



let it shine

The Haystack Prayer Meeting and its Legacy

In August 1806, five Williams College students met in a field to talk and pray and, like so many young people, to dream of a better world. When a sudden thunderstorm erupted, they sought shelter under a haystack, where talk turned to their concern about the moral condition of Asia. They knew of the British mission to India and spoke about the need to follow the mandate of Jesus to “make disciples of all nations.” Samuel Mills, Jr., a pastor’s son from Torrington, Connecticut, made a bold proposal—they should resolve to offer their lives, in the name of Jesus Christ, to carry their faith “into all the world.”

Until then, most churches regarded “missions” as the endeavor to convert Native Americans in their midst and to plant congregations on the frontier. The prospect of carrying the gospel beyond the shores of the new nation was exciting, and daunting. They entered into earnest prayer, and by the time the skies cleared they had pledged themselves to send the gospel to Asia.

By 1808, Mills and four others had organized an alliance called the Brethren, committed to personally taking the gospel overseas. In 1810, Mills and three others met with the annual gathering of Trinitarian Congregational Ministers in Massachusetts (the forerunner of the Massachusetts Conference of the United Church of Christ). They were inspired to form the organization that came to be known as the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Mission, the first foreign missionary society in the U.S. In 1812, the first overseas missionaries sailed to India, soon to be followed by colleagues going to Ceylon, to the Sandwich Islands and to Palestine.

Since that August day, people have been inspired to follow their call to meet the physical and spiritual needs in every part of the world—establishing schools, equipping hospitals, founding churches. They have been supported by the prayers and offerings of generations of Christians, most notably by Missionary Societies organized by the women of local congregations. Through these efforts, countless people worldwide trace their Christian heritage to a hayfield in Massachusetts. A monument now stands on the site with the inscription

Our Mission and Ministry Legacy

“The Field is the World,” commemorating that small but powerful gathering that inspired a ministry beyond the confines of individual churches. The legacy of that day lives on as Wider Church Ministries and Global Ministries in the national setting of the UCC.

Today the human family has drawn closer together than those students could ever have imagined possible: messages riding the harnessed energy of lightning now span in a matter of seconds the distances they laid down their lives to cross. We’ve been pulled farther apart, too—by the deepening threat of war, the widening gap between rich and poor, the estrangement of kindred cultures, the polarization that converts neighbors into adversaries. In 1806, on the edge of a new college poised on the frontier of a freshly-minted nation, their hearts burned with idealism and hope.

In 2006, on the edge of a new century, our hearts may be warmed, as well as distressed, when we recognize that the gospel message of compassion, justice, forgiveness and grace is alive at the places North Americans used to think of as the margins, and that we need to hear the still-speaking God through their voices.

Reflections:

- Now, as a new millennium begins, how will we live a third century of the Haystack legacy?
- What does Christian mission mean among us today?
- How might we respond to the issues, ideas and concerns that we are hearing from our ministry partners in other parts of the world.

Resources:

- Many references can be found on both the Global Ministries web site (www.globalministries.org) and the UCC web site (www.ucc.org). Enter the keyword “Haystack” in the Search field.
- The Connecticut Conference’s Korean and Colombian Partnership Committees.

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