

Free Methodist Historical Society

Newsletter

SPRING 2018 — Volume 17, No. 2

SELF-DENIAL: PENNY-A-DAY

BY MINDI GRIESER-CROMWELL

Published by the
**Marston Memorial
Historical Center**

ISSN 1546-4199

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Newsletter

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Years ago I heard a story from a dear saint in the Free Methodist church we pastored. She had attended that same church as a child during the Depression, and her mother was a member of the local Woman's Missionary Society (WMS). Members had weekly dues, but her mother's commitment was deeper than her pocketbook. So, each week, her mother set aside a bit of flour and other ingredients, got up early on Saturday, and made donuts to sell in the neighborhood to make her contribution.

The origins of the Penny-A-Day campaign and Self-Denial Week testify to our denomination's strong call to missions and belief that every lay person plays a vital role. In 1919, Free Methodist mission work in Mexico was in crisis over funding. B. H. Pearson, the first general director of Penny-A-Day, feared that lack of finances could derail God's work there. At his father's advice, he created the Self-Denial Relief Corp and launched the Penny-A-Day campaign. By the second year it had raised \$1400.

Penny-A-Day soon became a denomination-wide effort, uniting churches around a common sacrifice and highlighting their role in the larger movement.

However, as the fledgling Free Methodist missions program struggled through the Depression, Penny-A-Day was

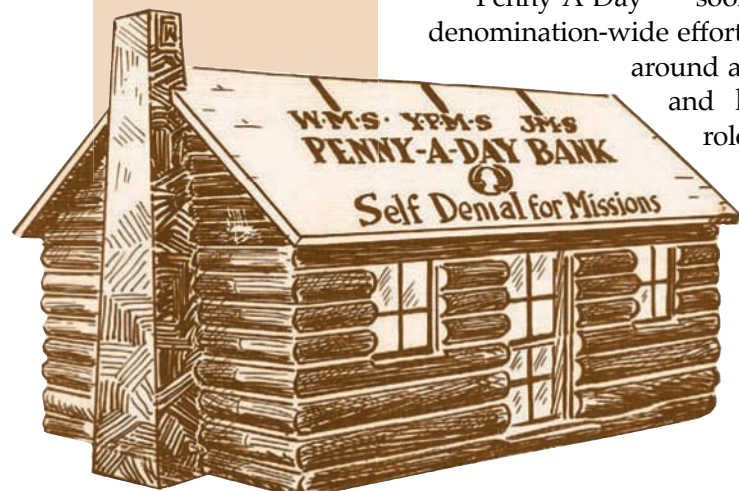
insufficient to cover the shortfall. Consequently, Self-Denial Week became a regular part of missions fundraising. Writing for *Missionary Tidings*, Jenne Harroun Howland recalled the nation's sacrifice during WWI and encouraged readers to emulate such self-denial in the cause of missions, to protect outposts facing possible closure. By the mid-1930s, Penny-A-Day and Self-Denial Week were denominational mainstays.

Core beliefs of both programs were that denying the self produced Christian character and that God had a plan for the money produced. In 1936, Pearson wrote that self-denial does two things:

1. It trains us all in the principles of stewardship as applied to little things. 2. It makes us watchful of the many ways which the devil and modern commercialism have devised for getting our money away from us a little at a time without value received.

This belief is reiterated in multiple articles from missionaries implementing these programs with new Christians in the field. In 1936, Grace Allen wrote that they had a Self-Denial Week in Greenville, Pondoland in South Africa, using many of the same techniques (educational talks, songs, prayers) as the WMS groups back in the States to collect money and corn.

While the full story of Free Methodist missions is told elsewhere, I find encouragement in this brief glimpse into creative ways we've funded mission through the years and that, from the beginning, the story of our missions was built on the belief that we all have a role to play.



The Mission of the Free Methodist Historical Society is to preserve Free Methodist heritage and transmit it faithfully to each generation in order to assist the Free Methodist Church in fulfilling its mission.

THE MUSTARD SEED GROWS IN BURUNDI

BY GERALD BATES

The global expansion of the Free Methodist movement literally abounds with “mustard seed” stories. This one comes from central Africa, occasioned by the 100th birthday of Esther Shelhamer James, member of the founding team of FM work in Burundi, where she was a pioneer in medical ministry to the local population. According to record, Esther was the first with basic medical training (from a short course in tropical medicine in Brussels) to serve at Kibuye station, now home to a flourishing rural medical institution. A part of Hope Africa University, Kibuye Hope Hospital now ministers to a population of hundreds of thousands and educates doctors and nurses. It is significant that Marston Memorial Historical Center is the preserver and furnisher of much of this information, helping us to “dig around the roots” of one of the mustard seed projects that show what Jesus envisioned for His kingdom.



