

**WOMEN'S WORK:  
THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN WESLEYAN METHODIST  
OVERSEAS MISSION IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY**

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For the Wesleyan Methodist women of nineteenth century Britain, life was limited primarily to a domestic role. A woman's place was in the home. A woman's work was to nurture her family and make their home a place of domestic comfort.

However, throughout the century, various expansions were permitted within the boundaries of that domestic role.<sup>1</sup> The work of nurture and comfort was allowed to reach outside the bounds of a woman's own home into the world of the church. There had almost always been a place for the Methodist woman to work in the class meeting, as a spiritual leader for her own sex. Equally, there was a place for her in the Sunday School and other work nurturing children outside her own home. Westminster Normal Training Institution, opened by the Wesleyans in 1851, provided teacher training for Methodist women as well as men, qualifying them to teach in Methodist day schools. Other places for 'women's work' outside the home were found in social ministries to needy women and their families. All these out-of-home ministries became acceptable for Wesleyan women because they were seen as natural extensions of, rather than departures from, the primary domestic role. Each was seen as a part of the 'womanly' work of nurture and comfort.

One of the most intriguing areas of expansion in the role of women was the field of overseas mission. Initially, women became involved only as fund raisers, or, by default, as missionaries' wives. But, in the mid-century, the way was opened for Wesleyan women to expand their domestic role by serving as single women missionaries. It was still seen as an expression of the domestic work which was uniquely women's, but it was carried out a long way from home.

The leadership of the Methodist Missionary Societies (founded to raise support for Wesleyan missions) was male. The speakers on the platforms of the meetings were male. The missionaries they supported were male. The officers they elected were male. But when the leaders challenged the

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<sup>1</sup>See, for instance, G. G. Findlay and W. W. Holdsworth, *The History of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society*, Volume IV, (London: The Epworth Press, 1922), 15-16.

crowd for a few good fund raisers, the call went out to the females among them.

In the famous Leeds meeting of 1813 to establish the first district Methodist Missionary Society, spokesman Jabez Bunting turned to address the women present in the galleries. He reminded them of how Christianity had raised the status of women in Britain. He challenged their sympathies with a description of the degraded status of women in "Heathenism" and "Mohametanism." He appealed to their sense of female solidarity with their "Heathen" sisters. And he called out,

British and Christian Females! The Gospel has done much for you, and I trust you will be among the first and foremost of those who are endeavouring to give it that universal publicity which it so well deserves.<sup>2</sup>

The report of the founding of the Methodist Missionary Societies at Plymouth-Dock and Plymouth in 1814 gives evidence that Wesleyan women needed no prodding to raise support for overseas missions. Here we read of a less official missionary society founded two years previously by the Wesleyan women of Stonehouse. This record, then, dates the Stonehouse society before the famous Leeds meeting. These "benevolent ladies at Stonehouse" are cited as examples to challenge the benevolence of those Methodists gathered at Plymouth-Dock and Plymouth.<sup>3</sup>

A motion made in the founding meeting of the General Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society in 1818, gives witness to the value of the Wesleyan women's cooperation in fund-raising. Rev. J. Buckley moved a vote of thanks to the fund-raising women of Methodism.<sup>4</sup> This motion was seconded, passed unanimously and echoed regularly in the annual meetings of the General WMMS.

These female supporters of Wesleyan Methodist missions resorted to various means of fund-raising, from the ordinary effort of collecting subscriptions from society members to the more imaginary efforts of forming worker's meetings or holding bazaars. Some "even took out hawkers' licenses" so that they could sell their products door-to-door to raise money

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<sup>2</sup>Bunting in James Nichols, *A Report of the Principal Speeches Delivered at the Formation of the Methodist Missionary Society for the Leeds District*, Fifth edition (London: John Mason, 1840), 38-39.

<sup>3</sup>*Methodist Missions. An Account of a Formation of a Methodist Missionary Society at Plymouth-Dock and . . . Plymouth*, (Dock: J. Johns, 1814), 27, 37 and 58. One speaker asserted,

The example of our sisters at Stonehouse, which cannot be too highly commended, shows that they can do much even among their own sex — how much more they might do among that sex over whom their influence is considerably greater." (p. 58)

<sup>4</sup>*The First Report of the General Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society*, (London: Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society, 1818), vi.

for missions. And when the funds were gathered the women handed them in to a male treasurer who passed them on to an all-male Missionary Committee who disbursed them to support male missionaries and their wives.

