Operators of Married Women Missionaries: A Case Study

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A Historical Perspective

The involvement of American Protestant married women in world mission has changed drastically several times during the past 200 years. R. Pierce Beaver’s American Protestant Women in World Mission is the definitive historical study on these issues.

Prior to 1800, Protestant women had almost no involvement in world mission, except for a few who accompanied their missionary husbands. Those women generally were limited to the role of caring for the home, husband, and children. American women first began to organize themselves to support foreign missions in 1800. During the first half of the nineteenth century this support grew, but was mostly limited to fund-raising, study and education, correspondence, and prayer. At the same time, roles of missionary women (both single and married) began to expand to include evangelistic work among “heathen” women and children, medical, educational, and numerous other kinds of work. Some individual women, blessed with great stamina and other gifts, performed amazing pioneer mission work; and their reports greatly inspired their female supporters at home.

The year 1860 marked the beginning of women’s missionary societies as sending agencies, though the movement did not gain momentum until after the Civil War. At that time, women who had undertaken new responsibilities while their menfolk were at war found a new outlet for their talent and zeal. This movement grew until the end of the century; by 1910 there were forty-four sending agencies and nearly 2,000 missionaries, mostly single women doing work that focused on women and children. Support and administrative personnel were all female and mostly volunteers.

Throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, missions provided an outlet, which was mostly unavailable in the American churches, for women’s dedication and zeal. Sending the gospel to “poor benighted heathen women in exotic foreign lands” captured the imagination, enthusiasm, and pocketbooks of countless American Christian women who had little official influence or recognition in their male-dominated home churches and denominational hierarchies. Beaver calls this burgeoning involvement the “First Feminist Movement in North America.”

By 1910 executives of the denominations or general mission boards were looking with envy at the support and womanpower being channeled into women’s missionary societies. A trend was initiated to consolidate the women’s societies with established church mission boards. By 1930 few women’s sending agencies remained. At first some women held administrative positions in the consolidated agencies, but gradually they were replaced by men. One exception was the Methodist Church, which retained a woman’s division in foreign missions.

As the middle of the twentieth century approached, women’s groups continued to support overseas work, but the level of intense commitment to missions that characterized the decades before and after 1900 had gradually faded. By the 1960s, in many main-line denominational mission boards, women had taken a back seat. Though there were still many married women who served overseas with dedication, skill, and effectiveness, their work was largely ignored by the denominations as a whole. The women’s missionary societies, which had once supported and publicized their work, had shrunk in size and effectiveness, and in some cases were absorbed into general women’s organizations. A lack of recognition affected single women missionaries to some degree, but was even more characteristic of missionary wives whose husbands’ work was often seen to be the “real” mission work.

The Story of a Recent Study

As the women’s movement, or “women’s lib,” brought attention to female roles in society in general during the 1960s and 1970s, some people began to take a new look at what was happening with women in missions. During the 1970s a few denominational mission boards made studies of women’s roles in their organizations. The remainder of this article will focus on one such study, which was done by the Division for World Mission and Ecumenism (DWME) of the Lutheran Church in America during 1980 and 1981. Most of the issues that were raised prior to the study had to do with married women rather than single women missionaries, so the study was limited to missionary wives.

The DWME had always considered both partners of a missionary couple to be missionaries. Both went through a lengthy application process, and both were included in the commissioning ceremony. However, with few exceptions, the husband was the only person called to a particular assignment. The wife accompanied him and was largely on her own in finding avenues of service that fitted her training, gifts, and preferences. While there was neither official requirement nor informal pressure for the wife to do “mission” work in addition to caring for her home and family, by far the majority of women became involved at least part time in activities supporting their husbands’ work or that of the mission or local church.

Salary was in the form of a single check made out in the husband’s name; Social Security, retirement benefits, and so forth accrued in the husband’s name also. DWME did not consider the salary to be a reward for services performed, but rather, a living allowance that enabled the missionary couple or family to carry on...
their work unhampered by financial strain. Couples and families received 1.5 times the salary of single missionaries, as well as assistance for children's education and other benefits. Compared with other mission organizations, DWME provided very well for its missionaries.

