Nineteenth-Century Single Women and Motivation for Mission

Lydia Huffman Hoyle

The major mission boards of the nineteenth century received numerous letters from women who were ready to be sent to the “utmost parts” for the Gospel. Until after the Civil War, however, the boards turned down the great majority of the single women who applied. Some were encouraged to find a spouse and reapply; some mysteriously found a man with a similar vocational disposition calling at their door; others were pointed in a new direction—west. Between 1815 and 1865, Protestant mission boards appointed over five hundred women (nearly half of whom were single) to labor in the West and South among Native Americans.¹ As noted by R. Pierce Beaver, “Strangely, it was easier for young women to get an appointment to the American Indian Mission than overseas. It seems never to have occurred to the directors of the mission boards that the Indian mission might exact a far heavier toll in wrecked health and death than overseas service.”² Thus, single women who were denied appointment to stations like India or Ceylon were cheerfully recruited and sent to the western territories.

The three mission boards with the largest number of female missionaries working with American Indians during this time period were the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM; nondenominational but composed primarily of Congregationalists and New School Presbyterians), the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions (Old School), and the Baptist Triennial Convention (after 1846, the American Baptist Missionary Union). Although records and correspondence were more carefully maintained in the postwar period, large numbers of letters are extant from the time before the war, providing the reader with a window into the world of nineteenth-century evangelical women and a glimpse at the factors that played a role in motivating women’s missionary service.

“If I can only be useful”

In reading the letters of application sent to the mission boards, one is struck by the likely validity of the primary impulse enumerated by the women. Although a number of motivations seem to have driven the applicants, many of the letters share a common refrain. The women, above all else, wanted to be useful. “Oh, I do want to spend a useful life, and in whatever part of the world I may labor I hope I will be the weak instrument in our Heavenly Father’s hands of doing some little good,”³ wrote Hortense Cogan to the Presbyterian Board. Chloe Bigelow of the ABCFM similarly noted, “I desire to give myself entirely away to the service of my Master and spend my days in His service. I am willing to go anywhere if I can only be useful.”⁴ Some of the missionary hopefuls had apparently been frustrated by inadequate opportunities “to do good” in their homes back east. In her application to the Baptist Board, for example, Harriet Morse lamèmeth, “I do nothing from Monday morning til Saturday evening for God, for the good of souls.”⁵ C. B. Downing, a Presbyterian, was likewise troubled when she was forced to leave the Cherokee Mission at the beginning of the Civil War. She dreaded a long stay back home. “Will you not pray for me,” she wrote the board secretary, “that the Lord will give me something to do in His vineyard whether in Vermont or on mission ground. It matters not to me if I can only feel that I am living for the Savior. Now, day after day passes—and I am doing nothing ‘worth the doing.’”⁶

It is interesting to note the resounding cry for a useful life that arose from these women in the early to mid nineteenth century. The leaders of the Second Great Awakening called their adherents to an active faith. Many Protestant evangelical women heard and responded. Some were not content with being domestically useful—making their homes “abodes of order and purity”—but rather wanted to be useful in securing order and purity for the world. This desire was bolstered and perhaps, in some cases, initiated by the rhetoric of the female seminaries where the missionary women frequently trained. With “ritual regularity,” the publications of the seminaries advertised that their purpose was to “prepare women for usefulness.”⁷

There were a number of options available to the evangelically motivated woman. The Sunday school movement, temperance movement, and local mission societies, among others, provided opportunities for women to put their hand of faith to the plow.⁸ Often, missionary candidates, or those writing in support of their candidacy, would mention previous involvement in such volunteer causes or in general acts of benevolence. In support of Elizabeth Backus, for instance, one reference noted, “She has been for years performing missionary labor in every neighborhood where she has lived.”⁹ Yet, for these women the growing opportunities for charitable endeavors in their own communities would not adequately feed the fire of zeal that burned within them. The desire to be more useful seemed to drive them forward. Some clearly felt trapped by the fetters of “woman’s sphere” and perhaps hoped to escape them by a move to Indian Territory. In a testimonial letter regarding Marcia Colton, an ABCFM candidate, her pastor wrote, “She has great self-confidence and would as soon address a public assembly of men as one of women and indeed at one time she made some little disturbance in my parish, by insisting upon her right to address the brethren of the church and admonish them of their duty.”¹⁰ Among the American Indians, perhaps, Colton dreamed of speaking more freely.

