

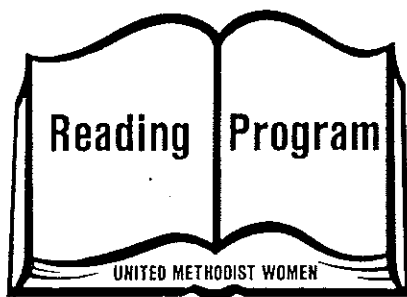
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# PAGES FROM THE PAST

by MARION L. BAKER

*Note: The material presented in this article is part of a Reading Program Historical Research Project commissioned by the Reading Program Committee. The committee wishes to express appreciation for the fine work done by Marion L. Baker.*



Leafing through the early histories and magazines of our foremothers, we find many references to reading and study.

As women committed to mission, they were convinced that reading and study were necessary preparations for themselves and their sisters. They said in effect (using the intent words from our purpose to interpret *their* purpose) that they wanted to continually expand their concepts of mission. Each and all of the different wom-

en's groups of the predecessor organizations instituted some kind of reading plan or program and recommended it to their conference branches and local auxiliaries or societies.

We will not attempt to chart the chronology or give equal attention to each of our predecessors or fully quote the words from everyone, but we will try to show how simultaneously each separate group proceeded to "program" reading by distributing literature, recommending a reading circle or establishing a reading course. Those who now follow the Reading Plan of United Methodist Women may discover they are in a grand company of present *and* past. They will notice both similarities and differences and can find assistance in the Reading Pro-

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gram.

One of the earliest references to a recommended plan of reading is found in *Heathen Women's Friend*, a magazine of the Methodist Episcopal Church Woman's Foreign Missionary Society. In an April 1870 editorial entitled "Missionary Reading Circles," these words are found:

Our hearts are usually reached by way of our heads. We must *know* a thing is so, before we *feel* its importance. One reason of the dearth of missionary sympathy and zeal, is the lack of missionary knowledge. If we can make Christian people intelligent in regard to the condition of nations, we can hardly fail of making them feel the necessity of doing something to better it.

There are facts enough that Christians can gather to arouse all Christendom to effort, if they could only be brought out. Many of these are published, but somehow they fail to reach everyday people. They come, too often, in dry, statistical form. Our heads do not comprehend them. Our hearts are not moved by them.

The new responsibility that the W.F.M.S. brings to the women of the Church, cannot fail to increase their interest and intelligence in this direction.

THE FRIEND will do much for the ladies of our Church in this matter. But, in addition, there should be a missionary reading circle formed in every auxiliary society. Let a copy of the periodicals published by kindred organizations be subscribed for, and placed by the corresponding secretary in the hands of the reader for the month. Let her serve up, at each meeting, *la creme de la creme*. Let all missionary books in the Sabbath-school and private libraries be looked over, and selected from for the readings; the other ladies, in the meantime, reading what they can, to prepare themselves to talk about it. An hour spent in this way, at each monthly meeting, could not fail greatly to increase the sympathy and zeal of the church for the evangelization of the world.

It was in October 1886 that the Woman's Home Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church considered a plan for instituting a reading circle. They approved it "in all important particulars" and created a "Home Missionary Reading Circle and Lecture Bureau." The object of this Bureau was "to systematize a course of reading, which shall consist in a few books well chosen, embracing about two books per year for a period of three years . . . the whole covering our mission fields, including temperance." There were to be dues and a plan of reporting, with recognitions/awards—a badge for each year of reading and a certificate for the completion of the course. The first two books to be read along with the magazine, *Woman's Home Missions*, were: *A Century of Dishonor*, by Helen H. Jackson, and *Our Country*, by Josiah Strong, D.D.

Every one of the predecessor organizations early on undertook the publishing and distribution of leaflets for use in local churches, on topics related to missions (home and/or foreign), to stewardship and to temperance as well as to organizational interests of women in the churches. For example, the Woman's Missionary Society of the Methodist Protestant Church in their magazine *Woman's Missionary Record* advertized a number of such leaflets monthly. A review of the titles is instructive: "Consecration and Culture," "Bible Rules for Giving," "The Social Element in Missionary Work," "How to Kill a Missionary Meeting," "So Much To Do At Home," and "Mrs. Gray's Opportunities."

The titles show the wide interests of the women and of the organization. A number of the leaflets were reprints from their own magazine. A number were later distributed in sister denominations.

Among women of the United

Evangelical Church (according to *The Abiding Past*, a history of the women of the Evangelical Church), "use of the Quarterly Envelope, the many leaflets ordered written and printed, and the deep concern manifested for the missionary periodicals, proves that they were excellent propagandists, and realized the peculiar power and far reach of the printed page."

In the periodical of the Methodist Episcopal Church South Women's Foreign Missionary Society, the *Women's Missionary Advocate*, a November 1888 article entitled "Mrs. Ansley's Plan (A Letter from South Rome to Mrs. Butler)" suggested that Required Reading from the *Advocate* be recommended to local societies and that questions be asked and answered about the readings in meetings.

In July 1892 a report of the Committee on Publication of the W.M.S. included two items:

We recommend the list of books prepared by Miss Mary Helm for general reading in our Woman's Missionary Societies; also the course of reading prepared by the Cross-bearer's Missionary Reading Circle. . . .

