

Quilts, Bandages and Efficiency: Mennonite Women's Missionary Societies and the Formation of a Modern Social-Religious Identity in California, 1930-1960

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Mennonite scholars such as Marilyn Peters and Gloria Redekop have argued that in church Mennonite women have enjoyed the most freedom in missionary activity, and suffered the most restriction at administrative levels where male leadership traditionally shut them out.¹ A result of this hierarchy is, as Virginia Brereton described, "Churchwomen, then, were both insiders and outsiders; they were both *of* [italics Brereton's] the Protestant establishment and yet barred from its inner citadel."² This hermeneutic of conflict adds a layer of meaning to women's history in the Mennonite Brethren world. Through an examination of California Mennonite Brethren sewing circles and missionary societies, that complexity of gender relationships, mediated through the process of organizing, is observed. It is, as historian Ann Braude argued, "We must not confuse the ability to endure with the opportunity to influence [and yet] this does not mean that women have been passive victims of religious ideologies."³ There was always social negotiation and a nuanced relationship with ruling church ideologies, even if, for the moment, those negotiations were kept to the world of missions.⁴

When the Reedley women formed their sewing circle in 1913, their stated purpose was, "to organize a mission society in order that they as sisters of the church would be enabled to more specifically serve to further the work of the Lord."⁵ At their inaugural meeting, they articulated an identity centered around piety, where they were sisters in the church, did the work of the Lord, and prayed and read the Bible. Yet, simultaneously

they developed an organizational culture that was democratically created through the election of officers by ballot when “with great enthusiasm the work was begun.”⁶

In promoting their work, both spiritually and practically, the Reedley women sought the blessing of their pastor, Rev. John Berg. Berg “commended them for their noble efforts and advised them to proceed without delay and agreed to bring the matter [of their organizing] to the church membership for approval.”⁷ He did so and the church membership accepted the group with “their blessing and accepted this project as an official service of the Reedley Mennonite Brethren Church.”⁸ The support of the church was “an encouragement for a large number of other sisters to join the new organization and become active participants.”⁹ Their organization was officially recognized at a special church service where Rev. Berg gave a prayer, read Acts 9:35-43, which concerned a woman named Dorcas who helped an invalid with garments she made, and “also gave them much good advice which later proved of great value.”¹⁰ Though the nature of the advice is unknown, one reads of active church support in the creation of this organization.

There were, however, subtle changes in the representation of this sewing circle in anniversary histories of the Reedley Mennonite Brethren Church. The church, for example, redacted the story into a more pietistic one. Although the text describing the start of the “Women’s Missionary Society” in both the 1955 and 1980 commemorative histories are nearly identical in scope and detail, a short phrase was inserted in the 1980 history that deepened an evangelical tone. The 1955 edition concludes with the sentence, “This resulted in the formation of the Pacific District Women’s Missionary Service, the object of which is to keep the missionary societies informed of the ways in which they can assist in carrying out conference projects.”¹¹ In the 1980 edition the corresponding sentence reads, “The main functions of the women’s district conference group are to inform all missionary groups of the district about ways in which they can assist in conference projects, *and to emphasize the importance of prayer to undergird the work of the Mennonite Brethren*”¹² [Italics mine]. The change signalled a fuller incorporation of evangelical culture where the emphasis on practical affairs shifted to individual expressions of piety.

While Reedley developed its sewing circles, the women in nearby Shafter created a similar organization. The church leadership, all men, questioned the need for such a group. It took two years for the church council to accept the sewing circle in principal, and an additional seven

years to approve it fully, which they did in 1928. The circle disbanded in 1934, and, led by Mrs. P.P. Rempel, was reorganized as the “Bible Class and Sewing Hour.”¹³

J.C. Penner and Adolf I. Frantz, authors of the Shafter Mennonite Brethren Church’s fiftieth anniversary book, negatively described the delayed approval by the church council. Penner and Frantz noted that most of the clothes and money given by the church to starving Mennonites in Russia and Canada during the 1920s and 1930s came from the women’s sewing circle. Yet, despite such a service record, the church council’s reluctance to approve the sewing circle only disappeared when the women agreed to buy the church a piano.¹⁴ According to the accounts by Penner and Frantz, it can be argued that the women of the sewing circle exercised agency by creating their own organization within which they chose the work they wanted to do and in resisting church reluctance to include them through negotiation to become an official church organization.

