Starting as a Women’s Organization:  
The Formation of the Women’s Foreign Missionary Association of Friends of Philadelphia

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Abstract
The Women’s Foreign Missionary Association of Friends of Philadelphia (the WFMA) was founded in 1882 and started its Japan mission in 1885. It was formed under the influence of the women’s foreign mission movement that arose after the Civil War. The motive that drove non-pastoral Quakers into establishing a foreign missionary organization was the somewhat humanitarian purpose of improving the status of heathen women by Christianity. This paper introduces the context in which the WFMA was established, and then examines with its own archives how its members related their project to Quaker teachings.

Key words: Quaker, the Society of Friends, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, the Women’s Foreign Missionary Association of Friends of Philadelphia, the women’s foreign mission movement

Introduction
The first women’s foreign missionary organization in the United States was the Woman’s Union Missionary Society of America for Heathen Lands, which was an inter-denominational organization established in 1861. It dispatched female missionaries to foreign lands and financially supported missionary activities that targeted women. Supporters of women’s foreign missions thought that women were the key to the success of foreign missions and that Christian missions in heathen societies could be achieved by creating Christian mothers and homes to influence their spouses and children. Major Protestant denominations already had foreign mission associations. However, separate from the foreign mission organizations that were under the supervision of male leaders, women’s foreign missionary associations were established in various denominations (e.g. Congregational, Methodist, Presbyterian, Baptist, and Episcopalian) from 1868 to the 1870s. By 1890, the number of women’s foreign missionary associations in the United States had reached 34, and they had dispatched 926 missionaries in total. The number of groups had increased to 42 in 1899, supporting more than 1,200 missionaries. The fund is said to have reached well over one million dollars by then. These figures show that they surpassed the women’s foreign missionary associations in England that were their predecessors in the field.1

Influenced by this women’s foreign mission movement, some women Quakers formed the Women’s Foreign Missionary Association of Friends of Philadelphia in 1882 and started the Japan mission in 1885. Relying on the archives in Quaker Collection of Haverford College, this paper follows how those women responded to the movement and established their own mission association. It further aims to investigate the significant Quaker aspects of this organization.
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Friends Foreign Missions in the Latter Half of the 19th Century

Quakerism is distinguished from other Protestant denominations by several characteristics—the teaching of the Inner Light, the denial of professional ministry, the silent and unprogramed worship, the emphasis on equality of all people, the peace testimony, and the simple way of life. It has a very different history in England and the United States, nevertheless. While Friends (Quakers) in England had banded together under one London Yearly Meeting, Friends in the United States had major schisms twice in the first half of the 19th Century—the Great Separation (the Hicksite Separation) and the Second Separation (the Wilburite Separation). As a result of these schisms, three types of Yearly Meetings existed in the United States in the latter half of the 19th Century, namely Hicksite, Wilburite, and Orthodox. The Hicksites took a democratic and liberal position in the church polity, placed emphasis on the teaching of the Inner Light, and followed worship in silence. The Wilburites kept worship in silence awaiting God just like the Hicksites, but they kept old Quaker traditions such as drab clothing and ways of speech. Orthodox Quakers had a strong evangelical tendency, and later gave up Quaker silent worship and introduced the pastoral system.

It was the Orthodox Friends in the Midwest who began to adopt the pastoral system. After the Civil War, a revival movement swept across the Midwest. In the first place, many of the Friends who migrated to the Midwest could not find a Quaker meeting in neighboring areas. Instead, they had opportunities to attend revival meetings with the people of other denominations. Through such occasions, they familiarized themselves with the pastoral type of worship that was common to other Protestant denominations, where a pastor was present, hymns were sung, and worship proceeded according to a program. On the other hand, there were Protestants of other denominations who participated in Quaker worship, and Quakers ended up holding revivals in their own meetings. As a result, the Society of Friends gained many new members. New Friends, however, were not accustomed to silent unprogramed worship that was the original Quaker way of devotion. It became necessary to figure out a better way for them. Orthodox Meetings in the Midwest first asked traveling missionaries to stay, then hired part-time pastors, and finally employed full-time pastors. They abandoned silent worship that was peculiar to the Society of Friends and introduced pastoral-worship to their Meetings. The pastoral system spread to the East as well, and all the Orthodox Yearly Meetings, except Orthodox Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, adopted it.

