

TESTIMONY: THE TASK OF UNITED METHODIST WOMEN'S HISTORY

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In 1862, Mary Clarke Nind of St. Charles, Illinois, was left with sole responsibility for five children when her husband James enlisted in the Union Army.¹ The immigrant Nind family was already poor because their hardware business had recently failed. As Mary turned to God for support, she overflowed with a deepened faith and felt an irresistible urge to testify. Even though her soldier husband was a deacon in their Congregational Church, Mary Nind was silenced and threatened with expulsion for speaking aloud about her deepening experiences of God's grace. When the congregation disciplined her for holding "Methodist doctrines in a Congregational church," she was advised by a friend to join the Methodists because "there is more liberty for women to exercise their gifts."² Despite receiving a negative transfer letter from her Congregational pastor, Mary Nind was welcomed into Methodism.

The opposition of the Congregationalists to Mary Nind's call to testify had profound implications for the next century of Methodism. The assurance that God accepted her gifts liberated her to become one of the great preachers of the late nineteenth-century, known as "Mother Nind" or "the little bishop." A tiny working-class woman in a plain brown dress, her testimony was so impressive and "so powerfully accompanied by the Holy Spirit" that Nind left her large family responsibilities and became the organizer of women's mission societies throughout the West.³ Traveling everywhere by train, stagecoach, or foot, often arriving late at night with nobody to meet her at the station, Mother Nind spoke in camp meetings, revival meetings, and even in churches where the male pastor opposed the idea of women's societies. In 1877 alone, she traveled 7,000 miles and was only home for 15 weeks. As her family noted, "Having been called into the work of the WFMS, it proved to be the open door for the preaching of the gospel."⁴

In 1888, Mary Nind received the highest number of votes from the Minnesota Annual Conference to attend General Conference. But the General Conference refused to seat any women, thereby beginning a six-

¹ Parts of this paper were taken from Dana L. Robert, "Testimonies and Truth-tellings: Women in the United Methodist Tradition," *Focus* (Spring 2008): 34-43.

² *Mary Clarke Nind and Her Work*, by her children (Chicago: J Newton Nind, 1906), 20, 22.

³ Mrs. Vane, quoted in *Mary Clarke Nind and Her Work*, 34. See also Georgiana Baucus, *In Journeyings Oft. A Sketch of the Life and Travels of Mary C. Nind* (Cincinnati: Curtis & Jennings, 1897), 31.

⁴ *Mary Clarke Nind*, 31.

teen year struggle for lay women's rights. Afterward, Mary Nind steamed to London as a delegate to the first large ecumenical gathering of Protestant mission societies. There the tiny grandmother read a set of social justice resolutions into the minutes. Through this radical act, she opposed liquor traffic and supported women's legal and civil rights. In 1894, Mother Nind visited her married missionary daughter in China and preached at women's meetings against foot-binding and other social customs that hurt women. She toured the world as an evangelist, preaching in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Not only was Mother Nind the most important organizer of women's societies in the West, but she was biological foremother to three generations of China missionaries and clergy. Her grandson George Lacy was the last Methodist bishop in communist China; he died there after the government refused to let him leave, and his bones were later paraded through the streets during anti-western demonstrations.

In Mother Nind's insistence on giving her testimony lie the roots of United Methodist Women's history. Her testimony to God's grace led her to seek the fellowship of like-minded Methodists. That spiritual and social fellowship led to the founding of one of the most important women's networks in American history. The network of women's organizations prayed together, studied together, and pooled their resources to support missions, schools, health care, and work for women and children around the world. The logic of testimony demanded that women have a voice across the connection, including the right to vote, preach, and be ordained in the Methodist Church. Nind lived out her commitment to global issues of social justice. Her motherhood was organizational, physical, and spiritual—and shows why women's history cannot be separated from the United Methodist tradition. What later became the United Methodist Women was built on the multiple foundations laid in part by a tiny, overworked emigrant woman who answered God's call to testify.

The Task of United Methodist Women's History

This paper calls for United Methodists to rediscover, remember, and reinterpret the history of women as intrinsic to the meaning of United Methodism. It argues that the stories of women like Mary Nind characterize core traditions of the broader Pietist, Wesleyan, and Methodist movements.

