The Year 2010

Two Anniversaries in the History of American Protestant Missions

"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations."

Matthew 28:19

The modern missionary era began about two centuries ago. It was an exciting time, the climax of the Enlightenment era when advances in science, technology, travel, and communications resulted in a belief in limitless human progress. Though Enlightenment ideas could sometimes be at odds with Christianity, Christians were not immune to their contagious optimism. The first "Great Awakening" in the British colonies of North America, from 1727 to 1760, was in part an emotional reaction against Enlightenment rationalism. The movement created an evangelical style of religion that emphasized conversion as an experience. Rooted in pietism, a profound respect for the Bible, and enthusiastic preaching that aimed at engendering immediate decisions for Christ, the Great Awakening inspired Jonathan Edwards, perhaps America's greatest theologian, to believe that Christianity was entering its final period in which Christ would be made known around the world. In the English-speaking world of the next generation, this postmillennial optimism ushered in a new missionary era.

George Whitefield (1714–1770), an Anglican minister and leading figure in the Methodist revival in England, was the most popular evangelist of the Great Awakening in the American colonies. He visited the colonies seven times between 1738 and 1770, preaching to crowds sometimes as large as 20,000.

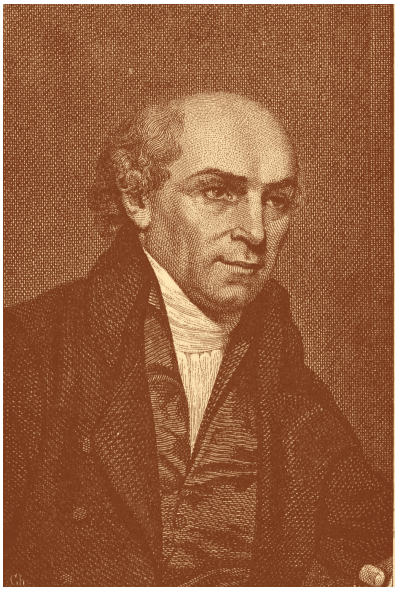
Until this time Protestants had not been particularly interested in mission. The Protestant reformers of the sixteenth century, such as Martin Luther and John Calvin, had been more concerned with other things: reforming Christian belief and practice, reinterpreting the Bible, converting Europeans to their new views. Foreign mission was rarely mentioned, and when it was, it was largely eschewed because of a common belief that non-Europeans had already heard the gospel message in the age of the apostles and had rejected it. Therefore, in their thinking the Great Commission, in which Jesus directed his followers to make disciples to the ends of the earth (Matt. 28:19–20), had already been accomplished. This view is all the more perplexing in retrospect because this was the generation that had discovered the New World, home to perhaps millions of people who could not yet have heard the word. It was left to the Roman Catholics to evangelize the Americas and parts beyond.

David Brainerd (1718–1747) is one of the most influential missionaries of all time. Born in Haddam, Connecticut, he attended Yale College in 1739, just in time to receive the full impact of the Great Awakening with the arrival of George Whitefield. In his junior year, 1742, Brainerd criticized a tutor for having "no more grace" than a chair. When he refused to apologize, he was expelled. In the same year he began a five-year missionary career among the Native Americans of New York, New Jersey, and eastern Pennsylvania. He died in 1747 of tuberculosis, spending his last months in the home of Jonathan Edwards. Moved by Brainerd's life story, Edwards wrote An Account of the Life of the Late Reverend Mr. David Brainerd, *a book that has inspired generations of missionaries, including William Carey and Henry Martyn.*

Ignatius Loyola, the founder of the Society of Jesus (or Jesuits) coined the term "mission" at this time, expanding the expression *Missio Dei*, the mission of God, to include the ongoing work to evangelize the world. From the Latin *mitto*, one sent, those voyaging around the world to do this work would henceforth be known as missionaries.

