

Chapter 5

WOMEN'S MISSION STRUCTURES AND THE AMERICAN BOARD

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DURING THE EARLY nineteenth century American Protestants sprang into missionary action, sending workers to countries around the world. Women played a significant role in this missions revolution. They organized local groups called auxiliaries to collect money and volunteers for a burgeoning foreign missions movement. Women's auxiliaries, however, worked under the supervision of the general church boards run by men.

WOMEN'S BOARDS ORGANIZED

After 1850, women organized mission societies that operated independent from male-led denominational boards. In each of five major Protestant denominations women set up mission boards to channel resources specifically toward women and children in other countries. Women believed that the Christian gospel would improve the status of foreign women.

Congregational women led the movement toward independent women's mission societies. Between 1868 and 1873 they set up four boards: the Woman's Board of Missions, located in Boston (WBM), the Woman's Board of Missions of the Interior, located in Chicago (WBMI), the Woman's Board of Missions for the Pacific, located in San Francisco (WBMP), and the Woman's Board of Missions for the Pacific Islands, located in Hawaii (WBMPI). The three mainland boards cooperated with the male-led American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions.⁽²⁾ The women's boards chose their missionaries and raised the money to support them. The American Board then commissioned them, arranged for living situations, and supervised their work. Women missionaries were responsible in part to the American Board, but the women's boards remained structurally independent of the American Board and retained control over the money they raised. Directors of the women's boards viewed the relationship with the American Board as a cooperative, rather than a supervisory one.⁽³⁾

At the time of organization the women's boards set strict governing principles. Funds raised one year were not disbursed until the next year, thus avoiding unforeseen deficits. Only single women were employed as missionaries. Married women, working with their husbands, came under the jurisdiction of the American Board.

The women organized themselves into a system of boards, branches, and auxiliaries to educate local women in foreign missions and to secure funds. Boards were regional entities that covered several states and directed the activities of the branches organized along state lines. Local auxiliaries, the backbone of the organization, carried on missions study projects and raised money. They sent money to the branches, and the branches passed it on to the boards. The regional boards then applied the money to missions projects and dealt directly with the American Board. The women's boards' system of organization was recognized as extraordinarily effective in rais-

ing money, and its success was attributed to the close communication between the boards and local constituencies.⁴

By 1877, in nine years of existence, the Boston-based WBM (the largest of the women's boards) raised nearly \$480,000 and published more than 40 million pages of missionary literature. Volunteer labor kept administrative expenses under 2 percent of board receipts over the same nine years. By 1918, after fifty years of independent work, the receipts of the three mainland boards (WBM, WBMI, and WBMP) totaled 20 percent of all the receipts of the American Board over twice as many years.⁽⁵⁾

The women's boards also increased the number of missionary recruits. In 1920 the American Board commissioned a new high of seventy-three persons for missionary service. Of this number, forty-seven were single women, nine married women; and seventeen were men. Of eight physicians, five were women.⁽⁶⁾

After fifty years of vigorous work the women's boards had made significant contributions to Congregational missions. They increased total missions receipts by thorough fund-raising efforts and low overhead costs. They supplied the majority of missionaries in the field and took full responsibility for financing them. Their fund-raising methods were highly personalized and recognized as models for the whole denomination. The system of women's boards cooperating with, yet remaining independent from, the American Board was an organizational success. It made possible women's contribution to the work of the denomination, without sacrificing the special concern women held to direct their resources toward other women.

In 1927 this cooperative venture came to an end. One by one the three mainland women's boards voted to merge their organizations into that of the American Board. Why did women in the 1920s choose to relinquish their autonomy? What persuaded them to allow their boards to be absorbed into the American Board, when the existing cooperative relationship seemed to work so well?

The full story of the absorption involves the relationship of the women's boards and the American Board in the 1920s, and the larger context of Congregational polity Changes in American religion and society also influenced women to choose a unified mission endeavor with the American Board.

MOVEMENT TOWARD CONSOLIDATION

Independent women's mission boards in the post-Civil War era always felt pressure to consolidate with existing male-led societies. Women struggled against assumptions that they were not capable of running an organization, since "the idea of their conducting a business, keeping books, or carrying on the work of a large organization was unheard of." Opposition to women assuming public roles was common. The notion that women would speak or pray in public "just like any other minister" challenged traditional sex roles. Men feared that the women's missionary movement was a thinly veiled suffrage campaign. Women feared disapproving husbands and the taint of impropriety.⁽⁷⁾ Some women's boards succumbed to these pressures and were taken over by the men.⁽⁸⁾

Despite early and continued opposition, women's boards were recognized as making valuable contributions to mission work. Women developed administrative techniques that appealed to

their constituency of women and children. Requesting small amounts of money (because women did not have access to large sums), women's boards canvassed regularly and extensively. They enjoyed huge financial successes.(9)

