

From One Woman to United Methodist Women in Missoula

By Evelyn Rimel, May 6, 2004

Updated by Kay Duffield, October 11, 2015

The beginning process of forming a women's group involved the growth of the church as well as happenings in the state and nation. The earliest years of Methodism in Missoula were rocky, hardship bound and financially hazardous. Organized religion first came to the area more than twenty years before gold was discovered. The black robed Jesuits set up their first church in Stevensville in 1841.

Montana became a territory in 1864, and spasmodically itinerate Methodist preachers brought the message to the area, but never stayed more than a few days. Rev. George Comfort, however, stayed throughout 1869. In his time a Board of Trustees was formed and Block #4 was bought for \$100.00 for the purpose "to build a church". In 1872, Rev. Thomas Iliff was called from Ohio to build the church.

W.H.H. Dickinson, a bachelor, was not only chairman of the Trustees but also Postmaster and a local merchant. In 1872, he married Emma Slack, who had come west to visit her brother Jasper who had settled on a farm near Stevensville.

Emma Slack, born in 1838, had grown up in a Methodist Episcopal home in Maryland. In the Butte Western District registry Emma was the only Methodist in Missoula in 1870. At about this time Virginia Speck's (long time member of First UMC) grandfather started a church in Whitehall. Emma, while visiting Jasper, was hired to teach fifteen students in Missoula for a three month summer session. She did so for two summers. Emma's 1872 wedding was the first performed by a protestant minister in Missoula.

In her new home Emma began teaching a Sunday School class on Sunday afternoons. Also, the Board of Trustees held their meetings in the Dickinson home. Emma served coffee and pastries to them, soon enlisting the help of a couple of other women. Was this the first Ladies Aid Group?

The frame structured church, 25' X 40' was built and dedicated on September 18, 1872. Refreshments were served by Emma and the ladies. This was the first Protestant Church between Helena and Walla Walla, Washington. A bridge was built across the river and Missoula began to grow. The following year was the Custer Massacre, followed two years later by Chief Joseph's famous last march.

By 1882 Emma and W.H.H. Dickinson were the only surviving members of the founding Trustees. It was now clear that a parsonage was needed in order to keep a pastor. By 1885 the first parsonage, a six-room frame house was built. The church now had 42 registered members. Emma and a few women, The Ladies Aid, readied the building for occupancy.

By 1898 the church needed to be enlarged and cleaned. After the enlarging was done, the Ladies Aid did the interior work. Although Emma was instrumental in getting the group organized, the organist volunteered the name "Lend-A-Hand Society", which was used for the next 45 years.

With a large pastor's family, a nine-room parsonage was built. The first parsonage was sold for \$300.00. The Lend-A-Hand Society bought all new furniture for the new parsonage.

With the late 1890s depression and Spanish-American War, a poverty class was developing. In 1901 the Home Missionary Society was formed. It met in the afternoons on the third Thursday in homes, while the Lend-A-Hand Society met the second Thursday at the church for dessert meetings.

With Teddy Roosevelt's programs in the early 1900s came prosperity and church membership was growing as was Lend-A-Hand's. Its members wanted a fellowship hall and a kitchen. Soon plans were drawn up to build a bigger church. Many beautiful stained glass windows were given as memorials. The Home Missionary Society donated a window depicting Mary and Martha that is no longer in the church. When the new church was dedicated, October 29, 1911, the bell in the belfry had been moved and marked the main entrance. A pipe organ was added as well as a full basement with kitchen. The Lend-A-Hand gave \$5,000.00 for remodeling and hot water came to the kitchen.

With World War I going on in Europe and Africa being opened up, in late 1915 a Foreign Missionary Society was organized and met the first Thursday afternoon in homes. With U.S. entry into World War I and the flu epidemic, church activities were at a slow pace. The Red Cross helped at that time.

But the year 1921 marked a half century of the Methodist Church in Missoula. Plans were made for a big celebration from April 27th to May 1st. There were now 510 members. Dr. Crouch delivered an address on "The Spirit of Methodism". A souvenir booklet "A History of Fifty Years of Progress" was prepared by John Inch. Lend-A-Hand was very busy and Emma Dickinson was honored.

For some years business and professional women of the church had discussed their need for an evening group. When Rev. Charles Donaldson became pastor in 1925, he encouraged them and Thela Guild was organized in 1927. Mrs. George Miller (Grace) chairman of the Home Missionary Society and its members became Thela's sponsors and provided homes for their meetings the first year. Jan. 1, 1927 when Emma Dickinson was in her eighties, she died in her son William's home at 201 4th St. West in Missoula.

In 1928 the Rimel family came to Missoula. Mrs. E.A. Day invited Agnes (Mrs. W.P) Rimel to the Home Missionary Society and later took her to church.

Thela's Welfare Committee became very active throughout the 30s because of the Great Depression. By 1930 the members had saved dresses for a mother and her eight children. Many quilts were made and distributed to the poor. The Guild gave both food and clothing to members of the County Poor Farm. They also gave hymnals to the church and began doing a Sunday Bulletin for the church.

In 1939 the Methodist Episcopal Church, the Methodist Episcopal Church South, and the Methodist Protestant Church merged to form The Methodist Church. The Missoula Societies joined together to entertain the First Conference of the new Methodist Church in June 1939. The 70th Anniversary of the Missoula Methodist was celebrated in 1941. Lend-A-Hand improved the church kitchen and parsonage for these events.

