



**The story of Presbyterian global mission began 175 years ago—  
with the ‘hardheaded, Holy Spirit–filled people’ of Western Pennsylvania.**

By Michael Parker

**W**hen Presbyterians gather June 30–July 7 for this year’s General Assembly, they will mark a significant milestone: 175 years ago, Presbyterians embraced international mission as the responsibility of the whole church. Pittsburgh is an appropriate setting for celebrating this anniversary, since it was mission-minded Presbyterians in Western Pennsylvania who persistently urged the denomination in the 1820s and ’30s to establish its own missionary-sending organization. Their proposal was finally adopted in 1837 with the creation of what has evolved into today’s Presbyterian World Mission.

Western Pennsylvanians “are a bunch of hardheaded, Holy Spirit–filled people who, when they hear the call, simply go,”

says Donna Havrisko, pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church in Greensburg, Pa. She believes that folks in the region are particularly devoted to mission because of their clarity of vision and hardscrabble background.

Havrisko, a former convener of the PC(USA)’s Sudan Mission Network, says people in Western Pennsylvania “have grit and courage. Many have pulled themselves up by their own efforts. Their ancestors came here to work in coal mines and steel mills, and today they continue to work with their hands and hearts. They don’t sit in ivory towers and just think about things. They get their hands dirty.

“Jesus said, ‘The kingdom is among you.’ Western Pennsylvanians get that,” Havrisko says.



**MISSION ON THE FRONTIER:** an early communion service in the New World, where Christian settlers at first channeled much of their zeal for mission into planting churches and evangelizing Native American tribes



#### A HERITAGE OF MISSION:

William Carey, a Baptist minister in 18th-century England, is known as the “father of modern missions.”

### The missionary spirit

Presbyterians first began organizing churches in Western Pennsylvania in the mid-1700s. The organizers’ missionary spirit may explain why mission seems to have been encoded into the DNA of the region’s Presbyterians.

The wave of church planting was triggered by events at the end of the French and Indian War. In 1758, the French Fort Duquesne fell to the British and was renamed Fort Pitt,

Redstone, which was soon subdivided into new presbyteries as the population increased and churches grew.

The Synod of Pittsburgh, established in 1802, committed itself to mission among Native Americans and white settlers. Presbyterians in the new synod soon began evangelizing not only in their own region but also in Ohio and Indiana. Following the War of 1812, they went farther west to evangelize tribes in Michigan, Illinois and beyond the Mississippi River.

In 1810, American Protestants established their first board of foreign mission, the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, founded largely by Congregationalists but supported by other denominations.

Western Foreign Missionary Society. Elisha P. Swift, an instructor at Western Seminary (one of the institutions that later became Pittsburgh Theological Seminary), headed the organization. During the six years of its existence, the society sent 21 missionaries to serve among Native American tribes and 39 to work in Liberia and the Punjab region of North India (now Pakistan).

When Presbyterians gathered in Philadelphia for the 1837 General Assembly, a theological dispute between the Old School and New School factions resulted in a schism in the church. The Old School wing adopted the Western Foreign Missionary Society as its denominational mission organization, changing its name to the Board of Foreign Missions and moving the headquarters to New York. This organization, which has changed its name several times over the years, is the origin of today’s Presbyterian World Mission.

*The World Mission Initiative at Pittsburgh Seminary keeps the fires for mission burning, giving students a firsthand view of mission work through mission trips and cross-cultural experiences.*

after British Prime Minister William Pitt. The fort and the area around it became the origin of the modern city of Pittsburgh. Shortly after Fort Pitt was established, immigrants began flooding into Western Pennsylvania, their numbers peaking in the years just prior to the American Revolution. The settlers included many Presbyterian Scots and Scots-Irish.

Seizing the opportunity, the Synod of New York and Philadelphia, formed in 1758, employed army chaplains and ministers to establish churches among the new settlers. In 1781, they formed the Presbytery of

Presbyterians sent out a score of missionaries under the American Board in the next two decades. Some Presbyterians, however, felt that the denomination should have its own missionary-sending organization. Overtures to General Assemblies in 1812 and 1828 called for the establishment of a Presbyterian mission board. Western Pennsylvanians joined the struggle in 1831, urging that year’s Assembly to embrace a “conceptual change” in mission thinking.

