WOMEN AND MISSION: The Woman's Missionary Society of Hephzibah Methodist Episcopal Church, South. 1882-1940

This year the United Methodist Women of the Hephzibah United Methodist Church celebrate 100 years of service to God, the church, the community and the world. In commemoration of this centennial and in tribute to all the women whose love, labors, and devotion have served so faithfully our Lord and this congregation since its founding in 1852, this brief history has been compiled.

TO THE GLORY OF GOD
and in honor of
THE WOMEN OF HEPHZIBAH WHO SERVE HIM WITH
SUCH DEVOTION
and in loving memory of
ALL THE WOMEN FROM THIS CONGREGATION WHO
NOW SERVE HIM IN THE CHURCH TRIUMPHANT.

"Lord, give us grace that we,
Like them, the meek and lowly,
On high may dwell with Thee. Amen."

Charles B. Walls
Hephzibah, Georgia
October 16, 1982
On May 22, 1878, the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, meeting in Atlanta, unanimously approved a memorial authorizing the establishment of a woman's department of missions. At 10:00 the next morning, 54 women met at the First Methodist Church in Atlanta and organized the Woman's Missionary Society. Four years later, in 1882, a local unit of the society was organized at the Brothersville Church on the old Richmond Circuit. The congregation moved its building to the town of Hephzibah in 1890, and the society continued as the Hephzibah WMS. In 1939, with the merger which formed the Methodist Church, the name was changed to Woman's Society of Christian Service and, with the founding of the United Methodist Church in 1968, to United Methodist Women.

I. WOMEN IN THE CHURCH BEFORE 1882

Before the establishment of organized women's work in the congregation, the women of Brothersville, Georgia, played an active, supporting role in the congregation, the community, and in missionary endeavors. In spite of dominant male roles in the leadership of the congregation, just as in society at large, women gave indispensable service to the church.

The pulpit Bible, presented at the sanctuary's dedication in 1854, records many furnishings in the church which were the gift of women: the Bible cushion by Mrs. Col. Anderson and Mrs. Maria Rhodes; the altar cushion by Mrs. Susan Anderson; pulpit chairs and mats at the door and altar by Mrs. Virginia P. Walker; table cover and pitcher by Mrs. Marcella Finley; the communion service by Mrs. Martha R. Clark; carpets for aisles, altar and pulpit by Mrs. Sarah Gresham, Mrs. Harriet Greenwood and Miss Louisa Anderson.

As early as 1856 a concern of the women for missions was manifest in donations to the Georgia Conference Missionary Society by Mrs. Melvina P. Anderson, Mrs. M.A. Averet, and Miss Ella Anderson. That same year Mrs. Martha R. Clark, by a donation of her husband, was made a life member of the society.

In these early years the woman from the congregation who was probably the most widely known in religious circles was Mrs. Frances Henry Varner, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Robert Malone, whose girlhood home, "Oakland," still stands today near Peach Orchard and Mims Roads. Her poems were widely published in the Southern Christian Advocate and other religious papers of the day, often signed simply "Fannie, Oakland, Ga." Dr. Samuel Clark described her as extremely fragile and timid by nature but a tireless laborer in the vineyards of the Lord. She was one of the first "Sabbath School" teachers in our congregation. In 1850, "knowing that one of the grand agencies of our arch enemy is the intoxicating bowl," Fannie Henry organized Hephzibah's first fair at the old Brothersville Academy, the proceeds used to erect a Temperance Hall for the Brothersville division of the Sons of Temperance. Mrs. Varner's varied activities in the field of literature, religious and moral education, and the temperance movement are indicative of the contributions of women from our church in the years before the establishment of organized women's societies.
II. WOMAN'S MISSIONARY SOCIETY OF THE BROTHERSVILLE CHURCH, 1882-1890

Information about the founding of the WMS and its early years is sketchy. No reports of the society are extant, but there are occasional brief references in reports of various pastors to the Quarterly Conferences of the circuit. The first actual notice occurs in the minutes for March 24, 1883, Rev. C.S. Owens reported "one missionary society at Brothersville."

