

**“IF GOD CALLS, DARE WE FALTER?”¹:
THE STRATEGIC FOUNDING AND INDEPENDENCE OF THE
WOMAN’S MISSIONARY ASSOCIATION OF THE CHURCH
OF THE UNITED BRETHREN IN CHRIST, 1869–1877**

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“Are you willing to go to Africa?” Miss Lizzie Hoffman of Dayton, Ohio, stumbled over this question while seeking to deepen her spiritual life. According to her own account, she battled within herself for more than a year, determined “to wrestle and pray till light would dawn upon my soul.” After a full night of prayer and reading her Bible, she conceded, “Lord use me as it seemeth to thee good,” and finally found the peace she had sought. She felt an inspiration that, although she may not need to go to Africa herself, she could assist others by organizing the women in the church for “active and special work for missions.” This insight turned into a sense of duty, then an imperative. She conferred with the Reverend John Kemp, a founder, then treasurer of the Home, Frontier and Foreign Missionary Society (HFFMS) of the Church of the United Brethren in Christ (UBC). An outspoken, tireless advocate of missions, he encouraged Hoffman’s sense of call. He connected the young school teacher with other women with leadership capacity and with mission-minded pastors in the region, who supported her resolve.²

Lizzie Hoffman’s commitment led to the organization in 1872 of the Woman’s Missionary Association (WMA) of the Miami Conference of the UBC.³ This body, assisted by supportive women and men, encouraged and rapidly developed an association of women’s missionary groups throughout the denomination. Despite early resistance to autonomy, the women of the UBC successfully organized and gained authorization in 1877 for an independent, church-wide WMA that reported directly to the General Conference of the UBC and dispatched a growing number of its own missionaries.

This essay will show that both the timing of its founding and the design of the WMA were strategically optimized by its supporters to improve the success and impact of the church’s mission program. Although concern was raised from time to time about traditional gender roles and financial

¹ Mrs. T. N. Sowers quoted in S. S. Hough, *Faith that Achieved: A History of the Woman’s Missionary Association of the Church of the United Brethren in Christ, 1872–1946* (Dayton, OH: The Women’s Society of World Service of the Evangelical United Brethren Church, 1958), 10.

² Hough, 4.

³ The Miami Conference was the first conference organized west of the Appalachian Mountains by the UBC and included much of southern Ohio, southeastern Indiana, and northern Kentucky. J. Bruce Behney and Paul H. Eller, *The History of the Evangelical United Brethren Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1979), 102.

implications for the general board, these concerns were quickly and soundly trumped by insistent voices focused on gospel imperative and mission expedience. Tracing these developments will contribute to understanding the history of the UBC and its significance in United Methodism, the history of Christian missions, women's history, and gender studies.

In the early 1870s, Lizzie Hoffman was far from alone in her interest in overseas missionary work. The UBC, founded in 1800, had launched its missionary society in 1853. This organization sent its first three foreign missionaries two years later to Freetown, Sierra Leone, in West Africa. After they and numerous other missionaries returned home suffering from tropical illnesses, African American missionaries Joseph and Mary Gomer, sent in 1870, began a successful, long-term mission residency and led a revival in which the chief at Shenge was converted. The chief's conversion, in turn, resulted in the multiplication of new opportunities and interest in the mission. Throughout the 1870s, articles depicting the urgency of this work populated the UBC's magazine, the *Religious Telescope* (hereafter *Telescope*).⁴

Specifically, Reverend Dr. D. K. Flickinger, who had served as one of the first UBC missionaries to Sierra Leone and thereafter as Secretary of the HFFMS, began publishing a series of articles in 1871 that encouraged the founding of a UBC women's missionary society to assist with the mission in Sierra Leone. Flickinger knew as much as anyone about the mission's perceived needs and the potential for women to contribute toward meeting them. In 1857 he had authored, *Off Hand Sketches of Men and Things in Western Africa*, based upon his experiences in the West African nation. In the twelfth chapter of this book he described "customs regulating the marriage relation, and the conduct of the men toward the women." Women in West Africa, he wrote, were essentially deprived of all rights and privileges and regularly subjected to brutal abuse by men. He closed the chapter with an appeal aimed at women:

Could Christian women of this land (and all Christians) realize how much they are indebted to the gospel for the unnumbered, and exceeding high privileges they enjoy, surely they would make greater efforts to give the bread of life to the thousands who are perishing.

