

THAT HANDFUL OF WOMEN

by

Barbara E. Campbell

The Woman's Foreign Missionary Society (WFMS) was the earliest of the several missionary societies that now comprise United Methodist Women, and it existed as a separate society from 1869- to 1939. When it celebrated its 70th anniversary, it paid tribute to 1,559 missionaries sent out during seven decades to work on four continents and in 17 nations. The society had established 20 hospitals and 1,114 schools with 3,403 trained national teachers and over 68,000 students.

But WFMS did not spring full-blown in a vacuum. It was a rainy, stormy day on March 23, 1869 when "a handful of women" came together at the Tremont Street Church in Boston¹ to form the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church. Notices of the meeting had been sent to 28 Methodist churches of Boston and vicinity but only eight women actually came. The church was locked when the earliest arrived but, once inside the church, the women prayed and listened to stories told by missionary wives recently returned from India of the "shut-in women of the Zenanas, and the call of the Master to Christian women."²

They also heard of the recent organization of the Congregational women; so they "covenanted together and with God" and a "resolution to organize was taken."² In quick succession they appointed a committee on nomination to select officers, accepted the list presented, sang the Doxology, and set the following Tuesday as the next meeting date. Notices for a meeting on March 30 were sent out; and although on that day there was another "torrential rain." 26 women were present. In the intervening week much work had been done on a draft constitution which was presented and adopted "by and for the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church."² Mrs. Osman C. Baker was named the first president.

At the Uniting Conference (1939), which created The Methodist Church, the program and responsibilities of the WFMS were merged with those of five other women's organizations to form the Woman's Society of Christian Service and the Wesleyan Service Guild. The growth and work of the WFMS is extensively documented through official records, bound volumes of its magazines and books of history. But these highlights of the society's history convey the dynamic momentum of its development.

Beginnings in India

The Methodist Mission in India was established in 1856 when William and Clementina Butler settled in Bareilly. Other missionary couples soon followed, (including the Rev. and Mrs. Edwin Parker and the Rev. James Thoburn), and by 1864 the India Mission Conference was organized. As early as 1858 the Butlers requested and received permission to establish churches. As the men worked at that, "the (missionary) wives, unnamed and unconsidered in the conference, sought to reach the women who fled from the [male] missionary."³ One wife opened a "veranda school" and another a "day school" in her home, and "quietly experimenting for a decade, [they] saw the way to the evangelization of India through her helpless, degraded, unhappy women."³ The men likewise began to recognize that single women missionaries were needed to work with Indian women.

In 1864, the Butlers returned to Massachusetts where Dr. Butler accepted a pastorate. Although deeply engaged in church work and a busy mother of five children, Mrs. Butler's interests in the women of India remained high. She took part in unsuccessful efforts to organize a (Boston unit of the Woman's Union Missionary Society. The following year (1868) she met with the Congregational women of Park Street Church in Boston, and offered prayer on the occasion of the organization of their Woman's Board of Missions. Her desire to have such a group for Methodist women grew stronger. In March, 1869, the Parkers returned home after nine years in India. Enroute to Boston Mrs. Parker addressed a small group of women in Brooklyn, "pleading the cause of Indian womanhood and the obligation of Christian women."⁴ She urged the organization of a woman's society. "They were responsive to the appeal, but decided that the season was inauspicious."⁴

Shortly thereafter when the Parkers visited the Butlers, Dr. Butler preached a missionary sermon on the "burdens which Hinduism and Mohammedanism place on the women of the Orient."⁵ Mrs. Flanders, a member of Tremont Church who was present that morning, visited with Mrs. Parker and Mrs. Butler at the parsonage following the service. Their discussion centered on Indian women and the possibilities of organizing Methodist women.

Mrs. Flanders agreed to bring the subject before the meeting of the Tremont Church Ladies' Benevolent Society two days later. Although the Society members felt they already had too much to do, they invited Mrs. Parker and Mrs. Butler to address a special meeting on March 23. Notices were sent to the 28 church and a good attendance was expected. Many who had planned to attend gave up on account of the weather. It was later reported, "when they heard what a wonderful thing had been done they forever regretted their lack of courage."⁶

The new constitution clearly set forth the intent of the Society, "For the purpose of engaging and uniting the efforts of the women of the Church in sending out and supporting female missionaries, native Christian teachers and Bible women in foreign lands."² Dues were set at one dollar per year "that membership might be within the means of every woman in the church."² "Two cents a week and a prayer"⁷ became the standard, although provision was made for larger gifts.

Although pastors and church leaders in the Boston area supported the idea of the woman's missionary society, the executives of the General Missionary Society of the church did not. They feared the success of the women would interfere with receipts of the Parent Board, and they doubted the ability of the women to get the job done. Dr. John P. Durbin, the secretary of the General Missionary Society, proposed, "you raise the money and we will administer."⁸ Bishop Edward Ames objected to the Society, "As it generally takes three-fourths of the funds to pay expenses of a ladies' organization."⁹

The appointment of the first missionary was the women's preeminent order of business in their first "annual" meeting in May, 1869. Three years earlier James Thoburn, in India had written his sister Isabella expressing his conviction that the only way to break down the barrier to the gospel was to bring girls into a central boarding school where they could be taught. He inquired of her interest in assuming this work, to which she replies, "The brethren were by no means sure they wished single females added to the mission."³ When Miss Thoburn did apply to the Parent Board her application was referred to the new Woman's Society.

