

# **Mary McLeod Bethune:**

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**Christ Did Not Designate Any Particular Color to Go**

MARY CLOUTIER

## Introduction

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Mary McLeod Bethune has a revered place in American history, as an educator, social reformer and political figure. She was born in freedom to a large family that had known the deprivations and injustice of slavery. Her life spanned from 1875 until the mid-1950s, allowing her to speak to, and participate fully in, the social transformation of the twentieth century. Despite her many accomplishments and influence in American history, Mary was prevented from realizing her girlhood dream of becoming a missionary in Africa, when her application to the Presbyterian Board of Mission was denied. Mary would later temper the injustice by suggesting that her missionary calling was based on a selfish desire for travel and excitement. However, hidden in the Presbyterian archives is a handwritten letter from Mary to the Presbyterian Board, which reflects her true perspective on their decision, and reveals that Mary was *certain* of her calling and qualification for mission service—and that the Board’s decision was based solely on her ethnicity.

## Mary McLeod

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Mary McLeod Bethune was the fifteenth of seventeen children, but the first child born in freedom, and the first in her family to receive an education. Her parents recognized that Mary was unusually gifted, and were certain that she would accomplish much in her life. It was during her childhood that the Presbyterian Board opened a school in her hometown of Mayesville, SC. Teachers, both black and white, arrived from the north to offer education to children of color in the former slave states.

Mary’s primary education ended when she was twelve. Convinced that she should continue her schooling, Mary prayed that God would make a way for her to go to high school. Her prayers were answered when her teacher came with the good news that a lady in Denver, a Miss Mary Crissman, offered to pay for one African American girl to attend the prestigious Scotia Seminary in a neighboring state. Mary was chosen out of all the eligible children of her school. Her family and friends celebrated this rare opportunity, collecting necessary clothing and materials, and seeing Mary off at the train station.

## Miss Mary Crissman

While most biographies describe Mary McLeod's benefactress as a *Quaker and seamstress*,<sup>1</sup> Mary Crissman was, in fact, an educated professional woman, the unmarried daughter of a prominent Presbyterian minister and educator. Her father, the Rev. George T. Crissman had pastored for years in Illinois, but relocated to the western states as a missionary church planter and educator, first in Nebraska, then in Colorado. Mary Crissman always lived with her parents in the minister's manse, though she continued her work as a teacher for decades. She was a mere *eight years older* than Mary McLeod, herself, and would have been in her early twenties when she offered to pay for her tuition at Scotia Seminary. Mary McLeod Bethune, herself, noted that Miss Crissman earned the scholarship money by doing sewing after school hours (Johnson, 1940). Little public information is available on Mary Crissman, but census reports and community directories of the time period invariably list her as a teacher. Her greatest, most lasting kingdom contribution seems to be her support and encouragement of the person who was to become Mary McLeod Bethune. Mrs. Bethune, many years later, thought of Miss Crissman every time she accomplished a new thing or made some contribution (Walworth, 147). Miss Crissman was among a number of godly, single professional women—white and black—who had influenced Mary and served as her models in her own educational ministry.

## Scotia Seminary

Mary was likely twelve years old when she transitioned to Scotia Seminary (Walworth, 147), and finished her studies there at the age of nineteen. Mary would note that she was never the brightest scholar, but she was known for her energy, friendliness, hard work and giftedness in practical skills, such as cooking. She was a great favorite among the scholars and teachers. It was during her years at Scotia that Mary became a member of the Presbyterian Church, and eventually sensed God's calling upon her life to serve as a missionary in Africa.<sup>2</sup>

Chartered in 1870, Scotia Seminary prepared African American girls "for usefulness, as teachers and missionaries among their own people in the Southern States and in Africa" (Ladies' Board, 1872b, 135). While many of the pupils worked part-time to help pay for their tuition, Scotia Seminary invited readers of various Presbyterian magazines to contribute to their scholarship at \$45 per annum per student (Woman's Executive Committee, 180).

1 Sterne, 56; Peare, 49; Hanson, 37. More contemporary biographies (McCluskey and Smith, 42) cite the Johnson interview, and correctly state that Miss Crissman was a teacher, and that she paid for the scholarship through sewing earnings.

2 Card file for Mary McLeod, Moody Bible Institute archives.

Scotia Seminary pupils were encouraged toward missions in Africa as missionary women often visited the seminary, and the pupils took part in mission society activities during their time at the school (PCUSA 1883, 143; 1895, 323). The Women's Presbyterian Board of the North-West supported a number of missionaries, both white and "colored" in Africa, including one well-known to their readers, Miss Mary Harding, a college-educated woman of color who served in Gaboon, Africa, from 1882 to 1889, with the Presbyterian Board of Missions (WPBM-NW, 16). The Women's Board of the Northwest hoped that Miss Harding and one other woman of color would be the first of many missionaries of African descent; they expected that Scotia Seminary would serve as a "feeder" of this supply, preparing missionaries of African descent, "for the education of colored youth of each sex" (WPBM-NW, 16-17).

For years, the Presbyterian Board of Missions affirmed the need for African American missionaries in Africa (BFM 1885, 56; 1886, 296), and offered education and ministerial training to that end. The Board periodically polled their white missionaries in Africa on their willingness to receive "colored brethren" as co-laborers on the field (Reading 1882; 1889; Nassau 1889), and the responses revealed two common concerns: that such candidates might not have the necessary education and qualifications, and that their presence may cause racial tensions among missionaries, and between the mission and the African church (BFM 1895). While the Presbyterian Board was investing in the education and training of African Americans for ministry, their foreign missionaries resisted their appointment to a common mission field. African American missionary applicants were thus given a mixed message: that they were wanted, needed and qualified to serve in mission work in Africa, but that there was no placement opportunities on the field (Nassau 1895; Stewart 1895). While Mary McLeod was still at Scotia Seminary, it appears that Miss Isabella Nassau, of the Gaboon Mission, began a conversation about Mary's coming to work with her on that field. It is not clear whether they had met in person, but Miss Nassau knew "Miss McLeod" by name and reputation, and was in correspondence with Mrs. Satterwhite, of Scotia Seminary, regarding Mary's plans to serve as a missionary in Africa.

