

**ADVANCING HOME MISSIONS:  
BELLE HARRIS BENNETT'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO  
SOUTHERN METHODISM**

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Isabel Harris Bennett (1852-1922) is most often known for her efforts to extend ecclesiastical rights and ministry opportunities to women in the Methodist Episcopal Church South (MECS). Indeed, Bennett led the campaign for full lay rights for women beginning in 1910.<sup>1</sup> Once those rights were granted in 1922, her home annual conference of Kentucky elected her the first female delegate to General Conference. Sadly, too ill to attend, she died later that summer. Earlier, Bennett also championed opportunities for women's ministry and training through her efforts to establish the role of Deaconess, adopted by the Methodist Episcopal Church, South (MECS) in 1902, as well as a training school dedicated a decade earlier.<sup>2</sup> Serving as president of the Woman's Home Missionary Society (1896-1910) and its successor organization, the Woman's Missionary Council (1910-1922),<sup>3</sup> Bennett's leadership of these organizations had a broad and deep impact within and through Southern Methodism.

Bennett's ability to practice, and form others to practice, *evangelistic ministry*<sup>4</sup> with multi-dimensional characteristics through Southern Methodism's Woman's Missionary organizations provides a significant example for the contemporary church. Her remarkably comprehensive Christian vocation included education and evangelism among numerous disenfranchised populations in the United States, as well as the pastors and laywomen within her denomination. Bennett's leadership arguably facilitated the establishment of schools and missions—mostly urban—in Italian, French, Polish, Hungarian, Slav, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Mexican, Latin American, and

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Miller Schmidt, *Grace Sufficient: A History of Women in American Methodism 1760-1939* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 172, see also 228-231.

<sup>2</sup> Schmidt, 210. Bennett sent a memorial to the MECS General Conference describing the urgent need. She and Mary Helm laid groundwork for two years prior to the affirmative vote, though approval was not granted without "long and bitter debate" that focused, among other topics, upon whether or not an officially recognized role for women would lead to the aspiration of women for ordination.

<sup>3</sup> Bennett initially served on the study commission and then presided during the amalgamation of the woman's missionary organizations in the MECS, a difficult and complicated task. See Schmidt, 228.

<sup>4</sup> The practice of evangelism is grounded in Scripture and is the heart of God's mission or *Missio Dei*—God's sending Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ sending the Church to the world (John 20:19-23). Evangelism, informed by its Greek root *euangelion*, is the proclamation of the message of salvation in our words and lives for the purpose of initiating individuals into the reign of God.

Cuban immigrant communities. Bennett not only acknowledged the social systems that continued to oppress African Americans in the South, but also the MECS's complicity in those sins during her lifetime.

Bennett called the MECS through its Woman's Missionary organizations to respond to Jesus Christ's commission to proclaim the message of salvation through an incarnational and inclusive witness of compassion, advocacy, proclamation, and piety. As articulated in a 1908 article from *Our Homes*, the periodical of the Woman's Home Missionary Society, Bennett notes: "This Society is first and always a *missionary* Society. Its purpose is missionary and its administration is on missionary lines. The idea involved in this use of the word 'missions' is that of a Society seeking to raise funds and employ workers to establish institutions for the purpose of evangelizing, educating, or reforming people who, on account of personal or local conditions, need this kind of work and are unable otherwise to obtain it."<sup>5</sup> Bennett both was inspired by and inspired others to practice ministry across boundaries of ethnicity and race with these verses from John 13:34-35: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."<sup>6</sup>

Bennett's Christian vocation advocated two sides of the same coin: first, ecclesiastical rights and ministry training for women, in order to, secondly, reach marginalized communities through organized mission work with the Christian gospel. This essay surveys a selection of Bennett's efforts during her tenure leading Woman's Missionary Organizations in Southern Methodism to demonstrate this multidimensional character of the impact of her leadership, particularly the significance of training women for ministry across racial, ethnic and cultural boundaries.