Two brief references to the founding occur in minutes of the WMS. At one meeting in 1911, Miss Ella G. Clark, treasurer and charter member, "gave a little history of the missionary society at this place, saying that the Society was organized by Rev. Miles Dillard and Rev. J. E. England in 1885. Disbanded from 1891 until July 1894, when it was reorganized by Mrs. F.W. McClesky. During the 26 years of its existence, $850.86 -- a yearly average of $32.72 -- was collected." Evidently there is an error in the minutes concerning the date 1885. The three years the society was disbanded, when added to "the 26 years of its existence," would make the date 1882. It was in that year, not 1885, that the reverend Mr. England served as pastor of the Richmond Circuit, only confirming the actual report from the year 1883 that the society was already in existence. Further confirmation comes from the society's minutes for January 22, 1931: "On Jan. 4th Miss Ella Clark, one of our charter members, and one who held the society together for many years -- also the only Treasurer the society ever had, being elected Dec. for 46th time -- passed from this life to her eternal home." Add the three missing years to the 46 of her service as treasurer and again one arrives at the year 1882.

From the records of the 1880's we learn nothing more about the society's activities, only its continued existence. It is clear, however, that during this time various pastors tried to enlist also the Sunday School and the young people in the congregation into missionary enterprises. Rev. L.P. Neese reported in 1884 that he had "appointed a committee of little girls to solicit funds" for the missions apportionment and he also proposed promoting mission causes in the Sunday School. Perhaps there was no connection between the Woman's Missionary Society and these endeavors, but a decade later the WMS had formed its own "Juvenile" missionary society and the Sunday School had been reorganized into a missionary society itself, studying mission literature in its classes and its collections going to missionary support.

III. WOMAN'S MISSIONARY SOCIETY OF THE HEPHZIBAH CHURCH, 1890-1919

The Brothersville Church was moved about one mile into the town of Hephzibah in April, 1890, and there followed a period of extensive renovations in which the old slave gallery was removed, the belfrey and pulpit recess added, the walls plastered and the building ceiled. As late as February, 1892, Rev. J.D. Milton reported that the Sunday School was still suspended "on account of the church being remodeled" but expressed hope that they would soon be back in the church again. The disruptions caused by the move and long period of renovation were quite possibly a major factor in the disbanding of the WMS during this same period.

Neither the work of women nor the cause of missions, however, rested long. In 1891 the congregation began taking monthly collections for support of a
missionary couple in Japan, "Bro. Shaw and wife ," support that continued for at least two years. In the absence of an active missionary society, Rev. Milton turned to the Sunday School as an instrument for mission support. The Sunday School throughout the circuit raised money to support the Shaws, and the pupils studied mission literature and wrote essays or gave recitations on missionary themes. By 1893 the Sunday Schools had been reorganized into actual missionary societies, and the pastor reported that the children were "using the mite box and like cards in collecting missionary money." These mite boxes, similar to ones we still use at Lent, became a prominent feature of the children's missionary societies, the quarterly service when the boxes were presented and opened being the highlight of the year. They were always cause for celebration and rejoicing, and to thank the children, at each of these "mite box openings" the women gave a party -- an Easter egg hunt or "Christmas tree" or treasure hunt, according to the season of the year. When the mite boxes were opened in Feb. 1908, "the showing was gratifying, especially as Miss Lillian Clark, the Lady Manager, had impressed upon the children the importance of earning by their own efforts what went into these boxes."

The missionary concern of the Hephzibah Sunday School continued for many decades with the fourth Sunday collections going for missions. The annual Work Day Offering for the Children's Home was a project of the Sunday School, and special Christmas offerings were taken each year for Wesley Memorial Hospital in Atlanta. Only in 1919 did the "Sunday School Standard" replace "The Missionary Voice" as the literature used in the various departments.

After the Woman's Missionary Society was reorganized in 1895, the women continued to expand this missionary work among the children and organized two auxiliary societies, the Young People's Missionary Society for teenagers and the Juvenile Missionary Society for children. Even infants were included on the "Baby roll" of the Juvenile society: missionaries from the cradle to the grave!

