

Methodist Women Abroad: Roles and Relationships

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It is probable that Ruth Watkins and Anne Wearing, sent to New York by the Primitive Methodists in 1829, were the only Englishwomen of any persuasion to be formally appointed as missionaries before 1837. Yet many women played a prominent part in the early history of Methodism beyond these shores. Almost the first Methodist class-meeting in America was started in 1766 at Barbara Heck's instigation. In the Caribbean there were women like Sophia Campbell, Mary Alley and Mary Gilbert in Antigua, Ann and Christina Gill in Barbados, Lydia Seaton in St Kitts, Kitty Dorset in Montserrat, Sally Kitts in Demerara and a Mrs Webley in Dominica, who maintained a Christian witness with and without missionary leadership. Of the women who have gone overseas from Britain and Ireland, by far the most numerous have been married women accompanying missionary husbands. In 1858 Wesleyan women formed their own organization and began sending and supporting single women, and both Primitive and United Methodists eventually followed suit. With the creation of a Deaconess order, another source of missionary personnel appeared. Organizationally, Methodist Union in 1932 brought the three women's auxiliaries together as Women's Work, and later the oversight of WW missionaries was integrated more closely with the administration of the MMS as a whole, as women, married and single, continued to make a distinctive contribution to the life of the overseas churches.

What did they do? Whether married or single, their activities and their priorities depended on their circumstances and their personalities. But first and foremost, unquestionably: They prayed. For women and men alike, whether at home on the mission station or travelling, personal, family and public devotions were prominent features of the missionary's life and witness. For the earliest missionaries, indeed, only that constant attentiveness to God made each day liveable. Secondly, and no less vitally, they needed to survive. The sheer business of survival could be so engrossing and exhausting that there was hardly any time left for the work they had come to do. 'Travelling, obtaining supplies, arranging the dispatch of mail, gardening, digging irrigation canals, ensuring your daily meal ... let alone having babies, coping with illnesses, and learning a language'¹ took almost every minute of the week and every ounce of energy. The priority of survival, however, was not only a basic human instinct but vital to the task in hand. As the long-serving LMS missionary Griffith John, who spent nearly sixty years (1855-1910) in central China, concluded, 'The cheapest mission is the mission which can keep its missionaries the longest, and get out of them the best service which they are capable of rendering.' This meant that they had to be 'properly fed and housed', and so provided for that they were 'able to work without distraction'.² J L Barton, Secretary of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, also writing at the start of the twentieth century, argued:

It is the missionary's duty to invest his life in the way that will bring forth the largest and most permanent results, and experience has proved that, as a general thing, these results are not obtained by starving the body or misusing it by unnecessary hardships, or causing it to carry unnecessary burdens, and thus wearing it out early in his career.³

¹Hastings 1994:269f

²John 1907:214-5

³Barton 1906:164

These observations, based on the premise that the call to missionary service was a life-long call, were born of bitter experience, after a century in which all too many failed to survive. The business of surviving and the practice of prayer were the constant, indispensable context of the life of the missionary in both 19th and 20th centuries. Their activities, lifestyle and attitudes, however varied, were shaped by their physical needs and their spiritual discipline.

After that particularly sweeping but incontrovertible generalisation, let me generalise more particularly about the roles of women, and to begin with the missionary wives. Many of the wives of the early missionaries did not live long enough to make their mark, but they were exceptional people. In some cases they knew almost as little of the man they married as of the land for which they immediately set out; it was a shared calling which had brought husband and wife together. For others, it was hesitatingly and apprehensively, their doubts often fuelled by their parents, that they agreed to accompany the man they loved. So it was for many in each succeeding generation. An unsurprisingly high number of single women missionaries sooner or later became missionary wives. Some of them indeed were engaged by the time they disembarked after their first voyage, while in other instances a widower with a small child was swift to propose. While early missionaries succumbed all too frequently and all too quickly, their wives were at even greater risk, since the perils of childbirth were greater than at home and the maternal mortality rate was markedly higher – hence the widowers with small children. These women were brave as well as devout.

The role of the missionary wife was two-fold: bearing and raising children, running the home, cooking and cleaning (with or without domestic help) on the one hand, sharing actively in her husband's vocation on the other. The first, inevitably but not only when there were young children around, took precedence. Men would have liked more unpaid assistance but could rationalise the situation with the argument that an exemplary domestic life was a crucial element in the task of evangelization. Women were often unhappy as 'organ blowers to the musicians'.⁴ They felt guilty that they could not do more mission work; they felt equally guilty if they failed to provide the comfort for which a husband craved.