### **Moody Bible Institute**

Mary graduated from Scotia the same month that she turned nineteen, in July 1894, and transferred to Moody Bible Institute to further prepare to be a missionary, with the continued financial support of Miss Crissman. Her Moody transcript notes that Mary was recommended by Rev. A. C. Johnson at the Maysville Institute, and Mrs. Satterwhite, of Concord (Scotia) Seminary. In the "Personal Character" section is written "Colored. A bright girl and a good student. A good worker and used in bringing her own people to the Lord. Fine singer and conducts a choir very ably." (MBI, 2016).

While a student at Moody, Mary was involved in practical ministries, singing and preaching at the Pacific Garden Mission, and to the inmates at the police department, and serving in various choir activities. Five months into her studies at Moody, Mary received devastating news from the Presbyterian Board of Mission concerning her application to be a missionary. There is no known record of their letter, but Mary's careful but honest response to the Mission Board gives the reader a sense of what the letter conveyed. Mary waited seven weeks before composing this response to the Presbyterian Board of Missions:

Dear Friends: —Your letter of Dec. 18<sup>th</sup> 1894 has been before me for sometime [*sic*]. I have prayed over that letter time and time again asking the Holy Spirit to give me only out of that letter what you intended me to have. I think I have been rather unfortunate in getting out of it what I have. Indeed, friends and co-workers for the Lord Jesus Christ, I have not been aware of the fact that you have not been sending out Colored Missionaries to Africa or I would not have attempted an exception to your rules. It seems to me that if the Lord Jesus Christ were here on earth in person and wanted someone to go on an errand for Him, He would not discuss the covering He has placed upon the bodies His blood bought people to protect the flesh He has made. As I sit here at my table writing you I can see my Saviour struggling with that heavy cross up Calvary's Mount, I am told that a man attempted to help my blessed Saviour bear the cross! I wonder did the Lord Jesus Christ stop to see whether that man was white or "colored." Dear Friends, I would have looked for almost any other difficulty than the one presented me in your letter. Christ has called me to the work. His command is to "Go." I am so glad He has counted me worthy to lay this Great Command upon my heart. I am so glad he did not designate any particular color to Go. Friends, my plans concerning my stay here in the Bible Institute have been changed and I would like to hear your decision as early as possible so that I may know what to definitely ask the Lord for. May He indeed guide you in your work for Him. Mary J. McLeod. (McLeod 1895, underlining in the original)

Mary may have misremembered these details some five decades later, during her interviews with Mr. Charles S. Johnson and others. She chose to conclude her studies after only one year (MBI, 2016), at which time she transitioned to full-time ministry in the south, with the Presbyterian Freedman's Board. An interview with Mary many years after the event gives the impression that she spent two years at Moody, and then received the letter of rejection. Mary's memoirs give the impression that she received her rejection letter from the Presbyterian Board with great disappointment, and with little question.

Archives of the Moody Bible Institute suggest that D. L. Moody may also have dissuaded Mary from foreign mission work. A broadcast screenplay of her life, aired in early 1958,<sup>3</sup> suggests that Mary had a conversation with Moody in

3 The program was aired by the National Broadcasting Company television network on Sunday, February 9, 1958, with the cooperation of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the US (DeRemer).

his office, during the course of which he suggested to her that her desire to serve overseas was “frivolous” and based on a selfish desire for travel and excitement (Branch, 17). In the script, Moody essentially convinces Mary that serving overseas would be a “false step” and that all of her promise and education would be “gone for naught” (Ibid) while teaching among her own people in the South would be a better use of her giftedness (Branch, 18).

Far away, in Equatorial Africa, the Presbyterian missionaries discussed whether they would receive Miss McLeod as a missionary (or assistant) on their field. While they had no misgivings about Mary or her qualifications, the missionaries openly discussed whether she would be equal to other missionaries in pay, voting rights and social standing, due to her being a person of color. Though many voted in her favor, a majority of those eligible to vote were against her coming. Miss Isabella Nassau wrote a letter to the Presbyterian Board, expressing her conviction that Miss McLeod ought to receive appointment, “on account of her especial call and intelligent consecration” (I. Nassau 1895b). If the Board was willing to go through with the appointment, Miss Nassau would be willing to donate fifty dollars towards Miss McLeod’s salary, and offer her room and board, at no charge. Once again, Mary had an advocate and supporter, in the form of a single, educated Christian teacher. By the time Miss Nassau wrote this final appeal, Mary McLeod had long since changed her plans, and had given up the idea that she would serve as a missionary in Africa, and had already begun her teaching ministry in the South, with the Presbyterian Freedmen’s Board.

## Conclusion

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Mary McLeod Bethune used her education and ministry training towards lasting and necessary contributions in education and race relations in America in the twentieth century. She often credited professional Christian women, her teachers in the mission schools, as well as her benefactress, Miss Crissman, as her models and greatest champions.

Few know that Mary McLeod was called and prepared for missionary service in Africa, but was turned away because of her ethnicity. Mrs. Bethune’s own biographical history indicates that she was affirmed and encouraged in this calling, while institutional archives offer a deeper glimpse into the attitudes and presumptions of that time period which prevented educated and fully-qualified African Americans like Mary from serving on the predominantly white mission fields in the late nineteenth century Africa.

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