

# PRESBYTERIANS IN MISSION: AN HISTORIC OVERVIEW\*

The establishment in 1837 of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.'s (Old School) Board of Foreign Missions (BFM) signaled the beginning of a worldwide missionary operation destined to embrace approximately fifteen countries located on four different continents.<sup>1</sup> Presbyterian interest in foreign missions however predated the creation of the BFM by almost three-quarters of a century.

The American Presbyterian Church has been committed from its inception to the belief that it is a missionary church and that every member is a missionary. By the end of the eighteenth century, increasing interest in missions was manifested by the creation of several local and independent missionary societies including the New York Missionary Society (1796); the Northern Berkshire and Columbia Missionary Societies (1797); the Missionary Society of Connecticut (1798); the Massachusetts Missionary Society (1799); and the Boston Female Society for Missionary Purposes (1800). These societies helped to prepare the foundation for the later and larger denominational boards. Though membership was interdenominational, Presbyterians were prominent in several, notably the New York and Northern societies.<sup>2</sup>

While many individual Presbyterians were active in these missionary societies, the church's judicatories were not indifferent to the subject of missions. As early as 1763, the Synod of New York ordered that a collection for missions be taken, with a pronouncement in 1767 that this be done annually. At the first General Assembly in 1789, each of the four synods were requested to recommend two missionaries to the General Assembly the following year, whose support was to be provided by the presbyteries. In 1802, the General Assembly created the Standing Committee on Missions, which theoretically worked in conjunction with the presbyteries and European missionary societies. Successive General Assemblies authorized additional funds, and in a single year the Standing Committee on Missions reported the appointment of fifty-one new missionaries. In 1816, the Standing Committee recommended to the General Assembly that it be merged into a more permanent organization known as the "Board of Missions acting under the authorization of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A." The General Assembly authorized and directed the Board to establish church auxiliary missionary societies that would extend its own operation.<sup>3</sup>

In 1817, the General Assembly joined the Dutch Reformed and Associate Reformed Churches in establishing the United Foreign Missionary Society. The Society's constitution declared that "the object of the Society shall be to spread the Gospel among the Indians of North America, the inhabitants of Mexico and South America, and in other portions of the heathen and anti-Christian world."<sup>4</sup> In 1826, the Society's work was transferred to the Congregational Church's American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) primarily because it was felt that the existence of two missionary organizations appealing to the same constituency was unwise and that a merger would strengthen the expanding operations of the ABCFM. Hence, the ABCFM became the recognized missionary agency for both the Congregationalist and Presbyterian churches.<sup>5</sup>

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Despite the transfer of Presbyterian work to the ABCFM, many Presbyterians believed that a denominational mission board was preferable to an independent association of Christians like the ABCFM. The General Assembly remained nominally committed to the latter. In 1831, when it became evident that the General Assembly was not prepared to establish a denominational board, the Synod of Pittsburgh did so by organizing the Western Foreign Missionary Society. In 1837, those forces that had been advocating a denominational board finally prevailed when the work of the Western Foreign Missionary Society, upon recommendation of the General Assembly (Old School), was transferred to the PCUSA's newly formed Board of Foreign Missions.<sup>6</sup>

The creation of the BFM thus marked the culmination of a controversy over whether missionary operations should be implemented by voluntary societies or by the church in its organized capacity. All Presbyterians were not in agreement over its formation, however. As part of the broader conflict between Old/New School Presbyterians, New School adherents opposed the Board's formation and continued to support the ABCFM until the two factions were reunited in 1870.

The PCUSA's Board of Foreign Missions was organized to convey the gospel "to whatever parts of the heathen and anti-Christian world the Providence of God might enable the Society to extend its evangelical exertions."<sup>7</sup> Throughout much of the nineteenth century, the BFM directed the church's foreign as well as some domestic missionary activities. Before 1870, foreign missions were established in Africa, Brazil, China, Colombia, India, Japan, and Thailand. Following the reunion of the Old/New School denominations in 1870, the BFM absorbed the ABCFM's mission work in Iran, Iraq, and Syria and expanded its own operation by initiating new work in Korea, Central and South America, and the Philippines. Missions to the Native American, Jewish, and Oriental populations throughout the United States, which had begun under the BFM, were subsequently transferred to the Board of Home Missions in 1885, 1894, and 1922, respectively.<sup>8</sup>

While the PCUSA was developing missions throughout much of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, other Presbyterian denominations were also active in this area. The Board of Missions of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church commenced its foreign mission work in 1852, though earlier efforts evidence this church's work with Native Americans. The Associate Presbyterian Church (APC) initiated missionary work in Trinidad in 1842 but was forced after considerable difficulty there to turn its work over to the Free Church of Scotland a decade later. The APC's work in India began in 1852. The Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church (ARPC) began its work in Syria in 1844 and in Egypt in 1853. In 1858, the APC and the ARPC merged to form the United Presbyterian Church of North America (UPCNA). The mission work in India, Syria, and Egypt started by these denominations was subsequently transferred to the UPCNA and placed under the auspices of its newly formed Board of Foreign Missions. UPCNA mission work would later extend to China, the Sudan, and Abyssinia. Following the merger of the PCUSA and the UPCNA in 1958, the mission work in India, the Sudan, and Ethiopia (Abyssinia) were transferred to the UPCUSA. With the establishment of the PCUS at the end of the Civil War in 1865, missionary work was eventually initiated in China, Korea, Japan, Mexico, and throughout Latin America.

The Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.'s foreign missionary enterprise in the nineteenth century was responsible for the establishment of indigenous churches, a variety of educational facilities, hospitals, orphanages, seminaries, and other institutions that reflected the church's educational, medical and evangelical ministry. The church's missionary operation continued to expand throughout the twentieth century, changing in response to forces both within and

outside of the church. Tumultuous events of this century—world war, civil war, and the emergence of Third World nationalism—have altered both the scope and direction of foreign missionary work. These events, for all intents and purposes, resulted in an end to the political, economic, and religious forms of colonialism as practiced by the West, though vestiges of these are still powerful irritants in different areas.

## Notes

1. Constitution of the Presbyterian Historical Society, adopted May 20, 1852.
2. Arthur Judson Brown. *One Hundred Years: A History of the Foreign Missionary Work of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., With Some Accounts of Countries, Peoples and the Policies and Problems of Modern Missions* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1936), 14.
3. *Ibid.*, 15.
4. Constitution of the Presbyterian Historical Society, adopted May 20, 1852.
5. Brown, *One Hundred Years*, 6.
6. *Ibid.*, 20–21.
7. Constitution of the Presbyterian Historical Society, adopted May 20, 1852.
8. Brown, *One Hundred Years*, 22.