### **From Frivolity and Idleness: Biography and Vocation**

Isabel Harris Bennett, named for her paternal grandmother, was born into a pious Methodist family of means near Richmond, Kentucky.<sup>7</sup> Her ancestors included Revolutionary War leaders, governors, senators, state legislators, as well as French Huguenots (maternal ancestors) and a Methodist circuit rider (Bennett's paternal grandfather).<sup>8</sup> The youngest of two girls and the seventh among eight children, she grew up on the family plantation, "Homelands," where she experienced affluence in its many dimensions from

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<sup>5</sup> *Our Homes*, [no title] (August, 1908), 3.

<sup>6</sup> R. W. MacDonell, *Belle Harris Bennett: Her Life Work* (New York: Garland Publishing Company, 1987), 125; quoted in Lacey Warner, "Redemption and Race: The Evangelistic Ministry of Three Women in Southern Methodism," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 40.2 (Fall 2005): 7-29, 21. Bennett asked her audience, "Are you ready to go quickly to the more than fifty million unchurched, neglected, unsaved people of our land? Has the Holy Spirit taught you to look upon and love the dark-skinned people among whom you were born and reared as our brothers and sisters?" and concluded with the above biblical verses.

<sup>7</sup> Charles E. Cole, ed., *Something More than Human: Biographies of Leaders in American Methodist Higher Education* (Nashville: United Methodist Board of Higher Education and Ministry, 1986), 11.

<sup>8</sup> Cole, 12.

servants and influence to hospitality.<sup>9</sup> Though an active church participant with her family, Bennett did not join the congregation as a member until the age of twenty-three, when she was moved by the preaching of a Presbyterian evangelist.<sup>10</sup> After returning from Lake Chautauqua, New York, in 1884 Bennett described experiencing “the presence of and power of God” and the “assurance of God-given leadership.”<sup>11</sup> She confided to a friend, “I have spent my life in frivolity and idleness. Now I mean to give it wholly to the Lord.”<sup>12</sup> Bennett never married, though she mothered many. She worked tirelessly during her career of over thirty-five years, never receiving compensation.

### Evangelistic Education

Bennett’s broader endeavors began with her leadership in establishing schools for training lay Christian women to meet the needs of rural and urban areas around the world. Indeed, education is one of the three pillars of her argument and vision for “the World-wide Movement for the Liberation of Women,” alongside rights to hold property and recognition by governments.<sup>13</sup> According to her dear friend, Sara Estelle Haskin, Bennett “was constantly giving and praying for the uplift of God’s children of every race and clime” including those in the United States. Haskin claimed, “It was her [Bennett’s] ambition to educate, at her own expense, at least one child of each of the races of the children of men.”<sup>14</sup> Haskin believed she accomplished this end, “and probably went far beyond it.”<sup>15</sup> While this legendary accomplishment seems an allusion to Bennett’s connection to foreign missionary work, it likewise connects to her work across denominational and racial boundaries closer to home. Haskin explained, “She also reached out beyond the confines of her own church in her inter-denominational service.”<sup>16</sup>

While attending a meeting in 1887 with her sister, Bennett experienced a deep concern over the lack of training for women foreign missionaries. Learning of the recently established Chicago Training School founded by Lucy Rider Meyer for the training of deaconesses in the Methodist Episcopal Church, Bennett contacted Meyer. In 1888, upon returning from a summer

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<sup>9</sup> Cole, 11-12.

<sup>10</sup> Cole, 13.

<sup>11</sup> Schmidt, 171.

<sup>12</sup> MacDonell, *Belle Harris Bennett*, 38; qtd. in Warner, “Redemption and Race,” 20.

<sup>13</sup> Belle Harris Bennett, “The History of the World-wide Movement for the Liberation of Women,” *Methodist Review* 61.1 (January, 1912): 56, “The modern woman’s movement in Christian lands, which has manifested itself in three sharply defined phases—(1) a demand for higher education, (2) for legal protection of property and personal rights, (3) and for equal political recognition by governments—parallels in time and importance the modern foreign missionary movement.”

<sup>14</sup> Sara Estelle Haskin, “Through Grace and Inheritance,” *The Missionary Voice* 12.10 (October, 1922): 296.