The missionary life also offered women an opportunity to be professionally useful. Especially for the single women, whose efforts to develop autonomy were more dependent on vocational identity, the commitment to missionary work may have been particularly attractive. Given that there were few openings for women in religious occupations in the United States,¹¹ the mis-

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sionary enterprise provided a vocational option for those who longed to have a productive Christian existence and who were also anxious to establish an identity separate from their families.13

For a few, the desire for greater usefulness reflected a second step of faith, a deepening of their commitment to God. Lucretia Purchase described her second experience of grace in this way. “I was not fill [sic] with inexpressible joy, but a most ardent desire to do something for God. The world with all its charms faded from my view and nothing appeared essential but the spread of the Gospel and the security of immortal souls from death. I desired in some way to be active and useful in this glorious cause.”14 Susan Thompson, a fellow Baptist and contemporary of Purchase, similarly experienced a religious renewal that drove her to seek a more active involvement in missions. Following a near-fatal illness, Thompson became consumed with the need of “pagans” for the “word of life” and of her duty to provide this word. “Almost continually, Thompson’s mind was “forced to inquire, ‘Have I done all which duty and conscience require in this cause? Are frequent prayers and small contributions all that I can possibly perform? Shall I spend a life of ease and comparative uselessness when thousands and millions of heathen children, even in America, are rising to manhood as ignorant of the God who made them and the eternity to which they are hastening as the beasts of the field which afford them sustenance? ’”15 Thompson answered her questions before they were asked and soon sought missionary appointment.16

Lois Hall believed that serving as a missionary would give evidence of her true commitment to God. “Since the recent revival in this place, I think I have felt an earnest desire to be wholly the Lord’s, and when this subject [missions] was presented, it seemed to me that it was designed to test the sincerity of my consecration.” Hall had been converted some time earlier but had had no “seasons of deep anxiety and distressing convictions of sin that many others speak of.” Thus, she perhaps welcomed an opportunity to do something that gave visible evidence of her faith.16

“I have a call”

Some women spoke more specifically of a direct calling into mission involvement. In seeking appointment by the ABCFM, Hannah Moore wrote, “I think if I am not greatly deceived, I have a call from a higher power than any earthly tribunal, to engage heart and hand in the work of the Mission, to carry the glad news of salvation to the benighted heathen who are perishing for lack of knowledge.”17 Lois Hall similarly proclaimed, “If I mistake not, God has led me by His Providence and by His Spirit to see that it is my duty to enter the field opened before me. There is nothing left for me therefore but to obey.”18 Naomi Diament of the Presbyterian mission explained her calling in this way to the corresponding secretary: “You would probably like to know how I feel in the Indian country, as you didn’t think I looked much like going among Indians. I don’t wonder that you didn’t think me a suitable person to come out here, for I wonder how I ever came here. The only answer I can give is that Providence sent me, for if He had not I should never have come.”19

The personal and subjective nature of the experience of divine calling makes it difficult to know how the women recognized this direct instruction from above. The extant letters of the women, however, bring some light to the matter. Eleanor Macomber believed God had “imprinted desires” in her heart for the salvation of the heathen. Sue McBeth saw God’s hand in the circumstances that came together to excite her to the idea of missions and to carry her to the field. Still others heard the call of God in voices that sounded peculiarly like those of men. Mary Dix Gray of the Oregon Mission recalled that she had prayed daily for many years that God would show her what he wanted her to do. When William Gray, a complete stranger at the time, came to her and asked her to marry him and go with him to Oregon as one of a “little band of self-denying missionaries,” she could not refuse, for she heard his proposal as the call of the Lord.20