As organizations, the sewing circles were successfully run. According to the “History of the Sewing Circle of the M.B. Church of Shafter,” the first recorded meeting was held on 4 September 1923 with thirty-one women in attendance. It was their fourteenth meeting and normally they met in a member’s home. These meetings opened and closed with singing, prayer and scripture reading. Like their counterparts in Reedley, the Shafter women held annual relief sales and only missed the 1933 sale when they sewed for the Red Cross.¹⁵ From the records, this was their service pattern for much of the 1920s and 1930s.¹⁶

On 2 March 1939, the Shafter women initiated a change in their focus, and “met for the purpose of organizing a Bible Class and sewing hour.”¹⁷ Reasons given by the group for reorganizing into a Bible Class were that “the ladies strongly desired more time to study the Bible under her [Mrs. P.P. Rempel’s] able leadership.”¹⁸ Their projects remained mission oriented and included visiting homes and collecting and mending used clothes for missionaries. Bible study then coincided with their mission activities. Both the needs for Bible study and finding “able leadership” were met from within the group. At this time, their insider status was confirmed both by having negotiated the creation of a successful organization in their church and in meeting their spiritual needs on their own terms. Conversely, the church leadership conferred outsider status upon them during the eight years it took to accept them, and then it was only achieved with a negotiated settlement concerning a piano.¹⁹

After several years, the church deaconate demonstrated some approval of their work when they came to the Bible Class and asked for canned fruit to give to poor people. The women decided to can apricots in June, and requested their membership "to visit some sick or lonely person before the next meeting."²⁰ They canned the apricots in June and then canned approximately 200 quarts of peaches.²¹ By the 1940s, the women of the Shafter Mennonite Brethren Church had established a stable and active mission organization complete with a leadership hierarchy, standardized structure for meeting and exercised agency in deciding on what projects to work, while fulfilling their own spiritual needs from within the group.²²

According to the fiftieth-year-anniversary history, the Reedley Women's Missionary Society conceived their mission broadly, though largely within the Mennonite community. They raised money and needed items for their church building fund, Kings View Homes, a mental health institute, and the local Home for the Aged.²³ As the Reedley Women's Missionary Society sewing circle steadily grew, it constructed a corporate identity through the manufacture of yearbooks. In their yearbooks, which contain the upcoming year's activities and meeting outlines, a different theme for each year was recorded. In 1940 their motto was, "To serve the master is our aim, M. B. Mission Society is our name." Having asserted their identity in sloganized form, they proceeded to elect a slate of twelve officers to run the group.²⁴ Throughout the early 1940s, annual themes included a prayer, "Lord help us to accomplish the greatest possible good in the shortest possible time," and in another slogan, "For God and Home and Everyland,"²⁵ underscoring an identity formed by efficiency and expressed through evangelical catch-phrases.

In 1942 this sewing group, in a mark of self-awareness, created the office of historian. The office of historian went through several incarnations. It began as a separate office in 1942-1943, was combined with Public Chairman in 1944-1945, and dropped completely in 1951 until it was finally paired with the Publicity Chairman in 1957. The duties of historian are not given, but one does find that the historian kept a scrapbook of pictures, such mementos as invitations to banquets, and newspaper clippings that described the group's activities.²⁶ Although the historian appears to have been more a chronicler, to even create an office of historian signaled a self-understanding of their importance to the church.

The Shafter sewing circle did very well through most of the 1940s. They averaged nearly twenty members a year for over sixteen annual meetings and made dozens of comforters and quilts for the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), an inter-Mennonite international relief agency, to distribute along with the thousands of pounds of clothing they annually donated to the MCC. In addition, they worked on several projects for the church and once with the Boy Scouts.²⁷ Yet, because their meetings were also about their own spirituality, the 1945-1946 annual report to the church stated, "For our devotions we usually quoted Bible verses and sang songs, not only for devotions, but also while working."²⁸

In the late 1940s, the Shafter sewing circle overcame some financial difficulty. After the sewing circle ran out of money in March 1947, an appeal was made to the pastor, Rev. H.D. Wiebe. Wiebe placed an announcement in the church bulletin and held a special Easter offering for them, which raised sixty dollars.²⁹ After the special offering they were told, "there would always be money in the church treasury to carry on their work."³⁰ Actions such as this offering, the pastor helping the circle when in need, and the large amount of work the sewing circle did for the church itself, demonstrated a supportive network between the women and the church leadership. This relationship changed, however, when a new pastor coincided with a growing women's movement to create an umbrella organization throughout the Mennonite Brethren Pacific District Conference.

