

Women's Missionary Society Records in the Presbyterian Archives

by **ELSPETH M. REID**

With funding from the Backlog Reduction Program of the Canadian Council of Archives and from the Women's Missionary Society (Western Division) of the Presbyterian Church in Canada, the Presbyterian Archives has recently completed the cataloguing of the records of various women's missionary societies in its holdings, thus opening significant new resources for the study of women's history, and in particular the examination of the development of the roles of women in the Presbyterian Church. The records also provide a useful new source for the study of the work of the Presbyterian Church among native Canadians and among immigrant ethnic communities, as well as contributing to an understanding of mission work overseas.

The Presbyterian Archives now holds six collections of material from the women's missionary societies. The two major collections are that of the Women's Missionary Society (Western Division) which comprises some eight metres of correspondence, reports, printed materials and supporting documents (1914-1988); and the records of the Provincials, Synodicals, and Presbyterials of the societies, which consist of about four metres of minutes and printed materials (1878-1986). The other four small collections contain mainly printed material produced by the Montreal Women's Missionary Society (1898-1914), Women's Foreign Missionary Society (Western Division) (1877-1914), the Woman's Home Missionary Society (1907-1914), and the Women's Missionary Society (Eastern Division) and its predecessors (1880-1988). The first three societies are better represented in the collections of the United Church Archives, while the records of the W.M.S. (E.D.) are held in the "Burning Bush Centre," First Presbyterian Church, Pictou. In addition to these collections, records of the local branches of the societies, known as Auxiliaries, can be found amongst the congregational records held in the Presbyterian Archives and the United Church Archives.

These six collections derive their significance from the importance of women's organizations in the Presbyterian Church. Until 1966, women's organizations were the only legitimate means by which women could exercise some influence on the administration and direction of the denomination. Although women could become members of the Presbyterian Church, they were not eligible for ordination, either as elders or as ministers, and were therefore barred from participation in the church courts which are the basis of the Presbyterian form of church government. After 1966, women

were accepted as candidates for ordination on the same basis as men and were admitted to the church courts. Prior to that, it was the women's organizations which fostered the development of work for women and recognition of the value of their contribution to the church. In 1864, when the first society was established, the aim was to educate women and children in mission and thereby increase financial support for the missions of the church. By 1966, following a period of increasing professionalism, both the W.M.S. (W.D.) and the W.M.S. (E.D.) had a large administrative missionary staff, with a wide range of missionary commitments in Canada and in cooperation with partner churches overseas. Despite this growth in power and influence, the two societies voluntarily relinquished most of their work and staff to the Board of World Missions in 1971 in the interests of cooperation. Thus five years after the ordination of women was approved, the women's organizations reverted to their original aim, leaving the way clear for women to assert their equality in the denomination without the need for a powerful organization to support them.

To put the records into context, it is useful to examine the constitutional development of the women's missionary societies. The earliest society in the western division of the Presbyterian Church (that is, all Canada west of and including Quebec), was the Montreal Women's Missionary Society, founded in 1864. This was followed by the Women's Foreign Missionary Society (Western Division) in 1876 and the Woman's Home Missionary Society in 1904. These three societies amalgamated in 1914 to form the Women's Missionary Society (Western Division) which still exists today. In the eastern division of the Presbyterian Church (that is, the Maritime Provinces), there was only one society, which changed its name three times before settling on the name Women's Missionary Society (Eastern Division) in 1915. In 1986, the W.M.S. (E.D.) opened its membership to men and renamed itself the Atlantic Mission Society.

The internal structure of the W.M.S. (W.D.) was inherited from its three predecessors at their amalgamation in 1914. The basic groups were the Auxiliaries, which were organized through the congregations, and the Presbyterials, whose boundaries were co-extensive with the Presbyteries of the denomination. In 1914, with the increase in membership due to the amalgamation, Provincial Boards were set up to oversee the work of the Presbyterials. These were replaced in 1946-47 by Synodical Societies whose boundaries were co-extensive with the Synods of the denomination. Nationally, the W.M.S. (W.D.) was run by a Council which met annually and was composed of delegates from Provincials or Synodicals and from Presbyterials, as well as an elected Executive. This structure deliberately paralleled the Presbyterian form of government with its congregations, Presbyteries, Synods, and General Assembly.