There were a number of Protestant missionaries in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and among them were Presbyterian missionaries supported at the congregational, presbytery, and synod levels from the mid-eighteenth century onward. The modern Protestant missionary movement began in earnest, however, in the early 1790s, when an obscure British shoemaker turned Baptist minister wrote *An Enquiry Into the Obligation of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens*. Its author, William Carey, the "Father of Modern Missions," opposed the ultra-Calvinist position that God alone would accomplish the work of world evangelization without human involvement. Carey insisted that "means" were necessary, and his book outlined a practical approach to mission. He was persuasive enough that in 1793 his ministerial colleagues organized the Baptist Missionary Society and sent Carey and Andrew Fuller as its first missionaries to India.

1810



William Carey (1761–1834) is called the "Father of Modern Missions."

William Carey's life and writings influenced a group of American students at Williams College, Massachusetts, who met regularly outdoors to pray. One day in 1806 they were caught in a thunderstorm. Taking shelter under a haystack, they pledged themselves to serve as foreign missionaries. In 1810 their pledges resulted in the creation of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, commonly known as the American Board. Headquartered in Boston, this was an interdenominational society, although mostly the child of the Congregational churches. Nevertheless, its members included Presbyterians, Baptists, and others. The American Board sent out its first six missionaries in 1812. The group included Adoniram Judson, one of the most celebrated American missionaries of the nineteenth century.

Adoniram Judson (1788–1850) was the first missionary of the American Board for Foreign Missions.

The year 1810 was the birthday of both the American Protestant missionary enterprise and the Presbyterian Church's involvement in foreign mission. Through the American Board, Presbyterians sent out two score missionaries over the next two decades. The American Board sent out hundreds of missionaries in the nineteenth century, but almost from its inception American Protestant denominations debated whether it would be better if each denomination had its own missionary society. Some Presbyterians began to argue that the missionary effort should be central to the work of the church, not relegated to a voluntary body. In 1831 the Synod of Pittsburgh

established the Western Foreign Missionary Society and declared that all elders, ministers, and Presbyterian bodies within its jurisdiction were members of the society. Six years later the synod persuaded the General Assembly to assume this work. Hence, in 1837 the Presbyterian Church created the Board of Foreign Missions. At that time there were forty-four Presbyterian missionaries, and sixteen were added the following year.

In 1858 and 1861 three principal Presbyterian churches emerged: the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. (PCUSA), which had churches in all the states but mostly in the North; what became the Presbyterian Church in the U.S. (PCUS), which was primarily a Southern church; and the United Presbyterian Church of North America (UPCNA), from the Scottish Covenanter and Seceder traditions, headquartered in Pittsburgh and with churches primarily in New York, South Carolina, and western Pennsylvania. The Northern church sent missionaries all over the world. The Southern church focused on six countries: Brazil, China, the Congo, Japan, Korea, and Mexico. The UPCNA focused mainly on Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia.

The century that followed 1810 was the heroic age of Protestant missions, a time when courageous and dedicated missionaries captured the imagination of the West in a way they never had before and might never again. In addition to Carey and Judson, there were such luminaries as David Livingstone, Hudson Taylor, Lottie Moon, the "Cambridge Seven," and missionary statesman John R. Mott. It was the era that mission historian Kenneth Scott Latourette rightly refers to as "The Great Century"—the period between the Napoleonic Wars and World War I.

This missionary era parallels that of the colonial era in European history, without which it might not have been possible. Much of the world prior to the middle of the nineteenth century was closed to the West. For

Constructed in 1895, the building at 156 Fifth Avenue in New York City was the headquarters of the Board of Foreign Missions, PCUSA.

Courtesy of the Presbyterian Historical Society

The Absalom and Carrie Sydenstricker family and Aurah. Absalom served as a PCUS missionary in China from 1880 to 1931. Their daughter Pearl, on the left—later Pearl Buck—became a missionary in her own right and the first American woman to receive the Nobel Prize for literature. Her most famous work is The Good Earth, *for which she received the Pulitzer Prize.*

