HEATHEN WOMEN'S FRIENDS:
The Role of Methodist Episcopal Women in the
Women's Foreign Mission Movement, 1869-1915

Patricia R. Hill

The rather dramatic story of the organization of the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church has been recounted both by historians of the society itself and by historians of Methodism in America. The slant taken differs from historian to historian, but in every account one finds the handful of women who fought their way through a raging storm to the Tremont Street Church in Boston on March 23, 1869. The “intrepid eight” met in response to an appeal brought by returned missionary wives for the Christian women of America to meet their obligation to their heathen sisters. The message was clear; women workers were essential if the Gospel was to penetrate to the secluded women of India and China. The response was swift; the eight women meeting in the Tremont Church scheduled an organizational meeting for March 30. The first issue of the new society's journal, The Heathen Woman's Friend, was published in May. The society's first missionaries, Isabella Thoburn and Dr. Clara Swain, sailed for India in November.1

The Woman's Foreign Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church was preceded by the interdenominational Women's Union Missionary Society and by one denominational group, the Woman's Board of Missions, formed in 1868 as an auxiliary to the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions of the Congregational Church. Methodist women acknowledged their debt to these pioneers, but they devised a structure for their own organization that met specific needs in their particular situation. Theirs was the first denomination-wide woman's missionary society. They divided their organization into geographic regions with Branch headquarters in each

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region. Eventually eleven Branches blanketed the entire country. This decentralized structure allowed women in local societies to feel more closely connected to and in control of the movement they supported with their pennies and prayers. The policy of assigning the task of supporting specific missionaries, schools or hospitals to a particular Branch or local society reinforced this sense of direct participation in the missionary endeavor. Methodist women were highly successful in enlisting support for the cause. One historian of the society reported in 1912 that one out of every eight female church members was enrolled in the Woman’s Foreign Missionary Society. Yearly giving in 1912 averaged $3.53 per member. This constituted 35 per cent of the total receipts for foreign missions in the Methodist Episcopal Church that year.\(^2\)

The formation of a woman’s foreign missionary society was not accomplished without confronting considerable opposition, most of it couched in terms questioning the wisdom of fragmenting fund-raising efforts for missions. The Corresponding Secretary of the General Missionary Society, Dr. John P. Durbin, felt strongly that the women should confine their efforts to raising money for the General Society. The First Annual Report of the WFMS glosses over the negotiations with Dr. Durbin in its account of the society’s formation, but its constitution incorporates his demand that the General Society review and approve all appropriations and appointments and that fund-raising be restricted to avoid competition with the General Society for gifts. Section III of Article VIII of the Constitution spells it out:

> The funds of the Society shall not be raised by collections or subscriptions taken during any church services or in any promiscuous public meeting, but shall be raised by securing Members, Life Members, Honorary Managers, and Patrons, and by such other methods as will not interfere with the ordinary collections or contributions for the treasury of the Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church.\(^3\)

Women had refused to become simply a collecting agency for the General Society; but tactful compromise was clearly the order of the day, and they agreed to confine their work to a restricted sphere. Making a virtue out of a necessity, they encouraged women to make a habit of systematically giving small gifts. This proved to be an extraordinarily successful tactic, one later adopted by the Laymen’s Missionary Movement. And, as it turned out, the men’s fears were unjustified; general receipts for missions rose as women’s groups championed and popularized the cause. Friction


\(^3\)The *Heathen Woman’s Friend*, Vol. 1; 13 (June 1870) 100.
over the scope of the WFMS’s perogatives continued in succeeding years, but Methodist women managed to maintain a greater degree of autonomy and administrative control over their work for women than that of corresponding societies in other denominations.

