

Social Change as Mission and Intersectional Sisterhood as Reflexive Influence:

A Twin Story of United Methodist Women

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United Methodist Women

The role of agency, solidarity, and resistance, on the part of United Methodist Women and their predecessor organizations, in effecting social change is one side of the story of women in mission. Equally important is the reflexive impact of engagement in mission on shaping the collective identity of these lay women in mission. This twin story of agency and reflexivity is a multiyear, multilayered, and multistage formation in mission narrative.

This paper focuses on how Methodist women responded to the sacred gospel call as well as the “woman question” by an ongoing process of negotiating their countless individual identities into a collective agency for social responsibility. Exploring one key struggle for social change, this paper examines how lay women organized for mission in the Methodist Church addressed the issue of differences among women, with particularities of race and ethnicity in the U.S. while striving to expand their own collective identity. It is a story of a multipronged strategy of operating *from* the margins and along *with* the margins, in order to bring about change in the center.

A timeless query and a plea

Using a modern conceptual framework of a critical theory, this paper seeks to respond to a timeless query and a plea lifted up in 1910 Edinburgh World Missionary Conference. The missional query is the one sent out to missionaries, prior to the conference, to report on the “Reflex Influence of Mission upon the Church” by Commission VI “The Home Base of Mission.” A questionnaire was designed to respond to this.

The plea is a timeless utterance of V.S. Azariah, a native of India, addressed to the missionaries during this conference, saying, “...You have given your goods to feed the

poor. You have given your bodies to be burned. We also ask for *love*. Give us FRIENDS.”¹ Positioning my paper as a response to this far-sighted questionnaire and the timeless plea, I have worked on two missional concepts, agency and reflexivity, in the story of Methodist Women’s Home Missions in the U.S. Historically, agency forms a more dominant content in mission history writings. Reflexivity, either as content or method, is often missing.

In my paper, I explore the agency of Methodist Women engaged in Home Missions and also examine how it has impacted the agents themselves. In other words, my historical analysis examines the growth of the reflexive history of the women engaged in mission. In this, while using the traditional periodization, I sought to mark the stages in the historical consciousness of the women engaged in Home Missions.

Sisterhood, in its historical consciousness, can be mapped differently, as distinct from traditional historiography. An article on “The Churchwoman” in *The Christian Century*, referred to as a “pre-feminist essay,” published in 1930, says, “Clearly, the place for an adequate organization of churchwomen is not in the kitchen, not yet in the obsolete parlor, but in the spacious living room of our social household.”² Women’s organizations cannot remain content as mere fellowship and “ignorant of the social gospel,” in addressing issues such as peace, child labor, and race relations’ and “with every issue which arises upon which the mind of Christ throws a clear light.”³ This was a crucial insight from 1930:

- From kitchen to parlor

¹ V.S. Azariah’s full speech is found in “The Problem of Co-Operation between Foreign and Native Workers in *History Records and Addresses*, Vol. IX, in *World Missionary Conference, 1910. Reports of Commissions I to VIII and Vol. IX* (Edinburgh and London: Oliphant, Anderson & Ferrier; and New York, Chicago, and Toronto: Fleming H. Revell Company, n.d. 1910), 306-315.

² See Document 17 for the article in *Christian Century* 1930, pages 300-303, on “The Spacious Living Room of Our Social Household”: Challenging Women’s Organizations to Confront Social Issues in *In Our Voices: Four Centuries of American Women’s Religious Writing*, ed. Rosemary Radford Ruether et al (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996): 101-103.

³ Radford Ruether, 103.

- From the obsolete parlor to the social household.⁴

I have attempted to examine the accompanying stages of “female consciousness”⁵ in this journey into the social household.

Intersectionality as a writerly enterprise and lived experience

While most of the available written historical records are well-preserved annual reports, periodicals published by the Methodist women’s organizations, and organizational histories, the voices of “hidden” and “invisible” women have remained part of the oral histories of women in mission.⁶ Identifying, recognizing, and restoring missing voices has been a writerly enterprise since the 1980s.⁷ Unearthing and placing women in mission history is a complex retrospective, restorative act, since this task involves taking into consideration gender in its multifaceted entirety such as race, ethnicity, language etc., Inserting “lived knowing”⁸ and lived experiences of women at the margins into histories of women’s reform movements themselves is a labor of *conscientization* and an ongoing task.⁹ Acknowledging this gap in history writing, this paper confines itself to selected struggles for social changes, with particular reference to gender and its multifacetedness known as “intersectionality”¹⁰ in the lived experiences of sisterhood among Methodist women in the 20th century within the U.S., as Methodist women were

⁴ Patricia Hill’s title of her book, *The World Their Household: The American Woman’s Foreign Mission Movement and Cultural Transformation, 1870-1920* traces women’s missionary enterprise and their expansion of the private sphere into embracing a world household.

⁵ See Gerda Lerner traces the steps by which women moved from kitchen to public square, *The Majority Finds Its Past: Placing Women in History* (Oxford, NY, Toronto, Melbourne, 1979, 1981), 146-166.

⁶ In 1981, Women’s Division of the General Board of Global Ministries of The United Methodist Church initiated an Oral History Project. Virginia Stewart’s unpublished manuscript on “Voices from the Past: The Testimony of Historic Documents” 1980 (1984-014) in folder 2348-4-5:14 in the General Commission on History and Archives, New Jersey.

⁷ A recent example is the conference on “United Methodist Women’s History: Voices Lost and Found” on May 28-30, 2015 in the Methodist Theological School in Ohio which was sponsored by the United Methodist Women.

⁸ See Catherine MacKinnon’s distinction between “lived knowledge” and objective knowledge in *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U Press, 1987), 31.

⁹ See David Billing’s critique of lack of voices of women of color and their representation in women’s reform movements in *Deep Denial: The Persistence of White Supremacy in United States History and Life* (Roselle, NJ: Crandall, Dostie & Douglass Books, Inc., 2016), 62.

