Funding Mission in the Early Twentieth Century

David G. Dawson

According to John R. Mott, one of the secrets of the success of the nineteenth-century evangelist Dwight L. Moody was that he was able to mobilize Christian businessmen to fund his work. Mott (1865-1955) emulated Moody in this regard and committed himself to raise money for missions. One of Mott’s associates in student work, Luther D. Wishard, joined him in this commitment. Recognizing the need for financial support for the missionaries of the Student Volunteer Movement (SVM), 1,200 of whom were serving overseas by 1900, Wishard took a leave of absence in 1897 from his work as international secretary with the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA). His purpose was to ask on behalf of the SVM missionaries, “Who will send us?” He became the architect of the Forward Movement (FM), the chief aim of which was to put before ministers of the churches and businessmen of the laity the needs of foreign missions.

Wishard reported that the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, at its October 1898 meeting, took the following action: “Resolved, That a Forward Movement be inaugurated to develop interest in foreign missions among the churches, and especially to secure the adoption of missionaries by particular churches, individuals and families.”

Wishard and other mission leaders (including Mott and Robert E. Speer) founded the movement at a time when “forward movements” were a common way to address perceived needs. Arthur T. Pierson, noting previous forward movements, called leadership: “So far as concerns the missionary enterprise, the laity has never been brought face to face with its personal obligation to do its part toward the support of the Gospel to every creature, contributing systematically and proportionately for the purpose.” In promoting personalized giving for missions, Mott declared, “Experience shows that the plan of asking churches or individuals to give toward the support of specified objects, results, as a rule, in their giving more largely than that of asking them to give to the general missionary fund of the denomination.”

The FM was built on evidence that personalized giving worked. Wishard surveyed 155 churches that featured “special objects” in mission fund-raising and 155 that had none. Over the period of the study, the first group increased its support of missions by $74,300 while the second actually decreased by $6,967. The denominational boards supported this centerpiece of the FM, even though there were some reservations among staff.

Givers were sometimes asked to provide scholarships for particular students, native teachers, and preachers. But that appeal proved problematic. Not only was there the tendency toward possessiveness (by both parties), but there were the inevitable personal failures of the individuals being supported as well as the waning of donor interest. What happens if the scholar you support fails in school? What are the implications of your sending the individual a special gift at Christmas when that person’s classmates do not receive one? What happens if the local church leadership says that your scholarship-supported student is not an appropriate candidate for the ministry? What happens if your scholar contracts a serious illness? Would you transport him out of the country for treatment when other students would not have that option? What do you tell the worthy recipient if the particular donors involved in the support lose interest?

To mitigate some of the potential abuses, mission board executives developed the “station plan” and the “parish-abroad plan.” The station plan invited complete support for a mission station on the overseas field, including the missionaries, national workers, buildings, and programs. The parish-abroad plan encouraged the American congregation and its members to make the connection between the support of their own parish and the support needed to establish a parish abroad.

Even so, the mission board staff people cautioned against “undue emphasis placed upon special objects, [and suggested that] an effort be made to arouse pastors to the necessity of so stating the broad work of missions, that they will persuade their
people to give to the general fund and not to specific objects.”

For the most part, however, the fund-raising principle of the FM was direct, personalized giving. Though the business culture (and the church with it) was moving toward “consolidation” and “efficiency,” it was not until the 1920s that centralization and unification of mainline denominational mission budgets marginalized the practice of personalized giving.

Development and Program of the FM

On November 5, 1894, three years before Wishard’s FM initiative, businessman E. A. K. Hackett of Fort Wayne, Indiana, offered to give $6,000 a year for two years to defray the expenses of an effort to induce churches and individuals to give to the work of foreign missions. The FM became the answer to that vision. The idea was for it to function as an umbrella organization that would encourage the formation of denominational FMs.