Gray’s experience was much like that of Laura Sheldon, a young single teacher. When Asher Wright, an ABCFM missionary who worked among the Seneca Indians, lost his wife of one year, a minister friend recommended Sheldon as a replacement. Wright wrote Sheldon, whom he had never seen, making proposals to that end. Sheldon responded: “As regards the missionary enterprise I must say I have always taken a lively interest in all its concerns. I have thought of devoting myself to that object ever since I was a child, but as no opportunity has yet offered and no special providence has yet pointed plainly the path of duty, I have often almost concluded that God had nothing for me to do in heathen lands and that my sphere of usefulness was evidently elsewhere.” Wright’s proposal of marriage and missions, however, was soon accepted as providential “pointing,” and the couple met, married, and departed for a long work among the Seneca and Cattaraugus Indians in western New York.21 It is unclear how many missionary wives joined Sheldon and Gray in viewing their fiancé’s proposal as providential direction. It was extremely common, however, for couples to marry and leave within thirty days for their mission assignment.22 For the female side of those couples, the marriage and missions decisions were thus united.23

Although most of the women did not mention a specific call to missionary service in their letters, they often referred more broadly to the general cause of Christ that made it every person’s duty to make known his salvation. Frequently, they spoke of being in the “path of duty” or of responding to the “call of duty.”24 While the missionaries filled their letters with biblical phrases and allusions, they made no direct references to the Great Commission at the conclusion of Matthew’s gospel. Some of the women, however, did speak of their motivation for missions as rising primarily out of the command of Christ. Eliza Hart Spalding of the Oregon Mission described this motive to her sister: “For this object I wish to exert my powers and spend my strength. The command of our Saviour, and the earnest desire of the heathen for the gospel, are sufficient to prompt us to cheerfully take our commission from the bleeding hand of the friend of sinners, and go to the heathen.”25 Although Spalding had not heard the voice of God personally, she believed she was responding to God’s call to all those who followed him.

In many cases, the missionaries looked to the mission boards for confirmation of their sense of divine direction. Trusting that

Women often referred to the cause of Christ that made it every person’s duty to share the Gospel.
God was in control of the mission boards, many would verbalize confidence that the boards or their secretaries would make the decisions that reflected the will of Providence. Elizabeth Hancock thus wrote, “I have prayed that the answer I receive from the Board may be God’s answer.”

Nancy Thompson similarly wrote, “I do not consider impressions or a predilection for an employment a sure criterion of duty; but wish to submit my decisions that reflected the will of Providence.”

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Lost Souls, Distant Goals, and Guilt

Another primary motivating factor in the women’s determination to go to the Indians was their concern for the Indians’ ultimate spiritual well-being. Regardless of their denomination, the women uniformly expressed a belief in the eternal happiness of the Christian and the eternal damnation that awaited the heathen. Elizabeth Morse was constrained to serve the Indians by thoughts of “the deplorable condition of a deathless soul without the gospel.” For Lucretia Purchase, who was engulfed in an internal debate regarding her potential involvement in the missionary enterprise, the plight of the Indian soul was the conclusive evidence that she should indeed head missionward. “I spent much time in revolving the matter in my mind when I was powerfully struck with the idea that whilst I was raising and surmounting imaginary obstacles, many precious souls were perishing for lack of wisdom and suffering for that instruction which through the blessing of God I might be enabled to give them. Here I came to a decision, and after much deliberation offered myself to the Board of Missions.”

