Fran Martinez Bussie, born in New Orleans in 1935 and raised Catholic, converted to Methodism as an adult. So did her husband, Victor Bussie. Following their conversion, Fran and Vic Bussie joined First United Methodist in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, because it was one of the most progressive churches in the state and thus suited them philosophically and theologically. Vic Bussie, head of the Louisiana AFL-CIO for forty-five years, led that federation of labor unions to support both civil rights for African Americans, who comprised roughly thirty percent of the population of Louisiana, and equal rights for women. Vic and Fran Bussie believed that ending oppression was a religious duty, and they joined the Methodist Church because they found its teachings and practices consistent with their beliefs.2

Fran Bussie served as president of the board of Louisiana ERA United, a statewide umbrella organization working toward ratification of the federal Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). In that capacity, she frequently gave public talks to build up political support for its ratification.3 Her speeches argued for women’s equality by referencing church authority as well as the Bible. Before an audience at the YWCA in Shreveport, Louisiana, she pointed out that “The 1976 General Conference of the United Methodist Church said, ‘The Gospel makes it clear that Jesus regarded women and men as being of equal worth.’” To a devout Christian like Fran Bussie, there could be no higher authority than Jesus’ words in the gospel. “People who claim that these laws [that discriminate against women] are based on the Bible are either unaware of the unjust principle upon which so many of our laws are based, or are reading a different Bible than I am. As a Christian I am appalled by laws that give so much power to, and literally deify, the husband. The only real solution I see to the various and unsurmountable problems that most women must at one time or the other face is the ratification of the Equal

1 The term “Holy Boldness” comes from Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, “If It Wasn’t For the Women…” (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001), 76.
2 Fran Bussie (pronounced with a long U, BYOO-see) was a paid lobbyist for the Louisiana AFL-CIO in the 1970s. Victor Bussie headed the Louisiana AFL-CIO from 1956 to 1997.
3 Section 1 of the Equal Rights Amendment reads: “Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex.” Passed by Congress in 1972, it was never ratified by the required number of states (38).
For many Methodist feminists in the South, gender equality was entirely consistent with Christian principles; they became feminist because of, not in spite of, their faith commitment. In the rest of the United States, the modern women’s rights movement, typically referred to as “second-wave” feminism, was self-consciously secular, but in the south, religion was a major motivating factor for many who sought gender equality, and Methodism was a particularly strong predictor of feminist leanings. In fact, southern Methodist women—and a few men—were instrumental in creating the national women’s liberation movement.

Feminist Methodists built on a long and “well-developed tradition of social concern” in the various branches of southern Methodism before the merger in 1939. Since the Victorian Age, Methodist women had worked on behalf of and in alliance with marginalized, oppressed people in the United States, including the poor, people of color, immigrants, and Native Americans, paying special attention to the needs of women and girls. In addition, since the nineteenth century women’s circles within Methodism had sponsored foreign missions and founded schools and medical facilities dedicated to improving the lives of women and children in non-Western countries. Though most Methodist women did not become missionaries themselves, they followed closely the work of those they sponsored in other lands and studied the conditions and rights (or lack of them) for women there. Everywhere they went, Methodist missionaries stressed the dignity of women and girls as part of the gospel message. Global studies and experiences taught Methodist women respect for cultural traditions different from their own. In addition, such education also helped to sensitize white women to the racism and oppression that existed in their hometowns.

Work on behalf of dispossessed women and girls also opened white women’s eyes to their own secondary status within Western society and in the denomination itself. Women of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South (MECS), for example, were horrified when the all-male General Board of Missions usurped control of their missionary societies, against their will and over their objections, at the General Conference in 1910. Though their protestation brought a concession in the form of at least token representation on the General Board, the “trauma of the merger,” as historian Alice G. Knotts puts it, led some of them “to identify with the frustration and anger that

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5 The “first wave” of feminism refers to the movement that began in 1848 and resulted in the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment (the woman suffrage amendment) in 1920.
6 These include the CME, AME, and AMEZ churches to which African Americans belonged.
7 Andrew M. Manis, “‘City Mothers’: Dorothy Tilly, Georgia Methodist Women, and Black Civil Rights,” in Glenn Feldman, ed., Before Brown: Civil Rights and White Backlash in the Modern South, (Tuscaloosa, AL, 2004), 138; Dana L. Roberts, Joy to the World: Mission in the Age of Global Christianity (Women’s Division, General Board of Global Ministries, The United Methodist Church, 2010), 27.
African Americans felt under segregation.” As a result, southern Methodist women reached across the color line and formed cooperative working relationships with women of all races while simultaneously urging white men to treat African Americans as children of God, just as they were. Southern white Methodist women, in fact, were the first people to organize for the purpose of encouraging fair, decent, respectful treatment of African Americans, an end to lynching, and, later, in support of civil rights.  