The Women's Societies having worked together to do these projects decided to formally join together. So Lend-A-Hand, The Foreign and Home Missionary Missions and the Thela Guild united to form the Women's Society of Christian Service (W.S.C.S.) with eight circles. At three to four year intervals the circle membership was shaken up but Thela was never involved. Thela requested it remain free to use its own name and do its own projects. With WSCS came pledge cards and no longer any Thela Rummage Sales. Thela then went to selling boxed greeting cards to raise money for its projects.

Also during World War II many circle members helped a group of community women, who met both east and westbound trains, and distributed sandwiches and beverages to the soldiers. Agnes Rimel was co-chairman for this project. She also was co-chairman of the group that dispensed coupons for gas and sugar for the Orchard Homes area.

In 1945 Agnes Rimel was elected president of the W.S.C.S. The National Mental Health Act was passed by congress. The Circles studied and campaigned for Montana to pass a state act setting up mental health districts with a clinic. Evelyn Rimel, among others, did door to door canvassing for the bills.

The fall of 1945 Virginia Speck and Evelyn Rimel became faculty members at Missoula County High School and active members of Thela. The Wesleyan Service Guild finally became active in 1950-51.

Church membership in 1943 reached 1,156 but dropped to 768 by 1944-45, then reached 1,255 by 1949. With church membership increasing there was another drive for a larger church. The Joint Convention at First Church of the Montana Council of Churches and the Council of Church Women met Oct. 5-7, 1953. An every member canvass was conducted. After several months of discussion, the Trustees recommended a new building plan, which was approved in October, 1954.

The new remodeling and enlarging job was to be done in stages starting with the sanctuary and then adding an Educational Building. The Annual Conference was held in the new sanctuary June 1957. The State Conference of W.S.C.S. came to Missoula in April 1958. That same time Rev. Hugh Herbert became the pastor for eleven years. The new educational Building was dedicated May 1970. For that day the choir, with the circles helping, wore 38 new choir robes.

In 1972 the Unified Methodist Church and the Ecumenical United Brethren joined and ten Circles including Thela were asked to vote on a new name for W.S.C.S. The winning name was United Methodist Women (UMW). Shortly after the Wesleyan Service Group joined a circle and became L.A.N.S. (Living Actively in a New Society). All the fellowships took names. Morning Glories was filled with young mothers and had a babysitter available. Susannah, Faith and Hedwig gave Tender Loving Care to the shut-ins of the church, the YWCA Battered Women's Shelter, and Poverello Homeless Center. L.A.N.S. supported a child of the missionary society *Save the Children* because one of our members, Mabel Purveyance was a director of this organization. Other prominent members included Tish Johnson and Helen Herbert. Vespers was an evening Circle and had lots of working women, they later moved to afternoon and helped with receptions and dinners. UMW had a huge fall Bazaar and luncheon each year and Rummage Sales were held twice a year to support missions.

For many years UMW helped put on the weekly Lenten Luncheons. The Circles also took day old bread to the Poverello Center, delivered Meals on Wheels, made quilts for Intermountain Children's home, dresses for mission, freezer meals for homeless, knit hats and mittens for the Blackfeet Parish, recovered the chairs in the Helen Herbert Parlor and

kept the kitchen clean and equipped. A craft group made quilts to be donated to the Rosemary Gallagher and the Francetich Youth Homes. They also provided monthly suppers for the U of M Wesley Foundation and the FIRST UMC Youth Fellowship. Scholarships were available to youth for camp. Donations were given to local, state and national missions. They also served a Silver Tea to benefit the Partnership for Children along with helping on funeral and wedding receptions and serving meals for visiting groups.

Since the 1990s and with the cost of living sky rocketing many married women have been forced to join the workforce in order to balance the family budget. This has necessitated changes to the functioning of UMW. The regular dessert meetings changed to potluck noon hour meetings. The monthly meetings were cut to eight and one is a joint evening meeting with Grace UMW.

In the 1990s when membership decreased Morning Glories and Faith Fellowship joined together and became Ruth Fellowship. Gems Fellowship was formed by Bonnie Faust early in 2000 to accommodate working women with an evening meeting. Special Interest fellowships were formed and included a Book Group with noon hour discussions and a prayer shawl Knitting Group, which met on Saturday.

Recent projects by the fellowships include the Christmas Shoebox Ministry for the Blackfeet, YWCA health kits, and support of the Wesley House and Intermountain Home. The church as a whole has taken over the Poverello ministry. Betsy Wilcox and Jo Reynolds have been active on the Intermountain Board in Helena.

Many of our UMW members have served UMW on the Western Mountain District and Yellowstone Conference Leadership Teams. They include: Charlotte Barger, Ellie Barnes, Jackie Krahn, Cindy Howard, Kim Darling, Erna Rae Daugherty, Alita Phelps, Virginia Speck, Phyllis Strosahl, Marilyn Whanger, Marcia Gay, Elaine Williams, Peg Plimpton, Tish Herries, Teresa Henry, Kay Duffield, Laurie Ball and Sandy Balliet. Jackie and Tish served UMW on Western Jurisdiction and Tish was also our first member to serve on the National Program Advisory Group.

So in 2019 we are observing 150 years of the United Methodist Women of Missoula.

We have come a long way but our purpose of serving women, children and youth remains.

Sources of information for this paper have been:

Published works:

Binford & Mort "The Montana Frontier"; Joscelyn, Archie "The First Hundred Years"; Lind, Robert "When Wagon Trails were Dim"

Unpublished works:

Rimel, Evelyn "History of Thela Guild" ; Rimel, Agnes "Notes from the 1940s"; Thela Guild and UMW minutes,

Interviews with a number of UMW members.