

Dear Friend

Today is the Commemoration of Mary Slessor, a remarkable Scottish missionary. Born to a poor family in Aberdeen in 1848, Mary Slessor came to faith as a teenager and engaged in outreach work amongst the deprived youth of Dundee. But she was already developing an interest in overseas mission work, still an unusual thing for a single woman in the mid nineteenth century. Like David Livingstone before her, Mary was born a Scots Presbyterian and spent her early life from the age of eleven working in the mills (in her case the linen mills of Dundee) for twelve hours a day, six days a week while at the same time studying in order to equip herself for mission work.

In 1876 she joined the Scots United Presbyterian mission, which had been founded by Hope Waddell at Calabar on the Niger Delta in West Africa. Able and independent, Mary became fluent in the local languages and showed both a humility and an understanding of Africans unusual in European missionaries of that generation. Instead of living in a European mission compound at a safe distance from the 'natives', Mary lived with her people. She gathered around her a household of outcast women and she adopted unwanted children, especially twins, who would otherwise be put to death according to the local superstitious practice. She also opposed other local practices, such as trial by ordeal, witchcraft and human sacrifice, eventually being successful in abolishing them altogether.

Unlike most missionaries of the nineteenth-century classical missionary societies, Mary adapted thoroughly to the culture of the people with whom she worked, eventually settling first with the Okoyong and later the Ibo people, in both cases doing much to assist their development. She encouraged the indigenous peoples with whom she worked to engage in trade, as much for its civilizing effects as for the financial benefits.

Mary earned the respect of both local leaders and the British colonial administration. She was often called upon to arbitrate in tribal disputes and in 1892 she was appointed as the British vice-consul – an unusual role for a missionary and a unique one for a woman. She was known as 'Ma Slessor' to her people, and became famous as 'the white queen of Calabar' to the British public, who read glamourized accounts of her exploits in books and magazines. Mary remained in Africa to the end of her life and died at Itu on 13th January 1915.

Extract from *Saints on Earth: A biographical companion to Common Worship* by John H Darch and Stuart K Burns

What an example of selfless love Mary has left for us.

Thank you to those who have been so supportive over the issue of closing the church for public worship. I felt that with the current number of cases locally, the risk of passing on the virus was too great. If you would like to go into church for private prayer, please do get in touch and we will make arrangements for you.

All of us are trying to come to terms with the loss of Sue Collins, who died last week and who did so much for St Matthew's. Her life was very much centred on the church. Given the current circumstances we have decided that we will prerecord the service in church and broadcast it on YouTube at the same time. The service will be on Tuesday 19th January at 10.45am.

Please keep Sue's family in your prayers, her mother Eve, her son Paul and his wife Sian, and their children Dulcie and Roman, as well of course as dear Lesley.

With much love, as well as condolences and prayers at this sad time for us all

Simon