

# “A Mission to Themselves”

## Changing Views of Mission in North American Mennonite Women’s Organizations<sup>1</sup>

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Mennonite understandings of mission went through a major shift in the mid-twentieth century. As local populations abroad assumed leadership of many mission stations, North American missionaries reconsidered their role in the international missionary endeavor. At the same time, North American Mennonites were sensing a need to better proclaim and embody the saving gospel of Jesus Christ in their own countries and even their own churches. In the context of these trends, Mennonite women’s organizations—which had been strong supporters of international mission since the start of the missionary movement in the nineteenth century—shifted to a more local and even internal sense of mission in the mid-twentieth century. Rather than (only) supporting externally focused mission workers and relief projects, Mennonite women’s organizations articulated goals that revealed a concern for bettering the society and denomination that women were part of themselves. As the women’s organizations drew attention to the need for self-care and personal faith development, they helped redefine the nature of mission in the broader church.

A denomination-wide women’s organization for the General Conference Mennonite Church (GCMC) began in 1917. Twelve years later, the organization stated that its purpose was “to glorify God and serve the Conference and its missionary representatives (1) in the support of home and foreign missions; (2) in the spread of mission interests; (3) in the promotion of cooperation between mission societies and missions; and (4) in the production and dissem-

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<sup>1</sup> This article draws on material from Anita Hooley Yoder’s book, *Circles of Sisterhood: A History of Mission, Service, and Fellowship in Mennonite Women’s Organizations*, forthcoming from Herald Press in summer 2017.

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ination of missionary literature.”<sup>3</sup> The organization started a magazine called *Missionary News and Notes* and facilitated connections between missionaries (and relief agencies) and the prolific quilters, sewers, and canners in church women’s groups across Canada and the United States.

But something happened when women gathered together to engage in tasks they could have done in their own homes. Women shared concerns and prayed for each other. They voiced their opinions on matters in the church and community. They led devotionals and gave “talks.” Women often attended meetings mainly to help others, whether through raising money for international mission, mending clothing for a local orphanage, or packing food for Civilian Public Service camps. But they also found a source of personal support and spiritual uplift in their gatherings, which in some contexts were held as often as once a week. Women’s groups provided a space for their members to exercise not only skills like sewing and food preparation but also public speaking, managing finances, and chairing committees. In an analysis of Mennonite women’s societies in Canada, Gloria Neufeld Redekop characterizes the societies as “parallel churches,” where participants could “support each other, grow spiritually, and live out their Christian faith.”<sup>4</sup> Women came to the groups not only to support missionaries but also to minister to each other and receive encouragement themselves.

By the 1970s and 1980s, the GCMC women’s organization, then called Women in Mission, had begun to embrace and articulate a more member-focused approach. A *Women in Mission* brochure from 1980 stated that the organization’s purpose was to help its members “become effectively involved in the total mission of the church.”<sup>5</sup> The brochure’s eight “goals for the ’80s” included assisting women in developing their gifts, strengthening relationships with women internationally, relating to the hurting and lonely, and improving television, along with continuing to support denominational and regional ministries.<sup>6</sup> “They were, in effect, calling for a mission to themselves,” wrote Gladys

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3 Edith C. Loewen, “Women in Mission (General Conference Mennonite Church),” *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, 1989, [http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Women\\_in\\_Mission\\_General\\_Conference\\_Mennonite\\_Church&oldid=78870](http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Women_in_Mission_General_Conference_Mennonite_Church&oldid=78870).

4 Gloria Neufeld Redekop, *The Work of Their Hands: Mennonite Women’s Societies in Canada* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1996), 99.

5 Information in this paragraph is from *Women in Mission* brochure, ca. 1980. Box 1, Folder 3. Women in Mission, Promotional items/printed matter 1980s–early 1990s. MLA.VII.N.3. Mennonite Library and Archives, Newton, KS.

6 Ibid.

Goering in her description of this time period in the organization.<sup>7</sup> During an era of increased attention to women's roles in church and society, the women's group recognized both the resources and the needs of its own members. Mission and service were no longer things to be done only in faraway places but were activities for women to engage in themselves in their communities and within their own groups.

Over the years, the women's organization of the "Old" Mennonite Church (MC) also shifted the way it articulated its mission—and its connection to international mission. A denominational network of local women's groups was first organized through the efforts of Clara Eby Steiner around 1915. In the mid-1920s, the fledgling women's organization was subsumed under the Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities.<sup>8</sup> During this time, the organization essentially became a sewing circle committee, with primary responsibility for providing handmade materials for missionaries and mission stations. In 1955, the organization took on a broader focus and new name: Women's Missionary and Service Auxiliary (WMSA). Minnie Graber, board president of the organization, explained: "This new strain of interest involved the total life of women. They met in fellowship groups, missionary meetings, sunshine circles, in prayer groups, homemakers groups, home builders—and many other types of groups."<sup>9</sup> While some of these congregational women's groups were primarily focused on missionary support, others gave more attention to their own members as they sought to raise godly families and strengthen their own faith.