¹⁰ Human identities are linked to systemic privileges as well as oppressions. Sex, race, ethnicity, language, national origin, sexuality etc., relate to such privileges and oppressions, and consequently impact the daily lived experience of people. See Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review*, vol. 43, no. 6 (1989): 1241-1299.

engaged “with” the boundaries of difference in order to accomplish border crossings organizationally. The notion of intersectionality is a conceptual shift in the story of mission in this period, from indigenization to contextualization, and from contextualization to intersectionality.¹¹

Sisterhood as a collective journey and transformative impetus in mission:¹²

A lived reflexive influence of women engaged in mission is sisterhood especially in the history of United/Methodist Women. Catherine MacKinnon, a legal scholar, invites inquisitive inquirers to participate in a venture by posing a question: “How sisterhood became powerful while women were/ powerless will take its place among the classic alchemies of political history. How did they do/ that? students will be encouraged to wonder.”¹³ While the “powerlessness” of women is a totalizing and contestable concept, women organized for mission as a sisterhood has been a powerful reality in women’s mission history.

Powerlessness and the “cult of true womanhood” often went hand in hand in the dominant culture, while powerlessness has been imposed as an oppressive layer in other cases, often pertaining to those at the margins. A key thread in undergirding United/ Methodist Women’s mission is, sisterhood, and it is still an evolving concept in their missiology and lived experience, after years of work at dismantling the “cult of true womanhood.” Growing into sisterhood in mission, while gradually outgrowing the “cult of womanhood” has been a story of struggle and choice between solidarity among women and co-optation into patriarchy in the church.

Cult of true womanhood and the birth of sisterhood on the Home Front

¹¹See Kimberlé Crenshaw,’s coinage of the word, *intersectionality*, in her “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and violence Against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review*, vol. 43, no. 6 (1989): 1241-1299.

¹² This paper focuses on sisterhood in the Methodist Women’s Home Missionary movement. In an earlier presentation on “The history and development of missiology of the United Methodist Women” at the United Methodist Women’s History: Voices Lost” on May 30, 2015, I focused on sisterhood in the Methodist Women’s Foreign Missionary movement and in the mission of the order of deaconess within the U.S.

¹³ Quoted in Josephine Donovan, *Feminist Theory: The Intellectual Traditions*, 3rd edition. (New York and London: Continuum, 2000), 199.

Mother roots of United Methodist Women's predecessors go back to the 19th Century, when women and men often operated from their assigned separate spheres by societal norms, "private" and "public" respectively. An ideal woman's place was considered "home," and religious interpretations, literary admonitions, and societal expectations worked together to construct the "cult of true womanhood"¹⁴ which was characterized by piety, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness. A key reason why religion was "valued" was that it did not take a woman away from her "proper sphere," home.¹⁵ By joining voluntary societies, women often claimed this familial dimension of their everyday life, worked within this assigned sphere, expanded it gradually, and transformed the concept of "private" sphere.

An impact of the revivals during the Second Great Awakening in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century was an increase in the membership of women in the churches. Inspired by faith leaders, including female faith leaders, women found a common purpose. Their involvement in religious activities helped them to be "active instruments, not merely passive receptacles of God's will."¹⁶ Enabled by a collective process of engagement in religious benevolence at different levels of society, from local to the national, they began to evolve and expand a sense of "sisterhood in faith."¹⁷

Initially, women organized for mission in the Methodist Church functioned within the restrictive bounds the Church leaders and the social norms of the day assigned to them: "private" sphere: their homes. "Mothering" and the maternal is a key model in mission. A lived imbalance in the life of the church, the phenomenon of "feminization" of religion, actually energized women to achieve their goals within their voluntary societies, as participants, and enabled them to strengthen themselves in the "ideology of sisterhood,"¹⁸ and later develop their own public sphere.¹⁹

¹⁴ See Barbara Welter's extensive treatment of "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," *American Quarterly* vol. 18. 2. Part 1 (June, 1966), 151-174.

¹⁵ Welter, 153.

¹⁶ Keith E. Melder, *Beginnings of Sisterhood: The American Woman's Right Movement 1800-1850* (New York: Schocken Books, 1977), 39.

¹⁷ Melder, 39.

¹⁸ Welter, *Dimity Convictions: The American Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1976)

African American women²⁰ also organized their own benevolent societies in their respective separate spheres. But the prevalent societal expectations of female propriety and “the cult of true womanhood” in the dominant culture did not apply to African American women.²¹ Their sphere was not defined by the Victorian “bonds of ‘true womanhood,’” since they worked outside their home doing a “man’s work in the field.”²² A famous rebuff of the myth of true womanhood was one from Sojourner Truth, a freed woman, “called in the spirit,”²³ who became the co-founder of Kingston Methodist Church in New York, and later a public speaker. In a response to a heckler in the 1851 Akron Woman’s Rights Convention, she cried out saying, “That man over there says that woman needs to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place!...And a’nt I a woman?”²⁴ Some of the black voices such as this are captured in written history; some in compensatory history at a later point in history.

Give us sisters

Some pleas for cross-racial sisterhood were from the African American women themselves even prior to the established Christian mission organizations of the Methodist Women. An earlier instance is in the form of a poem by Sarah L. Forten, a black woman, printed in the Convention of American Women, when Grace Douglass (not related to Frederick Douglass) was elected as vice-president of in New York in 1837:

¹⁹ See Estella Freedman “Separatism as Strategy: Female Institution Building and American Feminism, 1870-1930” in *Feminist Studies* 5.3 (Autumn, 1979), 512-529.

²⁰ “African American” and “black” are used interchangeably in this paper.

²¹ See Shirley J. Yee’s “Black Women and the Cult of True Womanhood” in her book, *Black Abolitionists: A Study in Activism, 1828-1860* (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 1992), 40-59.