Unknown child
with Esther
Shelhamer
at Muyebe,
1937

Reading the dispatches from the small band of missionary pioneers in Burundi 80 years ago, one is struck by their single-minded devotion to spreading salvation and compassion. Rev. J. W. Haley and his family, principal founders of the Free Methodist work in central Africa, arrived in 1935. They were soon joined by Frank and Hazel Adamson and Ila Gunsolus from South Africa, as well as new recruits Ron and Margaret Collett from Canada. This small staff began to reach out from Muyebe station to other places—Rwintare, Kayero and then Kibuye, where this part of our story begins.

Kibuye station is 28 kilometers south of Gitega in south central Burundi. Reactions to the new site were revealing. In 1938, Frank Adamson writes of a road “three-eighths of a mile” in from the main road and the necessity to build a small bridge. “We were able to get in without a road by coming down a hill too steep to go back up, by crossing the stream on planks and by the help of five men pushing part way up Kibuye hill.”

They pitched a tent and built an outdoor stove by digging a fire pit into the side of the hill, putting a piece of sheet iron over it and making a chimney by forming a trench in the hillside covered by sod. The first “house,” 16x24 feet, was built with poles and a grass roof and lined with reeds. In the process of making the fireplace, they needed mud or clay. Frank discovered to his joy that it

was the very best kind to make bricks or tiles. The Rev. Ronald and Margaret Collett came soon and described the site as “some of the most beautiful scenery in the country.” Typical of the spirit of these missionaries, Margaret writes in summer 1938: “Let me introduce you to our latest and most popular missionary, little Sheila Willene Collett, born in the first grass house, the roof of which lets in the sunshine and the rain. She has already had a share in pioneering on the new mission station Kibuye.” By October they had a six-room house built of mud bricks and several other buildings, “one of which is a small dispensary.”

Ron demonstrates the passion of these pioneers to see spiritual fruit:

“Feeling intensely for the condition of these people and their slowness of heart to believe in Jesus as Saviour from their sins, Miss Esther Shelhamer, my wife and I ... asked God to give us some definite cases of conversion as we felt we should not labour on indefinitely without this. In the next few days God, true to his promises, began to work. Natives became convicted of their sin and commenced to pray. Classes were interrupted by the moving of the Holy Spirit and became seekers meetings because sinners wanted to pray.”

Esther arrived at Muyebe station at age 19, where she spent a year doing medical work before moving to Kibuye to take charge of the dispensary. They reported 200-400 patients per day. She joined in the passion for winning Africans to Christ. In some verses of poetry she wrote:

Were there ever such hills, Were they ever so green,

Was ere such a landscape as this?

With its rivers and rills, And its gardens so clean;

Can it be that there is ought here but bliss?

Ah! My friend, it is true; 'Tis a beautiful land,

(There's no fairer on earth to behold).

But, alas! There is too, More than kind Nature's hand —

There are multitudes out of Christ's fold!

In the April 1938 edition of *Missionary Tidings*, she wrote an article entitled “Did You Know—,” followed by:

- *There are in this little mandate of Urundi about three and a half million people the great majority of whom have never been contacted by the true gospel?*
- *That the Barundi are very clever people—especially shrewd in business?*
- *That at present the medical work is the greatest contact we are making with the masses who do not attend our church and school?*

- *That it is very important that every one of you especially remember this department in your prayers, that these outsiders might receive along with their medicines the Water of Life freely?*

As mentioned, Esther was the first distinctly “medical” person to serve at Kibuye, from 1938 until her return to the US in 1939. This information only gives the briefest sampling of the beginning mission work 80 years ago. These heroic efforts by a small band of dedicated missionaries helped the mustard plant take root. Now, on to the flowering of that plant. As you read on, keep in mind Jesus’ parable of the mustard seed, which must have totally mystified his disciples as they looked around at their little company. Then rejoice and wonder at the flowering of this one piece of the kingdom story.

Visiting Kibuye today, you would come off the paved road from Gitega (28 kilometers) onto the little 3/8 of a mile lane described by Frank Adamson. (And, yes, the little bridge is still there along with the steep grade onto the compound.) But now what you see is buildings everywhere and construction always going on, a hospital of 220 beds, two dormitories for medical and nursing students on rotations in their educational journey, doctors’ residences for expatriates and national personnel, and a large new church just being finished. An 80-bed pediatric ward is scheduled for 2019, as well as services to the community and students that are truly out of sight. The 14 doctors are all specialists and full professors at Hope Africa University’s Frank Ogden School of Medicine. Shown at right are a few numbers from 2017 supplied by surgeon Jason Fader (one of seven expatriate doctors furnished by a cooperative arrangement with the evangelical mission group Serge).

