



DISCOVERY

Edited by
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Who Was Etta Wheeler?

You won't find her name in the *Encyclopedia of World Methodism*, nor in the three volume *History of American Methodism*, nor in *Faith in Action*, Bishop Ward's excellent history of Methodism in the Empire State. She is not listed in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* nor in many of the other sources where you might naturally search for some mention of her life and work. And yet she was a Methodist missionary whom The United Methodist Church should think of with the greatest pride.

She first came to my notice through my good friend Dr. Kip Charlton of Scottsdale, Arizona, where we spend our winters. Dr. Charlton is an important member of the Scottsdale United Methodist Church and a leading Pediatric physician in the west. He is on the Staff of the Maricopa Medical Center. I cherish my friendship with him and the many conversations we have shared. He has a brilliant mind and a compassionate spirit and always has something worthwhile to say. On one occasion our conversation veered in the direction of child abuse. Dr. Charlton asked me if I had ever heard of Etta Wheeler. When I answered in the negative he told me that she had been one of the first persons to raise an effective cry against child abuse, particularly in New York City, and that she was a Methodist. I was immediately interested and asked where I could read about her. He offered to send me some articles about her and her work, and he did.

I was surprised to learn that Mrs. Etta Wheeler was a Methodist missionary based at St. Luke's Methodist Episcopal Church in New York City. Around the 1870s she worked in the slum areas doing everything in her power for the poor. In this way she came to learn of a flagrant case of child abuse. The child was named Mary Ellen, and she was being cared for (if one can use that term in such a connection) by a Mr. and Mrs. Francis Connolly. She was actually the child of Mrs. Connolly's first husband, a Mr. McCormack, who had died and left the child in his wife's care. Her "care" consisted of beating the child daily, keeping her locked at times in a dark room, burning her with a hot iron, striking her a blow with scissors, and providing her with only enough food to keep her alive.

When Mrs. Wheeler discovered the situation, she contacted the police and various benevolent societies, but to no avail. By a strange twist of law, children were considered the property of their parents who might do with them as they wished. While this seems shocking to us today, child abuse, itself, on various levels, is as old as humanity and was usually ignored. Even John and Charles Wesley never raised their voices against the child abuse that was prevalent in the eighteenth century. Samuel Johnson, the great English lexicographer, told of seeing children sleeping in boxes in the streets of London as he made his way home late at night. He would often put pennies in their tiny hands so they would have something to cheer them in the morning. But John and Charles Wesley never once mentioned these sights or seemed to care about the condition of these children. Children worked long hours in the mines. Some of them were chained to their posts so they could not run away. Of this the Wesleys said nothing. It is not strange, therefore, that there was not much improvement in child care in the nineteenth century.

But Etta Wheeler would not surrender to what seemed to be inevitable. Although she had been defeated in her attempts to secure police protection for Mary Ellen, she resolved to continue her efforts. She took the case to a Henry Bergh who was noted for protecting helpless animals and was President of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. He looked into the matter and gave orders to his attorney, Elbridge Gerry, to do what he could. Gerry was an astute lawyer. He discovered a way to bring the child before the courts. Mary Ellen testified in her own behalf. Her story was reported by the newspapers and brought to the attention of all of New York City and even the country at large. It stirred the conscience of the nation.

Mrs. Connolly was convicted of assault and sentenced to a year in prison at hard labor, and Mary Ellen was placed in a home for troubled girls called "Sheltering Arms." Etta Wheeler did not think this was a suitable place for the child and later took Mary Ellen into her own home.

Mary Ellen became a changed person. She eventually married and had two daughters, both of whom became college graduates. Equally as important is the fact that out of her case grew the founding on December 28th, 1874 of a Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children.

The full story of Mary Ellen and the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children has never been written. A number of articles and newspaper reports are available. But a great deal of research needs to be done and this subject could easily be the basis for either a master's or doctor's thesis. The life of Mrs. Etta Wheeler could also be the subject of a small volume.

At any rate, Mrs. Etta Wheeler was a Methodist of whom we, as United Methodists, can well be proud—a Methodist whom we should know and exalt as an example of what can be done by one person filled with the spirit of Christ.