<sup>15</sup> Haskin, 296. While Haskin described this profound goal, Bennett did not seem to refer to this aspiration directly.

<sup>16</sup> Haskin, 296.

assembly at Lake Chautauqua, Bennett felt a call to begin missionary training schools for women and responded: "Yes, Lord, I will do it."<sup>17</sup> Within a year the MECS's Woman's Board of Foreign Missions gave Bennett permission to raise funds for such a school. Within another year Bennett received a generous gift of land and financial capital for a building resulting in the dedication of the Scarritt Bible and Training School in Kansas City in 1892.<sup>18</sup> Scarritt was the first of many similar endeavors Bennett would accomplish in her lifetime.

### **Confronting Resistance to Home Missions**

Bennett's Christian vocation to participate in, as well as facilitate, home and foreign missionary work framed by education and training facilities continued to unfold. She was elected President of the Woman's Home Mission Society in 1896. Interestingly, the work of home missions was rather slow, meeting apathy and even resistance in the Church including resistance from members of the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society.<sup>19</sup> Such resistance, particularly among Church members, would be a constant companion during Bennett's leadership: "there had been opposition to every new enterprise of the Board, and it could not be expected that what seemed to some as radical an undertaking as this [work among African American women students at Paine College] should pass without censure."<sup>20</sup> Mrs. J. D. Hammond, among those first to rally support for home mission work in Southern Methodism, described the opposition:

When the home mission work of the Church struggled toward organization, the majority of our preachers, at least one of the bishops, and most of our women considered it disloyal to the foreign field to take part in the work. Our best women felt that the cause of foreign missions was in danger, and they honestly and earnestly labored with the home mission group to cease their activities.

Mrs. Hammond continued her remarks, describing Miss Bennett as "already the best known woman in the Church," and a strong supporter of women's foreign mission work. "Yet she was one of the first to lead in the home mission work also." Bennett recounted that many women in both foreign and home mission work felt she should give up her foreign mission work as a matter of loyalty to the emerging home mission work. Bennett responded,

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<sup>17</sup> Cole, 14.

<sup>18</sup> Nathan Scarritt of Kansas City Missouri offered land and \$25,000 for a building as matching funds requiring the church to raise an equal amount. When the school was dedicated in 1892, it was debt free. Bennett declined to serve as the first principal of Scarritt, though continued in a voluntary role and as Vice President of the Board of Managers until her death. During Bennett's lifetime, Scarritt sent more than one thousand workers into Christian service (Cole, 14). Following the sudden death of her beloved sister, Bennett established the Sue Bennett Memorial School for poor children in the mountains of Kentucky in 1897 (Schmidt, 172).

<sup>19</sup> MacDonell, *Belle Harris Bennett*, 85.

<sup>20</sup> MacDonell, 123. Bennett's biographer describes Bennett's leadership style: "Miss Bennett's forceful personality and determined steadfastness and the loyalty of her cohorts soon quieted open expression." Bennett also offers advice regarding how to address (or not) "letters or communications of an offensive nature" about the work with African Americans (124).

“And that is the one thing I never will do. I intend to stay in both; and some day our women will see that none of us can afford to do anything else.”<sup>21</sup>

### Addressing Resistance to a Settlement Movement in Southern Methodism

Prior to her election as President, shortly following her appointment to the Central Committee of the Woman’s Home Mission Society in 1893, the organization held a conference on “City Evangelism” in St. Louis. Following the St. Louis Convention of Christian Workers, from which city missions among women in Southern Methodism is generally dated, several local auxiliaries organized City Mission Boards employing local, earnest, but untrained women and resulting in far from successful outcomes.<sup>22</sup> While women had for some time been “visiting prisoners, feeding the hungry, clothing the poorly clad, comforting the weary, and reading the Bible to those who could not read it for themselves,” the convention demonstrated a conviction that city mission work needed organization.<sup>23</sup> Among those earliest cities organizing City Mission Boards were, apart from St. Louis, Nashville, Atlanta, and Houston.<sup>24</sup> In 1899, seventeen Southern Methodist women pursued this work in ten cities, “Friendly visiting, Bible reading, teaching industrial classes and kindergartens constitute the main features of most of these organizations, although some of them were devoted exclusively to rescue work.”<sup>25</sup>

