

## Methodist Bible Women in Bulgaria and Italy

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Like new communities of faith in the apostolic age, Methodism sprang up in Continental Europe initially by word of mouth, through the personal sharing of stories of faith among migrants, sailors, and travelers.<sup>1</sup> At the first Central Conference of Europe, held in Rome in 1911, Rev. Vittorio Bani characterized the Methodist mission approach succinctly: “[Methodism] comes, first of all, with a message that religion is not a function, neither political nor ecclesiastical, but a living, vital experience of the individual heart.”<sup>2</sup> Mission societies in the early nineteenth century emerged among Wesleyan Methodists in Great Britain (WM, 1813) and the newly constituted Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC, 1819), the Evangelical Association (EA, 1838) and the United Brethren in Christ (UB, 1853) in the United States.<sup>3</sup> In these developments, a phase of informal connections and relationships gave way to the more organized and formal relationships of the burgeoning missionary movement. More extensive mission work in Europe with official

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<sup>1</sup> This research was made possible through a Bell Scholarship granted by Drew University in Madison, New Jersey. This article emanates from research conducted at the Methodist Archives there in March 2012. The term “Continental Europe” or “Europe” throughout this article refers to European nations not including those of the British Isles. Several critical resources provide a helpful foundation for the following exposition of Methodist mission on the continent of Europe. The most succinct discussion of this topic is Ulrike Schuler, “Methodism in Northern and Continental Europe,” in *T & T Clark Companion to Methodism*, ed. Charles Yrigoyen, Jr. (London: T & T Clark, 2010), 166-87. With regard to mission in those areas focused upon in this article, more recent studies supersede the earlier classic work, Wade Crawford Barclay and J. Tremayne Copplestone, *History of Methodist Missions*, 4 vols. (New York: Board of Missions, 1949-1973). Of particular interest in this regard is the remarkable inventory of the history of Methodism in the different European countries, Patrick Ph. Streiff, *Der Methodismus in Europa im 19. Und 20. Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart: EmKGM 50, 2003). English edition, *Methodism in Europe: 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (Tallinn: Baltic Methodist Theological Seminary, 2003). See also, Friedrich Hecker, Vilém Schneeberger, and Karl Zehrer, *Methodismus in Osteuropa: Polen—Tschechoslowakei—Ungarn* (Stuttgart: EmKGM 51, 2004), Ulrike Schuler, *Die Evangelische Gemeinschaft: Missionarische Aufbrüche in gesellschaftspolitischen Umbrüchen* (Stuttgart: emk studien 1, 1998), Peter Stephens, *Methodism in Europe* (Peterborough, UK: Methodist Publishing House, 1998), and Patrick Ph. Streiff, ed., *Der europäische Methodismus um die Wende vom 19. zum 20. Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart: EmKM 52, 2005). An older study that is still of great significance is D. John Nuelsen, Theophil Mann, and J. J. Sommer, *Kurzgefasste Geschichte des Methodismus*, ed. (Bremen: Verlagshaus der Methodistenkirche GmbH <sup>2</sup>1929).

<sup>2</sup> Minutes of the Central Conference of Europe, Methodist Episcopal Church, held in the Methodist Central Building, Rome, Italy, September 15-20, 1911. Official Journal (Rome: Methodist Press, 1911), 70.

<sup>3</sup> These four Methodist churches and their missionary societies influenced the spread of Methodism in Europe in the nineteenth century, later supported by mission efforts of the MECS, beginning after World War I.

connection and support by Methodist mission societies began, therefore, mainly in the middle of the nineteenth century.

The primary driving force behind all this labor was the desire “to spread scriptural holiness over the land.”<sup>4</sup> With the main Methodist mission policy oriented around reaching the “heathen,” in the minds of many it made sense to focus attention on Asia and Africa. When requests began to pour in from the European continent for British and American missionary support, the response of mission agencies was initially hesitant and even dismissive given the fact that many of these countries were deeply rooted in the Protestant heritage.<sup>5</sup>

Emigration to the United States from many European nations played an increasing role in these new developments, with immigrants consistently expressing concern about the moral and religious poverty of their homelands and the need for Christian renewal. The organization of Methodist Foreign Language Annual Conferences in the USA provided a natural bridge between the continents. These conferences, in particular, initiated new missions, provided financial support, and nurtured personal contacts among family and friends. They also helped foster deeper understanding of the cultural differences, approaches, and contextual dynamics. These Conferences in the USA produced periodicals for members of congregations in these foreign language annual conferences as well as in the respective countries of origin.<sup>6</sup> When the mission

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<sup>4</sup> John Wesley used this phrase in his “Minutes of Several Conversations” to describe one important part of the mission of his new movement of spiritual renewal in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. See Thomas Jackson, ed., *The Works of John Wesley*, 14 vols. (London: J. Mason, 1831), 8: 299.

<sup>5</sup> In the 19<sup>th</sup> century the territories in Europe were still very strictly separated according to confessions. According to the principle *cuius regio, eius religio* (whoever’s region, his religion), the ruling political leader determined the religion for his dominion. This principle remained in effect from the Peace of Augsburg (1555) to the end of World War II although in some countries the separation of state and church was statutorily regulated earlier. As a consequence of the war, however, refugees of different confessions became increasingly mixed in the population across Europe. The dismissal of mission work in south Germany was based upon the Wesleyan Methodist argument not to work in a Protestant context (see Friedemann Burkhardt, *Christoph Gottlob Müller und die Anfänge des Methodismus in Deutschland*, *Arbeiten zur Geschichte des Pietismus*, Bd. 43 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003).

<sup>6</sup> There seems to be no specific research about this at all. Massimo Di Gioacchino is currently engaged in research along these lines in relation to the Italian Methodist Annual Conference and hopes to publish his thesis on

boards did begin to deploy missionaries to Europe, their primary strategy revolved around an effort to renew Protestant state churches, often through an awakening or rediscovery of Pietist roots and practices in those traditions.<sup>7</sup> Ministers of state churches often welcomed these missionaries openly. But once the indigenous clergy began to sense differences in theological education and perspective, ecclesiastical tradition, and liturgical practice, however, this hospitality soon dissipated. Outright resistance and antagonism displaced an earlier spirit of tolerance and acceptance.<sup>8</sup>

Methodist mission strategy also focused on the use of the Protestant regions of Europe as “springboards” into Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox areas, and this concern touches more directly on the interests of this study. In those nations of Europe where Orthodoxy and Catholicism dominated, the situation was very different from that of the Protestant regions; Catholic and Orthodox traditions tended to pervade community and family life—Christianity and life were much more symbiotic and organic in these areas and directly tied to nationality. European Christians in these traditions perceived no need for renewal or change in their lives in terms of religious vision or practice. This was particularly true of Eastern Orthodoxy in Europe. The separate development of Eastern European history (part of the former Eastern Roman Empire), for example, is devoid of sentiments related to the reformation, pietism, and enlightenment, movements that had a profound shaping influence on Western Europe. It was difficult for Methodists to connect with people without any previous *preparatio* in the Protestant heritage of faith. Our most interesting discovery related directly to this issue was that women in

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*L'Italian Mission della Methodist Episcopal Church degli USA 1908-1916*. According to maps at the Methodist Archives at Drew University, the following foreign language annual conferences –German, Swedish, Norwegian and Danish—were still in existence in 1920, others, not yet documented, had existed before (like the Italian).