Women's Missionary Service

In October 1948, the Pacific District Conference asked the Reedley Missionary Society

. . . to make a survey of the women's groups in the district, and to report on their activities, finances, and on their distribution of the money. As a result of this survey, the conference saw the necessity for coordination. This resulted in the formation of the Pacific District Women's Missionary Service, the object of which is to keep the missionary societies informed of the ways in which they can assist in carrying out conference projects.³¹

The survey found that there were already eighteen women's groups with approximately 380 members and a combined cash income of approximately \$20,000.00. When the value of relief materials was added together,

it totalled approximately \$40,000.00. Following the report, the Conference was favourably disposed to their formally organizing in order to avoid duplication in the work of individual circles. The Women's Missionary Service (WMS), with the support of the conference and most of the pastors, formally organized on 14 November 1948. There was some resistance, which came mostly from Rev. Waldo Wiebe, the new pastor of the Shafter Mennonite Brethren Church.³²

After the report was given, all that was left was formal recognition at a service in Reedley in November. In a letter dated 12 November 1948, Waldo Wiebe, writing "in the name of the Shafter Mennonite Brethren Church Council," to Rev. J. B. Toews, pastor of the Reedley Mennonite Brethren Church, expressed his disapproval with the whole idea. He informed Toews of the passage of a resolution by the Shafter Mennonite Brethren Church Council:

Now as to the Sewing Circle work and the meeting that is to take place in Reedley Sunday afternoon. You are aware of my personal reaction as to the report at the Conference, and I wish at this time to further convey the feeling of the Church Council which is in perfect agreement and have made the following resolution which we wish that you would present to the sisters who are in charge of calling this meeting: "We, the Church council of the Shafter Mennonite Brethren Church, encourage our sisters to continue with the work but we do not wish them to organize with the intention to report to the Pacific District Conference."³³

Responding to Wiebe's request to read the resolution at the service, Toews wrote, "After consulting with the brethren H.R. Wiens and B.J. Braun, we felt that it would not be a proper procedure to read your letter to the group for as much as the Conference had passed a resolution recommending that this organization be effected." Later Toews suggested, "It would be the proper procedure to register such an opinion to the Conference instead of to the sisters who have proceeded on the strength of our Conference recommendation."³⁴ Wiebe was effectively rebuffed by Toews and the service went as planned.

A closer look at the letter by Wiebe is instructive, for he also wrote:

We have also talked to our Sewing Circle. We have as a church no objection in their planning together and counseling together of how to carry on their work, but our Sewing Circle officers do not wish to

be presented at the conference in a report that is given by their organization as an official Conference organization. They rather choose to work quietly under the direction of our local relief committee and Church Council who shall make it a point to report and carefully pray and support the worthy efforts of our Sewing Circle.³⁵

As Mennonite Brethren historian Valerie Rempel described, this was not the case. The Mennonite Brethren women in Shafter believed their ambitions were ignored and their experience misrepresented. The minutes of the sewing circle demonstrate that the women expected to be in Reedley for the service and were surprised by the request of Wiebe not to attend.³⁶

They respected his request, though not without disappointment. In the minutes of the Shafter sewing circle, several comments regarding this were underlined, and it is only in regards to this issue that any underlining occurs anywhere in their minutes. The underlined portions include, “This is Wednesday [3 November 1948], we met today because we expected to go to Reedley tomorrow to organize as a womens [sic] mission socioety [sic].” The minutes of 18 November 1948 begin with, also underlined, “We didn’t go to Reedley after all.” Two weeks later, on 2 December 1948 the minutes read, “For our devotional Rev. Wiebe read Exodus 35:23 to 26³⁷ and explained to us why he thinks we should not join the womens missionary soicioty [sic].”³⁸ A year later Mrs. Ruben Becker, Mrs. Henry Duerksin and Mrs. Gus Wyand and Mrs. Dan Loewen reported to the Pacific District Conference on behalf of the Shafter sewing circle. The minutes from that meeting conclude, also with underlining, “We talked about joining the missionary socieyte [sic].”³⁹ Despite obstruction from church leadership, the sewing circle still found it in their interest to be a part of the larger WMS and worked to that end.