A desire for usefulness, a sense of calling, and a concern for the souls of the heathen were the primary motivating factors mentioned by the missionary candidates. Although occurring...
less frequently, the women also named other motivations that drew them more specifically to the American Indians. Among these was a sense of secondhand guilt regarding the treatment of American Indians by the whites that had preceded them onto the Indian’s land. In a journal written for her mother, Sue McBeth recorded her feelings as she began her work among the Choctaw Indians. She recalled sitting on rocks jutting out of the Ohio River during her childhood, “rocks covered with hieroglyphics traced by Indians when their tribes possessed the land. [I] felt such sorrow for the vanished race and thought that if God spared me to be a woman I would go to the handful that remained and tell them of Jesus and show them the way to a home from which they could never be driven out.” Similarly, Delight Sargent wanted to teach the Indians, “not only because my Redeemer bids me do good and communicate, but because many of my people have done them continual injury.”

A small but interesting minority of the women mentioned an additional motivation for serving as missionaries to the Indians. They hoped to prove themselves among the Indians so that they would be considered worthy of being sent overseas. Sue McBeth, for example, was sent to the Choctaw Indians by the Presbyterian Board, but at every opportunity she reminded the board of her desire to go overseas. Shortly after her arrival, she wrote, “If I am very good and work hard here and am given life and strength sufficient and can find a good substitute here, would you send me to Syria—Japan—China or some of those Eastern fields. I am contented to spend my life here—if need be—if not—I can find missionary work to do wherever I am. I only mention this here so that if you need such services as mine in the East—you will know where to send.” Six months later McBeth spoke of her improved health, noting, “I hope soon to be strong enough (Deo valente) to go to Syria!” Within a few months, the offer was repeated a third time.

Beyond those motivations the women recognized as central to their decision to work among the Indians, other factors had an impact upon their decision. These primarily revolved around
familial and social relationships. Although individually “called,” women often were appointed in conjunction with a family member or close friend. Of those women sent out by the Presbyterian Board, one out of every six of the single women was to work alongside a relative or friend. A collection of short biographies of the missionaries serving the ABCFM similarly reveals that at least 20 of its 144 single female appointees accompanied a father, sister, or brother to the mission.

Beyond those who had the immediate support of family members as colaborers, some had the encouragement of siblings who were involved in the worldwide missionary endeavor. Sarah White Smith, one of the early members of the Oregon Mission, had an older sister who was appointed to a mission in Singapore four years before Sarah’s appointment. Martha Fullerton of the Presbyterian Board had a sister in India. Esther Smith Dunbar, similarly, had a sister who was sent by the ABCFM to Bombay.

Release from family connections and responsibilities, most notably through death, apparently propelled other women onto the mission field. One in every seven women whose offers of service to the ABCFM were accepted mentioned the death of a family member as one of the “providential” occurrences leading to their application. Lois Hall, for example, noted that both of her parents were dead. Even her ties to her childhood home had become weak, she reported. “Tis not my home now, the world is my home. God is my father and every man my brother.”

Although the link between the death and the mission decision was not always discussed, some of the women were clearly responsible for caring for or providing for their ailing parents until their death or recovery. Furthermore, some women, like Theresa Bissell, had been confined to their homes by parents who were unwilling for their daughters to go west, hoping instead that they would marry and settle in their backyard. For such women, death loosed the chain that bound them to their home.

Other women had married men who did not share their missionary interest, thus limiting their involvement in missions to the “home front.” Such was the case for Ann Dana, whose husband was a physician. According to Dana, she had wanted to serve as a missionary for many years, “but Providential circumstances have prevented.” Upon the death of her husband, “Providential circumstances” made mission work possible.

For those whose parents were living, relational responsibilities and commitments were germane to the women’s decisions to seek missionary appointments. Most did not apply until they were convinced that any family needs would be supplied in their absence. Furthermore, most first procured their parents’ acceptance, if not approval, of their decision. The family’s affirmation was viewed as a further sign of providential calling.