In the United States, the expansion of supporters for Friends foreign missions was closely connected with the acceptance of the pastoral system. Since the pastoral style needed paid ministers, it led the way to a foreign mission project based on the assumption of dispatching missionaries who were paid in a similar manner. While Orthodox Friends took up foreign missions, Hicksites and Wilburites that adhered to worship in silence were not interested in foreign missions. Putting it differently, not all Yearly Meetings in the United States supported foreign missionary activities. (Yearly Meetings mentioned hereafter always refer to Orthodox Yearly Meetings.)

In the United States as well as in England, interest in foreign missions was aroused by the work of individuals who visited foreign mission fields. Eli and Sybil Jones of New England Yearly Meeting went on missionary tours widely enough to visit Liberia, the West Indies, Europe, and the Middle East. Supported by the Provisional Committee on Foreign Gospel Service of London Yearly Meeting, some members of Indiana Yearly Meeting worked in foreign lands. In 1870, however, those interested
formed a Foreign Missionary Society in Indiana Yearly Meeting, and they sent Samuel A. Purdy to Mexico to undertake Friends work. Friends in the United States now launched their own mission fields. Thus, Quaker interest in foreign missions increased gradually, and financial support was offered by individuals and groups. Nonetheless, these movements were rather sporadic.

At the beginning of the 1880s, foreign missionary associations were formed in every Orthodox Yearly Meeting. It is noteworthy that, influenced by the women’s foreign mission movement that had gathered steam after the Civil War, almost all Friends foreign missionary associations started as women’s organizations. The first Quaker reaction to this movement was from the Midwest. On the occasion of visiting her parents near Monrovia, Indiana, Eliza C. Armstrong of Western Yearly Meeting found that some Friends had joined a Woman’s Foreign Missionary Society of the Methodist Church. She then determined to organize women’s foreign missionary associations in the Society of Friends. She hoped that Quaker women would promote activities “to carry the message of the love of Jesus to the womanhood of the world in a peculiarly womanly way.” Immediately, she wrote to female representatives of Quarterly Meetings of Western Yearly Meeting. Response to her call was prompt, and eight missionary associations were formed in six months. In September 1881, the Women’s Foreign Missionary Society of Western Yearly Meeting was established at the yearly meeting session (for women) held in Plainfield, Indiana.

Subsequently, some women of Orthodox Philadelphia Yearly Meeting set up the Women’s Foreign Missionary Association of Friends of Philadelphia in December 1882. One after another, women’s foreign missionary associations were formed among Orthodox Yearly Meetings: Iowa Yearly Meeting and Indiana Yearly Meeting in 1883; New England Yearly Meeting and Ohio Yearly Meeting in 1884; North Carolina Yearly Meeting and Kansas Yearly Meeting in 1885; and New York Yearly Meeting in 1888. The Friends Missionary Advocate was published in 1885 as a bulletin of Women’s Foreign Missionary Associations of Friends. At first, this bulletin reported the missionary works of other denominations, but later carried letters received from Friends missionaries all over the world (including such places as Mexico, Jamaica, Syria, Madagascar, India, China, Japan, and Alaska). In addition to the requests for schools and hospitals, foreign foods, clothing, marriages, funerals, and other exotic customs were introduced by the missionaries. Through these articles, interest in “unseen sisters” developed. The Five Years Meeting was formed as a federation of Orthodox Yearly Meetings in September 1887. Inspired by this, in March 1888, a joint meeting of Women’s Foreign Missionary Associations of various regions (10 groups) was held in Indianapolis, Indiana. As a result, all the women’s foreign missionary associations, excluding the Women’s Foreign Missionary Association of Friends of Philadelphia (the WFMA), joined and founded the Women’s Foreign Missionary Union of Friends in America.

