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SISTERHOODS OF SERVICE AND REFORM:
Organized Methodist Women in the Late Nineteenth Century.
An Essay on the State of the Research.

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In Anne Firor Scott’s April 1984 presidential address to the Organization of American Historians entitled “On Seeing and Not Seeing: A Case of Historical Invisibility,” she emphasized the importance of research on nineteenth-century women’s voluntary organizations. For nearly a decade and a half, from the time she began work on her book The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, Scott has been fascinated with and impressed by the vital part voluntary organizations played in making possible women’s move from the domestic sphere into the public world and in gaining influence and power within that world. She contends that while men had many areas of life in which they could assert themselves and build power bases—business, industry, government, the professions of law, medicine, the ministry, university teaching, and the military—women were formally or informally excluded from these areas during most of the nineteenth century. Women who wished to develop a public role were almost completely limited to voluntary associations of one sort or another.1

Although by now this insight has become almost a truism for historians of women, Scott points out that there is still far too little research on women’s voluntary associations and far too little attention paid by the historical profession in general to the research that does exist. Certainly much work has been done on voluntary associations but it has been primarily focused on what such associations have meant to men and on male activities within them. It should be quite obvious, Scott feels, that to analyze nineteenth- and twentieth-century social development without taking into consideration women’s voluntary organizations is to overlook a crucial factor, and yet the results of research already done on this subject have not been integrated into general works on social history, as she points out, in anything but “the most perfunctory way.” Nor, as far as she can ascertain, has anyone “systematically addressed the broader question: what did the mass of women’s associations have to do with the patterns of social development” during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries?2

2Ibid., p. 10, footnote 4.
Scott criticizes the historical profession in general and social historians in particular for overlooking the obvious and thereby rendering invisible a whole range of activity which should be visible to the historian's eye and available to us for a deeper understanding of the American experience. Such a criticism could be directed as well at church historians, including historians of Methodism. Although from time to time there have been a few voices in our midst who, like Scott, call us to notice what we have thus far overlooked, we have until lately ignored these voices. For instance, as early as 1957, Timothy Smith, in his classic *Revivalism and Social Reform: American Protestantism on the Eve of the Civil War*, suggested the importance of women's roles in the Holiness movement and the voluntary groups formed within that milieu, highlighting chiefly the leadership of Phoebe Palmer in the founding of Five Points Mission and her involvement in other benevolent associations. But we have yet to see a critical, contextual biography of Palmer, although there is a dissertation in progress by Charles White at Boston University under the direction of Earl Kent Brown. A long-overdue study, it will address Palmer's role as social reformer in addition to her more familiar one as an evangelist, and promises to link those two roles integrally in a demonstration of Smith's 1957 thesis. Over a decade later in 1968, a provocative article by Theodore Agnew on the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society (W.F.M.S.) of the Methodist Episcopal Church (M.E.C.) raised a number of possibilities for further research to document his informed hunches; in fact the topic sentences of many paragraphs in his essay could have been launching points for dissertations or monographs. But until the past five years, almost no scholar of Methodism that I am aware of, picked up on any of these insights and sought to investigate them. And so, like women’s voluntary


4Theodore L. Agnew, “Reflections on the Woman’s Foreign Missionary Movement in Late Nineteenth Century American Methodism,” *Methodist History* 6:2 (1968). In the same year that Agnew's article appeared, R. Pierce Beaver's study of Protestant Women's Foreign Missionary Societies was published (*All Loves Excelling: American Protestant Women in World Mission* Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1968; re-issued by Eerdmans in 1980 under the title *American Protestant Women in World Mission: A History of the First Feminist Movement in North America*). It remains until now the definitive work in the area and its reprinting with the addition of a short chapter on the decade of the 1970s probably points among other things to Beaver's assessment that there had been little research which he felt should be taken into account for a new edition of his book.
organizations in general, church women's voluntary organizations—and certainly among these Methodist women's organizations—have been mainly overlooked as research subjects, and thus are unavailable to historians of Methodism and others as data for understanding and interpreting both the Methodist experience and women's experience. Although the Women's Foreign and Home Missionary Societies, the deaconess movement, and the Woman's Christian Temperance Union ([W.C.T.U.] which had a large number of Methodist women in its leadership and membership) are mentioned in general Methodist histories, there has not been, as yet, any thoroughgoing attempt to wrestle with questions similar to the one which Scott raises for her social historian colleagues: what did these Methodist women's voluntary associations have to do with the patterns of development of Methodism during this time period? How have organized Methodist women had an impact on the church and also on the larger world? Just to suggest one way in which church women's organizations have shaped the larger society, Anne Scott states in *The Southern Lady* that "the public life of nearly every Southern woman leader for forty years (from the 1880s to the 1920s) began in a church society."5 I suspect that this is true (perhaps to a slightly lesser extent) for the rest of the country as well, at least until very late in the nineteenth century. And many of these women leaders were Methodists.

