BELLE HARRIS BENNETT: MODEL OF HOLISTIC CHRISTIANITY

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Belle Harris Bennett was, undoubtedly, the most important woman in the history of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. She ranks with the greatest women among the various denominations of American Methodism. In addition to her significance as a denominational and ecumenical leader, Bennett presents us with a role model of one whose personal life integrated traditional Christian piety with a deep commitment to social action, understanding the Gospel to hold these in dynamic tension.

Today The United Methodist Church is experiencing increasing internal conflict between those who demand it be more responsive to God’s call to the salvation of human souls and those who challenge the Church to take more leadership in advancing God’s kingdom through the creation of a more just social order. The timing is thus excellent for an examination of Belle Harris Bennett as one who embodied a holistic spirituality, affirming both aspects of Christian faith.

Influences Which Shaped Her

Isabel Harris Bennett was born December 3, 1852 in the elegant surroundings of “Homelands,” the Bennett estate near Richmond, Kentucky. Belle, as she was known throughout her life, was the younger of two daughters and the seventh of eight children. She was descended on both sides of her family from leaders in the Revolutionary War. Governors, Senators, and state legislators were numbered among her ancestors. She grew up in a family with all of the best life had to offer to white aristocracy—servants, private education, financial security, political influence, and gracious hospitality. Hers was an “environment of culture and luxury.”

Belle enjoyed an active social life from childhood. Her beauty was “crowned with all the graces of Southern womanhood.” Despite the availability of suitors, Belle never chose to marry. By virtue of her family’s wealth, she had no worries in regard to her own financial needs. In fact, despite the ceaseless energy she expended in volunteer work, there is no indication that she was ever employed for pay.

1Mrs. R. W. MacDonell, Belle Harris Bennett: Her Life Work (Nashville: Board of Missions, M. E. Church, South, 1928), p. 19. This biography is the primary source for the details of Bennett’s life and activities.
Although she travelled widely, Belle Bennett spent her entire life in Madison County, not far from Lexington. She died of cancer, after a "lingering illness" on July 20, 1922.

**Her Spiritual Journey**

The roots of Methodism grew deeply in the Bennett family. Belle's paternal grandfather had been a Methodist circuit rider in Kentucky. Her mother, Elizabeth Chenault Bennett, was a devoted member of the Southern Church. It was an established rule that the Bennett family attended church together each Sunday. Guests in the household discovered that they, too, were expected to join the family for worship services at Providence, the little brick Methodist church built on land donated by the Bennetts. Growing up, Belle and her older sister, Sue, worked in the Sunday School and sang in the choir—the only two activities open to females in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South at that time.

In 1875, Dr. Lapsley McKee, a Presbyterian minister, conducted an evangelistic meeting in Richmond. Something in his message must have spoken to the 23-year-old Belle, for she joined the Providence Church immediately thereafter. Little is known of her spiritual life for the next several years. In 1884 she spent the summer at Lake Chautauqua, New York, where she was greatly inspired by the various speakers she heard. A few months later, upon her return to Kentucky, Belle experienced the baptism of the Holy Spirit. She felt that she was able to receive this gift as a result of her study with the Rev. George O. Barnes, a visiting Presbyterian evangelist.

Soon afterward she travelled to Louisville to spend several months with Mette and Harriet Thompson, sisters of a cousin-by-marriage. These were consecrated, Spirit-filled women who developed a close Christian friendship with Belle, which nourished her over the years.

During that visit, Harriet Thompson first quoted the following Scripture in her hearing:

> If you turn back your foot from the sabbath,  
> from doing your pleasure on my holy day,  
> and call the sabbath a delight  
> and the holy day of the Lord honorable;  
> if you honor it, not going your own ways,  
> or pursuing your own business, or talking idly;  
> then you shall take delight in the Lord,  
> and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth;  
> I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father,  
> for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.  

Belle was deeply impressed by those words. From that time forward, she faithfully observed the Christian Sabbath.