In other denominations, women’s foreign missionary organizations were set out to supplement the work of already existing foreign missionary organizations. On the other hand, in the Quaker case, it was women who got down to organizing foreign mission work. They were not embarrassed by any men’s interference because there had not been men-dominating foreign mission organizations.

The Women’s Foreign Missionary Association of Friends of Philadelphia

Orthodox Philadelphia Yearly Meeting was exceptional among the group of Orthodox Yearly Meetings. Orthodox Friends experienced a conflict
over Joseph John Gurney’s emphasis on human initiative against passive waiting for divine leading. Since the majority of Orthodox Friends supported Gurney, John Wilbur (the main opponent of Gurney) and his followers left Orthodox Yearly Meetings and organized their own Wilburite Yearly Meetings. This was called the Second Separation (the Wilburite Separation), which divided Orthodox Friends into “Gunyites” and “Wilburites.” With Wilburites’ being separated, Orthodox actually became “Gunyite” Orthodox. When this separation occurred, unlike other Orthodox Yearly Meetings, the majority of Orthodox Philadelphia Yearly Meeting were Wilburite, and supporters of Gurney were in the minority. The leaders of Orthodox Philadelphia Yearly Meeting were concerned about another separation and further decrease in members. In order to avoid the second schism, they decided not to exchange letters with either Orthodox or Wilburite Yearly Meetings. (Each Yearly Meeting mutually exchanged letters once a year. Receiving letters officially from other Yearly Meetings, reading them at the yearly meeting session, and sending replies meant that the validity of the Yearly Meeting was recognized.) This meant that Orthodox Philadelphia Yearly Meeting selected coexistence of Gunyites and Wilburites in its membership and selected isolation from other Yearly Meetings without taking either side of Orthodox or Wilburite. Properly, Orthodox Philadelphia Yearly Meeting should have become Wilburite. While assuming the name of Orthodox, a majority of Orthodox Philadelphia Yearly Meeting were conservative Wilburite and did not adopt the pastoral system.

In Orthodox Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, those who were interested in foreign missions were Gunyite, and Gunyite women formed a foreign missionary association. In place of complete reliance on God, Joseph John Gurney laid emphasis on the role of individuals in salvation; he supported Bible study and the reform movement. Gunyite Friends wished to play a positive role in society. Gunyite Friends of the Yearly Meeting were a minority but strong, and were concentrated in Philadelphia and its suburbs. Their strongholds were the Twelfth Street Monthly Meeting, Haverford College, and the Friends’ Review. Philadelphia Gunyites formed an organization independent from Philadelphia Yearly Meeting and were involved in various social activities such as support for Native Americans and freed slaves, Sunday school, peace, and temperance. Foreign mission was one such activity.

The WFMA was founded at the meeting held on December 12, 1882, at the residence of Mary A. Longstreth in Philadelphia. Twenty-two female Friends gathered at the meeting and chose its administrators on the spot. Rebecca N. Taylor was one of the participants, who became treasurer. Saying that it was deeply branded on her memory like a snapshot, she recalled the first meeting as follows. At the time, large and elegant mansions lined up along the block from 13th Filbert Street to Juniper Street. Every house had large windows and green Venetian blinds, and porch stairs of brown stone or white marble were tidy and clean without dust. Large living rooms with high ceilings had thick carpets, and windows had white muslin curtains. Among those houses, the most orderly one was the residence of Longstreth. There, virtuous women got together and had a small meeting filled with a sacred atmosphere. Rebecca and her friend, Lucy B. Roberts (nee Longstreth), were still young—very much younger than other participants. They were anxious about what they could possibly do and they were completely diffident. Sarah W. Nicholson encouraged the two of them, by saying that she was happy to have them. She was the woman who became the first chairman of the WFMA. During the selection of administrators, when a treasurer was to be decided, Mary Morris nodded towards Rebecca, and Rebecca was chosen as treasurer. She shared for seven years the hardship in financial affairs with
Lucy, who was appointed as vice treasurer. Since she had never kept accounts, Rebecca had to ask for advice of her husband.

