CREATING A SPHERE FOR WOMEN IN THE CHURCH: HOW CONSEQUENTIAL AN ACCOMMODATION?

by Rosemary Skinner Keller

The "woman issue," in a multiplicity of forms, was the most controversial question confronting the General Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church from 1869 until shortly after the turn-of-the-century. The action taken by 399 male delegates, 248 of whom were ordained ministers and 151 of whom were laymen, who met in Pike's Opera House, Cincinnati, for the 1880 Convention was symbolic of a trend extending over almost forty years. The report of relevant legislation stated simply:

An episcopal ruling that the Discipline provides neither for the ordaining nor licensing of women as local preachers was approved; but it was ordered that the masculine pronouns "he," "his," and "him," wherever they occur in the Discipline, shall not be construed as excluding women from the office of Sunday-school superintendent, class leader, or steward.1

The decision of the 1880 Conference defined, in large measure, the status and role of women in the heritage of the United Methodist Church until the mid-twentieth century. First, by denying ordination to women and revoking their rights to local preachers' licenses, the church prohibited women from entering fields of leadership and service in which they could work as colleagues, sharing governing power and clerical functions, with men. Second, by sanctioning the service of women as Sunday School superintendents and volunteer workers, the Conference of 1880 determined that females would have an essential, though subordinate, role as "helpers" of men in positions of authority. Finally the delegates tangled, for the first time, with the "language" issue as it related to women in the church. Ironically, because the church could not function as a voluntary organization without women assuming a variety of service tasks, it disregarded the significance of the male gender when the daily needs of the institution were at stake. When need be, "he," "his," and "him," could apply to women, as well as men.

In the late nineteenth century, another development was taking place which was equally consequential in determining the pattern of female leadership within the United Methodist tradition. The major

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1Lewis Curts, editor, The General Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church from 1792 to 1896 (Cincinnati: Curts & Jennings, 1900), p. 201.
female service organizations of the denomination, notably the Women's Foreign Missionary Society and the Women's Home Missionary Society, were being formed and given official sanction and support by the same General Conferences which denied women the right to preach and to be ordained, as well as to serve as lay delegates in the church's governing councils. These organizations, the first to send single women missionaries throughout the world and deaconesses into the inner-city slums of burgeoning cities in the late nineteenth century, were forerunners of the present United Methodist Women and parallel organizations in other denominations.

By the turn-of-the-century, the leadership and service of women in the Methodist Episcopal Church was simultaneously being constricted and expanded. The legacy from these conflicting trends is complex. Women's activities were channeled into a sphere separate from men's which precluded the possibility that females could share decision-making authority and clerical rights with males. However, it also resulted in the development of powerful women's organizations, originally designed to be autonomous and to draw women of the church together in bonds of sisterhood, which have trained women for broadening positions of leadership both within and outside of the church and have enabled the church to function as a voluntary organization.

This heritage is not limited to the United Methodist tradition. Restriction of women's function to separate spheres determined the pattern of women's leadership and participation in all mainline Protestant traditions of America, including the Episcopal, Presbyterian, Baptist, Lutheran, and United Church of Christ denominations.

One essential approach to recovering the history of women is to discover and interpret clearly defined movements for freedom and equality — suffrage, education, property, employment and other concerns within secular society and ordination and laity rights in the church. A second focus is equally essential: to discover the variety of functions females have performed and to analyze the subtle changes, constriction and expansion of roles, which also have affected the evolution of women's position in society today.

Using the Methodist Episcopal Church as a case study for beginning to analyze the patterns of women's leadership in the church, this paper will combine these two approaches. It will focus on two movements occurring simultaneously which resulted in the creation of a sphere for women in the church: the denial to women of the opportunity to lead and work with men on a basis of collegiality and the founding of the first national women's organization of the denomination, the Women's Foreign Missionary Society. The W.F.M.S. was an accommodation to the system, the only way possible for women to work within the
denomination and at the same time to develop their vision and use their talents on behalf of the church. The underlying question of the paper is whether the significance of a separate sphere for women was more to contain and isolate women’s activity or whether its more important aim and consequence was to expand their function and even to liberate them from the constrictions of the church in the late nineteenth century.