Full treasuries spurred new rounds of opposition from male church leaders. Some feared that women's agencies would take over money available for mission work. Others complained that women collected their money at the expense of denominational treasuries. Both allegations had little basis in fact. Women continued to contribute to *all* mission boards, not simply women's groups. Women argued that they had tapped a source of funds not reached before: women's purses.(10) Yet pressures to absorb women into male-led structures mounted in the early decades of the twentieth century. By 1930 most major Protestant groups had effected such mergers. In some cases women participated in the decisions, in others women's organizations were simply confiscated.(11)

As Congregational leaders formulated plans to consolidate mission boards in the 1920s, the assumption that men should take rightful leadership over women exerted a subtle influence. Women made up only a small percentage of ordained clergy or membership on national committees. A commission investigating the 1.2 percent female clergy in Congregationalism reported in 1921: "Our ordained women are too few in number and too modest or at least inconspicuous in their form of service to appear at present to offer to our denomination any serious problem." It heartily endorsed women serving instead as church assistants in religious education, secretarial jobs, and social work. The report shows that in the early 1920s substantial feeling existed against women exercising full and independent leadership among Congregationalists.(12)

Yet the absorption of the women's boards by the American Board cannot be fully explained as the triumph of male dominance. Many factors influenced the final decisions. An examination of the broader context of American society and religion provides further clues.

THE IDEAL OF BUREAUCRATIC EFFICIENCY

Historians consider 1895 to 1915 the Progressive Era in American history. The period was characterized by reforms in many areas, from government policies to religious and social life. Reformers were driven by an unquestioned faith in "scientific" problem solving, which to Progressives meant dependence on bureaucratic solutions. The catchword was efficiency. Efficiency reigned when professional leaders headed well-organized structures that achieved clearly defined results.

Because organizations valued efficiency, certain patterns of decision making resulted. Progressives tended to centralize decision making nationally, rather than allow it to remain diffused in local, state, and regional bodies. Within the church this meant that denominational executives began to view administrative offices as the true center of the church's life. Legislative bodies, by contrast, were crude and cumbersome. Denominations followed the business community and moved toward a bureaucratic style of church government.(13)

Bureaucratic values of efficiency and centralization resulted in new fund-raising techniques. Mission and benevolent societies had proliferated during the nineteenth-century Protestant missions boom. By the twentieth century churches complained about the financial strain placed on them through duplicated giving and tried to centralize fund-raising systems. The "Apportionment Plan" and "Every Member Canvass" were two widely adopted schemes for increasing benevo-

lent giving. Under the Apportionment Plan, mission agencies cooperated in assigning a quota to each church in a denomination. Motivated by a goal, local congregations increased their giving and enlarged the income of the agencies. Funds were collected through the Every Member Canvass, a local annual fund drive in which canvassers secured pledges from members door to door in a one-day campaign. These new fund-raising methods called for the cooperation of all mission agencies in a given denomination. They were carried out systematically and with the businesslike efficiency so highly prized during the Progressive Era.

CENTRALIZATION AND CONGREGATIONALISM

Congregationalists participated in the Progressive movement toward centralized decision making and unified fund raising. But forces toward centralization had already existed for many years within Congregationalism. During the nineteenth century Congregational churches had built stronger associations with one another, culminating in 1871 with the organization of the National Council of Congregational Churches. The National Council was an advisory body without administrative powers. It was established to foster the unity of the churches without endangering their individual liberty. Its constitution decreed, "This National Council shall never exercise legislative or judicial authority, nor consent to act as a council of reference."⁽¹⁴⁾

One of the reasons a national organization had been formed related to the number of Congregational mission agencies. By the 1870s Congregational churches were contributing to five agencies alongside the American Board and the three women's boards: the Education Society, for training ministers; the Congregational Home Missionary Society; the American Missionary Association, for ministry to people of color; and two publishing societies. To reduce the financial burdens placed on churches by these agencies, in 1871 the National Council made the first of many recommendations to consolidate mission and benevolent societies. However, the loyalty of individual mission board constituencies made such a move unthinkable.⁽¹⁵⁾

By 1907 the National Council had increased the scope of its jurisdiction and functioned as an administrative, as well as advisory, body. Again, a committee investigating the situation recommended that the mission boards and churches avail themselves of the National Council's services as a central clearinghouse. However, the independent spirits of the mission agencies prevented them from agreeing.⁽¹⁶⁾

Recommendations that mission boards should connect themselves more closely to the National Council reflected growing tensions between the churches and mission societies. The churches viewed the mission boards as a threat to the democracy of Congregational polity. Mission boards had been established by individuals, rather than by representative groups from the churches. This tension was heightened by dissatisfaction over the financial askings of the boards. It confirmed the need felt by the churches for centralized fund raising.⁽¹⁷⁾

By 1913 Congregationalism took steps to integrate the mission boards into centralized denominational structures. The National Council adopted an Apportionment Plan and promoted the Every Member Canvass to simplify mission board appeals to local churches. A national committee, called the Commission on Missions (COM), brought together National Council appointees and mission board representatives to suggest a national missions budget. Local churches were informed of the suggested dollar amount to be raised each year. This new centralized system won many supporters, including members of women's boards. The treasurer of the WBMP lauded it

as “a systematic plan for the co-operative, not competitive distribution of all funds. . . . Congregationalism united in purpose, effort, and giving.”(18)

MISSIONARY PRESSURE

Pressure to merge mission boards came from directions other than the churches and the National Council. The first group to suggest the consolidation of the women’s boards with the American Board was a missionary group in China. The Council of the North China mission station, in their 1920 annual meeting, recommended “that the American Board and the three Woman’s Boards be combined in a single organization which will assure a more unified and efficient administration of foreign missionary interests both in the United States and upon mission fields, and secure a larger recognition and more adequate support for woman s work.”