The meeting of December 12, 1882, was held by invitation with the joint signatures of four women. According to Rebecca, however, Mary Morris was the leader who called the meeting. When Mary traveled in Europe and Africa, she felt sorry to find no Quaker missionaries in the regions and, thus, launched into the establishment of foreign missionary association. Wistar Morris, husband of Mary, was president of Pennsylvania Railway and a prominent Friend. Rebecca Taylor’s writings, including the description of Longstreh residence and reference on Mary Morris, indicated the circumstances in which the WFMA was formed under the leadership of well-to-do Philadelphia Friends.

A letter of invitation, dated January 16, 1883, was published to widely call for participation in the WFMA. This printed invitation pointed out that heathen women were oppressed and that only women could approach women in heathen lands, and appealed to the necessity of a women’s foreign mission as follows:

Our hearts were stirred by the reflecting upon the oppressed and depraved condition of our sisters among the heathen, and as the rules and customs of social and religious life in some of these countries, do not permit their women to be approached by any but women, it was felt that the time had come for us to do what we can, to convey to them the glad tidings of salvation through Jesus Christ.

It also referred to Quaker advantages in foreign missions. Quakerism had some elements easy for heathen women to accept. It emphasized spirituality and did not require baptism in which men needed to be involved.

The non-requirement of water baptism may in some instances prove a blessing, as the administration of that ordinance requires the intervention of a man—in submitting to which, these down-trodden women are separated by a ban of ostracism from husband and children and all family ties.

Then, the printed invitation announced that some women Friends in Philadelphia Yearly Meeting formed an organization to offer a helping hand to “those of their own sex, who are lying in ignorance under the tyrannical sway of bigotry and superstition.” It concluded by mentioning the membership fee and schedule of the next meeting (February 13, 1883).

In January 1884, the WFMA held the first annual meeting and the first Annual Report was published. It narrates the beginnings of the association as follows.

The cry of the women of heathen lands enslaved in ignorance and superstition, so touched the hearts of many of the women members of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, that it was believed the time had come for forming an organization among themselves to promote more effectually than isolated individual effort could do the knowledge of the gospel among our down-trodden sisters, and to assist in their Christian education. A call issued to women Friends generally to attend a meeting held on the 13th of 2d Month, 1883, was responded to by forty Friends. Since that time, the Association numbers 121 members, many of whom, while unable to attend the meetings, afford material aid by their membership fee of one dollar or more.

According to this first Annual Report, the total
income of annual fees and donations reached 2,239.74 dollars with the membership of 121.\textsuperscript{13}

**Why Should Friends Engage in Foreign Mission Work?**

What were some other positive reasons for women Philadelphia Friends to venture on foreign missionary activities and how did they understand their project in Quaker history? The WFMA distributed a lot of leaflets to spread their information, and 3,350 were printed in less than a year. “Why Should Friends Engage in Foreign Mission Work?” was issued in March 1884, and probably was one of the earliest.\textsuperscript{14} This leaflet is noteworthy in terms of describing the reasons for the establishment of the WFMA in greater detail. It pointed out four reasons.

The first reason derived from the early days of Quaker history when Friends were enthusiastic and mission-oriented. Trying to propagate Quaker teachings in foreign lands, they extended their visits from Europe, Asia, and Africa, to America and the West Indies across the Atlantic Ocean. George Fox, the founder of Quakerism, himself visited the new continent and proselytized Indians and black people in the West Indies. He wrote to Friends in America that true Christians “must preach the grace of God to all Blacks and Indians.” According to the WFMA, foreign mission was an activity of neither new nor of different nature. Rather, the spirit of Fox and other Friends in the early days was coming to life. The WFMA asserted that, in this light, its activities were based on Quaker tradition.

