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By EFFIE LEE NEWSOME

Early Figures in Haitian Methodism

One is likely when recalling the countless obstacles overcome by the pioneers of Haitian Methodism to think of Toussaint L'Ouverture's laconic proverb, "To make an omelet one must first break the eggs." Shells of tradition are as impervious as the twenty feet thick walls of Christophe's "nest egg of liberty," his citadel. One can appreciate what Evariste and Charles Pressoir, two youthful Wesleyan converts, must have encountered in efforts to shatter what to their minds was all-encompassing bigotry.

They had volunteered in 1818 to succeed two retiring Wesleyan missionaries, John Brown and James Catts, whom President Boyer had advised to abandon their Haitian labors. The English churchmen had been invited to Port-au-Prince by Boyer's predecessor, Pétion, courageous in his design for religious tolerance and expansion.

The Wesleyan missionaries had first preached in Port-au-Prince in 1816. Before departing for London two years later they were administering sacrament to a society of forty, had built a small school and were planning the erection of a church. But the passing that year of the President, Pétion, closed the immediate prospect of advancement. It has been believed by some that Pétion's liberal regard for Protestant and Catholic alike had bred in the older church the creedal animosity soon to break forth.

Jérémie, the priest, now came forward as spokesman of the faithful. With a potent hand he touched church and state. The new President granted the challenge twofold response, as one of Catholic heritage and as sympathizing statesman compliant with mass trend.¹ However, Boyer in time issued an unequivocal proclamation against subjecting Protestants to stoning and other outrages, demanding that their converts as citizens of the Republic be left unmolested. But the executive made no provision against the "strife of tongues." Resentment toward the Methodist society was fed by condemnation till it outgrew any promise of adjustment. It was at this moment that President Boyer asked Brown and Catts to withdraw. He

¹Mossell compares the attitudes of Pétion and Pressoir in one instance as "precisely opposite to anything Pétion would have done or said."

explained that Haiti was not at peace. "France is preparing to march upon us." The Wesleyan membership concerned for the safety of its organizers added further solicitations.

In this crisis the two natives, Evariste and Pressoir, felt constrained to champion the disparaged group. John Brown reported to the *Wesleyan Magazine* that he had chosen Evariste as his successor in Port-au-Prince leadership. Of Charles Pressoir, the Rev. C. W. Mossell, missionary to Haiti in later years, wrote, "Mr. S. C. Pressoir lifted up and carried forward the standard of Methodism, around which the little band of Christians continued to rally."

Assisting these two was St. Denis Baudhuit. At the commencement of their labors St. Denis did much of the reporting to British and American headquarters. Before long, however, he left for New York but continued to inform the missionaries there whenever news arrived from Haiti. Mossell places the name of Baudhuit, mentioned from the field as "St. Denis," first on his list of "faithful laborers in connection with the Wesleyan Church in Haiti." He refers to "Rev. St. D. Bauduy, S. C. Pressoir, C. H. Bishop, Sharp, Ereville and Baker."

Little further preparation for mission service upon the part of Evariste and Pressoir is mentioned beyond the urge of their zeal. John Brown recommends his representatives as "fruits of the mission" when writing of them to London. "One in particular," he states, is found to possess "promising talents." This doubtless is Evariste, though Charles Pressoir proves single-minded and unflagging in devotion to the cause. That the other converts hold him in high esteem is shown in references to him in reports to New York.

Evariste in writing to the mission board refers to Pressoir as "a faithful servant of Jesus Christ, who ceases not to fight the good fight." An issue of the *Methodist Magazine* has left a record of one of Pressoir's courageous procedures. One of his and Evariste's converts, a Monsieur Lubin, has realized as the result of a changed heart the sin of living as the husband of one to whom he has never been married. When Lubin confesses his guilt to Evariste, the spiritual adviser urges that the couple marry immediately.

Learning that there was no possibility of having a Methodist union legalized, the two went to Francois Jérémie, the hostile priest. Jérémie married them without realizing that they were adherents of the despised faith. When he discovered his misstep, Jérémie could scarcely contain himself. Ethical value of the act paled before his lowering wrath. He determined to berate the woman at a certain hour of the following day.