Missionaries observed that the American divisions, besides causing administrative problems, were difficult for the Chinese to understand. Noting that “at this time . . . so many former methods of organization are being overhauled and reorganized and made to give account of themselves and their reasons for existence throughout the world,” the missionaries urged the American Board and women’s boards to discuss merger at their next annual meeting.(19)

Initially the American Board expressed surprise at the North China vote and assured the women that it considered the missionaries’ action “rather beyond their jurisdiction.” The American Board left the women free to close the issue at this point. The women discussed the matter briefly and then dropped it. The seeds of consolidation had been planted, however, by missionaries-the very people the mission boards existed to support.(20)

COOPERATION

Throughout the 1920s momentum toward merging mission societies increased. The various mission agencies cooperated more fully, led by the women’s boards. In 1921 the three mainland women’s boards, feeling that their administrative work overlapped and sometimes conflicted, formed a cooperative council to unify procedures and advise the separate boards. The women chose a cooperative council as a middle way between the extremes of merging into one body, or functioning on a case-by-case basis. The women demonstrated their preference for greater cooperation but did not destroy individual board identity through merger.(21)

As the women’s foreign mission boards increased cooperation among themselves, they also began to break down the boundary between foreign and home mission work. Among Congregationalists, the two activities had been carried on by separate and sometimes rival boards. Each board had its own independent structure, so that local auxiliaries of the women’s foreign mission boards existed alongside local auxiliaries to the home mission boards. In the late 1800s women in the Far West had integrated some home and foreign mission board activities, planning joint projects and sometimes even sharing state officers. The women preferred cooperation to consolidation, pooling efforts but retaining individual board identities. Western women took pride and pleasure in cooperation, noting that they were pointing the way for the rest of American Congregationalism. “It may be that the Pacific Coast is destined to demonstrate the feasibility and desirability of closer relationships along these lines,” commented the WBMP secretary.(22)

While Congregational women cooperated freely among themselves, especially in the Far West,

tensions increased in the relationship of the women's boards to the American Board. Male decision makers were reluctant to open the door to women's participation. In January 1921 the Woman's Boards' Council voted to ask the Prudential Committee (executive committee of the American Board) if a representative of the women's boards might sit with them. But it was not until ten months later that an invitation actually appeared. In October, Letitia Thomas Evans, chair of the Woman's Boards' Council, reported with some asperity to the WBMP president, "I am going to be in Boston for the Prudential Committee meeting on the 25th, in response to the *first* of its 'frequent invitations to attend one or another of its meetings.'" She reported some trepidation before the meeting:

I feel that history is in the making and I am experiencing a "thrill" at the thought of being a part of it. I trust the realization will be as full of thrill. I am afraid I will have stage fright and that my brain will not function in the presence of this conservative, august body. It will take some time before we can expect to win the confidence of the members but I will be as quiet and humble and receptive, as I can be on occasions!! That always makes a hit with men!!(23)

Apparently it did, because cooperation between the women and the men intensified. By 1923 the three Woman's Boards and the American Board were discussing the corporate membership of women on the American Board.(24)

The American Board was not alone in opening its proceedings to women. The Commission on Missions, the overseeing committee from the National Council and the mission boards, had always included a few women. It was intended to be a representative body.(25) However, no woman served on its executive committee. At the end of 1921 the executive committee invited one secretary from each missionary and benevolent society to participate in its meetings, without vote. The three women's boards together were allowed one representative. It was a meager gain, but a real one.(26)

At the same time the American Board and the women's boards moved toward cooperation in another venture-publication. Before 1922 each of the four foreign boards published independent periodicals. The American Board's *Missionary Herald* was the oldest and carried the largest circulation. In 1922, in the interests of unifying foreign missions activities in the churches, the women's boards merged their publications into the *Missionary Herald*. They did so reluctantly, since it meant losing a special means of communication with their constituency. The minutes of the WBMP note that they discontinued publishing the *Bulletin* only for the sake of "playing fair with the other Boards who are giving up their magazines."(27) In the *Missionary Herald* each women's board was given a small number of pages each month and editorial representation. An article in the first issue revealed what had prompted the new joint venture:

Beyond question it is a right step forward, an adjustment that meets the temper of the times; that makes for consolidation and co-operation, and that recognizes the entire and united life of the churches that are behind the enterprise. . . . The call is to get together, to move forward in step, to rally all the forces for a more adequate advance.(28)

The "temper of the times" calling for cooperation and efficiency made such a move necessary.

