

Title: *Born To Serve: The pioneering ministry of Marjorie Prentice Saunders*
Author: Marjorie Prentice Saunders – in collaboration with Barbara Nelson, Thelma McKenzie, Audre Spence and Jennie Anderson
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THE Rev Ashley Smith, a former head of the United Church who has written the foreword to this publication, describes the Rev Marjorie Saunders – later known with love and affection as 'Madge', by one and all – as "the single most important person in the Jamaicanisation of the Presbyterian Church".



Review by AW Sangster

He further notes that she will be remembered by those who know the facts of her career as:

- A pioneer in human development;
- A resource person in ecumenical and international relationships;
- An exponent of contemporary missiology or the philosophy of missionary work;
- A crusader for political and ecclesiastical decolonisation; and
- An expert in the field of human relations.

Rev Smith continues by making the point that Saunders never allowed gender to hinder what she regarded as important issues. The tendency to divide human enterprise into male and female spheres of activity was something that Madge challenged at every turn. This approach to life was to characterise the pioneering vision and activism that became her life and work.

That pioneering spirit was such that once a need was identified and assessed, and there is sufficiently strong conviction about addressing that need, then the resources will be found. And Saunders' pioneering work in founding various institutions was not generated out of large resources, but rather from the faith principle that God was able to take the widow's mite and build lasting structures out of those small initial resources. It can be said that Rev Saunders' approach to human need and community backwardness has been that of 'lighting a candle' rather than cursing the darkness.

The book has five chapters with two appendices, one with some of the tributes paid to Rev Saunders, and the other a selection of some of her sermons.

Chapter One, The Preparation, deals with the early family life in Galina, St Mary. The chapter is, however, very significant for it points to what Madge Saunders was going to do and be in later years. The chapter highlights many of the pioneering initiatives that came to distinguish Saunders.

She was sixth in a line of seven siblings and her parents were sufficiently well off to be able to have hired servants. Her father was the keeper of the wharf – the wharfinger – and manager of Kerr & Company in Port Maria which was involved in shipping bananas.

Madge's mother died quite young and some years after, her father met another woman and decided to get married again. He was

going to leave his children and live with his new wife. He did not want his children to continue living in the house where they grew up and suggested that they go and live with their aunt. All the children agreed except Madge, who refused to move from her mother's house and lived alone with a helper in the family home. She had thus saved the family home and after graduating from teachers' college returned to live in it.

At a very early age, her independent spirit was demonstrated. Even before this particular action there was another important decision that Saunders made. While the opportunity

existed for her to attend secondary school, she opted to attend the elementary (primary) school in Port Maria, in order to find out why the people were poor. Passing the first two years of the Pupil Teachers Examinations she volunteered to teach at Galina Elementary School, a six-mile walk each day.

The head teacher helped her with her third-year studies and with that hurdle over, teachers' college beckoned. But financing was still a problem. The funds she had saved were not enough. So with the help of Rev John Wint she asked her father for a loan to go to college. Her father was flabbergasted at the strange request, but readily agreed and she promised to pay back the loan from her first salary.

Bethlehem Moravian Teachers' College was next to feel her presence. In a huge break with tradition, Saunders became the first student to be made head girl in her first year and she retained that position for the entire three years of college. That appointment caused a great deal of resentment, but

Saunders was chosen because her leadership skills were so strong.

Then Saunders claims that she initiated the first non-union strike in Jamaica. This had to do with the meal arrangements. Students who sat in year groups were given preferential food on a particular occasion. The third-year students got the good meat, the second-year students the next best and the first-year students got the spoilt meat. She told her batch-mates not to eat the spoiled food. Ultimately this led to her having to meet with the principal who was told the full story. Out of this protest came the decision that the girls would sit in fraternal houses and not by year groups. This was an important breakthrough and led to greater harmony within the college. This initiative was an expression of Saunders' philosophy that: "Sometimes you have to break certain traditions and laws to bring about positive change in life."

After graduation, Saunders was assigned the position of headmistress of Hopeton, an

elementary school operated by the Moravians. In the midst of that period of service, she had to fend off the unwanted attention of the village lunatic and an amorous policeman.

When her father became ill, she returned to Port Maria to be with him and became a teacher at the Galina Elementary School.

Here again, Saunders was at her pioneering best. Many of the children came to school hungry and she started a school kitchen. She claims that she was one of the first to start school kitchens in Jamaica.

Saunders regarded teaching as a sacred profession and was always looking for ways to

make the subject more interesting or to help a child who did not seem to be doing well. A 10-year-old boy was one such, who she took under her wing and promoted. He was to later become the father of brilliant Rhodes Scholar and university professor Steven Vasciannie.

But there was a change coming as she came to a major crossroads in her life. The choice was to work with the church or the Ministry of Education. The invitation by the Presbyterian Church to be trained in Scotland as the first Jamaican full-time female worker was an exciting possibility so she gave up teaching and went to Scotland for three years. This was truly revolutionary. For not only was she the first Jamaican to be so selected, but she was going to be the first Jamaican woman to be trained in the area of ministry.

St Colm's College in Scotland was a heart-warming experience and one that opened up her eyes to racial discrimination. A student concert had a line in a skit: "If you even go to heaven you're still a nigger." It hurt her deeply, but Saunders was able to shrug this off and move on.

One other incident that speaks to her enterprising spirit is recorded in this chapter. While she was studying abroad, she learned of a plan to sell the St Andrew's Scots Kirk on Duke Street. A church that had been built with the labour of slaves and had a ministry to the area should not be sold. So activist that she was, she went to the church headquarters in Edinburgh, found the documents that supported the view that the church should not be sold and got this information to Jamaica posthaste. The information was conveyed to a meeting called to decide the fate of the church. Her action had contributed to what was an important victory.

She graduated from St Colm's with flying colours and in addition took subjects for the London University Certificate of Proficiency in Religious Studies, which she also passed with flying colours.

Chapter 2: Pioneering in Education describes her return to Jamaica. As anticipated she continued her list of firsts, as the first Deaconess and the first full-time Presbyterian female worker. Islandwide visits as well as stints in Cayman and Haiti all added to Saunders' widening experience.

But her early educational experience soon became intimately married with the work of the church. Church and school soon became pivotal strategies for the widening vision of Madge Saunders. She continued being a pioneer. Basic schools was the next area to be tackled. Mona Prep followed, then Iona Prep, Meadowbrook Prep and then Meadowbrook High. In the final chapter her additional legacies in education are listed and these are extensive indeed.

Chapters 3 and 4 are titled Missionary to England I and II. These chapters tell the story of Saunders' involvement with the Diaspora and her role in bringing understanding and better relations between people from the Caribbean and the British. In all these experiences, Saunders brought her exuberant personality and generous faith into the equations of life and the problems of relationships.

The title of this small volume is not only a tribute to one of Jamaica's finest daughters but it also reflects in a very real way the character of this servant of God who was Born to Serve. The book will be an inspiration to any young person who wants to make the best for his or her life.

A tribute to one of Jamaica's finest daughters



From Sewer

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Marjorie Prentice Saunders

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In collaboration with

Barbara Nelson Thelma McKenzie

Audre Spence Jenni R. Anderson