By the late 1970s some married women missionaries were dissatisfied enough with their status in the DWME to raise issues within the organization. They felt that the work of married women was not adequately recognized or appreciated by either the national churches, the DWME, or the supporting churches in the United States. There were few records in DWME files of the work that wives had done, and articles in mission and church publications gave disproportionate attention to men's work. When area secretaries visited missionaries on the field, discussion focused on the husband's work and mostly ignored the wife's work. Little assistance was given to wives in locating suitable work or in increasing their involvement as children matured and less time was needed in the home.

In 1978 and 1979, at the annual DWME missionary conferences at Carthage College in Kenosha, Wisconsin, these and other concerns were aired. One of the focal points became the issue of salary. Some women felt that the only way in which their work could adequately be recognized would be to have a separate salary in the wife's name, along with Social Security, retirement benefits, and a valid work record. Since the most vocal women were those who were most dissatisfied with the status quo, it was decided that a survey should be taken of all DWME couples to discern how pervasive the dissatisfaction was.

In early 1980 Norman Nuding, personnel secretary for the DWME, sent separate questionnaires to all husbands and wives employed by DWME at the time (ninety-three couples in all). The questions were mostly open-ended; for example: "Describe your role as a missionary wife." "How is your missionary work given recognition?" "To what extent is satisfaction or lack of satisfaction in your work related to receiving salary and benefits in your name individually? Explain." Nuding then studied the responses, which were received from more than fifty couples, and prepared a survey report, which excerpted from and summarized the range of answers. This report was presented at the annual conference in Kenosha in July 1980.

The 1980 Kenosha conference became a watershed; it was then that the most insistent and even angry demands for change were made. Previously discussions had been polite and relatively low-key. By 1980 some women had run out of patience and felt that in order to overcome the inertia of a sexist and male-dominated mission structure their needs had to be stated in no uncertain terms. Other women were present who were generally satisfied with the system as it was, but they were not as articulate as the advocates of change. The resulting tension was feared by some to threaten the unity of the missionaries as co-workers.

In response to growing tension and demands for change within the DWME, a Consulting Committee, or study commission, was appointed. It included some of the most vocal present-missionary wives, a missionary husband, former-missionary wives (including the author), several top-level male executives within DWME, and female staff representatives; the committee was chaired by Sue Lane, a DWME Board member (nonstaff). A wide range of philosophical positions, life experience, and ages was represented by committee members.

During the first two-day meeting of the committee in February 1981 in the New York offices of DWME, issues were again articulated. Correspondence containing suggestions and demands from individuals and groups of missionaries from around the world was carefully noted. There were several "background-paper" presentations on related topics, such as an overview of the women's movement in the United States, the structures of the Social Security benefit system, and DWME policy and philosophy. A spirit of open-mindedness, hard work, and Christian commitment characterized the sessions. However, the opinions expressed as to what the problems and needs actually were seemed so disparate as to be irreconcilable. The meetings closed with a listing of issues, which were grouped under the categories of role, recognition, communication, and compensation.

At the time the committee met, the author of this article was taking a research course as part of a Master's degree in social work, and she decided to write a research paper on "The Role of the Missionary Wife." A literature search revealed that very little has been written on this topic except biographical, anecdotal, or advice-giving/inspirational material. However, William Douglas's 1961 work on the role of the minister's wife was very helpful, along with other material on the role of the ambassador's wife.

Using the fifty-three questionnaires that were returned by DWME missionary wives in 1980, an analysis was made of role patterns (described below), using an adaptation and expansion of Douglas's categories. Study of the questionnaires revealed clearly that although only about 20 percent of the wives were dissatisfied with the DWME single-salary structure, an overwhelming majority had problems or concerns related to their roles—especially the lack of definition and recognition of roles.

When the Consulting Committee reconvened in July 1981, this author's paper was presented. The scheme of role patterns provided a framework for discussion and thus facilitated the deliberations. It was discovered that many of the issues raised were related primarily to the "parallel worker" (see below).

David Vikner, executive director and "grand old man" of DWME, at that time nearing retirement after a lifetime of involvement in overseas mission, made a poignant and unforgettable point during the deliberations, which sharpened the committee's awareness of the conflicting values inherent in being followers of Christ in contemporary American society. Vikner stated that his mother, serving faithfully with her husband in China during Vikner's youth, could not have comprehended either the content or the spirit of the demands now being made. Such concerns as a validated work record, career development, a desire for self-fulfillment, and public recognition of one's work may be defensible, but they somehow smack of the "me-ism" that is the curse of our age. Such concerns are fundamentally, intrinsically incompatible with the biblical images of the missionary as servant, unencumbered with even an extra pair of shoes, a lamb among wolves. To demand one's rights is not the stance of a servant.