²² Dorothy Sterling, ed. *We are Your Sisters: Black Women in the Nineteenth Century* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1984), x.

²³ *Timeline of Women in Methodism* at <http://www.umc.org/who-we-are/timeline-of-women-in-methodism>

²⁴ Elizabeth Cady Stanton, et al. *History of Woman Suffrage* vol. 2. (Rochester, NY: 1881), 235.

"We are thy sisters. God has truly said,/That of one blood the nations he has made./ O, Christian woman! in a Christian land,/Canst thou unblushing read this great command?/Suffer the wrongs which wring our inmost heart,/To draw one throb of pity on thy part!/Our skins may differ, but from thee we claim/A sister's privilege and a sister's name."²⁵ In selected chapters of anti-slavery society, inclusivity was an intentional practice, and "both sets of 'sisters,'"²⁶ black and white, met to socialize across the color line and discuss their concerns.

The Woman's Home Missionary Society

A key reason for the founding of the Woman's Home Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church was to work with the freed blacks, a frontier of mission in the post-Civil War period, and to "...work for the elevation of home in the home land"²⁷ A key impetus to start The Woman's Home Missionary Society (WHMS) came from the personal work "inaugurated" by Jennie C. Hartzell among the "colored refugees" in New Orleans who had fled the attacks of Ku Klux Klan.²⁸ The organization of the Woman's Home Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church (WHMS) started in 1880, was not the result of the General Conference action of that year, since most of the "prominent women" were "absorbed in foreign" mission work already started in 1869, and mission work among the freedmen was quite "unpopular."²⁹ Persistence on the part of the tireless efforts of women and supportive clergy for the work helped to form the WHMS immediately after the General Conference in 1880. Woman's Home Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South was organized in 1890 under the leadership of Lucinda Helm, recognized by the General Conference, and later merged into Woman's Missionary Council in 1910. Home mission was not often popular, and

²⁵ Sterling, 114.

²⁶ Sterling, 115. In Philadelphia and Boston, Rochester, NY, Salem and Lynn, Massachusetts, female anti-slavery societies were integrated. In New York, two leading societies turned the black women away, and hence they formed a separate organization of their own. See Sterling footnote on page 114.

²⁷ Laura Tomkinson, *Twenty Years' History of the Woman's Home Missionary Society of The Methodist Episcopal Church* (Cincinnati, OH: Western Methodist Book Concern Press, 1903), 1.

²⁸ Stella Wyatt Brummitt, *Looking Backward, Thinking Forward: The Jubilee History of the Home Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (Cincinnati, OH: The Woman's Home Missionary Society, 1930), 16.

²⁹ Tomkinson, 26.

later, when home mission studies were introduced, the sale of the number of home mission study books was often less than that of texts on foreign mission.

Organized women in home mission

Though some of the leaders had initially internalized “true womanhood” and “worked within limited imagination”³⁰ of male leadership in the church, the sustained efforts of the WHMS came from generation after generation of women leaders and participants who slowly eroded the very foundations of this cultural construct. Jose Ortega y Gasset once said, “Each generation stands on the shoulders of its predecessors like acrobats in a vast human pyramid.”³¹ It is true of women’s mission work as well.

The first generation of women³² in home mission (1880-1900) organized societies with their auxiliaries reaching out to the local church women, raised funds, founded institutions such as bible and training schools, medical clinics, educational centers, and settlement houses and were engaged in benevolent acts in far flung areas in the U.S., including mission projects as a duty to the “weaker race.”

The second generation 1901-1920s expanded their task of institution building, and acquired more leadership in administration and business management, as they ran these institutions.³³ As for the Woman’s Home Missionary Society of the Episcopal Church, started in 1880, the leadership already started addressing the criticism directed against their building and maintenance of home mission institutions. Countering the argument of people, who are more interested in “folks,” namely “missionaries and students” than in “brick and stones,” May Leonard Woodruff, Corresponding Secretary,

³⁰ Russell E. Richey, et al. *The Methodist Experience in American: A History*. Vol. 1 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2010), 235.

³¹ “Preface,” in Justo L Gonzalez’ *The Story of Christianity: The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation*. Vol. 1. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1984), xiii.

³² For the idea of sequence of four generational work, see Alice G. Knotts, *Fellowship of Love: Methodist Women Changing American Racial Attitudes, 1920-1968* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 96-97. Though Knotts confines the work of the first generation to charity work, the founding of institutions through both home mission and deaconess ministries happened in this generation.

³³ In the conceptualizing of women’s history, this phase is known as “contribution history.” See Lerner, *The Majority Finds Its Past*, p. 146.

reframes the argument, saying, “Have we stopped long enough to think this matter through to its logical conclusions? How many missionaries would we have if we had no buildings?...We might appropriately say, ‘These are the buildings of the Women’s Home Missionary Society. These are the teachers who teach in these buildings of the WHMS. And these are the students who are taught by the teachers who teach in the buildings of the WHMS.”³⁴ Woodruff closes her report with the urgent plea, in the name of ‘mutual responsibilities in the light of the Fatherhood of God and brotherhood of man,’ to look at the racial relations with the black,³⁵ and lifts up that year’s Home Mission study text, *The Trend of the “Races* (1923) by George Edmund Haynes, and an earlier one, *Vanguard of Race* by Lily Hammond (1914).