These experiments eventually led to the establishment of settlement houses in 1901, with only a few trained women not only beginning work, but living in the neighborhoods in which they served in Nashville, Dallas, and Atlanta.<sup>26</sup> In 1903, Bennett described the recent developments in her annual address:

The advance in organized mission work during the past year has been phenomenal. Women in cities, towns, and villages seem to have suddenly awakened to the fact that enough time has been spent in talking and writing of the great need of evangelizing the cities, of the dangers from congested slums and the ignorant, degraded immigrant and are reaching out for work as though just realizing that *now* is God’s

<sup>21</sup> MacDonell, 85.

<sup>22</sup> MacDonell, 91. For further details, see also Noreen Dunn Tatum, *A Crown of Service: A Story of Woman’s Work in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, from 1878-1940* (Nashville: Board of Missions Woman’s Division of Christian Service, 1960), 241.

<sup>23</sup> Tatum, 241. Bishop Hargrove presided at the St. Louis Convention and Dr. Walter R. Lambuth and Bishop W. W. Duncan spoke.

<sup>24</sup> Tatum, 241. This increased interest and activity in city work caused the General Conference of 1894 to authorize the establishment of city mission boards made up of representatives of each of the auxiliaries in a given city. Within a few years city mission boards had been organized in more than thirteen cities, some of them raising as much as \$1,200 a year for the maintenance of the work.

<sup>25</sup> Tatum, 241.

<sup>26</sup> MacDonell, *Belle Harris Bennett*, 92-93. See also Tatum, 242. According to Tatum, in December of 1900, another stage of the work unfolded: “Mrs. R. W. MacDonell believed firmly that little of permanent value could be accomplished in city mission work unless the workers lived with their districts.”

accepted time for the redemption of the masses. Twelve City Mission Boards are already affiliated with this Board, and in many other places the women are eager to organize.<sup>27</sup>

However, the settlement movement also met severe criticism from pastors as well as connectional officers particularly in Southern Methodism.<sup>28</sup> Some claimed the work was not evangelistic. Others argued the work only treated symptoms, not the “disease.” A significant leader stated, “Churches, schools, and orphanages are real Church work, not these playhouses for women.”<sup>29</sup> Bennett listened attentively and realized much of the opposition was provoked by the term “settlement house.” In her annual address in 1906, she recommended revisions to the name. Bennett explained that studying the methods of similar work in Chicago and New York resulted in learning including the clear disfavor of the language “settlement house” since this work carried no pretense of connection to the Church.

The Presbyterians do their settlement work in down-town Church House; the Episcopalians in the Parish House. We are in the infancy of our city mission work. Let us take a distinctive name: Epworth Community House, Wesley Community House, or Methodist Community House. Let us have our own name . . . .<sup>30</sup>

The name Wesley Community House was adopted for neighborhoods with European Americans, often recent immigrants, and later Bethlehem House was adopted for work with African Americans.<sup>31</sup> Bennett saw more than forty institutions for social evangelism established in the United States as well as a number in Asia and Latin America.<sup>32</sup>

### **Pursuing Research and Study**

As Bennett implied in her annual address described above, research and study remained a constant practice and foundation for her Christian vocation alongside daily practices of piety, such as reading Scripture and prayer. According to her biographer, from the day Bennett became President of the woman’s work until her death in 1922 she read voraciously. She consistently read biographies of influential figures in world politics and history, texts from Christian tradition such as those of St. Francis of Assisi and John Fletcher, as well as texts in the growing field of sociology and fiction “that she might keep abreast of the trend of thought of the social world of her own times.”<sup>33</sup> Her reading nourished her teaching, which she offered through numerous addresses, sometimes three or four each day, as she diligently worked to cast a faithful vision for the Woman’s Missionary Boards within Southern Methodism.

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<sup>27</sup> MacDonell, *Belle Harris Bennett*, 94. Italics original.

<sup>28</sup> Tatum, 242.