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3 Isaiah 58:13-14 (RSV); MacDonell, p. 39.
Belle Harris Bennett

She made it a practice to avoid all travel on Sunday, except when at sea or “trying to reach some member of the family or loved one who was desperately ill.” This commitment often required her to stay in a hotel for a day enroute to out-of-town meetings. Telegrams or special delivery letters received on the Sabbath lay on her desk unopened until the following day. Her Sundays were spent in deep prayer, Bible study, hymn singing, and the reading of devotional materials, in addition to her participation in corporate worship. According to her friend and colleague, Mrs. Luke Johnson, “She suffered visible pain if long continental or worldwide travel necessitated her continuous going on the Sabbath day.”

Lest Bennett’s spiritual development appear lacking in the normal struggles of modern Christians, it should be noted that she experienced a period of depression early in her years of active church work which seemed to have no cause. Once again she turned to Harriet Thompson for help in her spiritual growth. She explained that “despite much heart-searching she had not been able to discover known sin that was breaking her communion with God, but that her persistent prayer for relief had been unavailing.” Her friend pointed out that Belle had become so busy with Christian service that she had neglected to adequately nourish her soul with the Word of God. “Ever afterwards it was her habit to spend some time every day in Bible study.”

Deaconess Emily Olmstead, who served as Bennett’s secretary and assistant for the last four years of Belle’s life, in describing their daily schedule, explained that

First, always, [came] that quiet hour together about nine o’clock. It was often interrupted by some member of the family connection, sometimes by a friend needing help or advice; quite often by a telephone call, but the lesson was always resumed. Occasionally, if a friend who was sympathetic chanced to come in, that friend was invited to share our devotions.¹

Belle first became interested in missionary work in 1887 after attending a missionary meeting in Carlisle, Kentucky with her sister, Sue. There she became aware of the lack of training with which missionaries were sent to work in other nations. As she thought and prayed about the problem, she learned of Lucy Rider Meyer’s Chicago Training School for women missionaries, established in response to the same concern. She corresponded with Mrs. Meyer, a member of the Methodist Episcopal Church, and received information about the Chicago school.

“In 1888, after returning from a summer assembly at Chautauqua, New York, she felt so positively a call to establish a missionary training school for women that she answered audibly, ‘Yes, Lord, I will do it.’” In

¹Emily K. Olmstead, Intimate Glimpses of Miss Belle H. Bennett (Nashville: The B. H. B. Memorial Committee of Woman’s Missionary Council, M. E. Church, South, 1923), p. 16.
1889, she was invited to attend the Woman’s Board of Foreign Missions meeting in Little Rock, Arkansas. She presented to them her concern about the lack of practical missionary training. The Board was so impressed by Bennett’s presentation that they immediately voted to empower her to act as their agent in raising the necessary funds for the establishment of such an institution—an unanticipated and somewhat unwelcome honor!

Scarritt Bible and Training School in Kansas City, Missouri was dedicated four years later on September 14, 1892, debt-free and partially furnished. By 1895, Bennett with the assistance of Maria Davies Wightman, had raised $52,394.58 from individuals for the endowment of the school. The final success of Bennett’s fund-raising belies the difficulties she experienced along the way. She is reported to have said, “There were days when I longed for death to relieve me of the responsibility of persuading the Church that missionaries needed training for their work. I was as literally driven of the Holy Spirit to establish the Training School as was Paul into Macedonia.”

Having completed her work as fund-raiser, she continued her formal relationship with Scarritt by serving as the vice-president of the Board of Managers until her death. Bennett lived to see more than a thousand workers trained and sent out from Scarritt.

Belle Bennett’s first active involvement with Negroes developed because of her passion for foreign missions. While praying that the way would be opened for the Southern Church to begin mission work in Africa, God gave her the vision to start work with Negroes in her hometown. She phoned a Negro minister of her acquaintance and inquired if there was anything she could do for the local Negro community. His immediate response was affirmative. He told her that “... my wife and I have been praying every day for nearly a year that you might spare some of your time for us, but you seemed so busy!”

As a result of their consultation, Bennett organized an ecumenical Bible study class at St. Paul A.M.E. Church, which she led every Sunday at three o’clock from 1900 to 1904. Attendance ranged from 200 to 500 members.

Belle Bennett was ecumenical in her spiritual life. Without ever compromising her commitment to her own denomination, she repeatedly sought to learn from all Christians who had something to teach her. She realized the stewardship value of various churches working together on common goals, especially on the mission field. She was never narrowly sectarian in her understanding of Christian faith.

