

## Chapter 10

# WOMEN'S WORK AND WOMAN'S BOARDS

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FEMINIST HISTORIANS HAVE NOTED that the ways in which events and trends are grouped in popular history relies on male experience and often fails to reflect the impact that the same events have on women's development. Hence in American history, materials are grouped into the pre-Revolutionary War period, and antebellum period (before the Civil War), and the post-World War II period. History becomes a series of periods between wars. And wars are nothing but disruptive and destructive interludes between those periods.

Recent research, however, is pointing out the importance of war in the history of women. It now appears that wars are periods of significant advances for women. During wars the regular patterns of family and social life are disrupted. Men go off to battle and women are left to take on many new responsibilities. Instead of being periods of decline and interruption, for women, wartime provides advancement and opportunity. It is no accident, therefore, that the organizational foundations for many of the women's boards and societies in American church life were laid during the years surrounding the Civil War.

One woman noted that the Civil War "had much to do with breaking up the crust of public opinion" against independent organizations for women.

In the country's hour of desperate need it had welcomed women into the camp hospital. They had gone to the front in some cases with their husbands, and lived intents, serving the wounded, or later been with their husbands at the front during the reconstruction period. They had prepared bandages at home and stepped out from the routine of homemaking to wider interests and experiences. So now, when the war was over they were ready to go on to new and vaster fields of opportunity.<sup>1</sup>

But it was not easy. Patterns of female subordination and auxiliary organizations pervaded the first half of the nineteenth century. Such women as Catherine Beecher<sup>2</sup> had argued eloquently that heaven appointed women to a "subordinate station." Woman's mode of gaining influence in the world was not any less important, but her "exercising of power should be altogether different and peculiar. . . . Woman is to win every thing by peace and love; by making herself so much

respected and loved, that to yield to her opinions and to gratify her wishes, will be the free-will offering of the heart.” And it was all to be accomplished in the domestic and social circle.

This attitude had been deeply internalized by many churchwomen. So much so that historians can document a “feminization” of the churches during the first half of the nineteenth century. Women, who made up the bulk of the laity in the churches, cultivated an interpretation of Christ that emphasized meekness, love, humility, and forgiveness. The prestige of the clergy declined, and popular religion focused on activities that were a natural extension of the role of wife and mother.(3)

Women who wanted to organize independent clubs, boards, or societies, especially in the churches, were not encouraged. Many years later an active churchwoman remembered:

It is difficult in these days to realize how much opposition existed toward any such independent organization of women. Probably it would have been impossible because of this general attitude of mind to have undertaken any common effort earlier than this [1868]. It was not supposed that women were capable of doing such work outside the home. The idea of their conducting a business, keeping books, or carrying on the work of a large organization was unheard of.(4)

Many mid-nineteenth-century Christians found it difficult to overcome their conviction that it was improper for a woman to offer prayer in public or to stand on a platform and preside over a meeting where men were present. After the Civil War, however, these attitudes began to change.

By the end of the century, women in most of the denominations that eventually came together to form the United Church of Christ had organized significant independent women’s boards and societies which were totally managed and supported by women. How did this come about?

## **EARLY MISSIONARY ORGANIZATIONS**

In 1800 Mary Webb became personally concerned about the mission outreach of American Christians. She gathered together some Congregational and Baptist women to found the Boston Female Society for Missionary Purposes. Soon thereafter women in many places formed what were known as “female cent societies” to raise money for mission. The idea was that any woman could save one cent a week if she denied herself some little thing. Building on the parable of the widow’s mite, churchwomen believed that their small contributions could make a big difference. And from this beginning a pattern of “auxiliary mission societies” was established.(5)

When four young college students responded to the rising global consciousness of American churches to found the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM), in 1810, the women cooperated. The American Board, as it came to be called, was the major ecumenical missionary society of mainline Protestantism until the mid-nineteenth century. It

channeled the monies of the “female societies” and received sizable bequests and legacies from committed Christian women. By 1839 the Board’s annual report showed that approximately 680 local “ladies’ associations” were at work collecting funds for foreign missions.(6)

In the early days the American Board thought that single women should not be sent out as missionaries. Only if a woman was married could she be commissioned as a full-fledged missionary. In time this pattern changed. Letters from the missionaries’ wives raised the awareness of the Board about “the degradation and deprivations of native women and girls in non-Christian cultures.” Public opinion came to realize that only single women, free from the obligations of home and family, could respond to the need. The entire mission enterprise was at stake, because women were a “great hindrance to the conversion of men.”(7)

