

We, Too, Sing America:

African American Seventh-day Adventist Healers in a Multicultural Nation

BY ANDREA KING

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There are things that make me proud to be an African American Seventh-day Adventist Christian. I am proud to say that the first president of the General Conference, John Byington, was a staunch abolitionist. He used his Bucks Bridge home as a stop for the Underground Railroad, and he often hosted fugitive slaves and Native Americans at his own table.¹ John P. Kellogg, another Adventist pioneer, and father of Dr. John Harvey Kellogg, also ran an Underground Railroad station on his farm in Michigan.² Perhaps it was such forward-thinking people, in addition to their rightly dividing the Word of God, that attracted women like Sojourner Truth, an itinerant preacher, abolitionist, activist, and healer to the Advent movement.

Originally named Isabella Baumfree, Sojourner Truth was bounced from plantation to plantation until she decided to escape with her infant child one year before slavery was abolished in New York. Of her escape she recalled, “I did not run off, for I thought that wicked, but I walked off, believing that to be all right.”³ After slavery had been abolished in New York, her son was sold to a slave owner in Alabama. She fought to get him freed by suing the owner. She won the case, becoming the first Black woman to win a court case against a White man.⁴

She refused to settle merely for her own freedom or the freedom of her children. She went on to fight for the freedom of both women and Blacks. She gave herself the

name Sojourner Truth, for she believed that this name encapsulated the calling God had placed on her life to preach against slavery. Like Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth made several trips to the South to free slaves through the Underground Railroad.⁵

Sojourner Truth was an encourager and liberator of both great and small. When Frederick Douglass was speaking of the horrors of slavery in Boston, it appeared that he was quite discouraged. Hopelessness was beginning to creep into his speech and his heart. Sojourner Truth yelled from the front row, “Frederick, is God dead?”⁶ This inspired and invigorated the whole audience. Her influence also earned her an invitation to the White House, where she met President Abraham Lincoln.⁷

She spoke at least twice at Millerite camp meetings in 1843.⁸ She chronicles in her narrative how, upon her arrival, everyone seemed to be so agitated and excitable—stricken with fear. This was understandable because, according to their calculations, the world was very soon to end. She’d speak to them to calm their minds, sing to them to give peace. She was a healer. This African American healer was able to operate with ease in various circles—from the Battle Creek Sanitarium to the White House; from the circles of Black Frederick Douglass to Ellen Gould White. She was a healer.

In 1851, Sojourner Truth attended the Women’s

Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio. Watching this “tall, gaunt black woman in a gray dress and white turban, surmounted with an uncouth sunbonnet, march deliberately into the church, walk with the air of a queen up the aisle, and take her seat upon the pulpit steps” caused quite a stir in the convention.⁹ Throughout the sessions, she perched herself like a statue, leaning against the wall while sitting on the steps.¹⁰ As an entrepreneur, Sojourner Truth would sell her book, *Life of Sojourner Truth*, during intermission—an awesome feat because she could neither read nor write. When she wasn’t selling, she was back on her step.¹¹

While listening to the presentations, she heard how women were dainty and should be helped into carriages and lifted over ditches. A man announced at the convention that women should have the best place. Other speakers and women had choice seats, yet she was seated on the steps. The irony and hypocrisy of this moment were not lost on her. Her life as a woman included none of the womanly amenities.

Francis Gage, the president in charge of the convention, was warned not to let Truth speak. The organizers for women’s rights did not want their cause muddied with abolition. Gage recalls, “Again and again, timorous and trembling ones came to me and said, with earnestness, ‘Don’t let her speak, Mrs. Gage, it will ruin us. Every newspaper in the land will have our cause mixed up with abolition and niggers, and we shall be utterly denounced.’”¹²

Gage was still undecided on whether she would allow Truth to speak. But after some male preachers from several denominations came and made light of the women’s cause, Sojourner Truth could scarcely hold her seat. The men asserted that women were weak and that men had superior intellect. Furthermore, Jesus Christ, the Savior, was a man, and Eve, the first sinner, was a woman. No one wanted to rebut what was being said. Most women were too timid to speak out in the meetings. Sojourner Truth, however, was not afraid.

She rose and made her way to the front, exciting quite a commotion. People continued to beg Gage to not allow her to speak. Gage, too, arose and quieted the audience. She then announced Sojourner Truth. Truth’s speech was masterful and memorable and

arguably the only reason we remember the Akron, Ohio, Women’s Rights Convention of 1851.

