

Not your father's mission field



PIONEER IN EDUCATION: Joanna Bethune founded the American Sunday School Union, shown above, in 1824, and the Infant School Society, both of which soon became part of the new public school system in New York.

The Presbyterian world mission movement might never have taken off without the skills and commitment of women.

By Bonnie Sue Lewis

Forty-five Presbyterian missionaries were already serving overseas when their denomination established a Board of Foreign Missions in 1837—and nearly half of those early missionaries were women.

Within the year, women throughout the church began organizing to support mission work with the destitute and the “heathen” (from the root “on the heath,” meaning outside the town and, hence, the faith). They formed benevolent groups called “cent societies,” and pennies from women’s pockets rolled in from all over the nation.

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leadership of women gave momentum to the church’s outreach in the world. Their story continues to inspire new generations of women called to help carry out God’s mission.

Close to home

Even before the founding of the first Presbyterian mission board, women were heavily involved in spreading the gospel through ministries of healing, justice and compassion. While patriarchy reigned in 18th-century America, Christian mothers possessed greater

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influence over the religious nurture of their children than did fathers because of their greater presence in the home. Swept up in the enthusiasm of the First Great Awakening, women with growing leisure time became aware of the plight of poor women and children in their neighborhoods.

Many responded like Isabella Graham, who immigrated from Scotland to New York City in the late 1700s. Widowed with four children under the age of eight, Graham would have been on the streets herself had she not found work teaching the daughters of the upper class. Her own struggle to survive inspired Graham to lobby for and establish the Society for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children, in 1797. She solicited help from civic leaders whose daughters she had taught and from members of her congregation, Cedar Street Scotch Presbyterian Church. Graham also established an asylum for orphans, which became the prototype for clean and wholesome orphanages throughout the country.

Her daughter, Joanna Bethune, worked at her side and was known for the founding of the American Sunday School Union, in 1824, as well as the Infant School Society, to provide education for the youngest students. Within a decade, these schools became part of the new public school system in New York. As Graham and



EARLY MISSION BOOSTERS: staff of the Woman's Executive Committee of Home Missions, organized in 1878, which raised funds for mission, published a mission journal and operated 86 schools

Bethune raised money and established and managed entire institutions, they set the stage for women to play larger roles in mission.

Proving their mettle

During the 19th century, which historian Kenneth Scott Latourette calls the "Great Century of Mission," Presbyterian women invested heavily in home missions—to immigrants, Native Americans and Jews—and in



CARE FOR THE NEEDY: After struggling to rear four young children on her own, Scottish immigrant and widow Isabella Graham established the Society for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children, in 1797.



EFFECTIVE ORGANIZERS: Women brought strong management skills to such groups as the Women's General Missionary Board of Directors, United Presbyterian Church of North America, 1889–1890.



CALLED TO SERVE AMONG THE NATIVE AMERICANS: After the Civil War, Sue McBeth, *above right*, left her family home for the Oregon Territory, where she served for 20 years, training 10 Nez Perce Indians for ordination to the ministry. Her sister, Kate, *back row in photo above left*, trained another four Nez Perce men for ordination before her death in 1915. Neither woman was ordained or had formal theological training.

foreign missions. By the end of the century, nearly two-thirds of the Presbyterian Church’s missionaries were women.

These female mission workers were not always well received by their male counterparts. Their spouses and pastors sought to protect the “gentler sex” from the contamination of the world and from “promiscuous” activities such as mixed prayer meetings. Single women were allowed on the mission field only if taken in by a married couple. Men were encouraged to marry and to take wives to assist them on mission assignments, but it was midway through the century before women were considered missionaries in their own right.

The Civil War opened many avenues for women outside the home, giving them opportunities to prove their mettle. Just before the war, Sue McBeth began teaching Choctaw children at a mission station in the South. When the war broke out, this Yankee woman was sent to St. Louis to nurse soldiers and to provide for their spiritual care—one of only a few women serving in the role of military chaplain. At the end of the war, a stroke and the loss of her fiancé left McBeth with a severe limp and deep depression.