CONSOLIDATION

While Congregational women worked for greater cooperation among mission boards, national Congregational leadership explored the consolidation of the boards. In January 1923 Charles E. Burton, secretary of the National Council and ex officio general secretary of the Commission on Missions, presented a proposal to the COM that accelerated the process of consolidation. Referred to as "Dr. Burton's Plan," the proposal called for making the Commission on Missions the central and sole fundraising agency for all benevolent and mission societies. Burton thought that the Apportionment Plan failed to solve the problem of mission board competition for funds. As many as eleven societies appeared on the list of apportionments every year-boards for foreign missions, home missions, church extension, education, plus the three women's boards. The Apportionment Plan had centrally organized fund-raising, but it did not address the problem of multiple requests for contributions. Burton proposed that the Commission on Missions become the central promotional agency.

Women responded promptly and negatively to Burton's proposal. The Woman's Boards' Council wrote in February 1923 that it favored cooperation but opposed a central promotional agency, since it would have a "disastrous" effect on the work of the women's boards. The women's boards would have to sacrifice more for the proposed system than either the American Board or any of the home mission societies because the women's boards had their own promotional system. Under Burton's plan for unified promotion the state branches-the intermediate agencies between local auxiliaries and the regional boards-would cease to exist. This would eliminate the boards' primary channel of communication with local women. In addition, since supporters of women's boards contributed twice to missions-once to the general church fund and once to their own mission projects-the women warned that Burton's plan would eliminate independent giving and decrease funds available for women's mission work.(29)

As a result of discussion raised by Burton's plan, in 1924-25 the Commission on Missions took steps to consolidate the mission societies. It appointed a Committee of Twelve (including four women) to investigate the possibilities of merging. The committee was asked to set guidelines to help the church spend money "in a way that produces the largest results for the Kingdom; one that will bear the closest scrutiny of keen-minded businessmen; one that the new generation, used to cooperation, will not be impatient of on account of an unnecessary number of organizations."(30) The times had changed; Congregationalists, emphasizing businesslike efficiency, could no longer tolerate wasted money or multiple agencies. A "new generation" had grown up during the Progressive Era that demanded new church structures.

The Committee of Twelve reported back to the Commission on Missions in January 1925, recommending the reorganization of mission societies into four boards: (1) foreign missions (consolidating the women's boards with the American Board); (2) home missions (consolidating women's groups into church-wide agencies); (3) education; and (4) ministerial pensions. Each of the four new boards would be composed of "not less than one third women." The committee asked all mission and benevolent societies to group themselves into the four categories, to study the possibilities for merging and present proposals for consolidation to the committee. The women's boards and the American Board were instructed to work out their consolidation so that "the splendid effectiveness of the Woman's Boards as educational and collecting agencies be not impaired."(31)

The mission boards responded in various ways to this radical proposal. The home mission societies strongly resisted the idea of merging. But the foreign boards, although wary of losing their independence, agreed to consider consolidation. The Woman's Boards' Council met with the

American Board Cabinet in February 1925 for a three-day conference to formulate a merger proposal.

The resulting ‘Tentative Plan’⁽³²⁾ was a carefully considered and highly specific outline for consolidation. It listed eight stipulations drawn up by the Woman’s Boards’ Council. The women’s boards would agree to consolidate on two conditions: if the women’s home missions unions merged with the male-led homeland societies, and if the Prudential Committee (executive committee) and the corporate membership of the American Board included at least one third women.

Following these stipulations the boards outlined the structure of the merged organization. Women were given one third of the membership on all committees. Fifteen of the forty-five directors would be women, as well as seven of the twenty members of the Prudential Committee. Women would make up one third of the corporate members at large. Women would hold at least one third of the departmental secretary posts. In some departments that plan called for near parity of men and women officers.

Appended to the detailed outline was a statement by the women discussing the advantages and disadvantages of consolidation. The statement provides clues to their attitudes toward consolidation. The women agreed that the first advantage of the new arrangement would be eliminating confusion in the churches by merging the homeland societies as well as the foreign boards. The women’s insistence that the home missions societies merge indicates that the women’s boards did not want to be alone in sacrificing their independence. The women acknowledged that now that mission work for women was integrated into the system of church benevolences (by way of the Apportionment Plan), there was less need for separate women’s collecting agencies. Foreign missionaries would approve of simpler methods of promotion and administration. They believed that younger women would support the integrating of men and women in organizational life. Finally, they indicated that women’s participation might improve the quality of administration, especially if women’s efficient methods were used by the whole organization instead of only by the women’s part of it.

On the one hand, all the advantages listed by the women benefited the women’s boards themselves only indirectly. Major beneficiaries were the constituencies of the women’s boards- missionaries, local churches, and the denomination as a whole.

Disadvantages, on the other hand, affected the women’s boards and the whole denomination. In the new structure women might lose their sense of ownership of mission work without a separate budget and the close working relationships cultivated by the women’s boards. Alongside this danger lay the possibility that if women entered the mainstream, men would no longer do their share.

Other disadvantages listed by the women show keen insight into administrative procedure. They feared that reorganization would decrease the level of giving for the period of readjustment. They felt that “a larger organization with more machinery” would not be more efficient, as the national leadership believed, but less effective. They suspected that reducing the number of administrators could diminish efficiency in the long run, since a corporate sense of ownership would be harder to maintain. They also opposed increasing the centralized power of the Commission on Missions, fearing that mission boards would lose autonomy.