Though not all Methodists were liberal on race relations or on any other issue, many historians have recognized that among white southerners, Methodist women were more open-minded than Methodist men. Andrew Manis says that women “led the way in the Methodist Church and became the most progressive element in the white South,” and Bettye Collier-Thomas characterized Methodist women’s organizations in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as “the leading liberal religious organizations” among white women. Men often could not take public positions that were at variance with the dominant culture for fear of economic reprisals, but women’s organizations had enough autonomy within the denomination to move forward with reform initiatives that preceded the stance of the institutional church by many decades.

While this essay ranges widely across the south in its discussion of Methodist feminists, most of the primary source research concentrates on my home state of Louisiana, where Methodists have historically comprised the third-largest segment of the churched population, behind Catholics and Southern Baptists. In the 1970s, the decade when the second wave gained momentum and when gender equality earned the imprimatur of The United Methodist Church, about 100,000 Louisiana, black and white, claimed Methodist affiliation.

As broached in the introduction, Methodists in the south developed feminist consciousness as a result of more than a century of social justice activism. Beginning in the nineteenth century, women’s support for economic and social improvement gained new vigor during the reform movement known as the Social Gospel at the beginning of the twentieth century. Based upon the ideas of leading theologians Walter Rauschenbusch, Washington Gladden, and Josiah Strong (among others), the Social Gospel stressed the importance of improving conditions in this world rather than on preparing for one’s own salvation in the hereafter. Focusing on one of those

8 Knotts, Fellowship of Love, 34, 37.
goals did not necessarily preclude the other, however, because the two were inextricably linked. As Mrs. R. W. “Tochie” MacDonell, the administrative secretary for the Women’s Missionary Council of the MECS wrote in 1911, “Give our people proper living conditions and it becomes easier to live righteously.” The Social Gospel’s emphasis on the faith community’s responsibility to create a more just and ethical world often translated into political reform, as activists sought secular solutions to pressing social problems.\(^\text{12}\)

The Social Gospel emphasized helping all people in need, but women’s groups were particularly concerned about the plight of poor women and children. In Louisiana, Methodist women supported orphanages, women’s prison ministries, and “led or played pivotal roles on behalf of child labor laws, juvenile courts, and public health measures.”\(^\text{13}\) In addition, suffragist Caroline Merrick and her fellow Methodists worked (unsuccessfully) to get Louisiana to ratify the Nineteenth Amendment in 1919.\(^\text{14}\)

Women’s church groups, whether activist or not, taught leadership skills and promoted continuing education for their members that led many into reform activities. In addition to Bible study and missional study, women’s circles, conference schools, and summer seminars assigned topics in the news that inspired calls for change. Some Methodist women were inspired to become deaconesses (that is, single women consecrated to work among the poor), either for a few years before marriage or as a lifetime commitment. Deaconesses were unusually well-educated among southern women. After 1918, the MECS required them to have two years of college and two years of professional-level education. Deaconesses trained at Scarritt College for Christian Workers in Nashville, where they read widely in the works of Social Gospel theologians. Scarritt’s liberal faculty encouraged cooperation with nearby Fisk University, an HBCU (historically black college or university). As a result, Scarritt produced graduates who felt a moral duty to reach across the race divide and challenge southern racial mores. Methodist women were the only white women in the south who did this.\(^\text{15}\)

Dorothy Weber (Carter), for example, from a very wealthy family in Lake Charles, Louisiana, held to the traditional views of most white southerners, but attending Scarritt College in the 1920s caused her to rethink her positions. Not only did she develop a new respect for African Americans after working with the students at Fisk; she also developed a sense of moral outrage at segregation itself. While Scarritt admitted “students from many countries, e.g., Japan, Korea, China, India and others,” Carter noted in her memoir, Tennessee’s laws prevented even this progressive college from ad-


mitting African Americans. After graduating in 1930, Weber asked for an appointment to the Bethlehem Community Center in Augusta, Georgia, the first of thirteen such facilities operated by Methodist women in black communities. For her first five years there, she lived with center director Thelma Stevens in a cottage in the heart of Augusta’s black community. She also came to know black women on a personal basis and to learn from them, because Bethlehem Center’s interracial board was made up of representatives from white and black churches in the area. Together, they decided upon the services that would best address unmet needs in the surrounding community. In 1953, she married Howard Carter and moved back to Lake Charles, where she was active in First United Methodist Church.¹⁶