How can the forgotten stories of women like Mary Nind shape the self-understanding of United Methodism, in the past, present and future? First, Nind's testimony reminds us that United Methodist identity lies not in specific structures, or ordination status, or the Book of Discipline, or race, or wealth, or nationality, but in the continuous narrative of believers' witness from the earliest days of Methodism in England; to Evangelical, United Brethren, and diverse Pietist movements in the United States; and to worldwide Methodism in the twenty-first century. Mary Nind did not insist on testifying because she was a Methodist. Rather, she was a Methodist because she testified! At its core, the organized witness of women expresses the essence of what it means to be a United Methodist.

Second, rediscovering, remembering, and reinterpreting the forgotten stories of women like Mary Nind remind us that judged by the majority of its members, the history of United Methodism should be told as a women's movement. As Ann Braude wrote, "Women's History IS American Religious History."⁵ When Mary Nind was asked to organize women's mission work, she responded that she could "never say no to God's call."⁶ Unless the voices of women are heard, then the story of United Methodism is incomplete. A major reason for the success of the Wesleyan movement in the eighteenth century was because it called both women and men to give account of their relationship with God and with each other (1 Peter 3:15). Even though patriarchal traditions and laws silenced women, Methodist movements empowered them publicly to pray, to speak, and to sing of God's grace active in their lives. In light of the female majority in the United Methodist Church, recovering the narrative of women's organizations shines like a beacon to focus on the reality that United Methodism IS its women.

Third, rediscovering, remembering, and reinterpreting the forgotten stories of women like Mary Nind uncovers a rich matrix of community engagement that stretches beyond the local church. The history of United Methodist women embodies the power of connectionalism. Mary Nind's travels, and her speeches for missions, women's rights, temperance, and other subjects, illustrates the global networking that makes United Methodism a distinctive force for social change in the world. By the late 1800s, Methodists had founded more co-educational academies, schools, and colleges than any other American denomination. Through a sense of God's presence in their lives, combined with opportunities for self-improvement, women gained the strength not only to care for their families but to make the world a better place.

Voices Lost and Found: Stories and Sources

The rest of this paper explores how, through biographical case studies, the recovery of women's stories thickens understandings of United Methodist tradition as a whole. From the founding of women's societies, to the ordination of women, to women's leadership in civil rights and larger social issues, as each woman found her own voice, she gave voice to many others. These examples also illustrate how finding the lost voices of women requires exploring sources not usually found in the official records or text books of the denomination. Although all three of the women mentioned here are from the United States, women's stories from around the world must also be recovered, remembered, and reinterpreted.

Clementina Butler and Mission Education (b. 1862-c.1949)

Clementina Butler represents the many women who have selflessly de-

⁵ Ann D. Braude, "Women's History IS American Religious History," in *Retelling U.S. Religious History*, ed. Thomas A. Tweed (Berkeley: U California P, 1997): 87-107.

⁶ Nind quoted in *Mary Clarke Nind*, 33.

voted themselves to women and children's organizations within the church. She spent her life working behind the scenes for mission education. To reconstruct her life requires being a detective or social historian, including reading minutes from Conference journals, annual reports of the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society, articles in women's missionary society magazines, newspaper articles, and the books Clementina wrote about others but not about herself.⁷ While photos of her parents abound, photos of her are scarce. Clementina Butler's parents William and Clementina Butler were the first India missionaries sent by American Methodists. The Butler family launched Methodist work in Mexico: Clementina taught in a girls' school under the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society (WFMS), and her brother John was a missionary there for forty years.

The reason to remember Clementina Butler today is because behind the scenes she organized support for women in mission. She took care of her parents in their old age, and acted as her father's secretary. Never married, she served as home secretary of women's societies in the New England branch of the WFMS. She worked as an evangelist in Boston slums. Although she has been completely forgotten, she was one of the most important national leaders of Methodist women's organizations in the early twentieth century.