The second reason originated with Quaker teachings. Quakerism did not have ceremonies and steadfastly maintained pacifism, and, therefore, heathens would easily be able to familiarize themselves with Quakerism. In the case of other Christian churches, believers were requested to observe Christian ceremonies after being initiated. This brought about friction with social customs of the local society, and often resulted in eviction of the believers from their homes. For Friends, however, there was no such concern, since Quakerism had no sacrament. In the first place, true Quakerism emphasized spirituality, so it was adaptable and highly flexible. Furthermore, Quakers steadfastly maintained pacifism, which would surely resonate with the hearts of heathens in the mission fields.\textsuperscript{15}

The third reason was that foreign missionary activities could have a positive influence on the churches in the United States. Friends launched foreign missions about half a century later than other churches. Major denominations had already promoted activities in heathen lands and achieved certain results. So, why did Friends need to participate in such areas? Was it necessary? To this question, the WFMA stated that not only was there still room for foreign missions open to Quakers, but also they should not miss benefits brought to those who supported it at home.

Not only is there vast room for more labor, and some opening for the entrance of their special views, but the Church at home cannot afford to miss the blessing that comes from such service. Obedience to the call of the Lord always brings a present reward, and nowhere are the words of holy writ, “He that watereth, shall be watered also himself,” more truly verified than in the effort to fulfill the command of Christ, “Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature.” Slumbering churches have been awakened by it, and under the power of the Holy Spirit accompanying such service, have been blessed with new life.\textsuperscript{16}

Good fortune would surely come in the present life to those who followed God’s call, and this applied best to the people who followed the words of Christ.
who commanded missions. In concrete terms, foreign missions could activate stagnant churches in the United States. This would be applied to Quaker churches, too. The leaders of the WFMA thought that participation in foreign missions would enhance their own religious life. This is called reflex theory—the reasoning that the women's foreign mission movement often referred to.\(^{17}\)

Lastly, as expected, the leaflet stressed a comparison between Christian women and heathen women, and stated that missions for women should be carried out simply from a humanitarian viewpoint.

That women should engage in this work, even if actuated by no higher humanitarian motives, must be apparent to all. The condition of oriental women is degraded. They are regarded as beings inferior to man and in some places are respected little more than brute beasts. They are denied all education and personal liberty, and are literally groaning under the iron heel of man's despotism. For the amelioration of this bondage, every intelligent woman must ardently long, and those who have partaken in the love of God in Christ, and realized the elevation of woman to be the result of Christian teaching, cannot resist making some effort for the benefit of their down-trodden sisters.\(^{18}\)

The seclusion of women, living in a world cut off from external society, was emphasized. Only women could enter this women's world, so dispatching female missionaries was necessary to help heathen women. As an example of this women's isolation, the leaflet pointed out Indian upper classes. In India, women of upper classes were prohibited to talk with men except family members. Male doctors could not examine female patients directly. A doctor felt a woman patient's pulse through a hole in sheets wrapped around her. He checked her tongue in the same manner. Female patients could not answer the questions of a male doctor first-hand.\(^{19}\) This description of Indian women might read a little bit comical. However, the female isolation not only was grounds to justify the “women’s work for women,” but also could be a barometer to show the unsoundness of ethnic religions. To appeal for the necessity of women's work for women, the women’s foreign mission movement focused on the immorality of ethnic religions and the degraded position of women. Bulletins and missionary magazines of various women’s foreign missionary organizations were media used for the purpose. They advertised polygamy, existence of seraglio (living quarters for wives and concubines) and brothels, and sati (widow’s self-immolation). Women Friends also accumulated such information and used somewhat stereotypical heathen women.

This topic of women's degradation naturally became an issue regarding the Quaker concept of gender equality. Although women’s work for women should be carried out simply and solely from a humanitarian viewpoint, the leaflet continues, Friends furthermore have a special cause to help heathen women.

The women of the Society of Friends should feel an especial call to this work, for to the founders of that Society was it first given to accept literally the truth, that in Christ Jesus there is neither male nor female, and to accord to their women a position of equality, on lines relating to service for the Lord.\(^{20}\)

The founders of the Society of Friends took the teaching of the Bible literally that men and women are equal before God. As a matter of fact, the Society was the first denomination that gave women equal status to men in church. The leaflet concluded that, for this reason, the Society bore a special responsibility to help heathen women.

