

**“THE MEANS OF DOING SOME GOOD”:
THE METHODIST FEMALE RELIEF SOCIETY OF BOSTON,
1828-1868**

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Two events in April, 1828, were significant for the cause of Methodism in the city of Boston, Massachusetts. The first was the founding of the Methodist Female Relief Society on April 3. The other was the laying of the cornerstone of the new Bennett Street Methodist Episcopal Church on April 30, just twelve months after the Boston Methodist Religious Society had proposed that “two houses of public worship be erected in this city, one at the north end and one at the other at the south.”¹ The floor of the new north end building had been laid and a portion of the walls constructed. The Rev. J. N. Moffitt addressed the congregation as part of the day’s program. At first he spoke from a platform constructed near the center of the floor, but only the portion of the audience directly in front of him could hear, so—fortunately for Moffitt—he was moved to a corner of the western wall near the street. Soon the people settled down and Moffitt’s voice echoed against the surrounding buildings. Toward the end of his address, Moffitt indicated the unfinished structure and said:

And now while our eyes rest on these material walls as they rise in proportion and beauty—while we gaze upon that which the tooth of time shall gnaw away, and the envious winds and storms shall strew on the earth from whence it was taken...²

At exactly that moment one-fifth of the structure’s floor collapsed, sending more than two hundred people crashing eleven feet to the cellar floor below. “It was like one of the terrible scenes of war or earthquake, and is remembered by those who fell into the chasm and those who could look into it, as a confused, horrible and bloody dream,” wrote one eyewitness:

The length of the floor which broke was near the middle, the center of the floor falling first, which precipitated all who stood on it towards that point, where they fell six or eight deep, crowded almost to suffocation; and when opposite ends of the beams struck the ground, there was a terrible rebound of timbers in the centre, under

¹ Subscription book, Bennett Street Methodist Episcopal Church records, Archives of the New England Conference Commission on Archives and History, School of Theology Library, Boston University.

² Handwritten account of the accident in subscription book, Bennett Street Methodist Episcopal Church records, 1.

which human flesh and bone, were crushed like the tender harts of the field.³

No doubt the tragic incident at the laying of the cornerstone of Bennett Street Methodist Episcopal Church remained a vivid memory for contemporary residents of Boston, but it was particularly significant for the Methodist Female Relief Society, which had been formed earlier that month. Just weeks old, the group was forced to cancel its second meeting, according to the minutes of May 29, 1828:

On account of several members of this society being seriously injured by the falling of the floor at the Chapel now erecting in Bennet [*sic*] Street: it was thought advisable not to hold a meeting on the first Thursday in May as required by the Constitution.⁴

The growth of Methodism in Boston, Massachusetts, paralleled a rapid increase in the city’s population in general in the early nineteenth century and the pressing demand for relief for ever-larger numbers of its poor and destitute residents. It was appropriate, then, that Methodist women should come together to seek means to address these needs, just as women throughout urban America began to flex their moral and social muscle in support of various benevolent and reform causes. Conditions in antebellum Boston contributed to the formation of such societies and the expansion of female benevolent work that was so characteristic of the era. The members of the Methodist Female Relief Society were motivated by the obvious needs of a burgeoning population, class-related ideas about work and poverty, and a genuine sense of Christian charity grounded in their vital religion. This engagement with the needs of some of the poorest residents of the city in response to the demands of the Gospel prepared the way for the work of later organizations of concerned Methodist women. In context, the Methodist Female Relief Society resembled many other such organizations of its time while its members retained a uniquely Wesleyan understanding of the needs of their fellow human beings and the Christian foundation for charitable work.

The population of Boston stood at 61,392 in 1830. It rose to 85,475 by 1840 and 99,036 just five years later, growing dramatically through the beginning of the Civil War, and increasing by as much as thirteen thousand every five years over the next decade.⁵ The city’s infrastructure deteriorated considerably. By the 1820s the old city had become a stifling, smelly place

³ Handwritten account of the accident in subscription book, Bennett Street Methodist Episcopal Church records, 1, 2.

⁴ Secretary’s book, 1828-1835, Bennett Street Methodist Female Relief Society, Archives of the New England Conference Commission on Archives and History, School of Theology Library, Boston University.