Southern Methodist deaconesses like Dorothy Weber Carter oversaw dozens of settlement houses in poor urban neighborhoods, schools, and other social service institutions for African Americans, immigrants, Indians, and those for whom English was a foreign language. In Louisiana, this included people of French ancestry known as Cajuns (a shortened form of “Acadian”), who spoke a French dialect. Until the 1970s, Louisiana law required English-only education, and French-speaking children risked punishment and ridicule if they attended public school. Some parents refused to send their children to public schools only to be humiliated for speaking their native tongue. In addition, poor Cajun families often lacked money for books and proper clothing for their children to wear to school, and many had no transportation.

To help those families, Deaconess Ella Keener Hooper and her friend Laura White established a mission in Terrebonne Parish in the bayou country of south Louisiana. Hooper, a native of Rosedale, Louisiana, had attended Scarritt for one year before illness forced her to leave.¹⁷ Sick, underweight, and with poor eyesight that disqualified her for overseas missions, Hooper convinced Tochie MacDonell, whom she had come to know while at Scarritt, to back her idea for a mission in south Louisiana among the Catholic Cajuns. In 1919, at MacDonell’s urging, the Women’s Missionary Council (WMC) purchased an old home—what became the Wesley House—on a tree-shaded twenty-acre estate near Houma. In honor of its benefactor, Hooper named it


¹⁷ McDowell, Social Gospel in the South, 16.
the MacDonell French Mission.\textsuperscript{18}

With the assistance of the Methodist women’s groups around the state, particularly the Women’s Missionary Society of the Louisiana Conference, and a Centenary gift of $10,000 from the MECS, the MacDonell site gradually added new structures, consisting of dormitories and classrooms for boys as well as girls, a dining hall, and a laundry. Neither an orphanage nor strictly a boarding school, MacDonell provided a temporary home for some of the ninety-five students enrolled at the school and expected residents to develop self-reliance by helping to maintain their rooms and the appearance of the campus.

Hooper also assisted Mr. and Mrs. George Deforest, a couple sent by the Methodist Church to minister to the nearby Houma Indians, in delivering Bibles, clothes, food, and other necessities to that group of Native Americans. As a result of this work, Hooper learned that the Houma had no school or reservation of their own, and, because they were not “white” enough, the segregated public schools would not admit them. Thus, in the 1930s, Mrs. Deforest and Ella Hooper set up a school for the Houma Indian children in Dulac, farther south along the bayou, and brought Hooper’s

When the laws changed in the 1960s and all children now had access to public education, Dulac Indian School became a community center, as it remains today. The United Methodist Women continued to send donations to both Dulac and MacDonell House into the twenty-first century, although well over three-fourths of the funding for both sites now comes from the state of Louisiana.

When Ella Hooper retired as director of MacDonell House in 1949, Julia Reid took over. Born in 1900 in Lake Charles, Reid had worked for twelve years in Cuba after her graduation from Scarritt. Having learned the Spanish language, she moved back to the United States to avoid the political tumult of revolutionary-era Cuba and ministered to poor Hispanics at settlement houses in Miami and San Antonio before taking over as head of the MacDonell mission. In 1950, she married W. W. Paxton, and the newlyweds returned to Lake Charles, where she served on the staff of First United Methodist Church as Director of Christian Education, a fairly new profession for women within the church.

While Protestant missionaries have been criticized for “cultural imperialism,” American Indian historian Theda Perdue argues that the relationship between Protestant missionaries and Native Americans was reciprocal and more balanced than first impressions may convey. American Indians benefit-

19 Because the Houma intermarried with Creole and Acadian settlers in southern Louisiana and became French-speaking, the Bureau of Indian Affairs has rejected their attempts at federal recognition, reservation lands, or tribal sovereignty. The state of Louisiana gave them tribal recognition in 1972. Governor’s Office of Indian Affairs website: http://www.gov.state.la.us/index.cfm?md=pagebuilder&tmp=home&navID=85&cpID=564&catID=0. Accessed August 21, 2013. Also see: http://www.unitedhoumanation.org/
tered in many ways from having missionaries and their institutions, particularly churches, among them.\textsuperscript{22} 