A sphere for women in the church resulted both from the denial to women of equal clergy and lay rights with men and from the initiative which women took to create their own organizations and to maintain authority in their carefully carved out domain. Though the struggle for women’s rights in the church has centered on ordination in the mid-twentieth century, and was gained in the United Methodist tradition only in 1956, it was not the center of controversy in the late nineteenth century. A sprinkling of women were local preachers in the Methodist Episcopal Church after the highly effective evangelist, Margaret Van Cott, had gained the right in 1869. No woman threatened male domination of clergy rights until the late 1870s, however, when Anna Howard Shaw and Anna Oliver sought to be ordained by the New England Conference. Support for preaching and clerical roles for women was not great enough, however, to arouse much opposition to the strong will of the majority which easily revoked preachers’ licenses and denied ordination to females at the 1880 Convention.

There was a recurring bone of contention, however. By the 1880s, vigorous support had developed for voting rights for women at the General Conference, which met every four years, and at Annual Conferences, which covered regional or state areas. The issue was whether females could be elected lay delegates to these governing conventions of the denomination. Laity in the Methodist Episcopal Church were usually referred to as “laymen.” The “issue” took visible and personal form when four duly elected female delegates from the Rock River (Illinois), Nebraska, Minnesota, and Kansas Conferences sought to claim seats as lay persons at the 1888 Convention. The Rock River representative was Miss Frances E. Willard, founder of the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union and an ardent advocate of women’s suffrage. Seventeen other women had been elected by their respective conferences, also, as first or second reserve delegates. 2

Minutes stated that “much time was given to the discussion of the ‘woman question’.” Debate was intense, contention being so strong that the delegates referred the decision to the membership of the entire church. The tally of votes, reported at the next quadrennial conference in 1892, indicated that 235,668 members of individual churches voted for the eligibility of women and 163,843 against, while 5,634 ministers were in

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1Ibid., pp. 209-211; Elaine Magalis, Conduct Becoming to a Woman (Women’s Division, Board of Global Ministries, United Methodist Church), p. 119.
favor of women delegates and 4,717 against. Though a plurality of the membership and ministers affirmed the change, the necessary majority in favor of admission of females had not been attained. A ruling by the Judicial Council was designed to clarify the meaning of the vote: "the intent of the lawmakers in using the words 'lay delegates,' 'laymen,' and 'members of the Church in full connection,' in paragraphs 55 to 63 inclusive, in the Discipline, was not to apply them to both sexes, but to men only."

The dissention was not a quibble over words, however, but of who should hold governing authority and decision-making power in the major Protestant denomination. Once again, the determination was left to the membership and ministers of the entire church. When four more women were elected delegates to the 1896 Conference, one lay representative, deeply fearful of change, alleged that "to seat the claimants would tend to destroy all respect for the Constitution of the Church." Conference members, wearied of the challenge which would not go away, finally agreed that they could not agree, and passed the "compromise" plan that "no formal decision of the question of eligibility be made at this time." Lewis Curtis, editor of the Conference Journal, made the significant commentary on the import of the 1896 decision: "Compromises may sometimes be useful as peacemakers, but more often they end in making more confusion." The lack of clarity and indecisiveness characterized the attitude of the conference until 1906 when the so-called "language" issue was resolved and women became recognized officially as lay persons in the Methodist Episcopal Church.

