Masculinizing the Pulpit

The Black Preacher in the Nineteenth-Century AME Church

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On March 13, 1869, in the latest installment of a series on “Pioneers of the AME Church” in the Christian Recorder, the official denominational newspaper, Henry Highland Garnet highlighted the achievements of the Rev. William Paul Quinn, Third Bishop. Garnet described one religious meeting on the Western frontier threatened to be disrupted by “ruffians” until Quinn grabbed “an ample green stick” and sprung into action:

Thus armed, he walked out among the rioters, who received him with a storm of jeers and derisive shouts. But the tables were speedily turned. Right and left the undaunted Quinn swept his ponderous weapon, and right and left ruffians fell like, wheat before the reaper’s scythe. Piercing cries for mercy began to be heard, instead of oaths and obscene epithets. On and on brother Quinn went through the band of villains, just precisely as though he was threshing corn. Some cried to the Holy Virgin, and others called on the twelve Apostles, and some in bad English called in earnest on the name of the second person in the Trinity, and others invoked the assistance of the blessed martyrs, and very many more saints than were generally known to be recorded in the sacred calendar
of the Roman Church. Astonished at the boldness of a single man, and intensely pained by his blows, the ranks of the enemy were broken, and they fled like chaff before a tempest . . . Rev. gentleman did not speak a single word, and when the work was finished, he calmly took his seat on the stand, and since that time Methodist camp meetings have never been disturbed in Allegheny county.¹

While narratives of manly exploits in the West are hardly unique for this time period, what is distinctive is the particular manifestations of the anxiety over achieving “true manhood” expressed by many male African Methodist Episcopal Church leaders. The founder of the denomination, Richard Allen, and others had established a tradition of robust leadership after refusing to be mistreated in the white St. George’s Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia at the end of the eighteenth century, and early itinerants proved their manhood on the western national boundary—but post-emancipation AME leaders had few comparable outlets to put to rest any doubts about their own masculinity. While younger men had new frontiers to conquer by performing missionary work among the newly freed slaves or traveling abroad to evangelize their African brethren, elder statesmen and leaders in the church had neither the physical ability nor the desire to engage in such activities. Instead, the pulpit, which had historically been a space where both men and women expressed and lived out their divine calling to share the Gospel message, became increasingly masculinized and the vocation of minister synonymous with manhood.

Anxieties over Female Preaching

Gender roles were fairly malleable in the early-nineteenth-century African Methodist Episcopal Church, but by the late 1830s, male AME Church leaders gradually separated positions by gender. Richard Allen heralded Jarena Lee, a female preacher from New Jersey, as one of the most powerful orators in the church and gave her carte blanche to speak at his Bethel AME Church in Philadelphia. However, in 1839, in Philadelphia, she was prohibited from ascending to the pulpit. She remembered, “I remained in the city about three months and received appointments in our churches on Thursday nights, although in years past I always had them at any time, Sunday afternoons not excepted.” Jarena Lee was not alone. A few years earlier, Rebecca Cox Jackson sought
to preach in the AME denomination but was prohibited from doing so based on the church discipline. She eventually left the black church in favor of the Shaker tradition.²

The denials of Lee and Cox from speaking in the pulpit were a result of the dramatic change in requirements for AME preachers in the 1830s. Because from its inception the AME Church made only subtle distinctions between the positions of exhorter and preacher, women regularly spoke from the denomination’s pulpits. The 1836 General Conference of the AME Church separated the callings of preacher and exhorter in its legislation: “It is not expected that an exhorter will attempt to preach formally, to read a text, announce a theme, and divide his subject; but he will sing, pray and then read a passage of Scripture, and make such remarks as he may feel disposed.”³ However, the imprecise phrasing that granted exhorters the opportunity to “make remarks” allowed for quite a bit of leeway in the interpretation of the line between exhorter and preacher and consequently, the enforcement of the passage varied from church to church in the tradition.⁴ By the late 1830s, male AME Church leaders had sharpened the distinction between preachers and exhorters. Practically, this meant that female exhorters were increasingly denied access to the pulpit. Though in the early nineteenth century women had spoken at revivals, church meetings, and conferences of the AME Church, male leaders began to limit their opportunities.

However, the increasingly gendered space of the pulpit would not exist without a fight. Female members aspiring to the ministry and the Daughters of Zion petitioned the AME General Conference, calling for the denominational leadership to officially sanction female preachers in 1844, 1848, and 1852. In each case the request was refused by a large margin.⁵ Further pleas received little notice and by 1864 the General Conference did not even call for a vote on the issue.⁶ Although unsuccessful in their motions, by petitioning the General Conference, these female members called for the right to lead and made the question of gender politics part of the public language and literature of the AME Church.