Home tuition for school-age children was usually a mother's responsibility, delivering her own syllabus in the early years and using formal schemes later on. Occasionally there were local schools children could attend daily; in India there were boarding schools in the cool of the hills for expatriate children; many, sooner or later, returned to Europe to complete their schooling. A common solution was to send the children, when they became teenagers if not before, to Kingswood School in Bath, and to a relative for the school holidays. The Society helped with school fees, and eventually with fares to ensure that the family had some time together every year. But children as young as six might be shipped home, if they were returning along with older siblings. This ensured they received a good education and enabled a mother to give more time to mission work, but the emotional strain of such partings was enormous for all concerned. Sometimes a woman, obliged to make the invidious choice between saying goodbye to her children in order to stay with her husband and being wrenched from her husband for the children's sake, would go home with them.

Almost invariably they had some household assistance – an ayah or amah, bearer, cook, houseboy or 'sweeper' – a euphemism employed in India for one who not only swept the yard but manually cleaned out the latrines. In North India particularly the household could include a platoon of servants. Many wives, unused to servants at home, found supervising

⁴ Bessie Price of the LMS in her *Reminiscences*

their domestic workers one of the most stressful aspects of daily life. But it enabled them to give more time to Christian service in the community. This however did not necessarily eliminate the demands of home. Henry Piggott reported on the conditions in which he began work in Italy in 1861:

I have a vivid picture of how ... I found my wife, insufferant by instinct and habit of dirt, crouched with bent knees on a chair, and gazing in despair on the floor, on which no pail of water had ever been poured since the cement that covered it had been laid down.

Some wives had professional skills, in education or health care, which they could put to good use – not a few schools and clinics began life on a manse veranda. However it does not take a trained nurse to nurse a sick person. Mary Calvert, who before her marriage had visited from home to home in Buckinghamshire during a cholera epidemic with medicines and comfort, had no sooner arrived in Fiji in 1838 than she found herself nursing the desperately ill daughter of an important chief. The girl recovered her health and became a Christian. The news spread, and soon Mary's home seemed more like a hospital ward than a living room. Wives were able to approach local women much more closely than could their husbands, and shared the Christian message with them in both informal and organized groups as well as in casual conversation. The missionary wife, especially in a rural area where she was more often than not the only white woman, soon became a well-known figure at the market and, if language skills allowed, would engage in 'gossiping the gospel'. It is told of Mrs Johnston⁵ that in Dominica in 1810

She embraced every opportunity of instructing the poor female slaves and their children, privately. Gathering them around her by stealth, in her own home, she taught them of Christ ... Leaving to her husband the more public work of the mission, she went in and out ceaselessly among the female population, striving to raise, civilise, Christianise, and refine them, by teaching, 'in season and out of season', the Gospel of Christ, and its kindred lessons.⁶

In the second half of the twentieth century it became possible in some situations for married women to take paid employment. Using their qualifications professionally was fulfilling, and their income was a welcome supplement to the missionary allowances. It was however still the most common thing, to the end of the century, for a spouse to give unpaid service. In a book with the improbable title *Cor Blimey! Where 'ave you come from?*, Winnie Tovey described her life in Mysore in the 1950s and 60s as 'wife, mother, hospital driver, physiotherapist, stenographer, librarian, sick visitor, church organist and food aid distributor'. It was possible because, she writes, 'Each servant had his or her own allotted duties and on no account was I allowed to cook or clean.'

For both women and men, the separations were hard to endure. Men might often be away from home, touring a far-flung circuit or attending a synod or committee, as Calvert and Lyth were in Fiji when their wives threw caution to the winds and intervened in preparations for a cannibal feast, and Boden and Protheroe in China when their wives were viciously attacked. In circumstances less dramatic but still traumatic, a child's sickness or a servant's rudeness could compound the stress of separation. Douglas Gray, who would spend five weeks at a time on trek in the Rhodesian bush, wrote with feeling:

⁵ Her husband served in the West Indies from 1808 to 1821 and was Chairman of the Jamaica District when he died. She died in 1811 after four active but frustrating years.