The External Call

Regardless of the specific motives mentioned or unmentioned by the women, it is evident that few would have applied to the mission boards had they not first heard or read an appeal for mission involvement. For many, this came through a representative of a mission board. Often, upon hearing an appeal from a mission recruiter visiting their local church, the women would “remember” their previous interest in the missionary enterprise or the Indians and respond to the agent’s urging. One woman, Mary Choate, heard and responded to a secondhand appeal for missions when her pastor read a letter to his congregation from David Greene, the corresponding secretary for the ABCFM. The pastor remarked that the letter ought to be considered a call from the Lord for missionary helpers. Evidently for Choate, it was received as just that. School principals and ministers also proposed the possibility of the mission professions to likely prospects. Other women responded to proposals made by missionaries. Often, missionaries would recruit assistants while visiting the States. Elizabeth Gookin reported that since her conversion she had been deeply interested in the perishing heathen, “but it was not until the appeal was made by the toil worn and exhausted laborers in the Indian field” that she decided to devote herself to the Indians. Perhaps some women felt more at ease going west when they knew something about those with whom they would be laboring. In any case, it was not uncommon for a vacationing missionary to return with extra laborers.

Finally, some women responded to the explicit and implicit appeals made in missionary biographies. Maria Arms thought that her reading of missionary biographies gave her “a sort of romantic wish to be a missionary.” Similarly, Harriet Morse decided to go to the heathen, in part as a result of reading the memoirs of Ann Judson, a greatly admired Baptist missionary to Burma. Together with other motivations and appeals, these heroic tales “formed and increased the latent flame” of zeal for the missionary cause.

Whether through a direct, personal sense of calling, a recognition of the universal call of God, or a belief in a providential arrangement of circumstances, nearly all of the single women who served as missionaries to the American Indians saw their work as a God-ordained act. This understanding empowered them to postpone (or forfeit) marriage plans, to make dangerous journeys to Indian Territory, and to face a substantially heightened rate of mortality. Ultimately, it allowed the women to view themselves as “accountable to a higher authority” and thus freed them to a degree, from the significant boundaries that otherwise constrained their lives as nineteenth-century evangelical women.

Notes

Unpublished materials cited below appear in the following archives:
American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM), Houghton Library, Harvard Univ., Cambridge, Mass. References to microfilmed correspondence files indicate unit, microfilm reel, volume, and individual letter number.
American Baptist Foreign Mission Societies (ABFMS), American Baptist Historical Society, Valley Forge, Pa. References to letters indicate the microfilm reel and volume number for each missionary quoted.
Presbyterian Historical Society American Indian Correspondence (PHSIAIC), Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia, Pa. References indicate box, volume, and letter numbers for each document.

1. Approximately 80 percent of the single women appointed by the ABCFM up to 1860 were sent to an American Indian mission. The board sent fewer than thirty single women overseas (although the ABCFM sent more single women to work in foreign missions than to any other board). See R. Pierce Beaver, American Protestant Women in World Mission: History of the First Feminist Movement in North America (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1968), p. 71. According to Ann White, denominational agencies appointed thirty-eight single women to overseas missions prior to 1850 and a total of ninety-three prior to 1870 (“Counting the Cost of Faith: America’s Early Female Missionaries,” Church History 57, no. 1 [March 1988]: 22).
2. Beaver, American Protestant Women, p. 59. The reason for the mission
The Missionary Impulse in North American History

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The Institute for the Study of American Evangelicals (ISAE) at Wheaton College has received a major three-year grant from the Pew Charitable Trusts to fund a study of the “Missionary Impulse in North American History.” This project aims to use the missionary impulse as a lens examining aspects of North American culture. These aspects may include religion, culture, society & institutions, and public life & policy. Our aim, in short, is to discover what the missionary impulse in its various forms may tell us about life in North America.

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boards’ reluctance to send single women beyond the American continent is not clear. According to Beaver, “It just did not seem to the average churchman of that day either possible or proper that a woman by herself, without a husband to make decisions and take responsibility, could venture to be a missionary pioneer.”