Home Mission Study Texts and Summer Schools of Mission

From 1909, The Woman’s Home Missionary Society set out to deepen the thinking of its membership by means of mission education through these annual Home Mission Studies produced ecumenically by the Council of Women for Home Missions. The Annual Home Mission studies were introduced in 1909.³⁶ The 1910 Home Mission study book was *From Darkness to Light: The Story of the Negro Problem* by Mary Helm, the editor of *Our Homes*, the periodical of the Woman’s Home Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. While the text displays a benevolent, patronizing approach to the issue of race, the writer seeks to include leading African American voices such as Booker T. Washington and H.T. Burleigh,³⁷ and lifts up the work of black women themselves in their work for their less fortunate sisters. Helm believes that a

³⁴ The forty first annual report of the Woman’s Home Missionary Society of the Episcopal Church, Forty First Annual Report for the Year 1921-22. Cincinnati, OH.

³⁵ The Forty First Annual Report of the WHMS, p. 44.

³⁶ Woman’s Foreign Missionary Societies engaged their members in annual mission studies dealing with peoples, lands and issues abroad. The Central Committee on United Study started its task in 1900, and the first mission study was published in 1901. See Dana Robert’s *American Women in Mission: A Social History of Their Thought and Practice* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1998), 260-261.

³⁷ The moderate voice of Booker T. Washington is different from a more radical voice of W.E. B. Du Bois, a Methodist.

“righteous solution to the race problem”³⁸ can be achieved by the cooperation of the black women leaders with the likeminded people in the “white race.” Raising consciousness continued through annual Home Mission Studies undergirded by sociological findings, a new emerging field of the day. Lily Hardy Hammond, a sociologist and a writer, who had roots in the home missions of the Methodist Women in the South, cites evidences and documents the impact of unequal systems of discrimination on black lives and families in her *Vanguard of Races* in 1914. Raising consciousness continued through annual Home Mission Studies undergirded by sociological findings, a new emerging field of the day. She exhorts people to take a Christian stance on behalf of the black saying, “we are pious people here in the South...perhaps like our brethren elsewhere, are more pious than we are Christlike.”³⁹ In his *The Trend of the Races*, George Edmund Haynes, an African American sociologist, lifts up the economic and social cries of the black, and calls for interdependency for the welfare of both the races. The segregation in the country was not yet challenged.

Community Centers

In a segregated nation, at the community level, while Wesley Houses offered direct services to the needy in the white neighborhoods, the founding of Bethlehem Houses by the Woman’s Missionary Council (WMC) in black neighborhoods offered service to the black. There were initiatives from black women themselves. Sallie Hill Sawyer of Nashville, Tennessee, a member of Capers Chapel Colored Methodist Episcopal Church and a black woman, initiated a service for her people in a Presbyterian Church building, and started a Bethlehem Center close to Fisk University. The Tennessee Conference Woman’s Missionary Society adopted the program and Sawyer served as a

³⁸ Mary Helm, *From Darkness to Light: The Story of the Negro Progress* (New York, Chicago, Toronto: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1909), 114.

³⁹ Lily Hardy Hammond, *Black and White: An Interpretation of Southern Life* (NY, Chicago, Toronto, London, and Edinburgh: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1914), 132.

house mother of the Bethlehem Center in Nashville.⁴⁰ It was decided that an inscription in the new main building would bear the name of both Sallie Sawyer and Estelle Haskin: "Haskin-Sawyer, a monument of to the memory of these who first had the vision—Miss Haskin and 'Mother Sawyer.'"⁴¹ According to Estelle Haskin, supervisor of the Bethlehem House in Nashville, it offered a "silent influence" and a "large hope," since the southern white and educated black leadership on the board promised greater racial relations.⁴² Mission in the new South, and the emerging of the new black and white women required yet a newer missional approach: mutual conversations across racial boundaries.

Black women's leadership, in the meantime, was seeking to build alliance with the white leadership, as a result of the work of WMC, the Bethlehem Houses, and, in particular, the stances taken by the leaders. Lugenia Hope, a leader in YWCA and National Association of Colored Women (NACW) took the initiative to meet with Will Alexander, a white southerner, who founded the Commission on Interracial Cooperation (CIC). Even though there was not a single woman on this commission, Hope urged him to use his Methodist connection to put her in touch with the WMC, and she arranged for the historic meeting between the black female leadership in NACW and Estella Haskins and Carrie Parks Johnson, leaders in the WMC in 1920.⁴³ Sometimes, in historical

⁴⁰ Theressa Hoover, *To a Higher Glory : The Growth and Development of Black Women Organized for Mission in the Methodist Church, 1940-1968* by the Women's Division and the Task Force on the History of the Central Jurisdiction Women's Organization (Cincinnati, OH: Board of Global Ministries, The United Methodist Church, 1978), 17. See also the founding of the Sarah Murphy Home by a black woman, Murphy on pages 17-18.

⁴¹ Martha Nutt, "The Nashville, Bethlehem Center," *The Missionary Voice* (December 1922): 374.

⁴² Estelle Haskin, *Forth Annual Report of the Woman's Missionary Council, Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1913-1914* (Nashville, TN: Publishing House of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, Smith and Lamar Agents), 374. In 1910, The Woman's Missionary Council was created by the merger of the former Woman's Home Missionary and Foreign Missionary Societies of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South.

⁴³ Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, *Revolt Against Chivalry: Jessie Daniel Ames and the Women's Campaign Against Lynching* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979) 87.

narratives, the latter's attendance at this meeting is credited solely to Haskins and Johnson, and not to the initiative taken by Hope.

Stepping into the social household

The journey from kitchen-to-the-parlor-and now slowly to “social household” is marked by tentativeness, since the latter phase involves cross-racial/ cross-cultural boundary crossings in home mission. In this instance, the meeting takes place on a black campus. As for the black women leaders at the Booker T. Washington library in Tuskegee, they thought that the white leaders’ concern for black betterment actually related to the “desire for more efficient and presentable domestic servants.”⁴⁴ Kitchen, in this respect, can be a race-inflected space. For the white leadership, being exposed to the new black middle class, it was a “new world opened” to them, “a world I had never conceived before,”⁴⁵ in Johnson’s words.