<sup>29</sup> MacDonell, *Belle Harris Bennett*, 94.

<sup>30</sup> MacDonell, 94-95.

<sup>31</sup> Tatum, 242. Bethlehem Houses developed in later years following the Wesley Houses.

<sup>32</sup> MacDonell, *Belle Harris Bennett*, 95.

<sup>33</sup> MacDonell, 88.

Bennett also studied alongside colleagues in leadership positions in the organization. In one season, Bennett regularly joined Miss Helm and Mrs. MacDonell for days set apart for collaborative intensive study of current research in fields such as labor and commerce, including immigration reports. “They studied histories of similar condition [*sic*] in other countries and sought to learn what other religious and welfare organizations were doing . . . .”<sup>34</sup> The learning compiled was then disseminated to women in local auxiliaries through the *Our Homes* periodical as well as institutes and other educational opportunities. According to her biographer:

Miss Bennett was twenty years ahead of her times when she foresaw the inevitable massing of unskilled laborers, alien peoples, and fortune seekers in the cities of the country as they followed in the wake of modern invention and industrial and commercial change . . . . She foresaw that nothing short of aggressive religious enthusiasm could cope with issues generated by these factors, and she believed that a Church alive to the ethics of Jesus had the power of regenerating municipal and commercial control of human relationships.

Only one-third of the population of the United States lived in cities when Bennett first called attention to such trends. Twenty years later, the 1920 census revealed more than half of the population lived in cities.<sup>35</sup> Her biographer, Mrs. MacDonell, described Bennett’s visionary leadership and pious character in an article featured in *The Missionary Voice* periodical volume honoring Bennett in October following her death that summer:

To me she was the greatest woman the South has produced and I believe it was a prophetic vision which gave her such larger leadership. She lived in close touch with the times and impending issues of our country and understood well the laws underlying the moral order of the world. At the same time she was sensitive to spiritual currents and lived so close to the Lord that she was equipped for a service granted to few.<sup>36</sup>

### Seeking to Find God’s Will and to Do It: Work among Immigrant Populations

Bennett’s biographer implies that many may not have realized how diligently Bennett followed “her only quest,” which the biographer describes as “Seeking to find God’s will and to do it.”<sup>37</sup> Though this “quest” did not necessarily dictate that Bennett should serve immigrant populations to the exclusion of other efforts, it certainly included this work. Wesley (and Bethlehem) Houses embodied Bennett’s comprehensive vision for home missions. She envisioned and built an institutional network of city mission and evangelistic work through the establishment of community centers in neighborhoods confronting complex challenges, and ensured they were led and staffed by trained Christian workers, such as Deaconesses. The various

<sup>34</sup> MacDonell, 89.

<sup>35</sup> MacDonell, 91.

<sup>36</sup> Mrs. R. W. MacDonell, “Belle Harris Bennett—Fellow-Worker and Friend,” *The Missionary Voice* 12.10 (October, 1922), 299.

<sup>37</sup> MacDonell, *Belle Harris Bennett*, 299.

components of her quest, though not necessarily limited to ministry among immigrant communities, culminated in this comprehensive vision of trained Christian workers facilitating a persistent presence ministering among marginalized communities. In other words, her many efforts throughout her life were neither random, nor reactive, but rather a sustained strategy not only to provide women with ecclesiastical rights, opportunities for training, and Christian service, but also to participate in God's reign by ministering to and with those in deepest need through carefully considered and effective organized efforts.

As described in an earlier section, Christian work among immigrant communities developed over many years and through many threads of existing work by women in Southern Methodism. Drawing from a number of sources, the earliest city mission work with immigrant populations occurred in the context of schools, particularly among Cuban communities in Tampa, Florida. While the significance of work among children in rural mountain areas claimed Bennett's initial attention prior to the establishment of the schools previously mentioned, the Wolff Mission School in Tampa began operations in 1894 before the Sue Bennett Memorial School of London, Kentucky, began operations in earnest in 1897.<sup>38</sup>