Should we not all be Missionaries, in sympathy, feeling, action, and should not the burdening inquiry of our life be, How can I best promote this great work?⁵

In a December, 1871, *Telescope* article, Flickinger cited organizational developments among women in other denominations and called the women of the UBC to organize likewise for missions. "What ought to be, can be, and what ought to be and can be, should be," he proclaimed.⁶

The concept of a women's missionary organization was not new to the UBC. The very first conference-wide UBC women's mission organization,

⁴ Hough, 2. This biweekly, denominational magazine was published by the UBC beginning in 1834.

⁵ D. K. Flickinger, *Off Hand Sketches of Men and Things in Western Africa*, (Dayton, OH: United Brethren Printing Establishment, 1857), 67-68.

⁶ K. K. Flickinger, quoted in Hough, 2.

the *Schwester Mission Verbein* (SMV) of the Ohio German Conference, was founded in May of 1869, two months after women in Boston organized the first women's missionary society in the Methodist Episcopal Church.⁷ As one German Conference pastor, Rev. M. Mittendorf, explained in a *Telescope* article, women of the German Conference began meeting monthly in 1869 to pray and collect financial contributions for missions. He noted that "no man is allowed to be present except the preacher and he only by the consent of the sisters." The German-American UBC women had quickly achieved the goal of supporting a missionary of their own, Reverend F. Lorenz in Parkersburg, West Virginia. Mittendorf challenged women in the English-speaking conferences "who have as much love for the Saviour and His cause" also to organize in support of the church's mission.⁸

Reinforcing Mittendorf's challenge, the constitution of the SMV was published in the January, 1872, *Telescope* and the February, 1872, *Missionary Visitor* (hereafter *Visitor*). It stated the purpose of the SMV as simply "to collect money for missions," and stipulated that each member, with a minimum age of 10, was obligated to contribute twenty-five cents per quarter into the society's treasury. These funds were routinely transferred into the annual conference treasury, but the society retained "the right to say to what department of the mission work its money shall go."⁹

The following year, the Reverend Gottlieb Fritz, also of the Ohio German Conference, published an article in the *Visitor*, upon request, to explain the success of the SMV. In four years, it had raised \$1,148.95 in mission support. Of five causes for the sisters' success, highest on his list was the support of the pastors of the conference for the society. It "had no opponents" or "luke-warm defenders," he wrote. Rather, "all were enthusiastically in its favor, and devoted much time and attention to its establishment and furtherance." Second, the conference-wide society was supported by local auxiliary societies, each related to a congregation and fulfilling its share of responsibility. Third, each society held quarterly prayer-meetings, led by its officers. Fourth, the annual conference recognized the women's society and "always respects and fulfills the wishes of the sisters, thus making them a part of the body politic." Finally, the SMV supported a mission and missionary of its own so that "the sisters know definitely what they are working

⁷ Jean Miller Schmidt, *Grace Sufficient: A History of Women in American Methodism, 1760–1939* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 158–161. Women of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South followed suit in 1878, the Methodist Protestant Church in 1879, and the Evangelical Association in 1883. See also Donald K. Gorrell, "'A New Impulse': Progress in Lay Leadership and Service by Women of the United Brethren in Christ and the Evangelical Association, 1870–1910," in Hilah F. Thomas and Rosemary Skinner Keller, eds., *Women in New Worlds: Historical Perspectives on the Wesleyan Tradition*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1981), 233–245.

⁸ M. Mittendorf, quoted in Hough, 3.