When the W.M.S. (W.D.) was established in 1914, the Constitution stated:

The Society shall be auxiliary to the Home and Foreign Mission Boards of the Presbyterian Church in Canada. Its aims and objects shall be to unite the women and children of the church in prayer and service for the advancement of the Kingdom of Christ; to develop a missionary spirit and effectively to aid these Boards by supporting women's work at home and abroad.¹

The financial resources of the W.M.S. (W.D.) were brought specifically under the control of the Home and Foreign Mission Boards. Meetings were to be held in Toronto, "for the better transaction of business with the Home and Foreign Mission Boards"²

while the financial transactions of the society were to be "subject to the approval; of the Boards."³ Policy on missions was completely in the hands of the Mission Boards, and the W.M.S. (W.D.) had no control over how the funds its members raised were to be distributed, nor over the placement of missionaries whom they supported. However, since 1914 the constitution of the W.M.S. (W.D.) and the societies' relationship to General Assembly and to the other mission agencies of the Presbyterian Church have been significantly altered three times: in 1925, in 1947, and in 1971. Each of these changes reflects both the development of work within the society and the changing status of women in church administration.

In 1925, the United Church of Canada was formed, and many of the members and officers of the W.M.S. (W.D.) entered the union. The non-concurring members of the W.M.S. (W.D.) who remained Presbyterian played an active and significant role in the Presbyterian Church Association which mobilized the resistance to union, and following the union, these women formed a Provisional Executive and reorganized the society. At the 1925 General Assembly, the W.M.S. (W.D.) constitution was revised and the Executive of their Council was made "a constituent part of the Assembly's General Board of Missions."⁴ Thereafter, representatives of the W.M.S. (W.D.) sat on the General Board of Missions, (which replaced the Home and Foreign Missions Boards in 1925) and participated in decisions about the placement of missionaries and the opening up of new mission fields. This involvement was particularly important as mission work was severely disrupted following the establishment of the United Church of Canada. The mission fields and properties were divided between the two churches, and missionaries were required to work for the denomination which was allocated their field or else resign their positions. The Presbyterian Church in Canada lost many personnel as a result, but considered it to be politically important to increase the number of mission fields it operated despite all the problems. The participation of women in missions was therefore crucial (as was the recruitment of men from other Presbyterian denominations in the United States and the United Kingdom), and so paved the way for their inclusion in the decision-making process. Officers from the W.M.S. (W.D.) were members of deputations to Japan and to India to assess the state of the mission fields and the potential for growth as early as 1927, and their participation in this type of work gradually increased.⁵ By 1946, the demands on the W.M.S. (W.D.) were such that there was a need for organizational changes. In December 1946 the Re-organization Committee of the society recommended the appointment of salaried executive secretaries for national missions, overseas missions and organization work. The W.M.S. (W.D.) also ceased to be a part of the General Board of Missions, and instead became an autonomous society within the Presbyterian Church, responsible directly to General Assembly. The W.M.S. (W.D.) and W.M.S. (E.D.) retained the right to appoint representatives to the General Board of Missions and therefore still participated in decision-making for the denomination as a whole, but in addition the two societies became equivalent to a Board of the Church and the way was clear for them to develop their own staffing and resources independently of the General Board of Missions.

The period following these constitutional, staffing, and organizational changes was one of growing professionalism. Both the administrative staff and the deaconesses and missionaries in the field were increased in number. The W.M.S. (W.D.) also began to deal directly with partner churches of the Presbyterian Church in Canada and opened up new mission fields and initiated projects in cooperation with these churches. Mission

work in Nigeria was begun in partnership with the Church of Scotland, which arranged for two women to be appointed there by the W.M.S. (W.D.), and led to a significant involvement in relief work during the Nigeria-Biafra civil war of the late 1960s.⁶ The projects which the W.M.S. (W.D.) tended to favour were closely connected with the perceived role of working primarily with women and children: the society set up kindergartens with the Korean Christian Church in Japan and the Chinese in Canada; it supported residential schools in Birtle, Manitoba, in Kenora, Ontario, in Berbice, Guyana, and in Jhansi, India; it contributed towards training of nurses in Vellore and Jobat, India; and it initiated and developed Christian Education for women in Japan, Guyana, and India. It is only in recent years that major development agencies have recognized the necessity for working with women: these records reveal that through women's organizations, women were supporting work in these areas throughout this century.

Within the Presbyterian Church the W.M.S. (W.D.) also made significant contributions to the debate over the place of women in the church and their participation in missions. During the 1960s, along with the move towards the ordination of women, it was generally acknowledged that women should take a full part in the church's mission work. The denomination recognized that a separate women's mission administration was an unnecessary overlap in the church's organization, and in some respects a hindrance to the equal participation of women in the denomination. This led to the consolidation of mission administration in the new Board of World Missions formed by the transfer of most of the staff and property of the W.M.S. (W.D.) and the W.M.S. (E.D.) to the new Board which replaced the old General Board of Missions in 1971.