The prospect of women preaching illumined the fragility of the black male psyche at mid-century. From 1840 to the late 1860s, the discourse in the public literature of the AME Church centered on the achievement of manhood. David Leverenz has suggested that a new understanding of manhood emerged in the mid-nineteenth century, which defined manhood based on “individual enterprise,” “competitive success,” and “power over others.” Unlike earlier notions of manhood, such as wealth and edu-
cation, these traits were understood to be attainable by all men. Because
the ideology presumed a level playing field, if men failed to demon-
strate their prowess in each of these areas, they had only themselves to
blame. One’s manhood had to be perpetually proven, inducing a perva-
sive insecurity among many men; Leverenz therefore defined the ideol-
ogy of manhood during this period as a “compensatory response to fears
of humiliation.” Historian Gail Bederman asserts that in the second half
of the nineteenth century, middle-class whites equated manhood with
“bodily strength and social authority.” Manliness was not bestowed upon
birth but was a “standard to live up to, an ideal of male perfectibility to
be achieved.” In the nineteenth century, facing both de jure and de facto
racial discrimination in America, African Americans had access to few
societal outlets and professions that would allow them to demonstrate
their acumen in the public spheres and arenas of power presupposed in
popular notions of masculinity. Because becoming a preacher was one
of the few careers available for talented and educated African Ameri-
cans, often the best and the brightest entered the ministry. This historical
trend coupled with the ambiguity of nineteenth-century conceptions of
manhood raised the stakes regarding access to the pulpit.

Reconstruction witnessed unprecedented political opportunities for
African Americans. The year 1865 witnessed the passage of the Thir-
teenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments, which banned slavery
and granted African Americans full citizenship and enfranchisement, and
the Union presence in the South allowed blacks to organize and register
voters in record numbers. African American men ascended to positions
that would have been unimaginable just a few years previously, and dur-
ing Reconstruction fourteen African American men were elected to the
House of Representatives and two to the Senate. However, in 1877 the
removal of federal troops from the South left African Americans to fend
for themselves in the face of violent white “redeemers” such as the Ku
Klux Klan, who felt blacks had stepped out of their rightful subservi-
ent place. Post-Reconstruction saw these gains taken away as African
Americans were thrown out of office and poll taxes, literary tests, and
property requirements were reinstated. The post-Reconstruction “nadir”
in African American history only elevated the material and symbolic
importance of the black male preacher. By the 1880s, in their collective
participations and revisions of manhood, many AME authors did not
look to the educated and refined ministers of the contemporary church.
Instead, they turned to the past for men who engaged in the strenuous
life of the itinerant ministry, demonstrating bodily strength and “manly”
courage. Historians in the AME Church looked back to a golden age of masculinity that they hoped could be recaptured in the present generation, and they constructed images of the vocation of minister and life on the road that held up the itinerant preacher as the exemplar of true manhood.

**Historicizing Manhood**

AME historians emphasized the ability of early male itinerants to eschew luxury and brave the harsh conditions of the mission field. In 1885, H. T. Kealing, in his *History of African Methodism in Texas*, closely linked manhood with his description of the first AME missionaries in Texas. He wrote, “We are not content, even, that the Missionary should remain on a level with the great men of earth. We claim for him the highest type of admirable manhood, in that he leaves the cushioned pew, and sure salary for the doubtful allurements of hardships, deprivation, and misrepresentation.” Kealing depicted the early missionaries in that region as pioneers who were uneducated men and therefore did not owe any of their success to “showy attainment, or glamour, but entirely to natural force of character, and superior cast of mind.” He underscored that many itinerant preachers traveled long distances and preached in log cabins, and other ministers suffered through hunger, wore worn-out clothes, and slept outside on the ground with only a rock as a pillow. In these accounts, the strongest men confronted whites face to face without fear. Kealing’s narratives of missionaries focused on particular incidents in Texas that exemplified their leadership qualities, self-assertion in the face of adversity, and fearless independence, even when opposed by white Americans.

Likewise, in his 1867 work *An Apology for African Methodism*, Benjamin T. Tanner described the early missionaries as men who did not need many material possessions to complete their mission. Tanner defined the necessary spiritual qualifications for an AME preacher as a strong heart and voice, and an uncompromising faith in God; armed with those traits, the preacher needed only “a horse, a saddle-bag, a Bible, a hymn-book, and a glorious field for work.” Tanner, like other AME historians, invoked the size and strength of the church’s preachers who “are the very men to do it, of strong muscles, a strength not to be resisted, with a will that recognizes no impossibilities, they are just the men to work at the oar, and work they do!” Tanner compared the AME itinerants to another male
leader, Moses, because they too were sent miles away with little or no money in their pockets: “Trusting God, they took up the march, and like Israel, as they advanced, obstacles gave way; many a stubborn river stood up in heaps, when their feet touched the waters.”