To signal the beginning of the WMS the organizers of the November 1948 service, were prepared for some resistance by local Mennonite Brethren pastors, for, “We felt that we had to expect some opposition, since any new thing, no matter how good, has usually some opposition.” The WMS was piously evangelical in their response, “It drove us to our knees, and we prayed much for God’s guidance, and that His will be done.” Some of the women thought that the problem was in church leaders who feared a power struggle, “It seemed that some [church leaders] were fearful that the women wanted to be on the Conference Program and gradually would take over.” After the WMS had grown to twenty-eight circles, with a membership of approximately 900, the leading personality behind WMS’ creation, Mrs. Henry Martens, reflected, “We also thank the

Lord for those who were opposed, for it caused us to pray much, and search our hearts to see whether we were really seeking only the glory of God.”⁴⁰ As WMS’ very creation caused concern in the Conference, they resisted such concerns through the evangelical language of prayer, searching of hearts and seeking God’s will.⁴¹

WMS also used the language of exceptionalism to connect their origins and the domestic influence of women to the expansionist trope of the westward course of American settlement:

As people moved westward and new churches were organized, in time they also had their Missionary Societies, the women realizing that there were some things to be done in the kingdom of God which only women could do. As a relief worker wrote, an expectant mother on the verge of despair because of the adverse circumstances, not knowing how she would clothe or feed her baby, found new hope when she saw the little embroidered designs on the baby garments and the label, “In the Name of Christ!” Today every church in the Pacific District Conference has one or more such groups, with a total of eighteen groups, an approximate membership of three hundred and eighty.⁴²

After mixing such images as the westward expansion, maternal strength, and power in child rearing, she acknowledged the historiographical issue of women’s history, “It is difficult to give an accurate report of all that the women do, as women do numerous little things in the home that go unnoticed and yet mean so much in making a home pleasant, which is also true in our societies. Too, a great deal has been done of which no record has been kept.”⁴³ The report is a clear articulation of the place of women in their world and their self-awareness of doing unreported, though important, work for family and society. Without formal recognition and a presence at the Pacific District Conference annual meeting, they accomplished plenty both within and without the Mennonite world. The message of traditional womanhood, grounded in the care of a family, was fused with their self-initiated mission activity and even national expansion.

The following year, the WMS Executive spent time locating the functional place of the WMS within the larger machinery of the Conference. In February 1949, they adopted the tentative name “Pacific Coast Women’s Missionary Society.” The purpose of this society was set out in a series of resolutions: “To be of help and to work with the individual circles; to try and distribute the work of supplying the needs of going

missionaries and those out in the field; to call for unified prayer for our missionaries and relief workers.”⁴⁴ They “divided the work into 6 phases: Prayer, Missionary Program, Missionary Sewing, M.C.C., Extension Work, and Home for aged.” A set of specific responsibilities was drawn up for the six phases “to avoid duplication our work at one place, and perhaps avoid omitting some needs entirely at another field.”⁴⁵ Their purpose was to organize efficiently the initially grass roots, spontaneously created, sewing circles established before 1948.

Within a year of organizing, there was interaction with male church leaders. On 15 November 1949, Rev. A.E. Janzen, General Conference Missionary Executive Secretary, spoke at the WMS annual meeting. The minutes note, “He stressed the fact to us how fortunate women in America are compared to the women of heathen lands. Christianity changes woman’s place from slavery to a higher level of understanding.”⁴⁶ Although Janzen’s view of the role of women within the structures of Christianity is ambivalent from this report, J.B. Toews, who was always supportive of the WMS, spoke in 1956 and “stressed the important part the woman has in the motivation of the spiritual program in our conference.”⁴⁷ The part that women had in mid-twentieth century Mennonite Brethren Pacific Conference work, while important and understood here as a “spiritual program,” expanded dramatically through the 1950s. With such expansion came changes in self-identity.

Through the 1950s, at least two themes dominated the WMS. First, the WMS continued a process of professionalizing and expansion in relief work; and second, the male leadership both sought help from the WMS while expressing a vision of traditional domesticity. In post-war America, an ideal of domesticity was reiterated by society as men returned from war and women were expected to return home from the factories. This process was reinforced by a baby boom in which the women had to raise and nurture a growing number of children. It has been argued that women joined social organizations or clubs as part of this rise in domesticity. Those Mennonite women joined the WMS, as a social organization is clear. Throughout the 1950s attendance rose in California’s WMS sewing circles, and the mixing of personal piety and social action was kept intact. The argument for American women, especially homemakers, to join clubs was contextualized by a pervading culture of conformism in the 1950s.⁴⁸

The WMS both encouraged conformism in their organizational structure, and presented Mennonite women with an opportunity to influence the Pacific District Conference of the Mennonite Brethren. It was

an agency of conformism in that all local groups held essentially the same type of meeting, all women in the church were asked to attend, and the stated purpose of the WMS was to provide a unifying structure to relief work to avoid duplication. WMS was a form of corporatism that prized an understood chain of authority, streamlined operations, and sense of professionalizing progress. The WMS also opened up the Mennonite world for its women as Mennonite convictions were finding institutional expression in schools, hospitals and relief work. WMS effectively fused piety, social relief, and professional stratification.