Courtesy of the Pearl S. Buck House

example, China, Japan, India, the Muslim countries, and the Catholic countries of Latin America were largely or completely closed to Protestant missionaries. Travel was also difficult, and many of the languages in these lands were unknown in the West. But by the middle of the century, largely due to European pressure, their leaders signed trade agreements that opened them up to both Western commerce and Christian missionaries. India under the East India Company had allowed few missionaries to enter, but following the Sepoy Rebellion in 1857, it became a British crown colony that allowed missionaries to flood in. With the Treaty of Tintsin in 1858, China became open to foreign trade, and missionaries for the first time were allowed to travel into the interior. Japan, confronted in 1853 with seventeen American warships in the bay of Yeddo under Commodore Matthew Perry, decided to open its doors to the West. The Ottoman Empire (Turkey, Egypt, and much of the Middle East) in 1856 abolished the death penalty for Muslim apostasy and guaranteed civil liberties to Christians and Jews, thus making it possible for missionaries to work there. In the middle of the nineteenth century, Africa was the Dark Continent, a land unexplored and unmapped by Westerners. But soon that was remedied by explorers such as David Livingstone, Henry Morton Stanley, and Richard Burton, so that by the 1870s missionaries were able to establish a presence in the interior of the continent. The Catholic countries of Latin America were also opening up to Protestants in the nineteenth century. Shrugging off what was often seen as Catholic oppression, in 1846 Chile affirmed the separation of church and state, in 1873 Mexico disestablished the Catholic Church, and in the 1880s Brazil established freedom of religion and extended legal protection to Protestant missionaries—and all three countries allowed entry to Protestant missionaries.

Because this was the height of the colonial era, it is understandable if not always excusable that civilizing and Christianizing were often seen to work in tandem. Yet it must be pointed out that while many missionaries

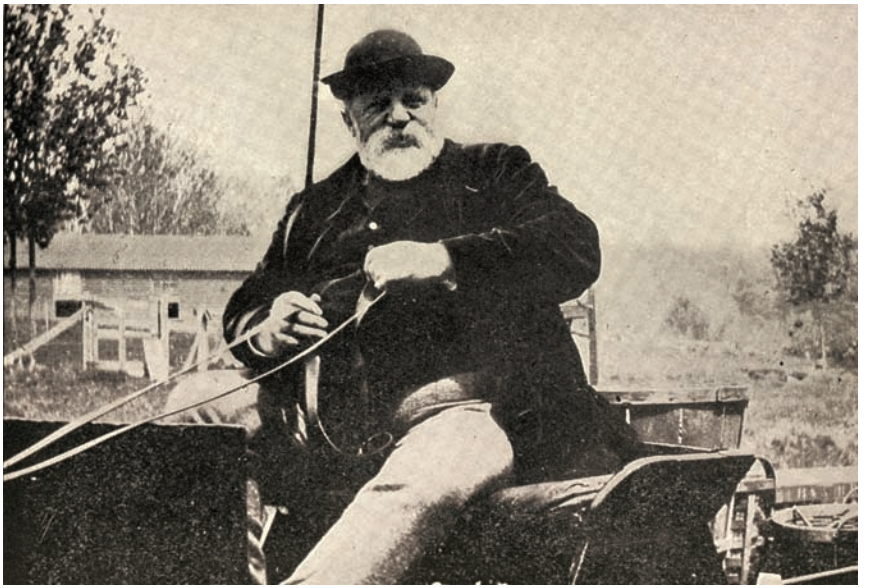
were guilty of complicity in the colonial agenda of the great powers, many also stood foursquare against the abuses of the colonial era. The Presbyterian missionary William Sheppard, for example, worked tirelessly to expose the enslavement and abuse of black people in the Belgian Congo under King Leopold II.

Moreover, many missionaries were motivated to alleviate the questionable practices that James S. Dennis highlighted in his 1897 book, *Social Evils of the Non-Christian World*. In a time long before the concept of moral relativism and a sense of Western culpability would dampen the ardor of many in the West to attempt to reform foreign lands, mission was often presented as, in Dennis's words, "a moral crusade to achieve the moral reconstruction of the world." Among the crimes Dennis catalogued in non-Christians lands were female infanticide, the slave trade, cannibalism, human sacrifices,

The Rev. George and Mary Chamberlain family. Chamberlain served as a Presbyterian missionary in Brazil from 1862 to 1902.