An ABCFM missionary from China, the Rev. David Abeel, was eventually convinced that the slow progress of mission work in China was largely owing to the lack of work among women. Abeel argued that “more than half of the women of the world were held in Oriental seclusion. They were unwelcomed at birth, married in childhood to men they had never seen, and shut away from all possible teaching except that of their husbands or of other women.” He obtained permission to come home. After stopping in London, where his appeal helped to organize the Society for Promoting Female Education in the East, he made his plea for women’s work among American women. The results were limited, but the record shows that the First Congregational Church of Rockford, Illinois, founded a local women’s missionary society in 1838. Almost thirty years later, in 1861, females of six denominations organized the Women’s Union Missionary Society in New York.(8)

Not until after the Civil War did the argument for women’s work and the organizational climate for independent women’s societies and boards in many denominations lead to the formation of separate mission boards for women. From that time on women’s work in American churches had new vitality and life.

## **INDEPENDENT CONGREGATIONAL WOMAN’S BOARDS**

In 1868 a Mrs. Bowker, of Charlestown, Massachusetts, developed a plan to encourage women in the missionary endeavor. She called a meeting of women to hear statements by returned missionaries regarding the “degradation and wretchedness of heathen women.” Under her guidance two committees were formed to write a constitution and to consult with representatives of the American Board. The Board believed that a woman’s society could “co-operate with theirs, availing itself of their long experience, and avoiding at the same time the perplexing details incident to an independent organization.”(9) On the surface it sounded like another auxiliary, but the result came to involve women quite differently in the mission enterprise.

Early reports of the Woman’s Board of Missions (WBM) emphasized the indirect power of Christian women.

Under Paganism, woman is a cipher. Hence the labor of Christian women, both in schools and visitations, assumes in the minds of heathen men a humble character. It neither stirs pride nor gives occasion for alarm; and the benevolence that prompts it disarms opposition. Our work is among the women; to teach them that they are of importance and interest to Jesus, if not recognized by their own households - that they have souls, and that there is a Saviour and a heaven for them. This wonderful news, once received and believed, spreads with lightning-like rapidity from one to another, arousing an eager desire for knowledge. Christ, accepted, brings a gentle refinement that unconsciously ennobles the recipient; and the men, too, are blest, before they have thought to recognize the cause.(10)

Within a year of the founding of the WBM in Boston a similar organization took root in the Middle West. Late in 1868 the secretary of the ABCFM spoke to a group of Chicago women and shared his enthusiasm for woman's boards. "The question may be asked," he said, "Why not act directly through the American Board?" The reply was that women could be brought into more immediate, closer personal relations to the work by taking on themselves a part and by entering into correspondence with the missionary women in the field. "Ladies will write to each other as they will not write to me, do the best I can to win their confidence. . . . The vivacity, the touching incidents, the free, hearty expression of their thoughts and feelings, joys and sorrows, they reserve for their own sex." The women were convinced and the Woman's Board of Missions of the Interior (WBMI), with headquarters in Chicago, came into being.(11)

Congregational connections to the growing frontier settlements of the West and of the Pacific Islands led to the founding of two more women's boards within five years. In 1871 the Woman's Board of Missions for the Pacific Islands (WBMPI) was organized in Hawaii by a female missionary on furlough from Micronesia.(12) In 1873 a small group of Congregational women met in Santa Cruz, California, to mobilize women's resources throughout the western states and territories in a Woman's Board of Missions for the Pacific (WBMP). Although the boards back east objected to these organizations, because they were "so far from the centers of civilization," the California women argued that this was exactly the reason they needed to be an independent board. Furthermore, they were "the natural gateway to Japan, China, the myriad islands of the seas and the infant missions of Mexico."(13)

Early on all the woman's boards adopted some important principles that shaped their work: First, they existed primarily to serve the needs of women. They supported women missionaries in the field who were single and encouraged the employment of competent, native "Bible women." Second, they sought funds in such a way so as not to diminish contributions to the American Board. They made it a policy, however, to raise money one year and spend it the next year. This way they always knew the limits of their resources. Third, their support was personal. Branches were encouraged to "adopt" specific missionaries and to "pledge" to specific projects. Fourth, they did everything in their power to keep administrative overhead low, relying on "unpaid,

freely given labor.”(14)