The programs launched by the movement included mission education, regular correspondence with the field, mission study classes with a series of textbooks, and men’s missionary conferences. “Year Books of Prayer” were circulated along with periodicals. “FM Notes” ran regularly in denominational periodicals. Denominational staff organized committees on regional and local levels. Congregations appointed FM committees. Annual reports documented the progress. Testimonial letters were received from congregations where the FM had a positive impact. Missionaries on furlough made tours to appeal for individuals and congregations to pledge support for definite parts of the work or for the salaries of specific missionaries who had volunteered to go but for whom there was no money. Success was evident, and no denomination could afford to ignore the positive impact.

At the onset of the FM, many congregations did not support any mission boards. In most denominations receipts had been declining, even when membership was increasing. But with the advent of the FM, giving increased significantly. The number of missionaries (all denominations) grew from 2,481 to 3,776 between 1892 and 1905. Mission giving grew from $4,181,327 to $5,807,167 during the same period, and per-member giving increased substantially.

The Forward Movement Missionary Handbook (1905) identified the challenge faced by the missionary movement: “The greatest problem which confronts us for the opening century, is that of distributing the missionary responsibility which has become congested in official centers.” FM president Francis Wayland lamented, “The tendency will be more and more for churches to turn over their missionary obligations to societies, for societies to turn it over to Boards, for Boards to turn it over to Executive Committees, and Executive Committees to Secretaries; so that, in the last result, the chief responsibility for the great work will rest on the shoulders of a dozen men.”

The FM countered this situation by combining personalized mission giving with systematic pledges based on theologically sound financial stewardship principles. The result was a more direct sense of responsibility in local churches and a significant growth in giving for foreign mission as well as other programs of the Protestant churches. A decade after the 1905 Handbook statement, Speer declared that progress had been “far in excess of the hopes of many.” The FM focus on personalized, direct support of missions made a tremendous impact in all denominations and, in fact, prepared the way for the development of the Laymen’s Missionary Movement.

The Laymen’s Missionary Movement

At least partly because the FM was co-opted into the structures of most denominations, it did not survive as an independent institution. In many ways it was the precursor of the more institutionalized Laymen’s Missionary Movement. Even though the two movements are seldom mentioned in the same literature, they formed a natural progression of growing interest among men in the missionary calling of the church. David McConaughy dedicated a book to “those far-seeing and large-hearted Presbyterian laymen who pioneered the Forward Movement for Missions, anticipating by several years the Laymen’s Missionary Movement.”

John B. Sleman, Jr., an insurance man from Washington, D.C., inspired by an SVM convention at Nashville during the Christmas holidays of 1905, joined J. Campbell White, Samuel B. Capen, John R. Mott, Robert E. Speer, David McConaughy, Robert P. Wilder, Luther D. Wishard, and others connected to the SVM and the FM in calling for a meeting in New York City in conjunction with a commemoration of the Haystack Prayer Meeting a century earlier. The purpose of the informal one-day conference on November 15 was to discuss whether a more united effort ought not to be made to greatly increase … the participation of laymen in all our denominations in missionary enterprises. … The tremendous development of the past decade calling for the largest exercise of business methods and broadest extension of financial support at home would seem to indicate that the time is ripe for the laymen in the churches to take a larger measure of leadership in missionary enterprises than ever before. The increase in wealth in the church is an element of greater danger unless it be used in the furtherance of the Kingdom, and no great increase in the gifts from the present generation of responsible business men can be expected without the determined and enthusiastic leadership of a group of such men. [Is it not] appropriate that at the celebration of the one hundredth anniversary of the students’ prayer meeting held in the quiet of the Berkshire hills there should be a prayer meeting of business men at the very heart of wealth and business activity in New York City?”

Chaired by Samuel B. Capen, the conference produced the following statement,

Be it resolved that this gathering of laymen called together for prayer and conference on the occasion of the [centennial anniversary of the] Haystack Prayer Meeting, (1) designate a Committee … to consult with the Secretaries of the Missionary Boards of all the denominations … with reference to a campaign of education among laymen to be conducted under the direction of the various Boards, (2) to a comprehensive plan looking towards the evangelization of the world in this generation, and (3) to forming a Centennial Commission of Laymen … to visit as early as possible the Mission fields.”

