Amanda Berry Smith
by Vivian L. Hairston*

Amanda Berry Smith was one of the most remarkable missionaries of the nineteenth century. Her dedication and unselfish service has impacted many people throughout the United States and other countries in the world. Even though she departed this life in 1915, she still lives on in the hearts of many because of her missionary efforts. The purpose of this paper is to briefly summarize her life, discuss her ministry, explain what motivated and sustained her ministry, and describe the principles and techniques that she utilized in her ministry.

Her Life

Amanda Berry was born a slave in Long Green, Maryland in 1835. Her parents, Samuel and Miriam Berry, lived on different plantations, even though they were married. Amanda was the oldest of their thirteen children. She was reared in a godly home. Her mother was an earnest Christian with strong faith in God. Her father read the Bible to his family and prayed over all their meals. Her grandmother, a woman of great faith, prayed mightily that her grandchildren would be freed from slavery.

Her Childhood

As a child Amanda was protected from the disciplinary actions of her mother by her matron, Rachel Green. This woman would often treat Amanda with bread spread with sugar and honey. She treated Amanda like one of her own children. She would dress Amanda like the rest of her family in Quaker style clothing, and take her to their Presbyterian Church. As a result of Mrs. Green's nurturing and protection, Amanda was not exposed to some of the harsh realities of slavery. It also began her close attachment to white people and unbending stand on racial equality.

During her early childhood years, her father purchased his freedom from slavery, and later purchased the freedom of his wife and children. At age 15, Amanda received her freedom. Her father earned the money for his family's freedom through hard and diligent work. His daytime hours were spent fulfilling his daily obligations to his mistress. Afterwards, he would harvest fields until the early hours of the morning. Since freedom was very important to her father, he allowed his family's home in Shrewsburg, Pennsylvania to be used as a hiding place for runaway slaves. None of the slaves that were hid in his home were ever captured and returned to their masters.

Schooling was very difficult for Amanda to obtain. When she was eight years old, she and her brother attended a Methodist school for black

*Vivian L. Hairston (M.A.C.M., ATS), is a mathematics teacher at the DePaul Center for Young Mothers in Cleveland, OH.
children. However, the school was closed within six weeks because the teachers moved out of town. Five years later, she and her older brother attempted to attend school again. It was not a special school for black children. Everyday she and her brother walked ten miles roundtrip to school. Upon arriving at school, they had no assurance that they would receive instruction because they had to wait and see if the teacher had the time to teach them. As a result of their long walks to school during the harsh winter, and the unwelcome reception from the teacher, Amanda and her brother dropped out of this school after two weeks.  

**Her Employment**

Since Amanda was unable to attend school, she left home at the age of thirteen to enter the workforce. Her first job was a live-in maid for the Latimer family in Strausburg, Pennsylvania. Her duties included cleaning, washing and ironing, babysitting, and cooking. She continued in this line of work after she had married and started her family. After she and husband moved to Greenwich Village, New York in 1866, she took in laundry, and occasionally cleaned the houses of wealthy people to support her family.

In 1871, she gave up her career as a washerwoman, and became the first female black evangelist. The next forty four years of her life she traveled around the United States and to other countries in the world, giving her personal testimony, and witnessing through song and the preached word to both white and black congregations.

**Her Marriages**

Amanda had two bad marriages. At age seventeen, she married Calvin Devine; they resided in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania and had two children. Their second child, Mazie, was the only one of their two children who survived. Her first husband, Calvin, caused her much mental anguish because he allowed alcohol to control him. He enlisted in the Union Army during the Civil War and never returned home after the war.

Amanda met James Smith, her second husband, in the early 1860’s. He was both a deacon and preacher at their local church. He was more than twenty years older than her. They were married in the mid 1860’s and moved to New York City. During this marriage, she gave birth to three more children, who all died during their infancy. For the majority of their marriage, she and her husband lived in separate dwellings. She either lived at her place of employment or in an apartment. He lived at his place of employment and used his earnings to pay his Masonic lodge dues and to keep up with New York black elite society. This marriage ended in 1869 when James Smith died of stomach cancer.

