“WE FOLLOWED THE LORD ALONE!”: THE ARDUOUS JOURNEY TO SECURE WOMAN’S MISSIONARY SOCIETIES IN THE EVANGELICAL ASSOCIATION, 1839–1884

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Permission to organize a Woman’s Missionary Society was a key outcome of the 1883 General Conference of the Evangelical Association, according to Rev. William Yost, in his 1911 Reminiscences. Given its importance, Yost thought it “peculiar and absurd” that nothing was said or done on the occasion to recognize the women who had worked long and hard to achieve this milestone. Instead they were solemnly granted “permission” to organize, with the stipulation that they wait another full year to gain approval from the General Board of Missions for their constitution. Only then could the women officially begin their work.

Although granted without fanfare and incomplete until 1884, this hard-sought breakthrough had enormous implications for Yost and his family, let alone the Evangelical Association (EA). By 1883, Yost had served for fifteen years as corresponding secretary of the denomination’s Missionary Society and eight years as its treasurer. He and two daughters, Ella and Emma Yost, had long been advocates for a Woman’s Missionary Society (WMS) against longstanding, resolute opposition within the EA. Yost’s summary of this resistance offers a glimpse of the challenge they faced: “This movement is only desired by such women as are more masculine than feminine [sic]. Our good wives have their mission in their own homes. It would be only a dress parade, anyhow. There is no need whatever for such an organization. The sisters have all the opportunity necessary to express their zeal by working for the interests of the organization we already have.” Nonetheless the Yosts and a growing number of Evangelicals in the late nineteenth century had doggedly followed what they believed to be the Lord’s call to create not only local organizations, but also a denomination-wide WMS.

Of the predecessor denominations that eventually merged to form The United Methodist Church (UMC), the EA was the last to authorize a denomination-wide women’s missionary organization. The slower time frame

1 Mrs. H. Bennett, Her Story: History of the Woman’s Missionary Society of the Evangelical Association (Cleveland, OH: Mattill & Lamb, 190[3]), 115.
2 S. C. Breyfogle, ed., Landmarks of the Evangelical Association, Containing all the Official Records of the Annual and General Conferences from the Days of Jacob Albright to the Year 1840; and the Proceedings of the East Pennsylvania Conference Together with Important Extracts from the Transactions of the General Conference from 1840 to the Present Time (Reading, PA: Eagle Book Print, 1888), 406; Yost, Reminiscences, 226–228.
3 Yost, Reminiscences, 227.
of this unfolding suggests a deeper dynamic that begs to be uncovered and understood as part of the broad tradition that is the heritage of United Methodism. The delayed process also points beyond the Evangelical and, later, United Methodist denominations to the continuing, drawn out battle between men and women through the ages for rightful positions, roles and agency within the institutional church. If women of the EA were up against challenges greater than were some others, the story of their efforts is as significant for posterity as those of their counterparts. This story has, however, thus far received only minimal treatment in United Methodist histories.

This paper will explore the challenging process by which members of the EA established authorized local women’s missionary societies. Beginning in 1839—the same year the denomination’s General Missionary Society was officially launched—this process culminated in General Conference approval of the WMS in 1883 and later, approval by the Board of Missions of its constitution in 1884. Using both primary and early secondary sources, this paper will trace determined efforts to found women’s missionary societies despite powerful resistance from men in positions of institutional authority. It will also document the expectation placed upon women to remain submitted to authority held by male church officials, and thus to assume auxiliary status for their organizations, rather than equal or independent standing in relationship to agencies administered by men. Finally, this paper will argue that Evangelical women leveraged their tradition’s Pietist theology as a means to interpret, endure, and overcome resistance to their goal of launching women’s missionary societies.

The train of events that led to the founding of the first local WMS in the EA began in 1838 with the organizing of the Eastern Conference’s Missionary Society. This was followed by approval of a denomination-wide missionary society by General Conference in the spring of 1839. According to EA historian Raymond Albright, branch societies were quickly begun in every annual conference, and “at least thirty auxiliary bodies were established” by 1840. Among these was “The Woman’s Missionary Society of Immanuel Evangelical Church in Philadelphia,” organized on November 11, 1839, with Mrs. Catherine Grafenstein as its president.