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Belle Harris Bennett

Bennett "early became a representative of her church in inter­
dominational missionary conferences."8 She was a speaker at the
Woman's Session of the Methodist Ecumenical Conference in London in
1901, as well as a delegate to the full meeting. Belle Bennett was sent to the
World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh in 1910. Five years later, she
chaired the Commission on Woman's Work of the Congress on Christian
Work in Latin America, which made its report at the full Congress
meeting in Panama the following year. From 1919 until her death, she
served as the sole female member of the Joint Commission of Northern
and Southern Methodism which was charged with planning the great
celebration of the Centenary of Methodist Missions. Bennett was one of 54
delegates (and one of three U.S. women) elected to the planning com­
mittee of the International Missionary Council, which first met in 1921 at
Lake Mohawk, New York. She also served on the committee of Reference
and Council of the Foreign Mission Conference of North America, which
she regarded as "the greatest interdenominational force in this country."

Mrs. L. P. Smith, a trusted friend and coworker, gives us a glimpse of
Belle Bennett's spiritual depth even in the face of death:

What a wonderful prayer life she lived! Every question was settled through prayer. My
last memory of her is one of prayer. I was in Richmond, Ky., for one more time of
precious fellowship and one more look of her face. We were in a fine old Southern
home, and Miss Bennett was sitting up for a short time. Josie, an old-time Negro
friend, came in, and after a few minutes Miss Bennett said: "Let us pray together."
We gathered around her chair, and as each prayed heaven was near and God's
presence was manifest.9

Belle Bennett once said, "I never married, never had children of the
flesh, but God has given me many spiritual children."10 Surely this was so!

Agent for Social Change

Available materials give no evidence that Bennett was involved in
seeking social change prior to her surrender to the Holy Spirit. This seems
to indicate that the tremendous energy she expended towards improving
society developed as a direct result of her spiritual vision of the importance
of building "the Kingdom of God on earth."

It should be noted that Bennett's biographer credits Belle with becom­
ing sympathetic to the cause of women's equality as a young girl. This is
attributed to the influence of Laura and Sarah Clay, her neighbors who
were leaders in the woman's suffrage movement in the South. Their
friendships were given special impetus when Sarah married James
Bennett, Belle's older brother. If she did develop this commitment early in

8Chandler, p. 133.
9MacDonell, p. 289.
10"Tributes from Deaconesses and Missionaries—Selected from Many," The Missionary
Voice, 12 (1922): 308.
life, there is no record of external actions motivated by it until after Bennett became active in church work.

After the death in 1892 of Sue Bennett, Belle was chosen to take her sister’s place on the Central Committee of the Woman’s Parsonage and Home Mission Society of the denomination. In 1893 she became Superintendent of Mountain Work, “a position which she held in sacred trust for many years.” In that role, “her first work was to carry forward her sister’s plan to bring education to the mountain district of southeastern Kentucky. The result was the Sue Bennett Memorial School, opened in London, Laurel County, in 1897.”

In 1896, Belle Bennett was elected President of the Central Committee of the home mission work, ten years after its organization. The General Conference of 1898 shortened the W.P. & H.M.S.’s name to the Woman’s Home Mission Society, and a more representative Woman’s Board of Home Missions was organized to take the place of the less democratic Central Committee. Bennett then became the first and only president of that governing board.

“She believed a chance at an education was the divine right of the child and that it was the duty of the Church and State to make this possible.” Undoubtedly, this belief was a motivating force behind much of Bennett’s social action. Her deep commitment to education was surely the reason that the Governor of Kentucky appointed her to the State Board of Education in 1921.

Belle Bennett was not limited in her leadership to past ways of accomplishing things. She was willing to attempt innovative solutions to problems. A striking example of this can be found in a series of letters which she wrote to Professor A. H. Mohn, President of Sue Bennett Memorial School, in August and September of 1918. In the first letter she explains that she has been made aware of a nineteen-year-old soldier’s wife who is seeking to finish her schooling while her husband is away at war. A problem has arisen, however, because after receiving encouragement for the idea, she discovers she is pregnant. Bennett requests his response to the question of whether the school can assist this young woman “as soon as you can.” Ten days later, she writes Mrs. Mohn again requesting, “Please let me know just what you can do about the soldier’s wife as soon as you can.” She continues, “... I think it altogether possible that we may be called upon to take care of a number of such cases, and if enough babies have to be taken care of, we can establish a Day Nursery.”