Truth would address women’s rights, but her immediate priority was to let her hearers know that she was included in this category. It became clear to Sojourner Truth that they had no intention of offering her, a Black woman, the rights they were fighting to gain for themselves. Thus, her first order of business was to remind them that she was a woman too:

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain’t I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain’t I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man—when I could get it—and bear the lash as well! And ain’t I a woman? I have borne thirteen children and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother’s grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain’t I a woman?¹³

After first establishing her right to be there as a woman, she then tackled the task at hand and provided an adept rebuttal for women’s rights. Equipped with a brilliant mind, she turned every point used against women’s rights on its head and used it in their favor. “If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone,” she proclaimed, “these women together ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right side up again! And now they is asking to do it, the men better let them.”¹⁴

Sojourner Truth was just one of many exceptional African American women healers. Women like Anna Knight, the first female missionary to India and also the first Black female employee of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, were also healers.¹⁵ Anna Knight learned about Seventh-day Adventists through mail correspondence as a young teenager. Because there were no schools in Mississippi for Blacks, she devoured any reading material she could get her hands on. As Knight learned more

about the Bible, she found that local pastors and the itinerant preachers who would come through her town knew so little of the Bible that she made a commitment to herself to get a formal education.¹⁶ Knight eventually ended up at Battle Creek College, where she studied to be a nurse. There Knight took an oath before John Harvey Kellogg, the director of the Battle Creek Sanitarium, that she would use her training to serve others and not to make money. Upon completion of her nursing degree, Knight went back to Mississippi to start a school for African American children. There were many who were less than excited about her teaching Blacks, and she often had to go to and from the school with a pistol for her safety.¹⁷ Kellogg had invited Knight to be a delegate for the General Conference session in Battle Creek. There she heard of the need for nurses to go to India as missionaries. Knight decided to go if the denomination would send two people to continue the work at her school in Gitano, Mississippi. She made the thirty-day journey to India and worked tirelessly teaching, selling books, and working in the fields to raise money for the school. Knight worked so hard in the field one day that she fainted and did not wake up for three days.¹⁸ While in India, Knight got word that the work in Mississippi had been abandoned. The school had been burned down, and everyone who tried to continue the work in the Black school was threatened. When Knight received a letter from one of her former students asking why she was in India trying to convert the heathen when her own people were growing up in Mississippi as heathens, her heart was broken. Knight wrote to the General Conference pleading for them to send someone to Mississippi to work with the students there. If they would not, she requested a furlough so that she could do it herself. They decided to grant her a furlough.¹⁹ When her furlough came, Knight made her way back to Mississippi. Almost immediately, she started a school with twenty-two students. Knight organized the first Seventh-day Adventist group in south-central Mississippi.

After holding services on Saturday in her home, she would walk six miles to Soso, Mississippi, and teach a Sabbath School class of fifty to eighty adults. Knight would teach them the Sabbath School lesson from *Our Little Friend*, and they loved it.²⁰

Some in the town thought a woman shouldn't



Anna Knight, 1874-1972 Credit; Seventh-day Adventist History Photo Archive; Dept. of Archives and Special Collections, Loma Linda University.

preach. Knight recalls their threats: “This here woman has gone up North and got all these Northern ideas, and is bringing all this in here and getting these people stuck up, and trying to preach, going from one place to another holding meetings there and here. We will fix her.”²¹ They threatened to catch her on the road and kill her. This was not the first time Knight was threatened, nor was it the first time she refused to back down. Knight (with her pistol) had an undying commitment to God and healing, whether in the fields of India, the schools of Mississippi, or the sanitariums of the South.

Anna Knight is an inspiration to women in ministry. Although she is hailed as an educator, she was a minister and a preacher. Knight pastored and organized churches even though she was not recognized formally by the denomination for doing so. Anna Knight is a predecessor for women in ministry who now release healing to this new generation. She was the first African American woman to be hired by the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Knight was a sought-after speaker in churches and universities across denominational lines and trained

pastors at union workers' meetings.²²

Anna Knight served in the Southeastern Union, which covered Florida, Georgia, North and South Carolina, and eastern Tennessee, as the associate Home Missionary secretary, Missionary Volunteer secretary, and educational secretary for the union. She was charged with "looking after the work in the colored churches and schools." Knight later served in the Southern Union, which covered Kentucky, western Tennessee, Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana, and western Florida. When the two unions combined, she was called to the same positions over the entire territory and was again tasked with looking after the work of the colored people.²³

