

“Items of clothing, bandages, medicines, and gifts”
The Work of the Women’s Missionary Societies of the
Bible Fellowship Churches

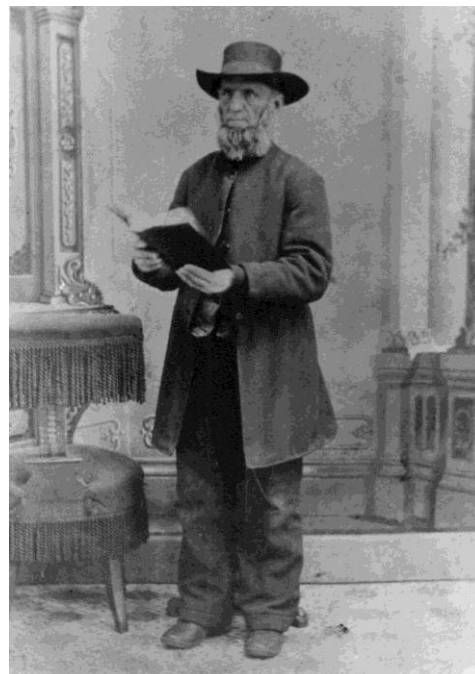
By Jill Davidson

The Historical Society of
The Bible Fellowship Church

October 26, 2013
Fellowship Community
Whitehall, Pennsylvania

Eusebius Hershey set sail for Africa in 1890, the first foreign missionary sent by the Mennonite Brethren in Christ Church, Pennsylvania Conference. He knew living there would be extremely difficult, but his passion for preaching the Gospel to the heathen was greater than his concern for his own life. Indeed, life was hard in Liberia, and Hershey succumbed to disease a year after his arrival.

With financial support from churches and individuals, many more followed Eusebius Hershey's example, serving in various countries around the world, some for one term and some for a lifetime. While money could pay for their passage to their various destinations, it would not buy everything they needed to live and minister there. In some countries these necessities simply were not available for purchase, and so needs developed, and when they were made known, the women of our churches stepped in to meet them.



Eusebius Hershey

Thus, in the 1950s, many churches organized a women's missionary society (WMS), and these in turn were organized into five regional divisions throughout the Conference. Congregations and officers for each region are listed in the 1955 year book: On July 7, 1955, the Board [of missions] met with the representatives of the various Regions, and the following general committee was organized: Chairman, Mrs. R. Paul Schaeffer, Bethel Church, Allentown; Vice-Chairman, Mrs. Stewart Seifert, Ebenezer Church, Bethlehem; Secretary-Treasurer, Mrs. James G. Koch, York Church. This committee will coordinate the activities of the five Regions comprising all the local organized missionary societies of our church. The united prayer ministry of this society has become one of the strongest links in supplying the growing need of prayer intercession for the regions beyond." (p.78,79 1955 Year book of Mennonite Brethren in Christ Church of Pennsylvania).

When these WMS were organized conference-wide, regional rallies were held generally twice a year, March and September. An annual conference-wide rally would be held in May. For several years, Reba Deily of Bethel Allentown was President of that conference. Mary Obarow from the Fleetwood WMS would attend with Rose Hummel, Lillian Hartline, Verne Hehre, and Beulah Adams.

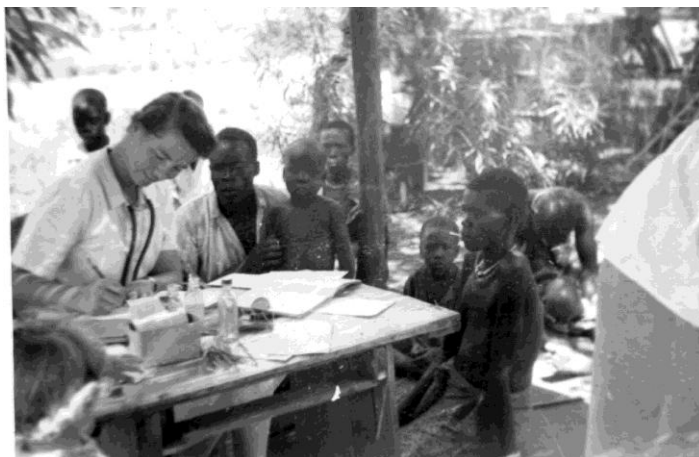


Doris Wire

In her history of Bethany Church in Whitehall (Bethany Bible Fellowship Church 1893-1993, p.36) Doris Wire says the purpose of the WMS was "to increase prayer and