Attempting to keep this and dozens of other considerations in mind, the committee worked very hard, even continuing dialogues into the night in hotel rooms. Recommendations were hammered out by the four subcommittees on role, recognition, communication, and compensation. On the last day, when the subcommittee reports were finally presented, the committee was amazed and gratified that a clear consensus had emerged out of the seeming morass of varied and sometimes conflicting views and opinions.

The final report reflected this writer's study as well as many other contributions. The following are (a) excerpts from the introduction and (b) the full text of the section dealing with role.

God calls men and women to himself in Jesus Christ. The primary vocation of each of us is, then, to be Christian. Each of us becomes part of the body of Christ. Each is given special gifts for the upbuilding of the body. It is always God who calls. We rejoice in the diverse ways in which Christians fulfill their individual callings, each contributing to the workings of the body of Christ, and therefore acknowledge no hierarchy of vocations or persons. We
believe that wherever stereotypes and culturally defined roles deny or limit any individual's possibilities for participation and personal growth, the working of the body of Christ is diminished and Christian freedom thwarted.

As Western society has undergone dramatic changes during recent years regarding the status and role of women, the missionary community has likewise been affected by these changes and has felt the need to reexamine its view on the involvement of women in mission. We do not wish to disavow the traditional model but, rather, hope to adjust policies and practices whereby changing roles can be accepted and full participation and recognition of women in mission can be affirmed.

The Role of the Married Woman Missionary

A role is a cluster of behavior patterns that carries with it expectations on the part of the person filling the role, and also expectations on the part of others who are related to a person in the performance of the role. In the case of the missionary there are expectations on the part of the family, the sending agency (in this case, DWME), supporting congregations, the missionary community, the national church, and the local culture. The missionary role is a representative role; the missionary represents the Christian faith, the sending church, and his or her home country to the people of the country in which he or she serves. Generally speaking, the more representative a role is, the more pressure there is to fulfill role expectations.

The role of the married woman missionary has usually been a derived role in that her role was largely defined by her husband's assignment. She has been expected to support and adapt to his vocation. Within this framework, several role patterns, or "wife-styles," have emerged, depending on individual situations and preferences. They may be categorized as follows:

1. Homemaker. She is primarily a full-time wife and mother. Her main focus is on the home and the support and nurture of the family. She is an enabler to her husband in his work. She may have very young children and/or may teach her own school-age children.

2. Background Supporter. She actively supports her husband and his work. She is moderately involved in outside activities, many of which relate to her husband's assignment. Her main focus may be on ministry that can be carried out within the home, such as entertaining, listening/counseling, Bible classes, or language classes.

3. Teamworker. Her main focus is on a team ministry with her husband, and both work full time. She feels free to choose a variety of activities, some of which relate directly to her husband's work. She may have part-time paid employment, but it does not detract from her sense of teamwork with her husband.

In addition to these role patterns, another pattern has emerged in recent years:

4. Parallel Worker. She sees her missionary role as distinct from her husband's role. She may work within the same organizational structure as her husband, or she may have full-time paid employment unrelated to her husband's assignment, which may be in a church-related setting or a nonchurch-related setting.

In the last category, a sense of a teamwork expresses itself in mutual support as persons, even though the work assignments may be functionally unrelated. Both husband and wife are involved in creating a nurturing home environment, and ideally both are enabled to find fulfillment in the stewardship of their abilities and gifts.

All four of the foregoing role patterns are valid for married women missionaries. However, not all options are viable in every location. Individual wives may not fit clearly into one category or another, because of the diversity of situations.

The diversity of roles, individual differences, and conflicting expectations may pose a dilemma for the married woman missionary when: (a) there is a lack of role definition; (b) there is a lack of job description; (c) there is a lack of role recognition and acknowledgment; (d) there is a change from one role pattern to another without corresponding changes in the expectations of others.

Recommendations and Changes

Committee recommendations for change that were later approved included giving more specific attention to married women's roles and options during the selection procedures and orientation of new missionaries, and during the first year on the field. Annual reports that include goals for the year, a record of activities, and a self-evaluation are now strongly encouraged (though not required) for all missionaries. These reports can form a basis for discussion with area secretaries during their annual visits to the fields as well as providing documentation for the work done by all missionaries.