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5 For the purposes of this paper, August Hermann Francke’s general emphases of Pietist theology will suffice: the new birth and new life in Christ, self-denial, obedience, trust in God, persisting joy, and the belief that trials can make one stronger in faith.

The approval and support of the pastor of the Philadelphia church, the Rev. Jacob T. Vogelbach, was instrumental in this society’s genesis. Historian of Evangelical missions, Paul H. Eller, wrote that Vogelbach was born in Germany and was well educated, having attended a Mission Institute in Basel. After moving to North America, he became one of the “dominant personalities” in promoting EA missions. He served as the secretary of the first missionary society in the denomination and as pastor of the church in Philadelphia in 1839 where the first WMS was organized.\(^7\)

Although some Evangelicals opposed the concept of missionary societies in general, let alone missionary societies led by women, Vogelbach was well within his rights and responsibilities in overseeing the organization of the one formed at his church.\(^8\) Article 6 of the Eastern Conference Missionary Society constitution provided that “all superintending preachers of the Evangelical Association shall be authorized agents to establish auxiliary societies and to receive moneys in order to hand them over to the treasurer.”\(^9\) Thus, the auxiliary society begun at this church should be regarded as both legitimate and dependent upon his relationship to this congregation and its WMS.

The women’s organization at Immanuel Evangelical Church duly elected officers and adopted a constitution, their stated purpose being to raise funds in support of the Eastern Conference Missionary Society.\(^10\) In addition to President Grafenstein, four female officers were named: Vice-presidents A. Maria Walker and Catherine Kiser, Secretary Caroline Vogelbach, and Treasurer Margaret Kraker.\(^11\) A special committee of two more women, Catherine Bixenstein and Margaret Arnsworth, was established to support the officers. The constitution identified the pastor and two laymen as “counselors” of the organization.\(^12\)

The sixty charter members were each expected “to make goods for sale, the profits of which would flow into the treasury enabling the treasurer to buy more raw materials for the making of still more goods.” Those without skills in handiwork were employed reading religious and missionary literature to the others while they made goods to sell.\(^13\) The society encouraged women to contribute “offerings of ‘finger-rings, earrings, pins of gold and silver and other valuables’ to be laid on the altar and sold” to raise funds for the mis-

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\(^8\) Albright, *History*, 201–202.

\(^9\) Albright, *History*, 199.

\(^10\) Bennett, *Her Story*, 10.


\(^12\) Eller, *Evangelical Missions*, 22.

cisionary cause.”14 In her 1903 history of the WMS, Mrs. H. Bennett defended the motivation of the society as a holy one in relationship to the mission of the church. In her words, “Those old-time, conservative sisters were certainly not simply seeking popularity; they had an intense longing for the world’s salvation and were anxious to do their utmost to that end.”15

The woman’s society at the Philadelphia church was discontinued with the departure of Vogelbach, who served in this appointment no more than two years before leaving the EA and associating for the remainder of his ministry with the Lutherans.16 In 1883, the last surviving officer of the society, Mrs. Catharine Bixenstein, declined to discuss the organization or its discontinuation. As quoted in Mrs. Bennett’s history, she simply stated, “I am determined to live a consecrated life every day until God calls me home” and “I regret that I can not give the information asked, for the dear sisters have all gone home.”17 Although it would be easy to read too much into Mrs. Bixenstein’s sealed lips, her terse reply fits squarely with a pattern of refusal on the part of EA women to speak ill of either the men or the denomination that may have frustrated their efforts to begin or maintain missionary societies.

Additional women’s auxiliary societies were formed in the 1840s through the 1860s, according to Albright. Remarkably, none survived long enough to have direct continuity with the eventual organization of Evangelical women’s missionary societies in the 1880s. J. Bruce Behney and Paul H. Eller’s History of the Evangelical United Brethren Church states that mission interests following the denomination’s Jubilee Year in 1850 “spurred women’s groups in many other local churches” similar to the one that had been organized in Philadelphia. However, this movement was discouraged by the general board as being “potentially rebellious.”18 Given these reports, the lack of continuity constitutes a gaping hole in the denomination’s history. It begs further research in primary documents but is beyond the scope of this study.