Failure to grant lay and clergy rights to women could have resulted in greater subordination of women and relegation of females to increasingly menial tasks always directed by men. At the same time the General Conferences were constricting women's role, however, women of prominence and capability recognized that opportunities had to be developed for leadership and service of their sex in the church. They consciously created a sphere for their sex by founding women's organizations of service to the church and maintaining their authority within the carefully carved out domain. The Women's Foreign Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church was formed in 1869, the year in which Margaret Van Cott received the first local preachers' license granted to a woman by the denomination. Before the society was one year old, it had sent two missionaries to India, Isabelle Thoburn, first single-woman missionary of the Methodist Episcopal Church, and Clara Swain, also a single-woman and the first female medical missionary from the United States ever to go to the Orient. The

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*Curts, General Conferences, pp. 214, 219.
*Ibid., p. 223.
*Ibid., p. 351.
next year, the Woman’s Foreign Missionary Society sent female workers to China and began to develop a broadly based world missionary program. Eleven years later, in 1880, a complementary organization, the Women’s Home Missionary Society was formed to concentrate women’s efforts on mission priorities within the United States. Five years later, Lucy Rider Meyer founded the Chicago Training School for women missionaries and almost immediately originated the deaconess order, one of the most significant forms of home missionary work in the denomination’s history. As prior conferences had sanctioned the Women’s Foreign and Home Missionary Societies, the General Conference of 1888 commended the Training School for the place which it had created for women’s work in the church.

A close look at the formation and early development of the Women’s Foreign Missionary Society suggests the far-reaching vision of early missionary society leaders and missionaries and points to the significance of a separate sphere for women in expanding their role in the church. Founded in March 1869 by six women who gathered at Tremont Street Church in Boston on a stormy day, the society began editing its monthly publication, *The Heathen Woman’s Friend*, two months later. Directed to all women in the denomination, it was begun as an eight-page publication and in three years had doubled in size. The lead article of the first issue stated concisely and persuasively the purpose of the W.F.M.S.:

“An earnest desire to develop among the ladies of our Church greater interest and activity in our Missions, together with the firm conviction that the pressing needs of our Foreign Missions demand our immediate attention.” Without “the great want experienced by our Eastern Missionaries, of Christian women to labor among the women of those heathen lands,” there would have been no objective purpose in creating the society. The founders were honest in forthrightly admitting, however, that “apart from all considerations of duty to others, it will be profitable to ourselves to unite together in such associations as are contemplated by this Society.”

The W.F.M.S. was created to liberate women in non-Christian lands from the bondage and insubordination to which custom and religion had subjected them and to provide outlets for the energy, ability, and leadership of women in missionary societies, because such avenues were closed to them in existing structures of the church. Christianity was the faith that promised true womanhood to them and the W.F.M.S. was designed to advance the cause of women, as well as to meet the needs of the church.

There had been antecedent missionary societies in which Methodist Episcopal women had participated, such as the Female Missionary Society, founded in 1819, and the Ladies’ China Missionary Society of Baltimore organized in 1847. Both were auxiliaries to the General

*The Heathen Woman’s Friend, May 1869, pp. 1, 2.*
Missionary and Bible Society of the denomination, not autonomous women’s societies, and both had disbanded several years before the W.F.M.S. was formed. One further antecedent, the Woman’s Union Missionary Society, had been organized in 1860 by women of six denominations. Before the end of the decade, however, some members felt missionary societies of separate denominations could better address the needs. By 1868 and 1869, the Congregationalists and Methodists had withdrawn to form their own organizations and others followed shortly thereafter. When the Women’s Foreign Missionary Society was formed, Mrs. Jennie Fowler Willing, whose position as Corresponding Secretary of the West made her the key leader in the mid-western states, could urge women to join the society which opened for them a new “avenue of work, that they may think, and plan, and talk, and write, to increase the enthusiasm of the Church, for the salvation of all people everywhere.”