<sup>7</sup>This is true of all Methodist missions working in Protestant contexts. E.g., see the chapter *Anerkennung als Gemeinschaft innerhalb der Landeskirchen*, in Burkhardt, *Christoph Gottlob Müller*, 253-80.

<sup>8</sup>With regard to these arguments, see *Reaktion landeskirchlicher Pfarrer und Consistorien auf die “ausländischen Missionar” –Auswertung Polemischer Schriften*, in Schuler, *Die Evangelische Gemeinschaft*, 141-59.

these contexts were the main supporters and “stabilizers” of religious education—the traditioners of religious experience and knowledge. Women also tended to be more open-minded and receptive to the impulses for change. Despite the fact that they were not recognized officially or offered a legitimate place of leadership in the structures of the churches, they provided spiritual leadership and shaped family life in the private sphere.

While reflecting upon and comparing the missionary approaches in the distinctive European areas, therefore, it became immediately clear to us that the different contexts had demanded different strategies. Whereas a “renewal” strategy may have had merit in Protestant regions, there was hardly any point of entry for it in these radically different contexts. Other factors militated against such a strategy as well. The situation in East European countries amplified this disconnect, especially for those who had been part of the Ottoman Empire (like Bulgaria up to 1878) and had a traditional Muslim lifestyle imposed upon them. Moreover, most of the people in cohesive Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox contexts were illiterate, not even allowed to own or read the Bible.<sup>9</sup> So typical Methodist practices such as Bible study, prayer meetings, hymn singing, shared experiences of faith, personal spirituality, assemblies outside the context of worship, or personal faith decisions were completely foreign. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that European Christians shaped by Catholic and Orthodox traditions would resist the missionary efforts of the Methodists strenuously. Regardless, the mission boards employed a fairly uniform strategy across Europe which included the formation of Methodist classes, Sunday Schools, and publishing ventures, augmented later with centers for theological

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<sup>9</sup> For Roman Catholics, this situation did not change until Vatican II (1962-65). With regard to Orthodox Christians in Bulgaria, the Bible was first translated into the Bulgarian language through the auspices of the British and Foreign Bible Society. They first had to create a Bulgarian Grammar in 1835. The first New Testament in Slavic-Bulgarian was published in 1840. It was one of the first Methodist missionaries, Albert L. Long, who translated and published the new translation of the Bible in Bulgarian in 1871 with the assistance of two native speakers. Not acknowledged by the Orthodox Church, this translation became known as the “Protestant Bible” (see Ueli Frei, *Der Methodimus in Bulgarien*, 1857-1989/90 (Frankfurt am Main: Medienwerk der Evangelisch-methodistischen Kirche 2012), 67-8; 101-103.

training, deaconess “mother houses,” and humanitarian institutions such as hospitals, orphanages, and schools for children. Christina Cekov has argued that the aim of the mission was “to reintroduce the Bible to Biblelands.”<sup>10</sup>

In most of the histories of Methodist mission in Europe, previous scholars devoted very little attention, if any, to the role and influence of women in any of these developments although they sometimes mentioned the “immense role” of women.<sup>11</sup> Sometimes the unnamed wives of male missionaries received a slight nod under the rubric of “Mrs. So-and-so,” but hardly any serious labor was devoted to the pioneering work of women.<sup>12</sup> Our presupposition—a strong conviction, in fact, based in part on the observations noted above—is that women were there and played an important role far beyond that which has been fully recognized or documented. As colleague Methodist historians, one with expertise in European Methodism and the other with particular interest in Methodist women’s history, we decided to devote some energy to the discovery of this “lost history.” Our hope from the outset was to identify the important Methodist women pioneers and missionaries in Europe and begin to discern the critical nature of their roles in their respective spheres of influence. While we had some sense of the dimensions of this task,

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<sup>10</sup> Christina Cekov, *Bible Women in the Balkans* (Strumica, Macedonia: United Methodist Church in Macedonia, 2011), 4.

<sup>11</sup> One exception to this rule was the work of Francis J. Baker, *The Story of the Women’s Foreign Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church 1869-1895* (Cincinnati: Curts & Jennings/New York: Eaton & Mains, 1898).

<sup>12</sup> Among efforts to redress this imbalance in Methodist scholarship, in particular, see the work of Dana L. Robert, *American Women in Mission: A Social History of Their Thought and Practice* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1997), 125-88 and Dana L. Robert, ed., *Gospel Bearers—Gender Barriers: Missionary Women of the Twentieth Century* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 2002), as well as Hilah F. Thomas and Rosemary Skinner Keller, eds., *Women in new worlds: historical perspectives on the Wesleyan tradition*, vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1981) and Rosemary Skinner Keller, Louise L. Queen, and Hilah F. Thomas, eds., *Women in new worlds : historical perspectives on the Wesleyan tradition*, vol. 2 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1982). Scholars have also begun to document the beginnings of women societies in European countries. See two publications, in particular focusing only on German-speaking areas in Europe: *Mit Weisheit, Witz und Widerstand. Die Geschichte(n) von Frauen in der Evangelisch-methodistischen Kirche*, herausgegeben vom Frauenwerk der Evangelisch-methodistischen Kirche [published by the Women’s Organization of the UMC] (Stuttgart: Medienwerk der Evangelisch-methodistischen Kirche 2003) and *Frauen in der Evangelisch-methodistischen Kirche Schweiz/Frankreich*, herausgegeben vom Frauendienst der Evangelisch-methodistischen Kirche Schweiz/Frankreich (Zürich: Selbstverlag , 2000).

we could hardly conceive the wealth of material we would encounter. Defining the parameters of this study, therefore, proved to be an arduous task. Many factors delimited our research agenda, and in the end, we decided to examine the life and work of the Methodist women pioneers connected with the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society (WFMS) of the Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC) in Bulgaria and Italy during the forty-year period between 1869 and 1909.<sup>13</sup> Our original methodology revolved around the attempt to answer three simple questions: Who were these women? Where did these women come from? What did these women do? This brief article represents only the beginning stage of an immense task we invite others to join and concludes, therefore, with an agenda for research.