material support of foreign missionaries.” To that end “the group avidly sewed, crocheted, made button cards, and gave generously to meet the needs of missionaries.” Since buttons are so useful but were generally not available in primitive areas, these fasteners, sewn onto card stock, were given as gifts or rewards. (They were a great motivator for people to learn Bible verses). Some of the faithful workers from Bethany were Pauline Adams, Clara Beil, Florence Deppe, Irene Deppe, Emily Oplinger, Helen Oplinger, and Irene Williams.

Many of our churches’ missionary societies made clothing for missionaries’ personal needs. When N. H. Wolfe was pastoring the Bethlehem church, his wife Esther learned that Olive Rawn needed dresses to complete her wardrobe for her time in Africa. She then purchased fabric with her own money, and Mrs. Steward Seifert opened her home for women to gather and sew the dresses. The women of the Terre Hill Bible Fellowship Church made coats for the Chinese mission that was led by Moses Chow.



Olive Rawn

Another way of meeting clothing needs was to purchase ready-made items. Unable to buy anything in Papua, New Guinea where they were serving under Wycliffe Bible Translators, Aaron and Marlene Hoffman were forced to take all the clothing they would need with them. Marlene’s mother, Lena Deppe, participated in the Women’s Missionary Society at Bethel Church in Allentown. Paul Clymer of that congregation owned a clothing store, The Carousel, and donated leftover sale items to the church which were then offered to missionaries. (Ron and Doris Hoyle’s children were also beneficiaries of his kindness).



The Hoffman Family

In further acts of generosity, the women of Ebenezer Bible Fellowship Church in Bethlehem gave a complete wardrobe to Charles and Stephanie Mann when they left for the Congo in the early 1960s. (Charles was a carpenter and Stephanie worked with women and children). Edna Pridham was also in Africa, working as a missionary nurse in Nigeria. She received the loving work of Celia Shelly, Connie Shelly, Thelma Heist, Sue Weller, and June Heist of the Zionsville church. They made baby clothes for the infants Edna delivered. In Finesville,

NJ, Pastor Tom Phillips and his wife Marge were in contact with missionaries to determine their needs. They were assisted in missionary society work by Peg Kraysanski and Edith Stout.

In the 1959 minutes of the WMS of Bethel BFC in Allentown, we find that dresses were made for Mrs. Georgina Solt, missionary in Central America; and coat suits were made for the wives of the home mission workers from the Allentown church. (The material used was purchased by the Rev. Jansen Hartman at a very reasonable price.) The Home mission field people listed include: Mr. and Mrs. Robert Entlon of Macungie, Mr. and Mrs. Richard Ruth of Jersey City, NJ, Mr. and Mrs. Harvey Fritz of Spring City, Mr. and Mrs. McIntire of Paradise, Mr. and Mrs. Dan Ziegler of Bethel Allentown, Mr. and Mrs. George Held, Missionaries to the Jews, Miss Louise Baldorf, Bible Club Movement.



The Solt Family

Elva Treible was active in the WMS at Berean Bible Fellowship Church of Stroudsburg where she was born and raised. The women of that church sewed bedspreads and curtains for Richard and Flo Gehman where they were establishing Scott Theological College in Kenya, Africa. Gladys Showers of the Reading Church sewed various pieces of clothing for the Gehmans, and she and other women of the church also made some thirty graduation gowns for the college.

The Salem, Philadelphia (later called the Maple Glen) church, had an active WMS led by Levina Messner. Other workers were Mrs. Byron Cassel (who made the curtains behind the baptistry at Maple Glen), Leah Rickert, and

Verdella Geibel.

The Lebanon Church was also a busy one. Ruth Bomgardner shares that their WMS collected items to be given to missionaries returning to the field. Some of these items included: pot holders, hot pads, and stickers for teachers and students given to the Schloneckers in Venezuela; styrofoam egg cartons for the Blausers; kitchen towels and placemats for the lunch room in the Poystis' office building; bath towels, toothbrushes, tooth paste,



Eva Treible and Great-granddaughters

soap and combs for Lillian Solt Ramirez's hygiene classes in Costa Rica; and cookie and brownie mixes for Sharon Bachman.

