

**“MOTHERING NOT GOVERNING”:
MATERNALISM IN LATE NINETEENTH-CENTURY
METHODIST WOMEN’S ORGANIZATIONS**

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A young woman named Joy, the protagonist in a late nineteenth-century novel written by Elizabeth Holding, declined a marriage proposal from a handsome, successful doctor with whom she had worked intimately for many years in a local hospital. When pressed about how she could make such a questionable—even foolish—decision, Joy replied, “Cousin Emma, I’m not so foolish as not to know that it is the right and proper thing for most girls to marry. And if there were no sorrow and sin and trouble in the world, perhaps God would put the desire to marry into the hearts of all of us. But think of the orphans, and those who need special care from someone, which they would never get if all women were absorbed by family cares. It seems as if God wanted some of us to be the mothers of humanity’s orphans.”¹

Such commitment Joy expressed by turning down the opportunity to marry a distinguished doctor and perhaps to mother her own children! Why? *Because Joy was a deaconess*. And deaconesses in the late nineteenth-century embraced a decidedly maternalistic ideology, not of mothering a nuclear family but a much wider family in need. The phrase our intrepid protagonist adopted—“mothers of humanity’s orphans”—encapsulated the maternalistic ideology in which the Methodist deaconess movement, as well as the Woman’s Home Missionary Society, was immersed. Maternalism permeated Methodist women’s religious work in denominational journals, such as Lucy Rider Meyer’s “The Mother in the Church,” published in *Quarterly Review*. Even more telling, maternalism showed up in popular literature authored by Methodist women. It is these publications, largely forgotten and untapped by contemporary historians, that ground the thesis of this paper.

On the basis of popular writings authored or compiled by Lucy Rider Meyer, Elizabeth Holding, Jennie Fowler Willing, and other female Methodist leaders, I will argue that maternalism was not simply a compromise to mollify a male church hierarchy but an ideology that these women embraced and perpetuated among a wide swath of the faithful. In other words, the maternalistic ideology disseminated by women in the Woman’s Home Missionary Society (WHMS) and the deaconess movement, two organizations folded into today’s UMW, restricted women by their own rhetoric and strategy to “mothering not governing.” I adopt the phrase, “mothering

¹ Elizabeth E. Holding, *Joy the Deaconess* (Cincinnati, OH: Jennings & Graham, 1898), 92.

not governing,” from Carolyn DeSwarte Gifford, who coined it to summarize General Conference decisions in the 1880s concerning women’s rights and responsibilities in the Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC). She rehearses, for instance, the complexity of the 1888 General Conference decision that sanctioned the office of deaconess while simultaneously denying laity rights to women. Gifford uses that decision, alongside others from General Conferences throughout the 1880s, to argue that official church decisions made by clergymen and laymen “intended to delineate clearly the boundaries of woman’s sphere within the church, relegating her to mothering not governing, allowing her to be a pastor’s helper but not a pastor.”²

I concur with Gifford. However, what I will demonstrate in this essay moves a step beyond Gifford and other scholars who have overlooked these more widely-disseminated resources published by Methodist women. For instance, the novel written by Holding that features Joy the deaconess expressed as strongly as denominational documents—and certainly for a much wider audience—a maternalistic ideology. The same was true in Lucy Rider Meyer’s novel, *Mary North*, where maternalism was as rampant as in her article with the explicit title “Mother in the Church.” It is these popular resources that demonstrate how pervasive maternalism was and how unchallenged it remained, even by female Methodist leaders who had the power and wielded the influence to extinguish it, certainly within their own organizations.

Before we go further, it is important to define maternalism, the pivotal term in this essay. Unfortunately, this is not an easy task. Authors of a recent essay on maternalism, which surveys the vast amount of literature published since the 1990s, concede that the meaning of the term “has not become clearer over time. To the contrary, the term has been defined in a variety of competing ways from the outset, and the confusion surrounding it has only multiplied in recent years.”³ Rather than sort through the morass of definitions and corresponding contexts, I will utilize one of the earliest definitions of maternalism, because it has stood the test of time, and it fits well the context and character of late nineteenth-century Methodist women’s organizations. Seth Koven and Sonya Michel define as maternalist those “ideologies that exalted women’s capacity to mother and extended to society as a whole the values they attached to that role: care, nurturance, and morality.” These ideologies, they claim, functioned simultaneously in the private sphere of domesticity as well as in the public sphere.⁴ Historian

² Carolyn DeSwarte Gifford, “Introduction,” in *The American Deaconess Movement in the Early Twentieth Century*, ed. Carolyn DeSwarte Gifford (New York: Garland Publishing, 1987),

4. See also Jean Miller Schmidt, *Grace Sufficient: A History of Women in American Methodist 1760-1939* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 202.

³ Rebecca Jo Plant and Marian van der Klein, “Introduction: A New Generation of Scholars on Maternalism,” in *Maternalism Reconsidered: Motherhood, Welfare and Social Policy in the Twentieth Century*, eds. Marian van der Klein, Rebecca Jo Plant, Nichole Sanders, and Lori R. Weintrob (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012), 5.

⁴ Seth Koven and Sonya Michel, “Womanly Duties: Maternalist Politics and the Origins of Welfare States in France, Germany, Great Britain, and the United States, 1880-1920,” *American Historical Review* 95 (1990): 1079.

