

Wisconsin Churches on the Eve of the Civil War by the Rev. Ramon R. Hernandez

The AMA

It's a tame name, so tame that it almost evokes a yawn when you hear it – the American Missionary Association (AMA). Yet it was conceived during a racially-charged cause celebre, and born and nurtured as the clouds of war gathered over our nation. After The Civil War, it helped educate former slaves in the South in viciously turbulent years that were punctuated by deplorable economic conditions.

Its Roots

The AMA has its roots in the Amistad incident of 1839, that captured national attention and rallied those committed to the abolition of slavery. A ship of 53 kidnapped Africans (including children) revolted off the coast of Cuba en route to slavery, and took over the Spanish ship “Amistad” (“friendship” in Spanish). After a zigzag journey up the eastern seaboard, they ran aground at the eastern tip of Long Island. Arrested by federal authorities, they were incarcerated in New Haven, Connecticut. A two-year legal struggle ensued that eventually went to the U.S. Supreme Court. They won their case and were free to return home to Africa.

During their incarceration, divinity students of the Congregational Yale University and eastern abolitionists, including three evangelical benefactors known as the Amistad Committee, looked after the Africans. Both the notoriety in the press and the legally successful outcome gave fuel to the church-oriented abolitionist cause.

Its Beginnings

Following the incident, two of the Amistad Committee members, Lewis Tappen and Simeon Jocelyn worked with other eastern evangelicals, mostly Congregationalists and “new school” Presbyterians, to form The American Missionary Association (AMA) in 1846.

At the time, there was also the American Home Missionary Society, the institutional agency supporting new and struggling Congregational and Presbyterian churches. However, the AHMS would not disqualify churches from support that counted slave owners in their membership.

Not so the AMA. It took the abolitionist message to churches throughout the American frontier, including Old Northwest (Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, Illinois, and Wisconsin). From 1846-1865, it financially supported struggling churches and pastors who were committed to the abolition of slavery.

Of course, there were churches, such as First Congregational in Ripon which were abolitionist, but not financially support by the AMA. The city of Ripon (along with Jackson, Michigan) claims to be the birthplace of the Republican Party, whose anti-slavery plank was what brought it to prominence in 1856 and gained it the presidential election of 1860 – and with that, civil war.

The Wisconsin Connection

In Wisconsin, the AMA supported almost 50 Congregational churches at various times during this period. First Church, Baraboo and First Church, Lake Mills, were supported during almost

the entire period of 1846-1865. In all, some eleven AMA-supported churches or their successors survive today. The others are Barneveld, Brodhead, Burlington, East Troy, Janesville, Mazomanie, Raymond, Rosendale, Somers, and Waupun.

These churches dealt directly with Lewis Tappen, who was treasurer of AMA, and Simeon Jocelyn, who was secretary. Correspondence by the local church's pastor or representative is probably on file at the Amistad Research Center at Tulane University in New Orleans.

The pastor in the late 1840's at Lake Mills was an 1843 Yale student, who possibly had first hand acquaintance with Amistad participants. The Rosendale church was founded in 1848 with AMA funds and from 1849-51 AMA supported its pastor Lewis Bridgman. Union Church, Waupun, in 1850 notes "assistance from abroad" a probably reference to the AMA.

Plymouth Church, Burlington, which received AMA support from 1856-1861, had strong anti-slavery activities, including a report of moving Wisconsin abolitionist Joshua Glover along the underground railroad in 1854. One of the tenets of the church during this time read: "No slaveholder or apologist for human slavery need apply for membership."

First Church, Brodhead, which received AMA support only in 1859-60, nonetheless reported in November 1859, it applied for \$200 for "the preaching of the gospel." On Christmas day, the Church recorded that its application was accepted on condition that its pastor, W. Cochrane, devotes one-sixth of his time as an agent of the AMA. The Church accepted the condition. On April 8, 1860, the Rev. Mr. Cochrane preached on the subject of missions, and \$10 was given for the work of the AMA. Three weeks later, another \$18 was given.

Epilogue

With the Emancipation Proclamation and then the end of the Civil War in April 1865, the AMA in the last third of the 19th century turned its attention to the education of former slaves. Although its financial resources were stretched to its limits, and through borrowing even beyond it filled a tremendous need of schooling at all levels.

It went on to help other disenfranchised ethnic groups in human rights, hospitals, and vocational training, as well as education. On May 1, 2000 (a Hebrew Bible jubilee year), PBS aired a documentary on the (once AMA-supported) Fish University Jubilee Singers.

In 1999, a replica of the Amistad was dedicated on the Connecticut shore, the largest contributor to the project being the United Church of Christ. In May 2000, the UCC national headquarters building in Cleveland opened its new 4,800 square-foot Amistad Chapel.

AMA exists today as an agency largely within the new Justice and Witness Ministries of the United Church of Christ, with programs in health and welfare, racial justice, liberation ministries, HIV/AIDS ministries, lesbian and gay concerns, family life and human sexuality, community empowerment, labor relations and economic justice, volunteers services, and persons with disabilities. In February 2000, it hosted a conference on rural UCC churches (40% of the UCC), followed by definitive statistical data.

And it all began when a group of slaves wanted to be free.

Amistad Resources available for loan from the Wisconsin Conference office.

Videos

Amistad – 1997 Oscar-nominated movie by director Steven Spielberg. Although Spielberg took artistic license with some facts and characterizations, he captured its stirring drama, tragedy and zeitgeist. The UCC has produced a study guide for churches using this video.

The Amistad Revolt (33 minutes) – 1995 production portrays the campaign that sparked the Abolitionist movement.

I Remember the Amistad – A resource packet with a 20 minute videotape and study guide, poster and brochure. Available from UCCR 1-800-654-5219

Bridging the Divide, Seeking Transformation: The American Missionary Association 1846-1996 – 1996 sesquicentennial video about AMA history and work today.

Books

Amistad: The Slave Uprising Aboard the Spanish Schooner by Helen Kromer, Pilgrim Press: Cleveland, 1997.

The Amistad Slave Revolt and American Abolition by Karen Zeinert, Linnet Books: North Haven, CT, 1997.

Lewis Tappen and the Evangelical War Against Slavery by Bertram Wyatt Brown, Louisiana State University: Baton Rouge and London, 1997.

Political Abolitionism in Wisconsin, 1840-1961 by Michael J. McManus, Kent State Press, Kent, OH, 1998.