From the beginning of Wesleyan Methodist missions the practice and the rule was that only Wesleyan preachers were appointed as missionaries. These missionary candidates went through the same process of confirmation as candidates for the British Wesleyan ministry, with just a few steps added at the end of the process.<sup>5</sup> There was no place for Wesleyan women as preachers under the Methodist Conference, so there was no place for Wesleyan women as missionaries under that Conference. Many of the missionaries, however, had wives, and this meant, unofficially, that the Wesleyan Conference sent women to the mission field.

Officially, only the men were expected to carry out the work of missionaries. The women, like preachers' wives in England, were simply to provide a nurturing, comforting home environment for their husbands and children. It was hoped that in so doing these Wesleyan women would provide effective examples of Christian womanhood for the 'heathen' women among whom their husbands worked. According to Findlay and Holdsworth,

... the greatest help our pioneer missionary women lent to the cause of Christ was found in the exhibition of a Christian domestic life, shedding the light of a pure, gentle, and beneficent womanhood amid the loathsomeness of heathen society.<sup>6</sup>

Overseas, as in England, the primary role of the Methodist woman was domestic.

Life overseas, however, provided a whole new set of challenges for the missionary's family. In this new environment the missionary's wife found the boundaries of her role expanding. Cyril Davey writes,

Victorian women won their freedom overseas more quickly than they did at home. The girl who obeyed her father without question in Britain, and promised in her marriage to obey her husband in the same fashion, began to take decisions both with him and without him when she landed overseas.<sup>7</sup>

These missionaries' wives rose to the challenge and, in spirit and practice, became missionaries themselves.

Ann Shaw and her husband began their South African ministry in the more settled, colonized regions of the land. But it was she, who, still weak from childbirth, pressed her husband to journey into "Kaffraria" to fulfil his calling to a pioneer ministry.<sup>9</sup> Mrs. Lyth and Mrs. Calvert,<sup>8</sup> left to

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<sup>5</sup>*General Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society*, 1818, x.

<sup>6</sup>Findlay and Holdsworth, Volume IV, 16.

<sup>7</sup>Cyril Davey, *The March of Methodism*, (London: Epworth Press, 1951), 69.

<sup>8</sup>Findlay and Holdsworth, IV, 16.

manage their Fijian mission station while their husbands itinerated, courageously intervened to halt the clubbing of men at a reportedly cannibalistic feast.<sup>9</sup>

Many of the missionary wives extended their husbands' ministries by setting up schools for women and girls. Mrs. Badger, for instance, set up schools and then directed the training of teachers in West Africa until her death in 1852.<sup>10</sup> Mrs. Piercy, trained at Westminster, opened a girls' boarding school in her home in Canton in 1854.<sup>11</sup> Missionaries' wives in India and Ceylon as well attempted to establish and run girls' schools. These ministries to women and girls were lauded because they were seen as useful extensions of the domestic calling of a missionary's wife. Her schools were the key to training up Christian wives and mothers to bring the influence of Christ to heathen lands. Along with reading and writing she often taught lacework, sewing or other domestic skills.

As their families and their husbands' work expanded, however, these missionaries' wives began to feel torn between their commitment to their families and their commitment to their out-of-home ministries. They found they could no longer do justice to their home role while they carried on their missionary ministries. There was no real choice in their understanding and, time after time, the girls' schools were shut down as the missionaries' wives withdrew to meet the ever-growing demands of home life. Mrs. John Walton, who served with her husband in Jaffna, Ceylon, reflected this withdrawal when she wrote that the place of the Missionary's wife was in the home — as an example of Christian home life and a protection for her children against "evil and corrupting influences."<sup>12</sup> The need was felt for "ladies, who free from domestic ties," could "devote themselves exclusively" to the girls' schools.<sup>13</sup>

The first single female Wesleyan missionary was sent by a nondenominational agency, "A Society for the Promotion of Female Education in the East." Miss Twiddie was assigned to serve as schoolmistress in the Wesleyan Girls' Boarding School in Jaffna, Ceylon. In Ceylon she met and married Peter Batchelor, a Wesleyan missionary. They were then transferred to Negapatam, India. There Mrs. Batchelor established a girls' day school. Convinced of the need of more concentrated ministry among Indian women and girls, Mrs. Batchelor wrote to Miss Farmer, the daughter of the General WMMS treasurer. Mrs. Batchelor's request was that a society be established to promote women's work in Wesleyan missions.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Davey, 69.

<sup>10</sup>Davey, 69.

<sup>11</sup>Findlay and Holdsworth, Volume V, (1924), 537-8.