Elizabeth Clapp reiterates this understanding of maternalism in these words, “The concept of maternalism accepted, even idealized, women’s traditional role as wife and mother but at the same time insisted that women had a duty to extend their female skills and concerns beyond their own homes.”⁵ These historians describe precisely the maternalistic ideology that WHMS members asserted as their mission. Most were mothers themselves, and they strove through the WHMS to extend maternalism into the homes of the poor and needy. To an even greater extent, deaconesses, although they were single women without their own home and family, pursued maternalism as both strategy and justification for their work. The conundrum, however, that maternalism exacerbated, according to Sonya Michel, is that “its acceptance of the existing gender order, although strategically necessary, also hindered the expansion of women’s roles and rights.”⁶ This was true for Methodist women’s organizations in the late nineteenth century. In other words, as historian Linda Gordon recognizes, women’s subordination remains intact with maternalism.⁷

Let’s turn first to the Woman’s Home Missionary Society (WHMS) with its thousands-strong army of organized women and consider how it utilized the maternalistic ideology in its own rhetoric. The WHMS of the MEC emerged in 1880 as an organization dedicated to the evangelization and uplift of women, children, and homes across the nation.⁸ At its first annual meeting held in 1881, every WHMS speaker spotlighted the home—and mothers in particular—as simultaneously the reason for people’s degradation and the gateway for their redemption. How would homes be reached and brought to shine as Christian exemplars? By WHMS women instructing poor or unfortunate women how to be mothers, mothers who would then create homes displaying Christian virtues. As Mrs. Rust, Corresponding Secretary of the WHMS, explained, the WHMS replicated here at home the work of the WFMS in foreign fields, “women working in the homes of women”⁹ By pursuing this strategy—from one mother to another, from one home to another—WHMS leaders set out the strategy of maternalism that women, as surrogate mothers of the underprivileged, would evangelize in concentric circles the family, home, and eventually the nation.

⁵ Elizabeth J. Clapp, *Mothers of all Children: Women Reformers and the Rise of Juvenile Courts in Progressive-Era America* (University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1998), 3.

⁶ Sonya Michel, “Maternalism and Beyond,” *Maternalism Reconsidered: Motherhood, Welfare and Social Policy in the Twentieth Century*, eds. Marian van der Klein, Rebecca Jo Plant, Nichole Sanders, and Lori R. Weintrob (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012), 27.

⁷ Linda Gordon, “Response to Theda Skocpol,” in *Contention* 2.3 (Spring 1993): 139-189.

⁸ The WHMS advertised itself not in competition to the Woman’s Foreign Missionary Society of the MEC, which had been founded over a decade earlier, but rather as its counterpart. The WHMS focused on mission at home, particularly for “the neglected condition of the population of our own country,” while the WFMS looked to mission in foreign lands (Elizabeth Rust, “Woman’s Home Missionary Society,” *Methodist Review* 69 [September, 1887]: 653).

⁹ Mrs. R. S. Rust, “Letters from Friends,” *First Annual Report of the Board of Managers of the Woman’s Home Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church, For the Year 1881-82* (Cincinnati: Western Methodist Book Concern Press, 1882), 44.

On its twentieth anniversary, this same statement of purpose filled pages of the *Souvenir Exhibit*. This slender volume sported a picture and brief description of each of the organization’s industrial homes and missions. For instance, the Thayer Industrial Home in Atlanta, Georgia, included in its caption the following maternal sentiment: “It is impossible to place too high an estimate upon the value of training that develops into a cultured, modest Christian womanhood the young women of a race who are later to become the teachers, wives, mothers, and leaders . . . of their people.” Similar sentiments described Palen Mission in Savannah, Georgia: “hundreds of young women, trained in hand, head, and heart, are carrying the lessons they have learned to others Some have married and are good home-makers”¹⁰

Most WHMS members were mothers, like the nation’s First Lady, Lucy Webb Hayes, mother of five children, who served as first president of the organization. Her staunch Christian faith earned official praise from the 1880 MEC General Conference, which passed a resolution “expressing high appreciation of the personal worth and noble example of the President and his wife and commended to all the women of America the heroic conduct of Mrs. Hayes in regard to temperance and especially the beautiful simplicity of her Christian life.”¹¹ In one of her speeches, Hayes reinforced the centrality of maternalism in these words, “Elevate woman, and you lift up the home; exalt the home and you lift up the nation.”¹²

Even WHMS members who were not mothers themselves nonetheless embraced maternalism. Take Jennie Fowler Willing who helped to organize the WHMS, served as Vice President and as Secretary of the Bureau of Spanish Work and contributed frequently to its magazine, *Woman’s Home Missions*. She was married but childless, yet maternalistic rhetoric saturated her voluminous writings. She often linked motherhood with power. In an article titled, “The Mother’s Power in Evangelism,” she declared, “Among the mightiest of undiscovered forces the mother’s power for good ranks all.”¹³ Elsewhere she expressed similar sentiments: “None can ever hope to wield the power for good that God has put into the mother’s hand. She shapes the life. We are what our mothers make us”¹⁴ This same maternal attitude applied as well to women like herself without children; they mother. They too use their power, their strength to mother the world. This maternal work for the “world’s bettering,” as Willing called it, centered on the home. Willing doggedly uplifted the home as the place for mission and evangelism.