When the MC denomination reorganized in 1971, the women's organization connected not with the Board of Missions but with the newly formed Board of Congregational Ministries. Now called the Women's Missionary and Service Commission (WMSC), the organization listed ten goals in its 1975 handbook, none of which included the words "mission," "missionary," or "service." The goals did mention encouraging Bible study, helping women and girls find faith and utilize their gifts, developing leadership potential, strengthening the quality of family life, and "responding as Christ's representatives to

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7 Information in this paragraph is from Gladys Goering, *Women in Search of Mission: A History of the General Conference Women's Organization* (Newton, KS: Faith and Life, 1980), 99.

8 This arrangement was not the idea of the women's organization's leaders. See Melvin Gingerich, "The Mennonite Woman's Missionary Society: Part II," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 37.3 (1963): 214–33; Sharon Klingelsmith, "Women in the Mennonite Church, 1900–1930," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 54.3 (1980): 163–207.

9 Quoted in Elaine Sommers Rich, *Mennonite Women: A Story of God's Faithfulness* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1983), 207.

needs in the community and world.”<sup>10</sup> Many local groups continued to maintain close connections with missionaries and engage in material work for Mennonite Central Committee projects and relief sales. However, like the GCMC group, the goals of the MC women’s organization showed a shift from (only) supporting missionaries and mission projects to seeing their members as doing God’s work themselves—and receiving spiritual benefits themselves. Barbara Reber (director of WMSC) expressed this greater attention to personal needs during her report to the 1979 MC delegate assembly. “It is as important to drink from the well as it is to give a cup of cold water in His name,” she said.<sup>11</sup>

For generations, Mennonite women’s groups had chosen verses like Galatians 6:9 for their theme: “Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up” (NIV).<sup>12</sup> The admonition to serve others and tangibly live out one’s faith had always been strong in Mennonite contexts. But as activities like silent retreats and small group Bible studies became popular in the 1970s, Mennonite women also started referring to other sorts of biblical passages. A late-1970s WMSC devotional guide cited verses like Ephesians 3:4: “If you will read what I have written, you can learn about my understanding of the secret of Christ” (GNT); and Philemon 1:6: “My prayer is that our fellowship with you as believers will bring about a deeper understanding of every blessing which we have in our life in union with Christ” (GNT). The guide promoted intrapersonal and interpersonal development through prayerful journaling and spiritual friendships. Perhaps the most appropriate biblical passage for late-twentieth-century women’s groups was the story of Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38–42), where Jesus commends Mary’s attentive listening over Martha’s busy preparations. In the midst of increased interest in spirituality and faith sharing in the broader Mennonite church during the 1970s,<sup>13</sup> women’s groups often led the way, drawing on their existing structure to create spaces for women to attend to their spiritual lives

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10 Ibid., 208.

11 “WMSC Report to Assembly,” August 16, 1979. Box 3, Folder 17. Women’s Missionary and Service Commission Executive Committee Records, 1917–1997. IV-20-001. Mennonite Church USA Archives, Goshen, IN.

12 According to Redekop’s 1988 survey, this was the most frequently cited verse by women’s groups connected to the Conference of Mennonites in Canada (*Work of Their Hands*, 112).

13 In *Seeking Places of Peace: A Global Mennonite History—North America* (Intercourse, PA: Good, 2012), Royden Loewen and Steven M. Nolt write that many Mennonites were part of the small group movement that “swept the North American evangelical world” in the 1970s (265).

as well as the physical needs of others.

A shift in the goals of women's organizations and understandings of mission in general was happening not only in Mennonite contexts. In fact, the move from a solely external focus for women's groups probably happened earlier in some denominations. In Joan C. LaFollette's discussion of Presbyterian women's organizations, she writes that by 1943 many groups within the denomination had started to "move away from being strictly missionary societies to being more inclusive societies, with broader activities of study and service."<sup>14</sup> LaFollette notes that this shift happened "partly in response to the church's broadening definition of mission" as well as in an effort to attract younger women who were not participating in the organizations as their mothers and grandmothers had.<sup>15</sup> In the mid-twentieth century, many Christian groups were starting to recognize some problematic aspects of international mission, while at the same time sensing the need to become more relevant to their own North American constituents.