Not surprisingly, William Paul Quinn figured prominently in the narratives. Tanner held up Quinn, who had led the church’s expansion westward in the first half of the century, as the standard bearer for all ministers who would follow. Quinn, Tanner averred, embodied the physical and mental makeup required to be successful on the rugged frontier: “God in his providence, having eminently endowed him with the necessary qualifications for the arduous and often dangerous task of planting the 'standard of the Cross' in those then Western wilds.”

Garnet gushed over Quinn’s stature, declaring, “No one, who then knew him, will accuse me of exaggeration when I state, that probably there was rarely to be found a man of finer personal appearance, even in that populous city. Standing more than six feet in height, full and roundly built, with every limb and feature well shaped, and proportioned, and of a beautiful olive complexion—fine forehead, and a bright and kindly beaming eye, and withal moving with elastic step, and possessing polished, and courtly manners, William Paul Quinn was a ruler, and a prince.”

Although women such as Jarena Lee had preached across the country, AME Church historians focused on the autonomy, rugged endurance, and powerful physical appearance in celebrating the achievements of the early male itinerants in their denominational histories in order to construct models of manhood for the contemporary church. Into the late nineteenth century, the published literature of the AME Church continued to wrestle with notions of manhood. In 1891, in the preface to his, History of the AME Church, Daniel A. Payne wrote that the formation of the AME Church allowed African Americans to “feel and recognize our individuality and our heaven-created manhood.”

**Domesticity and the Masculinization of the Pulpit**

Daniel Payne was one of the first to respond publicly to the petitions of the Daughters of Zion for preaching licenses. In his letter to the Christian Recorder, Payne contrasted the life of a preacher with the duty of a woman to her family. He argued that such preaching infringed upon the “sacred relationships which women bear to their husbands and children, by sending them forth as itinerant preachers, wandering from place to
place, to the utter neglect of their household duties and obligations.” Although Payne had preached for years regarding the necessity of an educated ministry, he dismissed the idea of female preachers by invoking the cult of true womanhood, describing the harm that would result by women leaving the domestic realm. Payne concluded that the idea was “antiscriptural, anti-domestic, and revolutionary.”

While education was important to Payne, his ultimate qualification for the ministry was masculinity. Payne’s celebration of the “sacred relationships” of women to their husbands and children was no accident, for he believed that the Daughters of Zion had overstepped their bounds in the church and forgotten their central duty to the home. However, his concern for domestic religious life, genuine as it might have been, was not his only motivation for his oratorical challenge. To the contrary, Payne wrote his response to vindicate himself and his fellow ministers in the church who, because of their own insecurities about their manhood, felt threatened by the prospect of female preachers. A spokesman for the African American race and an established figure in the AME Church, Payne wanted to counter the sense of degradation that came from viewing images of African Americans in the white press that depicted them as less than men. He did so by demonstrating a central perceived component of manhood, control over women in the church. For Payne, squelching the rebellion of women in the church was an act on the behalf of the family and the preservation of the divinely ordained gender roles of the AME Church.

When Payne reflected upon the efforts of the Daughters of Zion to create their own conference to empower female preachers, he took their failure as a sign of God’s disapproval. Payne recalled that “certain women members of the A.M.E. Church, who believed themselves divinely commissioned to preach by formal licenses, subsequently organized themselves into an association with the avowed intention of laying out a field after the manner of our Annual Conferences.” He proclaimed, “They held together for a brief period and then fell to pieces like a rope of sand.” While Payne may have been concerned that the authority of the General Conference was being undermined, he seemed pleased about the demise of the women’s efforts. For Payne, the failure of the movement validated his belief that female preaching violated the universal laws of nature.

Payne was not alone in his assessment, for early African American female preachers also recognized a tension between motherhood and the ministry. In her autobiography, Jarena Lee remembers leaving her sick son
to preach for a week at a church that was thirty miles away. She recalled that “during the whole time, not a thought of my little son came into my mind; it was hid from me, lest I should have been diverted from the work I had to [do], to look after my son.” Since her friends and family had taken good care of the child, she wrote, “I now began to think seriously of breaking up housekeeping, and forsaking all to preach the everlasting Gospel.” Throughout her autobiography, she recalls leaving her children, believing divine intervention lessened her maternal attachments. Another female preacher, Zilpha Elaw, could not comfort her daughter who converted during a revival. “Many a mother strongly felt with me on that occasion,” she wrote, “though my position would not allow me to leave the pulpit.”

While it would be unwise to interpret Lee’s and Elaw’s experiences as entirely typical for female preachers, they do illustrate the tensions they felt between their commitments to the ministry and their obligation to their children. Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, particularly in times of heightened insecurity about their own manhood, male AME Church leaders would invoke women’s “natural” duty to the home to squelch the aspirations of women. Within antebellum racial discourse, women’s place, many men argued, remained in the home.