¹⁰ *An Exhibit of the Industrial Homes, Missions, and Deaconess Homes of the Woman’s Home Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Souvenir of the Twentieth Anniversary, 1880-1900* (Cincinnati: Western Methodist Book Concern, 1900), 6, 14.

¹¹ Ruth Esther Meeker, *Six Decades of Service, 1880-1940: The Woman’s Home Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (The Woman’s Home Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1969), 8.

¹² Edith Deen, “Lucy Webb Hayes—Faithful First Lady (1831-1889),” in *Great Women of the Christian Faith* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959), 247.

¹³ Jennie Fowler Willing, “The Mother’s Power in Evangelism,” *Guide to Holiness* (December, 1896): 220.

¹⁴ Jennie Fowler Willing, “The Home,” *Guide to Holiness* (January, 1895): 20.

For example, in a speech she delivered to the fifth annual meeting of the WHMS, she declared, “Home-making is the special work of our Society. No service can be more important. All people are, and will be forever, what their homes make them. The home is the work-shop where is wrought out the character and destiny of the individual, the nation, the civilization, the race.”¹⁵ With sentiments like these, Willing, a WHMS leader, grounded the organization’s purpose and strategy in maternalism, which bound its work to the domestic sphere, moving from home to home in a maternal role.

Like the WHMS, the Methodist deaconess movement, launched officially in the MEC in 1888 by vote of General Conference, also revolved around maternalism. This is even more noteworthy given that deaconesses were single women without children of their own. Although there was no vow to remain single, as required for Roman Catholic nuns, if a Methodist deaconess married, she had to resign her office and leave the deaconess home. One of the earliest and most influential leaders of the Methodist deaconess movement, Lucy Rider Meyer, grounded deaconess work in maternalism not only in church publications geared to a clergy audience but also in her popular writings for a general audience.

Meyer established a direct connection between the deaconess movement and maternalism in her pivotal article, “The Mother in the Church,” published in *Methodist Review*. She commenced by positing the church as the “household of faith,” following Paul’s usage in Galatians 6:10. In the household of faith—the church—the pastor is the father, the laity the brothers and sisters. Following these declarations, she queried, “But—where is the mother?”¹⁶ Her answer: the deaconess movement.¹⁷ As she explained, “The real origin of the [deaconess] work in America was in the mother instinct of woman herself, and in that wider conception of woman’s ‘family duties’ that compels her to include in her loving care the great needy world family as well as the blessed little domestic circle.”¹⁸ Two questions frame the article, both of which focus on maternalism. As she began with the question—where is the mother—so she ended with a question that forever portrayed the dea-

¹⁵ *Fifth Annual Report of the Woman’s Home Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church, For the Year 1885-86* (Cincinnati: Western Methodist Book Concern, 1886), 27. She expressed identical sentiments in another publication that same year, “Let the home where she does her best work, have her strongest thought, her main strength, her most devout prayer” (Jennie Fowler Willing, *The Potential Woman* [Boston: McDonald & Gill, 1886], 182).

¹⁶ One might surmise that she considered women to be the mother in the church. She does in fact raise that possibility but rejects it. She wrote, “Nor can it be successfully maintained that woman’s helpful but necessarily limited activity in unofficial lines supplies the need of the mother in the Church” (Lucy Rider Meyer, “The Mother in the Church,” *Methodist Review* 83 [September, 1901]: 716). Her reasoning for this claim remains enigmatic: “For, if so, then the converse would hold, that because of the assistance of our stewards, trustees, class leaders, and Sunday school superintendents, who are usually men, we do not need the pastor,” (Meyer, “The Mother in the Church,” 717).

¹⁷ In yet another statement, Meyer answered her question—where is the mother?—in a more direct, succinct fashion: “The deaconess movement puts the mother into the Church,” Quoted in Isabelle Horton, *The Burden of the City* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co, 1904), 146.

¹⁸ Meyer, “The Mother in the Church,” 730.

coness movement in grandiose, maternalist rhetoric: “Who can realize what it will mean to Protestantism when the Mother [now with a capital ‘M’] shall have been fully established again in her place in the Household of Faith?”¹⁹

One might suggest that Meyer chose for political reasons to position the deaconess movement as the mother in the Church in a church-sanctioned journal, the *Methodist Review*, in order to solicit support for the new office that had its detractors, particularly among the clergy. Certainly *Methodist Review* targeted a ministerial audience. In the same volume as Meyer’s article appeared two others by leading Methodist bishops of the day—Bishop J. H. Vincent’s “The Class Meeting in Methodism” and Bishop J. M. Thoburn’s “Our Missionary Polity.” Perhaps Meyer purposively left church hierarchy fully intact with pastors (men) as the father in the church only to allay minister’s fears of deaconesses usurping the pastoral role.²⁰ Certainly, this would make sense given the vagaries of sanctioned church support for women’s work. After all, only a decade earlier, by vote of General Conference, local preacher’s licenses issued to women were revoked. Even more current, the 1888 General Conference denied laity rights for women. The atmosphere for women’s rights and responsibilities in the church remained charged.