⁹ Hough, 3; "Constitution of the Woman's Missionary Society of Ohio German Conference," in *United Brethren in Christ, Women's Missionary Association: Articles Dealing with Women's Work, 1872–1881*, typescript volume, Center for Evangelical United Brethren Heritage, United Theological Seminary, Dayton, Ohio, undated. Hereafter *UBCWMA*. The *Missionary Visitor* was published every other week beginning in 1865.

for," and, could see for themselves the "fruits of their labors."¹⁰

Flickinger published an appeal in January of 1872 for the women of the UBC to organize for missions and pastors to support them. He used scripture texts to emphasize the "open door" opportunity for women to serve, the love and power of God that compelled them, and the Great Commission given to all followers by Jesus, himself. He queried, "Will the pastors and Presiding Elders who are wide awake, large-hearted and courageous, who believe in God and the power of the gospel to save the world, take the lead in effecting such an organization of women?"¹¹

Lizzie Hoffman's discussion of her calling with John Kemp closely coincided with a published call in the *Telescope* for a meeting of interested women and pastors to take place at Home Street Chapel in Dayton on May 9, 1872, for the stated purpose of "organizing a woman's missionary society in Miami Conference." The objective of the society would be "to give material aid to the missionary interest of the Miami Annual Conference and to diffuse in our midst greater zeal and spirit for the extension of Christ's Kingdom."¹²

The organizational meeting was attended by numerous women, denominational officers, and ministers, including Mittendorf. Professor Dr. G. A. Funkhouser of Union (later United) Theological Seminary presided and Lizzie Hoffman served as secretary. The women in attendance elected officers, including Mrs. T. N. Sowers as President, Mrs. D. L. Rike as Vice-President, and Miss Lizzie Hoffman as Corresponding Secretary. They adopted a constitution for the organization "in obedience to the command of our risen Lord and Savior, 'Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature.'" It stated that women, as members, were expected to contribute twenty-five cents per quarter, and children, ten cents. The funds collected by the association would be transmitted each year to the annual conference treasurer with directions "how and where such funds shall be applied." Auxiliary societies, sponsored by local congregations, were expected "to hold monthly missionary meetings for prayer and other exercises of worship." Thus, the WMA began as a conference-wide organization in 1872, with a modest means of income and five dollars-worth of stationery donated by the Publishing House.¹³

Following the formation of the Miami Conference WMA, denominational periodicals featured articles publicizing the organization and the urgent need for similar societies in other conferences of the UBC. They emphasized not only its importance as a channel for women's work for missions but also its impact on children. As brother P. H. Davis from Arcanum, Ohio, put it, "we shall fall far short of doing all our work if we fail to bring the young of this church into a hearty sympathy with our missionary efforts." He implored women in congregations yet without an auxiliary branch society to organize

¹⁰ Gottlieb Fritz, "German Sisters' Missionary Society," in *UBCWMA*.

¹¹ Flickinger, quoted in Hough, 3.

¹² Hough, 4-5.

¹³ Hough, 5-6; "Constitution," June 26, 1872, in *UBCWMA*.

immediately, and for other UBC conferences to “follow in the movement.”¹⁴

The first annual meeting of the Miami Conference WMA on August 24, 1872, was chaired by Vice-President Rike in the absence of President Sowers, due to illness. It featured encouraging words by Rev. W. J. Shuey, who had been, with Flickinger, one of the first UBC missionaries to Sierra Leone, and Bishop John J. Glossbrenner. Mrs. Rike spoke of “the great amount of work to be done in the vineyard of the Master, and . . . the responsibility resting upon us as members of his church.” A decision was made to hire the corresponding secretary, Lizzie Hoffman, as an employee of the WMA. In this role she would travel throughout the annual conference, visiting pastors and congregations, organizing new societies.¹⁵ She later reported that generally, she received “a cordial welcome which usually resulted in the organization of a missionary society” when she visited churches.¹⁶

At a special session of the Miami Annual Conference in October, 1872, officers of the newly organized WMA presented the purpose, plans, and constitution of their organization to the gathered ministers. An editorial in the *Visitor* stated that the presentation “showed very clearly and satisfactorily to all the noble object for which this society was organized.” The regular session of annual conference immediately passed a resolution stating it was “highly pleased” with the interest the women were showing in the work of missions and promised to “heartily second the efforts of this society in their noble work.”¹⁷