⁶ Pitman nd:69,75

It is the women who pay the price of missionary work...; the wives who stay at home in utter loneliness, and grapple with all the problems of a big station, and bear the burden of everything.⁷

The lengthier separations when couples found themselves continents apart were sacrificially and painfully borne. Sometimes they lasted much longer than planned – separated wives shared the fears of servicemen’s wives as World War Two dragged on. Such fears were occasionally borne out by tragedy. Lilian Burgess went to England to visit her children and her parents, expecting her husband to follow; he was persuaded to prolong his time in India and so she set out to rejoin him, but was drowned on the voyage. Ida Goldsworthy was in England with her children when her husband was murdered in Shimenkan, South-West China

Wives did not always terminate their service when they became widows. Mrs Gordon remained in St Kitts as a teacher for ten years after her husband died; then in 1845 she went to teach in Sierra Leone and at length remarried. Mrs Roberts in Madras likewise remained at her post for a decade after her husband’s death in 1849, saw the orphanage she had begun grow into the Madras Wesley Girls’ High School, and became its first headmistress. Thomas Jenkins worked among the Pondo in the Transkei from 1845 to 1868, first at Umzimvubu when chief Faku moved his people there from Buntingville, and from 1862, when Faku again moved on, in Emfundisweni; when he died, his widow stayed on there for twelve years, and was buried beside him. Clara Ellis, whose husband was the Chairman of the Gold Coast District when he died, could not settle back in Britain. Appalled by the lack of education available to girls, she returned in 1900 at her own expense to restart the school in Cape Coast which had been set up in 1836 and later became the prestigious Wesley Girls’ High School. In Rhodesia, when Richard Mayes was killed in a road accident in 1969, Joan remained for another nine years, as District administrator and secretary to Andrew Ndhlela, the first black Chairman of the District, until an autonomous Zimbabwe Conference came into being.

Both on furlough and after their definitive return to Europe, many missionary wives and widows were as keen and able as their husbands – if not more so – to speak about their experiences and make the case for more money, more women and constant prayer. They were much in demand at branch meetings of Women’s Work and its predecessors. Their letters from abroad, too, were regularly read at such meetings. One such describes from the woman’s perspective the life of a Victorian missionary in Kenya. It was written by Annie Houghton a year before she and her husband were murdered:

We are now settled down in a good six-roomed house with a very large garden... We have some very beautiful flowers all around us... We have, too, the prettiest little chapel in East Africa, and a number of excellent rooms for joiner’s shop, stores, etc. We are very comfortable, and should like you to see our house with its pictures (minus frames) antimacassars, etc. and piano. The piano was the first Mrs. Wakefield’s, but the rats have eaten the inside away. We have varnished it and made a pretty piece of furniture of it, on which we put our musical box, which plays ‘Grandfather’s Clock,’ to the no small amusement of our African friends ... Ribe is as bonny a place as you would wish to see. It is on a hill, and from our front verandah we look across ...right to the sea, and it is possible to see ships near the coast, as they sail along. There are not many people here, for the famine last year has decimated the inland countries for hundreds of miles. We hope for better things with this year’s harvest.⁸

⁷ Gray 1930:93

⁸ Brewin 1888:58

Had the first Mrs Wakefield, mentioned in that letter, lived longer, she might have repented of her journal entry for 14 January 1871. Landing at last on the African mainland after some time in Zanzibar, she was encumbered with a lot of baggage and a small daughter. Her disapproval of what ensued displayed a prejudice which was not only common in her time but which was reiterated for generations beyond the age of the pioneers. Of the luggage she recalled, ‘The people obstinately refused to take up the loads, or to touch a single thing, except we would promise them an exorbitant payment for their trouble’. And of her little girl: ‘Nobody offered to take her even for a few minutes to relieve me, though I was completely worn out. This I have since discovered results from their extreme laziness. It is a matter of principle with East Africans, never to do a scrap more work than they are compelled to do, *lest they should feel tired!*’⁹ Quite oblivious to the incongruity, she then described in the next sentence how they were carried to their destination by four bearers in a chair with two poles attached.

Cultural attitudes, opinions and prejudices were part and parcel of furlough addresses. After long spells abroad, furlough might well last many months, but they were not devoted to rest and relaxation. There was a constant round of missionary meetings to sustain the enthusiasm and financial support for the enterprise. They told their stories with pathos – the word ‘pathetic’ in its original, complimentary sense appears again and again in 19th century reports of such meetings. Whatever the theological basis on which they based their sermons and addresses, it was self-evident that those Kipling called ‘lesser breeds without the law’ ought not to be left in the miserable state in which the missionary had found them. With that evangelical conviction they returned to their stations, and new volunteers – both men and, after 1858, single women – found themselves called by God to accompany them.