We cannot really expect our church's historians to assess the role women's organizations have played in its shaping since we are still in the beginning stages of uncovering the history of Methodist women, including those who participated in organizations. We lack the groundwork, the range of secondary sources including both descriptive and analytical articles and books which would generate lively discussion among historians over the interpretation of primary data. We have also lacked any forum in which to carry on this discussion. One reason why this has been the case is so obvious that it probably doesn't need mention, but I will do so nevertheless in order to bring it before you. Until very recently women's history—what women have been doing and thinking—has not been deemed

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5Anne Firor Scott, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1970), p. 141. See also Donald Mathews, "Women's History/Everyone's History" (*Women in New Worlds: Historical Perspectives on the Wesleyan Tradition* volume I edited by Hilah F. Thomas and Rosemary Skinner Keller, Nashville: Abingdon, 1981), pp. 43ff. where he offers a different periodization of American history based on women's experiences from the perspective of women's maternal role. He designates the period from 1830-1880 as "reformist motherhood" and that from 1880-1920 as "political motherhood." On p. 45 he notes that a powerful constituency of women activists was built up during these two periods using the tools of the home to get things done. He speculates that "the constituency of women developing over a long period of time may have been the crucial social fact upon which a reform tradition could be built." He suggests that it may be illuminating to think of the Progressive era in the context of women's history rather than the other way around, which is the usual perspective from which to view the two.
important among Methodist historians no less than other historians, and thus has not been encouraged as a research area in which a significant contribution could be made to the ongoing dialogue among historians of Methodism about the shaping of the tradition.

In an effort to address this situation, the Women's History Project of the General Commission on Archives and History sponsored a 1980 conference, "Women in New Worlds." It was the first attempt by a major denomination to provide a forum for the presentation of scholarly work on the history of its women. The event was exciting, one of those times when participants were continually frustrated because of their inability to be in several places simultaneously in order to hear what was to most of us absolutely new information. We are extremely fortunate that many of the papers delivered at the conference were collected in two volumes also titled *Women in New Worlds* and published by Abingdon. Among these papers were several which investigated various aspects of the history of organized Methodist women, adding to our knowledge about this phenomenon and contributing to the kind of descriptive and analytical work we need to do in order to be able to generalize about the impact of Methodist women’s organizations on the history of the church and the nation.

During the conference's closing plenary address, Donald Mathews, an historian of Southern religion, made a play on words from the title of the conference which echoes Anne Firor Scott's call to make visible what has been invisible. He said, "Our newest worlds are sometimes in the past." It seems to me that this paradoxical statement describes what perhaps should be the continual—not sometime—situation of historians as we discover new information about our past which forces us to re-evaluate our accepted interpretations of it. As historians of Methodism begin to explore and map a "new past" which includes the experiences of Methodist women, they can draw on the rapidly growing body of research by historians of women which seeks to describe and interpret all aspects of women's lives including their activities in voluntary organizations. So far this research has been done primarily on ante-bellum benevolent and reform societies, suffrage groups, the W.C.T.U., labor and socialist groups, and just lately on "clubwomen." This work provides us with some interpretive categories for understanding the motivation for women's organizing, the various forms such organizing took, the power bases built

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7 Mathews, "Women's History/Everyone's History," p. 29.
8 The reader is referred to Scott, "On Seeing and Not Seeing," footnote 4, pp. 9, 10 for a sampling of articles and books on women's voluntary associations which have appeared in the last decade.
by organizing, the goals for which organized women pushed and whether they achieved them, and the bonding and support systems which developed as women organized.