Clementina Butler's passion was Christian education for women and children. Around 1900, she was part of the team that organized the interdenominational women's mission study movement, and she acted as secretary-treasurer of the ecumenical committee that planned and published annual mission study books read by Protestant women across North America.⁸ She launched the first summer school of missions for women, held in Northfield, Massachusetts. She served many decades as an officer in local, regional, and national women's mission societies. She also served as the Executive Chairman of the American committee to support Pandita Ramabai, an Indian woman who rescued and educated child widows, and who was a close family friend. She wrote the first important biography of Ramabai in 1922, wrote an introduction to Ramabai's Bible translation in 1924, and raised money for her work.⁹

But to focus on just one of her signature achievements, it is important to recall her founding role in the Committee on Christian Literature for Women and Children, and its structure for financial support, the World Day

⁷ See, for example, the newspaper report of her time in Mexico during the war with the U.S., during which her life was in danger from Mexican soldiers, "Told about her work in Mexico," *The Day* (December 14, 1914), 3. https://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1915&dat=19141214&id=W_ogAAAAIBAJ&sjid=bXUFAAAAIBAJ&pg=5885,4841870&hl=en. Accessed June 21, 2016.

⁸ On the history of the ecumenical Mission Education movement, see Dana L. Robert, "The Mission Education Movement and the Rise of World Christianity, 1902-2002," *Focus* (Spring 2003): 21-23.

⁹ Sarasvati Ramabai, Clementina Butler, Aaron Jacob Divekar, Mary Lissa Hastie, *The Holy Bible in the Marathi Language* (Kedgaon, India: Published by Mary Lissa Hastie, at the Ramabai Mukti Mission, 1924); Clementina Rowe Butler, *Pandita Ramabai Sarasvati: Pioneer in the Movement for the Education of the Child-widow of India* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1922).

of Prayer.¹⁰ In 1906, Clementina Butler visited India for the fifty year jubilee of Methodist missions. She was gripped by the need to provide Christian literature for children and teenagers in their own languages as a way of supporting their spiritual growth amid situations unfriendly to Christianity. A discussion at the 1910 Edinburgh World Missionary Conference strengthened her resolve to do something about the problem of how to keep children in the faith after they graduated from mission schools. So Butler wrote a proposal that she placed before the combined North American women's mission boards. She called for the founding of a committee to raise money for the production and distribution of Christian literature for young people in their native languages. The women's mission boards adopted her proposal. Thus in 1912 was born the Committee on Christian Literature for Women and Children in Mission Fields (CCLWCMF). As the idea of a World Day of Prayer became established by missionary women around the world, women's annual thank offerings supported the literature ministry. This amazing committee lasted until 1989. Clementina Butler served for many years as its chairman.

In its first fifty years, the CCLWCMF sponsored twenty-seven Christian magazines in different languages. The magazine *The Treasure Chest*, for example, in 1922 featured stories, plays, poems, and articles. Children wrote letters to the editor, and enjoyed departments on the flora and fauna of India, biographies of famous people in Indian history, and travelogues. In the late 1930s, the National Christian Council of India endorsed *The Treasure Chest*, which by 1938 was being published in English, Urdu, Malayalam, Telegu, Hindi, Tamil, Marathi, Burmese, Gujerati, and Bengali editions. In 1939, Clementina Butler noted that not only did such periodicals strengthen Christian homes, but missionaries found them helpful "in education for world understanding, cooperation and peace."¹¹

Under Clementina Butler, the CCLWCMF became the first mission organization to systematically sponsor native Christian art. Concerned that converts in India only had cheap pictures of Hindu gods with which to decorate their homes, Clementina began commissioning Christian pictures in Indian styles in the 1930s. Sold at cost for 2 ¼ cents apiece, response to the first ten pictures was immediate. "The Good Shepherd" sold 27,000 copies in the first year, and later E. Stanley Jones' Ashram in Lucknow sent 2,600 copies as Christmas presents to workers among the poor. The CCLWCMF held annual contests for the best indigenous Christian art in India. In China, in addition to its magazines, the Committee sponsored a *Pictorial Life of Our Saviour* in five volumes. The first volume sold 23,000 copies in the first eighteen months. A missionary made filmstrips of the series watched by thousands, accompanied by rhymes sung by spectators. At a time when most

¹⁰ The section of this paper on the CCLWCMF is adapted from Dana L. Robert, "The First Globalization: The Internationalization of the Protestant Missionary Movement Between the World Wars," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 26:2 (April, 2002): 58-59.