In 1821 a Bristol woman sent £26 to the Mission House, urging the formation of a Female Association to help ‘poor infatuated females in India’. It was nearly forty years later before it came about. In the absence of such an association Mary Twiddy, a minister’s daughter with a missionary vocation, went to Ceylon in 1841 under the auspices of the *Society for Promoting Female Education in China and the East* which had been formed in 1834. She became governess to the widowed Peter Batchelor’s son, and soon married the father. They spent most of the next twenty years in South India. As well as raising a family, they had a shared ministry, with education at its core. In spite of opposition, she started a school for girls in Negapatam. But running it single-handedly was difficult alongside maternal duties, especially if a child was ill. So in 1858 she wrote to a friend in London, whose father just happened to be a treasurer of the WMMS, stating the case for young women teachers to reinforce the work that she, and other missionary wives, were doing.

The letter had results she could never have expected. It was read to the Committee, which at once gave its blessing to the proposal:

The subject of female education in India is regarded by this Committee with lively interest. They rejoice in the help that has been afforded by many ladies’ societies in London and elsewhere, and look favourably on the project for organising these societies more extensively for the promotion of female education in India and in other parts of the Mission field.

Promptly at the end of 1858, therefore, a group of enthusiastic women met at the Mission House to plan their activities. They would publish Occasional Papers with letters from missionaries – Mary Batchelor was quick to supply the first. They would continue the

⁹ Brewin 1879:115f

practice of those informal ladies' societies, sending packages of useful articles to missionaries, not to mention warm clothing for Inuit women in the arctic climate of the Hudson's Bay Territory. And they would raise funds to train and support single women missionaries: twenty-five young women swiftly came forward, though funds allowed only a handful to be selected. All this, it was resolved, would be managed by *The Ladies' Committee for the Amelioration of the Condition of Women in Heathen Countries, Female Education, etc* – no doubt an amalgam of competing suggestions for a name. In 1874 it was abbreviated to *The Ladies Auxiliary for Female Education*, the title *Auxiliary* making clear its relationship to the WMMS. In 1882 it became simply *The Ladies' Auxiliary*, reflecting a broader remit, and in 1893, for reasons which nowadays might be labelled 'political correctness', it was changed to the *Women's Auxiliary*. It was the *Women's Department* of the WMMS from 1927 until 1932 when Methodist union brought about *Women's Work*, a term that had long been used in publications.

The Ladies' Committee's earliest appointments were short-lived. The very first, Susannah Beal, was given six months' training at Westminster Normal College, still in its infancy. The Ladies' Committee found £11 for her fees, £4 for books, £10 for her outfit and a first-class passage to Belize. But she survived only a few months before she died of yellow fever. Mary Gunson, who had been the first woman to study at Westminster and completed her training before she offered herself to the Committee, was sent to Guangdong (Canton), to support Jane Piercy in her work among women. The Committee had already sent Mrs Piercy, the Chairman's wife, some materials for her Dorcas Society, a woman's group making clothes for the poor, and some money for her girls' school, but after Susannah Beal's death they were hesitant to send a young woman to an equally dangerous environment. On the other hand, Jane Piercy was managing to raise a family and yet fully immersed in mission work; so they took the risk. It did not pay off. Mary Gunson went down with tuberculosis and after nine months was compelled to return to England, where she died within another year. Meanwhile Mary Batchelor thought she had got her wish when Mary Scott was sent to join her. Miss Scott, however, succumbed to a different fate. She did not even get as far as Negapatam before meeting and marrying Robert Stephenson, a minister in Madras. She was not the last!