What Anna Knight did for the colored work, a corresponding male was doing for the White work. She had a clergy pass for her travel, by which some could conclude that the transportation industry recognized her as clergy—although her own denomination did not. Knight was not ordained but carried a missionary's license.²⁴ This was because she was a woman. As Josephine Benton points out, "Any man carrying her responsibilities year after year would surely have been designated a minister and would have been ordained."²⁵

Knight was no stranger to sexism and racism in the Church. Though she did not often talk about it publicly, Knight lived with this bitter reality from childhood. She recalls, "I had thought Adventists were saints. When I found they were real human beings, it was an awful disappointment. But I believed the truth nevertheless."²⁶

Anna Knight worked in the Southern Union with Black churches and schools. When regional conferences (Black conferences organized by regions) were instituted in 1945, her office was eliminated. Knight was offered a job in both the South Atlantic and the South Central Conferences. Although she did serve in interim positions in both conferences as they were getting started, Knight decided that it was a good time to retire. She had worked tirelessly for the Lord and for the Church for decades and was already in her seventies.

Anna Knight placed her commitment to God first and foremost in her life. She also honored the commitment she made before Kellogg to help people instead of making money. While doing union work, Knight would make sure that she personally gave an annual physical exam to each Black student attending Adventist schools in the

Southern Union—an admirable feat and a much-needed one because many African Americans had no other health care. When Knight retired in 1946, she reported that she had attended 9,388 meetings, made 11,344 missionary visits, written 48,918 letters, and traveled 554,439 miles.²⁷ A building named after Knight stands on the Oakwood University campus in her honor—as a monument to her work as a missionary, an educator, and a nurse. Anna Knight was a healer.

Others, such as a young, Black Seventh-day Adventist woman named Irene Morgan, were looking for healing. She had recently suffered a miscarriage and had been visiting with her mother. Morgan was returning home on the Greyhound bus to Baltimore to see her doctor. She was seated in the last four rows of the bus, which were designated for Blacks. The bus was filling up, and the driver told the Blacks to go to the back. Thirty minutes into the ride, a White couple boarded, and the driver told Morgan and her seatmate to go to the back of the bus. She refused. A mother with an infant in her arms, seated next to Morgan, stood to go to the back. Morgan snatched her back to her seat. Infuriated, the bus driver drove straight to the jail in Saluda, Virginia. The driver got the sheriff, who threatened to arrest Morgan—to which she replied, "That's perfectly all right."²⁸ The sheriff produced a warrant for her arrest. Morgan took the "warrant," tore it up, and threw it out the window. She knew it was fraudulent because they didn't even know her name.

At this blatant disregard for his authority, the sheriff tried to physically remove Morgan from the bus. She kicked him in the genitals. In a *Washington Post* interview, she recalls: "He touched me. That's when I kicked him in a very bad place. He hobbled off, and another one came on. He was trying to put his hands on me to get me off. I was going to bite him, but he was dirty, so I clawed him instead. I ripped his shirt. We were both pulling at each other. He said he'd use his nightstick. I said, 'We'll whip each other.'"²⁹

Eventually, the two men were able to get Morgan off the bus and into the jail. She pled guilty to resisting arrest and paid the one-hundred-dollar fine but refused to plead guilty for violating the segregation law or pay the ten-dollar fine. The Constitution forbade segregation in interstate commerce. Virginia and other southern states

had long ignored the “commerce clause” and enforced racial segregation. Morgan’s case went all the way to the United States Supreme Court and was argued by NAACP lawyers Thurgood Marshall and William Hastie. She won the case, and her victory became the catalyst for the freedom rides of 1947. The freedom riders would be heard shouting, “Get on the bus, sit any place / ’Cause Irene Morgan won her case!”³⁰

Over a decade before Rosa Parks was thrown off the bus in 1955, Irene Morgan fought and won against segregation in interstate travel. In 2001, Morgan was awarded the Presidential Citizen’s Medal by Bill Clinton. In the president’s speech, he recognized her for her “quiet and brave fight for freedom.” She fought “with dignity and determination.”³¹ The citation for her medal read, “When Irene Morgan boarded a bus for Baltimore in the summer of 1944, she took the first step on a journey that would change America forever.”³² She was on her way to a doctor’s appointment, seeking healing. Little did she know that day, that she would be transformed into a healer.