Although Payne invoked domesticity to oppose the movement to license female preachers, his concern for the spiritual life of the home was not disingenuous. Joining the AME Church in 1841, Payne perhaps more than any other member of the AME Church, wrote passionately about the importance of the domestic religious life of a family. In 1850, Payne wrote a book of poetry entitled The Pleasures and other Miscellaneous Poems, which appeared shortly after the deaths of his wife, Julia Ann Payne, on November 6, 1847, and his nine-month-old daughter on July 12, 1848. Having lost his own father at the age of four and his mother at the age of nine, Payne perhaps had his own personal losses as a reason to perpetuate a distinct vision of the importance of family in the life of the church. In his autobiography, Payne focused on his father’s role in his early religious and educational instruction. He remembered regularly being awakened by his father’s morning prayers and hymns, fondly recalling his father’s instruction in the alphabet, and receiving punishment for “neglecting his lessons.” His father named him after the Prophet Daniel, baptized him as an infant, returned home, and, Payne writes, “on bended knees, my pious father holding me in his arms, again dedicated me to the service of the Lord.” After his father’s death, his mother “took him by the hand” and led him to the church and sat by his side. Having
never experienced a traditional family life for any extended period, Payne sought not only to be, as he viewed his father, a “faithful observer of family worship,” but to perpetuate that practice in the AME Church.

Payne’s vision of domestic life was intimately linked with a masculine ministry. At the time of Payne’s membership in 1841, the question of licensing and ordaining female congregants divided the AME Church. As women challenged the traditional roles of men and women in the church and the home, discussions of the appropriate domestic religious life moved from the prescriptive columns to the front page and editorial sections of the *Christian Recorder*. Notions of domesticity informed the discourse about the appropriate role of women in the AME Church. Many male AME Church leaders staked their claim to the leadership positions in the church based on domestic ideology, relegating women to the role of “helper.”

In addition to gender concerns, Payne sought to increase the educational standards to enter the ministry. During his first assignment as an itinerant minister in Washington, DC, Payne began a movement to create an educated AME Church ministry, which had a lasting impact on women and unschooled men aspiring to the pulpit. Payne envisioned a well-educated male ministry in the AME Church, and he pressed the AME leadership to comply. At the 1844 General Conference, Payne proposed that the AME Church construct a “course of studies for the education of the ministry.” To Payne’s surprise, the conference defeated his resolution. After the vote, some members of the conference threatened that if no form of the proposal was adopted, they would form their own “ecclesiastical establishment.” The following day, the General Conference passed the resolution. Bishop Brown assigned Daniel Payne, H. C. Turner, David Ware, Richard Robinson, Abram D. Lewis, W. R. Revels, and George Weir to “select a proper course of studies” for young ministers.

For a brief period, the interests of uneducated men matched with those of female preachers, and many male ministers continued to argue that a converted heart and a gift for preaching were more important than a formal education. Uneducated AME Church leaders faced the real possibility that additional requirements for preachers might cost them their ministerial positions. Similarly, in their autobiographies, female preachers in the early AME Church downplayed the importance of an educated ministry. Zilpha Elaw felt the “wise and learned” often did not embrace “the heavenly discipline of God’s Holy Spirit.” Similarly, Jarena Lee believed that in many cases the uneducated had a unique sensitiv-
ity to the “operations of the Holy Spirit.” While early female preachers made similar arguments minimizing the necessity of education, most male AME Church leaders saw gaps in education as an easier divide to cross than the difference in gender and viewed them as the competition for ministerial positions rather than as potential allies.

As his influence grew in the AME Church, Payne increasingly linked education and manhood to the role of preacher. In 1845 in a series of essays on the “Education of the Ministry,” Payne argued that a well-educated ministry would preach more effectively, tying masculinity to the pulpit. He wrote, “Knowledge will become just what the Creator designed it to be, an element of your manhood, in which you may live and move and have your being.” According to Payne, women, rather than fully participating in this “glorious reformation, should support men in their efforts to achieve education. Payne later proclaimed, “Venerable mothers of Israel! We call upon you to aid us in this glorious reformation. Give us your influence; give us your money; give us your prayers.”

While Payne pushed for an educated clergy and more sharply defined positions in the church, access to those positions increasingly fell along gender lines. In their public literature, male AME Church leaders regularly defined ministerial positions and education as endeavors exclusive to men.