But the Ladies' Committee would not be discouraged. By 1862 they had sent out eleven agents, to Belize, China, India, Fiji and South Africa. They were styled 'agents' because the Society would not officially recognize them as Missionaries: that title was still reserved to the ordained! Of these eleven two died, three married and only two of the others completed as much as seven years' service. One of them was Eleanor Lamb, again Westminster-trained, who was sent to Verulam in South Africa. The last twenty miles of the long journey to her appointment were on horseback from Durban; riding lessons had not been part of her training, and she had never ridden before. She was soon in her element, however. The little school she found grew until she had sixty pupils in the morning and another sixty in the afternoon. Two dozen boarders were somehow accommodated in the mission house. She taught the girls crochet and needlework, while her minister colleague taught woodwork to the boys. The Natal government was impressed, and helped to provide purpose-built classrooms for these practical subjects. But Eleanor's pleasure in these achievements was far surpassed by her joy when, after long waiting, a first group of young people made their professions of Christian faith and the first school prize-giving was complemented by their baptism. [Pauline Webb's *Women of our Company*, written over half-a-century ago, has chapters on Batchelor, Beal, Gunson and Lamb, culled from their letters home and other information published in the Occasional Papers.]

The relationship between ministerial and women missionaries was a tricky one to handle, both at headquarters and in the local situation. Josiah Cox, Chairman of the Wuchang District, raised the issue of how the Committee's agents and those of the parent body, the WMMS, should work together. In a letter of 1874 praising the work of Catherine Radcliffe, a teacher, for 'her discretion, sound judgement, strong sympathy and patient diligence', he suggested

that your teachers, with our worthy wives, should form a Girls' School Committee, administer your funds, and exercise almost full control over this department. The office of the Superintendent will be, I suppose, to encourage, help, and advise both you and them.

The expression 'almost full control' is indicative of a determination to ensure that the life of his District should be properly managed and ultimately under his direction. A 'Women's Sub-Committee' of the Synod was in time formed in many Districts, and often the men and women worked in respectful partnership, but there were also many instances over the years of ministers who ruled the roost over their female colleagues in a distinctly oppressive manner. Women missionaries had to be strong characters, if they were not to be under the thumb as well as under the eye of the ordained man, who might well be younger and far less experienced than they were themselves.

None the less, women missionaries were challenging stereotypes in an unprecedented way. Far from the constraints of their native culture, working unchaperoned, they discovered and realized their potential and they developed a self-confidence which helped them to withstand the pressures of overbearing men as well as to tackle the many demands and opportunities which confronted them. Lavinia Byrne has put it rather well, and I quote:

When they took on the agenda of justice and began to question the cultural norms which meant that women's feet were tortured and bound in China, that widows were killed in India, that twin-children were slaughtered in Africa, that girl children were forced into prostitution and grown women into zezana harems, they challenged a world which had been established by men for the convenience and servicing of men, whatever their religious tradition. Islam, Hinduism and the African religions were judged and found wanting; but then so too was Christianity.

This was why the connections which the missionary women began to make made them a dangerous force within Christianity. The very freedom they professed to proclaim, the gospel message itself, turned round and hit them in the face and demanded that they too become accountable to the Lord of history. When they named the outrage they felt as they witnessed the violation of women's human rights, they raised difficult questions about the place of women in any society, including their own. When they called for change, they were demanding change for themselves as well. When they freed women by ensuring that they should have education, they challenged the entire social structure which, traditionally, had restricted it to men. In a most moving way the journey of the missionary women was a journey into freedom.¹⁰

This made them pioneers at home as well as abroad. Not the least of their achievements was opening eyes, both male and female, to the strengths and abilities of women waiting to be released. The Irish missionary Annie Wood pointed out at the turn of the century that people who were reluctant to have a woman doctor themselves were enthusiasts about sending them

¹⁰ Byrne 1993:11

to Eastern women.¹¹ The impact was unforeseen; whether indirectly or militantly, they made as big a difference to the culture of the west as in the east.

It was in 1882 that the Auxiliary extended its remit to include medical work as well as education. In cultures which would not allow a man access to a sick woman, the solution was obvious. The WA Committee was exercised as to how much training would be necessary for health care workers, and initially prescribed two years of study and a year in hospital. Agnes Palmer, the Auxiliary's first medical agent, had no more than this basic medical training when she was posted to Madras in 1884, but there she was able to train further, alongside her workload, at the Madras College of Medicine. The next year, Louisa Sugden was sent to Hankou to meet Cox's repeated appeal, and almost immediately declared her work impossible unless she had a hospital! The request was a daunting one for the WA, with its many commitments, but a heroic effort, especially on the part of Caroline Wiseman, its indefatigable organiser-in-chief, resulted in the opening of the Hankou Women's Hospital in 1888. Here the Auxiliary's first fully qualified doctor, Ethel Gough, was appointed in 1895 – and though ten years later she became a minister's wife, she continued to work in China for the rest of her days, dying in Wuhan in 1941. In a letter from India in 1898 Mrs Wiseman was exhorted by William Goudie:

Strengthen your medical work everywhere; do not be discouraged by past disappointments ... Avail yourselves of facilities offered in Edinburgh, and never be without two or three students in training. A large order, do you say? Then have large faith, and give the women of Methodism no rest.¹²

Goudie, indeed, never tired of importuning Mrs Wiseman, and was generally persuasive! The WA's efforts resulted in over a dozen hospitals and clinics in India alone. I was bemused to read in annual reports of the WMMS in the 1920s the hospital at Sarenga in Bengal, which opened in 1918, is described as 'our most important medical mission in India' or even 'our only hospital'; that was because all the others were women's hospitals, founded, funded and separately reported by the Women's Auxiliary. There was a very clear demarcation between the Society and the Auxiliary. For a few years the Auxiliary even had a separate office in Highbury, until in 1927 it became the Women's Department and moved back to Bishopsgate.

The other branches of the Methodist family formed women's sections as well. The United Methodist Church's Women's Missionary Auxiliary brought together three of them. The Bible Christians had launched their Women's Missionary League in 1892. It undertook to create support groups in every circuit, to organize children's working parties, known as Busy Bees, in order to sew and make items of use in China, and to maintain correspondence with the women missionaries. For a while that meant the married women, but, by 1907 when the United Methodist Church was united, a dozen single women had gone to serve in Yunnan. In 1899 the New Connexion in turn established its Women's Auxiliary. An earlier plan to start it, in 1890, had fallen through when the woman they planned to support, Annie Holt, was taken ill and unable to go, but a forthright Conference resolution in 1899 challenged the women of the Connexion to take up the active role they had observed women assuming 'in some of the Missionary Societies'. In the UMFC Ladies' Missionary Auxiliaries had been started in Yorkshire in 1897 and they spread quickly. But the Foreign Missionary Committee was disparaging. The LMA was scornfully called the 'Leave Men Alone' Society – to which the women's riposte was to sing the hymn 'The Master praises, what are men?!' The

¹¹ Taggart 1986:66

¹² Lewis 1923:82

Committee finally approved a central LMA structure in 1905. Last of all the PM Women's Missionary Federation was founded in 1909 and began sending women to Nigeria.

As with the men and the couples, the pattern of single women's lives varied immensely. There were full-time teachers with a regular time-table, hospital staff with rotas and emergencies, and village workers taking the gospel, along with new skills such as needlecraft, to women's groups of unpredictable size, often meeting in the open, never assembling until the missionary appeared. Others ran orphanages, or 'colonies' for victims of leprosy. As the twentieth century advanced, their activities tended to become more institutionalized and more regulated. When they moved around, it was often on foot; in towns, perhaps by rickshaw; for longer journeys, by public transport – train, boat and in due course overcrowded buses of disparate shapes and sizes. The advent of motor vehicles did not assist them for a long while; in general, men missionaries were provided with their own cars long before women, though from the 1960s a militant Women's Work team at the Mission House remedied that wherever travel was a requirement of the post.

Although Women's Work at home had its distinctive organisation, its own recruitment and training arrangements, and funds dedicated to supporting its missionaries, overseas the missionaries were under the direction of the church leaders, invariably male, and the discipline of the District Synod or autonomous Conference. They were immediately accountable to the heads of their institutions or to circuit superintendents; as the years went by these were increasingly men or women of their host nation. Changes of relationship abroad were accompanied by changes at home, and well before the advent of Network in 1986 new missionaries came to see themselves not so much as 'WWs' but – in all but name – mission partners.