In 1954, the WMS made several decisions to develop its structural identity. A constitution was adopted with nine articles that established the functioning of the society. Their purpose was codified as, "To promote spiritual growth. To help the various needs of our church, District Conference and General Conference with prayers, sewing, donations in kind and cash."⁴⁹ Within the constitution a voting mechanism was created, membership requirements established, and an Executive Committee and a smaller Executive Board created. The only deference made to male leadership in the document was the automatic inclusion of pastors' wives in the WMS and the WMS Executive Board. Power within the WMS Executive Committee was increased whereby they could by-pass a two-thirds majority vote and call a special meeting of the executive board. At the same meeting, they decided that the collection of all monies be sent to the secretary-treasurer. This shift implied a growing centralizing of power.⁵⁰ By the mid-1950s, the WMS grew more professional, rationalized and the Executive Committee gathered for itself increased authority.

As WMS developed professionally during the 1950s, it also increased its denominational presence. During the fall of 1956, the WMS made two recommendations concerning relief projects. The first supported a missionary nurse at the Maternity Hospital in Africa for \$1000.00 a year; the second read, "we accept an educational project [providing] groceries, clothing and baby furniture, at the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary."⁵¹ Education projects such as the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary dominated the WMS during the 1960s.

Despite WMS' increased conference presence in supporting missionary work and education, some Mennonite leaders still considered them little more than free help. In 1959, when Pacific Bible Institute and the Junior College opened a new classroom wing, the school held a social function for its dedication. In a letter P.A. Enns, Chair of the West Area Committee, Board of Education, Conference of the Mennonite Brethren

Church of North America and Krimmer Mennonite Brethren Church, to the WMS, asked:

Since the sisters of the Womens [sic] Missionary Service are so actively engaged in the Educational program of our Conference, the committee would like to extend a special invitation to all the sisters of the service. We would further ask whether a representation [sic] from each of the various circles would be willing to serve the refreshments during the open house.⁵²

Despite WMS' expanded role throughout the decade, some in church leadership still treated them as hosts to serve punch.⁵³

The process undertaken by the WMS to expand as a relief organization, replete with all the trappings of an institution, was formalized in October 1960. At that time, one of original committees of the WMS changed its name from "Missionary Sewing Committee," to the, "Missionary Supply Committee." With this change, the WMS identified themselves with a broader task than serving refreshments, though not all WMS activity reflected the trend.

In the 1955-1956 yearbook, the Dinuba Mennonite Brethren sewing circle had as its theme, "The Christian Woman." Under the rubric of a Christian woman the following devotionals were held: "Her Church and Conduct," "Her Responsibility and Influence in the Home," "Her Position and Service in the Church," "Her Avenues of Witness and Service in the Community," and "Her Position on the Mission Field."⁵⁴ Meanwhile, in Reedley, the themes for much of the 1950s kept to the image of church expansion with one example connecting it to domesticity, "We Sew and Serve." Other annual themes included, "Wider Horizons: The Gospel for the Whole World," and "Spread the Sail."⁵⁵ These examples indicate that important social movements work within their own historical universe and as such articulate some of its assumptions. Yet working within that universe of maternal assumptions is only a partial story, for women in these same organizations exercised agency in their responses to the spiritual and social needs they found in themselves, in their church, and the world.

Through the 1960s, some of the older themes continued while new ones appeared. The yearbooks of the Reedley Mennonite Brethren Church's Women's Missionary Society assumed ever-increasing apocalyptic imagery with rocket ships, a clock set to five minutes to twelve and a recurring image of a cross superimposed over the earth. By 1970 the

words, "Behold He Cometh [to] Occupy" adorned the cover of their yearbook.⁵⁶

Conclusion

This essay on gender, agency, identity and organization, supports Amanda Porterfield's thesis that the "authority" of women in "idealized perceptions," while possibly damaging, also carried social agency. Therefore, when women transformed their world by extending the ideals of "domestic pietism," they had extended their roles in family and home outward. For the Mennonites in California, women were part of the "cult of domesticity" exercising "domestic pietism," while seminary presidents came, cup in hand, seeking funds procured initially through "sewing."⁵⁷

Through the WMS, domestic work, such as sewing and mending clothing, was transformed into an efficient set of denominational organizations that, through negotiations, received conference recognition and exercised a measure of influence. In effect, this expanded their domestically defined pietism to incorporate society, on their terms, as derived from notions of responsibility for family. These women did not abandon their Mennonite identity; rather, they used it in the context of social outreach and mission activity to find a recognized role and measure of leadership within the larger denominational structures and community. It was a method to navigate between the insider/outsider dichotomies of their identity in the Mennonite Brethren church.