At the General Conference in May of 1873, the Bishop’s quadrennial address stated that the women’s organization would be both recognized and encouraged “as its importance demands.” Similarly, in his report, HFFMS Secretary Flickinger provided not only favorable recognition and encouragement for the WMA but also urged the organization of societies in every annual conference of the denomination. The Committee on Missions responded with a resolution “that we commend their zeal and enterprise in this good work to the favorable consideration of the women of the Church in all our annual conferences.”¹⁸

With the subsequent creation of additional local church women’s societies, multiple conference-wide women’s organizations, and overwhelming support from the HFFMS and the General Conference, it became increasingly evident that a church-wide body was needed to oversee the growing movement and its relationship with the denomination. As early as February of 1873, a committee had been appointed by the WMA board “to consider

¹⁴ P. H. Davis, “Woman’s Missionary Association of Miami Conference,” July 31, 1872, in *UBCWMA*.

¹⁵ “Miami Woman’s Missionary Association,” September 18, 1872, in *UBCWMA*.

¹⁶ “Miami Woman’s Missionary Association”; Hough, 5–6. During its first year of operation ending in 1873, the Miami Conference women’s society reported twenty-five supporting local church organizations totaling about five hundred members and \$322.35 in the treasury.

¹⁷ “Woman’s Missionary Society,” *Visitor*, October 22, 1872, in *UBCWMA*.

¹⁸ Hough, 7; “Women’s Missionary Societies” in *Proceedings of the Sixteenth General Conference of the United Brethren in Christ, held in Dayton, Ohio, from the Fifteenth to the 28th of May, 1873*, Inclusive (Dayton, OH: United Brethren Printing Establishment, 1873), 76.

interests of the association, and especially its relation to other departments of our mission work in the Church." It was composed of Hoffman, Sowers, Rike, and three other women.¹⁹ An editorial associated with a published letter from Hoffman in the February 8, 1874, *Visitor* concurred with the need for a church-wide society. It stated, "instead of merely helping the preachers collect missionary money, . . . we believe there ought to be organized a woman's board of missions for the whole Church."²⁰ At the 1874 meeting of the HFFMS, Flickinger also advocated for such an organization and pledged the general board's "cheerful and substantial help" in its development.²¹

In May of 1875 officers of the WMA were summoned to a meeting hosted by three men appointed by the HFFMS: Dr. Shuey and Bishops Glossbrenner and David Edwards. The meeting resulted in an official agreement that the women should form a "general women's missionary society" in co-operation with the HFFMS. In its report back to the general board, the committee offered four sub-points that had surfaced in the meeting. First, that the women should receive "heartly approval" for "any proper measures of co-operation in our work, adopted by them." Second, that the women should organize expeditiously "a general women's missionary society to be *auxiliary*" (emphasis added) to the general board. Third, the HFFMS advised that the women should propose "some field or fields in which they desire to sustain one or more missionaries" and nominations for "a person or persons to occupy such fields or field," *subject to the approval of the general board*. If the women complied with these conditions, the general board would agree "to aid them in the support of such laborers" if ever the women's society lacked sufficient funds. Finally, the "sisters of such society" would be invited to "meet with the Board in its annual sessions and to participate in its counsels in relation to our work."²²

According to the minutes, in the general board's discussion of the agreement, concern was expressed by J. Hoke of Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, over whether the money raised by the women would be counted toward meeting conference "missionary assessments." He later added that he "should not be understood to be opposed to the woman's movement," but favored it "with all his heart" and would support it financially. Shuey replied that "the details of the collection and use of money by the women must be left to them." Rev. Hott, then treasurer of the HFFMS, offered that "their money should not be reported to this board;" he did not want them to "catch its spirit." He explained, "women have vast influence, one being more potent over a man's mind than forty men." Rev. Kumler suggested that "women should do more for Christ than appear in prayer and class meetings" and raised the question "whether the ground gone over by the women must be traversed also by the Board." Rev. Shuck stated that he was not concerned about the

¹⁹ "Woman's Missionary Association," February 22, 1873, in *UBCWMA*.