Although there was an element of self-interest involved in Payne’s opposition to female preaching, Payne never wavered from his perceived duty to protect the family. Having experienced personal trials in his own familial life, Payne was committed to preserving the sanctity of the home. In 1847, Payne married his first wife, Julia A. Farris. Within the first year of marriage, Julia died while giving birth to their daughter. Payne’s daughter lived only nine months before also passing away. Perhaps because of the dramatic loss of his parents at such a young age, coupled with the deaths in his own family, Payne viewed himself as a defender of the home. Despite emphasizing the “natural nurturing” ability of mothers in the home, the central AME church text on domesticity was written by him, and his Treatise on Domestic Education (1885) appeared at an opportune historical moment. Published only one year after the licensing of female preachers, Payne’s work was readily received by an eclectic audience that included those critical of mothers who “abandoned” their families for the pulpit as well as others who observed devaluing of the contributions of women in the church and the home. In the midst of the turmoil surrounding the licensing of female preachers, Payne offered his notion of mothers as “domestic educators” as a means of uniting the...
divided constituency of the AME Church. Payne was one in a long line of ministers who viewed the licensing of female preachers as a threat not only to the family but to his sense of male authority as well. The ambiguity of the duties of fatherhood only increased the importance of the pulpit as a site to demonstrate true manhood.

**Elusive Fatherhood**

Early in his term as editor of the *Christian Recorder* from 1868 to 1884, Tanner, like Payne, assumed a masculine ministry in his writings and viewed preaching from the pulpit as an important demonstration of one’s manhood. However, while many authors wedded the attainment of manhood with activities performed outside of the home, Tanner was one of the few leaders in the AME Church who regularly connected manhood not only to the public sphere but to fatherhood and the religious leadership of the home. While masculinity could be clearly delineated in narratives of the rugged mission field, Tanner exerted enormous effort to construct an image of fatherhood that was not “feminized” by association with the domestic realm.

While Tanner was unique in his emphasis on fatherhood in the domestic space, he, like many of his ministerial brethren, believed that manhood was more easily demonstrated in the public sphere. For Tanner and other contributors, manhood could be demonstrated by standing up against racism and achieving success in business. In addition, Tanner viewed a man’s role as a husband as intimately linked with the public realm. In one article he wrote that a husband should go “out into the world in a conqueror’s spirit.” Although manhood could be attained without becoming a father, once an individual embraced marriage and had a family, Tanner made it clear that fatherhood entailed caring for children. Rather than confronting men in the church about their parental duties, Tanner often communicated points of morality through stories and narratives; in the case of manhood, Tanner included sketches of men that modeled correct manly behavior in the home and society.

Because much of the discourse of manhood in the *Christian Recorder* focused on a man’s success in business and society; where notions of true womanhood were central to the domestic realm, a father’s role in the home, while important, was difficult to reconcile with the public nature of “true manhood.” This struggle to merge the public and the private realms of manhood and womanhood is exemplified by the advice given
to young men. In one article, the Reverend A. E. Dickinson encouraged fathers to teach their sons self-reliance and the ability to perform essential physical activities such as splitting wood but also to be versed in the “uses and proprieties of kitchen, dining-room and parlor.” Articles in the newspaper that addressed the roles of men in the home struggled to balance the importance of a deep spirituality in the father without “feminizing” his role in the home. The compromise that emerged ascribed the formal leadership of the family’s religious service to the father but granted mothers the responsibility for the day-to-day maintenance of the home and the keeping of the children. With this model in mind, it was the father’s duty to put his “faith” in the mother’s ability to nurture the children and the family. Fathers modeled the correct religious behavior through a private piety that entailed retiring to their closets to pray for their wife and children.

While articles encouraged all children in the church to strive to improve the condition of the race, the father was charged with instilling manhood in boys. Tanner wrote, “If a young man deserves praise, be sure to give it to him else you not only run a chance of driving him from the right road by want of encouragement, but deprive yourself of the happiest privilege you will ever have of rewarding his labor.” In a similar vein, James C. Waters wrote, “It is conceded that young men are the pillars of any government . . . young men occupy, or should occupy a position in the Church, which at once constitutes them columns in the edifice; and this is particularly true with respect to the young men of the A.M.E. Church.” Articles encouraged young men to rise further in the ranks of society than their fathers and challenged them to take advantage of the opportunities made available to them through the sacrifices of those who came before them. Augustus W. Watson wrote, “Bishop Richard Allen, Morris Brown, Edward Waters and William Paul Quinn, suffered and labored in an age which dates back a few years, before I was born; but every word of their eloquent suffering was for me; they fought for truth and conscience, and I have as deep an interest in truth and conscience as they had.” Writers encouraged young men to begin their days early and “do something that will benefit their church and their race” and “not to get in their own way.” While contributors expressed concern about the spiritual development of children, many felt that as boys grew into men, they would face special challenges that would lead them away from the Sunday school system.