While one could argue that Meyer’s political savvy prompted her to utilize “mother in the church” rhetoric for the *Methodist Review* audience, she also utilized a maternalistic ideology in two popular venues. Consider the staging of photos in her book, *Deaconess Stories*, published in 1900, the year before the *Methodist Review* article. Many photos portray deaconesses in a motherly pose with children. In some of these, no other parent appears in the picture, just the deaconess and the child. In two pictures where an actual parent is included, it is still the deaconess that appears front and center. One picture poses the father halfway out the door while the deaconess, facing the camera, holds a baby, and two other children huddle near her skirts. The caption underneath reads: “I don’t want ‘em—hope I never see ‘em again,” said the drunken father. In the other picture, the mother, lying on her sick bed, is nearly hidden from view; it is the deaconess who stands upright and tall while folding laundry and keeping watch on the three children.²¹

Maternalism also permeates Meyer’s little-known novel, *Mary North*, published in 1903, two years after the *Methodist Review* article. This novel tells of the twists and turns faced by protagonist, Mary North, who eventually, on the brink of death in a Chicago tenement, recovers thanks to the maternal care of a Methodist deaconess. The story opens with Mary and her widowed mother living alone in a small New England village. Tragedy strikes when Mary’s mother dies leaving her motherless at a young age. Tragedy soon strikes again when a ruthless rogue skillfully and relentlessly takes advantage of Mary’s innocence and implores her to marry him. “. . . I cannot go

¹⁹ Meyer, “The Mother in the Church,” 732. The phrase “Household of Faith” also appeared in the article with capital letters.

²⁰ Meyer, “The Mother in the Church,” 716.

²¹ Lucy Rider Meyer, *Deaconess Stories* (Chicago: Hope Publishing, 1900).

alone—it will kill me,” he begs. “I plead with you. I need you for my little nurse. I have no mother—no one to care for me.” His appeals hit home with Mary, who knows what it is to be motherless. Even after she recognizes his deceit, she responds in a maternal manner: “She would devote her whole life to him. She would pray. She would *compel* his salvation. Mary had never come so near to truly loving this man before, but it was the love of a mother—a savior.”²² She soon realizes, however, that he is an abusive alcoholic.

In desperation, Mary escapes to Chicago, where she tries unsuccessfully to support herself as a shop assistant in a large department store. Again, her penchant to mother the helpless results in her being fired when she tries to protect a co-worker from a manager’s sexual advances. Mary’s economic situation becomes desperate when she cannot find another job, and after weeks of starvation and homelessness, she collapses on a Chicago street, not far from the deaconess home. There she is literally mothered back to health by a deaconess nurse who “begged that the ‘case’ might be given to her, and had watched over the stranger day and night, ministering to her as no mother, untrained, ever cared for a child.”²³ When she is back on her feet, she makes plans to open a boarding house in Chicago to train young girls like herself, “a motherless lambie,” in domestic skills for better employment opportunities. At the end of the novel, she opens the “School for Trained Helpers” as an extension of the Chicago deaconess home.²⁴

Maternalism provides the thematic infrastructure for this novel. Several leading characters are motherless—Mary, the man who betrayed her, and Vinnie, her co-worker in the department store. In turn, several leading characters, including Mary, act as a mother to another. It is curious that Mary’s first two attempts at mothering fail; the man who betrayed her never did turn from his abuse of her, and Vinnie drank carbolic acid to end her life. Mary only succeeds as a mother after receiving Sister Elizabeth’s maternal care. This time she begins an institution to provide a practical means for young women in the city to survive and prevent further victimization from men who prey on the innocent; now she mothers the motherless. However, it is Sister Elizabeth who stars in the novel as the mother *par excellence*. She fits the profile of deaconess’ maternalism, as voiced by Methodist deaconesses themselves. “I never married, never had children of the flesh,” stated a deaconess, “but God has given me many spiritual children.”²⁵

Maternalism permeates even more Elizabeth Holding’s novel, *Joy, the*

²² Lucy Rider Meyer, *Mary North: A Novel* (Chicago: Fleming H. Revell Co, 1903), 146.

²³ Meyer, *Mary North*, 275.

²⁴ Meyer, *Mary North*, 317.

²⁵ Myrtle James, “Tributes from Deaconesses and Missionaries,” *The Missionary Voice* 12.10 (October, 1922): 308. Historian Mary Agnes Dougherty fills out the picture of deaconess work as maternalism even more, “As single women free from the domestic claim, deaconesses could direct their maternal instincts into mothering the masses of men, women and children abused by the socioeconomic system,” (Mary Agnes Dougherty, *My Calling to Fulfill: Deaconesses in the United Methodist Tradition* [New York: Women’s Division, The General Board of Global Ministries, The United Methodist Church, 1997], ix).

Deaconess, published in 1893, a decade before Meyer’s. Holding, a protégé of Meyer’s, wrote from personal experience with the Methodist deaconess movement. She and Meyer first met when Holding studied Chemistry under Meyer at McKendree College. Later, when Holding returned home on furlough from mission work in Chile, Meyer offered her a position at the Chicago Training School. After several years on Meyer’s staff, Holding went to Scarritt Bible and Training School to teach Bible when the institution opened in 1892.