²⁰ Editorial, February 8, 1874, in *UBCWMA*.

²¹ Hough, 8.

²² Hough, 9.

women's work interfering with "regular church collections." He was willing "even to have them outstrip the Board," noting that his own congregation in Hartsville gave "one-third more than ever before under the recent influence of Sister Hadley's presence there."²³ With financial and structural matters yet to be finalized, the board encouraged the WMA to move forward with organizing a church-wide society.

A "mass meeting" was announced in the *Telescope*, with a date to be determined, in which "all the sisters in the church have an equal right to come and join in the work and deliberations." The notice advised that "the sisters of the various conferences should see that they are well represented in this meeting because its work relates to the sisters of the entire church."²⁴ The following month, Hott added a plea to both ministers and laymen of the UBC to "open the way in this enterprise . . . God and man ask of us in the name of all that is holy that we take an advanced step in our missionary work." He suggested that each annual conference of the denomination "appoint one or more women from their bounds to attend, by their order," the upcoming organizational meeting, the date of which was yet to be announced.²⁵

Meanwhile, the WMA kept the issue before members of the UBC. In the August issue of the *Telescope*, Emeline H. Day wrote that a "well defined effective woman's missionary association in active operation in our church" would be "what God intended woman should be to man, 'a helpmeet.'" The general society would never fully accomplish its purpose "without the warm heart, the quick perceptions, the ready sympathies, the self-denials, and the self-sacrificing and all enduring nature of women," she advised. Her desire was not a separate existence, but "to supplement, to round out, and to fill up and make complete *our present one-sided general missionary society*" [emphasis added]. Unless this responsibility was properly conferred upon women, they would "accomplish but little." The WMA deserved to be adopted by the General Conference "as a legitimate child of the church," she asserted.²⁶

In anticipation of the upcoming convention, a preliminary meeting of six women, including some who doubted whether the WMA was ready to take on additional responsibility, was held in September of 1875 at First UBC in Dayton. According to historian Mrs. H. H. Hough, the meeting included Sowers, Rike, Mrs. Shuey, Mrs. W. H. Lanthrun, Mrs. L. Davis, and Mrs. Lillian Ressler Keister. President Sowers encouraged those present to be prepared to assume the greater responsibilities under consideration. She replied to the hesitant: "Others cannot do our work. If God calls, dare we falter?" They set the date of October 21, 1875, for the previously announced convention to be held in Dayton, open to all UBC clergy and laity, to discuss "the great and glorious work" that lay ahead.²⁷

²³ "Woman's Missionary Work," *Religious Telescope*, May 13, 1875, in *UBCWMA*. Hereafter all references to the *Religious Telescope* in the footnotes shall be *RT*.

²⁴ "Proposed Call and Constitution," *RT*, June 30, 1875, in *UBCWMA*.

²⁵ J. W. Hott, "Woman's Missionary Association," *RT*, July 28, 1875, in *UBCWMA*.

²⁶ Emeline H. Day, "Woman's Missionary Association," *RT*, August 11, 1875, in *UBCWMA*.

²⁷ Hough, 10.

Prior to the convention, immediately following the Miami Annual Conference in the autumn of 1875, Mrs. Day published another article expressing frustration over the lack of understanding of the WMA she had encountered at Annual Conference. Some had questioned the legitimacy of the organization and failed to recognize its purpose. She wrote:

We are tired of standing around in the ante-room, waiting for admittance and recognition. We are tired of asking for your sympathy or aid. We are tired of being asked what we want. We now turn to you and ask; What do you want? We are ready to work with you for the Master. We come to you and say, "Give us work." . . . [G]ive us work in the vineyard. Give us a missionary society that shall put every woman and child in the church into the harvest-field.²⁸