When Francois Jérémie reached her house at the appointed season, he found resolute Charles Pressoir and other members of the Methodist company awaiting him. "Charles Pressoir was there," reported St. Denis Baudhuit, "Mrs. Clarke was there also. She held a long dispute with the priest

but I cannot tell what she said as she spoke in English.”

When Jérémie angrily reminded the group, “We have a church for the assembly of the faithful, and we are three parties in this town, we must come to the church.” Pressoir declared, “When all those idols are taken away and the Gospel is preached in its purity, then will we come.” Jérémie, smarting under this public defiance, designed further persecution of the Protestants, especially Pressoir and Evariste and their assistant.

Throughout their trials the leaders managed to keep in touch by letter with Brown and other missionary supporters. This Haitian correspondence through now Evariste or Pressoir or again some of the women class-leaders furnishes facts of the organized opposition visited upon the ever-increasing society and rather tending by the challenge of its injustice to furnish sympathizing accessions.

A note written above one of Evariste’s letters of 1819 or 1820² declares of him, “This is the young man to whom Mr. Brown left the care of the society.” As Evariste was frequently called upon to make surveying expeditions into the mountains, he often left his friends Pressoir and Baudhuit to carry on the church work. Evariste declared in one of his letters to New York missionaries that he was despised by the Catholics more than any one else in Port-au-Prince, it seemed to him. This resentment would indicate the relative power of his influence.

In 1819 the evangelist John Brown announced, “We left in society thirty approved members, and eighteen on trial.” Ten months later St. Denis reports a constantly swelling membership. “Evariste was obliged to appoint male and female leaders, having divided the society into five classes of twelve persons each, but there is now another, making in all six classes, besides many more persons who wish to join us, and who are in the habit of meeting with us at midnight, or at our sister Jane Dumas’ near the magazine of the state, and we meet classes late in the evening at different places.”

The retiring founder, Brown, was doubtless referring to Evariste when he told Wesleyan sponsors that “one has given exhortations.” Evariste himself wrote of such an occasion in 1821. “On May 8th coming from the mountains, where I had been measuring land for several days, on my arrival home I learned that Mrs. Clarke’s brother, with whom I had become acquainted only a little time before the sickness which proved his death, was very ill.”

Evariste took Pressoir with him to the sick man’s home. He asked three questions of the man in bed. They concerned his spiritual state. 1. Do you believe on the Son of God, Jesus Christ? 2. Do you believe that your sins are forgiven you? 3. “I then asked him if he prayed to God for pardon,

²*Methodist Magazine*, February, 1820.

confessing his faults and if he tried to believe and apply to his heart the merit of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ?"

When the ailing man replied that he "would try to do so with greater success," Evariste and the others "kneeled and prayed, and I returned home," continues Evariste's account which further tells of going again alone to learn of a gratifying reaction to his exhortations. Mrs. Clarke told of her brother's finding peace with God. And "When I heard this," Evariste concludes, "I prostrated myself before God, giving thanks to Him for that He had heard my prayer." And with a plea that the convert be urged "not to neglect, but to pray frequently," the missionary went his way.

He was one possessed of cool courage. We see him at an important executive meeting in the often used home of a class-leader, Francoise Hercule. He is organizing new classes to serve the growing church. After all have prayed for the preservation of the society and Evariste has read to each leader his enlarged membership list, Victor, the commandant, officially despatched to the scene, steps in to announce, "The faithful ought to meet in the church but not in any other place elsewhere."

As Evariste is holding another night class-meeting the same Victor, whose name seems synonymous with persecution in Haitian annals, arrives in the midst of the worshippers "like a roaring lion," as Evariste pictures the surprise, and orders the leader "home to his mother's." In spite of countless humiliations, the young man can cry in one breath "All are against me" and "I thank God because He has disposed my heart to leave father, mother, brethren and sisters, home and heritage to follow Him whithersoever He goes."