Both of these marriages caused Amanda to suffer. She had to work long hard hours and even starved herself so that her family would have food and shelter. All of her children from both the marriages died except one. Living in
damp rooms was stated as the probable cause of their deaths. These hardships did not discourage Amanda, but drove her closer to the Lord.\textsuperscript{12}

**Her Spiritual Encounters with God**

When Amanda left home at the age of thirteen to enter the workforce, she lived in a white neighborhood. Thus, she was the only black person who attended her church. In her endeavors to find peace with God, she joined this church. However, the instructor over the new members class refused to teach her until all the white new members had been taught. Since she had to wait, it made her late serving dinner to her employer. Consequently, she had to quit the class in order to keep her job. As a result, her formal spiritual growth was put on hold.\textsuperscript{13}

During her first marriage, she really was not concerned about spiritual matters until she nearly died due to an illness in 1855. Her father visited her sickbed and told her to pray.\textsuperscript{14} She prayed and fell asleep. While asleep, she dreamed that she was preaching at a camp meeting. After she recovered from her illness, she believed that God had spared her life for a purpose.\textsuperscript{15} One night during the revival services at a local Baptist Church, she felt the urge to go to the altar. While praying, "O, Lord, save me," she shouted out at the top of her voice. God responded to her by overwhelming her with a stillness that she could not comprehend, because she did not know how to exercise her faith. Since she did not understand what had occurred, she continued in her search for peace with God.\textsuperscript{16}

In 1856, she had her conversion experience in the basement of a Quaker home where she was working. For two months, she had been praying, fasting and longing for her personal conversion experience. Then, on March 17\textsuperscript{th}, 1856, she went into the cellar of the home and asked God to convert her or take her life that afternoon. She remained on her knees prepared to die, if God did not convert her. In the exact moment that she confessed her belief in Him, she was converted. She cried out, "Hallelujah, I have gotten religion," when she saw herself glowing with radiance in the mirror and experienced a wonderful change within.\textsuperscript{17}

Even though she had experienced instantaneous salvation in the basement of the Quaker home, she longed for the "second blessing," that is purity of heart (sanctification) through the power of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, she continued in fasting and prayer. In 1867, she received her blessing of purity of heart. She was at the Green Street Methodist Episcopal Church in New York. John Inskip, the Methodist holiness leader, was preaching a sermon on sanctification.\textsuperscript{18} He explained that a believer receives a pure heart by faith, and that God will keep all believers in a state of holiness. Amanda believed Inskip’s words, exercised her faith immediately and received the blessing of a pure heart. The blessing motivated and enabled her to witness others.\textsuperscript{19}
Amanda Berry Smith

Her Ministry

When Amanda left Green Street Methodist Episcopal church after receiving her sanctification, she was overcome with joy. On her way home, she stopped to tell all her acquaintances along the street that her soul had been sanctified by the Lord. She felt that she was prepared to tell the world of the sanctifying power of God. As she testified of her experience to her friends and neighbors, she urged them to seek purity of heart with God. She also began sharing her experience and promoting sanctification at many of the local churches in her community.20

Sharing her testimony with friends, neighbors and other churches was not enough for Amanda; she sought a deeper understanding. She began attending the weekly meetings of Phoebe Palmer to learn more about the doctrine of sanctification. As she became more committed to sanctification, she became more alienated from the members of her own African Methodist Episcopal (AME) denomination, and her husband too. It caused her to change her dress to Quaker style to distinguish herself from worldliness and to demonstrate her piety and commitment to God.21 In this attire, she continued to testify about holiness and to pass out tracts on street corners. Thus, Amanda took a bold stand for holiness.22

1869 was a turning point in Amanda’s ministry. The winter leading up to this year, her last son who was a small infant, contracted bronchitis. He died in June of 1869, and her husband failed to help her with the burial costs or attend their son’s funeral. The latter part of that same year her husband died of stomach cancer. After both of their deaths, Amanda left her daughter Mazie, the only one of her children who survived into adulthood, in the care of friends while she pursued her spiritual vocation.23

Amanda did not have the correct credentials to pursue her spiritual vocation as an evangelist because she was a freed slave and second class citizen, a washerwoman, a common servant and an uneducated woman. However, she overcame all these obstacles and became a dynamic spokeswoman of God’s amazing grace.24 AME and Protestant Churches allowed her to speak on the doctrine of holiness. In her message to others, Amanda stressed holiness and the purity of heart with God. Her many ministries to others included the Women’s Temperance Movement leader and spokeswoman, a missionary to foreign countries, and an orphan home founder and administrator.