The WMS provided more than quilts for missionaries. It provided identity and a sense of autonomy for women in a denomination that remained largely ambivalent to their role. In response to that ambivalence, or even outright opposition, they created a social organization and transformed it into a modernized service oriented institution. The process of modernization through the 1940s and 1950s transformed a series of unconnected sewing circles into a large umbrella organization that rose over a quarter of a million dollars for relief work in the 1950s.⁵⁸ When male church leaders from various institutions came to the WMS asking for money to help run schools and hospitals, the women discussed and voted on each proposal. Not acting as a rubber stamp, the women discussed and voted on each proposal.

In April 1961, at an Executive Committee meeting of the WMS, perhaps the clearest expression of this identity formation was given:

Mrs. Brandt reviewed the work of the Women's Missionary Service. She related how the organization had begun with 18 circles twelve years ago and now has 40 in number. She spoke of seeing the Liberty Bell and how it symbolizes freedom, and yet, through the years, so many changes have taken place in our land. So, too, many changes have taken place in the work of the Women's Missionary Service. Our work is increasing as new fields of service are opening. But, we are not to forget the purpose of W. M. S. which was set forth by the first group of sisters as they met to organize. "To promote spiritual growth. To help the various needs of our church, District conference and General Conference with our prayers, sewing, donations in kind and cash." We must forget our personal feelings and seek that which is best for our growing organization.⁵⁹

In addition, this statement, made in the context of navigating the various cultural claims on womanhood, contained a real sense of self-determination. These women experienced and exercised autonomy, made choices and worked with and against the strictures of the day. This statement fused domestic pietism with modernization. Though it supported the traditional church hierarchy, it also subverted it when, in conclusion, the women of WMS were asked to be selfless in regards to their own feelings, not for the church, but for the WMS.

Endnotes

1. Marilyn Peters, "Women in the Christian Church," *Your Daughters Shall Prophesy: Women in Ministry in the Church*, ed. John E. Toews, Valerie Rempel, and Katie Funk Wiebe (Winnipeg, MB: Kindred Press, 1992), 157-158, 178; and Gloria Neufeld Redekop, *The Work of Their Hands: Mennonite Women's Societies in Canada* (Toronto: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1996), 10.
2. Virginia Lieson Brereton, "United and Slighted: Women as Subordinated Insiders," *Between the Times: The Travail of the Protestant Establishment in America, 1900-1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 147. See also Karen Anderson, "Western Women: The Twentieth-Century Experience," *The Twentieth-Century West: Historical Interpretations*, ed. Gerald D. Nash and Richard Etulain (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989), 101.

3. Ann Braude, "Women's History Is American Religious History," *Retelling U.S. Religious History*, ed. Thomas A. Tweed (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 91-92.
4. The women in missions theme has received among the most scholarly attention, for examples of this regarding the Mennonite Brethren see the following two articles by Valerie Rempel, "'She hath Done What She Could': The Development of the Women's Missionary Service in the Mennonite Brethren Churches of the United States," *Bridging Troubled Waters: Mennonite Brethren at Mid-Twentieth Century*, ed. Paul Toews (Winnipeg: Kindred Productions, 1995), 149-164; and "Early Missionary Society Activity Among U.S. Mennonite Brethren Women," *Direction* 24, No. 2 (Fall 1995): 36-46.
5. "History from 1913," in *Diamond Jubilee 75 Years of Service*, 20, Reedley Mennonite Brethren Church Records, Box 5, File: Women's Missionary Service 1957-1970, 1985-1988, Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies-Fresno (hereafter CMBS-F).
6. "History from 1913," 20.
7. "History from 1913," 20.
8. "History from 1913," 20.
9. "History from 1913," 20.
10. "History from 1913," 21.
11. *50th Jubilee 1905-1955: Mennonite Brethren Church Reedley, California* (N.p., 1955), 47.
12. *The Church Alive in its 75th Year 1905-1980* (Reedley, CA: The 75th Anniversary Committee, 1980), 105, 107.
13. J.C. Penner and Adolf I. Frantz, *Through the Years: A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church of Shafter, California Its Organization and Its Development 1918-1968* (N.p.: Fiftieth Anniversary Celebration, 1968), 7; and, Valerie Rempel, "'She Hath Done What She Could': The Development of the Women's Missionary Services in the Mennonite Churches of the United States" (M.A. Thesis, Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary, 1992), 25-27.
14. Penner and Frantz, *Through the Years*, 7.
15. "History of the Sewing Circle of the M.B. Church of Shafter," Shafter Mennonite Brethren Church Records, Microfilm Reel #77, frames 1402, 1404, CMBS-F.