### Pioneering Bible Women

Who were those women who felt compelled to offer themselves for Christian service in the mission work of Methodism? Ironically and critically, the story of this pioneering work begins,

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<sup>13</sup> At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Protestant women became increasingly interested in mission as they learned about the terrible plight of women and children around the globe from women who were beginning to enter the mission force. Exclusively female missionary societies began as small prayer group meetings focused on the burgeoning missionary activity of the church, but rapidly expanded into powerful networks of women activated for mission in the world. The American Civil War (1861-65) led to significant changes related to women's roles in the United States as women assumed responsibilities previously restricted to the domain of men. All of these developments encouraged the organization of women's missionary societies as well as professional education. Since the history of these organizations is well documented, there is no need to rehearse their history here in full length. The leaders of the WFMS in the MEC were careful to document its development and success. On this subject, in particular, see Baker, *Story of the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society*; Laura Bixby, *An Outline History of the Foreign Missions of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (Syracuse: n.p., 1876); Mary S. Wheeler, *First Decade of the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (New York: Phillips & Hunt, 1881); and Mary Isham, *Valorous Ventures: A Record of Sixty and Six Years of the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society, Methodist Episcopal Church* (Boston: WFMS, 1936). For more contemporary analyses of this movement and its effects, see Theodore L. Agnew, "Reflections on the Woman's Foreign Missionary Movement in Late 19th-century American Methodism," *Methodist History* 6, 2 (January 1968): 3-16; Patricia Hill, *The World Their Household: The American Woman's Foreign Mission Movement and Cultural Transformation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1985); Dana L. Robert, "Holiness and the missionary vision of the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1869-1894," *Methodist History* 39, 1 (October 2000), 15-27; and Susan E. Warrick, "'She Diligently Followed Every Good Work': Mary Mason and the New York Female Society," *Methodist History* 34, 4 (July 1996): 214-29.

not with the missionaries sent by the WFMS from the United States, but with the Bulgarian and Italian Bible Women who laid a foundation for Methodist mission before the WFMS missionaries even arrived. So-called Bible Women or Bible Readers were simply indigenous women hired to do evangelistic work, functioning much like the deaconesses of the early church.<sup>14</sup> There seems to be little question that the development of this role for women coincided directly with the rise of the various women's societies since there was no such practice prior to their birth. In Methodism, the earliest "use" of Bible Women as paid employees dates from as early as 1861, perhaps, when Mrs. T. C. Doremus sent money to Annie Gracey "for the employment of some native Christian woman as Bible reader or teacher."<sup>15</sup>

According to R. Pierce Beaver, "The Bible woman, catechist or evangelist, was the lowliest employee on the hierarchical ladder of the mission churches."<sup>16</sup> These women were trained at first in an ad hoc manner and provided only the most rudimentary skill base for personal evangelism. Actual training schools soon displaced personal tutelage, and schools for girls, in particular, became the primary training ground for these women. The training of girls became all the more significant for the ministry of the mission since boys educated in similar schools often transferred their skills into business, industry, and government rather than finding a place in the service of the church. Used to great effect in Asian contexts, therefore, the office of Bible Woman later spread throughout the various arenas of WFMS activity.<sup>17</sup> Beyond this, Dana

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<sup>14</sup> On the work of Bible Women in Christian mission, see Ruth A Tucker, "The Role of Bible Women in World Evangelism," *Missiology* 13, 2 (April 1985): 133-46, from which the generic portrait of the Bible Woman here has been drawn. See also R. Pierce Beaver, *American Protestant Women in World Mission* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1969) and Helen B. Montgomery, *Western Women in Eastern Lands: An Outline of Fifty Years of Women's Work in Foreign Missions* (New York: Macmillan, 1910) both of whom highlight the work of Bible Women in their historical accounts. None of these resources identify the role of Bible Women in the European context. For a booklet describing these ministries in the Balkans, see Cekov, *Bible Women in the Balkans*.

<sup>15</sup> Annie [Mrs. J. T.] Gracey, *Eminent Missionary Women* (New York: Eaton & Mains, 1898), 17.

<sup>16</sup> Beaver, *American Protestant Women*, 119.

<sup>17</sup> For one of the first publications on this topic, see Mrs. S. Moore Sites, "Bible Women in Foochow," *Heathen Woman's Friend* 4, 5 (November 1872): 359-60. She provides the following description of the beginning of

Robert has noted the predilection of WFMS leaders to use indigenous women in simple evangelistic practices. “‘Bible women’ were both cheaper to support and more effective as evangelists than western women,” she observes. “Methodist women were more likely to find themselves training Bible women than serving as evangelists themselves.”<sup>18</sup> While they functioned primarily as evangelists, the Bible Women also devoted time and energy to teaching and discipling, distributing Christian literature, and providing health care services to the needy. Unlike other national workers, they were salaried employees of the mission station. While Frances Hiebert correctly notes that they shared in “the evangelism and Bible teaching that brought to birth the churches of the non-Western world,” Methodist Bible Women in Europe also fulfilled this significant role in a Western context as well.<sup>19</sup>

It is less known that “in 1845 women missionaries serving with the American Board of Commissioners of Foreign Mission opened a Female Seminary in Constantinople [the capital of the Ottoman Empire, today Istanbul]. It began with eight students, but the number quickly increased. By the 1860’s Bible Women were being employed in that city by the American Bible Society.”<sup>20</sup> Tucker also notes that “there were training programs for Bible women at several mission stations in Turkey, including a Girl’s Seminary at Aintab... still training women five decades later”<sup>21</sup> At the beginning of Methodist work with Bible Women in Bulgaria, it is difficult to distinguish between those who worked for the ABCFM and those who worked for the

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this work in China: “The introduction of ‘deaconesses,’ or Bible women, was a novel feature of missionary work to our native church in China; and it will still require some length of time to get the idea fully before our people. In beginning this work, we have not only to instruct these women more clearly in their knowledge of Christian doctrines, but often to teach them to *read*, beginning with the catechism, the gospels, and the hymns, as translated in their own ‘Chinese characters’” (359). The origin of the Bible Women in Europe remains a topic for further research. While a number of studies documents their origins and work in Asia, nothing comparable interprets their work in Europe.

<sup>18</sup> Robert, *American Women in Mission*, 169.

<sup>19</sup> Frances Hiebert, “Missionary Women as Models in the Cross-Cultural Context,” *Missiology* 10, 4 (October 1982): 459.

<sup>20</sup> Tucker, “Bible Women,” 135.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

Methodists; it appears that their greater concern was for a common “Protestant mission.” It is very difficult to document where the first Bible Women in Italy received their education. It seems that Emily Vernon<sup>22</sup>, the wife of the first MEC missionary to Italy, had her hand in this. Barclay writes in the context of Bible Women that she “had been in charge of women’s work in the mission [and] considered the work of the Bible women as highly important.”<sup>23</sup>

The MEC mission board and the WFMS simply replicated the non-Western pattern in their European centers, in which the Bible Women became the “backbone of women’s work in missions”<sup>24</sup> through their wide-ranging ministry. The evidence drawn from the Methodist work in Bulgaria and Italy confirms Tucker’s settled opinion that “without Bible Women, female missionaries would have been at a loss.”<sup>25</sup>

### Bible Women in Bulgaria

The American Board of Commissioners of Foreign Mission (ABCFM) began their work in the Ottoman Empire in 1819, having received calls from Bulgaria for support to renew the Orthodox Church.<sup>26</sup> While the Ottoman Empire formally authorized the practice of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism in 1839, in 1850/51 the Turkish Sultan granted a special dispensation

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<sup>22</sup> Emily F. B. Vernon (+1813), married Leroy M. Vernon after his first wife, Fannie Elliot Vernon (1840-1869) had died. The Vernons served for seventeen years in the Italian mission, helping to establish the MEC in Rome. They had eight children, three of whom died as infants in Rome. Little information remains concerning Emily Vernon’s personal life; not even her birth date is known (F. T. Kenney, “Mrs. Emily F. B. Vernon,” in *The Minutes of the Forty-second Annual Session of the Northern New York Conference, MEC*, [April 15-20, 1914], 126).

