History & 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.

Living the Legacy: A Historical Timeline, depicts the continuing journey of women in mission from 1869-2002.

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 nonexistent. 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. 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 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.”