She expressed indignation that "ten to one of you have 'kicked' at our present missionary society ever since it was organized" and added that "you cannot give us the cold shoulder and we not know it, though you may seek ever so earnestly to disguise the fact. We want something that will stimulate us to work, and yet something that will not be in your way." She lashed out at ministers who blamed the WMA for the fact that they "failed to get in [their] missionary money" while at the same time acknowledging that women "got one dollar where [the minister] could have got but twenty-five cents." The reason the women could get four times more, she declared, was that the women were doing "just four times the amount of work you do in the case." What the women wanted, she declared, was "to help kindle a missionary fire in the heart of every member of the church-men, women, and children. We crave no higher honor or greater glory on earth than to be a helpmeet to all God's faithful, self-denying ministers." She urged readers to "take this subject home to your hearts and be ready with something that shall be effective" for the October meeting, and signed off, "By order of the Board."²⁹

The October 21 convention was called to order by President Sowers, chaired by Mrs. Sylvia Haywood of Westerville, Ohio, and recorded by Mrs. Day. Delegates from fifteen conferences, plus sixteen "other women," and seventeen "ministers, general officers, Seminary professors and laymen" attended. Committees on permanent organization, enrollment, constitution, and business were appointed, with Sowers, Flickinger and Mrs. Shuck appointed to the committees on permanent organization and constitution. Day announced the purpose of the meeting as "to enlist women and children throughout the Church in an organized effort to carry the gospel into all the world." HFFMS representatives Flickinger and Hott addressed the convention highlighting the "need of women and children in Africa." They challenged the audience "to whole-hearted and complete dedication of life and service to this 'crusade' of missions." Seven women from multiple conferences spoke in favor of a Church-wide organization. They discussed a proposed constitution under the name initiated by the women of the Miami

²⁸ Emeline H. Day, "Woman's Missionary Association," *RT*, October 13, 1875, in *UBCWMA*.

²⁹ Day, "The Woman's Missionary Society."

Conference, “The Woman’s Missionary Association.”³⁰ On the second day of the convention, the issue of autonomy versus subservience to the general board was resolved in favor of WMA independence. As an editorial in the *Telescope* put it,

The vexed question of the connection of this society with the General Missionary Association was finally and fully settled, when it was seen that the only connection which this society needed was with General Conference and not with any Board in existence. Hence, it was agreed that the society shall harmonize with the General Missionary Board of the Church, and shall be subject to the General Conference.³¹

The decision to organize the WMA independent of the general board sparked intense discussion as soon as the constitution, subject to General Conference approval, was published in the November 3, 1875, *Telescope*. In the same issue, an editorial commented that the WMA “does not propose to open new missionary fields where the original missionary society has not been operating.” To this, Emeline Day objected in the December 4th issue that “if God shall give us the missionaries and the means, we shall find the field, whether the original Board has found it before us or not . . . We have never proposed to follow in the wake of any Board.” Rather, she wrote, “with one heart and one voice we placed ourselves under the direction and control of the General Conference and under none other.” The WMA, she wrote, “aims at the whole field and does not propose to hold its hand until the sickle has reached the uttermost corner.”³²

Rev. Hoke of Pennsylvania also replied to the publication of the constitution, predicting that the WMA’s plan would not only “fail to harmonize with our present methods,” it would also “deplete the resources of the present Board of Missions,” “cripple the annual conference,” and force the “parent” Board to reduce its operations. Two separate boards of mission in one denomination were “against all precedent” and doomed to fail, he argued. Furthermore, he doubted the competence of “inexperienced persons who must inevitably follow in the wake of all other similar boards, and squander much of their means for want of the necessary knowledge as to the best methods of operation.” He proposed instead that the General Conference should appoint “a fair proportion of [the sisters] on the Board of Missions” so that all could work together in close harmony.³³

Quick to reply, Flickinger pointed out that it was the duty of the General Conference, not of the women, to ensure harmony between various boards and agencies. He referenced Congregational and Methodist Episcopal denominations, both of which maintained multiple mission boards. In fact, he wrote, the Methodist Episcopal women’s mission organization “has the hearty endorsement of all its bishops and leading men generally, though at first it had a few Brother Hokes, and among them one bishop, who have

³⁰ Hough, 11. “Woman’s” was changed to “Women’s” in 1918.