16. "History of the Sewing Circle of the M. B. Church of Shafter," Shafter Mennonite Brethren Church Records, Microfilm Reel #77, frames 1441, CMBS-F. By April 1939, singing became a regular feature of meetings.
17. Minutes 2 March 1939, Shafter Mennonite Brethren Church Records, Microfilm Reel #77, frame 1439, CMBS-F.
18. Minutes 2 March 1939, Shafter Mennonite Brethren Church Records, Microfilm Reel #77, frame 1439, CMBS-F.
19. Shafter Mennonite Brethren Church Records, Microfilm Reel #77, frames 1436, 1439-1440, CMBS-F.
20. Minutes 11 May 1939, and 25 May 1939, Shafter Mennonite Brethren Church Records, Microfilm Reel #77, frames 1450-1451, CMBS-F.
21. Minutes 19 June 1939, and 10 August 1939, Shafter Mennonite Brethren Church Records, Microfilm Reel #77, frames 1452, 1454, CMBS-F.
22. Lynda McIntosh Thirlwall, a student of American quilting, observed that "quilting for numerous Mennonites has become a testimony to their commitment to mission work," as it related to an expression of faith in its sale for raising mission money (see Lynda McIntosh Thirlwall, "Mennonite Quilts of Fresno County California: 1900-1940" [M.S. thesis, California State University, Fresno, 1994, 14-15]; Rempel, "She hath Done What She Could," 27).
23. *50th Jubilee 1905-1955: Mennonite Brethren Church Reedley, California*, 47.
24. *M.B. Mission Society Yearbook, 1940*, Reedley Mennonite Brethren Church Records, Box 5, File: Women's Missionary Society 1940-1947, CMBS-F.
25. *M.B. Mission Society Yearbook, 1940-1941*, and *1942-1943*, Reedley Mennonite Brethren Church Records, Box 5, File: Women's Missionary Society 1940-1947, CMBS-F.
26. *M.B. Mission Society Yearbook, 1942, 1942-1943, 1944-1945*, Reedley Mennonite Brethren Church Records, Box 5, File: Women's Missionary Society 1940-1947, CMBS-F; *M.B. Mission Society Yearbook 1951-1952*, Reedley Mennonite Brethren Church Records, Box 5, File: Women's Missionary Society 1947-1957, CMBS-F; *M.B. Mission Society Yearbook 1957-1958*, Reedley Mennonite Brethren Church Records, Box 5, File: Women's Missionary Society 1957-1970, 1985-1988, CMBS-F; *Scrapbook 1940-1955*, Reedley Mennonite Brethren Church Records, Box 10, CMBS-F; and *Scrapbook 1965-1977*, Reedley Mennonite Brethren Church Records, Box 11, CMBS-F.

27. Annual Church Reports, 1 March 1945 to 11 October 1945; 25 October 1945 to 17 October 1946; 24 October 1946 to 2 October 1947; 16 October 1947 to 7 October 1948; 21 October 1948 to October 1949; and 20 October to 5 October 1950, Shafter Mennonite Brethren Church Records, microfilm reel #77, frames 1406-1411, CMBS-F.
28. Annual Church Reports, 25 October 1945 to 17 October 1946, Shafter Mennonite Brethren Church Records, microfilm reel #77, frames 1407-1408, CMBS-F.
29. Annual Church Reports, 24 October 1946 to 2 October 1947, Shafter Mennonite Brethren Church Records, microfilm reel #77, frames 1408-1409, CMBS-F.
30. *A summary report for 1930-1950*, Shafter Mennonite Brethren Church Records, microfilm reel #77, frame 1436, CMBS-F.
31. *50th Jubilee 1905-1955: Mennonite Brethren Church Reedley, California*, 47.
32. Rempel, "She hath Done What She Could," 35-41; *Yearbook of the 39th Pacific District Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church of North America, October 23-27, 1948* (Hillsboro, KS: Mennonite Brethren Publishing House, 1948), 37-38. Interestingly, there have been three histories written by the Women's Missionary Service about their organization and only one tells the story of resistance towards this organization (see Mrs. Henry Martens, "Fifth Anniversary," Women's Missionary Service Records, file: Scrapbook, Vol. 1, 1948-1958, CMBS-F). The other two are Mrs. Abe Leppke, "The History of the M. B. Missionary Service of the Pacific District Conference," and Mrs. Abe Leppke, "10th Anniversary," Women's Missionary Service Records, File: Scrapbook, Vol. 1, 1948-1958, CMBS-F.
33. Letter from Waldo Wiebe to Rev. J. B. Toews, 12 November 1948, Shafter Mennonite Brethren Church Records, microfilm reel #77, frame 1387, CMBS-F.
34. Letter from J.B. Toews to Rev. Waldo Wiebe, 18 November 1948, Shafter Mennonite Brethren Church Records, microfilm reel #77, frame 1388, CMBS-F.
35. Letter from Waldo Wiebe to Rev. J. B. Toews, 12 November 1948, Shafter Mennonite Brethren Church Records, microfilm reel #77, frame 1387, CMBS-F.
36. Rempel, "She hath Done What She Could," 38-39.