Turning to the records themselves, the W.M.S. (W.D.) collection contains a wealth of material relating to the role of women in the Presbyterian Church in Canada. This includes correspondence from missionaries and deaconesses in the field, formal and informal reports, publications, periodicals, reference collections of newspaper clippings and other printed sources, a few scrapbooks, and a collection of photographs. The records should prove valuable to researchers interested in examining the work of women, missions in Canada, native Canadians and immigrant Chinese communities, and overseas missions in India, Nigeria, Guyana, Taiwan, and Japan.

For researchers interested in the sort of work women did and the difficulties they faced, the personnel files are a useful but somewhat uneven resource. They are restricted for seventy-five years from the last date in each file, but access may be granted to researchers at the discretion of the Executive Secretary of the W.M.S. (W.D.) and the Deputy Archivist. A number of files contain only routine applications and medical reports. However, other files contain fascinating correspondence which reveal some of the attitudes of the W.M.S. (W.D.) to the employment of women. One file, for example, shows that in the late 1960s a former deaconess was refused re-employment after her marriage to a minister. Three reasons were given, one being lack of finances and another being that the Presbytery concerned had not requested an appointment at that time. However, it was made quite clear that even if these two conditions were met, the W.M.S. (W.D.) would not normally employ a married woman and in particular would not employ a minister's wife. The reason given was that it would be wrong to pay one minister's wife for doing the type of work that all ministers' wives carried out voluntarily. In fact, the W.M.S. (W.D.) did employ a minister's wife in the 1950s in one congregation, and this situation was very unsatisfactory for a variety of reasons

unrelated to the employee's marital status, but this experience made the W.M.S. (W.D.) somewhat wary of repeating the experiment. Another personnel file shows that attitudes were beginning to change very slowly. In this case, again in the late 1960s, a deaconess was retained in employment after her marriage at the request of the Presbytery in which she was working. The Presbytery was full of praise for this woman's work and very reluctant to accept a new appointment. The Executive of the W.M.S. (W.D.) emphasized that this continuation of her appointment was an exception, and that should either the marriage or the work show signs of stress the employment was to be terminated. The Executive expressed their feelings that the first duty of a married woman was to her husband, and it appears that they did not wish to be responsible for paid employment which might interfere with this duty. Within the context of time, these two incidents demonstrate the complexity of the struggle of women for recognition in leadership on the same terms as men in the Presbyterian Church: the W.M.S. (W.D.) executive officers who made these decisions were the same women who at the same time worked with the denomination towards acceptance of the ordination of women.⁷

The deaconesses and missionaries reported annually to the Executive Directors of National Missions and Overseas Missions and, while there are some gaps, these reports should prove to be a useful resource. It should be noted that the two Executive Directors each compiled a report for publication, but these reports contain virtually nothing of the material provided by the deaconesses and missionaries in these personal reports. Frequently these typescript or handwritten reports contained too much detail or made comments that were too penetrating to be available to the general public. The reports of the women working in Canada are often extremely detailed and very direct, raising concerns about the administration with which they had to deal or the purpose of their placements, and in some cases complaining about serious problems encountered in working with staff appointed by the General Board of Missions or the Presbytery or congregation sponsoring their work.

The work attitudes of the "ordinary woman in the pew" are not evident in the records of the W.M.S. (W.D.) and for this researcher must turn to the records of the Provincials, Synodicals, Presbyterials, and Auxiliaries. These records consist mainly of minutes and printed materials. Although much of the work of these branches was set by the Council and Council Executive — such as an annual mission study theme — there was nevertheless the opportunity for women to organize their own events and speakers and to sponsor their own mission projects. It is fortunate for the researcher that although correspondence and informal records have not usually survived, both the W.M.S. (W.D.) and the W.M.S. (E.D.) have valued history and archives since their inception and have encouraged the recording of events and activities. Each Auxiliary, Presbyterial, and Synodical has an historical secretary, responsible for the collecting of material and for providing an annual report. The standard of record-keeping is generally very high. This emphasis on history has in turn fostered a strong sense of coherence and identity in the organizations which has been maintained despite the decision to transfer most of the work to the Board of World Missions.