One week in April 1899, the church held a missionary rally Thursday through Sunday nights. The Rev. W. I. Delph, a local preacher residing in Hephzibah, preached and the services included a "series of talks, appropriate scripture lessons, songs, prayers and addresses." The pastor especially commended "the little Juveniles" for the help rendered during the rally. For a time in the early Twentieth Century, the Juvenile Society conducted services each fourth Sunday evening with the offerings going for various mission causes. Later they and the Young People's Society met weekly on Sunday afternoons.

The first reference to a specific cause supported by the WMU occurs in the records for 1900. In addition to the regular pledges sent to their conference treasurer for missionary support, the women pledged and paid $15 to the Twentieth Century Fund, a special crusade of the General Conference to strengthen Methodist educational work around the world.

Beginning in 1904 the Hephzibah Woman's Missionary Society began submitting annual written reports to the Fourth Quarterly Conference of the circuit. (Information before this date comes from the reports of the pastors.) The actual
minutes of the society have been preserved for most of the meetings since 1910.
From this time comes much more detailed information about the society and its
work.

The first report, for October 15, 1904, mentions 16 members of the adult
society, 15 in the Juvenile and 4 on the cradle roll. In that year both societies
together remitted $152.45 to the conference WMS for all purposes.

Then, as today, a major function of the society was to raise, through
annual pledges of its members, funds to support the on-going work of missionary
support and promotion through Annual and General Conference level organizations
of this society. Each new year every member signed a pledge card of her intended
contribution for the year, and these funds were sent to the conference treasurer.

The women also had their own mission specials and local projects. In the
period before 1920 a special interest was manifest locally in mission work in
the Orient. For a number of years the women in Hephzibah supported a Bible
woman, a native Chinese Christian evangelistic and educational worker. In 1907
funds were sent to China for famine relief and for the great Church in Shanghai
as a memorial to Young J. Allen, the Georgia native who had inaugurated the
Chinese mission work of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. The Juvenile
society in those years sent funds to a school established by W.B. Bonnell,
another Georgian, working in Korea. The minutes for the WMS meeting of February 27,
1912 record:

A most interesting letter to Mrs. Baxley from Miss Kate
Cooper, a Korean missionary, was read. It gave an account
of a Korean girl, "Pang Notuk," whom Mrs. Baxley is educat­
ing for a Bible Woman as a memorial to her Father and the
girl will bear his name, Geo. P. Bush. The society appreci­
ated very much the kind thoughtfulness of the President
in allowing them this little glimpse into her own personal
love and charity. Perpetuating his name not upon marble,
but as it were upon a human soul. (Miss Cooper was one
of Georgia's most renowned missionaries.)

Home mission work during this period centered primarily on sending boxes
of clothing or supplies to needy individuals or institutions -- the famed
"mission barrels" put to service at home as well as abroad. The women in
Hephzibah packed boxes of towels and other linen for Wesley Memorial Hospital
and boxes of clothing and other supplies for the King Mill Wesley House in
Augusta, the children of needy preachers in the conference, and for "a little
girl in Blairsville, Georgia." In 1910 the society made a quilt for the Orphan's
Home.

Locally the society's work centered in maintaining the parsonage and its
furnishings, cleaning and providing flowers for the church, and visiting the
sick and new residents in the community. Every month the Superintendent for
Social Services reported on the number of calls made and of flowers and "trays"
of food taken to the sick and new comers, the visits often numbering in the
20's and 30's. In 1915 the society, through the assistance of some of its members, was able to send a local girl, Fannie Lou Davis, to Vashti Industrial School for Girls and soon after sent "her a little box of accessories to her wardrobe as a love token."

Except for the Sunday School, the major youth work of the congregation was undertaken by the WMS through its Young People and Juvenile Societies. These were the true precursor of our present UMYF. Although the Epworth League dates from the Nineteenth Century, the first notice of a branch in Hephzibah occurs only in 1922. This late date is not indicative of a lack of concern for youth ministries but, on the contrary, of the active and successful programs of the Young People's Missionary Society. Much of the work and energies of the WMS was directed to these societies, which were actual branches of the adult society with their "Lady Managers" elected by and responsible to the WMS.