Similar to the life cycle of much city mission work, efforts in a neighborhood often emerged with the organization of primary education for children since immigrant children in most cases were not permitted to attend public schools. As community services developed in areas experiencing growing populations—eventually admitting immigrant children to public schools—city mission work developed to include other services such as nurseries for children of working mothers; adult classes for women and men including English language cooking, sewing, first aid, gardening, technical skills, and Bible classes; as well as free medical and dental clinics; emergency medical care for women and girls; and eventually children's homes.<sup>39</sup> Under Bennett's leadership city mission work, which often occurred among recent immigrant populations, was organized in at least fifteen, mostly southern, states—Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia. Following the 1906 earthquake in California, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, focused its ministry efforts among Koreans in an agreement with three other denominational missionary organizations.<sup>40</sup> However, Southern Methodist women organized outreach to Chinese and Japanese immigrant communities in Oakland, San Francisco, Stockton, Los Angeles, and Salinas beginning in 1897—the same year schools were initially established in Tampa, Florida.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Tatum, 226.

<sup>39</sup> Tatum, 223-285. The only free dental clinic mentioned was located in San Antonio, TX (275).

<sup>40</sup> Tatum, 282-283.

<sup>41</sup> Tatum, 281-282.

### Doing Something for Africa at Home: Work among African Americans

Bennett's leadership of the Woman's Missionary organizations to facilitate ministry to and with African Americans in the South began with her own sense of vocation prayerfully to seek out relationships and collaborations across racial lines. She taught Bible Studies and other classes in African American congregations. Alongside Bethlehem Houses, Bennett coordinated educational opportunities among African American Methodists with events similar to those held at Lake Chautauqua, the establishment of farm schools for African American children, and the construction of facilities and programs to train African American young women on a number of college campuses. She also spoke persuasively to MECS pastors of the Church's mission and the responsibility of pastors to support and participate in that mission, even when controversial. According to one tribute: "Her strong stand for right and justice to the Negro aroused the women of the Southern Methodist Church, until they have become the leaders in the inter-racial work of the South. This forward movement must be attributed to Miss Bennett's vision and leadership."<sup>42</sup>

### Teaching and Speaking among African American Congregations

Bennett first records in her journal an opportunity to speak to African Americans on October 18, 1891. She traveled to Wilmington, North Carolina, to present the need for a missionary training school, "to the women Monday afternoon and to the Negroes at night. I was so cowardly about the latter." Following this experience, she continued to speak in African American congregations, charity associations, bible studies, as well as building relationships with individuals.<sup>43</sup>

Another example of Bennett's teaching and speaking among African American Methodists begins with Bennett's biographer describing her concern that since the last decade of the nineteenth century, Southern Methodism had not initiated missionary work in Africa. "One day as she agonized in prayer, asking God to open the way for the Church to enter this dark, needy land, he seemed to answer, saying: 'Why not do something for Africa at home in the meantime?'" She promptly phoned an African American pastor in Richmond, Kentucky, where she resided and with whom she was familiar, to ask if there was anything she could do. He replied, "O Miss Belle, my wife and I have been praying every day for nearly a year that you might spare some of your time for us, but you seemed so busy!" Bennett began teaching a Bible Study class the following Sunday to a group of African American pastors from Richmond and the surrounding region of Kentucky. According to the Superintendent of the Sunday School, "Miss Bennett taught a Bible study class at St. Paul A.M.E. Church from 1900 to 1904 every Sunday at three o'clock. It was well attended, ranging from 200 to 500 members. She

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<sup>42</sup> Haskin, 296.

<sup>43</sup> MacDonell, *Belle Harris Bennett*, 121.

would often speak to our Missionary Society and Allen Christian Endeavor League."<sup>44</sup> According to a close friend and colleague, this was "one of the outstanding experiences in her [Bennett's] religious life."<sup>45</sup>