St. Mark’s Community Center in New Orleans, a settlement house founded by Methodist women in an immigrant neighborhood in 1909, and St. Mark’s Church, on the same grounds as the community center, likewise showed sensitivity to the religious traditions of the largely Catholic Irish and Italians they served. The services and Bible studies offered at the community center were ecumenical. The deaconesses who ran the settlement kept the funds, organization, and space under their own control, giving them an autonomy that led them to challenge traditional racial hierarchies.\textsuperscript{23} They broke both custom and law by providing health care, swimming lessons, and other services equally and without discrimination to blacks as well as whites. As a result, St. Mark’s stood as a unique nursery of change in New Orleans. The pastor of the church, Andy Foreman, defied the white boycott of William Frantz Elementary School by keeping his daughter in school with Ruby Bridges, the African American student who entered first grade there in 1960, despite the very real danger that such a stand presented to him and his family.\textsuperscript{24}

Among white Methodist women, anti-racist activities, because they were a form of protest against established authority and white male patriarchy,
became the forerunners of feminism. Historian Sara Evans, daughter of a Methodist minister and a participant in the civil rights movement in North Carolina, noted the important role of the Methodist Student Movement (MSM), which “represented a revitalization of the Methodist tradition of social action and concern,” on college campuses. MSM’s journal (motive magazine) was published in Nashville, a critical site of student protests against racial injustice—and also the location of Fisk and Scarritt colleges. “In the late 1950s, throughout the South,” Evans noted, “the MSM harbored the most radical groups on most campuses.” In March of 1969, it published an issue about the women’s liberation movement that inspired many readers to join the movement themselves.25

Like Sara Evans and many members of MSM, some came to feminism as a result of their exposure to and work within other change-seeking movements, particularly the black freedom movement. This was the case for Mary King, the descendant of six generations of Virginia Methodist ministers. She had many years of anti-racist work with the YWCA under her belt before going to work for the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in the early 1960s. While employed in SNCC’s Atlanta office, she met and befriended fellow SNCC staffer Casey Hayden, a radical (though not militant) Christian socialist. In 1964, King and Hayden joined other SNCC staff and volunteers—black and white—in a retreat at the Gulfside Methodist Assembly grounds in Waveland, Mississippi. There, the two women wrote a position paper that ultimately ignited the grassroots feminist movement not

just in the south but in the United States.26

Revised and issued in a longer version the next year, “Sex and Caste: A Kind of Memo,” was “a watershed in women’s history,” writes Casey Hayden’s biographer Harold Smith, “in part because it challenged the widespread assumptions that female subordination was the ‘natural order of things’ and that personal relationships were not politically significant.”27 King and Hayden concluded that “the problems between men and women” and the difficulty women experienced in functioning in society as equal human beings were “among the most basic that people face,” and raised the possibility of a women’s movement to address these concerns.28 Following the article’s publication in Liberation magazine in April, 1966, consciousness-raising groups formed across the country, and the movement expanded exponentially, with bureaucratic organizations dedicated to feminist goals, such as the National Organization for Women in Washington, D.C., forming shortly thereafter.29

The Women’s Division of the Board of Missions, under the leadership of Theressa Hoover, a southerner and the first African American woman to head the division, began expressing strong support for the women’s move-

29 King, Freedom Song, 468; Casey Hayden interview in Agger ed., The Sixties at 40, 259; King, “Fields of Blue,” 374.
After the ERA passed Congress in 1972 and went to the states for ratification, the Women’s Division distributed a pamphlet, “The Church, Religion, and the Equal Rights Amendment,” that educated readers and urged action on behalf of the amendment. It set forth the Biblical bases for religious support for ERA: the creation story in Genesis 1:27-28, which stated that God simultaneously created male and female in his own image; the role of female heroines and prophets in the Bible (Deborah, Miriam, Queen Esther, Anna and Lydia); and Jesus’ equal treatment of women. It also quoted the 1972 General Conference’s Resolution on Equal Rights for Women that began, “The Gospel makes clear that Jesus regarded women, men and children equally. In contrast to the contemporary male-centered society, Jesus related to women with respect and sensitivity, as individual persons . . . . We urge all United Methodists to work through the appropriate structures and channels toward ratification of the Amendment by their respective states.”