The WFMS of the Methodist Episcopal Church was the largest of all the women’s foreign missionary societies, but its story told alone misses the significance of the larger phenomenon known to its participants as the women’s foreign mission movement. The impetus for founding women’s foreign missionary societies was located by some of the women themselves and by early historians of the movement in the organizational experience gained by American women during the Civil War, particularly in the activities of the Sanitary Commission. Another, more direct antecedent of the denominational societies was the Woman’s Union Missionary Society organized in 1861. This forerunner of the women’s missionary movement was largely the creation of Mrs. Sarah Doremus, a devout and wealthy Baltimore widow whose concern for sending out female missionaries had been inspired by the plea of a missionary returned from China in the 1830s. Mrs. Doremus attempted to organize a society at that time but was thwarted by denominational opposition. By 1860 overt opposition to sending women to foreign fields had lessened considerably, and the Woman’s Union Missionary Society was formed. This society provided inspiration if not a precise model for denominational women’s groups that lacked its independent and ecumenical character. The women’s missionary movement grew rapidly after the Civil War. By 1900 there were forty-one female foreign missionary societies in the United States.4

The proliferation of denominational societies in part reflects pressure put on women by denominational leaders to support denominational missions rather than contribute to ecumenical efforts. Men were wary of women organizing in most of the denominations. In response to expressed fears and to more subtle suggestions about appropriate behavior for women, most of the new societies were careful to emphasize their subordinate status as auxiliaries organized for the sole and special task of assisting denominational boards in work with women and children.

The size of the women’s foreign mission movement cannot be measured with great precision. Records ordinarily indicate the number of local societies but not actual membership figures. A petition presented on behalf of fourteen denominational societies to President Cleveland in 1896 claimed a membership of over 500,000 women — all of whom joined together in urging the United States to protect the Christian women of Armenia. However, the editor of Woman’s Work, the journal published

by Presbyterian women, noted that membership figures contained in annual reports were inaccurate and that 600,000 members would be closer to the truth. By 1915 more than three million women were on the rolls of American women's foreign missionary societies. Rough as the figures may be, they demonstrate that the women's foreign mission movement enlisted more women than any of the other great women's movements of the late nineteenth century. Only the Women's Christian Temperance Union approached the mission movement in size. In order to assess the significance of the movement it must be considered in the context of the changing status of American women in the nineteenth century. Its appeal can be understood only when juxtaposed to the appeals of other causes competing for the time and energy of middle class women.

For middle class American women the most significant result of the industrial revolution was their confinement to the home in the first half of the nineteenth century. This restricted sphere — and woman's role within it — was glorified in the ideology of Victorian America by placing a new emphasis on the sanctity of the home. The ideal woman was the woman who played the roles of wife and mother to perfection. Since the church was the institution outside the home with which women were preeminent involved, when middle-class women re-emerged into the public sphere in the second half of the century, the church provided a framework within which women could test their wings and develop the skills that they would need when they left the domestic nest.

Middle-class women moved out of the home initially not into the professions but into voluntary associations for reform or self-culture. These associations provided an outlet for the ambitions of talented women who were denied an opportunity to exercise their executive ability in the marketplace. Historians writing about women in nineteenth century America have focused on the temperance and suffrage crusades as the great women's movements of the day. For women who were not crusaders on a grand scale, the woman's club movement offered a mixture of civic reform and self-culture. Regrettably, the women's foreign mission movement has received scant attention even though it constituted the largest of the female voluntary associations. Perhaps it appears, on the surface, too conservative and conventional to reflect anything of the sweeping changes that characterize the experience of women between the Civil War and the first World War. Perhaps its effect on American society

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has seemed negligible. Nevertheless, its size alone makes it imperative that students of women's history consider its meaning.

Besides comparing the women's foreign mission movement to secular women's movements, it is instructive to investigate the vexed relationship of the women's foreign mission movement to the women's home mission movement. The home mission societies were modeled on and organized after the foreign mission societies. In a few denominations a single women's mission group was established to work for both home and foreign missions. Most of the women's foreign missionary societies resisted efforts to combine home and foreign work. As early as 1878 Woman's Work for Woman reprinted a leaflet circulated by the Congregational woman's Board of Missions arguing against such combination. The leaflet protested that home missions do not call for women to participate in any "new work which shall be peculiar to them... it offers them no new responsibilities in administration." In distinct contrast the writer of the leaflet notes,

In the foreign work the raising of funds is only a part of the labor laid upon the Woman's Boards. They look out candidates to go abroad. Their counsel is sought, and their judgment has weight as to the fitness of such persons. They keep up a close correspondence with the lady missionaries on the field. They publish a periodical, print documents, circulate information, hold meetings, and direct the movements of their missionaries at home on furlough. In short, while everything is done through the channels... the women have a real responsibility in the management of the work. And the feeling that they are trusted with an important department of a great cause, which will prosper or fail as they prosper or fail, has given them an inspiration, a steadiness of purpose, a business tact, and an executive ability which have awakened admiration on every hand."