In the 1930s, the third generation of work on racial justice took on a campaign style advocacy work, with Estelle Haskins, Louise Young, and Dorothy Tilly helping Jessie Daniel Ames to found the Association for the Prevention of Lynching. As for Ames she considered lynching a “woman’s issue,”⁴⁶ and later the organization was named the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching (ASWL). The Methodist Women constituted 55% of the leadership in this organization.⁴⁷ The Woman’s Missionary Council endorsed the passage of the federal anti-lynching bill, the Costigan-Wagner Act in March 1934, though the bill did not pass the Congress, the persistent work of the women continued.

The period of 1940s was a crucial time in building a social order based on inclusivity in the area of human rights. It was also a challenging time for the Methodist Women, since

⁴⁴ Hall, *Revolt Against Chivalry*, 88.

⁴⁵ Hall, *Revolt Against Chivalry*, 88. Taken from the “Eleventh Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council, Minutes of Interracial Commission,” No. 17, 1920, CIC papers.

⁴⁶ Arnold M. Shankman in his “Civil Rights, 1920-1970” in *Women in New Worlds*, Vol. 2. Eds. Rosemary Skinner Keller et al (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1982), 221.

⁴⁷ Shankman, 223.

the merger of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, the Methodist Protestant Church, and the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1939 created the Central Jurisdiction for the black members. While five of the jurisdictions across the U.S. were geographically structured, the sixth one was racially based, exclusively for black Methodists. Integrated sisterhood remained an aspiration still.

However, this time of the merger saw the birth and growth of two major concepts in the history of the Methodist Women, as change makers in the history of their social action:

- One: “The universal Christian responsibility for changing conditions of life and society is through action (individual and group). Methodist Women must get to the root causes of human misery beginning in the local community and reaching to all parts of the world, taking responsibility with other like-minded Christians.”
- Two: “A plan and program of preparation and training Methodist Women to accept and carry their responsibility must become an integral part of the programmed work of the Woman’s Division of the Board of Missions of Methodism.”⁴⁸

With a goal of changing the systemic racial injustice, in 1948 a “racial questionnaire” was designed and sent out by the Woman’s Division, the policy-making body of the Methodist Women, to the various institutions related to educational, medical, and social and community work under the administration of the Division.⁴⁹ The questions were specific such as (1) What progress has been made in interracial relationships in regard to: Board? Staff? (2) What evidence of progress in attitudes can be noted in the community? (3) What are the areas where progress should be made? (4) What are the gaps which indicate a lack of interracial understanding? (5) What prevents employment of a bi-racial staff in your institution or project? Law? Prejudice? Inaccessibility? Lack of trained personnel?

⁴⁸ Thelma Stevens, *Legacy for the Future: The History of Christian Social Relations in the Women’s Division of Christian Service, 1940-1968* (New York: Women’s Division, Board of Global Ministries, The United Methodist Church, 1978), 15.

⁴⁹ From a March 29, 1948- memo sent out from the Woman’s Division with an attached “Racial Questionnaire (Prelude to Charter) 1948-1969” found in Drew Archives in folder 2594-2.3: 10.

A further step at documentation to study the social contexts of the institutions was taken when the Woman's Division Committee on Racial Practices made a report on the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights on December 1948 with the recommendation to expand the survey of the investigation into the public laws regarding race and color. A key staff leading the racial justice work at this period was Thelma Stevens (1940-1968). She contacted a young, black lawyer, Pauli Murray, to accomplish this arduous task of gathering data on state laws and local laws in places where the Home Department of the Board of Missions of the Methodist Church had its institutions and programs. In her autobiography, Murray calls her assignment from Stevens to write the states' laws an "unusual sponsorship of a massive legal study of laws on race and color by a churchwomen's group," while acknowledging that such an assignment was the "result of a leaven at work over many years among certain Methodist women."⁵⁰

As for Thelma Stevens who offered leadership to the Christian Social Relations of the Women's Division, it was a traumatic incident that she had witnessed as a young woman in 1922 that was a tipping point in her decision to make a difference in race relations. Later in her life, she narrates in an interview how as a young teacher, just out of high school, she was asked by some of her young students to chaperon them in a "bus ride" to a nearby place. Unwittingly, she was taken to a nearby wood to witness the sight of a lynching of a young black man. Stevens recalls saying to herself, "... if the Lord will just let me live long enough, this is one thing that I will work forever to rid this country of...in some way, in whatever way I could to eliminate the injustices that relate to the black community."⁵¹

⁵⁰ Pauli Murray, *The Autobiography of a Black Activist, Feminist, Lawyer, Priest, Poet* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1987), 284.

⁵¹ Interview with Thelma Stevens by Hilah Thomas and Barbara Campbell on May 13, 1982 at Brooks Howell Home, Ashville, North Carolina. # Tape 1 of Stevens interview in oral history tapes in UMW National Office, New York.

In January 1951, when Pauli Murray's almost 800-page book on *States' Laws on Race and Color* was published, Stevens referred to it as the "first compilation of its kind ever prepared in the U.S."⁵² Thurgood Marshall, who researched and argued a number of civil rights cases before the Supreme Court of the U.S., referred to this book as "the bible of desegregation."⁵³ Originally intended to investigate whether the mission institutions related to the Woman's Division practiced segregation due to the original law or to the custom of the states in the U.S., this book had an expanded impact far above the original intention. The survey revealed that segregation was practiced even when no law warranted it.

The first "Charter of Racial Policies" was adopted by the Woman's Division in 1952,⁵⁴ and prior to the Brown vs Board of Education decision on 17 May, 1954, the Woman's Division and its network of sisterhood at the connectional level, made a statement calling for building a "fellowship and social order without racial barriers" regardless of the pending decision of the Supreme Court. The Woman's Division was the first agency in the Methodist Church to issue a statement to shake the foundation of racial segregation. A second Charter on Racial Policies in 1962 broadened the scope of the racial justice commitment.

