

REMEMBERING HER

" . . . what she has done will be told in remembrance of her."
Matthew 26:13



Article 21

Retrieving Women's Histories

[NOTE: During 2006-2007 Barbara Brown Zikmund wrote 20 brief articles about women in the history of the UCC for the REMEMBERING HER website. This article resumes that series by highlighting the history of women's organizations in the Southern Christian Churches. The Christians, a loosely structured 19th century frontier religious movement in New England, the trans-Appalachian frontier, and in the South, united with the Congregationalists in 1931 to form the Congregational Christian Churches.]

Women in the Southern Christian Movement

The story of Abigail Roberts highlights the fact that although women were not formally ordained in the Christian movement until after the Civil War, in the early 19th century female laborers preached and started many Christian churches. (*See Remembering Her article #5*) In the 1840s arguments over whether women should be allowed to preach surfaced again. Rebecca Miller, the young wife of a Christian pastor in the Shenandoah Valley, wrote a lengthy exposition about the "Duty of Females" in the newspaper, the *Christian Palladium* (1841), citing many scriptural references supporting the legitimacy of women's place in evangelism. (See LTH volume VII: 11)

Rebecca Miller died soon thereafter, but she is remembered as the first woman who challenged Southern Christian church women to become actively involved in church work and mission. *The History of the Christian Church in the South* by Durwood T. Stokes and William T. Scott (1973) states, "In the South there were doubtless local church groups of women who engaged in community charities and cared for some of the furnishings of the church buildings and pastoral home, but the women among the southern Christians were not a part of any Church-wide organization until 1886."

In that year the northern based American Christian Convention, meeting in New Bedford, Massachusetts, authorized the establishment of a Woman's Board of Foreign Missions and invited Southern women to serve on that board. A few women did, but unfortunately resistance to female delegates at meetings and to the development of separate women's organizations in Southern Christian congregations remained strong. In the 1870s the Eastern Virginia Christian Conference had recommended that a "Ladies Missionary Union" be established in every church, but there is no record that any action was ever taken in any local congregation. It was not until 1906 that the Southern Christian Convention appointed a woman from each Conference to create a new committee charged to organize a "distinct uniform Missionary organization for the women of the Southern Christian Convention." The committee developed a plan that was adopted by the Convention.

Fearful that nothing would come of it, however, in 1911 McDaniel Howsare, husband of the woman who became the first president of the new Southern Christian Convention Board for Woman's Missionary Societies, wrote an article in the *Christian Sun* entitled "The Need of Missionary Societies Among the Women of the South." He suggested that church organizations for women stimulated "literary culture" and "social intercourse," and inspired "larger and more intelligent giving to missions."

Historians and observers of the Christian Church in the South agree that no other organizations of the time did as much for the liberation of southern Christian Church women from the relative obscurity of housekeeping as the missionary societies. "They furnished a medium by which the women learned organization procedure, augmented their knowledge, broadened their perspective, and experienced an independent part in affairs of their Church which prepared them for participation in the world's work generally." Church woman served others, but the most important impact of these societies was the way they empowered the women themselves.

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