When Lucille Byard, another Black Adventist woman from New York, needed healing, her story did not have such a happy ending. She had been ill, but as a loyal Seventh-day Adventist, she wanted to be treated in an Adventist facility, for she believed its care would be superior to the New York hospitals. She made prior arrangements and took a train from New York to Maryland and then a taxi to the Washington Sanitarium. Upon arrival, Mrs. Byard filled out her paperwork and was admitted. She and her husband were both mixed with Black and White parentage and were often mistaken for White.³³

When the hospital workers saw that her paperwork said she was Black, she was refused treatment. She was rolled out into a drafty corridor in the dead of winter. Her husband was told she needed to go across state lines to the Freedman’s Hospital at Howard University, where Blacks were treated. He begged for his wife to be treated at

Washington Sanitarium because she was deathly ill and might not live through the transfer to another hospital. His plea fell on deaf ears. He called Freedman’s Hospital and talked with J. Mark Cox, a Black Adventist physician interning there, who was also barred from Adventist institutions because of his race.³⁴ He said they had the space at Freedman’s and would be happy to help. The Byards traveled by taxi into the District of Columbia, but it was too late. By the time they made it to the hospital, Mrs. Byard had suffered too much. Despite valiant efforts to save her, she died shortly after her arrival.³⁵

The death of Lucille Byard became a turning point in the Adventist Church. Although she did not receive healing, her death launched a string of events that eventually led to the healing of many in the African American community. Namely, it was the catalyst for regional conferences that would tend to the needs of African Americans. Of course, this was not what African Americans wanted. They wanted an immediate end to segregation and institutionalized racism in the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Elder W. G. Turner, the North American Division president, came to pacify the members of the Black church in Washington, DC, shortly after Byard’s death. He preached the following Saturday morning from 1 Peter 4:12, “Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you.” Turner had scarcely sat down from



Artist Simmie Knox and Lisa Sweeney-Walker, great, great grandniece of Lucy Byard, unveil the portrait during the Dec. 10, 2021, recognition. Photo by Adventist HealthCare.

Looking at their track record of selfless service, I have become convinced that African American women will be great in the kingdom because, for centuries, they have been least of all.

preaching his sermon before a member rebutted: “Think it not strange? Yes, I think it very strange that there is an Adventist college [Washington Missionary College, now Washington Adventist University] nearby to which I cannot send my children. Yes, I think it is strange! A denominational cafeteria [Review and Herald] in which I cannot be served, and now—this incident. I think it mighty strange! I’m not prepared to hear you say, ‘Servants, obey your masters,’ meaning the General Conference is our master.”³⁶

African Americans were offended that denominational leaders would try to refer to racism and segregation as something they should accept. Blacks were outraged that policies of the Church would have them die rather than break racist protocols. They were upset their children could not be educated in the schools of their choice and that many of the policies of the Church communicated to African Americans that they were inferior. The Black constituency of the Seventh-day Adventist Church had had enough. Regional conferences were neither their desire nor plea, but it became clear that the Seventh-day Adventist Church was simply not willing to integrate, to treat all of its members with love, dignity, and respect as Christ had commanded. Thus, regional conferences became what W. L. Cheatham called the “next best plan.”³⁷

The birth of regional conferences, although not ideal, did much in the way of providing ministry to African Americans. In a 2008 demographic study by the North American Division of Seventh-day Adventists, the diversity of the Seventh-day Adventist Church was attributed in part to “the success of the regional conferences. The Adventist presence in the Black population in the United States is two or three times greater than in other ethnic groups. It is not by accident that the most visible Seventh-day Adventists in American society are Blacks.”³⁸

Another benefit of regional conferences is that

they have provided leadership positions for Blacks in the Church. Because of these conferences, African Americans who normally would not be able to sit at the table now have a place. Heretofore, the sentiments of African Americans in the Seventh-day Adventist Church were encapsulated well in Langston Hughes’s poem, “I, Too, Sing America”:

I, Too, Sing America

I am the darker brother.

They send me to eat in the kitchen

When company comes,

But I laugh,

And eat well,

And grow strong.

Tomorrow,

I’ll be at the table

When company comes.

Nobody’ll dare

Say to me,

“Eat in the kitchen,”

Then.

Besides,

They’ll see how beautiful I am

And be ashamed—

I, too, am America.³⁹

As African American Seventh-day Adventist women, we wanted to see our darker brothers have a seat at the table. We worked tirelessly to make it happen. Although African American men are not where they would like to be in the Seventh-day Adventist Church, they are not where they would be in the Seventh-day Adventist Church if African American women did not support and fight for them.

