

# United Methodist Women History and Legacy

1869: 8 women

Today: 800,000 members

United Methodist Women inherits the vision and toil of women's missionary societies of eight denominations since 1869. Its 140-year legacy started when the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society first organized in Boston in response to a lack of women's health in India.

Women in the Methodist and Evangelical United Brethren traditions organized about the same time in history (1869-1893) when women and children were legally classified as "chattel, legally dead, non-persons." There was little service to women because of prejudice and limitations of cultural attitudes in the church and in society.

In 1869, Mrs. William Butler and Mrs. Edwin Parker, wives of missionaries to India, were home on furlough. They spoke to a group of eight women in Boston. Mrs. Butler told about the desperate spiritual and physical needs of women in India. A male doctor could not treat women. Schooling for girls was almost non-existent. Single, trained and dedicated women were needed for medical and educational work.

The women who were present called another meeting of women, wrote a constitution, and organized the Methodist Woman's Foreign Missionary Society (WFMS). By November 1869, the newly formed organization raised funds and sent Isabella Thoburn, an educator, and Dr. Clara Swain, a doctor, to India.

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Ms. Thoburn began a school with six young girls in Lucknow. This school expanded to include Isabella Thoburn College, the first women's college in Asia. Dr. Swain began her medical work, resulting in the establishment of the first women's hospital in Asia. Both of these institutions are still serving the people of India.

In 1875, Lizzie Hoffman was instrumental in forming the Woman's Missionary Association of the United Brethren Church. After spending one night praying, she was convinced that the women of the church should be organized for special mission work. Sierra Leone, in Africa, was the first country to which missionaries were sent.

Strong Woman's Home Missionary Societies were founded in 1880 (Methodist Episcopal Church) and 1890 (Methodist Episcopal Church, South)

In 1879, the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society of the Methodist Protestant Church was founded; and in 1884, the Woman's Missionary Society was organized in the Evangelical Association. These groups became powerful, independent women's organizations, sending hundreds of missionaries all over the world and supporting many projects.

The Ladies Aid Societies, which had existed for many years, were incorporated into the missionary societies in the 1940s. Through reorganization and denominational mergers, these various groups were brought together. In 1973, United Methodist Women became the women's mission organization of The United Methodist Church.

The United Methodist Church General Conference 2012 voted to make United Methodist Women's

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national policymaking body autonomous. The transition began Oct. 1, 2012. Harriett Jane Olson in her chief executive report at the organization's annual meeting in New York City, October 2013 reported, "Our work is not just about service, it's about worship, it's about standing up, stepping up making our voices heard," she said. "We try to help governments see the world the way we see the world because it will positively impact the lives of women, children and youth."

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For more than a century, women in the Methodist and Evangelical United Brethren traditions have led a struggle for human rights and social justice. The generation of women who founded the early missionary societies developed powerful networks and organizational structures to help women attain full participation in the life of the church and society. In the early years of the women's mission organizations, the focus was on sending missionaries and helping to change the lives of women and girls in foreign lands. They incorporated the values of home and family into public life, as they addressed issues of poverty, child labor, immigration, migrant labor, family life, racial discrimination, full clergy rights for women, and many other social ills of the day.. Many problems faced by the women at the turn of the century have reemerged in our own time with a new and demanding urgency: new waves of immigration, homelessness, racial divisions, threats to the environment, substance abuse and addiction, lack of affordable health care, concerns for the well-being of

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children and the elderly, public education, questions about women's roles in society, and world peace. Because of the faithfulness and courage of the millions of women who prayed, planned, organized, marched, petitioned, labored, and supported the work of the early missionary societies, the lives of countless individuals, especially women and children, have been irrevocably changed. Women, children and youth in our generation, and the ones that will follow us, are living the legacy of the women's missionary movement of the 19th century. We have much to be proud of and a great deal to celebrate as we continue the journey begun almost 150 years ago by our faithful and courageous foremothers.

## **2019 – 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary**



United  
Methodist  
Women

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