Rather than a precise definition of fatherhood, constructions of manhood by AME church authors were often synonymous with living the
life of a good Christian. The traits of manhood included such broad practices as being pious and meeting one’s duty to God through obedience, engaging in labor and participating in industry, temperance, patriotism, and good character. Advice dispensed to boys and men alike encouraged them to seek spiritual strength from the Lord, maintain good character, and choose the spiritual gifts over physical desires. Reverend T. H. Jackson wrote, “Young men there is a higher a better, a nobler life than the merely sensual.” However, character itself was not the sole purview of any race. In one editorial, Tanner wrote, “What has character, and the love of it, to do with color or the want of it?” Reverend William D. Johnson constructed notions of manhood from his reflections on the life of his father, recalling his devotion to his mother and his marriage as well as an enduring abiding belief and faith in Jesus. These AME leaders’ recollections of the proper division of responsibility between men and women in the home saw their corollary in postbellum church legislation.

Women as “Assistants”:
Power Differentials of Gender and Race

The 1868 AME Church General Conference struck a compromise that created the position of stewardess and female superintendent. The General Conference decided that a pastor of a congregation could nominate a Board of Stewardesses, instituting the first official position for women in the church. The position did not require ordination, fell under the authority of the male leadership, and viewed women as “assistants” in the church. According to AME Church polity, stewardesses were a “collection of sisters, numbering not less than three nor more than nine, who assist the stewards, class leaders and pastor [ . . . ] but cannot always be recognized as a board, as they have no legislative or judicial discretion, but are merely assistants.” The General Conference stipulated that if the necessary “three to nine most influential women” could not be found in a congregation, men could hold the position. However, women could not occupy the position of steward. Male stewards as well as the pastor had the final say over potential candidates and the length of their tenure in the position. In contrast, AME Church legislation granted no power to allow stewardesses to remove stewards. The General Conference also defined the duties of the female superintendent in relation to the male superintendent. While both were required to arrive at the schoolroom on time, the female superintendent was also required to “assist” the male
superintendent in “preserving order in the school, especially among the females.” In addition, the female superintendent oversaw female teachers and their classes. Reticent to relinquish power, male AME Church leaders established positions for women with prestigious titles, but little real power.

In practice, AME Church leaders who appointed women to the position of stewardess met resistance. In 1873, Bishop Henry McNeal Turner appointed nine women to the role. Turner recalled that fellow preachers became “ashy over the matter” when they learned of his appointments and were “disposed to be troublesome.” Turner handled the matter by telling the ministers that if they could not work with the stewardesses, “they had better vacate their positions at once; or I would vacate them without their assistance, and put other men in their places.” While the General Conference had instituted the position of stewardess, it had not defined specific duties for the position. This oversight meant that the duties of the position varied from church to church. Turner created a list of duties for the stewardesses under his charge in Savannah, Georgia. They included attending to the sick and poor and “search[ing] out” children for the Sabbath school. However, he also made special accommodations for the women. For example, rather than meeting with the official board, he met with the stewardesses biweekly at four o’clock on Friday afternoons, because it was not “proper to have ladies strolling around after night.” For the most part, Turner limited their activities to working with women, but when they did work with men, he felt they were “abundantly successful.” In general, Turner spoke very positively of the stewardesses. He wrote, “I have found my stewardesses worth more than all the male officers put together. They are more industrious, more regular to time, more concerned about the religious progress of the church, and they find out more that is going wrong.” Although many ministers supported the passage of legislation that expanded women’s roles in the church on paper, few expected to enact the positions so swiftly.

Turner had a kindred spirit in a younger minister named Theophilus Gould Steward. Born April 17, 1843, two years after Payne joined the AME Church, Steward often clashed with the conservative stances taken by the many of the elder statesmen in the church. In April 1862, the AME Church licensed Steward to exhort and on September 26, 1863, he earned his preaching license. Although he had received little formal education, Steward proved to be an effective preacher and was appointed to the Macedonia AME Church in South Camden, New Jersey. Steward served as pastor there until early in 1865, when Daniel Payne assigned...
him to be a missionary in South Carolina. T. G. Steward made the case that one could not define manhood in the same way for African Americans as one would for white Americans because of the racism that existed in American society. Manhood could be defined for whites based on their occupation and training; however, many African Americans, even after attaining education, had to work as farm workers, on steamboats, and as mechanics. He declared, “We cannot judge colored men by their occupation; and the fact that they are not ashamed of such occupation, but are contented in them argues nothing.”

Steward understood the barriers that faced many African Americans as well as the burden that came with the “curse of color.” “Prejudice excluded colored people no matter how learned or talented from positions of honor or profit among whites, and colored people have not these positions to bestow.” Steward viewed such limits on an individual’s profession as linked to the project of racial uplift, because the field in which a young African American male chose to work was important because it affected whether African Americans were to be viewed as dependent servants or independent agents. He wrote, “It should be the aim of every colored youth to take advantage of every privilege by which he may better his own condition and reflect honor upon his race.” He continued, “There are too many young men growing up in this age who think they have no higher calling than to play the part of servants. While we do not wish to cast any reproach upon those who have chosen these occupations when no other doors were open to them, yet we think that the colored youth of this day should have a higher ambition.”