Evariste's seems to be one mission, in storm or calm, the message of God's salvation. Friends report that even during business trips into the mountains he makes opportunity to minister to men's souls. Often, however, the besieging commandants appear here too bent upon thwarting Evariste's efforts. "Evariste often spends Sundays in the mountains," St. Denis tells, "for when he is there measuring land, and it falls out to be Sunday, he stays where he is."

Unhampered by sectarian surveillance Evariste doubtless would have given still more time to his scattered converts. One is led to conclude that he was single. With the paternal home for his base the exhorter reached out to his membership through a connectional network of class-leaders. These during his absence from the community visited the sick and needy, under Pressoir's supervision.

The busy Protestant Marthas, no less devout than the Catholic Marys, kept the New York mission board informed rather of their zestful efforts for the church's extension than of her afflictions. The doors of their homes were thrown open for the secret assemblies that were their essential program. Often the meetings were held at midnight. Not infrequently dis-

covery of these gatherings resulted not only in social ostracism but even in bitter opposition within the family.

In February, 1820 two women of the congregation, Latine Noquest and Nannine Michot, daughter of the Madame Michot whose story appears later, wrote to thank New York distributors for tracts that had been sent to Port-au-Prince. The Tract Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church had been founded three years earlier as a perpetuating of Wesley's tract inauguration in the first half of the eighteenth century.

The class-leaders' letter of thanks for literature sent "by the hand of our dear Brother Dahr" mentions the progress of workers. "Among others we name the following persons:—Charles Pressoir, Saint Denis, Mamare Justine Deschant, Madame Bauduy, Charlotte Toto." Charlotte Toto and Madame Bauduy were leaders of classes five and three respectively.

Madame Bauduy was tirelessly active. Her house had been made accessible for worship at various hours of the day. On Tuesday mornings groups met there to study the catechism. On Friday evenings Bible classes assembled there. On Sabbath proselytes eager to study the Bible and the liturgy came. "We enjoy by the Grace of God," reported one convert, "the means of praying when several of us meet together."

On May 13, 1819 the president's aid-de-camp came commissioned by the government to warn Madame Bauduy to discontinue all Methodist assemblies under her roof. If she wished to conduct prayer-meetings she might do so with her children alone attending. Other field letters mention "police coming into the house of our sister Mary Pierre Jacques, who lives in Belair."

Persecutions from man and compassion from God formed the daily portion of these forerunners of faith. There was always the unremitting Francois Jérémie, who on January 16, 1819 issued a proclamation to be sent forth from churches of Port-au-Prince. "All the faithful are hereby warned that the Methodist religion, which is now in this city, is a bad religion; he or she who follows it shall never see the face of God; but shall be eternally delivered up to the damnation of hell.

"Therefore, all the faithful are hereby exhorted to have no communication with the people who compose that society. I know that meetings are held in diverse places of the city, but woe unto him who joins them, for it is an abomination in the city. On this account I exhort the faithful not to go to these meetings, for that religion is an abomination to all good people. I thus warn the faithful, because I perceive that some of them have gone among their people, and attended their meetings; but I exhort them to come out from amongst them, for they are a people to be despised. Let not the faithful have any communion with them.

"I know this religion to be absolutely bad; for two young men entered the society, but their relatives being displeased, compelled them to leave it.

It is a religion destructive to mankind. It is impossible it should take root in this Republic. It is necessary that it should be exterminated."

It seems scarcely surprising that Jérémie's importuning from his citadel of numbers and tradition met results. In February, 1820 Evariste wrote to the missionary John Brown, "The following persons have returned to lies, and to their ancient superstitions, viz."—and the list is given of the three who left the society.

Again a priestly hand intervened to proffer condemnatory literature,³ Abbé Grégoire's. "He lent Julienne's daughter a book written against the Methodists," Evariste wrote, "in which are things enough to revolt the feelings of any who do not know the society, but she returned it to him again, thanking God who had given her light not to be led astray by the artifices and malice of man, or of the devil. For where shall we find a way more holy, or doctrine more pure than that observed by our society? Thus was he secretly reproved by Julienne."