Dorothy Graham is the expert on the Wesley Deaconess Order and I have little to add to the papers she has read to these conferences. It is however to be noted that three years before the order was founded by Thomas Stephenson in 1890, a similar order had already been formed in the German Methodist District. The *Martha-Maria Verein* was founded by G J Ekert in 1887. By the time that little District was transferred to the Methodist Episcopal Church, under American Methodist oversight, in 1896, there were some three dozen sisters working in Nuremberg, Munich, Magdeburg and Vienna. They ministered to the sick, to the dying and – as in London – to destitute children. Stephenson's sisters were initially attached to the Children's Home which he also founded. Before long however the Order had a clear identity of its own, and the sisters were appointed to serve in circuits both at home and abroad. Those who went overseas did not necessarily go to places where the WMMS was working. One in Christchurch, New Zealand, later another in Lima, Peru, and some brief appointments in Canada are recorded; while in 1910 a request to supply a deaconess for the Falkland Islands was received, but could not be met for want of a suitable volunteer.¹³ Those who served WMMS were appointed by the parent committee and not by the Women's Auxiliary. Early in the twentieth century teams of three were sent to the Girls' High Schools in Freetown, Cape Coast, Accra and Lagos, on the basis that at any one time two would be on duty and the third on furlough. In view of the rigours of the climate, the WMMS agreed to provide £10 per annum to the superannuation fund for each deaconess.

In 1897 just four deaconesses were stationed abroad; thirty years later, when responsibility for their care was transferred to the Secretaries of the new-style Women's Department, there

¹³ Graham 2002:239

were thirty-four. The number of women who offered themselves for service overseas grew in the 1920s and 1930s – one consequence of the carnage of the Great War and the resulting shortage of husbands. The combined resources of the women’s networks in the uniting churches made it possible to support them. The majority, still, were either teachers or medical workers, but increasingly they were appointed to teacher-training, sister-tutor and kindred posts, preparing the way for national independence and church autonomy. Others were village or urban evangelists, on the front line of mission, and key support-workers, such as District administrators. The greatest concentration of women workers, as of ministers, was for many years in India – though within India they were widely dispersed, in the many Methodist hospitals, schools and circuits, and some, from 1947, in institutions of the Church of South India begun by other denominations. Ruth Anstey, teaching in Trichinopoly, lived in one room and said it taught her the asceticism of the SPG! When the Society celebrated the centenary of the Ladies’ Committee, in 1958, there were 218 women workers on its books. The next four decades saw a sharp reduction in their numbers, primarily because autonomous Churches became better equipped to staff their own institutions and circuits, and in part because of the admission of women to the ordained ministry from 1974. A number of women who first went abroad in a lay capacity were ordained. Peggy Hiscock, a deaconess, was ordained in Zambia in 1968, six years ahead of the field; it was agreed with the UCZ that she would be known as ‘Revd’ in Zambia and ‘Sister’ at home! By 1996 (when the Overseas Division was disbanded and my study terminates) the number of mission partners, men and women, ordained and lay, had fallen drastically. There were just thirteen single laywomen on the books, serving in nine different countries; seven out of the nineteen ministers were women as well. Four of them: Ros Colwill in Nigeria, Sheila Norris in Japan, Barbara Dickinson and Claire Smithson at Maua Hospital in Kenya, are still at their posts today.

I would like to end with a tribute to Ros Colwill. A social worker whose CV included jobs in Calcutta, Jamaica, Zambia and Bangladesh, she went to the Uzuakoli Leprosy Settlement in Nigeria in 1981. Her work over the next thirty years fell into three periods. The first eight years she spent bringing the Settlement back to life following its devastation during the Biafran war and creating a thriving community with a range of rehabilitation programmes including farming, printing, soap-making, brick and tile manufacture, sewing, beadwork and shoemaking. She moved on to undertake pioneer work among mentally ill vagrants, to that point totally neglected by the state, the church and NGOs. Persuading a traditional chief to cede land for such work seemed a hopeless task, but Ros was equal to the challenge. She was equally persuasive when it came to obtaining grants, and Amaudo (Village of Peace) was built. One by one destitute psychotic street people were brought to live there. Western drugs, traditional therapies, community life with plentiful doses of tender loving care, and a core ministry of prayer, began to transform their lives and resulted in most returning to their families. Amaudo later developed outreach programmes, and community psychiatric nurses in several states received training and supervision. Then Ros had a stroke which left her severely disabled. It looked like the end of her working life, but after two years in England she persuaded the church to let her return. In 2006 she started a new project, Ozuzu-Oke (Wholeness) training spiritual directors and conducting weeks of guided prayer. An exceptional mission partner in every respect: not least because, as a Roman Catholic, she had never been inside a Methodist Church when she enquired about the Uzuakoli vacancy; and, though the Roman Catholic Church remained her spiritual home, she became a member of the Nigerian Methodist Conference and was appointed to its executive. Whatever Faith and Order Committees may think about that, she is incontestably a Methodist Woman Abroad!

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