Unlike the mission field, where a more rugged individual type was in place, the precise scope of manhood in the domestic realm remained elusive for most contributors to AME literature.

Steward, no stranger to dissent during his time as a member of the AME Church, became one of the most outspoken advocates for the expansion of women’s roles in the church. In his effort to sway public opinion in AME Church newspapers, Steward challenged the patriarchal structure that had become entrenched in the denomination. He questioned why the public roles of the church—preaching from the pulpit, receiving ordination, and voting at Quarterly and General Conferences—were understood as exclusively male pursuits, while women were expected to support the church only at the local level by raising funds and supporting its programs. Although his stance was very unpopular among other male leaders, Steward made a case for the expansion of women’s roles in the denomination.
Steward encouraged women to draw upon the power they already possessed in local congregations across the country. While men held the highest leadership positions in the church, women constituted the majority of the AME Church membership. According to the AME Church Disciplinet, any person seeking to be a licensed preacher or an exhorter had to be nominated by members of his congregation. An individual aspiring to rise in the ranks of the church needed the recommendation of his local congregation. Because of this approval process, T. G. Steward made the case that women should be able to vote in all church meetings, including the election of the trustees. If female members voted throughout the career of a minister, he argued, “does not consistency alone, demand that it shall not be restricted in other instances.”

Skeptical about the ability of his fellow ministers to deviate from the status quo, Steward urged women to act on their own behalf. “It is well known that our brethren are seldom induced to inaugurate any improvement in our property until the complaints and calls of the sisters become as they fancy the greater evil.” According to Steward, it was the “more progressive wives and daughters, sisters and mothers acting like fire upon the back of a stubborn turtle” that would “compel” the church to “strike out.” If women could vote at church meetings, he argued, the “delays running through perhaps a decade, a score of years [would] be prevented by forcing a decision on the side of progress.” While Steward argued passionately for his position, there were a number of structural barriers in the church hierarchy to preempt the power of female congregants. For example, a local preacher received his license from the Quarterly Conference, which could deny a preacher a license or refuse to renew it “without any impeachment of his moral character, or finding any decrease of piety, talent or usefulness.”

Steward challenged the assumption of many male AME Church leaders that the role of leadership inherently belonged to men, which he felt presupposed a false male superiority: “This doctrine is based upon the barbarous idea of female inferiority and where men cling to it, clearly shows more love and tender regard for the gold of the temple, than for what is termed the spiritual interests.” The assumption that female congregants were the “weaker vessels,” Steward asserted, was used to justify the exclusion of women from positions of power. However, the AME Church still expected women to raise funds and to “shoulder about two-thirds, and in some extreme cases, nine hundred and ninety-nine one thousandths of the burden.” Steward pronounced “the whole thing wrong—the practice and the grounds upon which it is based.”

cally, Steward supported his position with the biblical passage in Galatians 3:28: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female; for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.”

In 1874, through the Christian Recorder, Tanner called for “representative” women of the race to join the missionary efforts of the church. In response to Tanner’s editorial, a group of bishop’s wives sent an open letter to the sisters and wives of pastors in the church to join them in their efforts to form a women’s missionary organization. The bishop’s wives called upon all women in the church and especially “those of us who have consecrated our all, jointly with our dear husbands, for the universal spread of the gospel.” They called for the pastor’s wives to organize “Mite Missionary Societies” in their husband’s churches. The women hoped that by gathering small “mites” from members of the church, the collective effort would result in a substantial amount of money to put towards missionary work. The founders of the organization were seven bishop’s wives: Mary Quinn, Eliza Payne, Harriet A. E. Wayman, Mary A. Campbell, Maria Shorter, Mary L. Brown, and Mrs. Bishop Ward. Officially, the WMMS fell under the authority of the missionary department and therefore served as a “helper” to the AME Church.

Although the WMMS was headed by women, male leaders asserted their authority over the organization, playing a large official role in the proceedings of the meetings. On May 8, 1874, at the inaugural meeting of the Bethel AME Church Women’s Mite Missionary Society, although Mary A. Campbell presided over the meeting, Bishop Shorter opened the ceremony and Reverend Theodore Gould, Bishop Campbell, Tanner, and W. H. Hunter all spoke before the women began the organizational process and elected officers. Although the opening meeting was “unceremonious” and not very well advertised, fifty people attended the opening meeting, and Mrs. Bishop Campbell was elected the first president of the organization. Over the weeks following the first WMMS Convention on August 11, 1874, in Philadelphia, Tanner printed the minutes of the meeting along with the bylaws and the constitution of the new organization.