Camp Meeting Evangelist

Camp meetings are a series of daily church services held at various locations. They became a hallmark of the Methodist movement after the first Great Awakening in 1800. During the 1870’s, the meetings lasted for 10 days with church services continuing into the night. John Inskip was the leader of the organization, The National Association for the Promotion of Holiness, which sponsored the camp meetings. Amanda attended her first camp meeting in 1870.
At this meeting, she gave such a powerful testimony on her sanctification that it was written up in the daily paper. She continued giving her testimony to other audiences, making a lasting impression upon those who heard it.

In 1873, Smith played a major role in the 16th National Holiness Camp Meeting at Landisville in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. At this meeting she led the prayer and testimonial services. She also led the separate services for colored worshippers. By 1874, Smith’s popularity had spread to some influential, wealthy white people in New Jersey. They engaged her to speak at a Methodist holiness resort in Ocean Grove, New Jersey. She preached her messages during this engagement with such persuasive eloquence that it convicted the hearts of hundreds of people and gave them the desire for the purity of heart. In 1875, Smith was involved in three camp meetings. Two were ten day meetings for the promotion of holiness, and one was a two day meeting for the promotion of temperance. She always enjoyed and participated in camp meetings because they gave her a sense of spiritual renewal. Since her singing and preaching ability stirred the hearts of the people during camp meetings, she was given two nicknames, “The Singing Pilgrim” and “God’s Image Craved in Ebony.”

Temperance Movement

During Smith’s involvement in an 1875 revival in Philadelphia, Mary Coffin Johnson, the first national secretary of the Women’s Temperance Movement, shared the podium with her. They began a relationship which enabled Smith to become successful in both the Temperance Movement and foreign missions. Amanda spoke from John 15 at a temperance camp meeting in August of 1875. Her message supported the temperance resolutions against alcohol sales and imports. She exhorted believers to trust God for everything, and to ask Him to make them holy. From this point forward, she began speaking at temperance meetings in both the Northeast and Midwest states.

The leaders of the Temperance Movement wanted Amanda to sail to Liverpool, England in 1878 to participate in the Keswick Convention. She was afraid to sail, but she prayed and God gave her the courage to take the voyage. It had been exactly ten years since she had proclaimed that she wanted to testify to everyone around the world about the sanctifying power of God. She presented her message to the English and became a popular speaker at Temperance meetings and revivals throughout England and Scotland.

Foreign Missions

Amanda’s plunge into foreign missions was just like the initiation of all her other ministries. It was an opportunity that was dropped into her lap by William Osborn, founder of the Ocean Grove Camp Meeting. He invited Amanda to join him on a missionary trip to India. She was reluctant about going to India. She prayed about it and God showed her that it was His will for her to
Amanda Berry Smith

Amanda had no funds to pay for her voyage, but a Boston lady, who was going to India too, raised the money to pay for Amanda's voyage. She landed at Bombay, India, but she traveled to Calcutta, where thousands of Indians came to hear her preach. Osborn was impressed with her impact on the crowd because many Indians, who had refused to enter a Methodist Chapel, came to hear her preach. She conducted revivals in the major cities of India. Along with her smashing success, Smith also faced opposition in India, because many Indians believed that it was a dreadful thing for a woman to proclaim the gospel.  

At the conclusion of Amanda's mission in India, she was led to visit West Africa before returning home to the United States. However, she did not have the money to finance a trip to Africa. Thus, she returned to London, England. While in London, her English supporters raised her fare to travel to Africa. Her visit to Africa lasted over eight years. During these years, Amanda had many accomplishments. She established many chapters of her Band of Hope Temperance Society which saved many from a drunkard's grave. She conducted revivals, visited and ministered to the sick and needy, and assisted with the establishment of schools and missions. In the midst of all these ministries, she suffered with several bouts of malaria. She also adopted two orphaned African children. Their names were Frances and Bob. At the end of 1889, she left Africa for England with her adopted son, Bob. She had no choice, but to leave her sickly daughter, Frances, in the care of friends.