The missionary societies for youth and children -- in addition to the money raised for missions, the regular Bible and mission studies, and assistance given at churchwide missionary rallies -- provided a major part of the social life of the young people in a small rural community. For the children there were the parties given at the mite box openings, and the minutes of the parent society are full of discussions of the monthly socials and picnics which were such a prominent feature of the Young People's Missionary Society and which account for its success and longevity. The church possesses the treasurer's record book for the Young People's society for the years 1919 and 1920. Among the members listed, along with the amounts paid each month, are Weldon Rheney and Ollie Burkhalter.

Another major effort of the society was missionary education. For several years it was the custom of the ladies of Hephzibah to answer the roll call by mentioning the name of a missionary -- a lovely way of remembering each and lifting her up to God in love and concern. The monthly meetings generally consisted of four parts: a devotional, a business session, a "literary meeting," and social hour with refreshments. Sometimes the literary meetings were held separately and the women met twice a month. The literary meetings were devoted to Bible and mission studies, the latter including a wide variety of area studies and topics: Cuba, Brazil, Mexico, China, Japan, Korea, Africa; medical missions; women's work; temperance, brotherhood; stewardship and tithing and "The Way In Which the Foreign Christians Sacrifice Themselves Ought to Put Us To Shame;" "The Religion of the Adolescent Boy;" and "Jesus Christ, Evangelistic Missionary." As today the "Week of Prayer" was observed annually, and the society greeted the new year of 1919 with a Watchnight Service in the church.

The Hephzibah society sent delegates to the annual meetings of their district and conference organizations and at least once, in 1912, had the "honor to tie with another Society for the Blue Ribbon." Many years it was on the Honor Roll. Fraternal delegates were sent to a meeting of the Woman's Missionary Union held at the Baptist Church during October, 1910, and many homes of Methodist ladies were opened to entertain the out of town guests.

During the last week in June of 1914 the society entertained in Hephzibah a two day District Conference of the Woman's Missionary Society. The women again opened their homes to the delegates and invited the missionary society of the
Baptist Church to attend the meetings. Much discussion ensued regarding the
menu, but finally a consensus was reached. "It was decided to serve a sandwich
and salad luncheon with iced tea, bread and pickles for the first day." The
second day it was barbeque paid for by taking subscriptions from the church
members. The subscriptions not only covered the cost but added 35¢ to the
mission treasury of the hostesses. The husbands of the members, in gratitude
for their subscriptions, were invited to attend the second day and enjoy some
of the barbeque they had paid for.

In addition to pledges, personal donations, and subscriptions from church
members for special projects, one summer the women sold ice cream at the Hephzibah
Railroad Depot and in 1913 raised $3.00 for missions from the sale of chickens.

In 1918, the General Conference, in celebration of one hundred years of
missionary endeavor, launched a five-year funds crusade for missions, the
Centenary Movement. The women in Hephzibah actively promoted this cause and
generously supported it in addition to their regular pledges and their own foreign,
national, and local specials.

IV. WOMAN'S MISSIONARY SOCIETY IN HEPHZIBAH, 1920-1940

Throughout the two succeeding decades the work of the society continued
along much these same lines with emphasis on spiritual growth and stewardship;
awareness and support of mission causes at home and abroad; maintenance of the
church and parsonage; care for the sick, the bereaved, new comers, and the
destitute; sponsorship of adjunct societies for youth and children. There were,
however, some subtle changes in emphasis.

The system of yearly pledges continued, but with increasing frequency the
minutes speak about fund raising projects, especially for local projects and
mission specials. Mission boxes continue to be sent overseas and to Bethlehem
House and Wesley House in Augusta, to the Children's Home and Wesley Memorial
Hospital, to Vashti, and to Scarritt College for Christian Workers in Nashville. Yet
the need is clearly beginning to shift from goods to money. "In place of
sending a box, as was our custom, cash was sent to Miss Annie White, a missionary,
to be used as she saw fit." (May, 1937) Primarily the increase in fund raising
projects reflects a growing awareness of and involvement in the missionary work
needing to be done locally. The percentage of the budget spent on local and
community projects increases dramatically.