¹¹ Quoted in Robert, "The First Globalization," 58.

mission literature was still using pictures of a blond and blue-eyed Jesus, the CCLWCMF was commissioning native art for the covers of its magazines and books.

The impact of Clementina Butler's testimony remains today in the UMW's summer schools of Christian mission (Mission U), the local and regional women's circles, the annual mission studies, the World Day of Prayer, and a long history of sponsoring literature and art for women and children. Butler linked the Gospel with literacy education and the improvement of women's lives. Her life demonstrates that even if the behind-the-scenes bridge figures have been forgotten, the emergence of global Christianity cannot be separated from the local actions of women's circles across the United States.

Grace Huck (1916-) Pioneer Preacher and Pastor

The story of Grace Huck is told largely in her self-published autobiography and in speeches she gave at denominational history gatherings. Born in 1916, Grace grew up in a family of five girls on a homestead in South Dakota. Because her family lived 32 miles from the nearest town, she never attended church until she was eight, when her family visited their grandparents in Iowa. In her senior year of high school, she attended a week long Methodist Camp in the Black Hills. During an altar call, the minister invited those who wished to become ministers or missionaries to come forward. Grace recalled, "I felt God's call stirring in my soul. I could not refuse, and I too, went forward and kneeled at the rough log and made a commitment of my life to full-time service in the work of the church."¹²

The next year Grace enrolled in a teachers' college. Although it dawned on her that women were typically not allowed to be ordained pastors, she was mentored by the wife of the minister in Bowman and applied for a local preacher's license. One day while herding sheep, she felt led to write a sermon on Matthew 27:22, "What shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?" The next day she was asked to preach to a small group gathered at a village school house. And so began Grace Huck's long years of struggle to be "obedient to the heavenly vision" that called her into the ordained ministry as a woman.

While pursuing an education and taking the ministerial Course of Study part-time, Grace began filling in as supply pastor in poor rural churches that had no minister, or could not afford one. She taught vacation Bible schools and served churches for less than normal wages. Whenever a District Superintendent was appointed who did not believe in women preachers, she would be fired from her pulpit supply post. Often from December to March she fought her way through snow as deep as a horse's belly in order to supply small rural churches that lacked electricity. When unable to get a church, she taught school.

¹² Grace E. Huck, "I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision," *Proceedings, North Central Jurisdiction Commission on Archives and History Convocation on the Campus of Bismarck State College, Bismarck, North Dakota, July 7-10, 1997*, 53.

By the 1950s, Grace decided she would never be allowed to be an ordained minister and so applied to be a deaconess. She was rejected because the deaconess board determined that she had a call to the ordained ministry! So she became a director of Christian Education while working on a masters' degree in education. Finally in 1956, the Methodist General Conference voted to ordain women into full conference membership. When the North Dakota Annual Conference met, they received Grace Huck "on trial" for full membership, despite that she had already been serving churches for over ten years.¹³ Even after becoming one of the first two ordained women ministers in The Methodist Church, she did not receive a full appointment. Thus in her mid-forties, Grace Huck enrolled in Scarritt College for a year of missionary training. She went in 1960 as a missionary to the Philippines, serving at Harris College, which had begun in 1903 as a women's deaconess training school under the women's board.

After eleven years of service in the Philippines, including full conference membership there, Grace returned to South Dakota to be near her elderly father. But once again, gender discrimination raised its ugly head and she was not given a church. In fact, the South Dakota Annual Conference would not immediately accept her transfer from the Philippines Annual Conference because she was "unproven." She recalled asking in prayer, "God what are they trying to do to me?" Then she remembered John Wesley's Covenant Prayer, "I rose from my bed, went to the study and got the Book of Worship. I found the prayer and truly prayed 'Let me be employed for Thee, or laid aside for Thee.' I had always been ready to go wherever He sent me and do whatever He asked of me. Suddenly I realized I needed also to be ready to be 'laid aside' for Him."¹⁴ She wrote a poem based on Wesley's prayer,