We must certainly pay attention to this work and keep current on research findings, as we look at organized Methodist women. At the same time, we must be alert to the possibility that even though the interpretive categories already proposed are insightful and useful as analytical tools, they may not exhaust the meaning and significance of Methodist women’s organizing. Those who describe and analyze Methodist women’s organizational activity may indeed see some ways of interpreting this experience which will shed a different light on the phenomenon of women’s organizing and thus they may be able to contribute to what promises to be a lively scholarly discussion on the subject over the next years, if Anne Firor Scott, Donald Mathews, and others are successful in persuading their colleagues of the significance of such work in the ongoing task of re-evaluating our past.

The last third of the nineteenth century saw the formation and rapid growth of many types of women’s organizations and women in the Methodist tradition definitely took part in this activity. From 1869 when the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church was formed to the 1893 establishment of the Woman’s Home Missionary Society of the Methodist Protestant Church, eight home and foreign missionary societies were established in the M.E.C., the Methodist Episcopal Church-South, the Evangelical Association, the United Brethren Church, and the Methodist Protestant Church. Five years after the first W.F.M.S. was founded, the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union held its organizing meeting in 1874. By the mid-eighties the Methodist deaconess movement was launched. To give some idea of how remarkable the rate of growth of these institutions was, let me quote some statistics. Only four years after it began in 1878, the W.F.M.S.-M.E.C.-South had thirty-one conference societies with 1,112 local groups. By 1895, 26 years after its founding, the W.F.M.S.-M.E.C. numbered 153,584 members in 6,223 locals. By its twenty-fifth anniversary, the W.C.T.U. boasted 168,000 members in 7,000 locals. This last-mentioned group had some sort of presence in every state in the Union and had developed a vigorous world

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organization by the late 1880s. (By comparison, in 1890 the National American Woman Suffrage Association had 7,000 members.)

The impression that has been given thus far by most historians is that this incredible proliferation of women's organizations literally sprang up out of nowhere and spread like "wildfire on the prairie," an impression fostered by the use of this wildfire metaphor by the early leadership and historians of these organizations as they sought for adequate language to describe what has also been termed an explosion of women's groups.

A common explanation for this explosion is that women, having tasted freedom and the opportunity to develop their organizational skills during the Civil War as they mobilized relief efforts, were dissatisfied when they were expected to go back home to their proper, domestic sphere after the war ended. No doubt there is truth in this explanation although it is relatively unexamined, being at this point not at all well-researched. However it is, I believe, only a part of a far more complex truth.

Anne Firor Scott touches on another piece of this complex truth when she observes that women served a long apprenticeship in voluntary associations during the ante-bellum period, an apprenticeship, by the way, which actually made them better equipped to play the roles they were assigned during the war as relief organizers than most men were to be soldiers.10

Just what were these voluntary associations in which women prepared for their Civil War work and what exactly were women doing in them? For Methodist women, voluntary activity undoubtedly included work in a variety of local benevolent societies, local and state temperance societies,11 early proto-types of the Ladies Aid societies,12 and even some local women's missionary societies, all of which we are aware existed but about which we know very little, since virtually no one has attempted to do any research on them.

If a person (or several persons) were to take on the arduous task of, for instance, trying to trace the extent of local Methodist women's organizations during the period from 1820 to 1869, I wonder if that person (or persons) might not be able to prove what many until now have merely assumed, that is, that Methodist women were already fairly highly organized at the local level before the so-called explosion of organizations beginning in 1869, and that what occurred from 1869-1900 was that this local

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11See Jed Dannenbaum, Drink and Disorder: Temperance Reform in Cincinnati from the Washingtonian Revival to the W.C.T.U. (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois, 1984), especially chapters 6 and 7 for evidence of women's active participation in temperance organizations during the period from 1850-1874.
12See Ronald A. Brunger, "The Ladies Aid Societies in Michigan Methodism," Methodist History 5:2 (1967) as an example of organized women's work at the local level prior to 1869. We could use many replications of this study done in different regions of the country to bring to light grassroots organizational work of the sort Brunger describes.
energy which had always existed somewhat in isolation from other “energy centers” was pulled together in denomination-wide (or in the case of the W.C.T.U. nation-wide) networks focused on common goals.

