

## SAMUEL AJAYI CROWTHER—DEC 31

While many today have never heard of him, Samuel Ajayi Crowther was often considered the most influential African Christian of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Crowther was born in Yorubaland (in modern Nigeria) and was captured (around the age of 12) during a raid on his village. He was sold to different groups of slavers a total of six times over a two-year period (1820-1822) before finally ending up on a Portuguese slave ship, which was intercepted by the British navy. The British freed those enslaved by the Portuguese as part of their ongoing anti-slavery campaign.

His village no longer existing, Crowther settled in an English colony along the coast, where he converted to Christianity and took up an intense period of academic study (he was reading the Bible in English within six months). His impressive intellect was noticed, and the Church Missionary Society arranged for him to travel to England where he could develop his skills as a missionary, educator, and linguist. Later in life he received a doctoral degree from Oxford University. Upon his return to Africa, he was reunited with his mother and sisters, whom he hadn't seen in 24 years.

Crowther was ordained in 1843 and spent the rest of his life as a missionary, translator, and advocate for the African church. He produced the first grammar of the Yoruba language, translated the Book of Common Prayer into Yoruba, and worked on a translation of the Bible into Yoruba (and eventually, several other African languages as well). His missionary work was incredibly successful in spreading Christianity throughout what is today the nation of Nigeria—one of the largest and most influential churches in the Anglican world. He was made Bishop of the Niger in 1864.

The last decades of Crowther's life were afflicted by white English missionaries attempting to undermine his work and humiliate him personally. The great success of the African-led Niger mission was seen as problematic by racist churchmen in England. Efforts were made to bring the Niger church firmly under white control. Crowther did his best to resist these efforts, continuing to believe that the African church was best led by Africans. While he did not live to see it, Crowther established the foundations (including the work of finding uniquely *African* ways of framing Christian theology) which later generations of African leaders would use when they arose to take full leadership of the church.

Today, in terms of global statistics, the average Anglican is an African woman.

Crowther died (at the age of 82) in Lagos on Dec 31, 1891.