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2Chandler, p. 133.
3Sara Estelle Haskin, *Women and Missions in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South* (Nashville: Publishing House of the M. E. Church, South, 1920), pp. 30-32 and Dunn, p. 11.
4Bennett to Mohn, 19 August 1918, Belle Harris Bennett papers, Minerva McDaniel Library, Sue Bennett College, London, Kentucky.
5Bennett to Mohn, 29 August 1918, Sue Bennett College.
Apparently the young woman was admitted and some arrangements made for eighteen days later Bennett writes Mohn again to suggest the production of “a little story leaflet of the young soldier’s wife who is now with you” as the school’s contribution to the war effort. She explains her thinking that

You might . . . say that if God showed us that our country needed the S.B.M. School to help do that kind of work, she would be willing to take into one or two of her cottages, young mothers with little babies. (Wives of soldiers, of course) And if it became necessary, a Day Nursery where these little ones could be cared for by some great mother-hearted woman, would be opened on the grounds. An article along this line could go out in the mountain papers, if you think it worth while. 16

Unfortunately, no further reference to the young soldier’s wife or Bennett’s ideas for developing a program for young mothers has been located.

Belle Bennett’s ceaseless interest in education was indicated by her agreement to serve as the first president of the Madison County Colored Institute-Chautauqua, which was organized in 1915. The Rev. J. W. Broaddus of Richmond stated that “under the auspices of this movement some of the best men and women of both races have spoken to large and appreciative audiences of our [Negro] people.” According to Dr. Henry Allen Lane, the County Cooperative Extension Agent, “Through her committees she brought to Richmond a brilliant array of Negro talent from all parts of the country—Carver, Dubois, Proctor, Simmons—whose lectures, addresses, sermons electrified, uplifted, and enlightened” those who attended from Madison and surrounding counties. Bennett continued as president for three years.

“Belle Harris Bennett was twenty years ahead of her times when she foresaw the inevitable massing of unskilled laborers, alien peoples, and fortune seekers in the cities and the country as they followed in the wake of modern invention and industrial and commercial changes.” She led the Board of Home Missions to develop City Mission Boards in the early years of this century. Settlement houses were established which conducted various “educational, friendly, and evangelistic forms of service as the effective means of reaching the unchurched and lonely masses.”

It became clear to Bennett that the program of city missions could not grow without a large number of trained workers. Consequently, the Woman’s Board of Home Missions “sent a carefully worded memorial to the General Conference of 1902, calling attention to the urgent need and asking for the creation of the office of deaconess in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South.” 17 The memorial was granted, with the development and conduct of the deaconess program being assigned to the Woman’s Board of Home Missions.

As cities of the South received increasing numbers of foreign born people, Bennett urged the women to reach out and address this special area

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16 Bennett to Mohn, 16 September 1918, Sue Bennett College.  
17 Dunn, pp. 39-40.
of need. Work was organized in the port cities of New Orleans and Galveston. Programs for Cuban women and children were inaugurated in Tampa and Key West.

Belle Bennett's "strong stand for right and justice to the Negro aroused the women of the Southern Methodist Church [so that they became] the leaders in the interracial work of the South."18 She repeatedly preached against racial prejudice. After World War I, "Bennett assisted Dr. W. W. Alexander in enlisting Southern women in the work of the Council on Interracial Cooperation."19 Her one outstanding unrealized vision was that of a Farm School for Negro Boys, which she had hoped could serve as a means of breaking the "cycle of neglect" that she observed all too often in the case of those who passed repeatedly through the juvenile courts.

The principle of woman suffrage was supported by Bennett, although early in her leadership she "refrained from pressing this conviction among the missionary women, that she might not create antagonism to the specific work of the Missionary Society." Her biographer explains that she "had always believed in the perfect equality of man and woman."