If this were so, the explosion metaphor which historians like to use to refer to the incredible growth of women’s organizations in the post-Civil War era is not entirely apt. We need to find a metaphor which suggests, rather a harnessing of energy directed toward a central purpose. We also need to understand both the kind of central purpose which could command such allegiance and sustain such effort and the process of harnessing (or in some instances creating) the energy so apparent in these organizations from their beginnings. In the case of the foreign missionary societies, the central purpose of evangelizing women and children in sex-segregated societies where male missionaries were excluded from the women’s world, a purpose epitomized by the slogan “woman’s work for woman,” has been well-described by several historians.13 For the W.C.T.U., a key energizing motto was “The Ballot for Home Protection” (woman suffrage in order to vote for a number of reforms the chief of which was temperance), and this has also been much written about.14 What has not been nearly so well investigated is that energy-harnessing process by which several hundred thousand Methodist women were motivated to join missionary societies and the W.C.T.U. We are just beginning to trace out the workings of this process.

For years, historians of women have been studying Frances Willard, first Corresponding Secretary and then long-time President of the W.C.T.U. during its formative period, whose watchword was “organization.” She was the embodiment of her watchword as she traveled thousands of miles around the country often speaking several times a day and leaving behind her small groups of enthusiastic women to form local units of the W.C.T.U. as she moved on to her next speaking engagement. In her spare time she produced manuals which detailed the organizational structure of the W.C.T.U. at every level of its existence from local, to district, to state, to the national Union. For well over 20 years (1874-1898)

13Contemporary historians include Beaver and Rosemary Skinner Keller, “Lay Women in the Protestant Tradition,” in Rosemary Radford Ruether and Rosemary Skinner Keller, eds. Women and Religion in America: The Nineteenth Century Volume I (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981) among others. The institutional historians of the women’s missionary societies also describe woman’s work for woman. Some of the best definitions and descriptions can be found in the periodicals published by the women’s missionary societies, for example The Heathen Woman’s Friend, published by the W.F.M.S.-M.E.C.

she hammered away at the need for organization which would direct women's enthusiasm and energy toward the Union's goals. Historians of women have marveled at what they have assumed to be Willard's unique style of organizational ability which created such a vast, efficient network of committed women. Frances Willard has been credited with having practically invented the methods of organizing she so effectively utilized, and yet she very likely simply popularized methods already developed.

Only a few historians have given passing notice to the fact that the W.F.M.S.-M.E.C. preceded the W.C.T.U. by five years, and the W.C.T.U.'s organizational style (with some differences) was borrowed (perhaps unconsciously, perhaps not) from the W.F.M.S. Several of the W.C.T.U.'s founding members were women already extremely active in the W.F.M.S. One of them, Jennie Fowler Willing, a Corresponding Secretary for the W.F.M.S.-M.E.C. and later for the W.H.M.S.-M.E.C., has been shown by Joanne Brown in a very recent dissertation to have been an organizer par excellence well before Frances Willard took the position of Corresponding Secretary of the W.C.T.U. It may be necessary to re-evaluate the uniqueness which has been claimed for the organizational skills and modes of operation developed by Frances Willard and the W.C.T.U. in light of research such as Brown's since Willard herself acknowledged Willing's superb ability as an organizer.15 Historians of women who have focused on the W.C.T.U. may have to re-look at the connection between the W.F.M.S. and the W.C.T.U. to bring to light the nature of the ties between the two organizations and the indebtedness of the W.C.T.U. to the W.F.M.S. in terms of organizational technique and even of membership. I am fairly certain that if studies of the membership and leadership in these two groups were done they would show a significant overlap. Historians have surmised this but, again, have not yet adequately documented it, to my knowledge.

It may further be important to look more closely at women like Jennie Fowler Willing who were leaders in the various W.F.M.S.s and W.H.M.S.s to see how they acquired and developed the organizational skills which made it possible for them to mobilize the large numbers of women who joined these organizations. Brown has given a good deal of attention to Willing's mode of operation as Corresponding Secretary of the W.F.M.S.-M.E.C. This position carried with it the responsibility for building membership through the formation of local units, and thus well before Frances Willard crisscrossed the U.S. by railroad in the late 1870s and early 1880s organizing for the W.C.T.U., Willing was travelling from coast to coast in the early 1870s throughout the northern half of the U.S. on behalf of the W.F.M.S.-M.E.C.