<sup>12</sup>Ladies' Committee for Ameliorating the Condition of Women in Heathen Countries, Female Education, &c., *Occasional Paper*, 1 (March, 1859), 12.

<sup>13</sup>*Occasional Paper*, 13.

<sup>14</sup>Findlay and Holdsworth, Volume IV, 20.

The WMMS secretaries approved the idea and on December 20, 1858 the Ladies' Committee for the Amelioration of the Condition of Women in Heathen Countries, Female Education, &c. was launched. This was an all-female organization with all-female leadership, sending female missionaries to minister to females overseas. As Allen Birtwhistle remarks, "For the first time, the women of Methodism had the right to decide how money they had raised should be spent."<sup>15</sup>

At the beginning, the work of the Committee focused on helping and multiplying girls' schools where Wesleyan missionaries were already laboring.<sup>16</sup> First, grants were sent to girls' schools in India, China, Natal and Hudson Bay. Goods were sent as well, such as warm clothing for the North American Aboriginal work. The first missionary, Susannah Gooding Beal, was sent to Belize in 1859. She died in 1860. Though no replacement was sent to Belize, many young Wesleyan women rose up to stand in her place in Wesleyan mission stations around the world. The majority of the early female teachers appointed had been educated at Westminster Institution.<sup>17</sup>

The Ladies' Committee was given the freedom to choose and train its own agents and to raise and administer its own funds. The stationing, however, was done through the General WMMS and the female agents came under the authority of the WMMS missionaries on the field.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, the female agents, held no seats on the decision-making missionary bodies on the field. Though far from home, the women were still serving properly "in their place."

The need for female missionaries was most keenly felt in India, where the culture allowed male missionaries no access to the 'native' women. But female agents were also called for and sent to Ceylon, South Africa, West Africa, China, Italy and elsewhere. Missionaries and missionaries' wives, writing in support of the female agency, saw the ministry of women to women as a key to penetrating the stubborn 'heathen' darkness on the mission field. If the 'native' women could be converted, it was asserted, then through their influence in their homes whole nations could be converted and civilized. Writing from India, Mrs. Batchelor asserted,

The women of this mighty continent are inveterate idol-worshippers . . . and they instil, with unremitting endeavours, their own belief into the minds of their children. I think that we must confess our own sex to be powerful agents for good or evil; and when we remember how blessed and holy is the influence of a pious mother, we may draw a correct inference as to the pernicious influence of a heathen mother.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>15</sup>N. Allen Birtwhistle, "Methodist Missions," *A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain*, Volume 3, (London: Epworth, 1983), 52.

<sup>16</sup>Findlay and Holdsworth, Volume IV, 23.

<sup>17</sup>George G. Findlay and Mary Grace Findlay, *Wesley's World Parish*, second edition, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, n.d.), 170.

<sup>18</sup>Findlay and Holdsworth, Volume IV, 68-69.

<sup>19</sup>Letter, 23 December 1858 in *Occasional Paper*, No. 1 (March, 1859), 8.

Rev. John Kilner, missionary to Ceylon wrote,

If there be one lesson plainer than another which the history of our intercourse with heathen populations teaches, it is that the home life, embracing especially the Mother's influence on the family, is, to a very large extent, the type and mould by which the national life is formed. In the homes of Heathendom, as in homes elsewhere, we find this is the key which locks or unlocks the destiny of the nations.<sup>20</sup>

He went on to call for increased attention to women's work on the mission fields. The work of the women missionaries focused on the domestic influence of native women. In so doing, it remained within the boundaries of a woman's proper work.

The Ladies' Committee struggled along through the first two decades of its existence. Management was weak, efforts inconsistent and the attrition rate among agents high. Agents rarely lasted five years in a post, falling victim to disease or, more embarrassing for the committee, to the marriage proposal of a WMMS missionary. Often an agent never got past language studies before she fell ill or married and became lost to the work. William Arthur remarks that the Ladies' Committee's nondemoninational sister agency became tagged with the nickname, "The Bachelor's Aid Society."<sup>21</sup>

In spite of the setbacks, however, the women's work slowly expanded. From education, the Ladies' Committee expanded into zenana visitation and Bible woman work. Zenana work was used in teaching secluded Muslim women in their homes. Bible women were "native" agents trained and supported in visiting from house to house, ministering to adult native women. In addition, the Bible women gathered groups of villagers around them in the evenings as the laborers returned from their fields. In these groups they would speak of Christ, read the Scripture and tell Bible stories.<sup>22</sup> William Arthur wrote that this native agency, "quietly operates behind and within the outworks of caste, by directly acting on the centre of the family."<sup>23</sup> This was the closest a female agent came to serving in a preaching role.