In 1907 thirty denominations endorsed the proposal, and
Capen and others worked together to form what became the Laymen’s Missionary Movement (LMM). Capen served as the first chairman, and J. Campbell White was the general secretary. Along with an executive committee appointed at the organizing meeting, these men prepared the basic documents of the LMM. They were clear about what the LMM was not. It was not a missionary board, recruiter, or sender of missionaries, nor was it an organization for young people or women. And it was not an interdenominational movement working outside denominational lines.12

The LMM Program

The program of the LMM was built around three- or four-day conventions that averaged well over 1,000 in attendance. More than fifty cities hosted conventions in 1909–10, and these were preceded by six summer conferences. In 1912–13, there were 425 shorter interdenominational conferences in cities of all sizes, attended by 350,000 with 200 speakers (who also spoke in local churches), and 300,000 books and pamphlets were sold. In 1914–15 the LMM, in cooperation with the United Missionary Campaign, sponsored 695 events, again of the smaller, conference variety. The following year events were held in only 69 cities because of the world war. However, the attendance in Chicago was 4,556, and in Los Angeles 5,990, the largest men’s convention ever held in those venues.18

As stated at the Boston Conference of 1908, “The problem is in the apparent indifference of men in nominally Christian lands to the welfare of the world and in their ignorance of the actual accomplishments of the missionary enterprise. . . . More money, every Christian man a giver to mission—this is the objective. Effected, it would result in possible enlargement instead of destructive entrenchment and remove forever the unchristian as well as unbusinesslike annual deficits of the Boards.”19 To address this problem the conferences and conventions were designed to be educational and motivational. The programs included home and foreign missions, matters of personal evangelism, deferred giving, church finance, specific country situations, stewardship, immigration issues, urban poor, and return of soldiers.20

Pledges, but no offerings, were received at these events, the assumption being that money flowed best through the churches. The cost of LMM structure and administration was provided by a small group of board members and others. The LMM periodical Men and Missions (first published October 28, 1909) articulated the program of the movement and provided a forum for debates on mission issues. Reports on campaigns were given, and readers were informed about important mission issues, including the fact that the ratio of amounts spent by American churches for local budgets and national ministry in the homeland compared to the amounts spent overseas was 12:1.

The LMM, like the FM, was self-consciously a laymen’s movement. The constantly recurring theme is that of men taking responsibility and bringing their business expertise to the most important business of the church.

In the normal operations of the LMM’s work, the typical local committee member was a self-employed business or professional man near the end of his career. Half of the LMM men had received a college education, and most were active in other religious activities. The overwhelming majority were Republicans. Presbyterians dominated the denominational representation, and New York was the geographic base. Most lived in Middle Atlantic East Coast cities. Few of them were men of “old money,” and few were extremely wealthy. They were activist men of faith.21

Even though the emphasis was clearly on the male identity of the LMM, a large number of women attended the mass meetings. Secretary William Howard Taft (who became president of the United States in 1909) addressed a LMM crowd of 5,000 in 1908 in New York City, where he noted that “a good share of the five thousand persons present were women.”22 The 1928 LMM Annual Report stated that of the 12,182 participants in the previous year’s major events, 44 percent were women.23

Merging of home and foreign missions committees in 1913 marked the beginning of decline.

Because of its success there was particular pressure for the LMM foreign mission focus to be broadened to include wider mission work. This ongoing debate is documented in executive committee minutes over several years. At the meeting of September 20, 1907, the executive committee stated its focus to be that of foreign missions, not because other concerns are unimportant but “because the Movement originated in the foreign missionary interest, because it is directly devoted to the foreign missionary purpose, and because it believes that all other forms of effort will be benefitted by the adequate performance of the Church’s foreign missionary duty.”24

On no less than ten occasions in succeeding years the executive committee rejected proposals to expand its interests to include home missions. Finally, in 1913, the American Home Missionary Society and others prevailed. The minutes agree to “advocate that congregations have one committee for the whole mission of the Church, both at home and abroad.”25

The United Campaign Committee (UCC) for home and foreign missions efforts was the result, and it was mentioned prominently in future minutes of the executive committee. The UCC sponsored the Interdenominational Conferences of the United Missionary Campaign. Thus, 1913 clearly marks a turning point for the LMM—and the beginning of its decline. The future belonged to the United Missionary Council (UMC), which was explicitly committed to fund-raising for missions, both home and overseas.