Willing herself believed and wrote that the secret of her organizing ability lay in her strong religious commitment to the causes for which she worked. She insisted that effective reformers must experience clear conversions to “heart purity” and act from the certainty that the cause for which they labored, whatever it might be, was God-inspired and directed. Willing had sought for and attained heart purity and dedicated herself wholly to the services of Christ, participating actively in a series of reforms over her lifetime. She was directly influenced by the Holiness movement and the revival milieu of the 1850s and 1860s which Timothy Smith has described. Indeed, she thought of herself as an evangelist in the mode of revival leaders like the Palmers. Her clearest appeal must have been to those who, like herself, existed in this milieu and who understood and responded to the language of the revival experience which Willing spoke as she sought support for the W.F.M.S.16

In my own research on Frances Willard and other W.C.T.U. leaders I encountered a similar evangelistic style which also spoke in the language of the revival. However, to use Anne Firor Scott’s phrase: “I saw it but didn’t see it;” that is, I did not attach any particular significance to the language other than to think to myself, “Well, that’s the way they talked; after all they were nineteenth-century Evangelical Protestants.” Colleagues of mine working on the Ohio Women’s Crusade of 1873-74 in which women formed praying bands and marched from churches to saloons, forcing proprietors to close down their dram shops, also noticed in passing the revival language and style among the Crusade leaders and their followers but didn’t think this worthy of attention. And since we all saw the Crusade as the formative event leading to what would become the W.C.T.U. (and in this we were influenced by the interpretation of the Crusade leadership itself who kept referring to the event as unprecedented, although it definitely was not), we never looked back behind this event to see what preceded it and how it was that women not only in Ohio but in many other parts of the country could be moved to such activity.

I also knew that Frances Willard had been converted by Phoebe Palmer in the 1860s during evangelistic meetings in Evanston, Illinois, and thus, like Willing, was greatly influenced by the Holiness revival movement. But I, along with many others, ignored these clues pointing to strong links between the revivals of the 1850s and ‘60s and the formation and growth of churchwomen’s organizations, preferring to look elsewhere in order to understand these groups. Thus they have been characterized by me and others as examples of feminist or proto-feminist movements, and we have concentrated on demonstrating this thesis through examining speeches and writings of the leadership for evidences of feminist theorizing, analyzing the groups as separatist organizations which provided

women the institutional space they needed outside of men’s control to develop effective power bases, and speculating that women were motivated to join them because they consciously or unconsciously saw them as avenues to public power. While all of this is true to a degree and can help to account for the way the organizations developed, I think that we must look carefully at what we have either overlooked or refused to notice, that is, those links I mentioned between the revival milieu of the 1850s and 1860s and the growth of churchwomen’s organizations in the 1870s and 1880s. It is time to stop viewing these groups from the perspective of feminist scholarship exclusively and treat them also as what they were: expressions of strong religious belief and commitment. To a group of church historians, that may seem to be an unnecessary, even slightly silly, statement, but there has been very little research done on these organizations from this perspective.

I think the reason for that has a good deal to do with the fact that many women’s historians are neither trained to describe and interpret religious behavior nor inclined to take it seriously, since they themselves are not religious and cannot seem to be able to exercise a “willing suspension of disbelief” (to borrow Coleridge’s phrase) and enter into the religious worldview of their research subjects. Happily, we are beginning to see some notable exceptions to this attitude, for example, a really stunning piece of work just published this year by Jane Hunter on women missionaries in turn-of-the-century China which exhaustively examines her subjects’ religious motivations with utmost seriousness, treating them with the integrity they deserve. I am convinced that we must have many more studies like this which concentrate on women’s religious motivation since it is for so many late nineteenth-century women the core of their existence.

