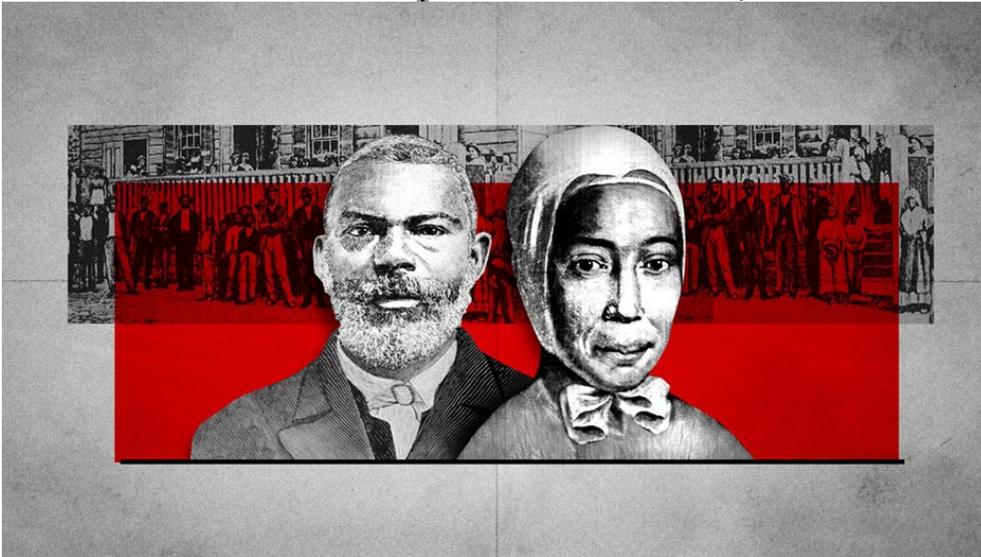


<https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2022/january-february/black-missions-history-rewritten-protten-liele.html>

## How Black Missionaries Are Being Written Back into the Story

Will fixing inaccurate representation encourage more minorities to “go into all the world”?

**REBECCA HOPKINS | DECEMBER 13, 2021**



When George Liele set sail for Jamaica in 1782, he didn’t know he was about to become America’s first overseas missionary. And when Rebecca Protten shared the gospel with slaves in the 1730s, she had no idea some scholars would someday call her the mother of modern missions.

These two people of color were too busy surviving—and avoiding jail—to worry about making history. But today they are revising it. Their stories are helping people rethink a missionary color line and, as National African American Missions Council (NAAMC) president Adrian Reeves said at a Missio Nexus conference in 2021, challenging the idea that “missions is for other people and not for us.”

African Americans today account for less than 1 percent of missionaries sent overseas from the US. But they were there at the beginning.

“We have a representation problem,” Reeves said. But “when we share with the Black church their history and legacy in missions, it makes it easier for them to connect.”

That was Noel Erskine’s experience too, when he discovered Liele’s name in the archives of the Great Britain Baptist Missionary Society. The Emory University historian said that growing up in Jamaica, he didn’t really think missionaries could be Black.

“We always associated missionaries with white people,” he said. “They’re a stranger to the culture. We’re not sure of motives.”

British missionary William Carey is often called the father of modern missions. Adoniram Judson has been titled the first American missionary to travel overseas. But both Liele and Protten predated them. Their stories add depth and complication to the sometimes too-simple narrative of missions history. Advocates of these two figures say they need to be lifted up.

The Southern Baptist Convention has added Liele to its official church calendar in 2021 as someone who should be honored. The NAAMC has designated an annual George Liele Award to be given to a Black missionary. And Protten, the subject of a recent academic biography, was highlighted at the 2021 Missio Nexus Leadership conference.

Deborah Van Broekhoven, a Baptist historian and the director emerita of the American Baptist Historical Society, said both Liele and Protten have “a lot to teach us.”

But they have been obscured, she said, and that means missions history needs a larger frame. “Lost” is the common way to talk about someone who was dropped from historical narratives, but it might not be the right word for Liele. “Excluded” might be more accurate.