The Methodist women leadership insisted that the then Schools of Christian Mission be held on a regional basis and not on a racially segregated jurisdictional basis. Hence the name, **Regional** Schools of Christian Mission: a collective resistance of Methodist women in the teaching of mission studies.⁵⁵ In the midst of a segregated church, integrated sisterhood began to happen. Commenting on the Gulfside Assembly School of Christian Mission at Waveland, Mississippi, Minnie B. Smith of Baltimore, Maryland, a member of the Central Jurisdiction, says, "The school was always integrated, and the fellowship and the friendliness welded us into a true sisterhood...The phrase, 'We are

⁵² Thelma Stevens, *Legacy for the Future: The History of Christian Social Relations in the Women's Division of Christian Service, 1940-1968* (New York: Women's Division, Board of Global Ministries, The United Methodist Church, 1978), 61.

⁵³ Pauli Murray, *Song in a Weary Throat: An American Pilgrimage* (NY: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1987), 289

⁵⁴ See Appendix A for the *Charter of Racial Policies-1952*.

⁵⁵ See Hoover, *To a Higher Glory*, 55.

one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord,’ could have easily described that experience.”⁵⁶

In 1980, on petition from the Women’s Division, the General the highest legislative body of the United Methodist Church, approved the Charter on Racial Justice Polices as a Charter for the whole church.⁵⁷ It was a gift from the United Methodist Women to the rest of the church.

Mapping the evolution of sisterhood

In her article, “Sisterhood of Service and Reform: Organized Methodist Women in the Late Nineteenth Century,” Carolyn DeSwarte Gifford wonders about the “nature and scope of the impact which organized Methodist Women have had on Methodism and the larger society.”⁵⁸ The evolution of a sense of sisterhood within the body of women is a reflex impact of their long years of engagement in mission. It is a gendered response to the ageless missional query of an earlier period: What is the reflex Influence of mission upon the Church in its home base?

The initial call to mission in the predecessor organizations was based on the maternal, a model of nurturing and protective motherhood, as my paper has shown earlier. Give-us-sisters has been a continuous call from the bottom-up, from the recipients of mission to the doers of mission. A rallying call of response to this was to connect with the racial “other” using the common experience of motherhood and family, whether the mission leaders were mothers or not. Living into sisterhood, while working on a “maternal” model of mission, was both acceptable and respectable.

Since 1920s, there has been an evolutionary understanding of the maternal in mission. Premises of bringing together women across the race-and-class divides on the common bonds of motherhood did not always work. For instance, Carrie Parks Johnson began her work on the newly created Commission on Race Relations in the Woman’s Missionary Council in 1920, confident in the belief that women’s special nurturing

⁵⁶ Hoover, *To a Higher Glory*, 87.

⁵⁷ See Appendix B for the *Charter for Racial Justice Policies in an Interdependent Global Community*.

⁵⁸ Carolyn DeSwarte Gifford, “Sisterhood of Service and Reform: Organized Methodist Women in the Late Nineteenth Century. An Essay on the State of the Research” in *Methodist History* 23: 2 (October 1985), 30.

sensibilities, maternal roles, and their faith in religion would lead them to engage in right action. She assumed that “the silent anguish and the cry of the mother heart” of the black race “leaped the chasm and found response in the mother heart of the white race.”⁵⁹ As Johnson herself complained that women had assumed that when their “emotions were stirred” they had done their duty. Further, they were willing to do mission studies and learn about the history, and they might even be willing to “issue a statement of principles calling for law and order and racial integrity.”⁶⁰ But it took a couple of more decades to engage in advocacy campaigns, slowly eroding the private sphere assigned to women, and expanding it to embrace their involvement in the public sphere.

Cross-racial and cross-cultural sisterhood came as the members gradually outgrew the maternalistic model of doing mission, and set out to addressing root causes and systemic injustices. An advocacy model, including running campaigns replaced a mere maternalistic model of mission. In this process, over the decades, women were shattering the constructs of “true womanhood” slowly and steadily. Embracing the goal of integrated sisterhood, the Methodist Women began to define for themselves the institutional arrangements to which they would further commit themselves, as sisters.

Institutionalizing sisterhood

In the 1970s, the Women’s Division of the General Board of Global Ministries of The United Methodist Church came up with a policy statement to define and institutionalize sisterhood.⁶¹ As the national policy-making body for the United Methodist Women, it set out to *institutionalize* sisterhood as a way of rejecting racism, classism, ageism etc.

⁵⁹ Dowd Hall, *Revolt Against Chivalry*, 105. This is based on 105 based on “The Business of Peace” in the fourteenth Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council, 1923-24.

⁶⁰ Dowd Hall, *Revolt Against Chivalry*, 105.

⁶¹ As a policy-making body, one of the responsibilities of the Women’s Division was to recommend programs, policies, constitutions and bylaws to United Methodist Women organized across the levels of Jurisdiction, conference, districts, and local units in the U.S.

without naming such a body of women as *intersectional* sisterhood,⁶² since the name was popularized later in women's history, in the 1980s. The policy statement affirms the programs and processes of mission set forth for the United Methodist Women, by identifying the existing gaps in women's collective lived experiences, naming the forces at work that widen these gulfs, and affirming and resolving, at the same time, to broaden the scope of sisterhood embracing the local and the global. It seeks out to bridge the gaps, as named below:

- "...between church women and the women's movement in society. (Rejecting the sacred/secular dichotomy; affirming wholeness.)
- "...between women of various races (Rejecting racism; affirming sisterhood)
- "...between older women and younger women (rejecting ageism; affirming sisterhood)
- "...between poor women and all other women. (Rejecting classism; affirming sisterhood)
- "...between single women off all categories and married women (Rejecting status; affirming sisterhood)
- "...between women employed outside the home and those who are exclusively homemakers. (Rejecting status; affirming sisterhood)
- "...between the struggle of women and other freedom struggles (Rejecting factionalism; affirming our common humanity)
- "...gaps between women in the United States and women in other countries (Rejecting parochialism affirming global citizenship).