The great demand, which called the society into existence, was the support of female missionaries abroad. An evangelistic thrust was at the heart of the missionary movement and many missionaries and society leaders stressed that native women must be reached — converted to Christianity and educated — in order to evangelize India and China, the first countries to which the Methodist Episcopal Church sent foreign missionaries. “We know how inestimable is the value, and how incalculable the influence of a pure Christian home;” wrote the editor in the initial appeal of The Heathen Woman’s Friend, “and if the influences of such homes are so indispensable in a Christian land, what must be their importance among a people, the depth of whose degradation is... altogether beyond our realization?” The woman’s influence at home held the key to salvation of all India and China. A steady stream of articles presented this goal to missionary society members to gain their support and identification with the cause and with native women. The Church need not worry about the conversion of heathen men if it could convert the women. Equally crucial was the influence of the Christian mother over her sons and daughters. The native woman must be taught to order her household and to give her children Christian training. For the first years of their lives were decisive in their development.

Because women of India and China were secluded in their homes, they could not be reached by male missionaries. Only female missionaries, to be sent out through the contributions of thousands of members of the Women’s Foreign Missionary Society could release the

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7Frances J. Baker, The Story of the Woman’s Foreign Missionary Society (Cincinnati: Curtis & Jennings, 1898), pp. 9-14; Mary Isham, Valorous Ventures: A Record of Sixty and Six Years of the Woman’s Foreign Missionary Society, Methodist Episcopal Church (Boston: Methodist Episcopal Church, 1936), pp. 7-9.

8Heathen Woman’s Friend, July 1869, pp. 12, 13.

9Ibid., May 1869, p. 1.
300,000,000 women enslaved in India, wrote the Methodist missionary to India, Rev. T. J. Scott. Isolated in their homes, they were more superstitious than men and the main support of idolatry. Once enlightened by Christianity, however, the case was reversed, and women were more zealous than men in accepting the Gospel. Within the last ten years, native opinion had turned strongly in favor of female education, missionaries contended. Now 30,000 pupils were being taught in seven hundred mission schools for girls, one for every 3,000 women. The largest numbers of these women were being reached by the five hundred Roman Catholic nuns ministering in the heathen land. The prominent presence of many Catholic sisters confronted the Methodists with a sharp challenge: "Are the women of the Roman Catholic Church to show more zeal, more energy, more self-sacrificing devotedness to the cause of Christ, than the true followers of the Lord Jesus?"10

If one emphasis in uplifting heathen women was the evangelization of whole dark continents, missionaries and society leaders also wrote of "The Great Motive" as the education of native women for their own sake. Christianity was the friend of women, wrote Rev. Scott of the India Mission Conference. Long-held customs of Hinduism and Mohammedanism assumed their inferiority and subservience. Where Christianity had not reached women, they were ignorant, degraded, and enslaved. These missionaries contended, not only that women existed for the sake of advancing Christianity, but that Christ came to save the whole person. The "foundation principle," of the faith, wrote Mrs. E. E. Baldwin, Methodist Episcopal missionary to China, was "the command to give the gospel to every creature." To bring Christ to Indian women meant that they must be given social and mental elevation as well as religious enlightenment.11

The education provided Indian girls who attended the orphanage sponsored by the Methodist Episcopal Church at Bareilly indicates that missionaries were genuinely concerned about the cultural and intellectual development of the natives, as well as gaining their religious conversion. In supporting the native children, branches of the W.F.M.S. changed their Indian names to English. The little Indian girls adopted by the New England Branch, for instance, were give names such as Susan Hamilton, Hester Poole, Elizabeth Monroe, and Harriet Richardson, after members of their own societies and their relatives. To automatically assume that education of these young women meant Americanization of them, may be too hasty a response. Isabelle Thoburn, the Women's Foreign Missionary Society's first single woman missionary, describes an eighteen year old girl who came to the orphanage bringing her baby of three months, after

10Ibid., p. 4; July 1869, pp. 10, 11; Sept. 1869, p. 28; Feb. 1871, p. 86; March 1871, p. 98; June 1871, pp. 134, 139; Isham, Valorous Ventures, pp. 11, 12.
11Heathen Woman's Friend, July 1869, p. 1; August 1869, p. 18; June 1871, p. 136.
they had been abandoned by her husband. The young woman wanted to learn English, but the missionaries persuaded her that she must first become fluent in reading and writing her native tongue. Girls were taught to read secular books, as well as the New Testament, in Urdu and Hindu, and were instructed in the geography and history of India. Descriptions of individual student’s progress indicates that their course of study, including arithmetic, cooking, sewing, and needlework was well-rounded.  