The women of the Lebanon Church also made bed pads and collected personal grooming items and pens and paper for the residents of Fellowship Manor in Nazareth; the women of Zionsville made lap robes for them. (In Reading the WMS made lap robes for elderly women in the congregation.) Doris Wire reports that the Bethany, Whitehall WMS made pads and bibs for Manor residents.



Ruth Bomgardner - Lebanon

In Harleysville, where Catherine Dietz was president of the WMS for many years, they sewed aprons for missionaries to Russia. One of the first projects of the WMS of Ebenezer Church in Bethlehem was making hospital gowns. Dr. Bill Campbell and his wife Holly, a nurse, received hospital coats from Bethel, Allentown, and nightgowns for their patients from Bethel Church in Emmaus. The Emmaus women also made curtains for Ron and Doris Hoyle's house and meeting room. Ardella Bray was the first WMS president at Emmaus; Kathlyne Stortz was the second and served for many years. The Hatfield Church also had an active WMS; Ruth Walter did many sewing projects for them.



Ardella Bray - Emmaus

Members of the Harrisburg WMS included Caroline Gardiner and her mother, Dorothy; Hilda Sunday; Ethel Rutman (Mrs. Paul), Miriam Hefner (Mrs. W. F.); Mrs. Earl Wert, Mary Sanderson (Mrs. Ralph), Peg Landes, Hope Achey, Patricia Wert, Ruth Ream, Mrs. Lavon Strauss, Zelma Carpenter, and Dottie Weaver. One of the Harrisburg women made many dresses at home; some were sent to Marian Gibbons in Kenya. R. C. Reichenbach was visiting Marian in Africa when the package arrived, and was present to witness her delight and gratitude.

Service projects involved more than making clothes, curtains and personal care items. In the 1960s missionary society women did a lot of quilting. The women of the Shamokin Church made quilts which they displayed (along with other handmade items) at their missionary conferences so those returning to the field could choose one to take back with them. Gloria Heiler says the Lancaster Church



Zionsville Quilt

women also made quilts for missionaries, and it should be noted that Lillian Ettinger of

Emmaus made a quilted bedspread that Richard and Flo Gehman used in Kenya for many years. The Terre Hill women made a quilt every year to be sold in support of Berean Bible College.

Not all quilts were made for missionaries. At the Zionsville Church, they made quilts for new babies born in the Church. At Bethel Allentown they made quilts for the first babies of families in the congregation.

Bandage rolling was another missionary project involving fabric. Most bandages were made of old bed sheets, usually white, torn into strips and wound on a contraption called a bandage roller. These bandages were not placed directly on a wound or incision, were used to hold a bandage in place. Bandage rolling was done by many of our churches, including, but not limited to:

Harleysville, Fleetwood, Hatfield, Bethel Allentown, Reading, Lebanon, Lancaster, Finesville NJ, Blandon, Walnutport, Zionsville, Salem Philadelphia, Stroudsburg, Harrisburg, and Bethel Emmaus. Recipients of the bandages include Olive Rawn, Edna Pridham, Bill and Holly Campbell, and Ed and Ruth Moyer. Janice Ahner of the Walnutport church said her mother knitted bandages.



Bandage Rolling

This would be more labor intensive; but for some women, knitting is very relaxing.

As noted in the description of button cards, not all missionary society projects were primarily about sewing. Projects utilizing birthday and Christmas cards were very

popular. Pictures were cut from donated cards and sent to Missionaries to use as gifts or rewards. Some had needles, thread and buttons enclosed. Judy Harley, who served in Venezuela, said mothers of growing children loved to receive them.

Lois Yerger of the Reading church remembers writing Bible verses in various languages for missionaries to use to encourage people to memorize God's word. She also remembers making five-color book markers for Ed and Ruth Moyer in Guadeloupe to use as a "wordless book." Edna Pridham, too, received booklets made from Christmas cards from Bethel Allentown when she served in Africa.

Gloria Heiler of the Lancaster Church and Janice Ahner from the Walnutport Church (now the Northern Lehigh Bible fellowship Church) remember paper bead projects. Made from colorful church bulletins, these beads could be made into necklaces and were sent to missionaries to be used as prizes.