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Even so, news of the need for teachers among the Nez Perce Indians compelled her to leave her family home for the Oregon Territory. There, veteran missionary Henry Spalding was cultivating a group of Nez Perce elders for ministry. He died within a year or two of McBeth’s arrival, and she took up his mantle, serving among the Nez Perce for 20 years. By the time of her death in 1893, 10 Nez Perce men had been ordained to the Presbyterian ministry. Her sister, Kate, continued the work, and another four Nez Perce were ordained by the time of her death in 1915. Their niece, Mary Crawford, took over, and two more Nez Perce men became ordained ministers before the “McBeth School” finally closed in 1932.

These three women were not ordained and had no formal theological training. Yet they nearly single-handedly prepared 16 native pastors for the oversight of churches that spanned the country—from the Canadian border to the Southwest.

Ace administrators

By the 1870s, so many women were engaged in mission and even organizing their own mission boards that it was labeled the “Church Women’s Decade.” Women proved more capable of raising and managing funds, publishing monthly mission journals, orchestrating ministries and garnering prayer support than anyone had expected.

The Woman’s Executive Committee of Home Missions, a predecessor of today’s Presbyterian Women, provided \$55,000 annually for the Presbyterian Board of Home Missions, operated 86 schools and published the popular *Home Mission Monthly* until 1924. The Women’s Board of Foreign Missions sent women to serve overseas as

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CALLED TO SERVICE OVERSEAS: Margaret Hodge was president of the Women's Board of Foreign Missions (1920), which sent women to serve overseas as teachers, doctors, administrators and even preachers at a time when they were forbidden ordination in their home church.



A POPULAR RESOURCE: The *Home Mission Monthly* was published until 1924 by the Woman's Executive Committee of Home Missions, a predecessor of today's Presbyterian Women. The group also provided \$55,000 a year to the Presbyterian Board of Home Missions.

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The remarkable work by pioneering female missionaries, fundraisers and administrators came to the attention of male church leaders in the early 20th century, at a time when bureaucracies throughout society, including churches, were being streamlined for efficiency's sake. Without even consulting the women, denominational leaders decided in 1923 to bring their mission boards and societies under the oversight of the national church. Organizations that had been founded and built by women suddenly came under all-male leadership.

As a result, enthusiasm among women for mission began to dry up. But the momentum and skills gained over a century of experience emboldened women to pursue other avenues of church leadership. Presbyterians



BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS WITH WOMEN AROUND THE WORLD: women from the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), in blue dresses, with leaders of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Equatorial Guinea in November 2011. The PC(USA) group also visited partner churches in Cameroon.

sanctioned the ordination of women as deacons (1906) and ruling elders (1930)—perhaps as much to placate the women as to enable them to use their many gifts in the church. This opened the way for women to be ordained as teaching elders (ministers) by midcentury.

The call continues

As women fill the ranks of the ordained in the 21st century, they have not abandoned mission involvement. The Birthday Offering, initiated by Hallie Winsborough in 1922, still enables women to support schools, hospitals and services for women around the world. Presbyterian Women (PW) has set a goal of \$900,000 for this year's offering. If past offerings are any indication, there will be no trouble raising the funds.

Presbyterian women promote and participate in the World Day of Prayer, observed by Christian women

around the world on the first Friday in March each year. PW's Justice and Peace Committee has been involved in projects ranging from advocating for clean water to seeking peace in the Middle East. Every three years, Presbyterian women visit a different part of the world through PW's Global Exchange program. Last October a delegation of 27 women from the United States traveled to India to build upon partnerships with church women there.

Today, as we mark 175 years of Presbyterian world mission, we can celebrate the many gifted women who were pioneers on the mission field as well as those answering God's call to service today.

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