Questions about the nature of international mission that impacted many Protestant groups also touched Mennonites. For example, in the early 1940s a revival movement spread among Protestant missionaries and local populations in East Africa.<sup>16</sup> Many new believers joined churches, but white missionaries also repented of their superior attitudes. Mennonite missionaries participated in this movement, especially in Tanganyika (now Tanzania), including respected women like Lancaster County natives Phebe Yoder and Catharine Leatherman. "The Lord came to me and showed me that the African brothers and sisters and I were on the same level," reflects Leatherman in *Quiet Shouts*, a book about Lancaster Conference women leaders by Louise Stoltzfus.<sup>17</sup> Stoltzfus reports that during this experience the missionaries "found themselves as changed as the people to whom they ministered."<sup>18</sup> Female missionaries were closely connected to congregational women's groups, and women likely heard about the missionaries' experiences firsthand through correspondence and later

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14 Joan C. LaFollette, "Money and Power: Presbyterian Women's Organizations in the Twentieth Century," in *The Organizational Revolution: Presbyterians and American Denominationalism*, eds. Milton J. Coater et al. (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), 215.

15 Ibid.

16 For more on this event, see Richard K. MacMaster, *A Gentle Wind of God: The Influence of the East Africa Revival* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 2002).

17 Quoted in Louise Stoltzfus, *Quiet Shouts: Stories of Lancaster Mennonite Women Leaders* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1999), 109.

18 Ibid., 67.

speaking engagements. It seems likely that changes in the attitudes of international mission workers would have caused Mennonite women to rethink their own attitudes about the work of their organizations.

Several decades later, questions about the nature of international mission work played out in the pages of Mennonite magazines. The January 4, 1966, *Gospel Herald* (the MC magazine) ran an article titled “Hard Times for Missionary.”<sup>19</sup> The article detailed the challenges of mission work in African countries where white Westerners were viewed with suspicion (understandably, according to the author). Later that year, the paper published a two-part article by R. Pierce Beaver titled “Why Ram Christianity Down Their Throats?”<sup>20</sup> Beaver advocated for respectful dialogue with people of other religions in order to promote more culturally appropriate versions of Christianity in different contexts.

Similar conversations were happening in *The Mennonite* (the GCMC magazine). The theme of 1966’s first issue was “As You Go Speak for Your Faith.” The lead article by Walter Goering called the church to continue spreading its Christian faith but also addressed needs of hunger, peace, “brotherhood” with other Christians, and literacy.<sup>21</sup> The article described a broad view of mission, though one that was still mostly outward focused. However, immediately following Goering’s two-page article in the magazine was a two-page poem titled “Soliloquy of a Pastor’s Wife.” In the poem, Sylvia Jantz questioned the many outward-focused roles she held or was expected to hold.<sup>22</sup> “I must have time to find myself,” she wrote. Jantz described doing something simply for the pleasure it brought and then noted, “This is neither selfish, nor sinful. / For can the re-creation this brings / Be contained for self alone?” In a way, Jantz’s poem can be read as an expression of an alternative view of mission work. Taking care of one’s own self—finding time for personal renewal and enjoyment—is valuable in the life of faith. The value is not solely for the self, for, as Jantz implied, the “re-creation” she experienced would spill out as she ministered to others.

Changing understandings of mission, an increased focus on spirituality, and influences from the women’s liberation movement combined to move Mennonite women’s organizations in new directions in the 1960s, 1970s, and

19 “Hard Times for Missionary,” *Gospel Herald*, January 4, 1966, 17–18.

20 R. Pierce Beaver, “Why Ram Christianity Down Their Throats?” *Gospel Herald*, June 28, 1966, and July 5, 1966 (566–67 and 588–89).

21 Walter Goering, “The Church Takes to the Road,” *The Mennonite*, January 4, 1966, 2–4.

22 The rest of the paragraph references Sylvia Jantz, “Soliloquy of a Pastor’s Wife,” *The Mennonite*, January 4, 1966, 5–6.

beyond. Petkau writes in her history of Canadian Women in Mission (the women's organization of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada) that local groups may not have noticed the gradual shifts taking place in the organization and the general outlook of its members.<sup>23</sup> But the missionaries the groups supported saw changes when they returned to North America for visits. Patkau records the reflections of one international missionary who joined a North American women's group for a prayer retreat in 1977: "I found a fellowship which was very deep and a spiritual maturity in the participants which is hard to find anywhere. I came away, however, with a question, 'Is it out of date to pray for missions?' This question has not yet been answered....I have concluded that while, in general, the spiritual life of the church has greatly improved, our concerns are immediate concerns: me, my family, my church, my friends, etc."<sup>24</sup>

This (unnamed) missionary both applauds a deeper spirituality and laments a more internal focus in the Mennonite women she observed. On the one hand, it can seem selfish to focus on concerns only within one's own sphere. On the other hand, in drawing attention to their own contexts—by proclaiming "a mission to themselves"—Mennonite women were in some cases uncovering serious concerns that had been ignored for years.