Other WMS projects or services of note include: the canning of over 1,000 jars of fruits and vegetables by the Bethlehem women for those in need after a devastating flood in Stroudsburg; the mailing of Paul and Julie Zimmerman's prayer letters (no email in those days!) by the women of Grace Bible Fellowship Church in Nazareth; the same service provided to Richard and Flo Gehman by the women of the Wallingford (and, later, the Bethel, Emmaus) Church; and, with funds from the Zionsville WMS and the congregation, the purchase of a new car from Gehmans in Emmaus which was shipped to Edna Pridham in Africa.

Over time the projects of the WMS have been dropped. With development in third world countries it is now possible for missionaries to purchase clothes, bandages, medical supplies and other necessities where they serve. Also, many countries now charge customs duties



Janice Ahner - Walnutport



The Gehman Family

on packages sent; this was not always so. (Some even forbid the importation of items such as bandages.) And with the development of polyester, the entire clothing industry has been revolutionized. Synthetic fabrics do not wear out as quickly as cotton, so much more clothing is made available worldwide. Nor are greeting cards a novelty since most countries now manufacture their own.



The Morrison Family

These changes meant that WMS's had to find new ways to thank or help their missionaries. In more recent years, Jan Morrison was approached by the Whitehall WMS, asking what she would like for herself. She requested airfare so that she, husband Phil, and their six children could all be together at one time.

The missionary societies of the Bethel, Allentown and York Churches (and perhaps others), would have a dinner in October to raise money, which would be sent in plenty of time for the missionaries to buy gifts for their own Christmas celebration. (Richard and Flo Gehman and Jan and Phil Morrison were among the grateful recipients.)

Research for this paper has revealed that only two of our churches still have an active women's missionary society. However, contact was not made with all our churches, so it is possible there are others. Both Bethany of Whitehall and the Zionsville congregation have a WMS. Bethany is led by Doris Wire. They meet monthly, inviting missionaries on furlough to speak to the group. They have a prayer time and take up a collection. Some of their monthly meetings are programs for the benefit of the women in the congregation such as a representative from AAA to give tips for older drivers. Another time they had a person instruct these women on hospice care and preparing for death. On a more positive note, they invite people in to share their testimony of how they came to faith in Jesus Christ.



Gospel Bracelets

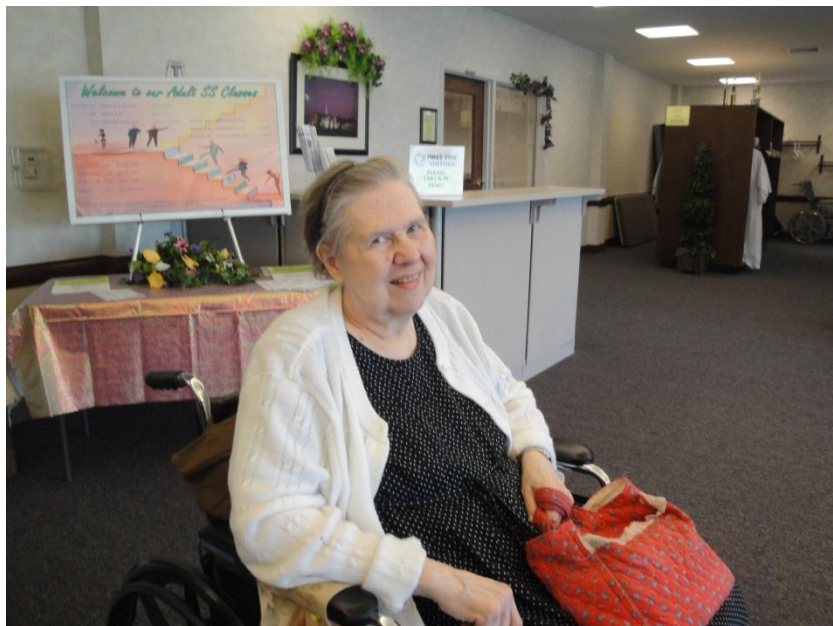
The Zionsville WMS is headed up by Sue Weller. They still do hands-on crafts such as the Gospel bracelet kits. In a sandwich bag they place a cord and 7 beads, each a color from the wordless book. These are sent to Sanjay Dalavai in India for evangelistic outreaches and for teaching children. They also collect used Christian books and CDs (compact discs of recorded music) to donate to Christian Resources International in Bowerville, Michigan who sends the items to places in the world where English is the trade language. They also participate in the shoebox project for Operation Christmas Child.