An additional reason adduced against combination was the prospect of reduced receipts in comparison to the combined totals from separate organizations making separate appeals. As a summation of the activities and benefits of female foreign missionary societies, this statement is admirably comprehensive and succinct.

One can speculate that the home mission field lacked the exotic attraction of foreign lands; the task may well have seemed less dramatic. Home work was certainly considered less demanding physically and much safer than service in a foreign field. In later years as the emphasis on professional training for missionary candidates grew, the home mission enterprise was often pointed to as an appropriate training ground for the foreign field.

The real key to women's resistance to subsuming foreign missions into a general category of mission work that included home missions and missions to freedmen lies in the special nature of the role they defined for themselves in foreign work. Their original justification for organizing was

"Woman's Work for Woman, 8/1 (January 1878) 12.
that only women could gain access to women in cultures where women were not allowed social contact with men outside their immediate families. A special need for the woman's touch was apparent in such non-Western cultures. One facet of the women's foreign mission movement that has been ignored is the systematic critique that it developed of other religions and cultures on the basis of their treatment of women. In 1910 Helen Barrett Montgomery codified this criticism in *Western Women in Eastern Lands*, a study published under the auspices of the interdenominational Central Committee for the United Study of Foreign Missions. Her argument follows a pattern established by other commentators who contrasted the condition of heathen women with the freedom enjoyed by women in the democratic and Christian West. Montgomery, like many other missionary society leaders, was herself involved in a variety of reform activities, including the crusade for women's suffrage, yet her primary allegiance was to the foreign mission cause. She was not blind to the problems of women in the West, but she felt that the wrongs suffered by American women would inevitably be rectified as the nation was more fully Christianized. The degradation of heathen women was inherent in the teachings of their religion; only conversion to Christianity could liberate them socially, politically and spiritually.7

Foreign mission work provided an ideal arena for relatively conservative, middle-class women who wanted to engage in social service and reform but felt threatened by radical feminism. Women involved in the foreign mission movement tended to be suspicious of the methods and motives of the secular women's movements. The foreword to Montgomery's *Western Women* manages to take swipes at both the suffrage and women's club movements by making disparaging remarks about "militant methods" and "self-culture."8

To paint these women as wholly conservative would, however, be doing them an injustice. They were, after all, engaged in a rather daring enterprise, and they were willing to adopt new methods in the service of their cause. Methodist women in particular were pioneers in medical and educational work. It is appropriate that the first two missionaries sent out by the WFMS, Isabella Thoburn and Clara Swain, were a teacher and a doctor respectively. Clara Swain was the first female physician sent overseas by any missionary society. Methodist women continued to lead the way in female medical work; sixty-two of the 687 female missionaries sent out by the WFMS bet-

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8 Ibid., p. xiv.
ween 1869 and 1915 were fully qualified medical doctors. Helen Barrett Montgomery credited Methodist women with being the first to recognize that the key to the evangelization of China lay in reaching women and that the most effective means of reaching them was with trained Chinese women physicians. That policy necessitated the development of institutions of higher education for women; it is not surprising that Methodist women were firm supporters of the project undertaken just before the first World War by the Federation of Women's Boards of Foreign Missions of the United States and Canada to establish seven interdenominational Christian colleges for women in the Orient.