After the hard work of hammering out a plan acceptable to both the Woman’s Boards’ Council

and the American Board Cabinet, the “Tentative Plan” was circulated to each of the women’s boards and the full American Board. Each of the three women’s boards carefully reviewed the document and in April 1925 approved the substance of it.(33)

BETRAYAL

In May 1925 the American Board and the women’s boards reported their findings to the Committee of Twelve. However, the document presented was not the carefully outlined “Tentative Plan,” but a more general statement drawn up by the Prudential Committee of the American Board. It seems that the Prudential Committee had unilaterally decided it was unnecessary to go into such detail in the report to the Committee of Twelve. At the last minute they had discarded the “Tentative Plan” and had drawn up an alternative and less detailed summary of agreement among the boards. The boards had barely enough time to review the document before reporting back to the Committee of Twelve.

The new document, the “Report to the Committee on Missionary Organization,”(34) was less attentive to women’s concerns than the “Tentative Plan.” It did not list the women’s eight stipulations regarding merger (although some of them were incorporated in a list of five conditions at the end). It did not discuss advantages and disadvantages, as did the first document. The “Tentative Plan” had specified the numbers of women and men to be elected to each office, approaching parity. The new report avoided detail.

Despite these changes, the women’s boards accepted the new document as necessary for coming to agreement with the American Board. They trusted the Prudential Committee’s word on the appropriateness of the statement because they had to report to the Committee of Twelve in less than three weeks. Helen B. Calder, secretary of the Woman’s Boards’ Council, mailed the statement to the women’s boards for approval. “I hope you can have time for unhurried consideration of this proposal,” she wrote. “We do not want to approve of anything because the time is short, but it is important that we have a united statement to present, and that may mean for all of us some compromises.”(35) The compromising done with the revised statement fell heavily on the women.

Although all three women’s boards approved the new report on time, when Calder and a representative from the American Board met with the Committee of Twelve, they reported that opposition to the merger was growing on their boards. The American Board felt that plans for consolidation were being forced. They thought present levels of cooperation with the women’s boards were adequate. Calder reported fears that the new organization might lose the distinctive efficiency of women’s work. She added that women who supported a merger felt that the reluctance of the men would keep the process from working. Calder later said, “I testified to the unselfish attitude of all the women who have discussed the matter, expressing my conviction that they have been considering it with the thought in mind of the best good of the work, not of maintaining their own organizations.”(36)

Eight days after the meeting with the Committee of Twelve, Letitia Evans, chair of the Woman’s Boards’ Council, wrote to Helen Calder of the Boston Woman’s Board. She voiced her discouragement with the process of consolidation. “More and more I realize that our men, even the friendliest, have to travel a long long way before they include women in their thinking.”(37)

During the summer of 1925, before the National Council meeting in October when the Commit-

tee of Twelve would make its final proposal, the women's boards considered pros and cons of consolidation. The discussion in the Woman's Board of Missions for the Pacific provides clues to the attitudes of the women toward merger.

Letitia Evans, former president of the WBMP, traveled from Boston to take part in WBMP discussion. She reported that the Prudential Committee of the American Board 'was not at all keen to take women on its board. It would mean losing members that the secretaries feel they cannot lose.' She advised refusing to merge unless the women's home missionary groups also merged with the homeland societies. She said that in a merger, the mission societies would come more directly under The National Council, and she did not want this to happen to the women's boards, if the home missions women retained their independence. "If we merge with the American Board we come under the National Council; cannot lift a finger unless the National Council let us do it. If the Home Boards do not merge, the [Woman's Home Missionary] Federation is a free lance."(38)

Evans' principal opponent was Mrs. J. H. Lash. Lash was president of the Southern California Women's Missionary Society, a group resulting from the merger of the WBMP branch and the corresponding women's home missions union. Because of the happy cooperation experienced between home and foreign missions women in her district, Lash did not believe that confusion would be caused by merging foreign boards and not home societies. Further, Lash reported that to the rank-and-file women of southern California, consolidation meant only working for the full Congregational apportionment figure (instead of only the women's boards' share). Because they were already doing this, merging mission boards would not change activities on the local level. Lash concluded, "I am all for merger every time."(39)

The WBMP discussion highlights the differences between women at the national level and in local groups. National leaders of the women's boards tried to protect the rights of their boards, especially vis-à-vis the home societies. Women on the West Coast, especially the rank-and-file women, saw no need to compete with the home missions agencies, since a great deal of cooperation already existed. The national women's leaders, perhaps because of their awareness of and contact with prominent denominational leaders (most of whom were men), tried to protect the independence of their boards against encroachment by centralized bureaucracy. Local women, especially those in the Far West who seldom came into contact with the leaders located in the East, did not see the possible threats to their status and were less protective of their individual organizations.