Accomplishments of the LMM

Measured in dollars for mission, no other institution had such an impact as the LMM on the foreign mission work of the American church. Between 1907 and 1909 Methodist giving increased by 166 percent, Presbyterian by 240 percent, and Baptist by 265 percent. Total mission giving in U.S. denominations increased from $8,980,000 in 1906 to $45,272,000 in 1924.26 William B. Millard compares the level of membership in major denominations as it grew in the ten years between 1904 and 1914:

| Membership | up 25.4% (16,462,102 vs. 13,128,208) |
| Total Giving | up 39.7% ($137,080,840 vs. $98,099,411) |
| Home Missions | up 62.8% ($21,163,789 vs. $13,002,114) |
| Foreign Missions | up 87.5% ($11,635,517 vs. 6,205,453) |
| Weekly per member for local expense | up 11.1% (16.0¢ vs. 14.4¢) |
| Weekly per member for missions | up 32.1% (3.7¢ vs. 2.8¢)27 |

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Between 1906 and 1924 the number of U.S. Protestant foreign missionaries increased from 5,708 to 16,754.28 "Protestant congregations by 1923 gave 25 to 35 percent of their offerings to missions and benevolent causes, up from 14 to 18 percent at the turn of the century."29 While giving in every other Protestant nation was in decline in 1908, the U.S. churches showed substantial increases. The United States replaced Britain in 1908 as the largest contributor to foreign missions, as 85 percent of foreign missions giving came from the English-speaking world. Capen observed that in churches that did not use the plan, there was decline.

Although the effective work of the LMM lasted only twelve years (1907-19), it had a tremendous impact. Sydney E. Ahlstrom wrote, "The thousands of laymen awakened by the movement also became powerful agents in other crusades and campaigns during the World War and the twenties, illustrating what has always been the most important aspect of the entire foreign missions impulse: its reflex effect on the life and church activities of Christians at home."30

John R. Mott, the most prominent mission leader of this period, summed up the significance of the LMM in a retrospect: &he wrote in the late 1930s: "In some respects the inauguration of the Laymen's Missionary Movement was the most significant development in the world mission during the first decade of the present century."31

The foreign missions enterprise of American Protestantism was making great strides when World War I intruded. The devastation in Europe and the need to rebuild idealistic hopes led American church leaders to emerge from the war years devastated by this barbarity among "Christian nations" but with a renewed commitment to great efforts to alleviate human suffering.

Denominations developed special programs that came together in a cooperative effort known as the Interchurch World Movement (IWM). The IWM is a subject that goes beyond the scope of this article,32 but suffice it to say that its legacy was one of great disappointment. This might be attributed in part to radical centralization, theological controversy, and a changing student culture. However, lessons about mission funding are to be found in the FM and LMM focus on personalized giving, explicit focus, mission education, and direct involvement by men.

Notes

3. Ibid.
11. Ibid. See also David G. Dawson, "Mission, Philanthropy, Selected Giving, and Presbyterians," parts I and II, American Presbyterians 68, no. 2 (Summer 1990) and 69, no. 3 (Fall 1991).
15. Laymen's Missionary Movement, Minutes of Executive Committee [hereafter, LMM Minutes], [no date], file 1, item 3, pp. 3-4, by courtesy of the Burke Library of Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York [hereafter, Union].
16. LMM Minutes, November 15, 1906, YDS, file 1, item 7, page 1.
17. LMM Minutes, 1906-13, Union, file 1, item 8, page 7.
23. 1928 Annual Report, p. 4. The effective work of the LMM concluded in 1919; however, remnants of the movement continued or were revived in later years.
24. LMM Minutes, Union, file 2, item 8, p. 2.
25. Ibid., file 8, item 2, pp. 1–2.
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