When their overture failed, the Synod of Pittsburgh decided to create its own mission organization, the



**PAVING THE WAY:** In the early 1800s, Elisha P. Swift, an instructor at Western Seminary, headed the Western Foreign Missionary Society, which sent 21 missionaries to serve among Native American tribes and 39 to work in Liberia and the Punjab region of North India.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF PRESBYTERIAN HISTORICAL SOCIETY

*The Synod of Pittsburgh, established in 1802, committed itself to mission among Native Americans and white settlers.*

### Continuing the vision

Presbyterians in Western Pennsylvania continued to be major supporters of world mission in subsequent years. The region contributed pioneer missionaries such as John C. Lowrie in India, J. Kelly Giffen in Sudan and Don McClure in Ethiopia, all of whom graduated from one of the progenitors of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary.

The United Presbyterian Church of North America, a small denomination that is now part of the PC(USA), had its headquarters in Pittsburgh and built a strong record of mission engagement. The denomination sent missionaries to Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia and Pakistan during its 100 years of existence from 1858 to 1958.

Today, World Mission Initiative (WMI) at Pittsburgh Seminary keeps the fires for mission burning, giving students a firsthand view of mission work through mission trips and cross-cultural experiences. One student traveled overseas on the first trip in 1998. In 2011, WMI offered 13 mission trips for 80 students.

“One of the reasons the church in the West is in decline is because we’ve lost the sense of urgency of our calling,” says WMI director Don Dawson, a firm believer in the church’s call to take the gospel of Jesus Christ to the ends of the earth. Seminaries need programs such as WMI, he says, “in order to stimulate the missional calling among the future leadership of the church.”

Jennifer Haddox, associate director of WMI, organizes Perspectives, a 15-week course on mission history, theory and practice for ministers and laypersons offered at Pittsburgh Seminary. The course “invites participants to a deeper

understanding of God’s mission in the world and how they can participate in it,” Haddox says. Prominent missiologist Ralph Winter initiated Perspectives in 1981. By the time Winter died in 2009, courses were being offered in 183 locations throughout the United States.

WMI also offers a program for recent college graduates, giving them what Dawson describes as “an urban immersion and discipleship experience.” Participants in the World Christian Discipleship program live in the homes of church members while working in businesses in Pittsburgh, joining in local ministries and being part of a community that follows a religious rule of life: “to submit our lives to Jesus Christ under the guidance of common rhythms and practices.” The participants study the Scriptures, the writings of early church leaders and modern missional literature.

“We are helping to shape many of the future leaders of the church,” says Dawson, noting that the program benefits both those who go on to seminary and those who opt for other kinds of leadership.

Dawson also directs the New Wilmington Mission Conference, the oldest Presbyterian mission conference in the United States. Since 1906, the weeklong event has drawn as many as 2,000 mission enthusiasts each year to Westminster College in New Wilmington, north of Pittsburgh.

“No one knows the number of individuals who have been called and sent by God through this conference,” Dawson says. With a primary focus on young people ages 12 to 24, the event includes mission classes and worship services for all ages.



**MISSION PIONEER:** One of the early missionaries contributed by Western Pennsylvania was John C. Lowrie, who served in India after graduating from a school that later became Pittsburgh Theological Seminary.



**MISSION PROMOTER:** Don McClure, a pioneering missionary in Africa, made sure all of his supporting churches had cardboard banks shaped like the African grass huts known as *tukuls* in which to collect donations.



**MISSION INTERPRETER:** Don Dawson gives seminary students a firsthand view of mission work and directs the annual New Wilmington (Pa.) Mission Conference.

## Building on the past

Don Dawson's brother Dave, executive presbyter of Western Pennsylvania's Shenango Presbytery, remembers the emphasis placed on mission when he grew up in the region in the 1950s and '60s. One of the great promoters of mission was Don McClure, a missionary in Sudan and Ethiopia. "We all knew about Sudan and Ethiopian missions," says Dave Dawson, recalling that McClure made sure all his supporting churches had cardboard banks shaped like the African grass huts known as *tukuls* in which to collect donations.

This rich mission heritage has continued to the present day. Current outreach efforts of Shenango Presbytery build on years of involvement in Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia. But Dawson notes that recent decades have brought major changes in the way Presbyterians do mission.

"Two hundred years ago we were largely focused on sending missionaries," he says. "Today our focus is on partnerships in the world Christian community." Rather than channeling all their support for world mission through a denominational mission agency, congregations and individuals are getting involved directly through partnerships and mission



**WORLD MISSION BOOSTERS:** Every summer since 1906, the New Wilmington Mission Conference has drawn as many as 2,000 mission enthusiasts, many of them young people between the ages 12 and 24, to the campus of Westminster College, north of Pittsburgh.