Still, the fight for rights for African Americans in the

Seventh-day Adventist Church has been primarily for African American men. Seventy years after the inception of regional conferences, most of the representation and leadership has gone to African American men. No one decries the fact that Black women have been left in the kitchen. After all, many think that is her place.

Consequently, African American Seventh-day Adventist women have held a peculiar place in history. We have often found ourselves at the intersection of racism and sexism. Being African American and female is what Francis Beale calls a “double jeopardy.”⁴⁰ It is as if we live and serve in a denomination where “all the women are white and all the Blacks are men.”⁴¹ Although there are fights for the rights of women and the rights of African Americans, change and progress for the African American woman has been slow. It seems we have been excluded from both categories. We have seen firsthand what scholars call the “invisibility of black women.” This is not a superpower implying literal invisibility but, rather, the fact that Black women continue to go unnoticed and unheard.⁴²

When the story is told of the women’s struggle in the Seventh-day Adventist Church, there is little, if anything, said about the contributions of Black women in ministry. In the lists detailing significant women in Adventist history, the names of African American women are strangely absent. I have been to many conferences and meetings on women in ministry in the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and it was not until I was preparing this chapter that I learned of the ministerial contributions of Anna Knight, how her life was threatened because she was a Black woman preacher. She had to travel with her Bible and her pistol. When the story is told of the struggle of African Americans in this denomination, we often hear of E. E. Cleveland, who traveled around the globe winning thousands of souls for Christ, but little is said of Celia Cleveland, his wife, who won over three thousand souls for Christ herself.⁴³ Women like Dr. Lottie Blake, the first Black Adventist physician, seldom have their stories told. In 1904, she was the only Black female physician with a private practice in Birmingham. Dr. Eva B. Dykes, the first Black woman to complete a PhD degree, was also a phenomenal Seventh-day Adventist woman. Mary Stovall broke barriers for African American Adventist

women by being the first Black and the first female mayor of Hurtsboro, Alabama.

There are others whose stories have gone untold—thousands in the shadows and behind the scenes. From Edgefield Junction, Tennessee, where the first African American Seventh-day Adventist Church was organized in 1886, women who healed were there. Women such as Jennie Allison, who was one of the first Black women to join the Seventh-day Adventist Church back in 1883, and one of the charter members of the Edgefield Junction Church. There were teachers who taught little Black children when no one else would. Bible instructors like Ola Mae Harris and Ida Hanks have worked alongside evangelists for decades, winning souls for Christ. These were, indeed, healers.

Today, we are blessed with trailblazers. Dr. Hyveth Williams was the first Black female pastor and the first female senior pastor in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Dr. Rosa Banks has embodied a long list of firsts: the first female vice president of Oakwood College (now Oakwood University), the first female general field secretary for the North American Division and for the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, and the first female associate secretary for the General Conference. She, Dr. Williams, and others like them, are healers.

Nevertheless, as African American women in the Seventh-day Adventist Church, we are still in a precarious position—because of both our race and our gender. Our race sometimes puts us out of step with our denomination, and our gender puts us at odds with our race. And nobody decries the fact that we are neither in the dining room with company nor sitting at the table with our darker brother but, rather, serving in both arenas quietly as we always have.

I spoke at a North American Division Fall Council meeting, and afterward, someone came to me and said, “Thank you. Thank you for not being an angry Black woman.” Being angry is definitely a warranted option—but not one that many Black women have chosen, because we are healers. Maya Angelou said, “You may not control all the events that happen to you, but you can decide not to be reduced by them.”⁴⁴ Harboring sickness, anger, resentment, and bitterness is debilitating and belittling, to say the least. These negative behaviors inhibit one’s ability to bring healing and exhibit one’s necessity to

receive healing. There is a healing power that flows from service. When one releases healing, it is returned, pressed down, shaken together, and running over. This is what African American Seventh-day Adventist women have done for well over a century. Looking at their track record of selfless service, I have become convinced that African American women will be great in the kingdom because, for centuries, they have been least of all. But until then:

We laugh,
 And eat well,
 And grow strong
 Tomorrow,
 We'll be at the table
 When company comes.
 Nobody'll dare
 Say to us,
 "Eat in the kitchen,"
 Then.
 Besides,
 They'll see how beautiful we are
 And be ashamed—
 We, too, are America.⁴⁵

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