Despite its untimely disappearance, the Philadelphia women’s society was used as historical precedent, model, and inspiration for later EA wom-

15 Bennett, Her Story, 9–10.
16 Vogelbach’s ministerial record in the Evangelical Association is available in Breyfogel, ed., Landmarks, 95, 100. The EA reported that Vogelbach “forsook his congregation” during the 1840 appointment year (Ammon Stapleton, Annals of the Evangelical Association of North America and History of the United Evangelical Church [Harrisburg PA: Publishing House of the United Evangelical Church, 1900], 261). Lutheran Church records indicate he was “received into the Lutheran Synod of Maryland” in 1842. He pastored Lutheran congregations until his death in 1880 (A. P. Horn, ed., Proceedings of the Re-Union of Apple’s Church and of the Boehm Family, Celebrated at Apple’s or New Jerusalem Reformed and Lutheran Church, Leithsville, Northampton County, PA., September 14, 1895 [Hellertown, PA: H .D. Laubach, Publisher, 1902], 41–42).
17 Catharine Bixenstein, quoted in Bennett, Her Story, 11.
18 Albright, History, 321; Behney and Eller, History of the EUBC, 217.
en’s missionary societies that did continue their service into the next centuries. The first of several extant historical narratives to place the beginning of EA women’s organizational efforts for missions in 1839 at the Philadelphia Church was Mrs. H. Bennett’s 1903 *Her Story*. Both Bennett and the official, fifty-year anniversary history of the WMS devoted their first chapters to the “holy ancestry” of the Philadelphia Woman’s Missionary Society. In a similar vein, Albright’s *A History of the Evangelical Church* (1942), Eller’s *History of Evangelical Missions* (1942), and Behney and Eller’s *History of the Evangelical United Brethren Church* (1979) all locate the genesis of the denomination’s Woman’s Missionary Society at Immanuel Evangelical Church in Philadelphia in 1839.¹⁹

It was by no means a new idea, then, when Evangelical women in Cleveland, Ohio, petitioned the Board of Missions for permission to begin a Woman’s Missionary Society in 1878 at their local church. Clear precedents had been set for such an organization both within the EA itself, in the broader Wesleyan and Methodist movement in the United States, and beyond.²⁰ It would have been common knowledge that, in 1869, women of the Methodist Episcopal Church had organized the Woman’s Foreign Missionary Society and that only a few months later, women in the Ohio German Conference of the United Brethren in Christ organized the *Schwester Mission Verbein* (Sister Missionary Society). In 1872, women of the Miami (Ohio) Conference of the United Brethren in Christ organized a Woman’s Missionary Association, which was expanded into a denomination-wide agency reporting directly to the General Conference in 1877.²¹

The chief petitioner for a new women’s missionary organization in Cleveland, Miss Ella Yost, was a daughter of Rev. William Yost, mentioned earlier. Ella Yost was in her early twenties in 1875, when the Calvary Evangelical Church in Cleveland hosted the denomination’s first group of missionaries on their way to Japan. One member of the group, Miss Rachel Hudson, stayed at the Yost family home.²² The two young women became friends and corresponded during Hudson’s assignment in Asia. Hudson encouraged Yost’s growing interest in the mission and in doing “something towards organizing the women” in support of the denomination’s missionary work.²³

Having been deeply interested in becoming a missionary herself, Ella

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²² The group included Dr. and Mrs. Frederick Krecker from eastern Pennsylvania, Rev. A. Halmhuber from Germany, and Miss Rachel Hudson from Philadelphia (WMS, *Abiding Past*, p. 12; Margaret S. Hudson, ed., *History of the Ohio Branch of the Woman’s Missionary Society of the Evangelical Church* [Cleveland, OH: The Evangelical Publishing House], 13).

Yost had concluded that she was unqualified because her “imperfect hearing would be too serious a handicap.”24 Thinking she could help with organizational work for missions instead, she conferred with her father.25 From him she received encouragement to submit an article to the denominational newspaper that would inspire women of the EA to organize in support of missions. Evangelical Messenger editor Dr. H. B. Hartzler not only agreed to publish Yost’s article, but also contributed an endorsement and, along with William Yost and several others, continued to provide steady support for the movement to establish a women’s missionary society.26