FINAL APPROVAL

In October 1925 the Committee of Twelve reported to the National Council the results of its yearlong probe into merging benevolent societies. The final recommendation was even more radical than the fourfold consolidation it had proposed in January.. It called for bringing all existing agencies together into two mission societies, one home and one foreign. When the home societies opposed this recommendation, it was modified to unify the home societies only at the level of boards of directors.(40)

The American Board and the women's boards, however, were challenged to consolidate completely. A new Prudential Committee would include "at least one-third women," who "should be co-ordinate with the men in every respect as an integral part of the management, in order that the

values of the Boards may be conserved.” Women were to be considered as departmental secretaries. However, the proposal retained local women’s auxiliaries, “existing because of the basic fact that many more women than men have free time for church work.” This rather patronizing comment, added to the proposal after discussion by the National Council, showed how the council assumed that women would continue to do the majority of the work on the local level while holding a minority of official posts in the organization. The council also approved of the merger because it “would place the women unitedly back of all church interests and responsibilities instead of behind only part of them.” There was an underlying fear on the part of national church leaders that if women were allowed to retain separate organizations, they would channel resources away from the national budget.(41)

The National Council approved the Committee of Twelve’s proposal for complete consolidation of the women’s boards with the American Board and the partial unification of home mission societies. Each mission board met separately to discuss the proposal, and within a year all had voted to accept them.(42) In November 1925 the WBM (Boston) and the WBMI (Chicago) voted to merge. The WBMP (San Francisco) waited until its annual meeting in September 1926.(43)

When that historic vote was cast ... which made the Woman’s Board of Missions for the Pacific one with the American Board, there was a finality about it similar to the feeling which possesses one upon handing in an examination paper. . . . This was the end of opportunity offered through the W.B.M.P. and the door was closed never to be reopened.

A brighter vision soon dispelled this disheartening one. . . . These fifty-three years marked not the extent of life of the W.B.M.P. but instead a time of sowing whose resultant harvests should continue through years never-ending.(44)

The women acknowledged that contemporary trends toward streamlining organizations had influenced their decision. “The new movement is in the development of unity—all the boards coming together . . . men and women working side by side in the churches [and] national organizations. This spirit of unity is the adventure of the new day.”(45)

Actual consolidation took effect on January 1, 1927, as each board began transferring funds to the new merged American Board. Each board retained a holding corporation to look after assets that could not be disbursed immediately.(46) The era of separate and independent Congregational women’s mission boards came to an end.

IMPACT

Women’s predictions about the disadvantages of consolidation proved accurate in the years after 1927. By 1929 income had decreased and the new American Board reported that “the merger has laid an extra burden upon the treasury of the American Board.(47)

The merger placed extra strain on all Congregational missions structures as they adjusted to new arrangements. The secretary of the National Council acknowledged that “without doubt some momentum was lost in turning aside for a little to repair the machinery.”(48)

The lost momentum was never fully recovered. In fact, the “improved organization” never became satisfactory to the mission boards or to the denomination as a whole. By 1927 the Commission on Missions reported that eight mission boards had rescinded their 1925 votes to approve unification. Furthermore, the Commission on Missions, a prime mover behind the plan to con-

solidate mission boards, lost favor because the boards continued to mistrust centralized authority. A new Missions Council took its place, composed entirely of mission board members.(49)

Women working for missions suffered a serious loss of morale. By 1939 the treasurer of one of the women's boards' holding companies wrote sadly to the American Board treasurer; "Another Board year is ending. For us it is almost as if it had not been, for we have had only one or two small meeting[s] and no business of importance to transact."(50)

Although consolidation integrated the American Board, it did not guarantee women an equal voice in administrative affairs. Women gained only one third of the decision-making seats. Consequently, they were never able to exercise power greater than that of a sizable minority. If American Board decisions had been made by consensus, a ratio of one-third women might have represented a democratic settlement, since the financial portion related to women's work totaled about one third of the American Board.(51) Board decisions, however, were made by majority vote. Women did not have the ability to outvote male board members. The fact that women were legally guaranteed one third of the American Board seats, however, did have a positive influence in subsequent years.

WHY?

Why did the women agree to merge their independent boards into the American Board? Pressure from denominational leaders certainly influenced them, especially the Commission on Missions as an arm of the National Council. Yet under democratic Congregational polity the women's boards were free to depart from the wishes of national leadership, as did the home missions societies, who successfully resisted consolidation.

Male dominance over women in church leadership played a part. The American Board and the National Council were reluctant to admit women to men's committee meetings. The American Board unilaterally dismissed the "Tentative Plan" and substituted a document that was less sensitive to women's concerns. Finally, the American Board agreed to give women only one third of the positions in the new merged board. Had men seriously intended to bring women's agenda into the new structures, they would have agreed to full parity between men and women in all aspects of American Board management.

The Congregational women, however, did possess the right to accept or refuse consolidation. What were their reasons for approving it?

In the first place, the women thought many of the circumstances that led to the formation of independent boards in the nineteenth century had changed. Women were beginning to be included in the decision making of the American Board. Women's concerns were no longer excluded from the missions budget. Through the Apportionment Plan women felt fully integrated into the denominational budget. In the minds of some women this nearly equaled consolidation.