To get at the nature of organized women’s beliefs and commitments it will be necessary to do much searching for and digging into materials from which to recreate Methodist women’s religious lives, especially from the 1850s onward. We know, for instance, that there were counterparts of Phoebe Palmer’s famous Tuesday meetings gathered in many cities from the late 1850s on, women’s benevolent groups generated out of the Holiness movement active in New York City by the end of the Civil War (and probably replicated in other cities as well, certainly, Chicago is a possibility for investigation), numerous camp meetings which women attended and in which they took active roles, and an organization called the Ladies and Pastors Christian Union formed in 1868. All of these indicate a high level of religious energy and enthusiasm among women. However, we do not yet have any sort of detailed description of these phenomena. Not only do we need to describe these and other similar types of activity; we also

18 Timothy Smith, Revivalism and Social Reform, pp. 124, 83.
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should be producing critical biographies of more women leaders during this period such as Annie Wittenmyer, one of the key organizers of the Ladies and Pastors Christian Union and the first president of the W.C.T.U., as well as others who were organizers of prayer meetings, benevolent societies, and those who were founders of women’s mission groups. Many biographies and autobiographies—full length books and shorter sketches—exist which were produced during the lifetimes of these women. They often pay much attention to religious experience and beliefs since these were perceived to be of great interest to readers. Moreover these women often wrote about their faith for periodicals such as the Guide to Holiness, published by the Palmers. Perhaps these and other print sources as well as manuscript sources such as journals, diaries, correspondence, reminiscences, etc. which might be unearthed with some detective work could enable scholars to reconstruct a religious profile of the Methodist women who became the organizers of women’s groups in the 1870s and 1880s. Such a profile would include descriptions of their religious experience, theology, and the manner in which their organizational activity related to that experience and theology. It could also diagram women’s networks in order to map out informal connections between women which served as avenues for communication of ideas and as a system of support which was often referred to as a sisterhood.

I have a hunch that this mapping process would reveal that large numbers of Methodist women spread out all over the country shared a common experience of conversion at a revival or evangelistic meeting and a subsequent dedication to social reform and mission work issuing directly out of their belief that God called them to such work, a process similar to the one Jennie Fowler Willing insisted was the basis for her organizing efforts. I think we would find that it is these women with a common experience of conversion and perhaps also with informal connections made during the 1850s and 1860s through channels like camp meeting attendance who became the mass of formally organized women of the 1870s and 1880s. They provided the audience to whom the leadership spoke in the shared language of conversion experience, they were the sisters who responded to the call to deepening dedication to the service of Christ through membership in the W.F.M.S., and W.H.M.S., and the W.C.T.U. or who became themselves missionaries. The close bonding occurring between these women which enabled them to characterize themselves as part of a sisterhood was not, at first, primarily based on their common womanhood, as some feminist scholars seem to suggest. They have tended to interpret sisterhood as implying something similar to the solidarity among women which the term connotes in the late twentieth century. Instead, the term “sisterhood” for churchwomen in the late nineteenth century was, above all, a sort of shorthand for a spiritual kinship among women who understood themselves as being related through their loyalty...
to and service to a common master, Christ. Only later in the 1880s did leaders like Frances Willard begin to interpret sisterhood more broadly to mean a kinship between all women simply because they were women, a kinship which crossed class and racial differences.

It may be a very difficult task, perhaps even an impossible one, to trace out the intricacies of this spiritual kinship which flourished through friendships nurtured in social/religious settings like yearly vacations at camp meetings and was sustained through letter writing, visits, and work together in charitable and reform efforts. It can be useful to look at organizational records, commemorative histories commissioned by groups, Minutes of meetings, etc. to get part of a picture of how women’s groups functioned, but to understand the kind of informal channels of support implied in the word “sisterhood” we need to get back behind these types of official records. For example, Mary Sparks Wheeler, who wrote a history of the W.F.M.S.-M.E.C. in celebration of the first decade of the group, mentions that organizing went on at camp meetings: Martha’s Vineyard, Massachusetts; Albion, Michigan; Ocean Grove, New Jersey; Round Lake, New York; Clifton Springs, New York; Lakeside, Ohio; Lancaster, Ohio; Tippecaneo Battle Ground, Indiana; Lake Bluff, Illinois; the Kansas Chautauqua; and Silver Lake, Michigan.19 These names are familiar to us as Methodist/Holiness watering holes, but we need a picture of what women’s life was like at these places and how they functioned as locuses of bonding and sisterhood. What kind of organizing activity took place? Who were the speakers who undoubtedly exhorted women to become members of missionary societies? What rhetoric was so persuasive in encouraging large numbers of women to join these organizations?