The presumption that women were the assistants to the male leaders impeded the early efforts of the WMMS, particularly their attempts to form separate branches of organization. In response to Tanner’s letter, Harriet Wayman expressed interest in forming a women’s missionary society but needed the support of the elders, trustees, and stewards of the church. Only with their support, Wayman wrote, did they “have the power to work.” The AME Church leadership, at times, posed a real
power barrier to the involvement of women in the missionary efforts of the church. Wayman asked, without the encouragement of the pastor, “what can we do?” While the women were ready to organize and “help work for the cause of Christ,” they needed the men to “loan the use of our Churches,” and “call the people together and make known the objects of meeting.” Despite the desire of the male leaders to have a hand in the organization, the female leaders made the WMMS their own. From 1874 to 1878, Mary A. Campbell, the first president of the organization, raised money for local societies and missionary work in Haiti, Santo Domingo, and West Africa. In America, they focused their efforts in the North. While many male AME Church leaders referred to Africa as the “fatherland” that they would “conquer” with the Gospel, many women in the WMMS viewed Africa as the “motherland” that needed support in the nurture of her children. The WMMS raised most of the money for the late-nineteenth-century missionary efforts of the church. However, the male leaders still defined the boundaries of the group and maintained final authority on the group’s decisions. Consistent with its historical legacy, the AME Church male leadership limited female participation to the role of “helper” in missionary work as well.

AT THE 1884 General Conference, in his opening address, Bishop William F. Dickerson challenged the AME Church to reach a final decision on the licensing of female preachers. He argued that if women were licensed to preach, a “proper adjustment of the pronouns” in the AME Church Discipline “may serve to give notice to all that we have risen to that height where sex is no barrier to the enjoyment of some of the privileges of the Gospel Ministry.” Although the motion passed, there was furious debate over the legislation. Among the faction of ministers who opposed licensing female preachers, the Reverend James A. Johnson was the most outspoken. In his rebuttal to the 1884 legislation, Johnson placed the pulpit at odds with the home. Johnson defined women as the “weaker vessel” and argued that women were physically incapable of dealing with the hardships encountered in the itinerant lifestyle. According to Johnson, women were intellectually and physically designed for the “particular sphere” of the home where they could be protected by a male, either a father or husband. Sanctioning female preachers, he asserted, would substitute man’s will for God’s will and do nothing more than “damage the church.” He concluded, “There is no advantage to be gained from it. God has circumscribed her sphere, and whenever she goes
out of it, injury is done to society. The Bible said she should keep silence in the church.”

Johnson’s transposition of the home and the pulpit was no accident, for the legislation represented a clear threat to the male dominance of the ministry by placing men in direct competition with women for congregations. By 1884, the home had become so closely tied to true womanhood that its mere invocation was meant to undo the aspirations of women in the church. By seeking a license to preach, the dissenters argued, women not only impeded the work of the church but disrupted home life and the nurture of children. The 1884 resolution of the General Conference to license female preachers challenged the male dominance of the ministry. The legislation implied that men would be in direct competition for congregations with women. On May 22, W. D. Cook proposed that licensed female preachers function only as traveling evangelists, rather than lead their own churches. Ministers opposed to the legislation employed the language of domesticity in their attacks. The Reverend G. W. Bryant spoke out “in favor of their staying home and taking care of the babies.” Cook’s resolution limiting women’s roles passed 65 to 11. The denomination would not elect its first female bishop, Vashti Murphy McKenzie, until the year 2000.

As we have seen, positions were fairly malleable in the growing AME Church in the early nineteenth century, exemplified by women such as Jarena Lee delivering sermons at Mother Bethel Church in Philadelphia. However, as the AME movement transformed into an institution, male leaders formalized rules, raised educational requirements to head congregations, and more rigidly mapped the boundaries of gender roles in the church, which increasingly limited the opportunities of women to assume leadership. There were numerous reasons for male ministers to seek to maintain control of one of the few public spaces and leadership roles available to African Americans, but this essay has concentrated on their concern of falling short of the standards of manhood. Romanticizing the manhood embodied by the strong early itinerant ministers and recanting the lore of their exploits on the frontier as they expanded the church westward in the first half of the century only accentuated the scarce outlets available to assert their own manhood. It is within this atmosphere that many AME leaders sought to masculinize the pulpit and engage the perpetual process of demonstrating their “true manhood.”
Notes


17. Payne, Recollections of Seventy Years, 11–13, 16.


Chapter 4

_Christian Recorder_, 6 April 1872, 4; Tanner, “Train the Boys for Business,” 
_Christian Recorder_, 5 June 1884, 2; Tanner, “The Best Good at Home,” 
_Christian Recorder_, 17 February 1876, 3; Tanner, “Boy’s Courage,” 
_Christian Recorder_, 17 February 1876, 3; Payne, “The Work 
of Life,” _Christian Recorder_, 24 December 1874, 1; Tanner, “Sketches of Young Men,” 


37. Bailey, _Around the Family Altar_, 49.

40. Ibid.
55. *Minutes of the 1884 A.M.E. General Conference*, 133.
57. Ibid.