In the fifty to sixty years of their independent work three of these women’s boards (WUM, WBMI, and WBMP) contributed over 20 percent of the total receipts of the American Board. In 1927 these three woman’s boards were reunited with the American Board and have continued as part of the United Church Board for World Ministries since the formation of the United Church of Christ. The WBMPI continues its independent existence in close relationship with the Hawaii Conference of the United Church of Christ.(15)

The Christian denomination had its origins in the American zeal to overcome past divisions and organizations and get back to the basics. Christians were in New England, North Carolina, and Virginia and on the Appalachian frontier well before 1800, but they were reluctant to organize. One historian wrote:

Remember that many years passed before the Christians pretended to organize like other denominations, and then ensued a period when energy was largely absorbed with church building and controversy over sectarian, theological, and metaphysical subjects. Combatting error was deemed almost paramount to declaring the truth.(16)

The Christians did eventually organize and embark on enterprises to share the truth.

Regional mission societies for “home” work were operating by the 1820s to help organize new churches, but not until 1854 was a national Board of Home and Foreign Missions elected and not until after the Civil War did the denomination have a national missionary department with a full-time secretary.(17)

This delay in organizing did not prevent women from becoming involved in the leadership of Christian churches. Women preachers and evangelists were an important chapter in the early history of the Christian denomination.(18) Also, records of local women’s organizations for mission in New York and Michigan during the 1850s have been found. Perhaps the lack of a national denominational organization actually helped the cause of women, because there were few structures through which to formalize masculine control.

Before long, however, men and women alike were advocating a “woman’s board.” And in 1886, at the quadrennial session of the American Christian Convention, held at New Bedford, Massachusetts, the Woman’s Board for Foreign Missions was elected. Four years later, in 1890, at Marion, Indiana, the women of the Convention organized a Woman’s Board for Home Missions.(19)

What these Boards, together with the Conference Boards and local societies with their constituents, have done for the missionary interests of our denomination would fill a volume. . . Suffice it to say that they have not worked to “be seen of men,” but “He who seeth in secret” will reward them

openly.(20)

When the Congregational Churches and the Christian Churches came together in 1931 to form the Congregational Christian Churches, the women's boards of the Christian Churches became part of the world and home mission boards of the new denomination. Together with their Congregational sisters, Christian women were guaranteed one-third female representation on the governing boards of these significant structures for mission and outreach.

### **WOMAN'S MISSIONARY SOCIETY OF THE GENERAL SYNOD (REFORMED)**

The first missionary society in the Reformed Church in the United States was created in 1826 by the Synod of Frederick, Maryland. An auxiliary Female Missionary Society apparently came into being at the same time, but its activities were strictly local. In 1838, when the Synod organized a foreign board it decided to carry out its work through the same interdenominational American Board that served the Congregationalists. The arrangement was a happy one. German Reformed money and missionaries worked through the American Board for twenty-five years.(21)

After the Civil War, however, in 1866, the Reformed Church in the United States decided to seek its own mission field and establish an independent mission board. In 1873 a Board of Foreign Missions was organized, with special commitments to sponsor mission work in Japan.(22)

The involvement of women in these developments was minimal. Women in the German Reformed churches were "at that time completely unorganized, and we might say completely uninterested." The records show, however, that in 1869 a Rev. S.B. Yockey made an appeal to the Ohio Synod that the church should organize women for missions. This appeal was the beginning, although the suggestion did not "take root in the extremely conservative soil of our Reformed denomination."(23)

Women's work in the Reformed Church eventually took shape. Much of its strength resulted from the tireless work of Samuel Yockey's wife, Elvira Beilhartz Yockey. Elvira Yockey was raised a Methodist, but on her marriage she embraced the Reformed tradition. She became convinced that women had a special responsibility for mission and could not understand how the church could revolve around Christ and yet have so little zeal in carrying out Christ's final command to share the faith.(24)

Reformed women had served the churches through "aid societies," whose chief aim was to raise money to help their own congregations. Contributions to mission were "incidental." Looking back many years later Elvira Yockey wrote: "Women's Missionary Societies as they now exist whose exclusive aim was to work for missions, not only in raising money, but in creating sentiment, in educating and training the women and children along the lines of missionary activity, were unknown." She wanted her church to follow the example of women in other

denominations and organize for mission. She wanted to release the energies of women for the gospel.(25)

The women were expected to “keep silence in the churches.” Their voices were never heard even in public prayer, and to this day in most of the prayer meetings of the church the number of audible prayers is limited to the number of men present. How much the church owes to the number of silent prayers that ascend heavenward from feminine hearts, can never be known.(26)