In the second place, many missionaries requested consolidation. The women's boards took seriously the wishes of the people they existed to support.

Third, women were open to consolidation because of the changes taking place nationally in the status of women. The Nineteenth Amendment giving women the vote passed in 1920. Women, especially the younger generation of women, were eager to join the ecclesiastical mainstream. The era of separate organizations seemed over. Those who continued to prefer them appeared

conservative in a new era of cooperation.

Finally, women were influenced by the American turn toward bureaucratic solutions for social and political problems. The nationwide emphasis on businesslike efficiency led Protestants-both men and women-to trust in organizational procedures for curing religious ills.

Yet ideal organizational life took different forms for Congregational men and women. National leaders (mostly men) pursued consolidation, whereas women preferred cooperation among separate organizations. The women celebrated cooperation because they believed it led to ecumenical and world unity. By working together peacefully with other women and men within the same denomination, they hoped to further the cause of world peace.⁽⁵²⁾ But they consistently drew back from centralized and consolidated organizations. In 1921 women chose to unify their three boards, not by creating a central structure, but by adding a joint council with advisory powers. In 1923 they opposed Burton's plan for a centralized promotional agency. Except for some women in the Far West who welcomed mergers, the women's boards favored cooperation but opposed consolidation. Yet, in the end, pressure from the central Congregational bureaucracy and women's desires to enter the mainstream of church and national life persuaded them to merge.

Unfortunately, consolidation did not accomplish the positive goals that Congregational leaders had promised. Rather, it reinforced trust in bureaucratic solutions, and it furthered a system of male-dominated leadership in the church. Women gave up autonomy, and their unique contributions to foreign missions strategy were lost. It was a high price to pay.

Notes

1. Congregational, Methodist, American Baptist, Presbyterian, and Reformed Church in America.
2. The Hawaiian board (WBMPI), although organized at the same time as the other three boards, remained independent of the organizations on the mainland.
3. Grace T. Davis, *Neighbors in Christ: Fifty-eight Years of World Service by the Woman's Board of Missions of the Interior* (Chicago: Woman's Board of Missions of the Interior, 1926), p. 9. A document written in 1877 to clarify the relationship between the women's boards and the American Board indicates that male denominational leaders continued to think of the women's boards as a type of auxiliary. See "A Few Thoughts on Woman's Boards," *Missionary Herald* 73 (December 1877):392-94, reprinted in Priscilla Stuckey-Kauffman, "For the Sake of Unity: The Absorption of Congregational Woman's Boards of Foreign Missions by the American Board, 1927, with Special Attention to the Woman's Board of Missions for the Pacific" (M.A. thesis, Pacific School of Religion, Berkeley, California, 1985), pp. 141-43. Further documents clarifying the relationship between the women's boards and the American Board were written in 1906 and 1923. The former appears in Fred Field Goodsell, *You Shall Be My Witnesses* (Boston: ABCFM, 1959), p. 166, and the latter in *Missionary Herald* 119 (January 1923):3-4. Both are reprinted in Stuckey-Kauffman, op. cit., pp. 144-46.
4. Minutes of the National Council of the Congregational Churches of the United States, 1921, p. 118.
5. 'A Few Thoughts,' op. cit., p. 394; Minutes of the National Council, 1923, p. 88; Good-

- sell, op. cit., pp. 165-67. The women's contributions represented net figures, since they always subtracted their own administrative and promotional expenses first.
6. Prudential Committee report, *Missionary Herald* 116 (November 1920): 534-35.
 7. Davis, op. cit., pp. 6, 15-16; R. Pierce Beaver, *American Protestant Women in World Mission: A History of the First Feminist Movement in North America* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), pp. 106-7.
 8. For instance, the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society of the Methodist Protestant Church, organized in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 1879, was in 1884 confiscated by a vote of the General Conference, a body comprised only of men. See Beaver, op. cit., pp. 105-6.
 9. Helen Barrett Montgomery, *Western Women in Eastern Lands* (New York: Macmillan, 1914), p. 38.
 10. *Ibid.*, pp. 264-73.
 11. Beaver, op. cit., pp. 184-91.
 12. For lists of committee members see "Preliminary Report of the Committee of Twelve on Missionary Organization, Presented to the Commission on Missions, Chicago, January 21, 1925," Woman's Board of Missions for the Pacific Papers, Badé Institute, Pacific School of Religion, Berkeley, California. For attitudes toward ordained women see "Report of the Commission on Ordained Women, Church Assistants, and Lay Workers," *Minutes of the National Council*, 1921, pp. 37-46.
 13. For a thorough study of the bureaucratic changes taking place in American religion between 1876 and 1929, see Ben Primer, *Protestants and American Business Methods* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1979).
 14. "Constitution of the National Council of the Congregational Churches in the United States," quoted in Gaius Glenn Atkins and Frederick L. Fagley, *History of American Congregationalism* (Boston: The Pilgrim Press, 1942), p. 213.
 15. *Minutes of the National Council*, 1871, pp. 46-47.
 16. *Minutes of the National Council*, 1907, cited in Atkins and Fagley, op. cit., pp. 313f.
 17. Summarized in Atkins and Fagley, op. cit., pp. 309-11.
 18. Henrietta F. Brewer, "The Apportionment Plan and the Board of the Pacific," Woman's Board of Missions for the Pacific, *Thirty-eighth Annual Report*, 1911, p. 11.
 19. W. E. Strong to Elisabeth S. Benton, September 8, 1920, WEMP Papers, Badé Institute, Pacific School of Religion, Berkeley, California.
 20. *Ibid.*
 21. James L. Barton to Henrietta F. Brewer, August 14, 1920; proposal for cooperative council inserted between letters dated June-July 1920; L. T. Evans to Mrs. Kirkwood, November 23, 1920, all found in WBMP Papers.
 22. *History of Fifty Years: Woman's Board of Missions for the Pacific and Program of Jubilee Meetings* (San Francisco, 1923), pp. 32-36; Council of Congregational Woman's For-