### **Bethlehem Houses**

Miss Estelle Haskin, a teacher of social activities at the Scarritt Methodist Training School and a mentee of Bennett, led her students in ministry with African American communities in Nashville, resulting in the establishment of possibly the earliest Bethlehem Houses by the Woman's Missionary Council (successor organization to the Woman's Board of Home Missions from 1910) in Nashville, as well as in Augusta, Georgia, in 1912.<sup>46</sup> Bethlehem Houses generally reflect the efforts of city mission work conducted through Wesley Houses and other initiatives consisting mainly of educational and spiritual initiatives. For example, these houses provided day nurseries for children of working mothers, kindergartens, adult clubs and classes, clinics, though there seems also to have been an inclusion of advocacy work with and for African Americans related to employment and civil rights.<sup>47</sup> The governing boards of the Bethlehem Houses were composed of European and African American representatives working together to break the systemic poverty and sins of prejudice within their communities. The Bethlehem Center in Nashville benefitted tremendously from the support and assistance of students from Fisk University and students and faculty members from Scarritt College.<sup>48</sup>

The Bethlehem Center in Augusta, Georgia, was the result of the persistent vocation of Miss Mary DeBardeleben.<sup>49</sup> Initially discerning a call to foreign mission work, DeBardeleben realized she felt deeply compelled to serve among African Americans in the South. "One Christmas eve, there came to her a sudden inescapable conviction that no group in all the world was more in need of Christian ministries than this one at her own door. Furthermore, she felt that no person was worthy of being a foreign missionary who was not willing to minister to the needy ones of her own homeland." Interestingly, Miss DeBardeleben found no encouragement from her peers or close acquaintances, which resulted in her finally entering the Methodist Training School in Nashville to prepare for missionary service in Japan. However, in Nashville, Miss Estelle Haskin encouraged her "to stand by her conviction" and invited her to attend the first session of the Woman's

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<sup>44</sup> MacDonell, *Belle Harris Bennett*, 131.

<sup>45</sup> Haskin, 296.

<sup>46</sup> MacDonell, *Belle Harris Bennett*, 128-129. See also Tatum, 249-250 and 264-265.

<sup>47</sup> Tatum, 250.

<sup>48</sup> Tatum, 264-265. Scarritt Professor Louise Young served for years as chairperson of the board and staff advisor at the Bethlehem Center in Nashville.

<sup>49</sup> Tatum, 249. This project in general does not refer to individual names and assignments beyond significant figures alongside Belle Harris Bennett. However, Miss Debardeleben's story is distinctive, demonstrating not only the challenges to her vocation, but also the work of women in Southern Methodism in service to and with African Americans.

Missionary Council in St. Louis in 1911 where DeBardeleben addressed the gathered body, testifying to her present conviction and calling. The women of the Council were deeply moved. Miss DeBardeleben was “the first missionary to the Negro race in America.” While the veracity of this claim is not certain, Miss DeBardeleben received financial support from the Woman’s Missionary Council—consisting of the amalgamation of both home and foreign societies—as well as the North Georgia Conference. Galloway Hall, later called Bethlehem House, was opened in 1912 in a recovered saloon. It grew steadily in the following years making a significant impact on the community.<sup>50</sup> Like the Nashville Bethlehem House’s relationship with Fisk and Scarritt, the Augusta Bethlehem House benefitted from relationship with Paine College.<sup>51</sup>

Bethlehem Houses and Centers generally emerge later and in fewer numbers than Wesley Houses. According to Tatum, drawing from Dunn and Haskins, Bethlehem Houses numbered significantly fewer than Wesley Houses (approximately eight, compared with more than forty Wesley Houses). Additionally, most likely because of resistance within church and society, and the need to develop capacity to serve well with respect, collaboration, and mutuality, the smaller number of Bethlehem Houses emerged over time with only two or three appearing in each of consecutive decades: two in 1912 (Augusta and Nashville); two in 1922 (Birmingham and Chattanooga); and three in the 1930s (Winston-Salem and Spartanburg in 1930 and Memphis in 1935).

In the midst of significant constraints and challenges as a woman in Southern Methodism, without ecclesial rights, at the turn of the twentieth century, Bennett rallies her denomination, particularly its women, to pursue the unimaginable for God’s reign.

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<sup>50</sup> Tatum, 249. Tatum describes the growth of the project and its many efforts (250).

<sup>51</sup> Tatum, 250.