Joy the deaconess, like Mary North in Meyer’s novel, is an orphan, and both protagonists exhibit maternal instincts from a young age, particularly for the poor and mistreated. This inclination leads Joy in her early twenties to train to become a nurse and work in the local hospital. When she hears Lucy Rider Meyer speak at a Sunday morning service on the deaconess movement, she invites Meyer home to dinner to hear more.²⁶ Their lunch-time conversation convinces Joy to enroll in Meyer’s school.

In Part II, after Joy completes the deaconess course at the Chicago Training School, she becomes Superintendent of a deaconess home and hospital. At this juncture, the deaconess home moves front and center as the space where family, home life, and spiritual guidance coalesce for the deaconesses. As historian Colleen McDannell explains, “Family religion,” when family members come together to worship with prayer, hymn singing, and Bible reading, “created a sacred time when the change and chaos of the profane world dissolved into the order and meaning of the eternal.”²⁷ This describes precisely the aim of the deaconess home, to be a sacred, set apart from the world space to which deaconesses returned after a long day of visiting in overcrowded tenements or nursing the infirmed. They gathered to eat, to discuss the day’s events, to share each other’s burdens, and to worship together, as depicted by Meyer in the ideal deaconess home. She wrote: “The deaconess home: its model is the family life, with the Superintendent taking the place of mother As Miss Thoburn beautifully says, ‘The happiest place in the world is that where father and mother gather their children into a family circle, but the next happiest place is one like ours, where women to whom no other home has been allotted, may live and work and pray and rejoice together.’”²⁸ In this home, deaconesses live together as family, and the Superintendent of the deaconess home fills the mother role.

Holding recreates in her novel a portrait of deaconesses as family settled in their home with Joy as the Superintendent and mother figures. Several

²⁶ Standing within earshot of Joy’s excitement about deaconess work is the doctor who hopes to marry her, “And poor Dr. Gilbert, waiting dejectedly by the door, knew that his fortune was waning. Here was a rival he had not counted on,” (Holding, *Joy the Deaconess*, 119). In this respect, the two novels differ, because Mary North marries her longtime admirer.

²⁷ Colleen McDannell, *The Christian Home in Victorian America, 1840-1900* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986), 104.

²⁸ Lucy Rider Meyer, *Deaconesses: Biblical, Early Church, European, American with the Story of the Chicago Training School, for City, Home, and Foreign Missions and the Chicago Deaconess Home* (Chicago: The Message Publishing Company, 1889), 70.

deaconesses in the story even grew up as orphans, which makes the deaconess home the only home they know. Annie, a deaconess, remarks, "I never had a home before, Mrs. Huntley. I found a verse in the Bible the other day, and I thought of myself and the Deaconess Home. 'He setteth the solitary in families.' Isn't that beautiful?"²⁹ Another deaconess, Mamie, requests that her wedding take place in the deaconess home, "the place that seemed more like home to her than any place else."³⁰ When Mamie announces her decision to marry, someone asks Joy, "Is this the first break in the family?"³¹ In turn, Joy considers the deaconesses as daughters; she even buys Mamie her wedding gown of white cashmere, because "she felt very much as if her eldest daughter was being married."³² She, who willingly gives up being a mother to a family of her own considers the "blessed deaconess work" as her lasting heritage. The novel ends with Joy's final words: "It is the joy of my life."

Maternalism shows up as well in the theology of both novels and conforms to McDannell's description of "maternal Protestantism." This theology encompasses characteristics, such as "God's loving mercy and kindness [which] surpassed [God's] fearsome characteristics. Intuition, emotion, and sentiment were the prerequisites for salvation. Salvation was demonstrated not by a violent submission to the will of God, but through acting out, in daily life, Christian virtues. Self-sacrifice, love, and interior devotion . . . The mediation of the clergy and the institution of the church took second place."³³ These features fill the two novels. First, clergy and institutional church presence is minimal. The only clergyman to appear in either novel does so under false pretense in the fake wedding ceremony of Mary North and her betrayer, who hires a con man to dress up like a minister and read vows from a prayer book for a \$100 extortion payment. In *Joy the Deaconess*, the only preacher introduced is none other than Lucy Rider Meyer, who delivers the Sunday sermon on the deaconess movement in Joy's local church.

Second, there is theological conflict in *Mary North* between a masculine focus on God's wrath and a feminine emphasis on God's mercy and kindness. Mary's mother tells her that God is good, yet what really comforts the child when she cries and worries that she will never be converted and will go to hell in her mother's presence. "Then the sobbing would grow quieter, and holding fast to her mother's hand the child would fall asleep, with the heterodox but comforting conviction that some way or other mother's hand would keep her from going to perdition, even if she should die before she wakened."³⁴ However, when her mother's hand is not there to console her, Mary does not know what to make of a God who allows suffering. In her darkest hour, as she flees from her betrayer on a train ride from Boston to Chicago,

²⁹ Holding, *Joy the Deaconess*, 150.

³⁰ Holding, *Joy the Deaconess*, 199.

³¹ Holding, *Joy the Deaconess*, 203.

³² Holding, *Joy the Deaconess*, 200.

³³ McDannell, *The Christian Home in Victorian America*, 128.

³⁴ Meyer, *Mary North*, 20-21.

she engages in a lengthy internal debate about her perception of God.

It was a hideous blunder—a sin too great to be forgiven. Yes, a sin—she would not spare herself . . . She saw only the mistake, the sin. It loomed up enormous, colossal, through the distorting mists of her shame and sorrow. Earth was ashes before her, and Heaven was brass above her. She had always prayed before—prayed about everything. Now, the thought of God was an added agony.

