

The Haystack Prayer Meeting and the American Missions Movement

In John 20:21, Jesus tells His disciples “as the Father has sent me, so now I send you.” We serve a sending God. God is sending every one of us into various places in our region and around the world to be ambassadors for Christ, giving us the ministry of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5).

Much of the missions movement in the United States got its first burst of energy about 200 years ago. One of the defining moments happened in 1805, at a place called Williams College. The Second Great Awakening had spread from its origins in Connecticut to Williamstown, Massachusetts. Enlightenment ideals from France were gradually being countered by an increase in religious fervor, first in the town, and then in the College. In the spring of 1806, Samuel J. Mills, the twenty-three year old son of a Connecticut clergyman, joined the freshman class. Mills, after a period of religious questioning in his late teens, entered Williams with a passion to spread Christianity around the globe.

On a sultry Saturday afternoon in August, 1806, Mills and four other students gathered as usual in the maple grove of Sloan's Meadow for one of their twice-weekly prayer meetings. Thunderclouds broke open the sky, driving the students to seek shelter from the rain on the lee side of a great haystack. With thought turned toward their classroom studies of Asia and the East India Company, Mills shared his burden that Christianity be sent abroad. With the exception of Harvey Loomis, who felt that missionary efforts should first be concentrated domestically, Mills, Byram Green, Francis L. Robbins, and James Richards prayed that American missions would spread Christianity through the East.

In 1808, Mills and other Williams students formed "The Brethren," a society organized to "effect, in the persons of its members, a mission to the heathen." Upon the enrollment of Mills and Richards at Andover Seminary in 1810, Adoniram Judson from Brown, Samuel Newall from Harvard, and Samuel Nott from Union College joined the Brethren. Led by the enthusiasm of Judson, the young seminarians convinced the General Association of Congregational Ministers of Massachusetts to form The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions in 1810. In February, 1812, Rev. and Mrs. Judson, Rev. and Mrs. Newall, Rev. and Mrs. Nott, Rev. Gordon Hall, and Rev. Luther Rice were commissioned as the Board's first missionaries and set sail for Calcutta, India.

Though only two of the five Williams students at the Haystack Prayer meeting ever left the United States, the impact of their passion for missions is widespread. Loomis, true to his early convictions, dedicated his life to domestic missions in the State of Maine. Robbins engaged in missionary work in New Hampshire before returning to pastor a church in his native state of Connecticut. Green preached for a short time before serving in New York State government and later in the U.S. Congress. Richards left America in 1815, serving as a missionary in India until his death in 1822. Mills engaged in missions in the Ohio and Mississippi valleys, in the Southwest United States, and in New Orleans. He influenced the founding of the American Bible Society and the United Foreign

Missionary Society before he died in 1818 while returning from a short-term mission trip to Africa with the American Colonization Society.

In 1854, the Hon. Byram Green returned to Williamstown and marked the location of the haystack next to which he had prayed forty-eight years earlier. Interest in the site peaked and in 1855 a group of Williams College alumni purchased a ten-acre tract of land to commemorate the Haystack Prayer meeting. In 1857, Williams President Mark Hopkins and two other alumni incorporated the Mission Park Association for the purpose of "improving the grounds...and to commemorate the origin and progress of American Missions".

After visiting Williamstown in August, 1866, the Hon. Harvey Rice (Williams Class of 1824) elected to donate the funds to "erect a monument of some kind, on the sacred spot in Mission Park" that Green had marked more than a decade earlier. The twelve-foot tall marble monument, mounts a globe three feet in diameter and proclaims, "The Field is the World." Beneath this inscription is a similitude of the haystack and the names of the five students who sought its shelter while in prayer.

Though Williams College never held religious affiliation, President Mark Hopkins served as chair the American Board from 1857 until his death in 1887. Williams has also been host to commemorative services of the Haystack Prayer Meeting in 1856, 1906, 1956, and most recently in 1981, drawing missionaries and other participants from around the globe. The scope of American Foreign Missions has expanded to include the establishment of educational institutions throughout the world as first begun in 1815 by Hall and Nott's pioneering work in India.

The story reminds us of the importance of prayer and listening for what God is saying to us. It illustrates the value of asking what God is up to in our world. As we learn more about what is going on in our neighborhoods and on the other side of the globe through the internet, this story encourages us to ask how God wants to send us into God's world, where we are called to serve, and how we can participate in the *missio dei*. The story reminds us that a small number of people can have a global impact. It reminds us that God works through young people. We continue to live into the tradition of the saints who have gone before us, even as God gives us new missional imagination of how to serve our Lord during our own times. Now to Him Who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen. (Ephesians 3:20)