3. Horstense Cogan to W. Lowrie, December 20, 1858, PHSIAIC 5:3.125.


5. Harriet Morse to W. Peck, August 5, 1843, and August 1, 1856, ABFMS 100-21.

6. C. B. Downing to L. Wilson, September 17, 1861, PHSIAIC 10:1.305.


10. Lavius Hyde to S. Treat, September 1, 1852, ABCFM Testimonials 20:149. In some cases, it was these Christian activities performed in their own communities that brought the women to the attention of missionary recruiters.

11. E. P. Rogers to D. Greene, October 16, 1845, ABCFM Testimonials 18:92. This report prompted the board to “proceed with caution” with reference to Colton.

12. The proliferation of volunteer opportunities for women in lay ministries was not matched by professional ministry options. A few women made their way writing Christian literature. A tiny minority served as religious teachers or evangelists. One woman, Antoinette Brown, was ordained by the Congregational Church in 1853 and served as pastor for a short time but was followed by few others in the mainline denominations.


15. Thompson to Rev. Fisher, January 18, 1836, ABCFM Testimonials 8:52; and Martha Fullerton to W. Lowrie, February 3, 1858, PHSIAIC 5:3.80.

16. Such appeals were also published in missionary journals like the Baptist Latter-Day Luminar.

17. Elizabeth Morse Information Form, October 18, 1842, ABFMS 100-20.

18. One-third of the women who taught whites in the West under the auspices of the National Popular Education Board mentioned the loss of a parent in their applications. See Polly W. Kaufman, Women Teachers on the Frontier (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1984), p. 15.


22. Five of the six women who worked in the ABCFM Oregon Mission, for example, left for the mission within a month after their marriage.

23. Although in a different form, the marriage and missions decisions were also united for many men. Although exceptions were made, mission boards preferred to appoint married men. The Presbyterian Board, for example, strongly encouraged Francis Lindsay, a male missionary hopeful, to find a wife. Lindsay heeded this advice, meeting his spouse, marrying, and departing for the Wea Mission within three weeks. See Francis Lindsay to Rev. E. McCurdy, n.d., 1835, PHSIAIC 3:1.223.

24. See Jane Kelly to S. Peck, August 23, 1843, ABFMS 99-18; and Lois Hall to S. B. Treat, March 8, 1852, ABCFM 6:746:12.43.

25. Eliza Hart Spalding to her sister, March 31, 1834, in Drury, First White Women over the Rockies, 1:178.


29. Elizabeth Morse Information Form, October 18, 1842, ABFMS 100-20.


32. Delight Sargent to D. Greene, October 20, 1836, ABCFM 6:742:8.171.

33. Sue McBeth to I. L. Wilson, May 9, 1960, January 12, 1961, July 9, 1961, PHSIAIC 101:1.115, 243, 286. McBeth was never taken up on her offer and spent over twenty years working first among the Chocktaw and later the Nez Perce Indians.

34. This ratio is based on the forty-four single women for whom there is information. Two sets of sisters were appointed, one pair of close friends, and one widow with two unmarried adult children.

35. Drury, First White Women over the Rockies, 1:273; Jacob Smith to D. Greene, January 18, 1836, ABCFM Testimonials 8:52; and Martha Fullerton to W. Lowrie, February 3, 1858, PHSIAIC 5:3.80.


38. Eldering J. Boardman to Secretary of the Board, June 20, 1839, ABCFM Testimonials 14:84.

39. Ann Dana to Treat, September 17, 1848, ABCFM Testimonials 21:208. The ABCFM appointed at least seven widows.

40. Only one woman in the written record admits that she took a mission position simply because there was a desperate need for a teacher and she needed a job. M. I. Bissell Smith wrote the ABCFM, at the end of a two-year tenure in the Cherokee Mission, to notify them that she had only taken the position until a more suitable position could be obtained.

41. E. G. Babcock to D. Green, March 1, 1833, ABCFM Testimonials 8:13. Such appeals were also published in missionary journals like the Baptist Latter-Day Luminar.
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