⁶² "Ministries to Women And Ministries to Children: A Policy Statement Adopted by the Women's Division, Board of Global Ministries" March 1976. Taken from Theressa Hoover's *With Unveiled Face: Centennial Reflections on Women and Men in the Community of the Church* (New York: Women's Division, General Board of Global Ministries, The United Methodist Church, 1983), 91-92.

The policy statement acknowledges the difficult choices posing women in the name of culture, customs, self-determination, and conflict between women's rights and children's rights but invokes courage to "face these choices and conflicting values with the aim of discovering the purpose and grace of God."⁶³

In incorporating this policy statement in her book, *With Unveiled Face: Centennial Reflections on Women and Men in the Community of the Church*, Theressa Hoover, the first black American woman to lead the United Methodist Women, embodies her undying belief that this sisterhood comes with a price: fierce determination to be independent, while keeping the vision of the foremothers of the organization alive. Hoover shares her institutional secret and collective wisdom with other women's groups who have been co-opted into the mission of their respective denominational boards, and who yet long to "re-form" their women's organizations, urging, "...it is imperative that Christian women develop distinct organizational bases, build bonds of sisterhood, and re-assimilate their foremothers' global views of mission."⁶⁴ An updated version of the *Policy Statement of the Women's Division* in 1992 and 1998, *Ministries with Women And Ministries with Children and Youth: A Gift for the Whole Church, A Policy Statement of the Women's Division*, reiterates its affirmation of "wholeness, sisterhood, and global citizenship," with an expanded vision to "bridge the gap between women and men" by creating a system that allows equality and mutuality...."⁶⁵ In keeping with the changing concept of mission in the last decade of the 20th Century, the title of the *Policy Statement* captures a key shift. That is, mutuality in mission, from Ministries *to* Women to "Ministries *with* women...."⁶⁶

The maternal has given way to sisterhood gradually, with a steady awareness that the maternal model can be a liberating force only when "transformed by a feminist

⁶³ Hoover, *Unveiled Face*, 92.

⁶⁴ Hoover, *Unveiled Face*, 124.

⁶⁵ *Ministries with Women And Ministries with Children and Youth: A Gift for the Whole Church. A Policy Statement of the Women's Division* (Cincinnati, Ohio: Women's Division, General Board of Global Ministries of The United Methodist Church, 1998), 11.

⁶⁶ Emphasis mine.

consciousness.”⁶⁷ The maternal has its limits unless it is coupled with concientization, and is translated into maternal feminism. Sisterhood, in the sense of solidarity among women, is still under construction.⁶⁸ It takes iteration, and in the recent years, United Methodist Women members are defining their collective being as a “sisterhood of grace,” an inclusive body of women in conversation across boundaries of difference, honoring the “liberating difference”⁶⁹ in their midst.

As a lay woman’s mission organization, the United Methodist Women includes in its membership ordained United Methodist ministers, both male and female, at the local, district, and conference levels. In this, the organization goes beyond its mere essentialist identity, as a woman’s organization, to order to include these clergy members strategically for the sake of engagement mission: an instance of what can be called “strategic essentialism.”⁷⁰ Belonging to a structure of women’s mission organization, while shaping it into a movement in an ever changing society is a signature characteristic of the United Methodist Women. In this process, agency and reflexivity become conjoined twins in women’s mission. Sisterhood of grace is an iterated historical agency as well as a lived reflex influence in their long history.

Appendix A:

Charter of Racial Policies-1952

We Believe

- (1) We believe that God is the Father of all people of all races and we are His children in one family.

⁶⁷ Sarah Ruddick on “Maternal Thinking” in *Feminist Studies* 6(Summer 1980): 356-67. Her essay on pages 342-67 is an elaborate explication of the maternal and the feminist.

⁶⁸ Letty M. Russell, “Sisterhood Under Construction: A Christian Feminist Perspective,” paper delivered at The Divinity School at Wake Forest University, Winston Salem, North Carolina on March 2-3, 2004. Phyllis Trible Lecture Series, The Children of Hagar and Sarah: Feminist Perspectives on Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

⁶⁹ Letty M. Russell, “God, Gold, Glory and Gender” in *International Review of Mission* (January 2004), 11.

⁷⁰ I have borrowed the term “strategic essentialism” from Serene Jones in *Feminist Theory And Christian Theology: Cartographies of Grace* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 59-60.

- (2) We believe that the personality of every human being is sacred.
- (3) We believe that opportunities for fellowship and service, for personal growth, and for freedom in every aspect of life are inherent rights of every individual.
- (4) We believe that the viable church of Jesus Christ must demonstrate these principles within its own organization and program.
- (5) We believe that the Woman's Division as an agency of The Methodist Church must build in every area it may touch, a fellowship and social without racial barriers.
- (6) We believe that progress may be advanced by declaring emphatically those policies on which the Woman's Division is determined to move in order to come nearer the ideal.

Policies

- (1) Persons to fill positions within the official body or staff of the Woman's Division of Christian Service shall be selected on the basis of qualifications without regard to race.
The Committee on Nominations of the Woman's Division shall consider all openings for service of the Division or staff on this principle giving due consideration to circumstances which will offer opportunity for fruitful and happy service.
- (2) The institutions and projects of the Division are instruments by which we may translate the Christian ideals and attitudes of this charter into action.
 - (a) We will employ all missionaries, deaconesses and other workers, regardless of racial or national background, on the basis of qualifications, and the promise they show for effective work in the field to which they will be sent.
 - (b) The facilities and opportunities offered by our projects and institutions shall be open to all people without discrimination because of racial or national background.
 - (c) Where law prohibits or custom prevents the immediate achievement of these objectives, workers and local boards are charged with the

responsibility of creating public opinions which may result in changing such laws and customs.