Orphan Home Founder/Administrator

During the latter part of 1892, Smith changed the focus of her ministry. She decided to channel her energies into institution building by establishing an orphan home for destitute colored children. In 1895, she began this effort by purchasing two lots and a building in Harvey, Illinois through taking a three year bank loan. The Amanda Smith Industrial Orphan Home officially opened on June 28, 1899 with one building, and an endowment of $288.00 and five orphans. Her goals for the home were to provide housing for destitute colored children, offering them care, education, and industrial training. Her home was not subsidized by the local child welfare authorities, yet they would often refer colored children to the home for help.

Keeping the home open was both a struggle and a strain for Smith. She found herself constantly struggling to pay the bills and to maintain competent help. She strained her health by overloading herself with numerous speaking engagements in order to raise funds to pay the bills. In spite of all obstacles faced by the home, it did manage to thrive until 1905. During that year, the financial situation of the home had deteriorated to the brink of financial collapse. In 1906, Amanda signed the home over to a group of local trustees comprised of local business and religious leaders. They were unable to raise the funds required to revitalize the home. It continued to operate, constantly bombarded by debt and neglect. In March 1918, a tragic fire at the home
destroyed the living quarters and killed two girls, resulting in the closing of the home. 

Her Motivation

Amanda Berry Smith spent more than forty years of her life preaching, singing, and testifying to others about the sanctifying power of God. She had long days and short nights. She would get up at about 6:00 A.M. each morning and would not retire until midnight. Before she became a popular evangelist, her mode of transportation to camp meeting and revivals was walking. Many days, she walked over 10 miles in all types of weather to carry God’s message to others. She was not a rich woman with houses and land. She was never fortunate enough to find herself a good husband to provide for her financial needs. Yet, in spite of these obstacles, Amanda continued to thrive. How did she manage to continue her mission and many ministries in spite of so many obstacles? The next few paragraphs will discuss her motivational forces and how they enabled her to fulfill her mission and ministries.

God

Amanda’s Father in heaven above was her chief motivator. Without His blessing and assurance, Amanda did not attempt to do anything. In 1870, she was invited to conduct a Methodist revival in New Jersey. She refused to proceed with the request until she received confirmation from God. She testified to others that God had made her aware that she had been ordained by Him as one of His chosen ones to carry the gospel message. When she was afraid to sail to England with the Temperance Movement, she relied on God to ease her fears and to give her courage.

Holiness

Ever since she received the blessing of purity of heart in 1867, she was motivated by personal holiness. She studied the holiness doctrine under Phoebe Palmer and her husband. This led her to join the Holiness Movement. She gave her personal testimony about the sanctifying power of God to others at churches, camp meetings and revivals all around the world. She wanted everyone in the world to experience the personal joy that she had received when God sanctified her heart. Her desire for holiness caused her to make a bold stand against the evils of alcohol as a spokeswoman for the Temperance Movement. Before her last husband died, she withdrew her involvement from the female auxiliary of his lodge, because she felt the organization’s activities were unholy. Holiness was not just a message that Amanda preached and testified to others. It was her way of life.
Evils of Segregation

Even though Amanda was sheltered as a very small child from many of the cruelties of discrimination, she did encounter it as she grew older. When she attempted to get an education, she had to wait until all the whites had been taught. When she needed a job, the only job available to her was domestic work. When she needed housing, she was limited to the black ghetto sections of town. When she needed welfare assistance for herself, as a young mother, and for her orphan children, as an institution director, she was denied because of race. When she attempted to serve the Lord at local churches and religious gatherings, she encountered special sections, restrictions, and services for blacks only.