Primarily, the missionaries sought to train the young women to go back to the cities and villages and to aid their native sisters. Many of the girls were members of medical classes taught by Dr. Clara Swain, first woman medical missionary from the United States to the Orient, and other male missionaries. They were educated to be doctors and nurses of practical medicine and some continued in more advanced work upon graduation. Others were hired to assist the missionaries as Bible readers to women in the zenans, apartments containing the harems of upperclass Hindu men. The goal for students could be described best in the progress of Rebecca Pettis. She was one of the best scholars in the school and a very good teacher herself. After graduation, she married a young native Christian man and “went at once with her husband to Nainee Tal, where they both joined Dr. Humphrey’s medical class. She is a very useful woman, well fitted in every way to work among the women of this country.”

Beyond their vision of evangelizing and educating native women in the mission field, the early missionary society leaders were equally clear in the goals they sought for their society and for women in the Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States. Their effort to create an autonomous women’s organization and to manage their own affairs was a sensitive issue from the beginning. Even before the formation of the society, its leaders were urged by Dr. John P. Durbin, secretary of the General Missionary Society, or “Parent Board,” to develop their society in light of these restrictions: “1) To raise funds for a particular portion of our mission work in India, perhaps also in China; 2) Leave the administration of the work to the Board at home and the missions on the field.” Durbin wanted the new women’s organization to be an auxiliary of the General Missionary Society. The women, however, carefully delineated their understanding of themselves as collaborators with the General Board and pastors and of the W.F.M.S. as an autonomous agency committed to harmonious relations with the General Missionary Society, “seeking its counsel and approval in all its work.”

One fear which the General Board had was that the Women’s Society would encroach on potential missionary giving. Describing themselves as

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12Ibid.
13Ibid., March 1871, p. 97; April 1871, pp. 112-114; May 1871, pp. 123-125.
14Ibid., May 1869, pp. 3, 4.
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an educational arm for the entire church, the women contended that they would expand missionary donations for the entire church "by increasing the missionary intelligence and enthusiasm of the people." Only once did the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, at the 1876 convention, recommend a closer financial union of the Women’s Society and the Parent Board. The women’s response was firm and clear: "We regard closer financial union as prejudicial to our interests, in short, a change would be disastrous." Maintaining the delicate balance as a coordinate but not subordinate agency, the W.F.M.S. gained commendation of the General Conference and increased freedom in its work. By the 1890s, its members were taking collections for the women’s missionary program in regular church services.

In consciously creating a sphere for women’s work, the missionary society leaders also hoped to give women of the church, who had abilities and energy which was unrecognized and unused, an expanded purpose for their lives. By developing a sense of responsibility for their sisters on the other side of the world, women could be caught up in a task of immense proportions, ordained by Christ, which only they, as women whose lives were also restricted and limited to the home, could value as of consuming significance for their lives. The leaders sought to present the vision of a task worth giving oneself for by creating empathy for their degraded and neglected sisters. The cause was presented graphically in an article entitled: "Facts for Christian Women:"

Suppose that these millions of degraded women were to rise up and pass in review before us, their Christian sisters, marching so that we could count sixty persons each minute. They pass by us at this rate all the day for twelve long hours, and we find that 43,000 have passed us... Days grow to months, and months to years, still the procession moves on. She who started as a pretty, innocent little girl, has grown to womanhood, yet with all that is lovely, noble, and pure in her nature crushed out in her growth. For twenty long years we must stand and count ere we number the last of this sorrowful procession of 300,000,000 heathen women, whom Satan hath bound in such galling chains "lo, these many years."

