

Five African American Christian Women That Changed History



Amanda Berry Smith

As an itinerant minister and evangelist in 19th-century America, Amanda Berry Smith had three notable strikes against her. She was a woman. She was uneducated. And she was black.

Born a slave and the oldest of 13 children, Smith was preaching regularly in Methodist and African Methodist Episcopal churches in the Northeast by the time she was in her early 30s, despite the fact that neither denomination supported female preachers. To earn a living, she worked 20-hour shifts as a washerwoman.

Smith also preached in the Methodist holiness camp meetings that were spreading up and down the East coast, and, because of the color of her skin, was scorned, ostracized, and gawked at as a curiosity. In spite of the daily abuse and humiliation she endured, Smith stayed focused on her mission, which was to bring people, including her persecutors, to Christ. "Lord," she prayed daily, "help the people to see."



Harriet Tubman

Harriet Tubman's story is familiar to everyone. Born a slave named Araminta Ross in Maryland, Tubman stood just 5 feet tall. But her courage and tireless devotion to the cause of justice for black slaves caused her to tower over many of her peers. She herself escaped from slavery around age 30, but her determination to assist hundreds of other enslaved people to escape southern plantations and travel northward, often all the way to Canada, has earned her a prominent place in American history. By her own estimation, she freed a thousand slaves, and she came to be known as the "Moses" of her people.

At a time when people of color, and women in particular, were forced to endure hardships most of us cannot imagine, Harriet Tubman stood against the tide of law and tradition. The driving force behind Harriet's insurmountable strength to fight for others' freedom was her faith. She grew up during the Second Great Awakening, which was a Protestant religious revival in the United States. She was said to have been very devoted to her relationship with the Lord, and she "talked with him daily." This devotion gave her the unwavering ability to dedicate her life to making a difference for countless slaves she helped escape to freedom.



Marian Wright Edelman

Marian Wright Edelman, civil rights activist and founder of the Children's Defense Fund, has dedicated her life to those who cannot always lift themselves up. Edelman obtained a law degree at Yale and worked in Mississippi, becoming the first Black woman to be admitted to that state's bar. As a leader with the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund, Edelman helped coordinate the Poor People's Campaign after Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination. She founded the Children's Defense Fund in the 1970s, to apply pressure on the federal government to help poor children and to coordinate nationwide activities to help children.

Edelman can trace her commitment to serve others directly back to her own childhood in the southern United States. Her father, Arthur Wright, was a Baptist preacher who raised his five children to believe that it was their Christian duty to help others and to try to make the world a better place. Since those early days, Edelman has taken many steps toward her goal of making the world a better place, especially for the poor and minorities.



Katherine Johnson

Katherine Johnson loved math. Early in her career, she was called a “computer.” She helped NASA put an astronaut into orbit around Earth. And then she helped put a man on the Moon. Growing up, Katherine always had an affinity for mathematics; in her early education, she even began college at the age of 15. In her early career, she was a teacher as well as a mother. At the age of 34, she found out that NASA (at the time known as NACA) was hiring women to solve math problems. She applied twice and received her new role the second time around, which began the historical journey of changing American history.

Katherine studied how to use geometry for space travel. She figured out the paths for the spacecraft to orbit Earth and land on the Moon. NASA used Katherine's math, and it worked! NASA sent astronauts into orbit around Earth. Later, her math helped send astronauts to the Moon and back. The work that Katherine provided for space travel was paramount to NASA's success, and without her passion for mathematics which helped her to think outside of the box, they wouldn't have made it happen.

Johnson was a devoted Christian, and she was a member of Carver Memorial Presbyterian Church for over 50 years. She also sang in the choir. The Rev. Dr. J. Herbert Nelson, II, Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of the PC(USA), said that Johnson “lived a life of courage that ought to be emulated by all of us who profess a faith in Jesus Christ.” “She was a faithful woman with regards to how she understood her own work, that it was directly the grace of God that allowed her to do the things that she was able to do and be able to break the barriers with work that, quite frankly, African American women were not expected to do and deemed as incapable of doing,” Nelson said.

Just like other brilliant women before her, Katherine Johnson challenged the status quo about what women were capable of, in particular, African American women. She paved a way for

many to come and proved to the world that there's nothing we can't accomplish if we want it badly enough and if we work hard for it. She is a true example of an American hero.



Mahalia Jackson

Known as the Queen of Gospel, Mahalia Jackson used her voice to promote civil rights. She was the granddaughter of enslaved Americans who worked on rice and cotton plantations. Mahalia was born in New Orleans, but moved to Chicago during the Great Migration, which was a mass movement of African American Southerners to the North escaping Jim Crow laws to search for fair job opportunities. Her 1947 release, "Move On Up a Little Higher" quickly became the bestselling Gospel single, bringing national and international recognition. She is also known for singing "I've Been 'Buked and I've Been Scorned" at the March on Washington on August 28, 1963, before Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech. After King's death in 1968, Jackson sang at his funeral and then largely withdrew from public political activities. With her music, she wanted to help give people faith and hope using the gifts that God gave her.