The wrathful pursuit of un-Romanized neophytes by Jérémie and other priests was as persistent as the Protestant resolve to commune. On one occasion during Evariste's absence for surveying and ministering, Jérémie learned that his offender of old, Charles Pressoir, was defiantly conducting prayer-meetings. Jérémie had his denominational foes overtaken and arrested. They were summoned to appear before the *juge de paix*.

Though the search for Evariste was in vain, Charles Pressoir was removed from his home and with others of his flock taken to prison. Here confined in a cell they prayed and sang as though in one of their secret assemblies. Their Bibles and hymn books were taken from them. Pressoir was forced into solitary confinement, "a felon's cell." While here Pressoir reminded his tormentors that the Methodist society had come to the island through the President's request.

When Evariste returned from the mountains and learned that authorities had been sent to his home to arrest him with the others, he immediately went to prison to rejoin his fellows. But the jailer refused to admit him without orders from the *juge de paix*. Evariste therefore went to the home of the *juge de paix* but found him out. "I saw him enter the office," St. Denis reported to New York concerning Evariste, "and in the afternoon I heard he was imprisoned."

The account tells next that all were finally released and adds "Should Evariste and Charles write, they will inform you particularly." Further news to headquarters declares that Evariste's people in the mountains were also being hounded by Commandant Coven even as Victor molested town worshippers. Victor, branding Christophe as "our enemy," warned the republic that this offender "had adopted that same religion, and if they

³*Histoire des Sectes Religieuses depuis le Commencement de ce Siècle.*

are suffered to go they will cause a revolt."

The Wesleyan Methodist prisoners were prohibited from any intercourse beyond the confining walls. Much of the food supplied for their sustenance was eaten by the guards. And in the meantime the tantalizing bait of a promise of plenty to all deniers of Protestantism was kept dangling before them. Priests were instant with their certificates of disavowal. One need only fill in the blanks and the father of the faithful would affix his signature. Prison doors would spring wide as by magic. "I having seen his or her errors," declared credentials that ended with a declaration of retraction.

In spite of this Evariste writes to John Brown of London of dauntless resolve to shepherd with "zeal and care" those "souls comitted to my trust" and "to go up and down preaching Christ crucified, determined to know nothing but Him to the end of my life." Under Evariste's leading the company developed fortitude to withstand. "With respect to the society," was his further affirmation, "they remain in general steadfast to the service of God."

With tapers of Catholicity fearlessly flashing and candles of the banned faith barely allowed to flicker, what was the attitude of the state? When on May 13, 1819, Madame Bauduy went indignantly to administrative quarters to inquire to what extent invasion of her home had official sanction, it was only to find the sponsors there.

Yet paradoxically more than once there appears in field correspondence a disposition to ascribe to President Boyer a degree of ecclesiastical tolerance. For in connection with the account of the expulsion of John Brown and James Catts shortly after his assumption of office appears the statement "We have no reason to suppose that the government had a part in the persecution; on the contrary, a military force was sent to protect us."

Again New York Methodists are told Boyer's "opinion of our character and conduct may be fairly inferred, as well by the complimentary letter addressed by the committee, as from a promise of a donation to the Society which promise he has since fulfilled by sending a bill of exchange for five hundred pounds sterling."

Still another case of presidential liberality is published. "The following extracts from a recent letter do great honour to the character and principles of the President, Boyer, and it would be unjust to withhold them. Many were at different times cited to appear before the President, who at first used to dismiss them, saying that every man was at liberty to serve God as he thought fit.

An instance is given also of six prisoners of Leogane confined "at one time by the General of that department, for having been found praying in the country." The President was then touring. He stopped at Leogane. Going at once to the prison he found members of the new church confined there. He asked each individual what was the cause of his arrest. When

about to leave town he called for those who had been imprisoned for praying and reprimanded the General who had sent them to jail "on such account." Taking them outside the town, he advised them to "go home, live quietly, and serve God according to the dictates of their own consciences."