Ella Yost’s “Call to the Women of Our Church,” was published May 23, 1878. In it she referred to a recent letter from missionary Rachel Hudson that spoke “very earnestly concerning the formation of a Women’s Missionary Society in our church,” and noted that the EA was among those “very few denominations” that did not currently have one. Thus, the EA was missing out on the blessings and good works of these “great auxiliaries to the General Missionary Boards,” she argued. She pointed out that numerous schools for children had been founded in mission fields and were being maintained entirely by women’s missionary societies of other denominations, something EA missionaries desired as part of their mission in Japan, but as yet did not have.27

Tellingly, Yost wrote that fear of failure was the reason “the Christian women of the Evangelical Association seem to do less for the public good than the women of some other churches.” She allowed that many women would not have the time “to engage actively in outside work” beyond the home, but insisted that “a vast number” would use their time “to do good outside of their little circles” if they had enough confidence to believe they could be successful. Informed perhaps by her father, she predicted candidly that there would be “opposition, difficulties, and discouragements,” but the women must rise above these challenges. Surely “croakers” would supply “this argument, that obstacle, and the other hindrance,” but no good reason why the women should not form a missionary society.28

Yost pointed to the fact that the General Board was in debt to the extent that “this cripples its efforts.” The Missionary Society had reduced its indebtedness from more than $23,000 in 1877 to under $13,000 in 1878. With an overall budget of less than $43,000, and major new commitments to the mission in Japan, this indebtedness still represented an embarrass-

24 Ella Yost, quoted in Hudson, ed., Ohio Branch, 14.
26 Hudson, ed., Ohio Branch, 13–14. William Yost wrote, “I encouraged the women to perseverance, and I myself advocated the movement with all the means at hand—by word and pen, upon every favorable occasion” (W. Yost, Reminiscences, 227). See also WMS, Abiding Past, 14–15, for the important role played by The Evangelical Messenger and Christliche Botschaffer as “friends of the cause.”
28 Ella Yost, “Call,” 1.
ment and a hindrance. She offered that women could help to relieve the financial burden, share responsibility, and assist in “spreading the religion of Christ.” While independent in its own maintenance and in “several other minor points” not specified, she emphasized that a women’s society “in all else would cooperate with the General Society.” Her call was comprehensive and insistent:

Is there a single woman in the Church whose sympathies cannot be enlisted in this cause? We believe our bishops, all our ministers, and all the influential brethren of the Church will sanction it. We have no desire to act independently of them; they have more experience than many of us have; we need all the help they can give us. . . . Fathers, help your daughters; husbands, assist your wives; brothers, give all the aid and information your sisters desire. God’s hand is certainly in the matter.

. . . Would to God that all, young and old, might be set on fire with enthusiasm, with earnestness and zeal for this good work!30

The article “created a stir,” as she put it, and prompted letters of support from those whose “hearts were prepared.” At the same time she found it a “shock and a rude awakening” to discover that some of the “official brethren” of the missionary society “did not look with favor upon a woman’s organization with its extra gifts.”31 Nonetheless, women of Calvary Evangelical Church in Cleveland sent a petition to the Board of Missions in October, 1878, officially requesting permission to organize a WMS.32

In response, the Board of Missions expressed “great interest” in the petition, especially its “noble, philanthropic spirit,” but summarily rejected it. The body replied that such an organization by women could not be allowed because it would not be in the “interest of the entire church missionary work.” Further, the board advised there was no need for a women’s society as there were already plenty of opportunities for “all our members to pray, give, and work in this direction.” It respectfully urged the petitioners, instead, to do their utmost to increase the wellbeing and efficiency of the general missionary society for the sake of saving souls.33

The women received this disappointing news with grace and humility. Mrs. W. H. Hammer, who later became the first corresponding secretary of the WMS, simply stated that, “for reasons which were considered wise and good by the members of the Board, the privilege was not granted.”34 In retrospect she interpreted the event with faith that the tide would soon turn: “The