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Belle Bennett became aware that there was no program in the denomination to educate members to the social problems of the times. Returning once more to her belief in education, she conceived a great educational scheme by which its womanhood might be aroused to Christ's principles of social justice and through their influence work like leaven in the Church. To her this was but obedience to God's law of love and the underlying principle of home missions; it established man's relation to man as brothers and sons of a common loving Father.20

Bennett was frequently involved in areas of social action outside the church, as well. She served on the National Child Labor Committee. In 1909 she was elected president of the State Y.W.C.A., and during World War I she served the work of mobilization and service as a member of the War Council of the National Y.W.C.A. Like many Methodist women, Belle worked and prayed long years for Prohibition.

Integration of Christian Piety and Social Action

One of the great examples of the creative dynamic between piety and social action in Bennett's life is described in the following account:

The Ensley Community House is a monument to her Sabbath-keeping covenant. She saw the great iron and steel plants for the first time early one March Monday while waiting for the midday train because she stopped over Sabbath in Birmingham, Ala., in obedience to her agreement with her Lord. The great number of foreign-born

19Chandler, p. 133.
20MacDonell, pp. 88-89.
workmen in the plants and hundreds of foreign children in the streets challenged her friendly spirit to a venture in friendship which eventuated in one of the largest evangelistic Americanization centers in the South.

The integration of piety and social concern in Bennett’s life is revealed in the way she reached the decision to lead the Home Mission Board into organized woman's work among Negro women and girls. According to Mrs. J. D. Hammond,

Miss Bennett wanted to begin work at Paine [College, Augusta, Georgia] years before it was done, but felt that the prejudice must die down somewhat before it was feasible. Finally, in answer to the argument that prejudice would die sooner if somebody fought it, she turned to God for guidance. There were three who prayed that afternoon in that upper room, and light was given. When the prayers were ended she rose from her knees and said, “We will begin to-morrow morning.” And she did.21

Bennett’s challenge to the women was delivered at the Board’s annual meeting in May of 1901. Although it took a full year to raise the funds to build the desired Industrial Annex for women students at Paine, a great deal of consciousness-raising occurred among the Southern Methodist women during that time. The work grew and by 1913 a third building was completed, a women’s dormitory that the students requested be named Bennett Hall.

Belle Bennett became widely known throughout the connection for her leadership in the struggle for women’s laity rights in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. Again, her personal piety and commitment to social change were intertwined.

In 1906, more than one hundred thousand “surprised Methodist women in the South” learned via the Associated Press that the upcoming General Conference had been instructed to unite the women’s home and foreign mission societies. Many church women were radicalized in the process of discovering that they had neither voice nor vote in the body charged with making that decision!

Belle Bennett, along with the General Secretary of the Home Board and two leaders of the Foreign Board, travelled to the General Conference to attempt to represent the concerns of their constituencies. Despite many frustrating experiences, the four succeeded in persuading the delegates to delay the decision on this matter for a quadrennium—a significant accomplishment, since the women were denied the floor even in committee sessions. The General Conference appointed a committee of thirteen “to consider and present to the General Conference of 1910 some definite and workable plan for a closer correlation of the missionary forces of the Church.” Four women were appointed to the committee by virtue of office. They were the Presidents and General Secretaries of the two Societies.

“...The question of Church suffrage had been thrust upon the women by the General Conference of 1906.” At the 1909 meeting of the Home Mis-

21 Dunn, p. 60.
sion Board, Belle Harris Bennett "after earnest prayer for guidance and wisdom," proposed that they petition the General Conference to "take the needed action to secure for the women of the Church the full rights and privileges of the laity." The measure passed the Board with a vote of 29 for and 6 against.

The men of the 1910 General Conference were much more courteous to the women than the previous Conference had been. By vote of that body, Belle Bennett was even invited to address the Conference on the issue of laity rights for women. "Hers was the first woman's voice ever heard at a session of the denomination's highest body."22 Despite her eloquence, the memorial was soundly defeated.

"When the first memorial for laity rights was lost by vote of the General Conference, the women promptly reorganized for a second campaign" four years later. When the measure was again defeated, it was obvious that sentiment had nevertheless grown in favor of the women, for the vote was 171 to 105.23

"A third time Miss Bennett rallied the Church forces for another effort to get fair dealing for its womanhood." On May 14, 1918 in Atlanta, Georgia, the memorial finally passed with 265 votes in favor and 57 opposed.