<sup>23</sup> Barclay, *History of Methodist Missions*, 3:1047.

<sup>24</sup> Tucker, “Bible Women”, 134.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> This rationale also provided the impetus for the MEC mission to Bulgaria. Barclay cites the Journal of the General Conference, 1856 (p. 260) with a general instruction of the corresponding secretary for the missionaries: “Its chief object is to awaken in the Bulgarian Church, which is of the Greek rite, a desire of the evangelical religion, and lead her people to seek for the same. It will be necessary for you to use all kindness and skill in approaching the people privately and publicly; and you should be well acquainted with the doctrines and customs of the Greek Church, as well as of our own Church, not for the purpose of assailing them in controversy, but, as the occasion offers, to show that they are not agreeable to Scripture.” (Barclay, *History of Methodist Missions*, 3:1018).

to Protestants, permitting them to engage in mission activities in the Ottoman Empire and in the Balkans, in particular.<sup>27</sup> Personnel challenges led the ABCFM to request support from MEC, which appointed two missionaries to Constantinople as their base in 1857.<sup>28</sup> In Tulča, Frederick William Flocken, later appointed Methodist Superintendent, opened a Sunday School and day school.<sup>29</sup> Clara Proca was the first women employed as a Bible Women of the Women's Foreign Missionary Society in 1874 when Methodist work began in Bulgaria.<sup>30</sup> She was also "one of the first scholars in the mission school in 1860".<sup>31</sup>

For details with regard to these developments, we must turn to the *Heathen Woman's Friend*.<sup>32</sup> Rev. Flocken arrived in Shumen, Bulgaria, in 1859 where he established the first Methodist work in that area.<sup>33</sup> As superintendent of the work in the 1870s, he submitted reports of the activities of the Bible Women to the women's periodical. In 1875, Flocken quoted from Clara Proca's quarterly report, detailing her encounter with an Armenian widow. She wrote:

I then took out my Russian Testament and read to her of Jesus; how He loved the world, died for sinners, shed His blood for their redemption, and how He invites all sinners to come to Him. I read to her of the prodigal son, and the malefactors on the cross, and begged her to pray to Jesus, to trust in Jesus, and to hope everything from no one else but Jesus. I prayed with her, commended her to Jesus, and left her.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> "Firman [decree] of His Imperial Majesty Sultan Abdul Medjid, granted in favor of his Protestant Subjects", original discovered at a demolition of a Methodist chapel in Strumica, Macedonia. Imprint and explanation by Heinrich Bolleter, *Protestanten-Erlass im Osmanischen Reich im Jahre 1850/51*, in: EmK Geschichte 28/1 (2007), 18-26. Cf. Streiff, *Der Methodismus in Europa*, 58.

<sup>28</sup> Streiff, *Der Methodismus in Europa*, 58.

<sup>29</sup> Frederick William Flocken (1831-1893), born in Odessa, Russia, but with German roots, emigrated to the United States in 1849, joined the New York Conference in 1853, and was appointed for Bulgaria in 1858. He served at different places, returned 1871 to the United States and went back in 1873 to supervise the Bulgarian mission until 1878. See Barclay, *History of Methodist Missions*, 3:1019n.

<sup>30</sup> Baker, *The Story of the WFMS*, 348, citing the records of the WFMS that documented "supporting one or two Bible women and two or three girls in the school of the American Board in Samokof".

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> The *Heathen Woman's Friend*, a news periodical published monthly from the outset of the WFMS, served as the primary voice piece of the Society, providing information on their work and inspirational stories to promote the mission. See Patricia R. Hill, "Heathen Women's Friends: The Role of Methodist Episcopal Women in the Women's Foreign Mission Movement, 1869-1915," *Methodist History* 19, 3 (April 1981), 146-54.

<sup>33</sup> Barclay, *History of Methodist Missions*, 3:1019.

<sup>34</sup> "From Bulgaria," *Heathen Woman's Friend* 6, 8 (February 1875): 798.

She later reported the positive effect of her prayers. According to Flocken's report, during the previous quarter she had visited sixty-five families and distributed tracts throughout the neighboring areas. Her general pattern was to teach a number of the children part of the day and to visit from house to house during the course of the remaining hours.

The October 1875 issue of the *Heathen Woman's Friend* provided a biographical account of Clara and identified some of her accomplishments.<sup>35</sup> Born of German parents in Transylvania around 1848, she immigrated with her family to Bulgaria and enrolled in the mission school in Samokov in 1860. Four years later she was appointed assistant teacher at the school and engaged in informal evangelistic work. In 1867 she married, but when her husband's business failed two years later, he left her for America, leaving behind two children and Clara's parents under her own care. The WFMS began to fund her work in 1873, thereby providing her with a livelihood—remuneration for the meaningful work she had continued in for some years. Flocken reflected on the range of her accomplishments during the course of her formal appointment as a Bible

Woman:

She has now been almost two years in the employ of the mission, and I have many proofs that she has accomplished what no male agent could have done. She has reorganized our former Sabbath School at Tultscha, holds regular prayer-meetings with the women, visits them in their houses, reads, and instructs them in the Bible, and distributes tracts to such as can read. The women attending her meetings are Germans, Russians, Bulgarians, Wallachians, and Jews, with all of whom she can converse in their respective languages.

He also identified Magdalena Elief as a partner in this work with Clara. An excerpt from her quarterly report provides some insight into the nature of her work as well:

In my visits from house to house I find that some of the women leave the house just as soon as I enter, and find something to do in their yards, so as to avoid my talking to them; but a good occasion offers itself to me at the time of the birth of a child in a

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<sup>35</sup> "Our Bulgarian Bible-Woman," *Heathen Woman's Friend* 7, 4 (October 1875): 82. The details concerning her life which follows below in the narrative are drawn from this portrait. Cf. Cekov, *Bible Women in the Balkans*, 16.

family, when usually the women of the whole neighborhood come together to congratulate the happy mother. On such occasions I have good opportunities to read to the women from the Bible, and to speak to them.

1877 Flocken reported how Magdalene Elief exhibited great courage in the face of war: “The prospect of a war with Russia and the atrocities of the Torkshave so taken up the mind that they hardly talk of anything else. At Lone Paleanka where Magdalene Elief is at work, the native preacher has been obliged to leave his charge to attend to the war sufferers, but Magdalene keeps bravely at her Bible work through heavy persecution and difficulties.”<sup>36</sup> Here we have but a glimpse of the pioneering work of Bulgarian Bible Women, a small group of gifted women whose contribution should not be underestimated.

“In 1877 the WFMS increased their appropriation to provide support for four Bible women. These women worked under great difficulties and faced heavy persecution again and again.”<sup>37</sup> The following year, Ellen Stone, a Congregationalist missionary from New England, had been sent by the ABCFM to Samokov to teach at the girls’ school.<sup>38</sup> An important part of her ministry there was the organization and oversight of women’s work and the education of Bible Women.<sup>39</sup> In these early years a very close connection obtained between the ABCFM and the MEC/WFMS, despite the fact that the region had been divided between them in a typical comity agreement,<sup>40</sup> and some of the Methodist Bible women received their training at Samokov. In 1886, Stone formalized the basic instruction she had been providing into a four-week formal

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<sup>36</sup> “Bulgaria,” *Heathen Woman’s Friend* 9, 1 (July 1877): 21.