Not only did a conception of these throngs of women have to be dramatically pictured, but the burden for their care had to be placed, in an equally intense manner, on the Methodist Episcopal women. "It is indeed a fearful sight to see these millions hastening to destruction," the article continued, "but it is almost as melancholy a sight to see Christian women quietly, carelessly sleeping the while, instead of putting forth the most strenuous efforts to save them."

Providing an enlarged purpose for their members’ lives, was closely tied to creating bonds of sisterhood among the women of the church in

15Ibid., Sept. 1869, pp. 29, 30, 31.
16Isham, Valorous Ventures, pp. 32, 33.
17Heathen Woman’s Friend, Dec. 1869, pp. 52, 53.
18Ibid., May 1869, p. 7; Nov. 1869, p. 45.
this country and with native women in the mission field. "Dear Sisters! shall we not recognize, in this emergency, God's voice as speaking to us—for who can so well do this work as we?" questioned the executive board in the initial appeal of *The Heathen Woman's Friend*. "Does it not seem as though the responsibility were thus laid directly upon us? And shall we shrink from bearing it?"19

Jennie Fowler Willing, Corresponding Secretary of the West Division of the W.F.M.S., articulated this theme of sisterhood most persuasively. In articles entitled "Under Bonds to Help Heathen Women," and "Put Yourself in Her Place," Willing challenged members: "If all men are brothers, all women are sisters." While American women had the opportunity for education, females of eastern cultures cowered in the gloom of paganism. "We have it in our power to rescue thousands of our Pagan sisters" and, by bringing Christianity to them, to insure a better civilization. 20

The bond of sisterhood, which Willing and her colleagues sought to instill in Missionary Society members, was an understanding of themselves as missionaries, just as those women whom they sent abroad by the contributions of their pennies and dollars. As young ladies, so nobly qualified to be "Protestant Sisters of the Cross" were waiting to be "sent" directly to their heathen sisters, all women of the church had to be aroused to organize societies, raise funds, and sponsor orphans in India and China: "Let every lady, who feels that she would be a missionary, go to work at home, and she may, by every dollar raised, teach her heathen sisters."21

The Missionary Society urged that a branch be created in every church with a female membership large enough to sustain it. Detailed directions of "How We Formed Our Auxiliary" were given in *The Heathen Woman's Friend*, resulting in the early success of 130 branches after one year of the society's existence. The whole scheme of fund raising, "based upon a constant and systematic gleaning of small sums," was designed both to raise money for mission projects and to insure that "all women, even the most humble, could have a share in the work." Membership fees in the W.F.M.S. amounted to one dollar per year, attained by "every Christian woman laying aside two cents a week." Similarly, the price of "*The Friend*" was only thirty cents per year, again designed to "be within the reach of all."22

Further, the pages of *The Heathen Woman's Friend* were an avenue for companionship and support of sisters for each other. Letters to the

19Ibid., May 1869, p. 1.
20Ibid., Aug. 1869, p. 20; Sept. 1869, pp. 25, 26; Oct. 1869, p. 36; Nov. 1869, p. 46; Jan. 1871, pp. 72, 79.
editor were a means of sharing “most welcome words of encouragement from distant cities and States.” One sister wrote from Indiana: “I cannot tell you how delighted I was to hear of the existence of such a Society.” From another state, a woman wrote of her long-held desires and prayers for such an organization and the eagerness of three members of her branch to enter foreign mission service. A further letter, described as “a cheering note from Illinois,” symbolized the way in which the Missionary Society helped to bridge the loneliness and isolation which women in far-flung rural areas and small towns felt and to give them a unified purpose for their lives:

Dear Madam: — A copy of “The Heathen Woman’s Friend” has reached me here in my prairie home, and wishing to help forward the work in so good a cause, I here enclose to the “Woman’s Foreign Missionary Society” ten dollars ($10.00), with the prayer that it may help some poor, benighted sister to know the truth as it is in Christ Jesus, our Saviour. I am but a poor music teacher, the daughter of a poor Methodist minister, and it is but little I can give; but my “mite” is given cheerfully, praying that God will bless the missionary cause in all its branches, and convert the heathen from their sins.23

Along with their concern to maintain an autonomous society and to develop purpose and sisterhood among its members, the founders gained personal value in the Women’s Foreign Missionary Society as an outlet for their own energy and capabilities. It is crucial to consider the make-up of the founders and first officers of the society. Primarily, these women were wives of bishops of the church, wives of secretaries of the General Missionary Society, wives of governors, college presidents, leading pastors and missionaries. The first president was married to a bishop and eight of the original forty-four vice-presidents, who lived as far east as Boston and Baltimore and as far west as Chicago and St. Louis, were wives of bishops.24 Because of their husbands’ positions, the women were concerned to maintain the society as a “middle-of-the-road” organization: to keep harmony between the women’s society and the larger church and to be sure that it did not take independent courses of action which would challenge the constituted authority.

But who were these women in their own right? In the past, they had found identity through their spouses and their basic professional roles had been as their husbands’ confidants, supporting and advising them informally in their leadership of the church. They were also highly cultured and well-trained women, who needed a sphere in which to express their own commitment to the church and to develop leadership ability. The Women’s Foreign Missionary Society provided such a channel and opened the way for other women to find avenues for self-expression. This emerging sense of their own identity, and the conflicting emotions which it would have produced among the women involved, may have been

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23Heathen Woman’s Friend, Aug. 1869, p. 21; July 1869, p. 13.
reflected in the diverging ways in which correspondents signed articles in *The Heathen Woman's Friend*, some continuing to refer to themselves as Mrs. Bishop Osman Baker, Mrs. Rev. Dr. Patten, and Mrs. Gov. Wright, while other women used their own names, including Mrs. Annie R. Gracey, Mrs. Emily C. Page, and Mrs. Jennie Fowler Willing.²⁴

The Woman’s Foreign Missionary Society had been clear about its goals to evangelize and educate women of non-Christian countries and to create for themselves an autonomous society which could provide purpose, sisterhood, and avenues for leadership and service to its members. By all measurable standards, the cause flourished. When the Society celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary in 1894, the progress report was impressive: 231 women missionaries had been sent out by the W.F.M.S. and 161 were serving actively at that time. Strong mission stations had been established in India, China, Japan, Korea, Burma, South America, Mexico, Malaysia, Bulgaria, and Italy. Property holdings in mission countries were valued at $408,666; 57,000 patients were cared for during the year at thirteen hospitals; 13,000 girls were in day and boarding schools. Almost three and one-half million dollars had been received and spent for missions.²⁵

Surely any commentator would have praised the women for their notable service to the church. Bishop Simpson did that in addressing a public meeting of the New York Branch of the Society. He lauded the strides which women were making in the late nineteenth century in attaining increased rights of property, education, and suffrage. This was a time of culmination for women: “God is intending, evidently, that woman shall do something in this age more than in the past.... I think I see in this Society an answer to the great question, “What shall women do?”²⁶

The Woman’s Foreign Missionary Society appeared to be the fulfillment, even the containment, of women’s progress for him. How would the founders and leaders have evaluated their gains? In looking backward, we can conclude that by developing an autonomous organization which opened up expanded purpose, sisterhood, and leadership for women, the founders had the enlightened vision and practical know-how to begin a movement which one day would enable women and men together to eliminate a sphere for women in church and society.

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²⁴Ibid., June 1869, pp. 4, 5; Isham, *Valorous Ventures*, p. 15.
²⁵Ibid., p. 43.
²⁶*Heathen Woman's Friend*, Jan. 1871, pp. 77, 78.