The Ladies' Committee advanced most significantly under the leadership of Mrs. Caroline Wiseman who served as its secretary from 1874 to 1912.<sup>24</sup> An able manager, she brought a higher level of organization to the Committee's efforts. Also, through her publicity efforts she greatly increased public awareness and the support base of the Committee.

Mrs. Wiseman initiated working parties to make items to send overseas for children or to sell to increase mission support. This made

<sup>20</sup>John Kilner, *Remarks on Christian Women's Work in Heathendom*, (London: The Ladies' Auxiliary of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society for Promoting Female Education, 1874), 3.

<sup>21</sup>William Arthur, *Women's Work in India*, (London: T. Woolmer, 1882), 12.

<sup>22</sup>Findlay and Findlay, 172.

<sup>23</sup>Arthur, 50.

<sup>24</sup>Findlay and Holdsworth, Volume IV, 42.

the way clear for young women with less economic power to join the work of the Committee.<sup>25</sup> In 1881 Mrs. Wiseman inaugurated the publication of an annual report. In 1882 the group changed its name to "The Ladies' Auxiliary of the WMMS." In 1883 the Auxiliary established a connexion-wide Easter Offering to be collected annually from Methodist families. In 1885 the Auxiliary made its first appearance at the May Meetings of the WMMS with good success. In 1886 the Auxiliary first appeared in the annual Conference celebrations. By 1887 it had begun to use women as the Auxiliary's spokespersons at the May Meetings.<sup>26</sup> This meant that women were now speaking publicly in behalf of missions. In 1888 Mrs. Wiseman travelled to Ceylon and India to see the Auxiliary's work for herself. Under her leadership the Ladies' Auxiliary had made tremendous advance in just over a decade.

In its overseas work the Auxiliary also made significant advances in this period. It entered into compassionate ministries, beginning with orphanages formed during the South Indian famine in 1876-77. Out of the orphanages industrial schools were established where the Auxiliary contributed to the teaching of lace-making skills. The Sisters of Uva, organized by Mrs. Wiseman's class meeting in 1890, proved a strong support for these humanitarian efforts.<sup>27</sup>

In 1884-5 the first medical workers were sent by the Ladies' Committee (by then the name had been changed to the "Ladies' Auxiliary of the WMMS") to India and China. This need for female medical workers was especially felt in India where women would not go to a hospital staffed by men. William Arthur included in his 1882 publication a special appeal for fully-qualified "lady doctors." The preface to his appeal reveals the hesitation with which female medical work had been entered (medical missionary work was still fairly new even among males):

We have now left behind us the stage at which the question was, Are Female Medical Missions possible? They exist. Perhaps I may also say that we have left behind the stage at which the question was, Will they be useful? They have been useful; they are useful. At present the question seems to be, Should a lady doctor be half trained or fully trained?<sup>28</sup>

The first diploma-qualified woman doctor, Dr. Ethel Gough, was sent by the Auxiliary to Hankow Hospital in 1895. By 1900 medical work had become a major focus in the Auxiliary's ministries. Women's work in Methodist missions had come a long way from home fires, but it was still a work of nurture and comfort, and still the work of female agents for females. It still fit loosely within the boundaries of proper women's work.

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<sup>25</sup>Findlay and Holdsworth, Volume IV, 48.

<sup>26</sup>Findlay and Holdsworth, IV, 50.

<sup>27</sup>Findlay and Holdsworth, Volume IV, 60.

<sup>28</sup>Arthur, 66.

In 1927 the WMMS assimilated the Ladies' Auxiliary as its Women's Department. For the first time women could be sent out as official missionaries of the WMMS, but because of the work of the Ladies' Auxiliary they were already veterans on the field.

The women of nineteenth century Wesleyan Methodism accomplished much for the cause of mission. They provided a strong base of financial support even before the founding of the first Methodist Missionary Society. They pioneered the way for lay agency on the mission field. It was not until 1873 that the men followed their lead with the sending of the first male lay missionary.<sup>29</sup> Most significantly they made literacy, industrial skills, medical care and the Christian gospel available to thousands of their sisters overseas. All this was accomplished within the bounds of an established domestic role. But, thus stretched and extended, how long could those bounds hold?

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<sup>29</sup>Findlay and Holdsworth, Volume V, 545.