<sup>37</sup> Barclay, *History of Methodist Missions*, 3:1026.

<sup>38</sup> Ellen Stone (1846- 1927), worked for ten years on the editorial staff of *The Congregationalist Magazine*, decided to become a missionary in 1878, and was sent by the ABCFM to Samokov to teach at a school for girls. She inaugurated training classes for Bible Women. In 1901 she was kidnapped with Katarina Cilka, a pregnant wife of a native missionary, and held ransom for six months by Macedonian freedom fighters. 1902 she returned to the United States. See Cekov, *Bible Women in the Balkans*, 10-14). In various sources, there are different spellings of these place names: Samokof or Samokov, Tulča or Tultscha.

<sup>39</sup> Cekov, *Bible Women in the Balkans*, 7.

<sup>40</sup> Frei examines this agreement carefully according to later tensions about the responsibility in Sofia (see Frei, *Der Methodismus in Bulgarien*, 77-80, 125-127).

curriculum, generally taught during the summer, that included Bible study, church history, moral philosophy, and geology, as well as remedial work in reading, writing, and mathematics.<sup>41</sup>

Despite the fact that the WFMS had employed Bible Women for some years by this time, they quickly replicated her vision, and her imprint on the lives of the later Methodist women was deep.

The 1881 report of WFMS work in Bulgaria had noted that the Society was “carrying for several years the support of two or three Bible women.”<sup>42</sup> Well in advance of Stone’s more formal provision of training, in 1881, the Methodist leadership appealed to the WFMS “to send out two ladies to establish a solid, permanent work there, manage the school and employ Bible women.”<sup>43</sup> One of the hopes expressed by Rev. DeWitt C. Challis,<sup>44</sup> at that time the superintendent of the MEC mission in Bulgaria, was that the schools they were establishing would produce a generation of Bible Women who would render invaluable service to the church.<sup>45</sup> He and his wife, “Mrs. Callis,”<sup>46</sup> opened a school for girls in their own home in Loftcha in November 1880. The following year, Challis was instructed by his board to build a school that, over the course of the following years would go through a rollercoaster of successful work, interruptions by several government ordered closings, and relocation to Samakov. The 1882 report celebrated the fact that “already the girls have begun to read the Bible in the homes

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<sup>41</sup> Cekov, *Bible Women in the Balkans*, 9.

<sup>42</sup> Twelfth Annual Report of the WFMS (1881), 50.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, 53.

<sup>44</sup> DeWitt C. Challis (1845-1939), studied at the University of Michigan, became a member of the Detroit Conference, committed to mission work in Bulgaria in 1875, and was responsible for building the school in Lovetch (The Minutes of the Eighty-fourth and final Session of the former Detroit Annual Conference, Michigan [June 21-23, 1939], 144).

<sup>45</sup> It is important to note that in Bulgaria, as well as in Italy, the first stage of the WFMS mission strategy was to establish schools for girls and to teach women (Bible Women) with the hope that this would transform traditional Christian life.

<sup>46</sup> This “Mrs Callis” is Dewitt C. Challis’s second wife, Irene L. Shepherd, whom Challis married after his first wife, a physician, whose name we could not uncover, died from smallpox shortly after the birth of their first child in Bulgaria in 1877.

of the women. Two of them, Ceika Dematrof and Suka Petkof, have been engaged in this work during the summer vacation.”<sup>47</sup>

The supervising pastors and missionaries, however, provided very little detail concerning the work of these women and generally excluded their names from their communications. Most of the reports to the WFMS focused on the work of the missionaries and their hired assistants. In 1884, for example, Linna Schenck, the WFMS missionary, secured Miss Stonata Atanasova, “a graduate of the Samokof school, with ten years’ experience as teacher and some years residence in England, a very companionable lady”<sup>48</sup> and Mrs. Kassova, “an experienced Bulgarian teacher”,<sup>49</sup> to assist her in the work of the mission school. They provided support in the classroom and dealt with logistical matters in the institution.<sup>50</sup> More often than not, these women are simply referred to as the “native assistants.” While these women tended to remain fixed in their institutional settings, the Bible Women expanded the influence of the mission into areas outside the reach of Methodist institutions. “The Bible women report a wonderful interest among the women in the villages,” claimed the 1887 review, “and they say that there is work for twenty additional women to travel all the time.”<sup>51</sup> The mission schools, as had been hoped, tended to fill the ranks of the Bible Women as a comment in the 1888 report infers: “The girls who graduated are all engaged in teaching and Bible work.”<sup>52</sup>

Generally the girls’ schools functioned to recruit future evangelists on different levels – women to “infuse” Protestant influences into the Bulgarian society from the grassroots.

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<sup>47</sup> Thirteenth Annual Report of the WFMS (1882), 41.

<sup>48</sup> Baker, *The Story of the WFMS*, 351.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> Sixteenth Annual Report of the WFMS (1885), 49. Both women continued to work for some time at the primary Methodist school at Loftcha. As other schools were developed, native women typically filled positions of leadership in these new institutions. Mikala Motchora, for example, directed the educational activities at Orchania in later years (see Nineteenth Annual Report of the WFMS [1888], 49).

<sup>51</sup> Eighteenth Annual Report of the WFMS (1887), 53.

<sup>52</sup> Nineteenth Annual Report of the WFMS (1888), 49.

Occasionally the hopes were fulfilled. “Four people graduated in 1886. . . . Two of these girls were engaged to marry young preachers, graduates of the Theological school at Sistov. One of them took work as a Bible woman, and another returned to the school as primary teacher.”<sup>53</sup> Unfortunately, in the Bulgarian context, the repeated cryptic comment in the reports, “the Bible work has been faithfully done, superintended by an efficient woman,” reveals little about who these women were or what they actually did.<sup>54</sup> Paul Mojzes, an expert on the Methodist Church in Bulgaria,<sup>55</sup> could only fill two pages about Bible Women, where he states that they were “the most significant torchbearers of evangelical work”, that they “taught women, by reading to them and selling them Bibles.”<sup>56</sup> He also determined that “these women were mainly humble souls whose identity is not easy to establish. Only a few were mentioned by name. . . . Missionary wives assisted the Bible women and toured the region with their husbands but their main activity was in the locality of the station where they taught sometimes in the schools, or organized Ladies’ Benevolent Societies to help destitute women . . . the women had to be cultivated more carefully, and only women, Bible women, could do this job as they so admirably did.”<sup>57</sup>

### Bible Women in Italy

The Italian context reveals a very different picture with regard to this “office” within the life of the Methodist community there. Records reveal no fewer than twenty-nine named Bible Women between 1877 and 1892. (See the Appendix for a full listing of the names and vital information for each of these women.) Likewise, the reports—many of which were prepared by

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<sup>53</sup> Baker, *The Story of the WFMS*, 351. There is added: “Most of the students expected in after years to refund the amount expended on their education.”