- eign Mission Boards, Minutes, February 2, 1923, WBMP Papers; Elisabeth Benton, 'Annual Report of the Assistant Recording Secretary,' WBMP *Forty-seventh Annual Report*, 1920, p. 8.
23. Evans to Mrs. R. C. Kirkwood, October 16, 1921, WBMP Papers.
 24. Woman's Boards' Council minutes, January 8, 1923, WBMP Papers.
 25. In 1913 this had meant that the COM roster consisted of twenty-one men and two women, whose names appeared at the bottom of the list (*Minutes of the National Council 1913*. p. 394). By 1921 the women were no longer listed in last place, but the proportion of women had decreased to three out of forty-nine members (*Minutes of the National Council, 1921*, pp. 5-6).
 26. Evans to Helen Street Ranney, December 6, 1921, WBMP Papers.
 27. WBMP minutes, April 4, 1923, WBMP Papers.
 28. "Hark to the New 'Herald'!" *Missionary Herald* 119 (January 1923):3.
 29. Woman's Boards' Council minutes, February 13, 1923, WBMP Papers.
 30. WBMP minutes, "Main Points," February 6, 1924, WBMP Papers.
 31. "Preliminary Report of the Committee of Twelve on Missionary Organization," WBMP Papers. It is not clear how the proportion of one third women was agreed on. The fourfold structure of benevolent and mission groups was probably borrowed from Presbyterians, who in 1923 had effected sweeping consolidations (including the women's missionary boards) along these lines. See the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), *General Assembly Minutes*, 1923, 1:58-88, cited in Lois A. Boyd and R. Douglas Brackenridge, *Presbyterian Women in America: Two Centuries of a Quest for Status* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1983), p. 61.
 32. "Plan of Proposed Merger of the American Board and the Three Woman's Boards, March 10, 1925," WBMP Papers. Reprinted in Stuckey-Kauffman, op. cit., pp. 147-54.
 33. See Stuckey-Kauffman, op. cit., pp. 97-101, for details of the women's agreements and differences with the "Tentative Plan."
 34. "Report to the Committee on Missionary Organization," WBMP Papers. Reprinted in Stuckey-Kauffman, op. cit., pp. 157-59.
 35. Calder to women's boards, April 28, 1925, WBMP Papers.
 36. Helen Calder, "Report of Meeting of Committee of Twelve in New York City," May 19, 1925, WBMP Papers.
 37. Letitia Evans to Helen Calder, May 27, 1925, American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.
 38. WBMP minutes, August 31, 1925, WBMP Papers.
 39. Ibid.
 40. *Minutes of the National Council*, 1925, pp. 59-62.
 41. Ibid., pp. 58, 67.

42. Atkins and Fagley, *op. cit.*, p. 330.
43. The Pacific Board spent the ensuing nine months discussing the merger proposal and negotiating terms with the appropriate men's committees. For a full review of their negotiations, see StuckeyKauffman, *op. cit.*, pp. 116-18.
44. Rosa B. Ferrier, "After the Merger, Whither?" *WBMP Fifty-third Annual Report, 1926*, p. 2.
45. *Pacific* 76 (October 1926):2.
46. WBMP minutes, April 6, 1927 and December 7, 1927, WBMP Papers.
47. *Minutes of the National Council, 1929*, p. 96, quoted in Atkins and Fagley, *op. cit.*, p. 333.
48. *Minutes of the National Council, 1929*, p. 18, quoted in Atkins and Fagley, *op. cit.*, p. 333.
49. Goodsell, *op. cit.*, pp. 148-49.
50. Mrs. W. C. Blasdale to Harold Beicher, August 31, 1939, WBMP Papers.
51. Receipts of the Woman's Boards in 1925 equaled 34 percent of the American Board's. See the *Congregational Yearbook, 1925* (Boston: Executive Committee of the National Council of Congregational Churches, 1925), pp. 19, 26.
52. Grace T. Davis of the WBMI wrote: "We have endeavored to show a great and inescapable sense of the value of working together. The very vocabulary of the annual reports [shows that] words [such as] cooperation, interdenominationalism, internationalism, unification, occur with increasing frequency" (*Neighbors in Christ*), p. 200. See also Stuckey-Kauffman, *op. cit.*, pp. 81-83.