Researchers looking for purely biographical information are not so well served as those studying aspects of women's history. The most promising sources relate to those women who worked in Canada between 1925 and 1971; although the personnel files are uneven in content, they are reasonably complete for this period. The files even include the nurses and ancillary workers employed in the 1920s and the 1930s in hospitals and

schools. Again it should be noted that permission to view these files is required from the Executive Secretary of the W.M.S. (W.D.) and the Deputy Archivist. The many photographs which accompanied initial applications for posts with the W.M.S. (W.D.) have been removed from the personnel files and are accessible in the Photograph Collection. As well as the personnel files, a thorough search of the annual reports and correspondence of missionaries and deaconesses may prove useful. Both Frieda Matthews (1947-1961) and Giolla Kelly (1962-1971) as Executive Directors of National Missions kept extensive and detailed administrative records, and it should therefore be possible to track down any employee of the W.M.S. (W.D.) who served in Canada during their periods of service. Many of the records of the Executive Director of Overseas Missions were transferred to the Board of World Missions in 1971. Although there is some material on a few of the more prominent missionaries, such as Bessie M. MacMurchy and Dr. Caroline Macdonald, the search for less well-known people in these collections is likely to be unsuccessful.

For researchers interested in the study of mission work in Canada, the most important contribution this collection has to make is in the area of mission to native Canadians. The W.M.S. (W.D.) administered two Indian Residential Schools, in Birtle, Manitoba, and in Kenora, Ontario, both of which are well-documented. The W.M.S. (W.D.) was also involved in inner-city missions to native Canadians in Winnipeg and in work with native Canadians in Kenora. The collection also records work with the Chinese communities in Vancouver, Victoria, Toronto, and Montreal and, to a lesser extent, work with Hungarian immigrants following the wave of immigration after 1956. The W.M.S. (W.D.) also inherited from the Montreal Women's Missionary Society an interest in work with French-speaking Canadians and this expanded into the development of inner-city missions in Montreal and in other urban centres.

The major source for the study of the two Indian Residential Schools in Birtle and Kenora is likely to be the correspondence of the Indians Secretary (1932-45) and the Executive Director of National Missions (1947-1971) with the principals of the two schools. This correspondence deals primarily with the routine administration of the schools, ranging from the appointment of staff, their resignations or dismissals and their general welfare, to the mundane details of supplies and equipment. Buried among this material, however, are comments on policy issues which the W.M.S. (W.D.) had to face, decisions on staffing, on relations with other denominational schools, responses to criticism of the residential school system in general and the two schools in particular, and attitudes towards education and evangelism. Particularly valuable is a lengthy report made in 1953 to the W.M.S. (W.D.) by Principal J.C.E. Andrews of Cecilia Jeffrey Residential School, which details his assessment of the larger issues concerning the opportunities for evangelism of native people and the role of the residential schools. In the report, Andrews states his belief that the assimilation of Indians into white society was inevitable but protested:

The situation in which the Indian is forced to make all the significant advances towards something which he does not understand and actually may not want, is an intolerable one for him. This is particularly true when the internal tension of the circumstances is heightened by traditional and historical racial conflict and the complications of racial prejudice on either or both sides. In actual fact the Indian is made to stand in the inferior position. This is something which he feels very keenly and it is the

responsibility of the Christian worker in all cases to do everything he can to alleviate the processes of the assimilation and Christianization of his people.⁸

Supplementing the principals' correspondence files are circulars and official correspondence with the Indian Affairs Branch of the Department of Citizenship and Immigration (later transferred to the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development). There are also subject files which deal with inter-church meetings and policy issues. This material provides a useful chronology of developments in the relations between government and churches concerning the denominational residential schools. The records on the residential schools and on Indian work should prove extremely helpful to researchers.

The main strength of the W.M.S. (W.D.) collection is in the documentation of missions within Canada and the role of women in the Presbyterian Church in Canada. However, there is also important material relating to the overseas mission of the Presbyterian Church. This material has not been preserved particularly well and there are a lot of gaps in the records. Despite these problems, researchers concerned with India, Guyana, Japan, Nigeria, and Taiwan will find potentially useful sources in the collection.

The most useful sources for each of the overseas mission fields are the correspondence and reports of the missionaries. These contain the type of information that the missionaries thought important to convey to their employers and supporters in Canada and therefore they concentrate on their routine work. The W.M.S. (W.D.) was particularly involved in education, medical work, and the establishment of women's organizations in the mission fields. In India they administered and supported the Helen Macdonald Higher Secondary School, and supported the work of training hospitals in Jobat, Vellore, and Ludhiana. In Guyana and Taiwan, they supported deaconesses who worked with the women of the partner churches to establish women's organizations and to train women in Christian education, and sponsored the training in Canada of a number of women chosen by the partner churches for leadership positions. Some of the administration and support of these aspects of their work is documented in this collection. The records include some fascinating items — a detailed diary from 1927 of one woman's visit to the Mackay Memorial Hospital in Formosa (now Taiwan); correspondence concerning the civil war in Nigeria (Biafra) in 1966-1969 and the response of the churches to the need for disaster relief; and policy discussions with the Presbyterian Church of Formosa in the 1950s concerning the membership and status of missionaries in the partner church. Many of the topics covered in this material are also dealt with in the records of the General Board of Missions/Board of World Missions deposited in the Presbyterian Archives.