But the idea of a woman’s society had little favor among the older members of the congregation. Elvira Yockey continued to promote the idea in her husband’s church. Frequent mention from the pulpit and in “social intercourse” of the benefits that other denominations were deriving from woman’s work in missionary societies brought about a gradual change in sentiment. Finally, in 1877, the Woman’s Missionary Society of the First Reformed Church of Xenia, Ohio, came into being. It was the beginning.(27)

Elvira Yockey wrote many letters and encouraged other churches to found societies. “There were no precedents to follow, no model constitutions, no prepared programs or books of study.... The presidents were compelled to do almost all the work, not because our women were unwilling, but because they were timid and untrained,”(28) In 1883 the first public recognition of women’s work was made by the Pittsburgh Synod, and in 1887 the Woman’s Missionary Society of the General Synod was organized at Akron, Ohio.(29) By the second triennial meeting of the Society,

many who had opposed or failed to encourage the movement became convinced that the work was for and from God. The unwomanly aggressiveness which some feared was entirely absent. There was no spirit of self seeking, no effort to adopt masculine methods, or usurp masculine prerogative, but only an intensely earnest desire to have some part in the evangelization of the world. This earnestness, as is usually the case in the best type of womanhood, went hand in hand with a persistence that admitted no denial.(30)

From these beginnings the national society came to publish *The Woman’s Journal* and by 1914 to establish a national Philadelphia office. In 1923 the Woman’s Missionary Society of the General Synod supported three full-time staff members.(31) As the Society approached its fiftieth anniversary, in 1937, conversations commenced with the women of the Evangelical Synod of North America. Soon thereafter, in 1939, the Woman’s Missionary Society of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in the United States and the Evangelical Women’s Union of the Evangelical Synod of North America formed the Women’s Guild of the Evangelical and Reformed Church.(32)

## EVANGELICAL WOMEN'S UNION

During the years when Congregational, Christian, and Reformed women were creating national organizations for women, women in German Evangelical churches were preoccupied with the local needs of their congregations. This preoccupation is understandable, considering the fact that Evangelical churches were the last of the four denominations that merged to form the United Church of Christ to organize nationally. In the late nineteenth century many German immigrants were still tied to their European roots and slow to develop an American ecclesiastical loyalty. The Evangelical Synod of North America did not come into being until 1877. Therefore, that a national organization for Evangelical women was not created until 1921 was not surprising.

Once again, wartime experience—this time World War I—prompted women to seek more independence and gave them confidence in their abilities. One woman wrote:

“Every cloud has a silver lining,” says the optimist and our “silver lining” lay hidden in the black cloud of the world war. In those days organized effort was a necessity. Community, fraternal and church organizations found a common cause and vied in ardor and zeal. Our constituency [Evangelical women] did its part. Red Cross reports showed Evangelical women in the front ranks. That was therefore the psychological moment. ... [Women] saw the opportunity and seized it by sending a plea to the General Conference, convening in the city of Pittsburgh, September, 1917, asking them to federate the Evangelical womanhood. Statistics of the Red Cross Society showed that the organized women of our church could be made a power.(33)

A convention was called at Cincinnati, Ohio, June 29-30, 1921, and the National Union of Evangelical Women was born. The Union did not limit its membership or the types of activities it supported. It “chose to include ALL *women's societies within the Church* and to incorporate ALL branches of the denomination in its program.”(34) Yet the organization of a national union was a radical step in the eyes of some.

In the *Evangelical Year-Book* for 1923 a seven-page article appeared entitled “The Call of the Church to Her Women,” which defended the legitimacy of women’s work in the church. The author admitted that the new organization was an innovation, but the church does not need to fear innovation when it “can be shown to square with reason and conscience and the Word of God.” The call of the church to these women had in “back of it the whole age-old force of religious tradition from the very beginnings of the human race.” After spelling out the power of these traditions the article closed with conviction.