Courtesy of the University of Delaware Archives

William (1865–1927) and Lucy Gantt Sheppard (and family), Presbyterian missionaries to the Congo Free State. William Sheppard is most famous for publicizing the atrocities of Belgium's King Leopold II in the Congo.



Dwight Moody (1837–1899) was photographed in his carryall in Mount Hermon, Massachusetts, circa 1890.
Courtesy of Yale Divinity School Library

general ignorance represented by illiteracy and witch doctors, cruel customs such as foot binding, vast poverty, unsanitary conditions, and frequent famines.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, the "open doors" and the increasing number of missionaries sent by the Protestant denominations gave many the sense that if efforts were better coordinated and maximized, the completion of the task of world evangelization might be in sight. In 1886, at Dwight L. Moody's student summer camp at Mount Hermon, Massachusetts, one hundred college students volunteered to serve as missionaries, launching the Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions (SVM). The watchword of the movement became the slogan of this missionary age: "The Evangelization of the World in This Generation." By 1890 the American Protestant churches were maintaining 934 missionaries on the field. The SVM, by concentrating on recruiting college students, was able by 1920 to recruit about 8,000 missionaries in the United States. During this period around twice that number would be sent out by the American churches.

Cartoon for the **New York Tribune** *at the time of the Student Volunteer Convention in Des Moines, Iowa, ©1920.*

Courtesy of Yale Divinity School Library

1910

The missionary era reached its height in the generation before World War I. Mission had never been more popular in the general culture than at this time. At the Ecumenical Missionary Conference in New York in 1900, the speakers included former President Benjamin Harrison, current President William McKinley, and future President Theodore Roosevelt. At the 1910 World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh, arguably the apogee of this age of mission, there was a note of triumphalism. The 1,200 delegates, all but seventeen from the West, heard two great themes expounded: the need to pursue to completion the goal of world evangelization and the need for ecumenical cooperation in order to achieve this goal. The Edinburgh conference, chaired by SVM leader John R. Mott, closed one chapter in the history of mission and opened another. Mott believed, as the title of his book on the conference suggests, that the world had entered *The Decisive Hour of Christian Missions* (1910). The age of exploration and establishing footholds in mission lands was now largely over. Protestant denominations in the coming years would strive through "comity" agreements to cooperate with one another to evangelize the world. This meant in some instances that a denomination would focus on one country and avoid another. For example, the Presbyterians would leave Burma to the Anglican Church, while the Anglican Church would leave Thailand to the Presbyterians. In Sudan this meant that Presbyterians, Anglicans, and Catholics would divide the southern part of the country among them, each focusing on its own territory and agreeing not to wander into another's. The Edinburgh conference is also credited with launching the modern ecumenical movement. It created a Continuation Committee, chaired by Mott, which led to the establishment of the International Missionary Council in 1921. He was instrumental in the establishment of the World Council of Churches in 1948. Based on his life of service, Mott received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1946.

Robert E. Speer (1876–1947) and John R. Mott (1865–1955). Speer served as the secretary of the American Presbyterian Missions (PCUSA) from 1891 to 1937. A tireless missionary recruiter, he presided over and largely directed the most active period in the history of Presbyterian missions. Mott, Speer's good friend and colleague, was one of the great Christian leaders of the early twentieth century. He was a leader in the YMCA and SVM; he presided over the 1910 World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh; and he helped to form the World Council of Churches.

Courtesy of Yale Divinity School Library

The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh, June 14–23, 1910, is often seen as the triumphal apogee of the "Great Century of Missions" and the beginning of the modern Ecumenical Movement.

Courtesy of Yale Divinity School Library

Horace Grant Underwood helped to establish the (Northern) Presbyterian mission in Korea beginning in 1885. He was joined there a few years later by Lillias Horton, a physician appointed in response to a request by the Korean queen for a female doctor. They married, after which they worked together in an ecumenical spirit and promoted John L. Nevius's plan for a self-propagating, self-governing, and self-supporting Korean Church. In addition they encouraged education for laypeople in secondary and higher education, including physicians and nurses. Horace Underwood founded Korea's first Christian (Presbyterian) Church in Seoul and Chosen Christian College, now a leading university in Asia. Lillias Underwood pioneered in medical work both alone and in cooperation with Dr. Horace Allen, the first Presbyterian missionary in Korea.