Methodists also relied on an expanded network of itinerating Bible women, native women given minimal training and sent out into the villages to spread the Gospel message. Similarly, girls' schools were established in the anticipation of educating village girls who would return to be leaders in their communities, raising the standards of hygiene and living in model homes. By recognizing that cultures would not be Christianized (and Westernized) until a self-supporting, self-propagating native church was firmly established, the foreign mission movement inevitably found itself broadening the definition of evangelism to include educational work that would supply trained leadership for native churches. Eventually, evangelism encompassed a broad spectrum of social services. Women were instrumental in broadening the definition of evangelism. Partly, this was a practical effect of the increase of the percentage of women engaged in foreign mission work. As the net result of the aggressive recruitment policies of the women's societies, by 1900 the majority of the overseas mission force was female. Women missionaries, denied ordination, necessarily went out as teachers, doctors, nurses and social workers rather than as preachers. Their presence on the mission field in those capacities changed the nature of the missionary enterprise. The ideology elevating the home and motherhood that middle-class American women subscribed to in defining their special mission to women and children reinforced the practical necessity for a broader understanding of evangelism. The transformation of the heathen home into a Christian one was a goal that could be attained only by combining evangelism with medical and educational efforts.

Methodist women had, through their missionary society, assumed

9Statistics compiled from the Annual Reports of the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society of the M. E. Church.


11Ibid. Also in Beaver, pp. 108-109.
"primary responsibility... for the evangelization of women in the fields where the Church has established missions." Their rationale for the need for evangelizing women was grounded in their view of the home as the most important unit in any society; they believed that a permanent church could not be built without women. "A man’s church will last for one generation. Mothers are the conservators of religion, bringing up their children in their own faith."12 The rhetoric they employed indicates their willingness to accept the centrality of the home and the importance of the mother figure presiding over it. The women’s foreign mission movement, for all its emphasis on sending single women to the mission field, was unhesitating in its endorsement of the special virtues attached to motherhood in late nineteenth century America. Yet their actions belied their conservative ideology.

Despite the centrality of the home in their rhetoric, the women’s missionary societies played a crucial role in the professionalization of the social service aspect of missions. In the recruitment of women for the mission field, societies sought women who were educated and capable as well as dedicated and devout. Women’s societies contributed to the support of missionary training schools with curricula covering topics such as domestic science and kindergarten training in addition to the history of missions and comparative religions.13 In a sense the women’s missionary societies created a new profession for women. Work in a foreign field represented an exciting yet respectable option for women whose alternatives were otherwise limited to marriage or teaching. Still, it was a profession that reflected an understanding of woman as nurturer.

The motivations of those women who went to the foreign field are not difficult to imagine. But why did tens and hundreds of thousands of ordinary church women commit themselves to support these missionaries financially, emotionally and spiritually? It is true that middle-class women had more money and more leisure time at their disposal in the late nineteenth century. It is also true that women had to some extent formed the habit of organizing for service during the Civil War. But why foreign missions? Why not home missions or civic reform? The answer probably lies in their belief that in foreign missions work for women and children they had found a task that was

12Isham, pp. 5-6.
specifically the duty of women. It was a task that they could undertake without having their assumptions about their own culture and their religion challenged. They were meeting their sacred responsibility as Christian women. It must have seemed like a worthwhile endeavor. The women who joined local societies in the early days of the movement could not have foreseen the ways in which the movement would change them, moving them out of their parochial worlds toward ecumenism in religion and internationalism in politics.

The effect of women’s involvement in the foreign mission enterprise was the reverse of conservative in tendency. Mission study broadened women’s cultural horizons. Mission societies were an effective forum for leadership training. The foreign mission movement encouraged women to play a more public role within the context of the church at large. The “reflex influence” of missions led to greater participation by women in all aspects of church affairs. For example, the development and growth of children’s and young people’s organizations was largely due to the efforts of women’s missionary societies. Women gained experience in managing large sums of money, in editing and publishing journals, and in creating effective organizational structures. And through it all they maintained a theology of sacrificial service, closely linked to the Victorian ideology of home and family, that proved elastic enough to allow them to accept radical changes without losing their firm faith. In the words of one of their favorite missionary hymns, their goal remained.

To stretch our habitations,
Lengthen cords and strengthen stakes,
Till Christ’s kingdom, of the nations
One unbroken household makes.