If she had been a man and not a girl, a girl, too, into the very fiber of whose life had been woven the profound belief that God is good—if she had been a man and ten years older, she would have fiercely arraigned God for bringing this trouble upon her. She would have told Him to His face that He had been a poor guide, a false father to her. She would have asked Him how, even if she had done wrong in not speaking, He could permit the one little error of an ignorant girl to bring upon her such awful, eternal ruin! She would have demanded to know where His promised love and care were, that He had let her blindly fall into this lowest hell . . . God was angry with her, but righteously so. The fault was all her own—she would not now commit the supreme sacrilege of trying to throw the responsibility of it off on Him. No, suffer as she might, God was good. Mother said that with her dying breath . . . She clung desperately to her childhood traditions and prayed in an agony to be delivered from this last temptation.³⁵

On the one hand, Mary views her situation as a man would and blames God for “the mistake.” She recognizes that one could argue, especially if one were a man, that God is “a poor guide, a false father,” that God is responsible for “bringing this trouble upon her,” that God is “angry with her” and withholds “promised love and care” and allows her “blindly [to] fall into this lowest hell.” On the other hand, given her age, gender, and religious upbringing, she blocks out those thoughts about a God who masochistically delights in her downfall, and she blames herself instead. “Yes, a sin—she would not spare herself.” Her mother’s final words, “God is good,” becomes her mantra, but she turns it on herself with this implication—if God is good, then I am not.

This theological debate over God’s nature returns to the fore as Mary recovers in the deaconess home. Once again, the view of God as good, loving, and kind triumphs in the end and comforts Mary as it did when, as a child, she held onto her mother’s hand. However, she must shed the view of God as wrathful and punitive in order to be healed physically and spiritually. It is the mother love of Sister Elizabeth that sparks the transformation. She tells Mary a story of a lost lamb who runs away, but the father, “who knew every lamb by name,” searches for it, rescues it, and brings it back home. The father, like a loving parent, does not punish the lamb but “gathered the little crying creature tenderly up in his arms and carried it home.” Then Sister Elizabeth, with maternal care, calls Mary her “little lost lamb” and promises to bring her home. Meyer, as the narrator, comments that Mary does not come around primarily because of argument or assertion; rather, she responds to the maternal love of “this pure beautiful woman who knew all the dreadful things of her past, did not loathe her, did not shrink from her, but

³⁵ Meyer, *Mary North*, 131.

actually loved and trusted her.”³⁶ It is Sister Elizabeth who helps Mary theologically to see herself not as sinner but as the sinned against, to view God not as one who brings wrath and enmity but as one who forgives and nurtures. Consistent with maternal Protestantism, as narrated by McDannell, Sister Elizabeth, not a clergymen, acts as a theological interpreter for Mary.

Thus, by constructing their religious work as maternalism, leaders in the WHMS and the deaconess movement maintained rather than dismantled separate spheres for men and women, for clergymen and deaconesses. Historian Ann Taves offers this succinct summary of separate spheres: “The standard rendition depicts the ideology of separate spheres as a dichotomized view of male and female nature and function wherein men, economics, and politics were associated with the public spheres and women, children, religion, and morality with the private sphere.”³⁷ WHMS women operated in the domestic sphere with the uplift of poor women and children and the creation of pious and orderly homes, and deaconesses, in conformity to their consecration vow, were to “minister to the poor, visit the sick, pray with the dying, care for the orphan, seek the wandering, comfort the sorrowing, save the sinning.”³⁸ Methodist clergymen applauded this delineation. In an annual report given at the 1900 WHMS’s annual meeting, the Rev. Dr. A. H. Ames, Superintendent of the Lucy Webb Hayes National Training-School for deaconesses in Washington, D.C., made the following statement demarcating deaconess work from that of the preachers, “Preachers and deaconesses represent the two ministries of the Christian Church: the ministry of the Word and the ministry of work; the expounding and enforcing the message which God has ordained for the quickening and perfecting of souls, and the making that Word real in the removal or mitigation of sorrow, poverty, and pain.”³⁹ The purpose of deaconess training, Ames continued, was to preserve these separate spheres. “The education of a deaconess must be conformed to our idea of the proper scope and sphere of her mission. True education is that which fits one best for the duties which are to be performed.”⁴⁰

Several years later, a Methodist district superintendent criticized Iva Durham Vennard, a Methodist deaconess and founder of a deaconess training school in St. Louis, for hiring deaconesses (i.e., women) to teach courses

³⁶ Meyer, *Mary North*, 280.

³⁷ Ann Taves, “Women and Gender in American Religion(s),” *Religious Studies Review* 18 (October, 1992): 263.

³⁸ Meyer, *Deaconesses*, 232.

³⁹ A. H. Ames, “Lucy Webb Hayes National Training-School,” *Nineteenth Annual Report of the General Board of Managers of the Woman’s Home Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church, For the Year 1899-1900* (Cincinnati: Western Methodist Book Concern Press, 1900), 137. The Woman’s Board of Home Missions of the MEC, South, anticipated this argument and included a statement in their annual meeting minutes entitled, “What A Deaconess Is, And What She Is Not.” The first line under the category, “What A Deaconess Is Not,” reads, “1. She is not a preacher” (Mary Helm, “What A Deaconess Is, And What She Is Not,” *Fourth Annual Meeting of the Woman’s Board of Home Missions, M. E. Church, South, Held in Centenary Church, Richmond, Virginia, April 18-23, 1902* [Nashville: Publishing House of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1902], 119).