The timing of her application just as the Society was being organized seemed providential. Some members counseled prudence but exhibiting great faith, the women voted to send two missionaries to India as soon as possible—Isabella Thoburn, and a “medical lady.” By September Dr. Clara Swain had received her degree from Woman’s Medical College in Philadelphia and agreed to serve with the WFMS. “On November 2, 1869, Bedford Street Church, New York, was crowded to the doors with a sympathetic audience to see this strange sight, two single ladies about to sail the ocean to a new and untried task, with no pledge of support save that handful of women!”¹⁰

Need for Periodical

The women had quickly decided there was need for a periodical to publicize the work of the Society. They recognized that such a venture was costly, and some “doubted whether a woman could be a success as an editor.”⁷ Mr. Flanders (husband of one of the founders) provided a reserve fund of \$500; and Mrs. William F. Warren agreed to become the editor. *The Heathen Woman’s Friend* began publication in June, 1869. (The name was changed to *Woman’s Missionary Friend* in 1896). The editor was cautioned, “People want information, but they want information on fire.”⁷ She must have heeded the injunction for subscriptions reached 3000 rapidly.

In just eight months a Society had been formally constituted, two missionaries recruited and sent to India, and a missionary magazine launched. The women knew the growing missionary interests of women must be organized into programs of prayer, study and giving to support the work they had undertaken. And if single women missionaries were they key to reaching women in India, what of other countries?

Upon arrival in India, Isabella Thoburn opened a school for girls in Lucknow and medical work was started by Clara Swain in Bareilly. The orphanage started earlier by the Butlers was taken over by Fannie Sparks, the third missionary of the WFMS. Soon the first Zenana work was begun. In 1871 work was started in China: boarding schools, village day schools, followed shortly by medical work undertaken by the first woman doctors, Lucy Hoag and Lucinda M. Combs. As work in India and China continued to expand, new work was undertaken in Mexico, South America, Japan and Bulgaria (1874); Italy (1877); Africa (1879); Malaysia (1887); Korea (1888); and Philippines in 1903.¹¹

From its beginnings in 1869, the Society at home expanded across the U.S. and developed program and structures at local, district, conference and branch levels. The first German Society was organized in 1872, and in 1885 the first issue of *Heiden Frauen Freund (Heathen Woman’s Friend)* was published.

The national structure was an executive committee composed of the corresponding secretary and two other representatives of each branch. The group had central authority in matters of administration of missionary personnel and projects, budget and finances, and the development of plans for the societies. Initially leadership was rotated with the president and secretary elected for each annual session, often chosen from the members of the entertaining branch.

As the organization grew, leaflets and study materials were printed; Thank Offerings and special observances initiated; and missionary societies for children and youth organized.

Securing financial support for the missionaries and their work was paramount. The Society reported its income in its first full year (1870) as \$4,546.86, and the following year as \$22,397.99. Income and program expanded steadily, and by 1881 income exceeded \$100,000, and doubled to \$200,000 by 1888.¹¹

The full story of the WFMS cannot be told in this brief space. In 1939, the Society simultaneously planned for its 70th Anniversary celebrations and its movement into new organizational forms in The Methodist Church. Leaders summarized the life and work of the WFMS in this manner:

“In its last full year the total membership of the Women’s Foreign Missionary Society was 347,245. One thousand, five hundred and fifty-nine (1,559) missionaries had been sent out during the seven decades, to work on four continents, and in 17 nations. The Society owned property valued, in grounds, buildings and furnishings, at \$8,719, 460.35. It had given through the years a total of over \$60 million. At the time of unification, 292 missionaries were on the field. There were 1,114 schools with 3,403 trained national teachers, and 68,191 students, as well as 20 hospitals and dispensaries and other types of work. An International Department had been launched in 1929 which by 1935 had 26 national units around the world. On October 26, 1939, at the 70th anniversary, this international organization became officially, by the formal signing of a constitution, the World Federation of Methodist Women, with 28 national units.”¹²

Women, motivated by the gospel, gave their time, skill and resources to the work of this Society. In so doing, they set in motion an organization whose world-wide accomplishments cannot be measured. The impact of those efforts is still felt today.

¹See February, 1983 *Response* for article about Tremont Church.

²*Valorous Ventures, A Record of Sixty and Six Years of the Woman’s Foreign Missionary Society*, by Mary Isham, 1936, pages 13-14. The Zenanas were women from India’s lower classes secluded from all public life.

³*Valorous Ventures*, page 11.

⁴*Valorous Ventures*, page 12.

⁵*Two Empires and the Kingdom*, Clementina Butler, 1929, page 104.

⁶*Two Empires and the Kingdom*, page 107.

⁷*Two Empires and the Kingdom*, page 107.

⁸*Valorous Ventures*, page 16.

⁹*Two Empires and the Kingdom*, page 116.

¹⁰*Valorous Ventures*, page 20.

¹¹*49th Annual Report of WFMS, 1918.*

¹²*Valorous Ventures, Second Supplement, 1939-40*, Elizabeth Lee, 1964.