37. Exodus 35:23-26 specifically states, “And all the skilled women spun with their hands, and brought what they had spun, in blue and purple and scarlet material and in fine linen. And all the women whose heart stirred with a skill spun the goats’ hair” (New American Standard Bible).
38. Minutes, 3, 18 November, and 2 December 1948, Shafter Mennonite Brethren Church Records, microfilm reel #77, frame 1562, CMBS-F.
39. Minutes, 1 December 1949, Shafter Mennonite Brethren Church Records, microfilm reel #77, frame 1570, CMBS-F.
40. Mrs. Henry Martens, “Fifth Anniversary,” Women’s Missionary Service Records, File: Scrapbook, Vol. 1, 1948-1958, CMBS-F.
41. Martens, “Fifth Anniversary.”
42. Report of the M. B. Missionary Society, *Yearbook of the 39th Pacific District Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church of North America, October 23-27, 1948* (Hillsboro, KS: Mennonite Brethren Publishing House, 1948), 37.
43. Report of the M. B. Missionary Society, *Yearbook of the 39th Pacific District Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church of North America, October 23-27, 1948*, 37, CMBS-F.
44. Minutes, 2 February 1949, Women’s Missionary Service Records, File: Executive Committee 1949-1960, CMBS-F.
45. Minutes, 2 February 1949, Women’s Missionary Service Records, File: Executive Committee 1949-1960, CMBS-F.
46. Minutes, Annual Meeting, 12 November 1956, Women’s Missionary Service Records, File: Annual Meeting 1948-1959, CMBS-F.
47. Minutes, Annual Meeting, 15 November 1949, Women’s Missionary Service Records, File: Annual Meeting 1948-1959, CMBS-F.
48. George Brown Tindall, with David E. Shi, *America: A Narrative History*, 3rd ed., vol. 2 (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1992), 1270-1272.
49. *Constitution* [1954], Women’s Missionary Service Records, File: Constitutions, CMBS-F.
50. Minutes, 13 November 1954, Executive Committee, Women’s Missionary Service Records, File: Executive Committee 1949-1960, CMBS-F.
51. Minutes, 10 November 1956, Executive Committee, Women’s Missionary Service Records, File: Executive Committee 1949-1960, CMBS-F.

52. Letter from P.A. Enns to Mrs. Henry Martens, 28 March 1959, Women's Missionary Service Records, File: Executive Committee 1949-1960, CMBS-F.
53. Examples of their work are found throughout their minutes. One example of the tremendous variety of their work is found in, Minutes, 9 November 1959, Women's Missionary Service Records, File: Annual Meetings 1948-1959, CMBS-F. By 1959, the WMS also had fixed an origins narrative to recite at official functions that operated as a form of creedal statement that stressed unity, helping missionaries in a coordinated effort and support for their church conference.
54. *Yearbook, Missionary Sewing Circle, 1955-1956*, Dinuba Mennonite Brethren Church Records, File: Missionary Sewing Circle Yearbooks 1955-1956, CMBS-F.
55. *Yearbooks, Women's Missionary Society, 1952-1953, 1956-1957*, Reedley Mennonite Brethren Church Records, Box 5, File: Women's Missionary Society 1947-1957, CMBS-F; and *Yearbook, Women's Missionary Society 1957-1958*, Reedley Mennonite Brethren Church Records, Box 5, File: Women's Missionary Society 1957-1970, 1985-1988, CMBS-F.
56. *Yearbook, Women's Missionary Society 1962-1963, 1969-1970*, Reedley Mennonite Brethren Church Records, Box 5, File: Women's Missionary Society 1957-1970, 1985-1988, CMBS-F.
57. Amanda Porterfield, *Femine Spirituality in America: From Sarah Edwards to Martha Graham* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980), 5, 14-15, 109-110.
58. Rempel, "She Hath Done What She Could," 51.
59. Minutes, Executive Board, 4 April 1961, Women's Missionary Service, File: Executive Committee 1961-1965, CMBS-F.