Let me be a channel of your love, O God! My physical strength is waning, But my spirit grows strong. Use me as you will. Your people cry out in their need. The homeless cry for shelter, The lonely cry for friends, The sick and dying are crying out for healing, And the hungry cry for bread. Show me how and where I can help, O God! Let me be a human channel Through which your love can flow. I am ready, I am open, I am yours.¹⁵

After appointment to another succession of small churches at minimum salary, Grace Huck retired. Despite having earned very little over her lifetime of ministry, she used her social security and part-time supply preaching to pay off most of the \$100,000 debt on a dormitory at Harris College in the Philippines, a task she completed in 1993 when the denomination finished off the last \$22,000. At the end of her testimony Grace Huck proclaimed, "I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision." Her closing paragraph states, "I am so grateful to God for His presence, His guidance and His blessing. I believe He has used me for His service, and I praise and thank Him for every

¹³ Huck, "I was not disobedient," 59.

¹⁴ Huck, "I was not disobedient," 60.

¹⁵ Grace Huck, "Let me be your channel," *God's Amazing Grace: Stories from My Life* (Spearfish, SD: Grace Publisher, 2005), 225.

opportunity He has given me.”¹⁶ In August of 2006, at age 90, Reverend Huck was one of the three surviving original clergywomen to attend the 50th anniversary celebration of the ordination of women in The United Methodist Church.¹⁷

Huck’s testimony shows the hidden yet central importance of the women’s missionary movement in supporting formal leadership positions for women, including ordained ministry. Her life story illustrates how the history of women’s activism within United Methodism cannot be separated from the efforts of lay women to improve women’s lives around the world. She attended the women’s missionary training school founded by women leaders in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. She worked as a missionary in a mission college founded and funded by Methodist women. In a perverse way, the women’s societies even supported her call by refusing to consecrate her as a deaconess because they discerned she was called to be an elder.

Victoria Gray Adams (1926-2006) and Voices for Freedom

The story of Victoria Gray Adams shows the link between spiritual empowerment and work for social justice. It also illustrates the importance of oral history to preserving women’s voices. For several years before her death, Mrs. Adams testified at conferences commemorating the civil rights struggles of the 1950s to the 1970s.¹⁸

A little-emphasized aspect of the civil rights movement is how many activist students and leaders came from Methodist homes.¹⁹ The Women’s Society for Christian Service (WSCS) of the Methodist Church, the YWCA, and women’s missionary organizations provided educational tools and infrastructure for challenges to segregation both in churches and in American society. Mary King, communications director for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in Atlanta, for example, recalls that her views on the equality of all persons flowed not only from her father’s pastorate, but from her favorite children’s book given her by a Methodist deaconess entitled *All About Us*, on the unity of humankind.²⁰ Historian Sara Evans, daughter of a Methodist minister in South Carolina, collected the stories of

¹⁶ Huck, “I was not disobedient,” 62.

¹⁷ For her comments to the assembled delegates, see Linda Green, “Pioneer Women Pastors Share Stories, Advice for Ministry,” http://gbgm-umc.org/global_news/full_article.cfm?articleid=4187. Accessed March 1, 2007.

¹⁸ See the powerful obituary written by her son, the Rev. Cecil Conteen Gray, “Mrs. Victoria Jackson Gray Adams,” <http://www.nacacad.org/grayadams-pr.html>. Accessed June 21, 2016.

¹⁹ See, for example, Mary King, *Freedom Song: A Personal Story of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Quill William Morrow, 1987); Ann Braude, ed., *Transforming the Faiths of our Fathers: Women Who Changed American Religion* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Sara Evans, ed., *Journeys that Opened up the World: Women, Student Christian Movements, and Social Justice, 1955-1974* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2003). On the general theme of Methodist women’s witness to social justice, see Rosemary Skinner Keller, ed., *Spirituality and Social Responsibility: Vocational Vision of Women in The United Methodist Tradition* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993).

²⁰ King, *Freedom Song*, 51.

church-based female civil rights workers and discovered a direct line from denominationally-supported youth work to support for social activism at the university level. For example, Ruth Harris, former missionary and director of youth work for the WSCS, held conferences that launched some of the earliest nonviolent action on the part of Methodist college students in the late 1950s. As Methodist youth flowed into Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia during voter registration drives in the 1960s, women's society members provided hospitality for them, often across racial lines.