- (3) All promotional plans of the Woman's Division must take into account the various racial groups within its organization pattern and related to its program emphasis.
- (4) Special guidance toward the integration of all groups into the life and work of the church shall be given to the auxiliary societies of the Woman's Division.
- (5) Summer Schools of Missions and Christian Service of both Jurisdictions and Conferences are urged to seek increasingly to establish a working relationship across racial lines in planning and carrying out all phases of the programs, taking into account geographical accessibility of groups involved.
- (6) Summer school subsidies provided for or by any Jurisdiction or Conference should be available when requested for use at the school most accessible to the person receiving the subsidy.
- (7) Workshops, seminars, and institutes should be set up on geographical basis with full opportunity for initial participation by all racial groups in the making and execution of plans.
- (8) Local societies and Guilds should give increased emphasis to the working together of all racial groups and study and action that affect the life of the church and community.
- (9) All Jurisdiction and Conference Societies are urged to work for the enactment of policies at all Methodist Assembly grounds that will enable the full participation of any racial group in any phase of the assembly program.
- (10) The Woman's Division has consistently observed its established policy for holding its meetings in places where all racial groups can have access to all facilities without discrimination in any form. To further extend this policy Jurisdiction and Conference Societies are urged to work for its implementation as a basic step toward building a Christian fellowship within the organization and toward an impact on the community as a whole.

THE WOMAN'S DIVISION OF CHRISTIAN SERVICE CALLS WITH NEW URGENCY ON THE JURISDICTION AND CONFERENCE WOMAN'S SOCIETIES OF CHRISTIAN SERVICE TO STUDY THE PRINCIPLES AND POLICIES IN THIS CHARTER LOOKING TOWARD EARLY RATIFICATION BY EACH JURISDICTION AND CONFERENCE. SUCH A RATIFICATION WILL CONSTITUTE A COMMITMENT TO WORK FOR THE SPEEDY IMPLEMENTAION OF THOSE PRINCIPLES AND POLICIES WITHIN THE BOUNDS OF A RESPECTIVWE JURISDICTION OR CONFERENCE.

Appendix B:

A Charter for Racial Justice Policies in An Interdependent Global Community

Women's Division, Board of Global Ministries, The United Methodist Church

April 1978

Because We Believe

- (1) that God is the Creator of all people and all are God's children in one family;
- (2) that racism is a rejection of the teachings of Jesus Christ;
- (3) that racism denies the redemption and reconciliation of Jesus Christ;
- (4) that racism robs all human beings of their wholeness and is used as a justification for social, economic and political exploitation;
- (5) that we must declare before God and before each other that we have sinned against our sisters and brothers of other races in thought, in word and in deed;
- (6) that in our common humanity in creation all women and men are made in God's image and all persons are equally valuable in the sight of God;
- (7) that our strength lies in our racial and cultural diversity and that, we must work toward a world in which each person's value is respected and nurtured;
- (8) that our struggle for justice must be based on new attitudes, new understandings and new relationships and must be reflected in the laws, policies, structures and practices of both church and state;

WE COMMIT OURSELVES AS INDIVIDUALS AND AS A COMMUNITY TO FOLLOW JESUS CHRIST IN WORD AND DEED AND TO STRUGGLE FOR THE RIGHTS OF THE SELF-DETERMINATION OF EVERY PERSON AND GROUP OF PERSONS. THEREFORE, AS UNITED METHODIST WOMEN IN EVERY PLACE ACROSS THE LAND...

We will UNITE OUR EFFORTS with all groups in The United Methodist Church

1. to eliminate all forms of institutional racism in the total ministry of the church with special attention to those institutions which we support, beginning with their employment policies, purchasing practices and availability of services and facilities.
2. to create opportunities in local churches to deal honestly with the existing racist attitudes and social distance between members, deepening the Christian commitment to be the church where all racial groups and economic classes come together.
3. to increase our efforts to recruit women of all races into the membership of United Methodist Women and provide leadership development opportunities without discrimination.
4. to increase local churches' awareness of the continuing needs for equal education, housing, employment and medical care for all members of the community and create opportunities to work for these things across racial lines.
5. to work for the development and implementation of national and international policies to protect the civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights of all people such as through support for the ratification of United Nations covenants on human rights.
6. to support and participate in the worldwide struggle for liberation in the church and community.
7. to support nomination and election processes which include all racial groups, employing a quota system until the time that our voluntary performances makes such practice unnecessary...

History

...The history of United Methodist Women reflects its awareness of racism in both the church and society. United Methodist Women has struggled against racism for many years. In 1941, the Woman's Division of Christian Service of The Methodist Church adopted a policy of "holding tis meetings only in places where all members of its groups can be entertained without any form of racial discrimination"....The Woman's Division of Christian Service continued its commitment to eliminate institutional racism. A Charter on Racial Policies was adopted in 1952. The present Charter of Racial Policies was adopted in 1962. At its annual meeting in 1973, the Women's Division adopted a strong objective to eliminate institutional racism in the total ministry of the Women's Division. In 1977, this objective was reaffirmed.

We are conscious that "we have sinned as our ancestors did; we have been wicked and evil" (Psalm 106: 6, Today's English Version). We are called for a renewed commitment to the elimination of institutional racism. We affirm the 1976 General Conference statement on The United Methodist Church and Race, which states unequivocally: "By biblical and theological precept, by the law of the Church, by General Conference pronouncement, and by episcopal expression, the matter is clear. With respect to race, the aim of the United Methodist Church is nothing less than an inclusive church in an inclusive society. The United Methodist Church, therefore, calls upon all its people to perform those faithful deeds of love and justice in both the church and community that will bring this aim to reality."

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