

# Iti Fabvssa

## The Choctaw

## Methodist Mission

The Methodist faith has been around for centuries. Many Choctaw tribal members can trace their family's faith back to early influential Choctaw Methodist ministers, both in Mississippi and in Indian Territory.

This *Iti Fabvssa* will conclude our exploration of missionaries that served the Choctaw Nation in its early formation by highlighting a brief history and Methodist Choctaw missionaries of this faith.

The Choctaws and Chickasaws were first introduced to Methodist missionaries in 1827 by the Mississippi Conference. The MC is a regional body that governs much of the life of the "connectional church" including meetings, funding, and missionary efforts, and is still in existence today. The Rev. Alexander Talley was appointed superintendent of the MC, and through him a number of the leading men of the Choctaw Nation were converted. One of these men was the Choctaw chief, Greenwood Leflore, of the Okla Falaya District. The Methodist missionary work among the Choctaw lasted 10 years until it was interrupted by the removal of the Choctaw people from their homelands, beginning with that of the Choctaw in 1830.

In anticipation of the upcoming removal, in November and December of 1830, Methodist Reverend Alexander Talley traveled with 400 Choctaw people, a school teacher, and an interpreter, to Indian Territory to make preparations (Foreman 1989: 42, Wright 1928). They secured bushels of corn and set up a blacksmith shop, in order to provide for this early Choctaw community, anticipating the arrival of more Choctaw the following year (Foreman 1989: 42, Wright 1928). It seemed like they had to start completely over, but they knew they wanted to continue the mission work for Choctaw people. Fortunately, some strong Choctaw people had been added to the church before they were removed, and these Choctaw people would continue to lead the nearly 3,000 Choctaw and Chickasaw Methodist in their faith during and after removal.

Once settled, many Native ministers were sent out to particular communities across the Choctaw Nation. This lay ministry, powered by compassion and familiar faces, grew the membership of the Choctaws by the thousands. The Methodist Church created the Indian Mission Conference (IMC) in 1844. The inaugural annual meeting was held at Riley's Chapel in Park Hill, Cherokee Nation, Indian Territory, near Tahlequah on October 22, 1844. Nearly one-fourth of the official attendees were Native. This growth continued into what would become the Oklahoma Indian Missionary Conference that Methodist members know today.

This success was in large part because of the two basic positions Native ministers served in Indian Territory: local preachers and translators. Since most missionaries were unable to speak any native language, translators were vital to spreading Christianity. Methodist missionaries would appoint native ministers to serve local congregations as their official preachers. With Choctaw people still speaking their native language, these preachers were in high demand by native congregations. John Q. Tufts, the federal government's Indian agent at Union Agency, stated in 1881 that native congregations "have no use for those in whom they have no confidence" (Smith 2012:70). Native preachers fostered trust among their congregations with services conducted in their native language and scheduled camp meetings to coincide with their community gatherings. Many congregations blossomed under this practice.

The Methodist Church sent missionaries to work alongside the native ministers to aid in their ministry and help shape them into fine ministers of the faith. Among these first Choctaw ministers was a man that went by the name of William Winans Oakchiah. Oakchiah was a full blood Choctaw who continued to preach the gospel, despite being threatened by his father that if he continued to preach, he would die by his hands. He stood up to his father, tall and proud, closed his eyes and said, "Shoot father, no forsake my Lord" (Babcock and Bryce 1935:47). This man was admired for his soft, gentle manners and thought to be warm and ardent in his piety (Goode 1864: 170-71). On one account from J.M. Steele, a missionary who traveled with Oakchiah, stated, "Never shall I forget the closing scene of our Sabbath evening service, when, after having in his own language preached in a most feeling and pathetic manner, he left the stand, and with eyes overflowed with tears, passed around, taking his congregation individually by the hand. Rarely have I seen in any human countenance so much of heaven" (Goode 1864:171). In 1831, he was admitted by trial into the Mississippi Conference, and became the first itinerant Choctaw preacher. Oakchiah served faithfully until his death in 1849.

Another Choctaw missionary who was able to capture his native audience was Willis Folsom, a mixed blood from Mississippi who came to Indian Territory in 1832. Being a part of his community, Mr. Folsom respected daily life of the

Choctaw family and incorporated Christian principles into his sermons, rather than enforce new difficult-to-understand doctrine alien to the community. His emphasis on prayer eased the transition for individuals into Christian society. It also did not require that Indian converts immediately throw off elements of their native culture once they became Christian. Native converts were less obsessed with church dogma and more concerned with Christian experience, which explains how Natives could incorporate Christianity into their own community without totally supplanting their own customs or beliefs. Mr. Folsom was able to reach many of his native people, and bring them to Christianity by just being himself and showing his love for the word.

Through the years, the Methodist faith continued to spread throughout Oklahoma. More native ministers created their own space with the larger Church communities, allowing them to grow and lead of their congregations. After heeding the calls from a collection of white and native ministers for change, the M.E. Church South created the Brewer Indian Mission in 1918. This gave native members more administrative control over the Church's work. Camp meetings became, in the words of A. Frank Smith, the presiding bishop over the Indian Mission from 1930 to 1944, "a world within a world" (Babcock and Bryce 1935). For much of the twentieth century, Methodist Indian congregations found ways to protect, cultivate, and direct their own culture within a Christian context, which eventually culminated in the creation of the Oklahoma Indian Missionary Conference in 1972.

Today the Oklahoma Indian Missionary Conference continues to thrive. The present membership is approximately 6,000 with 84 churches, several congregations being over 100 years old. The Conference has five fellowships and a Church & Community center. While OIMC is mostly comprised of Native American community members, the doors are always opened to anyone. This Iti Fabvssa, like others focusing on the early missionary efforts within the Choctaw Nation, hopes to highlight the dedication of early Choctaw people in shaping their communities to be strong, family and culture centered, and rich in faith. If you have family stories to share about early missionaries, please contact Joseph Wolf with the Historic Preservation Department at 580-924-8280 ext. 2259.



by Apryl Mock

**The Whitesand Bennington United Methodist Church in Boswell is one of the oldest churches in the Southeast Region of the Oklahoma Indian Missionary Conference circuit. The first location is just two miles south from the present site. The original location was used for worship until the new sanctuary was built by local members. The new sanctuary was dedicated by General Superintendent Dr. D.D. Etchieson on Sept. 25, 1966. According to the Oklahoma Indian Missionary Conference website, the church is still very active.**