<sup>54</sup> Twentieth Annual Report of the WFMS (1889), 51.

<sup>55</sup> Paul Benjamin Mojzes, *A History of the Congregational and Methodist Churches in Bulgaria and Yugoslavia*, Ph.D.Dissertation, Boston University 1965.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 164

Emily F. Vernon, the wife and the superintending pastor, Dr. Leroy M. Vernon<sup>58</sup>—provide a full portrait of these women and their activities. In 1877, the General Executive Committee of the WFMS appropriated funds for “five Bible readers, to be stationed where the mission should most need their services.”<sup>59</sup> Mrs. Aurelia Conversi and Mrs. Carolina were immediately appointed to Rome and Venice respectively. The tenure of several women in this service stands out: Camilla Stazi (14 years), Miss Monta (11 years), and Mrs. Campani (8 years), all of whom ministered in the city of Milan, soon to become a major center of Methodist influence. Despite the fact that Camilla Mattioli married a Methodist preacher in 1881, Rev. S. Stazi, she spent all but two of her years as a Bible Woman in her native Milan. Many of the Bible Women, in fact, were Methodist preachers’ wives, some of their husbands being former priests of the Roman Catholic Church. Whereas it is quite difficult to determine the length of service of these women, due to the lack of precise records, from the information available it appears that the Italian Bible Women functioned in this role on average about four years.

Emily Vernon’s very first report of Mrs. Conversi’s work in Rome provides both a biographically-informed snapshot of her spirituality and a detailed description of her work:

Mrs. Conversi has been employed as Bible reader under the auspices of your Society since August 1<sup>st</sup>, 1877, and gives her entire time to such duties. Her labors are varied. She daily visits the homes and haunts of the people, carrying always a small quantity of testaments and tracts, adroitly seizing every occasion and opportunity to teach the one great truth so grateful to every human heart, the full, free, unmerited love of

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<sup>58</sup> Leroy M. Vernon D.D., L.L.D. (1838-1896) graduated from Iowa Wesley University and became a member of the Arkansas Conference in 1862. He served as a pastor in St. Louis, Missouri and was later appointed Presiding Elder of the Springfield District, Southwest Missouri. In 1871 Vernon was appointed missionary and superintendent of the MEC in Italy. Together with his second wife, Emily Vernon, he “laid wisely the foundation of our Italy mission,” working in Rome and the surrounding area for seventeen years. In 1888 Vernon resigned and served as pastor of the First MEC in Syracuse, NY, where he was subsequently elected Dean of the College of Fine Arts at Syracuse University in 1893. He died in 1896 as the consequence of an accident. Vernon served both as member of the General Conference several times and as a member of the first Ecumenical Methodist Conference in 1881. In 1881 he also received the silver medal from the Italian government “for service rendered in the taking of religious census of the country” (E. C. Bruce, “Leroy M. Vernon,” in Minutes of the Twenty-Fifth Session, Northern New York Conference, MEC [Watertown, April 14-19, 1897], 63-65).

<sup>59</sup> Seventh Annual Report of the WFMS (1878), 33.

Christ. She rarely fails of getting a hearing, and winning over the roughest characters to respectful attention.

Her personal experience of the saving power of the truth in Christ makes her ever welcome among the sick and afflicted, where she goes with words of cheer, and comfort and prayer. She visits the cafés, drinking places, etc.; and her journal, which she brings as a monthly report, is full of conversations and disputations at different times and places, with various persons. She conquers in so far that they generally acknowledge she is right.<sup>60</sup>

Quoting a letter of Dr. Vernon, the report concluded: “There is a broad margin here where only ladies can work—at least, judiciously and with security, and I believe your labors would reach rich realms and interests intangible to us; would carry fuller spirituality and faith into the houses, the sheltered quarters of our work in this mission of truth and grace in the land of hearty loud song.”<sup>61</sup>

In these early years, the annual reports of the work in Italy give large place to the activities of the Bible Women, often quoting copiously from their own journals and letters. In fact, the work of these women dominates the reports. In 1880 Emily Vernon expressed her high esteem for these women and their peculiar role in the expanding work of the mission: “We feel that the work of these Bible-women is highly important, and that, urgently and faithfully prosecuted, it may be eminently useful and successful.”<sup>62</sup> Two years later she provides an account of the work of the six women then in their employ. An excerpt of the report reveals both the tensions and the strategies at play:

We have been making some changes among our workers. Mrs. Conversi and Mrs. Folchi have been dismissed. Miss Quercia and Miss Benincasa have been employed in their places. Both of them are well educated, energetic and earnest Christians. They will be able to reach a good class of people. Miss Quercia has already found access to families of good position. She is very courageous in presenting religious truth to them. The leaven of truth must work, as we hope, and pray, till all Italy is renovated.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>62</sup> Eleventh Annual Report of the WFMS (1880), 33.

<sup>63</sup> Thirteenth Annual Report of the WFMS (1882), 42.

We are left to speculate about the dismissal of the earliest Bible Women. Perhaps the growing responsibilities of parenthood deflected energy from the mission. Perhaps their passion for the work had dissipated over the course of several years. Perhaps their theological perspective did not align with that of the mission leadership.<sup>64</sup> Perhaps they were not in a position to reach into the strata of the society that a newly emergent strategy required.

The shift in Vernon's approach to the work—engaging women in the upper echelons of society through the work of the Bible Women, with its implied “trickle down” strategy—is reflected elsewhere in the report. Camilla Stazi, for example, began to give “gratuitous lessons in music in some of the better families for sake of getting an influence over them for good.” The following comment reflects her preference for unmarried or childless Bible Women: “She is married, but has no children, and will be able to give herself wholly to the work.”<sup>65</sup> She concluded her report with a note of triumphalism: “There ought to be . . . at least a hundred women at work in the different towns and cities before the ringing of the Christmas bells of 1883.” The following year Vernon's husband appealed to the WFMS to send a superintendent for the work of the women, a task that had become too burdensome for his wife.<sup>66</sup> He identifies two issues that mitigated against their success: 1. Women who are “incapable and untrustworthy” for the work, and 2. Catholic prejudice. It is a new husbandry to which they are called,” he

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<sup>64</sup> When Vernon began his work in Italy in 1873, he “followed a policy of using Italian evangelists, pastors, and teachers who had been converted, rather than delaying rapid evangelism until workers could be trained into a thorough understanding of Methodist religious experience, aims, and policies. This had been the practice of the Waldensian and Wesleyan groups which in their beginnings had availed themselves of native converts” (Barclay, *History of Methodist Missions*, 3:1044). The policy with regard to the Bible Women paralleled this basic approach.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>66</sup> Emily Vernon had actually broached this issue as early as 1879, writing to the WFMS: “It would be wise to send out some capable young woman whose exclusive business might be to direct the Society's work and greatly enhance its efficiency. She could be a great power for good” (Eleventh Annual Report of the WFMS [1880], 44).

wrote, “and *amid a sea of difficulties and a tangle of obstacles*, such as your banner-bearers *nowhere* else encounter. *Mark that.*”<sup>67</sup>