2010

Presbyterians might well appreciate the prescient and prophetic nature of the Edinburgh conference. Certainly its emphasis on cooperation between denominations struck a chord with Presbyterians, for the PCUSA and UPCNA united in 1958 and then united with the PCUS in 1983. Moreover, Mott's belief that mission lands were entering a decisive hour was true, but perhaps not for the reasons he had thought. In the postwar era of the 1950s and 1960s, the former mission lands largely became free of their colonial masters. Presbyterian missionaries and mission leaders, who had often shared a paternalistic approach with the colonizers, changed course in 1956.

At the Lake Mohonk Consultation in 1956, the mission boards of the PCUSA and the UPCNA began a movement toward integrating their mission programs into the national churches. When these two churches united in 1958, they formed the Commission on Ecumenical Mission and Relations (COEMAR), which would seek to encourage the independence of the indigenous churches with which it was associated. The PCUS followed suit in 1962. It was to be a "new day" in mission. Presbyterians entered an era of "partnership" with the churches that it had helped to create. The new day also meant a new nomenclature. The word "missionary" became passé and was replaced first by "fraternal worker" and then by "co-worker"—sometimes "mission co-worker." Since the 1960s Presbyterians have been learning to do mission in partnership. This has been a difficult task because the partners are often at different levels of development, newer churches are sometimes ill-prepared for the responsibilities thrust upon them, and the American partners have sometimes persisted in outmoded, paternalistic habits.

Looking back at two hundred years of mission experience, Presbyterians can be proud of our record in mission. Presbyterian churches have been established in more than eighty countries throughout Africa, Asia, and Latin America. And over the years we have sent out thousands of highly effective missionaries. Most of them are unsung heroes of the faith. Some became famous, such as Horace and Lillas Underwood in Korea, Sam and Jane Higginbottom in India, William Sheppard and William Morrison in the Congo, John Leighton Stuart in China, and J. Kelly Giffin in Sudan.

Special gratitude is appropriate for the role women have played in Presbyterian mission. As early as 1900 an estimated two-thirds of all American Protestant missionaries were women. Presbyterian women in particular have always been stalwarts of the missionary enterprise both as missionaries and as mission supporters, raising money, studying the issues, praying, and organizing.

Sam Higginbottom (1874–1958) served as a missionary in Allahabad, India, specializing in the teaching of scientific methods of farming or, as he put it, "the gospel of the plow."

Courtesy of the Presbyterian Historical Society

Emma Dean Anderson sailed for the Punjab in India in 1881. A member of the UPCNA, she served in India for fifty-six years. Because of her mission to homeless women her fame spread widely, and her name became a household word.

Courtesy of the Presbyterian Historical Society

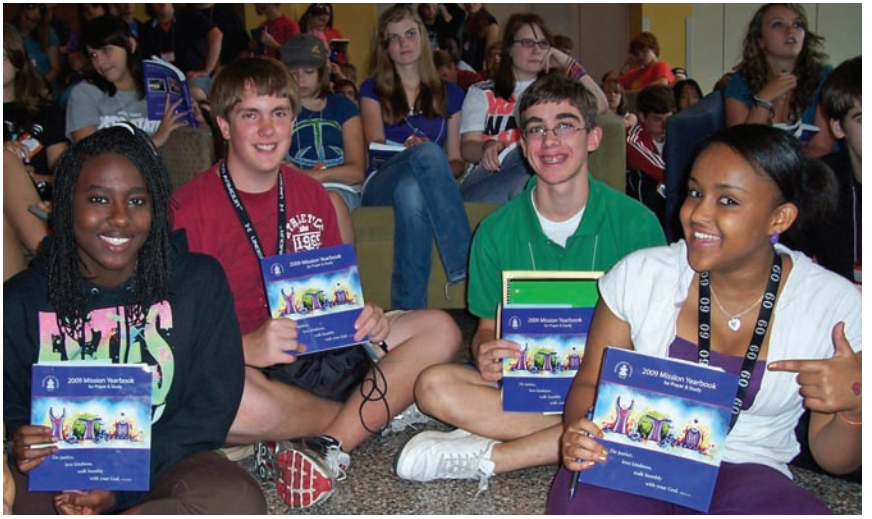
Rev. Clifton Kirkpatrick serving Communion at Montreat.