Christmas Card Craft

Even though most of our churches no longer have a WMS, they still have an interest in foreign missions. Many churches have a missions committee comprised of men and women. Many churches send out short-term missions teams both home and abroad to assist with evangelism, vacation Bible school, or construction projects.

The Pocono Mountain BFC has a group called "Women of Grace," started by Priscilla Day and Maria Cicala in 2006. Women of all ages are invited to events that encourage fellowship and service. They made quilts for orphanages in Belarus and began a ministry to missionary wives and single women missionaries. After a year or two of getting gift suggestions and purchasing and shipping them, they switched to sending debit cards, as being more cost effective.



Lois Yerger - Reading

Yvonne Watkins is involved with “Women’s ministry for Missions” at the Quakertown church. It is an outreach by women both home and abroad. They are involved with one-on-one mentoring at church, donating to the local pregnancy resource center, and hosting the Christmas tea as an outreach project. Foreign missions support includes shipping donated towels, aprons, combs, pencils, writing tablets for Amy Sandt in the Philippines for her to give to people;

and making jewelry for a missionary in Haiti with which to make friends among women there.



Harry Senft, Hank Snyder - Harrisburg

Melinda Watkins reports that the Coopersburg church has both a women’s ministry and a missions committee. The Women’s ministry includes various projects to teach and encourage women in the congregation and in the community. The missions committee consists of men and women and is concerned with both foreign and local mission projects.

The Harrisburg church holds an annual used book sale to raise funds for training French nationals for the pastorate. This effort was begun by men, Harry Senft and Hank Snyder.

SUMMARY

It is Carolyn Ellingson’s observation that the WMS lost its usefulness after a time because of modernization. They lost their opportunity to help. During WWII, there was a big push for everyone to have a “victory garden,” to do your bit to help. This mentality carried over to missions: do your bit to help. It was hard for people to let go of WMS; their help wasn’t needed anymore.



Paper Crafts

Richard Gehman shares, “All told, the women’s missionary societies of the Bible Fellowship Church were great friends of missionaries and demonstrated their love and prayer support through these various tangible projects.”

Today's members of the Bible Fellowship Church still express their interest in and support of foreign missions. Missionaries are financially supported by our congregations and by individuals, short-term mission trips are scheduled, and prayers are continually offered for our missionaries.

People interviewed

Janice Ahner – Walnutport

Flossie Bertolet – Blandon

Ruth Bomgardner – Lebanon

Ardella Brey – Emmaus

Leonard Buck

Fay Copenhafer - Graterford

Reba Deily – Bethel Allentown

Carolyn Ellingson – Maple Glen, Coopersburg

Caroline Gardiner - Harrisburg

Nan Gaugler - Graterford

Flo Gehman – Kenya, Africa; Florida

Richard Gehman – Kenya, Africa;
Florida

Randall Grossman - Reading

Judy Harley – Venezuela, Allentown

Gloria Heiler – Lancaster

June Heist – Zionsville

Thelma Heist – Zionsville

Ethel Herb – Lebanon

Peg Kraynanski – Finesville, NJ



Harrisburg



Judy Harley

Stephanie Mann – Quakertown
Jan Morrison – Kenya, Africa
Phil Morrison – Kenya, Africa
Ruth Moyer – The Congo, Africa;
Guatelupe; Perkasie
Mary Obarow – Fleetwood and Oley
Olive Rawn – Hatfield
R. C. Reichenbach - Harrisburg



Ruth Moyer

Blanche Rickert – Hilltown Baptist Church
Al Roberts – Harleysville
Betty Roberts – Harleysville
Edith Stout – Finesville, NJ, Quakertown
Lena Thomann – Bethel Allentown
Elva Treible – Berean Stroudsburg
Melinda Watkins – Coopersburg
Yvonne Watkins – Quakertown
Sue Weller – Zionsville
Leroy Wilcox
Doris Wire - Whitehall
Lois Yergey – Reading
Fern Yorgey – Fleetwood
Julie Zimmerman - Africa
Paul Zimmerman - Africa



Ethel Herb - Lebanon