Born in 1926 in a tiny African American community south of Hattiesburg, Mississippi, Victoria Gray Adams was reared in St. John's Methodist Church. As a child she took seriously the church's mottos, repeated weekly, "What kind of church will this church be if every member was just like me?" and "Be ye doers of the word and not hearers only."²¹ Victoria's opportunity to live out these mottoes occurred in the 1960s, when she was sitting at a desk in her beauty products business, and two young men from McComb, Mississippi, walked in and introduced themselves as SNCC workers there to help fellow black Mississippians register to vote. Mrs. Gray Adams introduced the young men to her pastor, and they appealed to the members of the one room church to meet them at the court house the next morning. Half a dozen members agreed to participate, including Virginia and the pastor. By the next afternoon, several from St. John's Methodist had been fired from their jobs for trying to register to vote. So began Victoria Gray Adams' involvement in the civil rights movement. In the words of her son, Rev. Cecil Gray, "One of the earliest and most vigorous supporters of civil rights/human rights activity in Mississippi, Mrs. Gray Adams continued her work in spite of repeated death threats, being shot at, chased by people in cars with guns, threats to kill her family, and other attempts to end her life."²² The peak of her involvement came in 1964 during the Mississippi Freedom Summer. With Fannie Lou Hamer and Annie Devine, she founded the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party in attempts to integrate politics in the state of Mississippi. She challenged Senator John Stennis in the election for Senate. Although she lost by 30 to 1 because African Americans were not allowed to register to vote, in 1968 the Mississippi Democratic Party finally seated an integrated delegation at the Democratic National Convention.

Grounded in the Hattiesburg church network, the civil rights movement spread across the South.²³ Mrs. Gray recalled the first Freedom Day in 1964, when hundreds of ministers and other supporters descended on Hattiesburg to support voter registration. Her remembrance underscored the importance of the Bible, of the Methodist publication *The Upper Room*, and her personal

²¹ See University of Virginia, The Project on Lived Theology, 2003 Conference Proceedings, "Civil Rights as Theological Drama" (Jun 12, 2003). http://www.livedtheology.org/conf03_grayadams_moses.htm. Accessed March 1, 2007.

²² Cecil Conteen Gray, "Mrs. Victoria Jackson Gray Adams."

²³ Taylor Branch, quoted in Tim Weiner, "Victoria Gray Adams: A Founder of the MS Freedom Democratic Party," http://realcostofprisons.org/blog/archives/2006/08/victoria_gray_a.html. Accessed March 1, 2007.

relationship with God as foundational to her life of activism.

And it came to my mine [*sic*] the writer of Isaiah . . . we were at a point right there in Hattiesburg where King Josiah was about to leave us, and yet we knew, I knew, we had to keep this momentum going, and so I thought of the scripture when he said that he heard a voice, and it said, “who shall we send and who will go for us?” and I said, “Here am I, send me, I’ll go.” And as I sat there, and that thing played out in my head, I had to get up and tell the gathered body about it. I said this is what we who live in Hattiesburg, this is what we must understand that King Josiah has died and it’s up to us to continue this, and I for one, am saying, “Here am I, I’ll go, send me.” And I invite you to do likewise. And then a little later, on another occasion, I remember I was on my way to a speaking engagement at Reverend Phillips church in D.C. and I wasn’t at all sure what I was going to talk about that morning, and I had my *Upper Room* with me, that’s a devotional booklet of the Methodist church, and there was this scripture where Jesus, I started to say stood, but I believe he sat down, among the gathered body, and unrolled the scroll and started to read, and he talked about—you know what he talked about—he’d come to release, to minister to, to visit, and then when he had finished that scripture, the really amazing thing was he rolled the scroll up and handed it back and said, “Today, the scripture is fulfilled.” And once again, I understood that as an affirmation of what I must do. And so, those are some of the things that have guided my life, that have informed my life as I have continued to this journey.²⁴