Women’s historians like Carroll Smith-Rosenberg and Nancy Cott offer help at this point because they have written about what Smith-Rosenberg has termed “the female world of love and ritual,” taking seriously the strength and intensity of women’s bonding during the nineteenth century.20 Using their work as a jumping off point, scholars investigating Methodist women’s organizing could seek to show just what kind of role women’s bonding played as a basis for the formation of strong mission and reform groups. Smith-Rosenberg’s and Cott’s studies are limited to a more private world of visiting in homes and corresponding. It would be significant to apply their insights to a semi-public space like the camp meeting.

19Mary Sparks Wheeler, First Decade of the Woman’s Foreign Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church With Sketches of Its Missionaries (New York: Phillips and Hunt, 1881), p. 64.

Wheeler's account of the first decade of the W.F.M.S. is one official history which does in fact contain some useful material for an understanding of women's bonding in a Holiness context. In her history she gives brief sketches of missionaries sent by the organization in its early years which support the hunch that the Holiness movement provided the religious climate for women's missionary activity and also gives hints of the kind of strong female support system which encouraged, in this case, missionary vocations. The missionary sketches were included in Wheeler's volume to convey to her readers an idea of what the call to mission work was like (and no doubt to elicit similar calls from her readership if possible). Out of nineteen missionary sketches, nine specifically mention Holiness meetings (some at campgrounds and others at individual churches) at which they consecrated their lives to God, with several claiming to have received "the second blessing" or "a baptism of power." Some who had been considering service in the mission field were led to a clear decision during the course of a series of meetings. For others, the search for a "larger field of usefulness" in Christ's service in response to a conversion experience pointed them toward a missionary vocation.

One woman mentioned personal counsel by Mrs. Bishop Hamline (Melinda), leader of a Holiness prayer meeting in Evanston, Illinois, which enabled her to "step upon the promise (of full salvation)" which she had been unable to claim until her visit with Mrs. Hamline. She was then able to go forth to the mission field. Another woman, the first sent by the Northwestern Branch of the W.F.M.S.-M.E.C., requested the "fervent and constant prayers" of the Northwestern Branch women gathered at a farewell meeting for their missionary. "The burden of the petitions was for the baptism of the Holy Spirit . . . to lead her to larger usefulness." Nine women is admittedly a very small sample from which to make any kind of generalization about the nature of the religious experience and the extent of female bonding which supported and encouraged women's missionary vocations. Yet it is enough evidence perhaps to suggest that it might be worthwhile to pursue this line of inquiry and see if it would be possible to reconstruct this female world of mutual support based on a shared religious experience which was characterized by the participants as a sisterhood.

Further evidence comes from looking at the women who took part in the Ohio Women's Crusade in 1873-74. These women spoke of their experiences in the same language that the missionary candidates used to describe their call. The Ohio women referred to themselves as receiving "a baptism of power" which enabled them in this instance to move from prayer meetings into the streets, demonstrating against saloon owners.

21Ibid., pp. 47-212.
22Ibid., p. 135.
23Ibid., pp. 121, 122.
Later, Crusade and W. C. T. U. leaders would interpret this activity as "a Second Pentecost," an outpouring of the Spirit specifically allowing women to act on a call from God and deepen their dedication by working for temperance in more public ways than women had thought possible. By the 1880s, W. C. T. U. women were describing their conversions to women suffrage, claiming that God had demanded yet more from them than they had thus far given, requiring them to put aside their scruples against entering the male domain of the voting booth and national politics to further God's Kingdom. By this time women were indeed beginning to experience God leading them onward to what one might now term feminist behavior, but which W. C. T. U. women interpreted as a deepening of their commitment to God and God's work. Though the goal might be different in the cases of missionary, Ohio Crusader, and W. C. T. U. woman suffrage supporter, the process of conversion and the consecration and rededication of one's life to God's service was similar and seems to have had its roots in the Holiness/revival movement which could provide both the type of religious experience common to the women and the bonding and support network necessary to create and sustain strong formal organizations, although this still remains to be proved.