A major effort in 1925 was helping pay for the building of Sunday School
rooms onto the church. In that single year the women held a barbeque, a chicken
supper, a rummage sale, and a bazaar of Christmas items which the women worked
on all year long. They made and sold ice cream and even raised $13.67 picking
cotton in order to contribute $296.11 to the Building Fund and $191.72 for re­
pairs to the parsonage (largely to replace the porch). For the July meeting,
"owing to work going on in the S.S. rooms, we had to stay on the porch. The
song was omitted."

Through these decades the society spent a considerable portion of their
funds on the parsonage. Almost every year the women held a silver tea or
barbeque or chicken supper for the parsonage. In 1925 it was an "apron and
sock social" and in 1926, "an oyster supper." (Now that's the one I wish I
could have been at!) One year the Gracewood WMS volunteered to put on a play with all the proceeds going to our parsonage fund.

In 1920 the women were urged to give all their "Sunday eggs" to the support of local causes and to make and sell sandwiches at the Hephzibah High School one day each week, helping both to provide lunches for the students and support their social services at the same time. Increasingly the mission boxes are not sent away but are packed for a needy child in the community or a family recently burned out.

Also noticeable is a growing concern for the needs of poorer Black families in the community. Except for such mission studies as "The Negro In His Native Land and In Our Native Land" and occasional church wide offerings taken for Paine Institute in Augusta, Black people are not mentioned in the earlier records at all. But, after the first mention of the society's work with Blacks in August, 1923, ("also looking after an old darkey"), the references occur with accelerating frequency. The Social Services Superintendent begins to report on visits to Black families, distributing religious literature to their children, and making contributions to a family whose home burned. At times the society even served as a kind of social services agency helping poorer members of the community in their contacts with public and government agencies. In February, 1932, the "Superintendent of Supplies told of a colored family wanting to adopt two children and asking her to help them get them. She read a card from Miss Stephens saying she would try and arrange for them." During much of the 1930's the society provided a partial scholarship for a young woman to attend Paine and in 1933 at the height of the Depression, hired a Black woman to clean the church. Why would they hire someone to do what they had done all along in a period when labor was so much more plentiful than money? In 1935 the society organized a "Sunday School at the colored church over on the Hughes' place, which we thought would be a good thing to do." A highlight of a mission study in the fall of 1936, to which the WMS at Blythe was also invited, was the solos of a black woman. In an era of resurgent Klan activity in Richmond County, as well as throughout the South, this was a most remarkable but quite courageous Christian witness for the women of a small southern town.

Throughout the 1920's the WMS continued to support home mission specials such as Bethlehem House, Wesley House, and King Mill Mission in Augusta, the Golden Cross and Wesley Memorial Hospital, Vashti and Scarritt. In 1921, a box was sent "to near east relief" and $20.00 to the "starving Chinese", Miss Emma Lester, a missionary to China, seems to have been a favorite of the women in Hephzibah; her name appears in the minutes over a period of several decades, and the society helped support her study at Scarritt during one furlough.

The women also supported two special funds crusades: memorial offerings for Dr. Belle Harris Bennett and a Golden Jubilee Crusade in 1928 and 1929 celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Woman's Missionary Society. Miss Bennett was something of a heroine to Methodist women in the South. As president of their Board of Home Missions, she had fought for twelve long years and finally, in 1918, won for them equal rights among the laity of the church. It was 1923,
however, before the first women in Hephzibah actually took their place as full voting members of the Quarterly Conference: Mrs. Lillian Clark as Recording Secretary and Mrs. C. M. Raybun as President of the WMS.

The special causes supported by the women often mirror changing political, social and economic conditions in the nation. The prayer special for 1924 was designated for "Prohibition." In 1935 when the clouds of war rising over Europe were but the size of a woman's hand, the WMS invited the women of the Baptist Church to join them in a day of prayer for peace. In 1919, in response to the genocide of the Turkish government, relief was sent to the Armenians and in 1938, after the Japanese invasion, "for the relief of China."