In addition to her civil rights activism, Mrs. Gray Adams was active at annual conference and national levels in the United Methodist Church. She taught public school in Mississippi, ran a business, did women’s club work and taught in a language school in Bangkok, Thailand, served as campus minister at Virginia State University, and lectured at numerous colleges and universities. Her son wrote in her obituary: “A local-and-global woman, with an immediate and long-term vision, Mrs. Victoria Jackson Gray Adams—with clarity and intentionality—gave her life to her family and local people, all over the globe. She was committed profoundly to empowering and elevating local people, because she wanted local people to access and enjoy greater life chances and greater life choices.”²⁵

Conclusion: Voices Lost and Found

What can be learned about United Methodist identity from the stories of foremothers Mary Nind, Clementina Butler, Grace Huck, and Victoria Gray Adams? United Methodist Women inhabit the trail of testimony that reaches back to the women’s encounter with the angel at the tomb, and with the risen Christ who told them “Do not be afraid; go and tell. . .” (Matt 28:10). Congregationalist Mary Nind discovered she was a Methodist when she answered God’s call to speak in churches and international gatherings. Clementina Butler developed an infrastructure of women’s societies that supported the education of women and children in the Americas and Asia. Grace Huck’s work as a home and foreign missionary opened the door to ordination. Victoria Gray Adams’ life demonstrated how the power of tes-

²⁴ Virginia Gray Adams, Quoted in “Civil Rights as Theological Drama.”

²⁵ Cecil Conteen Gray, “Mrs. Victoria Jackson Gray Adams.”

timony spilled over from the church into the civil rights movement. Taken together, their stories show how organized women's work provides an infrastructure that links American Methodism to the growing world church.

I'd like to conclude my reflections on a personal note. Today we stand at a crossroads. When the church forgets the stories of women, it squanders the gains made by earlier generations. Well-meaning bishops stand up at General Conference, and being ignorant of our history, deny that deaconesses are an "order." Congregations embrace social causes like sex trafficking and child poverty, but don't realize that United Methodist women have been resourcing these issues for the past century. Scholars write studies of important social movements that ignore the role of grassroots church women's organizations. Lobbies in the church accuse the United Methodist Women of being a socialist political front.

To recover women's voices requires educating our denominational leaders to read United Methodist history through a different lens. This problem became clear to me in reports from a liturgical dancer at the 2002 Louisiana Conference. The "service of healing and resurrection" began with the witness of liturgical dancers from a largely black and a largely white United Methodist Church, most of them active in United Methodist Women. As they danced down the aisle, the women touched each other, intertwined, in physical unity across racial divisions. Then they sat together in the front of the Conference, a hopeful witness to racial reconciliation. But when the invited bishop got up to speak, he ignored the testimony of the liturgical dancers. Instead he accused the conference of failing to make any progress in racial relations over the previous forty years. The participation of black and white lay women, dancing together, was treated as incidental to the Conference and invisible to his reading of United Methodist race relations.

Are race relations perfect? Of course not. But by ignoring the lived religion of the lay women, by treating the interracial women dancers as irrelevant to the message, male authority figures miss the deeper meaning of why people are United Methodists. Our first challenge as historians is to help others hear the voices of lay women, and not allow their testimony to be silenced by the "noisy gongs and clanging cymbals" of denominational politics. As historians, our testimony requires that we reweave the forgotten voices of United Methodist women across time and space. In so doing, we re-clothe a tattered and increasingly threadbare denominational body.

What do United Methodist women have in common that spans from the age of John Wesley and his women preachers to that of Barbara Heck and Jarena Lee, to Phoebe Palmer and Amanda Berry Smith, to Mary Nind and Frances Willard and Belle Bennett and Vera Blinn, to Thelma Stevens and Dorothy Height, to Laura Bush and Hillary Clinton, to Kim Hwal-lan (Helen Kim) and Shi Meiyu (Mary Stone) and Ellen Sirleaf Johnson, to the active female bishops of the United Methodist Church? These women have in common the liberating testimonies of God's grace through Jesus Christ.

If United Methodism is to flourish, it is time to rediscover, remember, and reinterpret the testimonies of United Methodist Women for generations

to come. Through the history of United Methodist Women we rediscover the core of our faith and our identity in Christ. We remember how the structures of connectionalism can work for social change. We reinterpret the place of women in the history of the church. The stories of women represent our past, anchor our present, and inspire our future.