. She is still one of only 3 women to have sat in that seat.

This was very significant as it happened over a decade before the first woman was ordained to the pastoral ministry and it was also significant given the fact of her being a lay person in a Union that in many respects could be described as clergy centered. She served with distinction during her term of office.

The late Claire Maddix in sharing from an interview with Mrs. McKoy after her election quoted her as saying ‘I see it as a great honour and privilege to be elected to serve as Vice President of this great denomination as well as an overt recognition of the value of women in leadership positions within our churches and denomination. The women of our denomination are a vibrant group and over the years have contributed selflessly and significantly to the growth of the JBU. They are ready to do more in years to come” She went on to urge women to seize every opportunity to increase their awareness of the possibilities which exist at all level of national life for service to people and for personal growth and development. “In particular to keep refining our skills so that when there is opportunity we might respond with competence and commitment”.

Mrs. McKoy also made a significant contribution to the recognition, growth and development of the Jamaica Baptist Women’s Federation & the Caribbean Baptist Women’s Union. She was:

- Vice president- Jamaica Baptist Women’s Federation, 1972-1979
- President - Jamaica Baptist Women’s Federation, 1979-1982
- Represented the Jamaica Baptist Women’s Federation at the Baptist World Alliance meetings, the North American Baptist Women’s Union and the Caribbean Baptist Women’s Union.

- Caribbean Baptist Women’s Union - She played a significant role in the formation of the Caribbean Baptist Women’s Union for which she became president, and represented the Caribbean on various bodies at several international gatherings.

- Caribbean Baptist Fellowship - She gave sterling contribution as a member of the Caribbean Baptist Fellowship Executive, serving as recording secretary of CBF for 23 years (1983-2006).

- Caribbean Baptist Christian Publications - Writer for the Children’s Curriculum

Mrs. McKoy’s commitment at the leadership level of the JBU and within the region was not at the expense of her local contribution. She served faithfully in her church as church organist, secretary, lay preacher, Christian Educator, mentor and as a tremendous support to her husband, the late Rev. Sebert McKoy. Mrs. McKoy is currently retired.

She received the Prime Minister’s medal of honour for service to education.

JOAN MILLICENT PURCELL (B.Sc., M.ED. Dip. Theology) - PUBLIC THEOLOGIAN & ACTIVIST

Grenadian by birth, educated to the Masters level with degrees in social work, education and theology.

Joan Purcell is a Christian leader whose service to her country could be viewed as service to her church by the way she lived out her Christian convictions while maintaining an active life in politics. She served in both Houses of Parliament; as a Cabinet Minister in the Interim Government of Grenada, from 1983 to 1984 and from 1990 to 1995, she served in the House of Representatives as the Member of Parliament for the Town of St. George.

When she served twice as Acting Prime Minister, and was Deputy Leader (from 1996) and then acting Leader of the National Democratic Congress (1998-1999), the general sense among the people of Grenada was that here (finally) was a Christian political leader.

She has been described as someone who theologized politics. As she almost always used politics as the vehicle to share the gospel in her spheres of influence.

Her faith has been an integral part of her spiritual leadership journey. Purcell believes that faith is a core factor in making a significant difference in life; particularly in the area of leadership. She maintains that her own faith helped her to stay the course despite disappointments, disillusionment, and an environment that seemed so corrosive.

Ms. Purcell is a:

- Community activist,
- Children and women's advocate,
- Development worker and adult educator, with particular interest in Leadership Development
- Ecumenist
- As a member of the St. George's Baptist Church of the Grenada Baptist Association for over 20 years she served as;

Sunday School Teacher/Trainer,

Camp Coordinator, Board Member

Christian Education Writer; Caribbean Christian Publications

- Theologian - She has taught courses in most of the theological institutes in Grenada. Her more recent and impactful courses were at the Grenada Institute

for Theological Education where she focused on Theology of Work and Discipling the Nations.

- Radio Host of a weekly devotional (2017-2018) on Chime FM in Grenada (2017) called, “First Love”. Radio Talk Show Host - Good News GM Grenada
- Author - Purcell has written and published: *Vision of Change: A Caribbean Perspective* (2010); a bible study for women entitled *at His Feet* (2009) and her memoirs: *Memoirs of a Woman in Politics: Spiritual Struggles* (2008) and a number of other pieces and articles.

Other areas of service included:

- Executive Member, Association of Evangelical Churches,
- Chair, New Horizons Charity Organization
- Executive Member and Board Trustee Inter School Christian Fellowship Grenada
- Church Administrator, Evangelistic Centre, St. George’s, Grenada
- Executive Director, AGAPE FOUNDATION Grenada, Faith Based Organization
- Retreat Coordinator and Facilitator Samaritan Encounter Retreats for Adult Women and Teen Mom
- National Coordinator, Women’s Commission, Evangelical Association of the Caribbean 2001 - 2002
- Board Trustee, Caribbean Rep, Youth for Christ International, USA

Due to geographical relocation she currently attends the Evangelistic Center, a member church of the Pentecostal Assemblies of the West Indies (PAWI).

These are but a few of the many stories I could have shared. I trust the stories of these women will serve as an inspiration to all.

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Merlyn Hyde Riley (Rev)

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Nassau Bahama