It is not only lawful for her [the church] to call upon her army of devoted and earnest women to render what service they are able to perform, it is her sacred duty to do so, and to organize them so that they may be able to do the work to which they are best suited in the most effective manner.(35)

Evangelical women had always been loyal in assuming responsibilities and meeting the needs of the local church. Now they were invited to move beyond home and congregation to support programs for the Synod and for the "Kingdom-at-large." In so doing they would become acquainted with one another and better understand the program of their denomination.(36)

The organization was a success. In 1923 the name was changed to the Evangelical Women's Union. Soon thereafter the Board of Directors began issuing a "Monthly Program," with topics and suggested activities for women's groups. As the years went by the programs of the Union affected the lives of women in many ways. By 1936 its work was carried out through six departments: education, devotional life, missionary education, stewardship (including the thank offering), social welfare, and citizenship. It was an impressive record.(37)

Once the Evangelical and Reformed Church had been consummated the Evangelical women moved with confidence toward merger with their Reformed sisters. They believed that the Evangelical Women's Union had "proven herself a faithful and fruitful 'Handmaid' of the Church, locally and inter-denominationally." In the coming merger they prayed that it would continue to be a blessing.(38)

## **THE SUCCESS OF WOMEN'S WORK FOR WOMEN**

The development of these independent women's mission boards did three things for women and the churches: (1) It transformed the mission consciousness of the churches, (2) it improved the situation of the women involved, and (3) it created a climate that supported the advancement of women and the ecumenical movement.

The personal involvement of women in the mission movement was its great strength. The women demonstrated repeatedly "the power of small offerings frequently collected from large numbers of contributors." Whereas the general mission boards asked for large contributions, "the women asked for two cents per week - asked it from door to door; devised mite boxes, formed small local circles, held frequent meetings, looked after children, old women, poor people, hand-picked their own fruit, and astonished the world with their success."(39) Furthermore, the women developed a new style of missionary literature. Historically, missionary literature had consisted of annual reports, anniversary sermons, and missionary biographies. In contrast, the women prepared low-cost materials that appealed to women and children. They overwhelmed the missionary ignorance of the churches with leaflets, stories, poems, and summaries that could be bought for a few cents or even given away. "These light troops could penetrate where the more ponderous forces never would be moved, and so began the great popularization of missions."(40)

The active and personal involvement of women in this work not only assisted the mission cause but also enriched the women themselves, "These women could never have learned so much had they merely turned their money over to others to administer." Rather they took on heavy

responsibilities and the necessity for decision and initiative. They were “in touch with great things, they saw and knew the women missionaries going out to the field, they became their personal friends, they were aware of international problems and movements.” Their organizations became training schools for thousands of women throughout the land.(41)

An argument can be made that the women’s mission boards were an important step in the secular movement to expand woman’s role in American society and to push American Protestants into the ecumenical movement. Women’s organizations for missions were the first women’s clubs specifically to send out help to other women. This experience built networks of support and raised consciousness about women’s problems. As the years went by simple mission piety changed to feminist consciousness, Words like foreign and heathen disappeared from the annual reports. The word ladies was changed to women. Women placed increasing emphasis on cooperation, internationalism, interdenominationalism, and unification.

In 1888 women from the United States and Canada joined with British women to create the first international ecumenical missionary agency intended to be universal in scope—the World’s Missionary Committee of Christian Women. Despite strong denominational pressures to organize separately the women “kept their sense of solidarity and conversed, discussed, corresponded, and acted together.” Working through ecumenical councils, federations, and committees they invited all Christians to pray together and share responsibility for the work of the church. They were extremely successful. The Sunday School Union, the World Day of Prayer, the Young Women’s Christian Association, the Cooperating Committee for Women’s Christian Colleges in Foreign Fields, the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, the Committee on Christian Literature for Women and Children in Mission Fields, and Church Women United are only a few of the ecumenical ventures that grew out of these independent missionary organizations for women.(42)

Women’s work and woman’s boards are a unique chapter in the history of women and the United Church of Christ.

## Notes

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7. Goodsell, op. cit., pp. 156—57.
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10. *Third Annual Report of the Woman’s Board of Missions: Presented at Its Annual Meeting in the Mount Vernon Church*, Boston, January 3, 1871 (Boston: Rand, Avery and Frye, 1871), p. 9.
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13. *History of Fifty Years: Woman’s Board of Missions for the Pacific and Program of Jubilee Meetings* (San Francisco: n. p., 1923), pp. 11—12.
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22. Elizabeth T. Flynn, "Historical Sketch," *The Outlook of Missions* 13(May 1921):p. 230.
23. *Ibid.*
24. Yockey, *op. cit.*, p. 4.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
26. *Ibid.*
27. *Ibid.*
28. Flynn, *op. cit.*, p. 231.
29. Yockey, *op. cit.*, pp. 8-9.
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