One of those concerns was violence against women, including domestic violence and sexual abuse. In an article about women in Anabaptist traditions in North America, Marlene Epp notes the irony that most peace churches did not include violence against women in their theological work until quite late in the twentieth century.<sup>25</sup> It took efforts from grassroots networks of women to convince church leaders of the importance of this issue.<sup>26</sup> While these networks of women were mostly outside of the denominational women's organizations, the turn to more local concerns helped open spaces for these kinds of conversations within the organizations as well. Vel Shearer, editor for the MC women's organization from 1978 to 1987, remembers that in the late 1970s

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23 Esther Patkau, *Canadian Women in Mission: 1895–1952–2002* (Saskatoon, SK: Canadian Women in Mission, 2002), 176.

24 *Ibid.*, 177.

25 Marlene Epp, "Women of Anabaptist Traditions," in *Encyclopedia of Women and Religion in North America*, eds. Rosemary Skinner Keller and Rosemary Radford Ruether (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006), 267.

26 For example, see Rachel Waltner Goossen, "'DeFanging the Beast': Mennonite Responses to John Howard Yoder's Sexual Abuse," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 89, no. 1 (January 2015): 42–44.

the church was not yet talking about violence against women.<sup>27</sup> Shearer was also working as a counselor for women in her community and had heard many stories of abuse. Figuring it had to be happening in the Mennonite church as well, she devoted an issue of the organization's magazine to domestic violence. She received a letter back from one reader wondering what to do when your husband was abusing you—and he was also your pastor. Shearer realized that the topic was indeed a relevant one, but the denomination had little theological or practical resources to help people in abusive situations. Sara Regier, coordinator of Women in Mission in the late 1980s, remembers that during her time with the organization there was starting to be a stronger awareness of inappropriate sexual behavior in the church.<sup>28</sup> “I think every district I went to, I heard stories,” she said in a 2014 interview.<sup>29</sup> Regier met many women who expressed the feeling that if they said something, nobody would listen.<sup>30</sup> While neither the MC nor the GCMC women's organizations started specific programs to address domestic violence or sexual abuse, the attention they gave these issues in their magazines and program resource guides were small steps toward cultivating greater awareness in the broader church.

Of course, giving attention to personal and societal issues does not preclude an interest in mission, and the magazines for both women's organizations continued to carry reflections from missionaries and relief workers. Still, the role of Mennonite women's organizations continued to shift, down to the local level. In 1988, Redekop conducted a survey of Mennonite women's societies in Canada, receiving responses from 116 groups in the Conference of Mennonites in Canada.<sup>31</sup> When respondents were asked to mark their group's top priority, over 60 percent chose “fellowship.” About 20 percent chose “serve the local church” as a first priority, and zero chose “mission” as a top purpose.<sup>32</sup> Redekop finds these results noteworthy compared with the prominent support of mission the groups espoused in their early years, though she also notes that service and

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27 Information in this and the following three sentences is from Vel Shearer, phone interview by author, May 5, 2015.

28 Sara Regier, interview by author, Newton, KS, December 10, 2014, audio recording.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

31 Redekop, *Work of Their Hands*, 5. Redekop also surveyed Mennonite Brethren groups. I have only included information about the Conference of Mennonites in Canada, since those congregations were connected to the GCMC or (to a lesser extent) the MC.

32 Ibid., 117.

mission were selected by the survey respondents as significant second and third priorities.<sup>33</sup>

Lois Deckert, who was involved with Women in Mission at various points throughout the late 1970s to early 1990s, reflected in a 2014 interview on the changing role of the GCMC women's organization.<sup>34</sup> She noted that some of the older missionaries felt abandoned by the women's groups, whose "mission outlook had changed and broadened."<sup>35</sup> Deckert, who grew up as the child of missionaries in India, said that some of her missionary friends saw her as a deserter. "But mission to me was much more than some place overseas," she explained.<sup>36</sup> Marian Hostetler directed the MC women's organization (WMSC) from 1987 to 1996, bringing connections from work in Africa with the mission board and Mennonite Central Committee. Hostetler remembers having significant contact with returned missionaries, who would come to the MC offices in Elkhart and be sent to her for help with material needs like bedding.<sup>37</sup> But WMSC's most prominent role during Hostetler's time continued to be supporting women's retreats, where women in area conferences and congregations gathered to listen to God and share with each other. Under Hostetler's leadership, WMSC also tried to more intentionally connect with Mennonite women from various North American cultural groups. By the early 1990s, the WMSC executive council included representatives for Hispanic, African American, and Native Mennonite women. Hispanic and African American Mennonite women were also having vibrant retreats of their own, which provided space for women to use their leadership gifts, receive encouragement, and minister to each other.