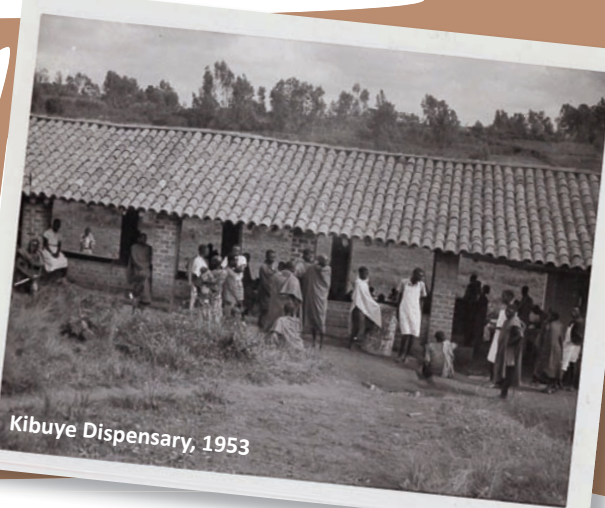
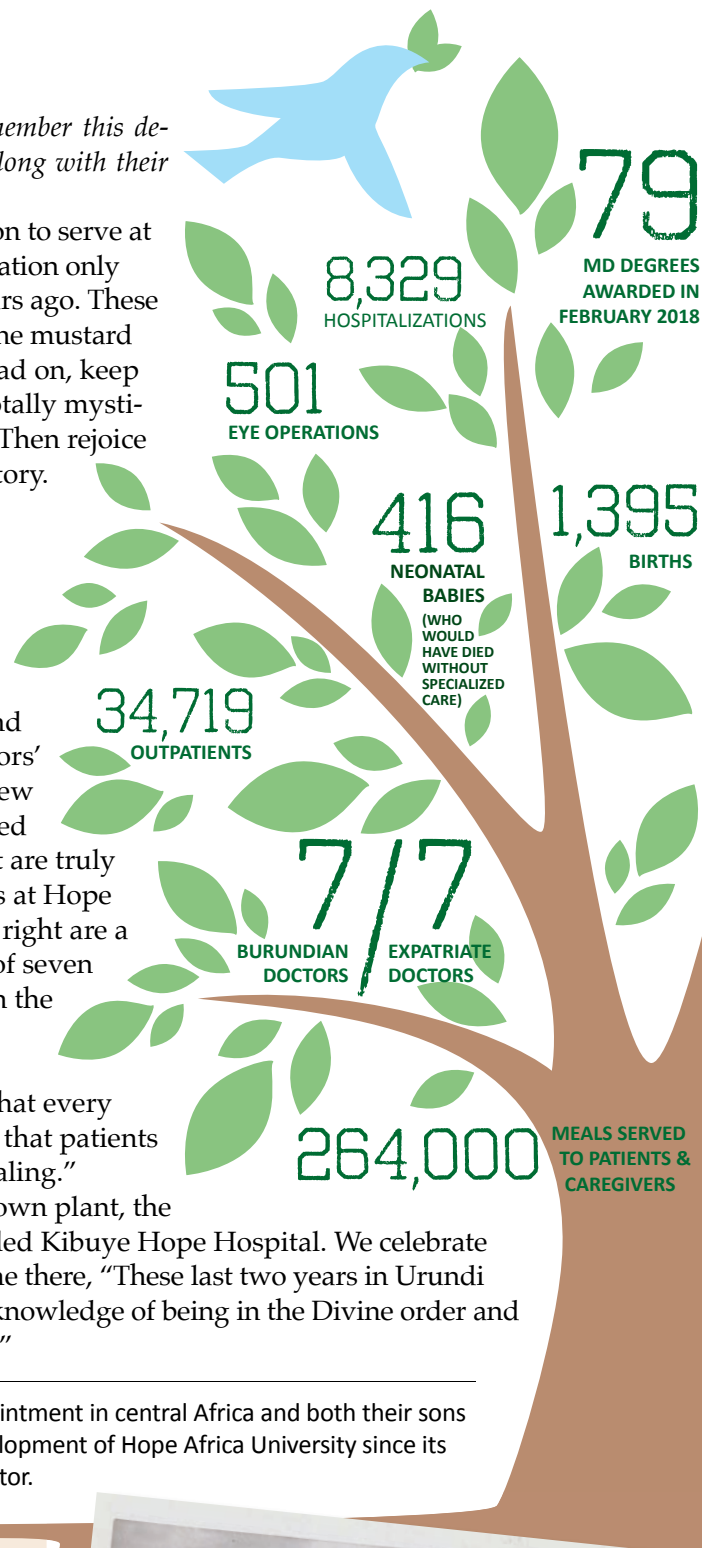
Dr. Fader also reports with great satisfaction that they have gone from one to three chaplains “who do their best to ensure that every patient hears the gospel during their time here and help ensure that patients have emotional and spiritual healing in addition to physical healing.”