³¹ “Woman’s Missionary Society,” *RT*, October 27, 1875, in *UBCWMA*.

³² Emeline H. Day, “Our Woman’s Missionary Society,” *RT*, November 24, 1875, in *UBCWMA*.

³³ J. Hoke, “Woman’s Missionary Association,” *RT*, December 8, 1875, *UBCWMA*.

been converted from the error of their ways, as Brother Hoke will be ere long, unless I am very much mistaken in the man." He predicted that the WMA would collect thousands of dollars that otherwise would not be gathered for missions. "All that the sisters in this association ask is an open field among their sisters and the children of the church; and surely they ought to have that—yea more, the warm sympathy and hearty co-operation of all Christians of both sexes," he stated. "We need their help, and must have it," he insisted and closed with a blessing upon Hoke, and assurance that, if the WMA constitution was not quite right, the next General Conference would amend it.³⁴

With General Conference approaching, the tussle continued with Hoke predicting again that the WMA would fail in its present plan, and Flickinger replying it was a lot easier to complain about the constitution of the WMA than to do the work of the several men and women who had carefully prepared it.³⁵ Among numerous articles, an unnamed author in April of 1876, possibly Flickinger, implied that the WMA earnestly proposed to pick up work at which men had failed. It stated:

If the sisters come to the front as workers, it ought to be gratifying to all. If they become so successful as to supplement the failures of the men in raising missionary money in some fields, as among the women and in the Sabbath-school, they ought to be welcomed. It will be gain if the preachers who fail to fill up their "chart" in the missionary column shall have even gleaners in their fields. If the new element of workers shall excite a pious emulation in the Church, the result must be good.³⁶

The new, church-wide WMA board did not await General Conference authorization before engaging strategically in furthering its mission and thereby strengthening its position. It voted in May of 1876 to use its funds to build and support a mission school and to hire a "native teacher" in Shenge, Sierra Leone. Given that it did not have the denomination's official approval to function independently, the project needed supervision from the general board's missionaries and approval from the general board. Both were readily forthcoming in the form of a resolution that provided the board's "entire sympathy and approval." In consultation with missionary Joseph Gomer later the same year, the WMA Executive Committee decided to open not only one but two schools and to cover half the travel costs for the general board's missionary, Miss Emily Beeken, who would supervise both schools.³⁷

One month before the May, 1877, General Conference, the WMA annual meeting reported three branches, eighteen local societies, and approximately three hundred members. With Lizzie Hoffman having resigned for family reasons, Mrs. J. K. Billheimer was appointed on a volunteer basis as

³⁴ D. K. Flickinger, "It is Against All Precedent," *RT*, December 22, 1875, in *UBCWMA*.

³⁵ J. Hoke, "Rejoinder to Rev. D. K. Flickinger," *RT*, January 5, 1876, in *UBCWMA*; D. K. Flickinger, "Glittering Generalities," *Telescope*, January 19, 1876, in *UBCWMA*.

³⁶ "Our Missionary Work," *RT*, April 12, 1876, in *UBCWMA*.

³⁷ Hough, 14.

“traveling missionary” to organize additional branches and local societies. Billheimer was well-known as the daughter of Bishop William Hanby and had served as the first female UBC missionary in Sierra Leone. Billheimer and Rike were authorized to represent the WMA in petitioning the General Conference to authorize the WMA officially as a full-fledged board of the denomination under the direction of the General Conference.”³⁸

At the General Conference of 1877 Flickinger presided over the session in which the WMA brought their request. He recommended that action be taken so that the WMA would have “an equal chance with our organization, to live and flourish, and [to] entirely remove the idea that they are intruders when they attempt to organize the women of the Church and children of our Sunday schools into missionary societies.” Then, while Mrs. Billheimer was speaking, without solicitation, offerings totaling more than three hundred dollars in cash and pledges were spontaneously passed to the platform. Flickinger later commented, “It was a grand meeting and so deeply impressive that it melted away all prejudice against this woman’s movement.”³⁹ The following morning, Mrs. Rike presented to the General Conference a memorial “embodying our wishes and plans,” which was followed by a motion for a rising vote. As she put it in summary for the *Visitor*, “so far as we know, every delegate did himself the honor to stand.”⁴⁰