Because they had accepted the cause and rhetoric
from the women’s foreign mission movement, the members of the WFMA repeated the reflex theory and the status of aggrieved heathen women in the leaflet titled “Why Should Friends Engage in Foreign Mission Work?” On the other hand, they tried to appeal for support on the grounds of Quaker history and teachings. The members asserted that Quakerism had been mission-oriented from the very beginning, that Quaker teachings held elements easily accepted by heathens, and that womanhood was to be respected in heathen society as well. All the more because they had been enjoying equality with men in church, they argued, women Quakers had to help heathen women gain the same privileges. Their argument on gender equality here, however, seems to require scrutiny on two points. First, the women’s foreign mission movement was based on the Victorian concept of womanhood which had embraced the sexual division of work. Second, Quaker equality in church was limited to ministry; women Quakers were powerless in church polity and they had no voice in such important matters as finances.

**Conclusion**

Reading the early records of the Women’s Foreign Missionary Association of Friends of Philadelphia affirms a conclusion that, from its premises and goals, its establishment was a part of the women’s foreign mission movement. Thus, the motive that drove non-pastoral Quakers into the establishment of foreign missionary association was the somewhat humanitarian purpose of improving the status of heathen women. It is also to be mentioned that its members were fully aware of their denominational advantages in foreign lands. On the other hand, they were totally ignorant of what confusion and confrontation a non-pastoral Friends’ foreign mission project would bring about. These denominational aspects are to be discussed in another paper.\(^{21}\)

**Notes**


2. Regarding the tendency of denominational separations in the United States, see: Richard H. Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (New York: New American Library, 1975: Reprint of 1929). For the following explanation, two sources were mainly referred to: Elbert Russell, *The History of Quakerism* (New York: Macmillian, 1941), 280-293; John M. Moore, ed., *Friends in the Delaware Valley* (Haverford: Friends Historical Association, 1981), 57-79. In the latter book, J. William Frost explains that, when activating Quakerism in the period of Quietism, Orthodox leaders took evangelism and Hicksite leaders took rationalism. Many of the Friends who accepted evangelism were the most intelligent and cosmopolitan people among Friends. Frost points out that the influence of the second revival on Quakers was not as enthusiastic as the movement represented by camp meetings of Methodists and Baptists, but was closely related with Quakers in London and Congregationalists in Connecticut (pp. 64, 66).


5. Mr. and Mrs. Louis Street were posted in Madagascar; Mr. and Mrs. Elkanah Beard were dispatched to India in the same manner. Russell, 436-440; Christina Jones, *American Friends in World Missions* (Elgin: Brethren Publication House, 1946), 26-31.

6. C. Jones, 72-74.

8) Russell, 322. For more detailed values, see Moore, 78.


10) Russell, 354, 497; Benjamin, 14-15.


12) The Women’s Foreign Missionary Association of Friends of Philadelphia, printed letter of invitation to join the Association, Philadelphia, 1/16/1883. (Hereinafter, this Association is mostly referred to as the WFMA.)

13) This first *Annual Report* included the Constitution of the WFMA. According to Article II, the object of the WFMA should be “to promote the knowledge of the gospel among women and children in heathen lands, and to assist in their Christian education...” In the second *Annual Report*, the quoted part was revised to “to promote the knowledge of the Gospel in heathen lands, especially among women and children, and to assist in the Christian education of the people...” (Underlined by the present author.) By changing the expression, the target of missions seems to have expanded a little although the emphasis was still placed on women and children. Article III stipulated that “Any woman Friend may become a member of this Association by the annual payment of one dollar or more,” and thus the membership was limited to female Friends. *Annual Report of the Women’s Foreign Missionary Association of Friends of Philadelphia*, 1 (1884), 3, 14-17; 2 (1885), 17-18.


19) *Ibid*.

20) *Ibid*.

21) The present author is now preparing for a paper on this topic relating to Quaker denominationalism propagated from Philadelphia to Tokyo.