In 1997, the MC and GCMC women's organizations merged in anticipation of the merger of their respective denominations. Reference to mission or missionaries was omitted from the new organization's name in favor of a more general title: "Mennonite Women." Mennonite Women proclaimed that every woman in a Mennonite church was part of their constituency, whether or not they attended a local women's group. Mennonite Women's leaders bolstered the organization's somewhat tenuous identity by engaging in projects of aid and service. They facilitated "Sister-Links" between women in international

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33 Ibid.

34 Lois Deckert, interview by author, Newton, KS, December 10, 2014.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid.

37 The rest of the paragraph draws on Marian Hostetler, interview by author, Goshen, IN, October 3, 2014, audio recording.

contexts and women's groups in North America. They built on an existing fund of the GCMC group to provide scholarships for women studying theology in developing countries. They promoted activities that used the material skills of women, such as making quilted wall hangings for homes renovated by Mennonite Disaster Service.

When in 1999 the (Old) Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church merged and reorganized as Mennonite Church USA and Mennonite Church Canada, Mennonite Women also divided into Mennonite Women USA and Mennonite Women Canada. Under the auspices of Mennonite Women USA, Rhoda Keener organized a series of Sister Care seminars, which were initially promoted with the tagline "equipping women for caring ministry."<sup>38</sup> As the seminars were further developed by Keener with Carolyn Holderread Heggen and Ruth Lapp Guengerich, they took on more of a self-healing component. "Our own wholeness is what precipitates being an effective caring person," Keener said in a 2014 interview about Sister Care. "And so we start with ourselves." Keener noted that this focus has been confusing to some women who come to the seminars expecting mainly to hear practical tips for caregiving situations. Instead, Sister Care's first unit is titled "Claiming My Identity as God's Beloved." Keener remembers a comment from one of the first meetings she had with women leaders after she started as Mennonite Women director in 2001. When she asked what the organization should be doing, Gracie Torres replied, "The most important thing is that women know that they have worth."<sup>39</sup> In other words, the organization's mission should start with empowering its own members.

Today's Sister Care seminars are a prime example of Goering's "mission to themselves" comment from 1980—in both the "selves" and the "mission" sense. The seminars start with the individual wounds and blessings of women, then give the women tools for extending Christ's message of comfort and wholeness to others. Sister Care seminars have been presented around the world and have especially gained traction in Latin America, where Latina leaders have replicated the teaching in their own contexts over one hundred times.<sup>40</sup> In a

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38 This paragraph draws on Rhoda Keener, interview by author, Shippensburg, PA, October 16, 2014, audio recording.

39 Quoted in Rhoda Keener, "To Know We Have Worth," *Timbrel*, May–June 2007, 15.

40 Linda Shelly, Mennonite Mission Network director for Latin America, estimated that as of July 2015 Latina leaders had taught ninety-five Sister Care seminars reaching 2,800 women (quoted in Laurie Oswald Robinson, "Timing is Everything," *Beyond Ourselves*, November 2015, 7). More seminars have happened since then.

way, Sister Care has brought the Mennonite women's organization full circle, returning it to significant international engagement.

Throughout their existence, Mennonite women's organizations have been a significant part of the church's missionary efforts. While their early work was mostly about direct support of missionaries and international mission stations, the organizations always had at least a partial "mission to themselves," as women found support in each other's company while working together on a project for those outside their group. As understandings of mission have shifted in recent years, Mennonite Women USA's dual focus of inward development and outward service can perhaps be a model for the denomination. The women's organization has understood that people of all places need the life and wholeness Jesus brings, whether they are people of unreached cultures or overexerted church members. Mennonite Women USA's current vision statement invites women "across generations, cultures, and places to share and honor our stories, care for each other, and express our prophetic voice boldly as we seek to follow Christ."<sup>41</sup> Sometimes the cultivation of a prophetic voice and a care for others is an outward-directed urge, charting new places of mission and service around the world. Other times that prophetic voice and caring spirit is directed inward, as women engage in "mission" among their own members and within their own souls.

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41 "About Us," Mennonite Women USA, <https://mennonitewomenusa.org/about-us/>.