⁴⁰ Ames, “Lucy Webb Hayes National Training-School,” 137.

in Bible and Theology. Like Superintendent Ames, he clarified the separation between deaconesses (women) and preachers (men):

Methodist preachers do not want deaconesses who study theology. We can attend to that ourselves. We want women as helpers who will work with the children, care for the sick, and visit the poor. If our deaconesses are trained in theology they will become critical of the preachers, and that will be the end of the deaconess movement.⁴¹

He then led a coup supported by leading laymen and clergymen to oust Vennard as principal and installed clergymen to teach at the school instead of the female faculty. That’s one understanding of separate spheres.

Separate spheres can also be defined in a more literal sense as a physical space apart from men which women claim and develop as their own. This understanding of separate spheres has gained traction with contemporary historians. For instance, historian Estelle Freedman argues that the separate female sphere, what she calls “female institution building,” proved beneficial because it promoted the development of women’s political and social power during the Progressive Era. Female institution building “helped mobilize women and gained political leverage in the larger society” while at the same time, it maintained “the positive attraction of the female world of close, personal relationships and domestic institutional structures.”⁴² Rosemary Skinner Keller applies Freedman’s thesis to women’s organizations in the MEC, like the WHMS and the deaconess movement. She interprets the formation of a separate sphere for women’s religious activities as an essential step to women’s developing a powerful organization of their own, training themselves for broader positions of leadership, and strengthening sisterhood among church women.⁴³ Her one disclaimer about the complex legacy of separate spheres can be easily lost in her enthusiastic assessment of separate spheres for MEC women. She traces animatedly a direct connection from the “female institution building” of these women’s organizations to “a movement which one day would enable women and men together to eliminate a separate sphere for women in church and society.”⁴⁴

In another article, Keller delves specifically into Lucy Rider Meyer’s maternalism, what Keller calls “motherly leadership,” and presents it as a “style of soft feminism, an effort to extend the home into the public sphere.” By slowly and watchfully introducing young women from rural areas to

⁴¹ Ames, “Lucy Webb Hayes National Training-School,” 145.

⁴² Estelle Freedman, “Separatism As Strategy: Female Institution Building and American Feminism, 1870-1930,” *Feminist Studies* 5 (1979): 513, 517.

⁴³ Rosemary Skinner Keller, “Creating A Sphere For Women,” in *Women In New Worlds*, eds. Hilah F. Thomas and Rosemary Skinner Keller (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981), 247.

⁴⁴ Keller, “Creating a Sphere for Women,” 260. Curiously Keller omits any reference in her article to Jane Bancroft Robinson who, in fact, utilized this separatist strategy. Instead she focuses on Meyer, who vociferously rejected this strategy. About the deaconess movement in particular, Keller argues similarly that it opened up a “new public ‘sphere’” . . . with “greater autonomy and independence of action in the church and society than was previously possible” (Rosemary Skinner Keller, “The Deaconess: ‘New Woman’ of Late Nineteenth-Century Methodism,” *Explorer* 5 [1979]: 40).

the wiles of the big city, providing protection and maternal care along the way, deaconess leaders “gently moved them [deaconesses] into leadership and control of their own public organizations and private lives.” With such rhetoric, Keller spins “motherly leadership” into an expansive strategy. She writes,

If Lucy Rider Meyer’s motherly care of the deaconess family may seem conservative and protective to readers a century later, her motivation was to liberate young women of the late nineteenth century. The ‘new woman of Protestantism,’ the single woman who could have a life and a vocation of her own, was created through the leadership and community building of Lucy Rider Meyer and the deaconess family of the Chicago Training School.⁴⁵

Keller, looking back a century later, finds expansion for women’s roles from a maternalistic ideology and its concomitant preservation of separate spheres, yet a prominent proto-feminist literary humorist and reformer of the day, Marietta Holley, does not. Holley’s writings under the pen name, Josiah Allen’s wife, became a “household word” in American popular culture for half a century, from 1870-1920.⁴⁶ An article in *The New York Times* claims that “she was as widely read as Mark Twain and even achieved a considerable audience in foreign countries.”⁴⁷ Holley takes on with acerbic wit the prominent issues of her day, like temperance, race, and Mormonism, to name a few, but she focuses particularly on “wimmen’s rites,” as she calls them in her colloquial language. Over the span of 40 years and 20 published books, she advocates for women’s suffrage, “equal pay for equal labor, a mother’s equal right to her children, and the right to speak out in public without being considered ‘unwomanly,’” and inclusive language.⁴⁸ Especially relevant for this study, she also fights for, according to a biographer, “adjustments in the separate spheres ideology” in order that women be liberated for participation in the public sphere.⁴⁹

To that end, Holley threads through many of her books a critique of organized religion’s restriction of women to a sphere separate of duties. In *Samantha Among the Brethren*, published in 1892, she turns the spotlight on the issue. This book, into which a biographer of Holley claims she pours her “angry response,” arises from a particular event relating to “wimmen’s rites,” in the MEC.⁵⁰ In 1888, by a long-winded discussion and vote at General Conference, women duly elected by their annual conference were

⁴⁵ Rosemary Skinner Keller, “Leadership and Community Building in Protestant Women’s Organizations,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, 57.3-4 (2003): 47.