While we appreciate the good accomplished by all missionary publications, we think it advisable for the Woman's Board of Missions to urge the zealous support of its own, connectional organs.

In the April 1889 issue of *Woman's Missionary Friend* the Prescribed Reading Course of the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church was outlined. Called a "forward movement," it proposed to aid persons interested in the work of the Society who "have not the material available for reading: women burdened with cares, busy mothers who want to be told where they can find at hand what will keep them in touch. . . ."

The first year's course consisted of five books, all within the cost of

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three dollars. Among them were: *Light in the East*, by Bishop J.M. Thoburn (25¢); and *Holy Spirit in Missions*, by Rev. A.J. Gordon (50¢). The Literature Committee in their report gave a review of each book and detailed the plan for reporting and recognition (by diploma) for the first year of reading.

A plan for United Mission Study for Women's Societies was introduced at the Ecumenical Conference (a world missionary conference) in the spring of 1900. An interdenominational committee of women was appointed. The first book published was an outline study of Missions from the time of the Apostles down to the Nineteenth Century. Entitled *Via Christi* by Louise M. Hodgkins, it was listed on the Reading Courses of the Methodist Protestant Church W.M.S. and the United Brethren W.M.A. and others, no doubt. It was used by all for study and a number recommended it for reading, too. Ten interdenominational mission study books published under those auspices found their way into the monthly programs of all the women's missionary societies, including those prepared by the Women's Missionary Association of the Church of the United Brethren in Christ.

The United Brethren women adopted a Reading Course in May 1900 and organized a Literature Department "for the purpose of greatly increasing the output of attractive missionary literature with the hope that an informed womanhood would result in an awakened and an enlisted womanhood."

In 1907, a Missionary Reading Department was authorized by the Woman's Missionary Society of the Evangelical Association. The purpose of the department was to "promote systematic reading and study classes." The helpfulness of this type of mission study was evidenced by the testimony of a group of women who said, "We felt we were following the footprints of the King as he passes through the nation." By 1915,

there were 134 "missionary libraries" reported in 538 auxiliaries (local organizations) and the Standard of Excellence for auxiliaries included "A Reading Circle" as one of the 15 measures of success.

As for the United Evangelical Church Woman's Missionary Society, the Gruhler Memorial Circulating Library of 40 volumes of "choice missionary reading" was donated for circulation from what was called the Bureau of Literature. In 1900, a Roll of Honor was "established to be published in *The Missionary Tidings*, consisting of the names of women who read three of these books in a year." Within a few years "the library was doubled and enthusiasm tripled." Circulating libraries were established in several of the conference branches. "An established headquarters, in charge of a salaried full-time superintendent will be a necessity, if the best interest of the work is to be served," reported the volunteer superintendent of the Bureau.

Reading and study were major programs of all the foremother groups. In every transition period, in every union and/or merger, plans were written into the agreements and these programs, in some form or another were carried forward, usually with the total/general/national/jurisdictional organization supervising the programs, often with the conferences/auxiliaries assuming special initiative and leadership. We are told that at the time of "unification" and the organization of the Woman's Division of Christian Service of The Methodist Church in 1939, it was determined that Woman's Societies of Christian Service ought to concentrate on a thorough-going mission study program and reading as such was not promoted.

In contrast to this, upon the union of the Evangelical and United Brethren women and the organization of the Women's Society of World Service in 1946, the two reading plans which had been so

similar, even as to categories of emphasis, were merged and lists of about 30 books were approved in three categories: Spiritual Life; Christian Social Relations and Missionary Education.

With union in 1968, both these major elements inherited from the past were carried into the Women's Society of Christian Service and Wesleyan Service Guild of the United Methodist Church, and with the inauguration of "one, new, organization for women in mission," in 1972 the United Methodist Women's Reading Plan became one more way to fulfill the fourfold Purpose with book selections in four categories: Christian Personhood, Supportive Community, Christian Social Involvement, and Christian Global Concerns.

#### PREDECESSOR ORGANIZATIONS

##### THE METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH:

The Woman's Foreign Missionary Society—1869-1940

The Woman's Home Missionary Society—1880-1940

The Ladies Aid Society (not a centralized organization)

##### THE METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH, SOUTH:

The Woman's Foreign Missionary Society—1879-1910

The Woman's Home Missionary Society—1886-1910

The Woman's Missionary Council—1911-1940

##### THE METHODIST PROTESTANT CHURCH:

The Woman's Foreign Missionary Society—1879-1940

The Woman's Home Missionary Society—1911-1940 (not organized along conference lines)

##### THE EVANGELICAL UNITED BRETHREN CHURCH:

Women's Society of World Service—1946-1968

##### THE CHURCH OF THE UNITED BRETHREN IN CHRIST:

Women's Missionary Association—1875-1946

##### THE EVANGELICAL CHURCH:

Woman's Missionary Society—1921-1946

##### THE UNITED EVANGELICAL CHURCH:

Woman's Missionary Society—?-1921

##### THE EVANGELICAL ASSOCIATION:

Woman's Missionary Society—1886(?)—1921