While the struggle for laity rights for women spanned a good ten years in the life of the denomination, the precipitating cause was "resolved" at the General Conference of 1910. At that time, based on the recommendation of the committee of thirteen, the two women's mission boards and the General Board were merged into a single entity. The new Board of Missions was constituted of one-third clergy, one-third laymen and one-third women, with ex-officio membership held by all of the bishops and all the officers. "A women's organization known as the Woman's Missionary Council, with home and foreign departments, was created to direct the women's activities."

Once the measure was passed, the Executive Committees of both woman's boards met together at the site of General Conference to organize the Woman's Missionary Council. Belle Harris Bennett was unanimously elected president of the new body, a position in which she served until her death.

In a letter to a friend, Bennett explained her feelings in regard to the new structure.

I am a unionist, but I did not believe in the union of the Woman's Board with the General Board on the basis which we were compelled to accept. I accepted what they

gave us, fearing something worse—complete subordination. The constitution under which we work was written by the brethren; and while we were given an opportunity to consider and suggest changes, it was not until after we reached the General Conference. Even then a number of suggestions were met with the statement: “Bishop ______ won’t stand that.” Fifteen women to forty-five men haven’t much showing. 24

Doubtless, this particular action fueled the fire of the commitment of the women of the church towards securing the full rights of the laity for themselves.

The General Conference of 1910 did not mark the end of the struggle for the organized women’s work of the church to maintain a degree of autonomy in their efforts. In February of 1922, Bennett met with the General Conference Commission on the reorganization of the mission forces of the Church. According to Mrs. Luke G. Johnson, who, along with Bennett, represented the Woman’s Missionary Council at the meeting,

It was evident from the beginning that a majority of the Commission thought the Board of Missions as then constituted should be divided and the Home Mission work placed with the Board of Church Extension. While this was strongly opposed by the two women, it likely would have carried in the Commission but for the fact that the organized form of the woman’s work did not fit the scheme. The Woman’s Missionary Council was a united body composed of both Home and Foreign work. 26

The two women were sick at heart as they anticipated the division of the woman’s work and its attachment to the two proposed Boards, “without any individual form or function and without any degree of administration left to the women anywhere.”

Once again Bennett’s disciplined spiritual life served her as she agonized whether to prolong the fight for a continued woman’s mission effort. Mrs. Luke Johnson reports that:

In the early morning while it was yet scarcely day, [Bennett] called me to her room. I found that she had spent the night in prayer and meditation even though in great [physical] pain and weakness. Together we talked and prayed for hours more. In this Gethsemane there settled upon us the conviction that there could now be no wavering, that the battle for woman’s place of service in the Church must be held. Together we talked it out, and from her lips there came a statement of faith and devotion to her Lord and Christ rarely paralleled. Christ and his cause were first and over all in her thought. To maintain his supremacy, woman must not fail. Out of it all there came a decision as to the course we should pursue in the Commission meeting soon to follow. 26

From the time she first became active in the Home Mission Society, Belle Bennett was committed to persuading the women of the Church to study the Bible on the subject of their stewardship of time and money. In the last years of her life, she was still reminding the women of the importance of this subject. She stated that “there must be a great new concep-

24 MacDonell, p. 143.
25 Ibid., p. 274.
26 Ibid., p. 275.
tion of our stewardship to God if we would have fellowship with him in service. Money is one of his all-powerful agencies, but without ourselves, our love, our time, it may be made a curse.” Even as her life demonstrated the integration of faith and works, she consistently prodded others towards the same wholeness.

Bennett’s Legacy

At the close of the 1922 General Conference (to which Bennett had been elected, but was too ill to attend), her long-time friend, Dr. W. W. Pinson sent this message:

The entire Church is indebted to you for the high standards for womanhood and the progressive measures for the entire Church that you have so eloquently and so powerfully enforced, both by example and precept, for so many years. Your influence and leadership have erected a monument in the heart of Methodist people which will defy the ravages of time. 27

Surely this woman was one of the saints of the Church. Her life was a witness not only to God’s loving compassion for humanity, but also to the heights of service which can be achieved by those who truly wait on the Lord.

27Ibid., p. 255.