

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE UMW READING PROGRAM

For more than 100 years, some version of the Reading Program has been part of each of the predecessor organizations of the Women's Division. The earliest reference to a recommended plan is found in April 1870 in the *Heathen Women's Friend*, the magazine of the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church. An editorial urges that missionary reading circles be formed in every society. Each month a member was to read materials on mission and report the highlights to the circle.

In 1886, the Woman's Home Missionary Society created a Home Missionary Reading Circle and Lecture Bureau to choose two books per year, to collect dues and to award a badge for each year of reading.

The Reading Program went ecumenical in 1900. The United Mission Study for Women's Societies appointed a committee to select ten interdenominational mission study books. The United Brethren women adopted this Reading Course in May 1900.

In 1907, the Woman's Missionary Society of the Evangelical Association authorized a Missionary Reading Department. In eight years there were 134 "missionary libraries" reported in 538 local groups. Inclusion of a Reading Circle was a requirement among the Standards of Excellence for Evangelical women's missionary groups.

With each merger of the predecessor organizations, some form of a reading program was carried forward. Upon the creation of the Evangelical United Brethren Church women's groups in 1946, the reading plan included a list of about 30 books in three categories: Spiritual Life, Christian Social Relations, and Missionary Education.

However, in the 1939 merger of the southern and northern Methodist Churches, the newly formed Woman's Societies of Christian Service decided to concentrate on an in-depth mission *study* program and did not promote reading as such.

However, when the Evangelical United Brethren and Methodist Churches united in 1968, both the Reading Program and the emphasis on mission studies became part of the Women's Society of Christian Service and the Wesleyan Service Guild. These two groups joined in 1972 to become United Methodist Women.

Today, the Reading Program Committee of the Women's Division chooses books each year in four major categories: Education for Mission, Nurturing for Community, Social Action, and Spiritual Growth. In addition, there are categories of large print books, books for children and youth, and Spanish and Korean language books.

In the total program of the Women's Division, the Reading Program is a major part of our mission education efforts. It relates to each of the four mission emphases of the organization of United Methodist Women: Membership Nurture and Outreach, Mission Education and Interpretation, Social Action and Spiritual Growth.

(Historical material from "Pages from the Past" by Marion Baker, Response, December 1979)