⁵ Oscar Handlin, *Boston’s Immigrants: A Study in Acculturation* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 1959), 239.

in need of physical and administrative repair.⁶ The North End, the oldest part of the city, housed most of the local poor population. It was still the most populous area of Boston and by the 1830s it housed the citizens in the worst economic conditions. "I always enter your city with my mouth open, and I always leave it with my eyes shut," wrote one correspondent to the *New England Magazine*. "So much outward happiness, and so much real misery! There are pale cheeks, sunken eyes and broken hearts! . . . They die by poverty with opulence all around them."⁷

Economic and physical conditions made living difficult for the poor of Boston during this period. A family of four could not be supported by the wages of an employed laborer. There had not been a smallpox epidemic in the city since 1792, but after 1845 smallpox, cholera, and tuberculosis flourished.⁸ Some scholars have insisted that prior to the 1840s poverty was not a pressing issue in Boston and that needs for relief were easily met by municipal and private agencies. Yet the years prior to that decade witnessed a steady rise in both public interest and the extent to which resources were applied to the problem of poverty within the city. A number of publicly supported institutions were established during this period, including a House of Industry, a House of Juvenile Reformation in 1826, and a municipal lunatic asylum in 1839. Cash expenditures by the city of Boston for poor relief fluctuated annually during this period, from as low as \$33,076 to as high as \$43,316 per year in the first dozen years of the life of the Methodist Female Relief Society. Still, a gradual rise in expenditures was evident, with several dramatic annual increases in money spent by the Board of Overseers, the House of Industry, and the House of Reformation for Juvenile Offenders.⁹

Public assistance was supplemented by the efforts of numerous religious and charitable societies whose goals included not only the material relief of the poor and unemployed, but the exertion of some spiritual and moral influence as well. Boston's merchant-capitalists played a role in the development of government-run institutions and joined Protestant clergy in organizing and funding associations designed to promote a number of middle-class values, including temperance, hard work, and chastity.¹⁰

Female participation in benevolent and reform causes became a dynamic part of the social landscape in antebellum America. The motives of these women were varied and complex, especially as female involvement in such activity became more widely accepted and began to attract women of all social classes. Debra Gold Hansen has written that "women's organizational

⁶ Thomas H. O'Connor, *Bibles, Brahmins, and Bosses, A Short History of Boston*, Lectures delivered for the National Endowment for the Humanities Boston Public Library Learning Library Program (Boston: Trustees of the Public Library of the City of Boston, 1976), 51-54.

⁷ Debra Gold Hansen, *Strained Sisterhood: Gender and Class in the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society* (Amherst MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), 37.

⁸ Handlin, 60, 114-115.

⁹ Handlin, 18, 19, 240.

¹⁰ Hansen, 41.

activities (not to mention their occupational patterns, family relationships, denominational affiliations, and leisure pursuits) can be class, ethnic, and/or generational based, depending upon women’s particular position within society at that time.”¹¹

Hansen’s study of the members of the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society is insightful and many of her conclusions may be applied to an understanding of the work of the Female Relief Society. Hansen believes that white middle-class women developed a value system that was the complete opposite of the male-controlled culture from which they were excluded. Instead of power, privilege, and personal success, these women came to value morality, piety, and domesticity:

They sought virtue not wealth, pleasure in self-control rather than in extravagance or self-indulgence. They hoped to secure status and respectability through upright Christian deportment, not through individual creativity or accomplishment. Middle-class women did not find their exclusion from public life or intellectual endeavor necessarily oppressive or demeaning, since they believed that women’s roles and capabilities were entirely different from those of men. Although they acquiesced in the patriarchal organization of society and politics, believing that the separation of the sexes and the fulfillment of prescribed gender roles were the natural order of things, they considered their responsibilities to be different from, not inferior to, men’s.¹²

It was not difficult for this new class of activist women to frame their social work in the language of their faith, describing “their benevolent work as Christian, their means as fundamentally moral, and their mandate as uniquely female.”¹³ Protestant benevolence was at the very heart of their efforts to improve society. In the nineteenth century Christian virtues such as humility, modesty, submission, and piety were identified as a woman’s birthright and spiritual heritage. “The message was clear: women were protected by their religious training from abandoning themselves to the lusts and corruptions of men; they were in turn duty bound to cling to religion as the only safeguard against vice.”¹⁴

Because of these widely held attitudes regarding women and their social and moral roles, female charitable societies began to appear in the final years of the eighteenth century and by the 1830s were a common feature of America’s urban landscape. They were often organized in response to clergymen’s sermons, published reports about social problems, or at the instigation of prominent women who were recognized as potential leaders. Sometimes they were auxiliaries to organizations already formed by men.¹⁵ Generally the membership of these groups was drawn from the white

¹¹ Hansen, 9.