However, on other occasions Boyer's aid was less unqualified or less timely, as in the case of Madame Michot. Her story reached the *Methodist Magazine* for July, 1824. Incensed upon discovering that her daughters had allied themselves with Methodists, Madame Michot proclaimed her disgust. But even while she protested she found herself mysteriously drawn into this faith, thorough-going woman of the world though she had been.

Now she felt impelled to convert her fashionable home into a devotional refuge for Evariste's people. Inhuman treatment became her lot, even to the death. People of the older belief stoned her home as she was dying. It was necessary to remove her to the house of a friend. Many years before, in 1790, persecutions of this kind against the Methodists, mockingly branded "itinerating pedlers," had occurred in Connecticut, where at the hands of Unitarians stones were rolled into homes used for worship by followers of Asbury.

Madame Michot's harried life had drawn to a close when President Boyer reprimanded the general who had permitted the indignities. As successor to Pétion, Boyer had conciliatingly found more than one occasion for condemning his predecessor's leniency toward the church of Wesley.

One parallels Pétion's sending to London for Wesleyan missionaries with the inspiration of Christophe, who while establishing the Church of Rome in his North, maintained nevertheless "tolerance of every other form of worship." He sent for English missionaries to bring their Bibles, dogma and speech to offset loathed traditions of French planter and popery. He distributed among students hundreds, some say thousands, of Bibles with parallel French and English text.

Pétion turned toward London for Wesleyan missionaries. John Brown writes in a letter of May 30, 1817 to the *Methodist Magazine* of kindly reception from President Pétion and assurance of protection. One however recalls the fact that this executive's contact with the new church was brief. Death removed him within two years after its coming. One could all but conclude that the smoldering Romish resentment which flared into flame in Boyer's day as again in the era of Solouque was rather a question of time than an issue of administration.

Yet it is unforgettable that Boyer, prompt and daring in matters of arms and statecraft, often administered tardy intercession for this new church. One could not altogether measure his response to the dictates of charity by this. No matter how wide the pendulum seeks to swing it must regard the encompassing walls of the clock. Boyer was only a creed-bound legislator in a Catholic world.

He had been in office for about two years when the evangelist Evariste wrote to the *Methodist Magazine* of the arrival in Port-au-Prince in 1820 of an American missionary named Tredwell, a "man of colour" from the United States who had brought with him his wife. They purposed to build a church. Co-workers from America were expected to come and aid the enterprise. One finds nothing further from Evariste concerning this beyond the fact that President Boyer had granted permission for the work.

About four years later the African Methodist Episcopal Church, an all-Negro body founded by a former slave, Richard Allen, in 1816, ordained two men to serve as missionaries in Haiti. The first Protestant church built in Haiti was erected by members of this denomination in 1824. It was Saint Peter's. Votaries of the American-born Negro Methodism were to link efforts with the Wesleyan missionaries and form what Jennifer⁴ describes as the "primitive connection of missionary interests between these two religious bodies in the two countries." In 1830 the African Methodist Episcopal Church received a request to incorporate Haitian Methodism with its body.

It was in 1820 that Jean Pierre Boyer's colonization invitation had come as a promise of deliverance to American shores of slavery. A whole-hearted yet motley response had resulted from this promise of hospitality. The island haven became a dream for thousands.

Slaves composed songs about Haiti such as this given by A. W. Wayman, a contemporary minister and historian

Sailing on the ocean.
Bless the Lord,
I am on my way,
Farewell to Georgia,
Moses is gone to Hayti.

Wayman tells of how in 1824 he listened to his elders discussing Eastern Shore bondsmen who were trying to escape to Haiti—one in particular, whose owner had set frantically out to pursue him as far as Philadelphia.

All conceivable avenues of escape were used. It remains an abiding marvel to historians that some of the dilapidated craft resorted to for transportation should have landed their human cargoes. Yet records show none lost in the Red Sea-like emancipation.