From having read many descriptions of National W. C. T. U. meetings and reunions of the participants in the Ohio Women's Crusade, it appears to me that it would be interesting to study just how the organization ritualized the feelings of sisterhood in its membership, strengthening it, broadening its meaning, and leading the "sisters" toward somewhat radical stances during the late 1880s and early 1890s. The same kind of study might be done on the W. F. M. S. and the W. H. M. S. organizations to show how the concept of sisterhood developed in those organizations over time. The W. F. M. S., for example, encouraged their membership to look upon those to whom missionaries were sent as sisters. However, Jane Hunter contends in The Gospel of Gentility that sisterhood across racial lines was an ideal more than a reality, since in China, at least, missionaries tended to view the Chinese as children rather than as siblings.

It was above all the deaconess movement which institutionalized for women the process of consecration to Christ's service within the church, receiving the official approval from the M. E. C. General Conference in 1888 for a new role for women within Methodism. Deaconesses constituted a formalized sisterhood who chose not to marry, wore distinctive garb, often lived together in small groups, and consciously led a life of sacrifice "for Jesus' sake" (the motto that Lucy Rider Meyer, a leader in the move-

24 Ruth Bordin, Woman and Temperance, chapter 2.
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A recent dissertation by Mary Agnes Dougherty looks closely at the nature of this religious commitment by reconstructing the lives of 509 women who became deaconesses in the late 1880s and 1890s. 27 Catherine Prelinger and Rosemary Keller, in an article entitled “The Function of Female Bonding: The Restored Diaconessate of the Nineteenth Century,” portray the mutual support and intensely felt sisterhood among deaconesses as the means which enabled women to minister to the unfamiliar and often threatening world of the cities’ poor and immigrant communities, initially the deaconesses’ chosen field of service. 28 Dougherty makes a strong case for the thesis that as deaconesses labored among the poor they began to make a very sharp critique of the traditional attitudes toward poverty which looked on the poor as failures through their own faults. Some deaconesses began to question an economic system which exploited the poor, writing about this theory in the Deaconess Advocate and other publications. 29 Dougherty maintains that deaconesses were practicing social gospel theology decades before the M.E.C. officially espoused social gospel principles by incorporating them into The Social Creed in 1908. Work in progress by Alice Knotts, a student of Jean Miller Schmidt at Iliff, is attempting to follow the careers of several deaconesses who were founding members of the Methodist Federation for Social Service in the early twentieth century, looking at how their deaconess experience radicalized them and made them participants in the Methodist left.

It would be rewarding to study the W.H.M.S.s, particularly that of the M.E.C.-South, as it moved into the twentieth century since it made critiques of the industrial development of the “new South” in the years following Reconstruction. In making these critiques W.H.M.S. leaders disagreed with influential male Methodist leaders such as Bishop Atticus Haygood who supported industrialization which resulted in the marginalization of blacks and poor whites. Mary E. Frederickson has made a provocative beginning of such a study in her article “Shaping a New Society: Methodist Women and Industrial Reform in the South, 1880-1940.” 30 In it, she points out that the Woman’s Missionary Council of the M.E.C.-South adopted the motto “Grow we must, even if we outgrow all that we love,” which they understood as a statement challenging the status quo of the so-called solid South. This group and its successors provided some key leadership in the struggle for racial justice during the


1920s-1960s in which women did find themselves outgrowing all they loved and experiencing disapproval and threats from some of those whom they loved most. Frederickson identifies women's bonding and mutual support as a crucial factor in their ability to call for social change when it was clearly dangerous to do so. Thoroughly tracing the shifts in meaning of the term “sisterhood” for Methodist women's organizations from the 1870s to the 1970s would be work which would make a significant contribution toward understanding the developing theology of organized Methodist women and how that theology was linked with social action as women urged each other onward in what seems to have been continual rededication to God's work, even though this might lead them into places they had not ventured before and might call them to grow beyond a comfortable, undemanding faith.

Research in the history of organized Methodist women is in its early stages. We need to fill in many gaps in the secondary literature on the subject in a variety of areas, only a few of which I have indicated in this paper. As we produce such studies, we can carry on a preliminary wrestling with the questions raised by Anne Firor Scott, Donald Mathews, and others about the nature and scope of the impact which organized Methodist women have had on Methodism and on the larger society. Once we do this we will be able to see what we have not seen and discover new worlds in our past.