29 The Financial Report of the Missionary Society for 1878 showed a deficit of $12,388.75 in an overall budget of $42,741.89, as well as progress in reducing the previous year’s indebtedness (“Missionary Society-Thirty-Ninth Annual Meeting,” Evangelical Messenger 32.42 [October 17, 1878]: 5).
30 Yost, “Call,” 1.
31 Hudson, ed., Ohio Branch, 14.
32 WMS, Abiding Past, 13, credits Mrs. W. H. Hammer, Ella J. Yost, Minerva Strawman, and Kate Klinefelter as chief instigators in the movement to form the WMS.
33 WMS, Abiding Past, 13; Bennett, 13.
34 Mrs. W. H. Hammer’s full name was Margaretta J. Hammer (Margaretta J. Hammer, “Annual Report of the Corresponding Secretary of the Woman’s Missionary Society,” Evangelical Messenger [October 6, 1885], 629).
seed-sowing had been completed. The seed had already taken root and was springing up. The ‘well done’ was pronounced by our heavenly Father. In the consciousness of his divine approval his handmaidens continued waiting and watching for the further development of the young plant, which was well nourished by tears and earnest prayers, and there was a feeling of confidence that by and by the fruit-bearing season would certainly appear.\(^{35}\)

In his report in the denominational newspaper, editor Hartzler also suggested it was only a matter of time until the women would be successful. He emphasized the “fact . . . that such Societies in other Churches have proved a decided success” and affirmed, “God’s blessing has been set, as a seal of Divine approval, upon the special work of consecrated Christian women. And they shall not fail of success or reward, if they labor on in the old ways, with fervent zeal for the Lord, until the set time for special, organized effort shall come.” Another article immediately followed featuring “Successful Societies”; it showcased ministries and related fundraising accomplishments by women’s missionary organizations already operating within Congregational and Presbyterian denominations. The author noted that the “marked success of these organizations proves their adaptability to the work which they have undertaken and is a cheering promise of a very bright future.”\(^{36}\)

WMS historian Bennett likened the “brethren of the Board” to Jesus’ disciples on the road to Emmaus, unaware of with whom they were speaking when they were face to face with Jesus himself. She wrote: “Those women of that olden time could well afford to be patient with the incredulity of their brethren, knowing that back of their word was the risen Christ, and these women of a later day who were just as anxious to spread the glad tidings, met the Board’s refusal to grant their urgent request in the same kindly spirit. They saw the Easter dawn of a ‘forward movement’ and could patiently wait and work until other eyes were open to its light.\(^{37}\) Determined to press forward, the Cleveland women immediately began planning a follow-up campaign to gain approval for a WMS from the Board of Missions.

Concurrently, in Lindsey, Ohio, another young woman, Miss Minerva Strawman, was also working on a petition to the Board of Missions. Strawman was a student at an academy in Fostoria, Ohio. This school had ties to the United Brethren in Christ, which had authorized its own denomination-wide Woman’s Missionary Association in 1877. Strawman had become captivated by the concept of a women’s missionary group when the school’s preceptress, Mrs. G. P. Macklin, invited her to attend a “missionary tea” hosted by the local Woman’s Missionary Association of the United Brethren in Christ. This gathering inspired her to ask her father, Rev. D.


\(^{37}\) Bennett, Her Story, 13–14.
Strawman, if the women of the Evangelical Church in Lindsey could likewise form a missionary society. Her father, a member of the EA Board of Missions, advised her that she would need to petition the board. She was directed to her pastor, Rev. E. Wengert, and the Rev. George Schneider, who assisted in writing a petition that was signed by fifty women of the Lindsey Evangelical Church and sent to the Board of Missions to be acted upon at their meeting in October of 1880.

Just as Ella Yost had done two years earlier, prior to the Board of Missions meeting Strawman submitted a position paper in the form of an article to the Evangelical Messenger. “Woman’s Work in the Missionary Cause,” was published on September 14, 1880. As the title suggests, Strawman claimed for women a portion of the work of missions and argued that women’s responsibility in this work should not “be overlooked” as if it were of “little importance.” She leveraged Jesus’ parable of the talents to make her case that “it is required of us that we do our whole duty to spread the glorious Gospel of Jesus Christ . . . . God forbid that we should be . . . unfaithful servants or handmaids.” Echoing Ella Yost, she reminded the reader that the General Missionary Society was “in debt, and that cripples its efforts to some extent.” Women felt it was “our duty to try in some way to relieve it,” she wrote, “and to enhance the glorious work which the Society has begun.”