Most of all, the minutes of the 1930's document some of the effects of the Great Depression. Almost every year the women somehow managed to continue sending a little something to Paine College and Bethlehem Center. These are the two projects most dear to the women in Hephzibah and must be dropped, these contributions continue, even if only 75¢ or $1.00 annually is the best they can do. During the decades one box of supplies each was sent to Goodwill Industries, the King Mill Mission, and Vashti. The minutes are full of requests for support of needy causes, each one carefully considered. But one sentence from the meeting of March 27, 1932 sums up the situation! "Because of so much near local relief work being necessary, we have sent no box of supplies to any of our Conference or Council specials." Most of the funds raised during the decade were spent on "relief of the poor," usually in the form of clothing and food.

In all the pages of minutes my favorite line occurs in the President's report to the Quarterly Conference of June 19, 1931: "Clothes for Mrs. $18.00." Preserving the poor woman's anonymity and the last vestiges of her pride are almost as great an act of charity as the gift itself. A close runner-up, but in an entirely different vein, comes from the minutes for 1922, when Mrs. A. B. Eubanks, Secretary of the society for many years, recorded that the dialogue she and a friend presented during the literary meeting "was a failure." This is the only outright disaster admitted to in all those 58 years! Perhaps she was being overly modest. Or could she just not resist her one chance to interject a bit of levity into what might otherwise prove to be a dull, serious evening?

Throughout most of the 30's there were no oyster suppers or chicken dinners, no bazaars or rummage sales. Only one cake sale in 1933 and the sale of an old carpet from the parsonage to get funds with which to have the clock repaired. 1933 was one of the few years in its entire history that the Hephzibah society did not send a delegate to the annual meeting of the Conference WMS. That year it was held almost across the state, in Newman, and "under existing circumstances, no one could go." One member donated a small quilt for the Orphan's Home, but the meeting ended without anyone coming up with a way to get it there. In 1934 came a letter suggesting that in the absence of money, contributions of old gold might help keep some of the missionaries in the field. In April the next year the society received a letter of thanks for its participation in that project. "It was good we had a small part in it."

The Easter egg hunts and Christmas trees for the children continued and pennies were a cause of celebration when the mite boxes were opened. In 1933
each member was urged to make a special effort to try and find something for
the treasure hunt. By 1938 things had started to pick up and by working with
other churches in the community, the congregation helped raise "enough in
cash and donations to remember about twenty-five families at Christmas." The
pledges were smaller, but they were still sent to the Conference treasurer.
The women still gathered for prayer and Bible study and to learn about India,
"Industry in America," or the "Missionary Message of the Bible." There were
still "stork showers" and after every meeting "delightful" or "tempting" refresh­
ments, or a "salad course," or "gelatin and cake" was served by the hostess.

The more things change, the more they stay the same. How often we too
have heard:

"My people claim they can't pay me and missionary money too." (1895)
"Could not decide what to do with the Bazaar money -- so many
places needy of it." (1926)
"On Jan. 16th our faithful few met . . . only wish we could prevail
on more of our members attending our meeting." (1923)
"See that your children attend regularly and when assigned a part
in the program, help them be prepared." (1923)
"These studies are so interesting those not coming are missing
a lot." (1939)
"...told of the work that had been done at the parsonage and there
was so much more needed if the funds were available." (1931)
"Miss Lillian was appointed to go to District Conference which she
accepted provided she could get a cook." (1924)
"The woman's work moves on quietly and faithfully." (1898)

During the social hour following the December meeting of 1939, one of the
members brought up a matter that had been overlooked, so Mrs. Eubanks added on
to the minutes: "We were informed we were not WMS any longer -- Women's Society
of Christian Service."

The charter meeting of the new society was not held until the following
September. Mrs. Hendee, the District President, came and spoke, "taking for
her theme the old and the new day. Her message was inspiring. She told us
we had greater work before us and urged each one to contribute all they could."

Two weeks before, on August 28, 1940, the Hephzibah Women's Missionary
Society had met for the last time. A picnic was held at Windsor Spring, the
Gracewood Society was invited, and 20 were present. "A beautiful lunch was
served and each returned home so glad they went." "Words fail to express how
much we enjoyed being together."

"Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of
witnesses, let us also run with perseverance
the race set before us, looking to Jesus."