None of the aforementioned evils of segregation destroyed her will. In 1873 she gave her testimony at the annual camp meeting. She told the congregation that since the Lord had sanctified her, she no longer wanted to be white, but was happy that God had made her as she was. She emphasized that she had no bitterness towards whites, but she loved them and wanted them to be saved. This public statement about her love for whites was not something new for Amanda. Since she had spent so much time with whites as a child, and had been genuinely touched by their love and kindness, she sought to eliminate racial barriers through expressing the love of God in song and testimony. As a result, she had many influential white friends who supported her in her ministries and missionary efforts.

She also loved her own people and did not want them to experience the pains of a segregated society. This was one of the stimuli which motivated her to establish an orphan home for colored children. Her love for her own people is also exemplified through her extended missionary trip to Liberia, where she traveled all over the country, freely extending her helping hands to all classes: civilized, Christians, and native worshippers. She received a warm reception in many places that had rejected whites. During her eight years in Africa, she had many opportunities to return home, but she often found herself delaying her departure in order to complete another humanitarian project.

Thus, Amanda freely gave her unselfish love for all races as she served the Lord. She spoke in white churches as well as black. Her message of holiness was the same to all. Her life demonstrated that holiness is colorblind. God used her life to tear down racial barriers and exhibit the power of His love.

Needs of Her People

While recuperating at a local sanitarium in England in 1894 from exhaustion, Amanda Smith had an eye-opening experience. She received such good care at the sanitarium that it greatly affected her. In a letter to a friend, she praised the facility and expressed that she would not have received the same care, as a black woman, in the United States. Her friend sent the letter to a local newspaper that published it. This caused Amanda’s name to be highlighted in a religious controversy. She was accused of lacking faith, and relying on the
hospital instead of prayer. In spite of the negativity, Smith never retracted her praise of the sanitarium. Between this controversy and her extended stay in Liberia, Amanda was motivated to change the focus of her ministry from evangelism to building an institution that would protect and educate destitute colored children. She wanted them to have a place to live and to have access to the educational opportunities that she was denied as a child.

Her Ministry Techniques

Amanda had one basic technique that she used as she commenced all her ministries. It was quite simple. She sought, acknowledged and trusted God (Proverbs 3:5 - 6). Before she would begin any ministry endeavor, she would ask the Lord for divine guidance. She would remain prayerful until the Lord gave her the confirmation and the financial means to proceed. When she arrived at the places to which the Lord had directed her, she did not exalt herself. She would take a back seat, and wait until she was asked to testify, lead, speak or sing. Despite this humble and submissive technique, Amanda still faced the barriers against her race and women in ministry. God removed all the barriers that prevented her from doing His will.

Evangelism and orphan home founder and director are the two major ministries that Amanda fulfilled during her productive life. For each of these ministries, she used not only her basic technique, but others as well to accomplish her mission.

Evangelism of the Common People

As a revival speaker and worship service leader, Amanda was forceful, but drew the worshippers together and enabled them to experience the power of God. She would walk up and down the aisles among those who were kneeling and seeking salvation to show them the simple way to be saved by faith. When she took the podium, she spiritually blessed the congregation with her melodious voice. When she preached on a passage from the Bible, she would break it down into common terms, easily understood by all. As she ministered in the church, she made the people fall in love with sanctification. At the conclusion of her messages, she would make an appeal for personal holiness, stressing that faith is required to obtain purity with God.

Faith, Sacrifice and Hard Work

Continuous and diligent work was the method that Amanda used to establish her home for colored children. She worked without ceasing until she was able to open her home in 1899. Her challenge was to raise enough money to pay the mortgage on the buildings that she had purchased in 1895. To accomplish her goal in a three year time frame, she published and sold a monthly newsletter entitled The Helper. She used the proceeds from her autobiography, which was written while she was in the home of friends in New York.
Amanda Berry Smith

Jersey and published in 1893. Donations that she received from singing and speaking at camp meetings, revivals, and church speaking engagements were all deposited into her savings account for the home. She also sold a photograph of herself for twenty-five cents. All of the aforementioned activities were done on a rigorous full-time schedule all over the United States to raise money to open and maintain the operation of her home.