Negroes of all stations set forth as prospectors in new agricultural ventures. Families in their entirety or solitary beings went from town and plantation. Little worldly goods accompanied them for the most part. The two African Methodist Episcopal missionaries, Richard Robinson and Scipio Beans, journeyed to this scene of labor without promise of compensation from their young church.

⁴Late historian of the A. M. E. Church.

It happened that these two Marylanders possessed in common the genius for service that was to bring to the island's Spanish as well as French portion many humble Protestant chapels. Robinson and Beans as heralds of a later Methodism were soon related in effort as were Evariste and Pressoir in leading Wesleyan Methodism six years before. Robinson acted as supervisor, Beans as assistant.

Richard Robinson, the first pastor of Saint Peter's African Methodist Episcopal Church, had left his native state in youth and gone to live in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. Here he was enjoying a care-free existence when one of the most striking figures of the African Methodist Church, William Paul Quinn, then a circuit-rider, came to a small settlement in Bucks County and preached. Robinson was at the services. He lightly received Quinn's designation of him as a future class-leader.

Yet not long after this the young man and those whom he had been chosen to lead joined church. When the call for missionaries to Haiti came in 1824 Richard Robinson was ordained for the cause. He put his best effort into the work and toiled in his moral vineyard as well as in his fields for six days in the week. On the seventh day in spite of surrounding practices, Robinson's labors were consecrated solely to God.

"So devoted was this true successor of the apostles to his church and race that he toiled beneath the broiling sun with his horse and cart to obtain meat that perisheth that he might give to his congregation the bread of life."⁵

After about ten years at his mission Robinson was confronted by a challenging situation within the church body. His appointing to office of certain members who were unpopular with the congregation resulted in serious division. Deciding that reconciliation could scarcely be effected through him, Robinson left for America in 1835. At home again, he took a definite and needed part in the church till a street car accident in Philadelphia ended his many years of service.

Scipio Beans, who remained in Haiti to carry on the work after Robinson's departure, was a man of spiritual fortitude. Early in life he had become a circuit-rider. The attendant hardships of such a career in a primitive organization had schooled him in courage but weakened his already frail physical state.

Urgent advice to relax forced Beans to relinquish circuit travel. He was returning from Annapolis to Washington after having said farewell to his following. A violent snowstorm overtook him and finally compelled Beans to dismount and lead his horse for the remaining miles. He reached his home on Capitol Hill in a critical condition. The physician declared that only immediate change of climate could save Beans.

⁵T. G. Steward, A. M. E. missionary to Haiti in 1873.

He was thereupon ordained deacon, then elder for Haitian duties in 1824 and soon left for the island with his good wife. They went as true missionaries to sacrifice much and ask little. After Robinson's leaving, Scipio Beans strove to restore peace in the society. Aided by his wife he turned all energy to this end. But the fight seemed futile and within a year Beans, overtaxed, passed from earthly trials. He was the first representative of Negro Methodism to die on foreign soil.

These simple yet earnest pathfinders had taken what to that land so remote to them? They had gone as messengers in shoddy, one might say, into a region in which worship meant ceremony. With no centuries-ripened tenets for surety, they had nevertheless a confidence deep rooted in Him who had empowered bondmen to conceive their own creedal approach to Him. These humble men were not ashamed of what they brought, the gospel that the true shrine is the heart.⁶ What they and what Evariste and Pressoir had met had been the portion of other Methodist precursors in the New World.⁷

⁶T. G. Steward reported in connection with his missionary trip to Haiti in 1873, "I found in Port-au-Prince many interesting Christians, descendants of the immigrants of 1824."

⁷An 1820 Louisiana Methodist Episcopal circuit of fifty-eight Negro and one hundred and fifty-one white members was so assailed by "priestly influence that the missionary could

gain no access to the people." He returned to New York.

And Catholic Saint Augustine, where in 1823 there were fifty-two Methodists, forty of whom were Negroes, was found to be "a barren place for the growth of Methodism." These are merely two of many similar contemporary records by the Methodist Episcopal historian, Nathan Bangs.

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