The ranks of the Bible Women grew through the coming years. In 1885 the Vernons attached their hopes, in particular, on Mrs. Conte, a teacher and the wife of one of their indigenous preachers just moved to Naples. His glowing report of her work reflects both their strategy and the extent of Conte’s ministry:

She is an experienced teacher, and being convinced that the best way to reach the mother is through the child, she opened a day school for gratuitous instruction, which met with great success, the number increasing so rapidly that she was obliged to refuse further admissions—at one time she had as many as eighty-seven. In order to have a more direct influence over the women she formed an evening adult class; ten women joined, four of whom are now members of our church, and two probationers. She also conducts a Sunday afternoon Bible Class, besides being the head and heart of the Sunday school. Making the acquaintance of a rich and prominent family of the neighboring town of Malfi, through her influence two young sisters have been won to Christ, and the brother has become a firm friend, though not an adherent of the cause. The Bible women use tracts, bibles, testaments, and religious books in their work, distributing or selling them as they can, though there are few who wish to buy.<sup>68</sup>

That same year the WFMS appointed their first missionary to Italy, Emma Hall, but the work was being done largely by the twelve Bible Women, employed in as many cities. The Vernons appealed for support for fifteen Bible Women, but a less than veiled critique of their work also indicated the need for some changes:

The Bible women are, of course, unacquainted with the system and methods used in our American evangelistic work and are slow to make improvements upon the most simple plans. Many of them are the wives of pastors, and are very busy mothers; others have embraced Christianity but recently and have so much to learn, hence the great necessity of someone to visit them, oversee their work, make suggestions, and modify and enlarge the plans.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Fourteenth Annual Report of the WFMS (1883), 41.

<sup>68</sup> Sixteenth Annual Report of the WFMS (1885), 51.

<sup>69</sup> Seventeenth Annual Report of the WFMS (1886), 51.

The year 1888 proved to be momentous for the Methodist mission in Italy.<sup>70</sup> A new generation of missionaries, spearheaded by William Burt<sup>71</sup>, severely criticized the supervision of the mission, particularly shocked by the prevalence of smoking and drinking among the indigenous clergy. Under pressure and having served for seventeen years in Italy, Dr. Vernon tendered his resignation. Burt replaced Vernon as Presiding Elder over all of Italy, reappraised the mission, and inaugurated what might be properly described as a purge. While the ranks of the Bible Women had remained fairly stable up to this point, under the new policies, and with many of the Bible Women being wives of former Roman Catholic priests, disintegration was inevitable. By 1890 only six Bible Women remained.<sup>72</sup> Despite their shrinking numbers, the women continued their work with indefatigable energy. Miss Monta, of Turin, the senior Bible Woman of the group managed no less than 869 visits during 1891.<sup>73</sup> Of the three women remaining in 1893, Miss Biondi deserves special attention. Having labored at that time for seven years, she had been converted, in fact, while attending a holiness meeting of Phoebe Palmer<sup>74</sup> in New York.<sup>75</sup> She returned to Italy “full of zeal for the conversion of her country women.”<sup>76</sup> She

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<sup>70</sup> See Barclay, *History of Methodist Missions*, 3:1050-57. Tension arose, in particular, between Dr. Vernon and William Burt who had been appointed as a missionary to Italy in 1886. Later elected an MEC bishop in 1904, Burt represented a vehement counter-cultural approach to mission in Roman Catholic areas.

<sup>71</sup> William Burt (1852-1936), born in England, emigrated with his family to the US, studied at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut and at Drew Theological School in Madison, New Jersey. He served at churches in Brooklyn before being transferred to the Italy Annual Conference in 1886. In 1888, he became superintendent of the Italy Mission. Among other things he helped to establish the Methodist Building, the Boy's College, a Theological School, Publishing House, and Young Ladies College in Rome. In 1904 Burt was elected a Bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church and appointed resident Bishop of Europe. He organized the France Mission Conference, the Austria- Hungary Mission Conference, the Russian Mission Conference, and the Denmark and Finland Annual Conferences. In 1910 he organized all the Methodist work in Europe into the European Central Annual Conference. His episcopal areas included Europe (1904-1912) and the Buffalo, New York area (1912-1924). Burt received several honorary doctorates. He was also knighted by King Victor Emmanuel II of Italy.

<sup>72</sup> Twenty-first Annual Report of the WFMS (1890), 50.

<sup>73</sup> Twenty-third Annual Report of the WFMS (1892), 81.

<sup>74</sup> Phoebe Palmer (1807-1874), was an evangelist and writer. She promoted the doctrine of Christian perfection and became one of the founders of the Holiness movement at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century – a movement that spread from the US to the United Kingdom and at least the European Continent.

<sup>75</sup> On the influence of the nineteenth century holiness movement on Methodist women's mission, see Robert, “Holiness Piety for Missions,” in *American Women in Mission*, 144-48.

<sup>76</sup> Twenty-fourth Annual Report of the WFMS (1893), 75.

reported twice daily meetings in her home and a total of 692 visits for 1892. In the successive reports of the WFMS work in Italy, the voices of American missionaries displace those of the Italian Bible Women who simply disappear.

### Concluding Reflections

Through this process of tracking emergent Methodist mission in Bulgaria and Italy, and identifying the Bible Women and their primary roles, we arrived at a number of conclusions related to this significant group of women pioneers. One observation that merits much more research and reflection relates to the complex relationship obtaining between the indigenous Bible Women and their expatriate missionary counterparts. Space has not permitted an examination of this latter group of pioneer women in these two contexts—we hope to remedy this with a second article devoted to that topic—but our preliminary examination of the interface of these two groups of women has enhanced our appreciation for the work of the Bible Women.<sup>77</sup> To state our observation succinctly, echoing Ruth Tucker’s settled opinion, “without Bible Women, female missionaries would have been at a loss.”<sup>78</sup> In addition to this major issue to be explored at a later time, several concluding observations related to the work of the Bible Women in Bulgaria and Italy in the second half of the nineteenth century stand out in our minds and serve as an agenda for further study: the importance of the contextual dynamic, the

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<sup>77</sup> We hope to follow up this article with an examination of “the women pioneer missionaries in Bulgaria and Italy.” Obviously, the relationship between the Bible Women and the other women missionaries was critical, but also extremely complex. Their experience does, however, tend to reveal a typical pattern of growing expatriate control and subsequent domination. As the scales of power shifts in the direction of the missionaries, the Bible Women fall increasingly under their shadow and eventually disappear. We hope to explore these developments more fully in the second “movement” of this story.

