



*Report of the Freedmen's Aid Society of the
Methodist Episcopal Church
(1868)*

The abolition of slavery in the United States created what northerners viewed as a humanitarian crisis: the need to educate over four million formerly enslaved African Americans, called "freedmen," the vast majority of whom had been denied literacy. Organizations in northern states raised funds and dispatched teachers, mostly women, to run schools for freedmen in southern states. Northern denominations involved in these efforts—among whom were independent black denominations—also aimed to recruit freedmen as church members.

The Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC) was at that time the largest Methodist body in the United States. It had been a northern denomination since 1845, when its southern members broke away, over slavery, to form a separate body (with whom the MEC would not reunite until almost 1940). The MEC was multiracial but dominated by whites. One year after the Civil War ended, the MEC founded its own Freedmen's Aid Society. The report excerpted here touts the accomplishments of that organization's first eighteen months. By then, the aid society had recruited nearly 125 teachers and claimed to be teaching a total of 7,000 students in schools located in every former Confederate state except Texas and Florida. Note how the report characterizes recently emancipated African Americans—who were 90% of all African Americans—as people who need to be civilized.

The South being thrown open to a loyal and liberty-loving ministry, Christians who had remembered those in bonds, who had prayed for and, in all proper ways, labored for the overthrow of slavery, could carry or send to the millions degraded by it the means of mental and moral elevation. The church, called to give the gospel to every creature, must, if faithful to her trust, enter the open door and use every efficient means to hasten the evangelization of the South. The school was found to be invaluable as an auxiliary to the missions among the Freedmen. They were everywhere anxious to have the gospel preached to them by missionaries from the North and to have churches planted among them, but they were more anxious to have schools for themselves and their children. The dawn of their freedom kindled within them a passion to learn to read and write, and a people whose incapacity to learn had been urged as a plea for their servitude welcomed the teacher as first among their benefactors. [...]

The General Conference of 1864 recognized the providence of God in the emancipation of the slaves. The report adopted by that body says:

The grave problem in regard to this people, which has long baffled both statesmen and Christians, is being wrought out in our own day. While the government is investing the neglected and despised bondmen with freedom, the way opens for Christian benevolence to throw around them those elevating influences of civilization by which they may be prepared for the higher achievements of man. The way opens for the church of Christ to carry to them a gospel which, instead of countenancing their servitude, sanctions their liberty and recognizes their manhood.

[...] It is a gratifying fact, and one that indicates the missionary character of our enterprise, that nearly a score of our teachers are ministers of the gospel, who have been drawn to this field of

labor because it furnishes such rare facilities for doing good both to the bodies and to the souls of men. These teach school during the week and preach on the Sabbath and thus carry forward, in harmony, this great movement for the intellectual and moral elevation of the race. All our teachers labor in the Sunday schools as well as in the day schools and are preparing the thousands of ignorant and degraded children for usefulness on earth and happiness in heaven. We have been exceedingly fortunate in the selection of our laborers, for they have almost invariably been good scholars and successful teachers and have been drawn to this work by love to Jesus and fallen humanity. The schoolhouse—occupied as a meetinghouse for religious worship, as it usually is by our missionaries, and also by our teachers for Sunday school and the instruction of the children during the week—becomes to the South, as elsewhere, the true symbol of a high Christian civilization. These humble buildings in which the children are taught are scarcely less the temples of the living God than the temples of science—for in them, immortals pass into a higher spiritual, as well as intellectual, life.

Our missionaries acknowledge their indebtedness to our teachers for valuable assistance and assure us that in them they find their most efficient aid in gaining access to the hearts of the people and in building up the cause of Christ. Missionaries and teachers unitedly cultivate this vast field and harvest sheaves for the garner of the Lord. And though our work is an educational one, it is closely allied to missions, aiming as it does at the culture of the heart as well as the intellect. It seeks the complete and symmetrical development of all the faculties with which God has endowed our common humanity. It strives to lead the youth to Christ as well as to the fountains of intelligence, and we are profoundly thankful to God for the success that has crowned our teachers' efforts and made them scarcely less efficient in teaching the doctrines of the cross than the elements of science.

Our schools have rendered essential aid in the work of restoring social order; of bringing about friendly relations between the employers and the laborers; in promoting habits of cleanliness, industry, economy, purity, and morality; rendering more emphatic the grand distinction between right and wrong, falsehood and truth; enforcing fidelity to contracts; portraying the terrible consequences of intemperance, licentiousness, profanity, lying, and stealing; teaching them to respect the rights of others while they are prompt to claim protection for themselves. The teachers have furnished for the Freedmen a vast amount of valuable information in regard to the practical matters of life which could be obtained nowhere else. The schools have met a great want which no military or political organization could supply, and without which it will be impossible for peace and harmony to be restored. Our teachers have been pioneers in the work of reconstruction and are laying the foundation upon which the most enduring superstructure can be reared. [...]

That this has been done by our Society, under the circumstances named, shows that the heart of Methodism is in sympathy with the cause it represents—the cause of crushed yet rising humanity.

Source: *Report of the Freedmen's Aid Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (Cincinnati: Methodist Book Concern, 1868), 6-7, 11-12, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/coo.31924011851858>. Public domain, Google-digitized.

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