



If we are not careful, homeschooling in America may follow the same path as the women's missionary movement.



by
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The Future of Homeschooling in America

The homeschooling movement has thrived for more than thirty years, and when I have an opportunity to speak to homeschooled high school graduates, I am impressed with their insightful thinking, their big dreams, and their heart for the world. They are empowered and equipped to go out and change their world.

Over these years, the homeschooling movement has been successful at raising up the next generation of leaders, young people who love the Lord and seek to serve Him.

In the current homeschool arena, I sense a different emphasis being presented. Some male speakers seem to imply that husbands need to choose materials (as the only ones wise enough to do so), that only Christian books should be read, and that scholarship is less relevant than spirituality.

I find this a disturbing trend.

I offer a historical analogy as a cautionary tale.

A Brief History of Women's Mission Societies

At a *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement* class I attended, Lorry Lutz, a retired missionary, spoke on the role of women in missions. She highlighted many stories of wonderful things God has done through women through the



Clementina Butler helped found the Women's Foreign Missionary Society. She served in Mexico and India.

ages. When she came to the 19th century, she discussed the rise of women's missionary societies.

After the American Civil War, she said, women were forced, by necessity, to run the farms and family businesses since many of their husbands—or potential husbands—had left for the war and/or died in the war.

At this same time, many women caught a vision to impact their

world and decided to carefully save funds from their household money to give for world mission outreach.

When traditional missionary boards refused to send single women to the field, women who had an obvious passion to share Christ with the lost, thousands of these newly-energized women formed volunteer fund-raising organizations like the "Cent Societies" (in which members donated one cent per week for their charitable purpose—a penny acquired by doing without some small "extravagance" like tea or coffee or a fancy dress)¹. They formed over 100,000 women missionary

societies within local churches and raised funds and prayers. But they went beyond fund-raising and prayer and organized their own mission boards and built women's colleges in order to train women missionaries.

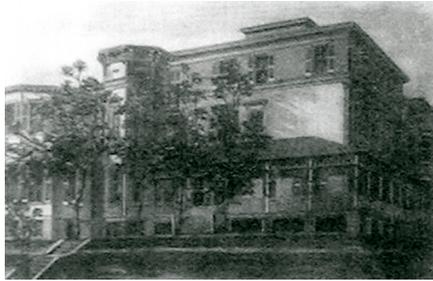


Lucy Webb Hayes, the wife of U.S. President Rutherford B. Hayes and first president of the Women's Missionary Society, 1890

By 1900, over 40 denominational women's societies existed, with over three million active women raising funds to build hospitals and schools around the world, paying the salaries of indigenous female evangelists, and sending single women as missionary doctors, teachers, and evangelists. By the early decades of the 20th Century, the women's missionary movement had become the largest women's movement in the United States, and women outnumbered men on the mission field by a ratio of more than two to one.²



Missionary sewing class in Japan, 1925–1826



Lucy Webb Hayes Bible School and Deaconess Home, Washington, DC, 1891

Dr. Ralph Winter, instigator of the modern “unreached peoples” movement and founder of the U.S. Center for World Mission, says he believes the strong missions movement of the early 20th century was built on the sacrificial giving and prayers of these women.

But, said Lutz, “these boards were persuaded to combine with the denominational boards in the 1920s and 30s,” and “women lost their opportunity to direct the work.” Over a brief period of time, men took over leadership of the boards and women had competently run for more than thirty years. And while, no doubt, certain aspects of this take-over had valid and godly goals (for example, the women's efforts were less focused on church-planting, say, than were the denominational boards), the denominational boards wanted control of the money the women collected and the power to decide the direction of the agencies.

And as the women were moved out of the leadership roles they had fulfilled so long, they also tragically lost their passion and drive for missions. All the women who had once worked so hard and sacrificed so much to support “their” societies disappeared. Few vital, denominational-level women's missionary societies still exist. Indeed, you will be hard-pressed to find many such agencies today.

Why Does It Matter?

I look at this history and wonder.

The homeschooling movement, obviously, has succeeded as men and women, husbands and wives have worked together. Our earliest forebears in the movement—usually the men, the husbands—went to jail in order to win us the right to teach our children at home.

But for all the vital influence and help of these self-sacrificing men, I don't think I am misspeaking when I say that the homeschooling movement was initially galvanized and faithfully staffed primarily by women. And I know of many mothers, who even without their

husband's support (for different kinds of reasons) have continued to homeschool their children at great personal sacrifice.

I tremble that, just as godly men's desire to take charge of and override perceived deficiencies in the women's missionary movement may have destroyed it, so too, an over-eager desire on the part of homeschooling fathers to control the homeschooling movement may destroy the

homeschooling movement as well.

Yes, let us listen to the good counsel of these men. But let us also beware the potential extremes.

May God give us all wisdom and discernment as we seek to pursue His plans. 



San Francisco Training School and Deaconess Home, 1891

¹ For a relatively brief but detailed overview of this phenomenon, see “But Gideon Refused: The Institutionalization of Methodist Mission” by Jane Donovan of West Virginia University (are.as.wvu.edu/MissionPaper.htm).

² For more on this, see for example, Johann N. Neem's *Creating a Nation of Joiners* (Harvard University Press, 2008), pp. 90-97 and “Aspects of the Changing Status of New England Women, 1790-1840” found at <http://sn.im/womenstatus>.