## LEARN MORE

- » **World Mission Initiative:**  
[www.worldmissioninitiative.org](http://www.worldmissioninitiative.org)
- » **World Christian Discipleship:**  
[www.wcdpittsburgh.com](http://www.wcdpittsburgh.com)
- » **Perspectives:**  
[www.perspectives.org](http://www.perspectives.org)
- » **New Wilmington Mission Conference** (July 21–28 this year): [www.nwmcmission.org](http://www.nwmcmission.org)

trips. To help coordinate these efforts, 41 mission networks enable Presbyterians involved in various areas of the world to communicate and share best practices. Western Pennsylvanians helped organize the first mission network, for Sudan, in the late 1990s.

Still, the role of PC(USA) World Mission remains vital, says Dawson, "because of its expert staff and their knowledge that helps us to make connections with our partners." Ties between the denomination and Western Pennsylvania Presbyterians will be strengthened even more this summer as new mission workers undergo orientation at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary and the New Wilmington Mission Conference, where they will be

formally commissioned July 25. The new recruits will receive instruction as well as enjoy a cross-cultural experience by being housed with people of non-Western cultures in the Pittsburgh area.

Over more than two centuries, the frontiers of Presbyterian mission have moved beyond Western Pennsylvania to places such as China, Vietnam and North Korea. The commitment of mission-minded Presbyterians across the nation will ensure that the movement to take the gospel into all the world continues well into the future.

*Michael Parker is coordinator of international evangelism for the General Assembly Mission Council of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).*

# 120 YEARS of prayers

## Presbyterian Mission Yearbook for Prayer & Study

"The Yearbook unites the one who prays and the one for whom he prays to the loving heart of Christ in whom is the hope of the whole enterprise."—1919 Year Book of Prayer

"Knowing that the power of prayer can, and does, make a difference, I committed myself to the reading of the Mission Yearbook of Prayer."—2012 blog by Lucia Oerter, a Presbyterian pastor in Pontiac, Ill.

Each year, for 120 years, Presbyterians have prepared a resource to guide their intercessory prayers for mission. In 1892, the Woman's Executive Committee of Home Missions, a predecessor of today's Presbyterian Women, first prepared a simple prayer calendar to help women's societies pray for missionaries on designated days. Three years later, the first mission yearbook was produced. The yearbook and the prayer calendar merged in 1919 to become the *Year Book of Prayer for Missions*, listing Presbyterian mission personnel serving in the United States and overseas.

Though the book's size and name have changed various times over the years, it remains a continuing source of inspiration and current information for all who share in Christ's mission. What accounts for the popularity of the *Presbyterian Mission Yearbook for Prayer & Study*?

Presbyterians love to be connected. With a story from each presbytery, synod and country in which the church works in partnership, the yearbook presents a snapshot of Presbyterian mission.

Links in the stories posted online allow readers to get background information or let people on the prayer lists know they were prayed for.

Presbyterians want to be in the know. Each *Mission Yearbook* is a living mission history told in the voices of



**A LEGACY OF SUPPORT FOR MISSION:** Covers spanning 120 years show that though the *Mission Yearbook's* size and name have changed various times over the years, it remains a continuing source of inspiration and current information for all Presbyterians who share in Christ's mission in the world.

more than 350 contributors. In addition to stories, the book contains a wealth of information. Each entry includes a daily lectionary to guide Bible reading. Sundays also include a Sunday lectionary and hymns to help pastors prepare for worship. Each international story contains helpful demographic information.

Presbyterians want to make a difference. Many can't travel or engage in hands-on mission, but they can influence the course of events—become part of the story themselves—through prayer. Intercessors faithfully place the mission efforts of this denomination in God's hands. Each entry lists people to pray for and concludes with a prayer.

Today's *Mission Yearbook* has many added features. Readers can still use the printed book for personal or family devotions, but they can also download entries and color photos from the Web for publication in church bulletins or newsletters. They can read the entries via daily email or links on Twitter and Facebook or by subscribing to the RSS feed. Recordings of the Minutes for Mission included in the *Mission Yearbook* are available through iTunes.

» For more information about how to engage in this ministry of prayer with Presbyterians around the world: [www.pcusa.org/missionyearbook](http://www.pcusa.org/missionyearbook)