¹² Hansen, 162-163.

¹³ Lori D. Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics, and Class in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990), 1.

¹⁴ Ginzberg, 11.

¹⁵ Ginzberg, 37.

Protestant middle and upper classes. It was more desirable for the leadership to be married, though laws which placed financial assets under the control of husbands encouraged groups to elect single treasurers. Women engaged in benevolent work, as distinguished from reform work, tended to organize their public careers around their family responsibilities and identities so that their charitable work reflected their “definition of themselves as daughters, wives, mothers, or widows.”¹⁶

While large-scale charitable organizations flourished in antebellum Boston, most women’s groups engaged in benevolent work were relatively small bands affiliated with local churches. Fifteen to thirty women participated on a regular basis, meeting once or twice a month. These meetings were valued as much for their social atmosphere as anything, but they were primarily work meetings where members made items to give to the poor or organized efforts to raise money for the poor.¹⁷ The Methodist Female Relief Society was one of these organizations.

Certainly such work for and among the poor was very much a part of the Methodist tradition. John Wesley, Anglican priest and founder of the Methodist movement in England, believed his evangelical mission should include some attempt to ameliorate the desperate conditions that accompanied eighteenth century poverty in that country. He also recruited women of all ages and classes to assist directly in his relief efforts. In June, 1775, he advised one young English woman to “Go and see the poor and sick in their own little hovels. Take up your cross, woman! Remember the faith! Jesus went before you, and will go with you. Put off the gentlewoman. You bear a higher character.”¹⁸

So it seemed appropriate that on April 3, 1828, “a number of Ladies being desirous of forming a society for the relief of the Poor and Distressed” met at a private home in Boston to form the Methodist Female Relief Society, a voluntary benevolent association apparently connected to the new Bennett Street church. The constitution laid out the purpose for the organization:

The object of this Society, is to relieve that class of citizens, which most forcibly calls for our aid, and assistance: In particular the Sick and Aged, that are destitute and without the means to make them comfortable, To give or loan such articles of apparel as the visiting committee may judge expedient. . .¹⁹

The society was supposed to meet on the first Thursday of every month. Each member was to pay twenty-five cents upon joining and a regular subscription of eight cents at each meeting. Such a low subscription rate

¹⁶ Anne M. Boylan, “Timid Girls, Venerable Widows, and Dignified Matrons: Life Cycle Patterns Among Organized Women in New York and Boston, 1797-1840,” *American Quarterly* 38 (Winter 1986), 780-783.

¹⁷ Hansen, 59, 60.

¹⁸ Letter to Miss March, June 9, 1775; quoted in Paul Wesley Chilcote, “The Blessed Way of Holiness,” *Journal of Theology* 101 (1996): 47.

¹⁹ Secretary’s book, 1828-1835.

and the fact that annual expenses never exceeded three hundred dollars clearly indicated that this group of women did not have ready access to large fortunes nor did they expect the men with which they associated to fund their organization. The women may have come from the middle class, but they were certainly not upper class philanthropists. At the same time, however, they did not expect their new members' dues and their monthly collections to underwrite their entire project. The constitution expressed the hope that “Each member may promote the intentions of the Society by contributing such cast off clothing as may be spared with convenience, or any other donation will be gratefully acknowledged and duly appreciated.”²⁰

The society left fairly complete secretaries' and treasurers' records for the forty years between 1828 and 1868, after which the group may have disbanded or merged with a larger denominational organization. Each fall an annual meeting was held and year-end summaries were diligently reported. The society grew to as many as 120 active members in the 1830s and reported 135 members in 1855. Its most productive year for which records exist was 1837, in which \$293.28 was expended and thirty families and individuals assisted.²¹

The ministry reflected in the report for the year ending September 30, 1830, was typical of the society's work. In that year, \$123.26 was expended for various needs including \$33.50 for pensioners, \$7 for shoes for nine people, \$12.50 for nursing eight families, \$23.56 for wood for twenty families, and \$33.48 for materials to make garments to be given away or loaned. The following year the society reported eighty-nine members. The year's total collection was \$108.68 but the society spent \$116.30. Seventy-three garments had been made and one hundred people helped. The rest of the report included expenses for flannel, gingham, and cotton cloth as well as twelve pairs of shoes, wood for thirty families, nursing care, groceries, medicine, and five grave gowns. That year \$48 was given to pensioners whom the society supported on an annual basis.²²

In addition to collecting money for charity and producing goods for the use of the poor and for fundraising, the society also *loaned* garments and bedding to those in need—a practice not continued by modern charities for obvious reasons. The annual report of 1839 showed that four pairs of sheets, three pairs of pillowcases, one quilt, some nightwear and several dresses were “loaned in sickness.” All were returned but one dress.²³

It is generally understood that groups such as the Relief Society served a number of social and intellectual functions for their members. The fact that the women in this group often shared pleasant conversation was recorded in their minutes. In July, 1856, the society voted to pose a question for discussion at each meeting. The first was: “Is it proper for Christian Laydes

²⁰ Secretary's book, 1828-1835.