<sup>78</sup> Tucker, “Bible Women,” 134.

ecumenical nature of their endeavors, their networking with women and children, and their authentic witness through personal and incarnational evangelism.<sup>79</sup>

*Importance of the Contextual Dynamic.* In both Bulgaria and Italy, the Methodist mission was viewed as a foreign sectarian movement with unsolicited intruders during a period of unprecedented national and ethnic resurgence. The statement of a minister in Sistov, Rev. Constantine, about the difficulties of Methodist work in Europe, reflects the suspicion and mistrust in the minds of many:

[The] difficulty is the spirit of suspicion that the missionaries are political agents of Great Britain or America whose object is to prepare the people of the country by making them Protestants to accept the supremacy of the Protestant States, when they see their convenience to invade this territory which they consider to be the envy of the world, and which they poetically describe as being – “Bulgaria land of paradise”. . . . they think that it is patriotism to remain in the Orthodox Church and treason to become a Protestant. They cannot see why Protestant countries should have any care about the spiritual welfare of other nations unless they had some ulterior objects in view.”<sup>80</sup>

This particular contextual dynamic made the work of the indigenous Bible Women all the more critical. Being “inside” these issues by virtue of heritage and birth, but also “outside” them by virtue of gender, status, and role (with little standing within the corridors of power), gave these women a unique space to inhabit in the missionary movement. They were able to “go about their business,” as it were, inconspicuous and unobtrusive; they understood the political landscape, but had the ability to rise above it by remaining “low.”

*The Ecumenical Nature of Their Endeavors.* We remain fascinated by the ecumenical character of the Bible Woman’s movement. With regard to the Bulgarian context, in particular, the confessional background of the women seems to have played no role at all. Bible Women

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<sup>79</sup> In addition to these aspects of the subject that bear further study, we offer the following topics as items in an expanded research agenda: the critical nature of the period 1870-1900 with regard to women in mission, women and persecution in foreign lands, how women’s mission practice shaped their view of Christianity, the metaphor of “mother” in women’s mission, the feminization of Methodism in the mission context, and the influence of prejudice and insufficient knowledge about other confessions on mission method and support.

<sup>80</sup> Minutes of the Second European Methodist Episcopal Church Congress, held in Zürich, Switzerland, from September 17<sup>th</sup> to 21<sup>st</sup> 1903 (Zürich: Christliche Vereinsbuchhandlung, 1903), 51.

worked for the ABCFM and/or the WFMS – both Protestant movements in non-Protestant contexts. Bible Women, scattered across the field of mission in Bulgaria, often received their initial training in mission schools of the ABCFM, supported and worked alongside the wives of MEC missionaries, and engaged in work among girls, in particular, without regard to comity agreements or denominational boundaries.

*Networking with Women and Children.* As we have seen, the work of Bible Women was possible because they had access to women and children. They met women at the market place, visited them in their homes, worked with their children, and connected with them as mothers. Like deaconesses—another group of women the influence of which has been grossly understated—the Bible Women revived the ancient ministry of Christian women who sought to meet both the physical and spiritual needs of others. This dynamic and organic networking also meant that women had to be flexible and grasp opportunities as they emerged and as situations changed; they had to be nimble and walk through open doors as they were opened to them. In Bulgaria and Italy, as is the case in many parts of the world, women were the primary bearers of religious meaning and had the responsibility to transmit these values to their children. Whenever Bible Women connected to women and children in meaningful ways, therefore, their influence was multiplied. The WFMS slogan, “mission of women for women,” perfectly characterizes the networking function of the Bible Woman’s role.

*Authentic Witness through Personal and Incarnational Evangelism.* We move seamlessly from this conception of networking to the authenticity of the Bible Woman and their practice of evangelism. We began this essay with the observation that “Methodism sprang up in Continental Europe initially by word of mouth.” Those who had been transformed by the Methodist message eagerly talked about the gospel that had revolutionized their lives. They openly shared their

stories of faith. The Bible Women were not so much “door-to-door evangelists,” as that phrase might be understood today; rather, their concept of faith sharing was much more organic, directly connected to the lives of the women and children they sought to serve. They lived their lives with authenticity and integrity before others. While they functioned primarily as women who simply bore witness to the gospel—as evangelists—they devoted much time and energy to teaching and discipling, providing health care services to the needy, and let us never forget, simply reading the Bible to any who would listen.

## Appendix

### Methodist Bible Women

#### Bulgaria (1873-1882)

1. Clara Proca	Loftcha	b 1848? a 1873	
2. Magdalena Elief	Lom Palank	a 1874?	
3. Ceika Dematrof	Loftcha	a 1882	student at school
4. Suka Petkof	Loftcha	a 1882	student at school

#### Italy (1877-1892)

1. Mrs. Aurelia Conversi	Rome	a 1877 d 1881	
2. Mrs. Carolina	Venice	a 1877 r 1881?	
3. Mrs. Comeri	Rome	a 1878 r 1881?	
4. Mrs. Folchi	Rome	a 1878 d 1881	
5. Mrs. Cardin	Venice	a 1878 r 1879	preacher's wife
6. Camilla Mattioli (Rev. S. Stazi)	Milan	a 1878 m 1881	preacher's wife
	Alexandria	1884	
	Venice	1885	
	Milan	1886	
		r 1892	
7. Mrs. Borelli (Rev. Enrico Borelli)	Venice	a 1879 r 1885?	preacher's wife replaced Cardin
8. Miss Querci[a]	Rome	a 1881	replaced Conversi

			r 1885?	
9. Miss Benincasa (Rev. G. Benincasa)	Rome	a 1881 r 1885?		preacher's wife replaced Folchi
10. Miss Monta	Turin	a 1881 r 1892		
11. Miss Nota	Bologna	a 1881		withdrew after 3 months
12. Mrs. Palmieri	Perugia Pisa Forli	a 1881? 1885 1886 r 1887?		
13. Mrs. Cavalleris [Cavalleris] (Rev. E. Cavalleris)		a 1882 r 1885?		preacher's wife
14. Mrs. Stasio (Rev. Edoardo Stasio)	Perugia	a 1882 1885 r 1887?		preacher's wife
15. Mrs. Conte[i] (Rev. Gaetano Conte)	Venosa  Naples	a 1882  1885 r 1887?		preacher's wife; teacher
16. Mrs. Tollis	Venice Bari	a 1883 1884 r 1886?		preacher's wife; Marchioness
17. Mrs. Cruciani [Cruceani] (Rev. Federico Cruciani)	  Modena	a 1883  1884 r 1887?		preacher's wife; Swiss woman
18. Mrs. Polsinelli (Rev. Domenico Polsinelli)	Naples Bologna	a 1883 1886 r 1887?		preacher's wife
19. Mrs. Lopa	Bologna	a 1883 r 1887?		10 years a colporteur
20. Mrs. Marini		a 1883 r 1885?		teacher

21. Mrs. Campani [Campari]	Milan	a 1884 r 1892	
22. Mrs. Mando [Mondo]	Rome	a 1884 1892 still active	
23. Mrs. Tagliatela (Rev. Pietro Tagliatela)	Foggia	a 1885 r 1887?	preacher's wife
24. Mrs. Mondì	Rome	a 1885 r 1887?	
25. Miss Biondi [Beondi]	Pisa	a 1886 1892 still active	
26. Mrs. Fabroni	Florence	a 1886 r 1887?	
27. Miss Nittio	Venosa	a 1886 r 1887?	
28. Miss Gay	Tarento	a 1886 r 1887?	
			Only 6 BW in 1889
29. Miss Passesini	Forli	a 1890 1892 still active	

Only 2 BW in 1895

a = appointed  
b = born  
d = dismissed  
m = married  
r = retired