This kind of theological and institutional support for gender equality emboldened many others, including Louisiana native Ollie Osborne, the daughter of a Methodist minister. From her home in Lafayette, Louisiana, she spearheaded a campaign in support of ratification of the ERA, and established the Acadiana Women’s Political Caucus, an affiliate of the National Women’s Political Caucus (“Acadiana” is the unofficial name for a heavily Cajun region of southwest Louisiana). In 1975, Osborne organized the first conference on Louisiana women—essentially a well-organized consciousness-raising session—at the local university where her husband taught.

Another significant Methodist feminist was Dorothy Mae Taylor, the first African American woman elected and only the second African American elected to the Louisiana state legislature (in 1971) since Reconstruction. A lifelong member of Mount Zion United Methodist Church in New Orleans and the mother of eight children, she credited her faith with giving her the courage to face down opponents and those who treated her disrespectfully because of her race and gender. Taylor said that to have served as an elected official “and not made a difference in the lives of others, especially the oppressed, would be sinful.” Because “God calls on man and woman to address the needs of His children,” she said, she supported the Equal Rights Amendment and other measures sought by feminists in Louisiana.

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30 Collier-Thomas, Jesus, Jobs and Justice, 465.
31 “The Church, Religion, and the Equal Rights Amendment,” prepared by the ERA Support Project, a joint project of the Women’s Division of the Board of Global Ministries and the Board of Church and Society of the United Methodist Church (n.d., 1975?).
Taylor exhibited what sociologist Cheryl Townsend Gilkes called a “holy boldness,” an assertive spirit that came from religious devotion and the support of faith communities. Gilkes interviewed black women community workers and realized that “the religious experience was such a taken-for-granted aspect of their lives that the women usually did not mention it.” For African American women, “holy boldness” inspired in them a dogged reformism against sometimes very long odds.

Some Methodist men and women also supported another plank in the feminist platform: abortion rights. In 1967, six years before the Supreme Court decision in Roe v. Wade legalized abortion throughout the land, the Rev. Howard Moody, pastor of the Judson Methodist Church on Washington Square in New York City, brought together local ministers and rabbis and founded the Clergy Consultation Service on Abortion (CCS). Reverend J. Claude Evans, the head chaplain at Southern Methodist University in Dallas (and Sara Evans’ father) established the CCS in Texas; it referred about 6,000 women for abortions in states where it was legal. Fearing they might be prosecuted under Texas’ strict anti-abortion law, members of the CCS and local feminists who were also providing information about abortion, sought advice from twenty-four-year-old Sarah Weddington, daughter of a Methodist minister, graduate of a small Methodist liberal arts school in Abilene, and a recent graduate of UT law school. Because no law firm in Texas hired women as lawyers (a consciousness-raising experience for her), Weddington free-lanced a bit; with time on her hands, she agreed to take the case pro bono. To assist her, Weddington brought in her former classmate Linda Coffee, then living in Dallas. Coffee located a pregnant plaintiff, Norma McCorvey, listed as Jane Roe to protect her privacy. McCorvey was an unmarried, pregnant twenty-one-year-old who had already borne two children and had relinquished custody of both. The defendant, Henry Wade, was the Dallas district attorney who defended Texas’ law that prohibited all abortions not necessary to save a pregnant woman’s life. In a major victory for feminists, Coffee and Weddington persuaded the U. S. Supreme Court to strike down not just Texas’ restrictions but all state restrictions on abortion during the first trimester of pregnancy.

Undoubtedly, scores of similar stories about southern Methodist women’s actions on behalf of gender equality remain buried. In Louisiana and

34 Gilkes, “If It Wasn’t For the Women,” 5.
36 Sarah Weddington, A Question of Choice (New York: Putnam’s, 1992), 33.
37 Weddington, A Question of Choice, 25-30; 45-47.
likely in many other southern states as well, Methodists were over-represented in the older single-sex community organizations, like the League of Women Voters and the Business and Professional Women’s Clubs, that laid the groundwork for second-wave feminism. Southern Methodist women developed interracial efforts and critiques of sexism that set aflame a grassroots feminist movement in the 1960s. They also participated in other aspects of the feminist movement not explored in this essay, such as the anti-violence movement, which made domestic abuse a crime and established the first battered women’s shelters and rape crisis centers. To them, seeking to create a less prejudiced, less oppressive, less discriminatory, less violent society was part of their responsibility as children of God. Their long schooling in social justice work had taught them that cultures that educated, empowered, and provided equal opportunities to women were better off, materially and in many other ways. In that sense, they knew it was just the right thing to do.