²¹ Secretary's book, 1828-1835; Secretary's book, 1835-1945; Secretary's book, 1852-1860.

²² Secretary's book, 1828-1835. See the appendix for a more detailed record.

²³ Secretary's book, 1835-1845.

[sic] to indulge in the use of ornaments [sic]?" The following February it was noted that no one was too interested in discussing the appointed question. At other times, the discussion was rather relevant. The minutes of February 2, 1832, for example, recorded that the women "were sober'd [sic] by a very excellent piece on the education of girls."²⁴

The women encouraged their managers to provide spiritual support as well as physical comfort to the poor as they made their rounds, although the society never explicitly stated that evangelism was one of its goals. The group was reminded in 1853 to "not forget to impart some word to the salvation of their [the clients'] immortal souls."²⁵

Whether the members of the Methodist Female Relief Society were aware of class distinctions or not, the language of their benevolent work was couched in Christian charity. Still, on the day of the group's founding they were warned by a Dr. Booth to be aware of "the real objects of charity." He pointed out "the many ways they were liable to be deceived" and advised "discrimination that their charity might be useful."²⁶ The society did its best, affirming in 1830 that while some people may think the society's clients were lazy and wasteful and "unworthy of charity," the organization believed it had managed for the most part to prevent "this imposition upon the society."²⁷

Since the Bennett Street church was located in the North End, its parishioners certainly had every opportunity to come into contact with the city's poor, at least when traveling to and from the church. By the early nineteenth century Bostonians in general were becoming very much aware of the relationship of social class and benevolent work. According to Debra Gold Hansen, by 1835 "bourgeois Bostonians worried about the 'Irish Mob' and the permanent poor. Citing their 'propensity to drink to excess' and 'habits of dependence,' the upper and middle class condemned the North and West End 'rabble' who periodically outraged respectable Boston with violent and destructive behavior."²⁸

The residents of the poorest part of the city came to be seen less and less as unfortunates and more and more as "inhabitants of a separate world ruled by raucous, vulgar, and dangerous ruffians and foreigners."²⁹ According to Hansen:

Local benevolent organizations and city administrators also began to distinguish between what they viewed as the innocent poor—the orphan, widow, disabled and elderly—and the vicious poor who were considered capable of work but preferred idleness and vice. The city and charities then allocated public assistance to the deserving poor and withheld funds from those judged unfit as a form of coercion and punishment.³⁰

²⁴ Secretary's book, 1852-1860; Secretary's book, 1828-1835.

²⁵ Secretary's book, 1852-1860.

²⁶ Secretary's book, 1852-1860.

²⁷ Secretary's book, 1852-1860.

²⁸ Hansen, 38.

²⁹ Hansen, 38.

³⁰ Hansen, 39.

Such animosity along the lines of class differences was not immediately evident in the Relief Society’s annual records. It has been suggested that after 1830, membership in female organizations such as the Relief Society shifted from being drawn predominantly from upper and middle class women and began to be more representative of “women of widely varying social backgrounds.” As these organizations attracted more upwardly mobile women they also drew females from “the least orthodox and most liberal wings of their denominations.” These “reformist women freed themselves from the definition of women’s proper sphere so carefully honed by the orthodox churches.”³¹

It is reasonable to assume that the members of the Methodist society shared some of the views held by their fellow Bostonians. But most modern studies have focused on Baptist and Congregational groups. The Methodists were certainly more evangelical than many of the Protestant neighbors and had a tradition of female leadership similar to that of the reformist women mentioned above. The secretary’s report of 1832 kept the group’s mission in scriptural context:

Our little society has been the means of doing some good among the poor, and what can gratify us more than to say, we have clothed the naked, fed the hungry, administered to the sick, and shrouded the dead, when it was necessary. The particular feeling, it gives to each one, that takes part in it is better than honors conferred by men.³²