Strawman placed a greater emphasis on the auxiliary nature of the organization she was proposing than had Ella Yost. Yost had urged the formation of a Woman’s Missionary Society, while Strawman made a clear distinction between the General Missionary Society and Women’s Missionary Auxiliaries. In a significant move of deference, she even questioned “the propriety of organizing an independent Women’s Missionary Society” (which the United Brethren in Christ had done only three years earlier) but stated that “we can find no reason whatever why Women’s Missionary Auxiliaries should not be formed.” The purpose of these auxiliaries, as proposed by Strawman, was fourfold:

1. “To unite the efforts of the women to raise funds for the support of heathen missions . . . .
2. To unite the earnest prayers of the women of our Association in behalf of the missionary cause . . . .
3. To make it an object to visit the sick . . . .
4. To speak to the unconverted . . . .”

She urged women to get busy asking for support and assistance from the male leaders in the denomination, strategically tossing in the compliment that their “sympathies are with every good word and work.”

Strawman’s petition to the Board was approved, although not unanimously. Historian Paul Eller attributed its passing largely to the practical matter of

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the board’s “mounting indebtedness.” The argument in favor of the women helping to address this embarrassing situation was persuasive. Additionally, the latter petition’s emphasis upon auxiliary status may have helped to quell enough of the board members’ concerns about women assuming power to have made a difference. The fact that Strawman did not refer to the opposition as “croakers,” as had her predecessor, may also have helped turn the tide. The Board’s resolution observed “this movement among our sisters with pleasure” and stated its desire to support them in their work for the missionary cause. It encouraged the formation of auxiliary societies, “wherever practicable,” of male, female, or both sexes, “as the preacher-in-charge may deem most advantageous.” In all cases, the resolution emphatically preserved the authority of the preacher, who was responsible to supervise any society in his “field of labor.”

Immediately following the publication of the Board’s decision in October of 1880, Woman’s Missionary Societies were formed in Lindsey, Ohio, and in South Chicago, Illinois. A third was organized the following February in Cleveland. Funds from the women’s societies began to flow into the General Society’s treasury by February of 1881. In its first year, the Cleveland society contributed $102.15, and the Lindsey society $87.48 to the missionary treasury. By the first annual meeting in September of 1885, the WMS had raised $1,532.84 for Evangelical missions.

The next challenge the women faced was formation of a denomination-wide missionary society. Although technically local in nature, the Cleveland society assumed the task of connecting women within the entire denomination. In 1881, it appointed Mrs. W. H. Hammer as corresponding secretary and her adept communications led quickly to the founding of forty new women’s societies. Two years later, in June of 1883, the Cleveland society hosted a convention of fifteen delegates to deliberate over the possibility of a denomination-wide society. At this convention, the body passed two resolutions. The first designated an hour per day for prayer for success of the WMS movement. The second was a decision to appeal to the General Conference of October, 1883, for permission to organize “a Woman’s Board of Missions for home and foreign work” as an auxiliary to the parent society “under the supervision of those in authority.”

At General Conference, the petition came to the floor four times, according to Mrs. S. L. Wiest, the wife of one of the delegates. It was referred back to the Committee on Missions twice, where some committee members, according to Wiest, “at first could not endure the idea of women usurping

40 By 1883, the Board’s indebtedness was more than $20,000 and by 1887 it exceeded $40,000 (“Quadrennial Report of the Treasurer of the Missionary Society,” Proceedings of the Nineteenth General Conference of the Evangelical Association held in Buffalo, NY [Cleveland: Publishing House of the Evangelical Association, 1887], 82).
41 Quoted in WMS, Abiding Past, 14.
42 Hammer, “Introductory Remarks,” 244; Eller, Evangelical Missions, 24; Bennett, Her Story, 18, 20–21, 34.
43 Hammer, “Introductory Remarks,” 244.
so much authority.” After much discussion in the committee and a “grand address in favor” on the floor by Brother Strohman, the day’s session closed, requiring that it come to the floor yet again the following day. Then, following much discussion that included “noise, confusion and earnest speaking upon the subject,” permission was finally granted to organize as *The Woman’s Missionary Society of the Evangelical Association.* Conditions under which this approval was granted mandated continuing deference to men:

- All local Woman’s Societies shall be under the supervision of the preacher-in-charge where such societies shall be or are already organized.
- The WMS shall be auxiliary to the Missionary Society of the Evangelical Association, and under the supervision of the Board of Missions; and shall annually submit their proceedings to said Board for examination and approval.