Notwithstanding the long, hard, strategic work of many women and men in the prayerful founding and development of the WMA, in true Pietist⁴¹ fashion, its leaders and supporters understood this organization and the events leading up to it to be the work of God. As a post-General Conference editorial in the *Visitor* put it:

We as women are able to do much good in the Master’s vineyard. We have laid idle a long time. To us the Master has come in a way he has never come before, and has opened out before us in a most wonderful manner a field already white to the harvest; and we have only to thrust in our sickles to garner a glorious harvest.⁴²

The founding and structure of the WMA offer an example of German and Methodist Pietism at its best. In obedience to God, Lizzie Hoffman prayed and read her Bible diligently, but her faithfulness also included acting strategically for the sake of the mission to which she was called. The contact she made with Brother Kemp was part of a strategy toward fulfilling her call and assisting with the church’s mission. Flickinger’s tireless advocacy may be viewed as pastoral ministry or exceptional leadership, but his efforts

³⁸ Hough, 15.

³⁹ “Woman’s Missionary Association,” *Visitor*, June 22, 1877 in *UBCWMA*; Hough, 16.

⁴⁰ “Recognition of the Woman’s Missionary Association by General Conference,” *Visitor*, July 8, 1877, in *UBCWMA*.

⁴¹ For a perspective on UBC, Evangelical, and Evangelical United Brethren piety in practice, see my chapter, “‘True Holiness’ as Social Practice in the Evangelical and United Brethren Traditions: A Legacy for Successor Denominations,” in J. Steven O’Malley and Jason E. Vickers, eds., *Methodist and Pietist: Retrieving the Evangelical United Brethren Tradition*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2011), 179–189.

⁴² “Master! Unto thy Feet my Gifts I Bring!,” *Visitor*, July 22, 1877, in *UBCWMA*.

were strategically employed for the sake of the mission of the church as he understood it. Women's meetings and communications in the *Telescope* and *Visitor* were timed and calculated to maximize success in organizing the most promising form of association, one that would not be limited or held back by the politics they believed to be associated with the general board. UBC women across the country strategically leveraged relationships with "sisters," husbands, fathers, bishops and congregations to formulate an unprecedented movement within their denomination; why? Out of an imperative of obedience to God, to honor and glorify their Savior, Jesus Christ, for the sake of his mission as they understood it. The abundant fruit of their Association is another story.

This essay shows that the dynamics around the founding and structure of the WMA were strategically optimized by a growing body of women and men to maximize the success of the church's mission, aka, the "Master's vineyard." Other concerns, such as socially and biblically acceptable gender roles, few known precedents, and apparent financial risks, were soundly trumped by UBC understandings of gospel imperative and mission expedience. In this way, the women and men who founded and formed the WMA were driven by a practical divinity akin to early Methodism as led by John Wesley. This practical divinity helped to pave the way not only for rapid expansion of women's participation in missionary work but also in itinerant and ordained ministries.

By telling the story of a significant organization that was an essential part of its life and influence, this essay contributes to our understanding the history of the Church of the United Brethren in Christ and to church history. It adds to understanding women's history by demonstrating how one piece of it unfolded, and to gender studies by tracing dynamics between a group of women and men in the late nineteenth century in the United States. At the same time it underlines the fact that so many of our historical narratives remain at best, incomplete, and at worst, inaccurate. While researching the WMA of the UBC, it quickly became apparent that little is now known about the women in the smaller denominations that became part of the great stream of American Methodism; not only women of the UBC, but also of the Evangelical Association, the Methodist Protestant Church, and the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. When we have omitted women from our dominant narratives, we have left out more than half the story. Historians, like the women of the WMA, have "a field already white to the harvest."