Occasionally the correspondence and reports break away from the work of the missionaries and make reference to the political situation of the time. During the Nigeria-Biafra civil war, for example, two employees to the W.M.S. (W.D.) were working in Eastern Nigeria/Biafra along with a few employees of the General Board of Missions and of the Missions Board of the Church of Scotland. In January 1966 following the military coup, one circular letter commented:

As I write this you will be worried about events in Lagos, but don't, for absolutely nothing is happening on the level we live, and there is no danger

at all. Even the men at the top don't seem to know too much but realize that a power struggle at the top is taking place without much reference to the rest of us.⁹

As events progressed, the W.M.S. (W.D.) became increasingly concerned over the safety of the two W.M.S. missionaries, with whom they lost contact for some months. The women later emerged unscathed, as did their G.B.M. colleagues despite at least one near-execution. The W.M.S. also cooperated with the International Red Cross relief work, seconding one of its deaconesses to work in a team in Biafra. However, there is little reference in these papers to the major Canadian relief efforts with which the Presbyterian Church was closely involved, and researchers should examine the records of the General Board of Missions and the E.H. Johnson papers for information.

Political commentary in these records is rare, and is usually associated with periods of conflict such as the Biafran war or the independence struggles in Guyana. For the most part the women concentrate on their own work. Typical are comments on cultural traditions from the Canadian perspective:

It is because most of their rules of life spring from religious beliefs that it is so difficult to persuade the people to adopt rules conducive to more healthful living.¹⁰

Equally typical are the references to the social cause of disease. The missionaries were under no illusion that they could resolve the health problems they saw, without a radical change in the economic and political structures within which they and their partners worked:

The chief complaints we seem to meet are still skin diseases, effects of malnutrition, fevers, T.B. and dysentery. As long as the condition of over-population and under-production of food exists in this country, it would seem to follow that these maladies will not be able to be improved too greatly.¹¹

Despite the gaps in the overseas material, there is a great deal of information which merits a thorough study. Frequently the work of western Christian missionaries in development work in the period since 1945 is criticized. These records provide a useful counterbalance to that perception, revealing as they do the extent of the W.M.S. work in medicine and education with people who were otherwise ignored. The concern of the women missionaries and the W.M.S. (W.D.) that their work be appropriate and meet the needs as they saw them is evident throughout these records.

In addition to their work overseas and in Canada, the women's missionary societies were responsible for missionary education for women and children within the Presbyterian Church, and this work is represented in these collections by the publications and periodicals issued by the societies. Evidence of their work is also to be found in a number of related collections: the Board of Christian Education (Accession 1982-1015); the Board of Congregational Life (Accessions 1988-1006 and 1989-1004); and Canadian Girls in Training (Accession 1988-9001).

The cataloguing of the six collections of women's missionary societies is an important addition to the sources available to researchers in women's studies, in native studies, and in the history of missions in Canada and overseas. The re-cataloguing project currently

in progress in the Presbyterian Archives will make access to the records of the Auxiliaries more systematic, and the Atlantic Mission Society is also exploring the possibility of having its records professionally arranged and described.

Notes

- 1 Annual Report of the Women's Missionary Society (Western Division) of the Presbyterian Church in Canada 1914-1915, p. 149 [1988-7004-1-6]
- 2 Ibid., p. 149 [1988-7004-1-6]
- 3 Ibid., p. 150 [1988-7004-1-6]
- 4 Constitution of the Women's Missionary Society. Presbyterian Church in Canada (Western Division) 1925, p. 3 [1988-7004-1-1]
- 5 See Report of delegates on the matter of establishing mission work among the Koreans in Japan [1988-7004-48-1] and reports of visits by delegates to the Bhil Field, India [1977-7004-47-22]
- 6 See Nigeria: Mission Administration [1988-7004-52-11]
- 7 Source references for these restricted files are available from the author to researchers who obtain permission to examine the personnel files.
- 8 Report, J.C.E. Andrews, to Frieda Matthews, May 1953 [1988-7004-15-3]
- 9 Nigeria: Mission Administration [1988-7004-52-12]
- 10 India: Annual Reports of Missionaries; Report for Medical Unit #1, 1955 [1988-7004-50-1]
- 11 India: Annual Reports of Missionaries; Report of Mobile Medical Units, 1959 [1988-7004-50-3]