Lasting Impact of Amanda Berry Smith

“A picture is worth a thousand words” is an old saying that can be used to describe the impact of the life of Amanda Berry Smith. Her life’s portrait has been painted by the information written in her autobiography, biography and other sources. All this information provides a lasting picture of Amanda’s life and legacy. This picture is framed with her devotion to God, drawn by her dependence upon God, and colored by her unselfish service to others.

Amanda’s devotion to God has shown what God can do through those who are fully committed to Him. She was not merely satisfied with just accepting Jesus as her personal Savior. She wanted purity with God. She did not want anything to come between her and God. She did not make a move without asking God for His guidance and blessing, because she always wanted to be in the will of God. Her devotion to God exemplifies that she loved God with all her heart and permitted nothing to penetrate the framework of her love.

Her total dependence upon God revealed her steadfast faith in Him. She did not have possessions or any hope for her future, except God. She asked God for everything that she needed, and waited patiently for Him to provide. He did not always immediately answer Amanda’s prayer requests, so she trusted Him and waited until His appointed time. He always provided her exactly what she needed and she gave Him the Glory for His goodness to her. Her total dependence upon Him demonstrates that her life’s portrait is drawn by the power and will of God.

Amanda spent over forty years of her life edifying others. When she became sanctified, she wanted others to experience personal holiness, so she testified of her personal sanctification as often as she could. She visited the sick and the unevangelized to pray and to comfort them with words of encouragement as often as she could. She spoke to many groups within the United States and other countries in the world about the evils of alcohol. She worked diligently for eight years in Africa to improve the living and spiritual conditions for the people she encountered. She spent the senior years of her life establishing a home for destitute colored children. Her dedication and unselfish service to and for others has demonstrated how the children of God can color this dim and dark world with His light of love and kindness.

Just thinking about the picture that Amanda has left in my mind has caused me to evaluate my life and ministry. If I could take on Amanda’s heart for holiness, I would stop my complaining about what is not right with my
ministry and spread God’s message to everyone I encounter. If I used the spiritual gifts that God has given me to build my ministry, it would multiply like the two fish and five loaves of bread. If I stopped allowing every little set back to distract me, and continued in faith to do God’s will, I would reap the bountiful blessing of obedience like Amanda did. If I would channel my dissatisfactions with today’s society into projects which would improve the quality of life for mankind, what a wonderful imprint I would leave on this world. In order to make all my “if” statements true realities, I must walk in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, seeking holiness and purity of heart like Amanda did, moving ahead in faith and obedience at God’s command, and sacrificing my will for His.

Thus, the life of Amanda Berry Smith has inspired me to serve God with all my heart and trust Him for everything. I am certain that her life will also impact others too.

Notes
1 Amanda Berry Smith The Singing Pilgrim *Available online from www.blackseek.com/bh/2001/100_ASMith.htm.*
4 Amanda Berry Smith *The Singing Pilgrim.*
5 Smith, 18-19.
6 Israel, 19-20.
7 Smith, 27.
8 Israel, 29-41.
9 Ibid., 49-56.
10 Ibid., 19-22.
11 Ibid., 23-51.
13 Israel, 19.
14 Ibid., 20.
15 Smith, 42-43.
16 Israel, 20.
17 Ibid., 20.
18 Smith, 73-77.
19 Israel, 42-43.
20 Ibid., 49-50.
22 Israel, 49-50.
23 Ibid., 50-51.
25 Israel, 51-52.
26 Ibid., 53-62.
27 Amanda Berry Smith The Singing Pilgrim
28 Israel, 59-62.
29 Ibid., 59-64.
30 Ibid., 70-73.
31 Smith, 472-475.
32 Israel, 74-86.
33 Ibid., 105.
35 Israel, 127-147.
36 Ibid., 52-53.
37 Ibid., 55.
38 Ibid., 64.
39 Ibid., 49-51.
40 Ibid., 55-56.
41 Ibid., 51-59.
42 Smith, 467.
43 Ibid., 461-464.
44 Israel, 103-104.
45 Smith, 206-207.
46 Ibid., 277-282.
47 Ibid., 436-442.
48 Israel, 57.
49 Ibid., 96-99.
50 Bartlett and McClellan.
51 Israel, 109-123.