⁴⁶ Patricia Williams, “The Crackerbox Philosopher as Feminist: The Novels of Marietta Holley,” *American Humor: An Interdisciplinary Newsletter* 7.1 (Spring, 1980): 16.

⁴⁷ Rudolph Ojensness, “Centenary of Samantha,” *The New York Times* (July 19, 1936); quoted in Phyllis Tholin, “Samantha and Her Sisters: Images of Women in the Writings of Marietta Holley,” in *Rethinking Methodist History: A Bicentennial Historical Consultation*, eds. Russell E. Richey and Kenneth E. Rowe (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1985), 204.

⁴⁸ Jane Curry, *Marietta Holley* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996), 21.

⁴⁹ Curry, *Marietta Holley*, ix.

⁵⁰ Kate H. Winter, *Marietta Holley: Life with “Josiah Allen’s Wife”* (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1984), 110.

not admitted as delegates. Holley, a member of the MEC, takes on, through her beloved character, Josiah Allen’s wife, this decision.

To begin with, in the book’s preface, Holley analyzes the semantic debate concerning the word, laymen. What exactly does it mean and whom does it include? Josiah Allen, the hapless husband, explains that the word, laymen, does not always include women; only sometimes it does. He likens it to the way the Declaration of Independence uses the word, “man” or “men.” To put it in Josiah’s language: “Now that word ‘men,’ in that Declaration, means men some of the time, and some of the time men and wimmen both. It means both sexes when it relates to punishment, taxin’ property, obeyin’ the laws strictly, etc., etc., and they it goes right on the very next minute and means men only, as to wit, namely, voting, takin’ charge of public matters, makin’ laws, etc.”⁵¹

Later in the book, the General Conference vote to create the office of deaconess comes under Holley’s scrutiny. In this scene, as is generally the case in her novels, the women are busy actually getting things done. “Wall, we wuz all engaged in the very heat of the warfare, as you may say, a-scrubbin’ the floors, and a-scourin’ the benches by the door of the old meetin’ house, and a-blackin’ the 2 stoves that stood jest inside of the door. We wuz workin’ jest as hard as wimmen ever worked . . .” Here they are cleaning the church when Josiah and several other male deacons barge in to announce that women, specifically unmarried women, can be deacons. The men believe without hesitation that this news will please the women. Josiah Allen’s wife puts her characteristically witty spin on it. “Josiah wanted me to know immegietly that I, too, could have had the privilege if I had been a more single woman, of becomin’ a deaconess, and have had the chance of workin’ all my hull life for the meetin’ house, with a man to direct my movements and take charge on me, and tell me what to do, from day to day and from hour to hour.”⁵² In other words, what’s good about this news?

A woman in the crowd, Miss Sypher, pursues the matter and asks if she, like the male deacons, can pass around the bread and wine during communion and the offering plate during the service. The answer—no! “[T]hese hard and arjuous dutys belong to the male deaconship. That is their own one pertickiler work, that wimmen can’t infringe upon. Their hull strength is spent in these duties, wimmen deacons have other fields of labor, such as relievin’ the wants of the sick and suffering’, sittin’ up nights with small-pox patients, takin’ care of the sufferin’ poor, etc., etc.” She does not take no for an answer. “But,” sez Miss Sypher, “wouldn’t it be real sweet, Deacon, if you and I could work together as deacons and tend the sick, relieve the sufferers—work for the good of the church together—go about doin’ good?” The answer—again, no! That is “wimmen’s work,” he tells her. And then he speaks the phrase that explains all, “**We will let it go on in the same old**

⁵¹ Marietta Holley (Josiah Allen’s wife), *Samantha Among the Brethren* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1892), 256.

⁵² Holley, *Samantha Among the Brethren*, 263-264.

way. Let wimmen have the privilege of workin' hard, jest as she always has. Let her work all the time, day and night, and let men go on in the same sure old way of superentendin' her movements, guardin' her weaker footsteps, and bossin' her round generally."⁵³ Thus, Marietta Holley, with a seasoned wit likened to Mark Twain, lets the reader know that, in her opinion, despite the news about the office of deaconess for women, "the same old way" will prevail. After all, as Deacon Sypher remarks, this is "wimmen's work." Mothering—not governing.

In conclusion, I resonate with Holley's realism. The MEC hierarchy propagated gendered separate spheres to keep roles and responsibilities for men and women "the same old way." Further, the maternalistic ideology evident even in the popular writings for Methodist women's organizations certainly did not challenge it either. Considering these realities of separate spheres perpetuated by male and female leaders alike, I contend that Keller draws overly optimistic conclusions concerning the impact of women's organizations in the late nineteenth century for women's rights and leadership opportunities in the MEC. Instead, as I demonstrate in this paper, the maternalistic ideology rampant in these writings—authored by women and read by women—served to enlist women primarily for mothering, not governing.

⁵³ Holley, *Samantha Among the Brethren*, 263-267.