We have sampled some of the roots and now see the full grown plant, the wonderful favor of God on a place in south central Burundi called Kibuye Hope Hospital. We celebrate the service of a young woman who reported at the end of her time there, “These last two years in Urundi have positively been the happiest of my life; first because of the knowledge of being in the Divine order and second, because of the unparalleled opportunity here for service.”

Gerald Bates and his wife Marlene served 28 years under missionary appointment in central Africa and both their sons were born at Kibuye Hospital. The Bates have been involved with the development of Hope Africa University since its founding in 2000 and returned from 2013-2015 while Gerald served as rector.

“WE ARE SURROUNDED BY A GREAT CLOUD OF WITNESSES”

We usually think of that in terms of Hebrews 12, but in 2017, it could refer to the 11 former Free Methodist missionaries who graduated to glory: Henry Church Jr., Florence DeShazer, Gordon Evoy, Floyd Hicks, Howard Hoffman, Larry Houck, Marjorie Parsons, Clara Rice, Ruby Schlosser, Linda Stryker and Naomi Vought. Their lives represent 231 years of missionary service and countless lives and communities transformed by the power of the gospel. Their decision to follow Jesus to the ends of the earth has borne eternal fruit. You can view a video tribute at <https://vimeo.com/238216269>.



BOOK REVIEW

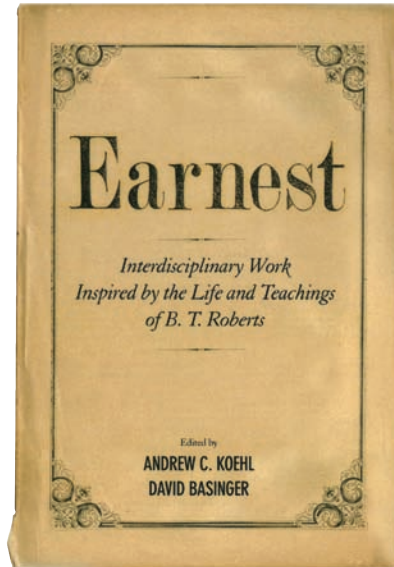
Andrew Koehl and David Basinger, eds. *Earnest: Interdisciplinary Work Inspired by the Life and Teachings of B.T. Roberts*. Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2017. ISBN: 978-1-5326-0633-5

What does it mean to be Free Methodist today, and how does the life of B. T. Roberts speak to this question? *Earnest* is a handbook of interdisciplinary research on the life and interests of B. T. Roberts. Using a wide variety of methodological approaches, this text examines how Roberts' advocacy for the poor, commitment to social justice, advocacy for the environment, and desire to "spread Scriptural holiness across the land" outlined his mission and calling. As Koehl and Basinger state in the introduction, "Since holiness for Roberts was inextricably tied to social action, he left behind a legacy of advocacy for temperance, abolition, prohibition, economic justice, and the equality of women." This book is a timely critique of those distortions of church and witness which divorce holiness from social justice.

Earnest is divided into two main sections. The first, "Equality, Holiness, and Social Transformation," includes

a series of essays exploring Roberts' activism against perennial social problems. For example, Timothy Vande Brake's essay on "B. T. Roberts and the Roots of Environmentalism" identifies earth care as an important calling in Roberts. The second major division, "Every Relation of Life," features contributors applying contemporary psychology, epistemology, hermeneutics, spirituality, and health care ethics to Roberts. The effect is a gallery of sketches relating Roberts to current academic questions, inviting further research and creative application.

Published for the 150th anniversary of the founding of Roberts Wesleyan College, *Earnest* meets the church at a crucial juncture in its public witness. *Earnest* shows us that Roberts was *both* an activist for the socially and economically marginalized *and* an heir to the Wesleyan tradition. The volume will prove useful for years to come, both for anyone interested in learning about B. T. Roberts, and as a springboard for future scholarship.



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