



DISCOVERY

Edited by
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New York City's Five Points Mission

The Five Points Mission was the first urban mission established by American Methodism. It was created by the Ladies Home Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church in New York City. The pioneer women who led the effort were Mrs. Edmund S. Janes, Mrs. J. A. Wright, and Phoebe Palmer.

The Five Points Mission began in 1850 in one room where a Sunday School was established on the corner of Cross and Little Water Streets. The space was quickly outgrown. Children came to the mission from the alleys, garrets, and cellars of the neighborhood. One woman present at the beginning remarked that those gathered were a more vivid representation of hell than she had ever imagined. When seventy children gathered it was evident that a day school was needed.

The need for more space led the women to look for property. They decided on the dilapidated old Brewery that for 40 years had served its purpose and for the last 20 years became the "haunt of murders and robbers ... a pest house of sin." Daniel Drew, the founder of Drew University, came forward with others to contribute funds to buy the building. His wife, Roxanna Mead Drew, joined a group of Methodist women to give leadership.

In 1853 the mission was up and running at its new facility. A school and library were just a few of the programs at the Five Points Mission by which it reached out to the community. A recent film, "The Gangs of New York," in its brutal portrayal of life in that part of New York City portrays the Mission, but does not accurately reflect the extent of the Mission's work. One of its programs opens a window on one of the most heart-rending problems of urban life at that time – the large number of children whose parent

or parents could not house, feed, and clothe them. There were many reasons why this was the case although each situation was different. The important point is the lack of agencies to provide care for the poorest in society. This kind of care seemed to be left to voluntary groups. The Mission formed a sort of adoption agency where children could be placed in the custody of the Mission with the hope that a suitable home could be found for each of them.

We have in the United Methodist Archives the records of the Five Points Mission back to its beginning. The people at the Mission did their best to place children. Records do not indicate how accountability or follow-up was accomplished, but we do have the actual verbatim records as individual children were left by parent(s). I was deeply touched by these records and I want to share a couple of these statements given as children were left with the Mission.

“August 20th, 1856- George Leon 10 to 11 years old; born in Paris; been in America 4 ½ years - his father died about 1½ years ago. His mother brought him to us to-day and gave him up for a home; he did not wish to stay, and his mother had to slip away slyly from him; he cried an hour afterwards, and had to be held. And compelled to stay.

He is not sharp and shrewd as some boys; but of a gentle, docile temperament. He has never had a kind friend to tell him about heaven or God, - his mother did not. - He went to live with R.M. Bullock, Rockton, Ill. - Mr. Bullock's children love George so much that they said to their father, 'If George is a bad boy and deserves a whipping, don't whip him whip us for him.'”

Another case presented to the Mission describes a father's desperate move to give up his son.

“Feb. 4, 1857

I hereby give my son Manuel Page born Jan. 1, 1847 in the city of Philadelphia to the Five Points Mission to be placed by them in a good home where he will be well educated and brought up to some useful employment till he is 18 years of age. Thomas Page.”

One wonders what circumstances led to a father to give up his ten-year-old son. There are other records from the monthly report of the Mission which further reveal the kinds of terrible situations presented daily. For instance, in the Mission Report for 1862 we find the following:

“A little girl, six years old. Was found standing at our door in the midst of a cold rain-storm, wet and shivering. Her father and mother are intemperant people, and were turned into the streets by their landlord. The child was once before an inmate of our House, and now gladly consents to be an insider. She had been all day in the school, and when the children were dismissed, had gone out with them. But, poor thing! She had no home, not even a bad one to go to, so she turned back to our door, and stood crying at the gate. She had a little sister, younger, with her, and they were a pitiable couple of for-saken children.”

To learn more about Five Points Mission and its current work contact Five Points Mission, Olmstead Center Box 291, 114 Bay View Avenue, Cornwall-on-Hudson, NY 12520. One might also examine the extensive collection at the United Methodist Archives and History Center, Box 127 Madison, NJ.