

Witnesses for justice

African Americans have played a vital role in Presbyterian world mission.

In 1894 Maria Fearing, a 56-year-old former slave, felt called to serve Christ in Africa. She was so determined to go that when the Presbyterian mission board told her she was too old to apply for a missionary post, she purchased her own ticket to the Congo. She quickly proved her value to the mission enterprise and within a year was taken under care of the Presbyterian board, which supported nearly a dozen African American missionaries at the time.

During her 20 years in Congo, Fearing opened a home for girls, purchasing many young girls out of the slave trade with her own funds. Another African American woman, Althea Brown, came to Congo to assist Fearing in 1902 and served there more than 30 years. She married minister Alonzo Edmiston and raised two sons while teaching, nursing, and running hospitals, schools and homes for girls. She also wrote and published a grammar and dictionary of Bukuba, the language of the people among whom she served.

William H. Sheppard, a Presbyterian minister and graduate of what is now Stillman College, was one of the earliest African American missionaries appointed by Presbyterians in the Southern United States. With Samuel N. Lapsley, a white minister from Alabama,

Sheppard ventured into remote regions of Congo's Kasai province. They set about learning the language and gaining the trust of the people. It was several years before they had their first convert.



CONGO BOUND: Althea Brown Edmiston, who served in Congo running hospitals and schools for more than 30 years

Their patient efforts to build relationships with Africans stands in stark contrast to the pattern of Western exploitation of Congo's natural resources and people unleashed during the colonial era. King Leopold II of Belgium took control of the Congo in 1885, forcing villagers to work in the booming rubber industry and sometimes cutting off the hands of laborers who failed to meet their quotas. Sheppard, his wife, Lucy, and William M. Morrison, another white missionary sent after the sudden death of Lapsley in 1892, began documenting the human rights abuses and speaking out against them. A



GAINING THE PEOPLE'S TRUST: William and Lucy Sheppard with orphaned children, top, and with members of Lapsley Memorial Church

public outcry against the atrocities arose, and a Belgian rubber contractor sued Sheppard and Morrison, accusing them of libel. When Sheppard stood trial, he called many Congolese friends as witnesses. In 1909, with public opinion firmly on the side of the missionaries, they were acquitted.

Today's partnership between the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and more than 9 million Christian brothers and sisters in the Democratic Republic of Congo is rooted in the powerful witness of missionaries such as Fearing, the Edmistons and the Sheppards. With more than 800 schools and ministries of leadership training, health care, community development and evangelism, this growing mission partnership continues to provide hope and healing in Jesus' name.