Montreat Conference Center in North Carolina was, for over ninety-five years, the site where the PCUS held its annual mission conference. Most mission personnel appointed by the PCUS from 1943 to 1982 went through five to seven weeks of orientation at Montreat that included a commissioning service at the World Mission Conference. Dr. Grier Davis, president of the conference center during the 1960s, wrote, "Many of us in Montreat were convinced that the Commissioning Service on the last night of the World Mission Conference was the climax of the year for the whole church. The congregation, which overflowed Anderson auditorium, was estimated to be about three thousand." The largest number of missionary candidates were appointed in 1961 when forty-three appointees were commissioned.

Is the missionary task now complete? Looking only at the numbers of missionaries, an outside observer might conclude that Presbyterians think so. In 1859 the Presbyterian churches in the United States counted 159 missionaries. The numbers of missionaries peaked in 1927 when the combined strength of Northern and Southern churches was 2,159. These numbers have slowly decreased. There were fewer than 600 missionaries in 2000, and in 2009 the number of Presbyterian missionaries may have reached its nadir at 189. The 218th General Assembly (2008), however, voted decisively to reverse this trend, mandating that the denomination support 215 missionaries in 2010 and 220 by 2011.

The decline in missionary numbers may reflect a general loss of interest in the missionary enterprise by Western churches. Yet this cannot be the full answer since some 1.6 million Americans now annually engage in short-term international mission trips. Presbyterians have also been demonstrating their continuing interest in mission through the development of other mission organizations. The Outreach Foundation, the Medical Benevolence Foundation, and the Presbyterian Frontier Fellowship, all established in the 1960s and 1970s, were recognized as validated mission support groups in 1988. The Association of Presbyterian Mission Pastors was formed the next year. Other groups that have emerged in recent years include Pittsburgh Theological Seminary's World Mission Initiative, Presbyterian Global Fellowship, and Presbyterian Peace Fellowship. In the late 1990s network groups began to form, with meetings and ongoing communication among those churches, presbyteries, and others interested in the Christian work occurring in a single nation or region. There are now thirty-six such groups. This decentralization or democratization of mission, though in many ways a positive development and a possible harbinger of better days ahead, has also meant a lack of coordination and strategic thinking in mission.

Courtesy of Pam Courtney



The New Wilmington Mission Conference has met for a week every year since 1906 at Westminster College in western Pennsylvania. The principal purpose of the conference is to inspire and recruit future PC(USA) mission co-workers. The focus of the conference is youth between the ages of twelve and twenty-five, but Presbyterians of all ages attend.

The Young Adult Volunteer Program (YAV) began in 1994. It has since sent hundreds of Presbyterians between the ages of nineteen and thirty to numerous sites in the United States and around the world to serve for one year. Pictured here are the YAVs serving in Peru in 2009.

As the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) approaches the next Edinburgh conference in June 2010, it faces both a bicentennial of the American missionary movement and a centennial celebration of the birth of the ecumenical movement. The years 1810 and 1910 were crucial in the history of American missions because they were times when Christians asked searching questions about what new things God might be calling them to do in the world, and because they were willing to respond boldly and move confidently in new directions. Perhaps 2010 will also be remembered as a crucial year, for Presbyterians and other Christians now seem fully engaged in developing new ways of doing mission in response to the call of the One who is ever about the business of making all things new.

As Presbyterians, we look hopefully to a third century of mission, and we pray to be part of the new directions that God's mission is taking even as we wonder . . .

Wither missions today?

Written by the Rev. Dr. Michael Parker, Presbyterian World Mission's coordinator for international evangelism. He was a Presbyterian mission co-worker in Africa from 1995 to 2006 and is the author of *The Kingdom of Character: The Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions, 1886–1926*. Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2008.

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