In his study of women and philanthropy in nineteenth century England, Frank Prochaska made a couple of points which probably applied to this group of Bostonian Methodists as well. His researched uncovered the fact that in charities managed by women, virtually all of the visitors to poor homes were female. By the middle of the century, the ratio of female to male visitors was as high as three to one and still increasing. Male volunteers may have expected payment. Women, on the other hand, seemed to be quite willing to minister in a variety of situations. They were also more familiar with and sympathetic to the difficulties of “domestic management.” Prevailing social theories maintained that reform began at home.³³

In addition, Prochaska wondered what kind of women assumed the role of visitor to the poor. Some women may have been anxious about the state of their eternal souls, wondering whether they had fulfilled Jesus’ admonition

³¹ Anne M. Boylan, “Women in Groups: An Analysis of Women’s Benevolent Organizations in New York and Boston, 1797-1840,” *Journal of American History* 71 (December 1984), 511, 513.

³² Secretary’s book, 1828-1835. The reference is to Matthew 25:35-36, 40 (KJV): “For I was an hungered, and ye gave me meat; I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink; I was a stranger and ye took me in; naked, and ye clothed me; I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me. . . Verily I say unto you, inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.”

³³ Frank Prochaska, *Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth-Century England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 109, 110.

to feed, clothe, welcome, and visit the needy. Witnessing death was also a powerful motivator, reminding the members of their own mortality and inspiring them to reach out to the suffering poor even as they reconciled themselves to their own inevitable passing. On the other hand, many women commented on the pleasure they received from visiting. They felt needed in a society that might rather put them upon a pedestal. Few women probably thought about social reform on a large scale, accepting the limitations imposed on class and gender by English and American society in that era as a given.³⁴ They may have been thinking much like John Wesley, who acknowledged the benefits of the patriarchal system while doing his best to aid the individual victims of it.

While the Methodist Female Relief Society of Boston shared many of the characteristics of other benevolent and reform societies in urban antebellum America, its members may have had a distinct outlook born of their church's proximity to the poorest parts of Boston, their social position (reflected in their relatively low budgets) and their Methodist roots. David Hempton has argued that "Methodism's concern to draw in those on the periphery of society, the sick, the aged, and the distressed, gave official recognition to traditional female ties and endowed them with a more tangible moral authority."³⁵ For all of the work that has been done on the history of female benevolent groups in antebellum America, few scholars have addressed the impact of religious sentiment as a motivator for charitable work. Writing about Irish Methodism, Hempton says:

The evangelical industry of charity in the Victorian period was, in the main, neither fueled by repressed social guilt nor motivated by any desire to restructure the social order. It was essentially an expression of Christian duty and piety by women who thought that society could be transformed by voluntary zeal and the daily disciplines of compassion.³⁶

Further research into female benevolence organizations will probably continue to raise questions about class, society, and bourgeois values. However, as historians let women speak for themselves through the records left behind scholars may find that smaller, more evangelical groups were motivated as much by the ethical injunctions of their vital, popular religion as anything else.

³⁴ Prochaska, 117-125.

³⁵ David Hempton, *The Religion of the People: Methodism and Popular Religion c. 1750-1900* (London: Routledge, 1996), 183.

³⁶ Hempton, 190.

Appendix

Membership and Financial Figures,
The Methodist Female Relief Society of Boston, 1828-1868³⁷

Year	Membership	Money Raised	Money Expended
1830	77	*	*
1831	89	\$108.68	\$123.36
1832	100	\$162.55	\$163.82
1833	115	\$131.72	\$142.25
1834	117	\$166.25	\$162.66
1835	120	*	*
1836	*	\$244.92	\$217.07
1837	134	*	\$293.28
1838	119	\$159.19	\$159.12
1839	116	\$159.42	\$155.15
1841	101	*	*
1842	81	\$147.00	\$159.59
1843	73	\$85.21	\$107.50
1844	61	*	*
1848	*	\$185.48	*
1850	105	*	*
1851	*	*	\$229.86
1852	97	\$216.70	\$218.41
1853	105	\$150.47	\$149.47
1855	135	*	*
1856	120	*	*
1857	108	*	*
1860	75	\$186.72	*
1861	70	\$170.91	*
1862	50	*	*
1863	52	*	*
1864	50	*	*
1865	64	*	*
1866	67	*	\$248.50

*No data available.

³⁷ Secretary's books, 1828-1868; Relief and Clothing, 1849-1863, Bennett Street Methodist Female Relief Society, Archives of the New England Conference on Archives and History, School of Theology Library, Boston University.