Further, all organizational aspects of the society had to be worked out with the Board of Missions and subject to its approval. The petitioners were required to wait another full year to meet with the Board of Missions to gain approval of a constitution before beginning their operations.

To position themselves for an immediate start of operations upon board approval of a constitution, Ohio women invited WMS organizations from other conferences to meet in Cleveland in October of 1884 in conjunction with the annual meeting of the Board of Missions. On October 13, the day following the Board of Missions’ approval of a constitution, the convention formally launched the denomination-wide WMS and elected officers. The first elected president was Mrs. Ella Yost Preyer, who six years earlier had petitioned the Board for permission, without success, to organize a women’s society at her church in Cleveland. Mrs. H. C. Smith, Mrs. Thomas Bowman, and Minerva Strawman were elected Vice-presidents. Mrs. W. H. Hammer was elected corresponding secretary, and Mrs. W. H. Hammer was elected recording secretary, Mrs. U. F. Swengel, treasurer.

Presentations at the convention in October of 1884 brimmed with biblical and theological themes employed to celebrate the providential development of the WMS despite enormous obstacles. In her address, Emma Yost Preyer reflected theologically on the Christian belief that “God chooses the weak things of the world to confound the mighty.” She spoke of the practical need for “special work by women for women” in the mission field and argued that the Christian faith makes woman “the equal of man, and as much entitled to the privileges and enjoyments of a Christian nation, as he.” The great difference between the past and the present, she submitted, was that with the formation of the WMS, women would be free to work in unison across the church to accomplish God’s purposes alongside faithful men. Alluding to the resistance the women had encountered in their efforts she declared,

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... with eyes fixed on the Cross, and strength derived from it, we shall move upon the old arch-fiend, however obstinately he may oppose us now, and conquer him at many a point. Our object is not to “cut a figure” on “dress parade,” nor to “have our names put in the paper;” we seek no “prominence” for our own unworthy selves, but if we can hold up the Cross, so that all men may see it the sooner, God helping us, we will! 48

In her early twentieth-century history of the WMS, Mrs. H. Bennett concluded with a poem intended to depict, from a faith standpoint, the founding and first two decades of the WMS:

[God] guided by paths that we could not see,  
By ways that we had not known,  
The crooked was straight, and the rough made plain  
As we followed the Lord alone.

*Her Story* reflected the Pietist faith of the women who humbly, but boldly birthed a transformative, far-reaching organization—against determined resistance by those often closest to them, their husbands, fathers, brothers, sons, and preachers of their religious community. In these women’s hierarchy of relationships, however, God was to be obeyed and trusted above all. **God’s will would prevail through faithful obedience,** Bennett and her counterparts believed, regardless of their sex.

The nineteenth century is sometimes referred to as the “age of missions,” so the interest of EA women in forming an organization to support Christian missions was far from unique. It was also a period of transition for women’s roles in the church and in society, so their desire to gain authorization for a woman’s organization also was not exceptional. What is most remarkable about the eventual, successful formation of the WMS was how it was accomplished against staunch opposition through the persevering efforts of women, with the assistance of certain men, such as Yost and Hartzler in key positions. Each of these understood what they were doing, and why they were doing it as a matter of humble, courageous obedience to God.

The women who founded the WMS succeeded in birthing their organization, to be sure, but they remained strictly hemmed in by continuing oversight claimed by men who were loath to cede control over institutional church affairs. There is double meaning, then, in the testimony of Mrs. Bennett, “We followed the Lord alone.” Not only did women of the EA understand themselves to be singularly following their Lord—they also understood themselves as having to stand alone in doing so, over against the ridicule, resolute opposition, and domination placed in their way by men in positions of ecclesiastical authority.

Evangelical women were careful not to complain publicly, as did William Yost, about treatment by men that others would deem unkind, demeaning, or disrespectful. It was part of their pietist spiritual discipline to rise quietly

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above these trials, trusting only in God for final victory. Far from sounding a note of self-pity or exuding an air of self-congratulation, Mrs. Bennett’s *Her Story* concluded with gratitude for divine peace and protection on the arduous journey these women had undertaken:

We praise Him still for the pleasant psalms;
And the water-springs by the way,
For the glowing pillar of flame by night,
And the sheltering cloud by day.49