Erskine wrote about this in a recently published article in the academic journal *Missiology*. He found that several years after Liele established a Baptist church in Jamaica, he was told he

needed to go to England to get permission to preach in his own church.

What happened next is recorded in the minutes of the May 1822 meeting of the Baptist Missionary Society:

“Resolved, that the committee cannot sanction the application of Mr. Liele unless it be concurred in by those brethren in connection with us, who are already in the island.”

In other words, Liele was “dismissed in a paragraph” because white people in Jamaica did not want him to have any authority, Erskine said. “White supremacy is the power to exclude.”

But in 2004, a longtime African American educator caught a vision to return Liele to missions history. David Shannon gathered a team of 20 Black and white historians, educators, and pastors to write a book about Liele.

“David Shannon saw the story as important, not just because it had been neglected but because it did show redemption, it did show bridge building,” said Van Broekhoven, who contributed to the project.

Sadly, Shannon didn’t live to see the 2012 [publication](#) of *George Liele’s Life and Legacy: An Unsung Hero*. He passed away in 2008.

Bringing Protten back into the narrative had additional challenges, according to University of Florida historian Jon Sensbach, who wrote a book on Protten in 2005. He first learned of her while researching the work of the Moravians on the island of St. Thomas. There was a brief reference to a mixed-race woman who brought hundreds of enslaved people into the church.

Through careful work, Sensbach was able to unearth a larger story and show how Protten’s evangelism challenged white slavers and plantation owners who feared the gospel message would undermine the order of slavery. He found she had a pivotal influence on how Christians in those regions talked about being born again.

“That model involved a sense of Christianity being a religion of spiritual rebirth, of spiritual equality,” Sensbach said. “For an

enslaved population—oppressed, beaten down, told that they were not only inferior but also perhaps not even fully human—this was a liberating message.”

Protten, who moved to Saxony with the Moravians, became a deacon in 1746 and is possibly the first Black woman ordained in Western Christianity. Later she went as a Moravian missionary to Africa’s Gold Coast.

Reestablishing Black people to leading roles in the history of American missions is an important corrective, but it doesn’t erase some of the complicated ways missions has been part of a story of racism and oppression.

Protten, for example, was once jailed on charges that her message would start a slave rebellion. She also defied the system by marrying a white Moravian. But later, Sensbach asks, was she complicit in a “cultural genocide” when she started a school at a Danish military outpost in modern-day Ghana?

“Maybe,” he said. “Maybe not.”

Liele stood apart as someone who believed the Jamaicans were human enough to receive the gospel. And he went to jail for his preaching. But he also enslaved people in Jamaica. And he later offered a compromise in his church, allowing enslaved people to be married there—a subtle protection against slave owners breaking apart marriages—but accepting that slaves should still obey their owners, who could at any time separate “what God hath joined.”

“Liele is complicated,” Erskine said. “He’s a survivor.”

But Liele shows modern Christians how to work for good in divisive times, said Van Broekhoven.

“Liele didn’t tackle racism head on—he couldn’t,” said Van Broekhoven. “But he certainly figured out ‘workarounds.’ In that sense, I see him as wildly successful with those workarounds in establishing the church in Jamaica that endured to this day.”

These complicated conversations are exactly what younger people of color want to discuss when considering missions work, said Barna researcher Savannah Kimberlin.

“A lot of young ethnic minorities really want to be mobilized,” said Kimberlin. “They’re hoping to have their ethnicity be part of the conversation. They want to discuss the history of missions, the good, the bad, and the ugly, if this is something they’re looking to commit to.”

Brent Burdick, a former missionary to the Philippines who now teaches missions at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, learned about Liele through Colleen Damon-Duval, an African American missiologist who does diversity and inclusion work.

She convinced him, Burdick says, that African Americans are an important part of mission work’s history—and its future. Now he believes African Americans are a “sleeping giant” with an important part to play in the proclamation of the gospel.

“They have a lot to offer to the world,” he said.

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