One group of recommendations made by the Consulting Committee, which has not been acted upon by DWME as yet, concerns making resource persons available to all missionaries to help in adjustment on the field and "reentry" after return to the United States. Many individuals have expressed a need for counselors, seminar leaders, or other support persons to aid in sorting through issues such as role, vocation, marital and family relationships, and reentry into American society. While DWME has funded career-counseling and vocational-training programs for some individuals, there is a felt need for much more aid in these areas. DWME does officially encourage seminars, regional meetings, and other kinds of group discussions at the missionaries' initiative. These can go a long way in helping individuals and families examine their own issues, but they are not a full answer.

The salary issue occupied a major share of time and attention before, during, and since the committee's deliberations. While salary may not be the central issue for most women, it has been one of the most controversial issues, partly because of budget considerations. The recommendation of the committee, which was approved by the DWME Board of Managers in October 1981 but did not go into effect until the 1983 budget year, was to provide for a dual-salary status for certain missionary couples. In order to qualify for this status, in which each partner receives a salary and benefits equivalent to that of a single missionary salary, or two-thirds that of a couple or family salary, rather stringent conditions must be met. They are: (1) a local church institution or related agency must request that the missionary spouse fill a full-time position; it has been defined as essential and which the missionary is qualified to do.
fulfill; (2) an activity description must be drawn up describing the position, including the way it meets the criteria above; (3) the position must be recommended by the area secretary for approval by the DWME Cabinet of Directors within DWME programmatic and fiscal guidelines.

At this writing, six couples have been approved for dual salary status, and others are in the process of making application. While they are a small minority of DWME couples, the presence of an additional salary option has brought attention to the importance of missionary wives’ roles. (In only one situation has the “spouse” been a husband.)

**Some Reflections**

The work of the Consulting Committee on the Married Woman Missionary was done with insight, integrity, and a spirit of understanding and cooperation that are rare in discussions of controversial issues. Having completed a fine piece of work, the committee members felt a strong sense of accomplishment and unity. When the committee’s findings and recommendations were presented by the author to the 1981 Kenosha conference, there was a deep sense of relief and gratitude that women’s issues were not going to become divisive within the missionary fellowship, but that a broader range of options was now available and affirmed.

At this writing, two years have passed since the committee’s work ended. It has been rediscovered that, difficult as it may be to agree on recommendations and effect changes in policy, it is far more difficult to change attitudes and time-honored practices. While the male executives and area secretaries of DWME have become more sensitive to women’s issues, there is a long way to go before women, especially those who are missionary spouses, take their place as fully recognized equal partners in mission. Of course, attitudes toward women in the local cultures where missionaries serve frequently stand in the way of equal partnership for women, and there is always a tension between respecting local cultural values and working for change. But a good beginning has been made and it is incumbent upon both women and men to continue their quest for attitudes and practices that honor the Creator who made both male and female in the image of God.

**Bibliography**


A significant moving of the Spirit has been taking place among the Chinese people worldwide, particularly in the Peoples' Republic. Christians are becoming concerned about evangelism, church growth, discipleship training, church planting, cross-cultural missionary service, theological reflection, and literature production. There is great receptivity to knowing Jesus Christ and making him known. Many of these needs can be met through the resources available at the School of World Mission in conjunction with the China Graduate School of Theology in Hong Kong. This program of Chinese Studies and Evangelism is a response by both Schools to the needs of the worldwide Chinese community.

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FACULTY
The program is under the directorship of Dr. Tan Che-Bin (B.D., Th.M., Ph.D.), who taught in the Discipleship Training Center, Singapore, China Evangelical Seminary, Taipei, and continues on the faculty of the China Graduate School of Theology, Hong Kong. He is assisted by Dr. Arthur Glasser (B.D., S.T.M., D.D.), pictured here, professor and former Dean of the School of World Mission. Lecturers in Missiology and Chinese Studies will be drawn from the faculties of both the School of World Mission and China Graduate School of Theology.
Christian leaders and recognized experts in the Chinese church such as Drs. Wing-Ning Pang, Ralph Covell, Wing-Hung Lam and Danny Yu, serve as adjunct professors.

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