

An image of street preaching in front of the Bedford Street Mission, from the 1860 book, *Sorrow's Circuit*.

Philadelphia’s “Five Points:” Evangelism and Social Welfare at the Bedford Street Mission

by Rev. Dr. Benjamin L. Hartley (2009)

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New York City’s “Five Points” neighborhood in lower Manhattan was well-known in the mid-to-late nineteenth century as a major locus of concern related to the problems of burgeoning American cities. Its prominence was highlighted in Martin Scorsese’s 2002 film, *The Gangs of New York*, which even briefly portrayed the Methodists’ Five Points Mission that the famous holiness leader Phoebe Palmer was instrumental in founding.¹ Philadelphia and Boston had similar neighborhoods to New York’s “Five Points,” and Methodist mission outposts in both of these cities eagerly (if ironically) claimed the notorious “Five Points” label to remind donors there were rough neighborhoods closer to home which rivaled the destitution – and missionary opportunity – found in New York.²

¹For the secondary literature on Palmer’s Five Points Mission see Tyler Anbinder, *Five Points: The 19th-Century New York City Neighborhood That Invented Tap Dance, Stole Elections and Became the World’s Most Notorious Slum* (New York: Plume, 2002), 243-256; and Timothy L. Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform: American Protestantism on the Eve of the Civil War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1957), 170.

²One article in the *Christian Advocate* even argued that the situation in Philadelphia’s Five Points was worse than New York’s. *Christian Advocate and Journal* (New

Philadelphia's Bedford Street Mission was located in the vicinity of Bedford Street (today named Kater Street, one block south of South Street) and Sixth Street.³ One Methodist observed in the 1850s that the surrounding neighborhood, a "terribly degraded district, the hot-bed of all the lowest vice and degradation of this great city, which had hitherto been, by common consent, left out of the pale of all Christian Missionary effort, was fallow ground of the richest character, promising, with proper culture, to yield abundant returns."⁴

Taverns, brothels, and (eventually) Protestant mission efforts were plentiful around South Street, but historical writing by Methodists about their mission in the neighborhood has been scarce.⁵ Historians of social welfare in Philadelphia have likewise not had much to say about the Bedford Street Mission. On the whole, they have tended to look more at municipal efforts at poverty alleviation than religious ones. Social welfare history in Philadelphia from the colonial and early republic

York), November 23, 1854. Boston's North End Mission, begun in 1868 by the Methodist founder of the New England Conservatory of Music Eben Towjee, is discussed at length in the author's dissertation. See Benjamin L. Hartley, "Holiness Evangelical Urban Mission and Identity in Boston, 1860-1910" (Th.D. diss., Boston University, 2005). Baltimore Methodists also constructed a mission outpost in 1852 in the "Causeway" neighborhood of East Baltimore. *Christian Advocate and Journal* (New York), November 23, 1854.

³The Mission had two locations within its first few years – both on Bedford Street near Sixth. The building constructed for the Mission in 1856 still stands at 619 Kater Street. A large white stone by the second floor windows displays the faded name of the Young Men's Central Home Mission, the first name for the organization. The streets surrounding the Mission were reported to be Bedford, Baker, and St. Mary's. An 1869 annual report from the Mission indicates that Bedford Street was renamed Alaska Street in the late 1860s. Today, St. Mary's Street corresponds to Rodman Street, located between Sixth and Eighth, one block north of South. *A Plan of Philadelphia* by Samuel Mitchell, published in 1860, shows the location of Bedford Street. A copy of this map may be found as part of the David Rumsey Map Collection, <http://www.davidrumsey.com>, accessed December 18, 2008.

⁴Benjamin T. Sewell, *Sorrow's Circuit, or Five Years' Experience in the Bedford Street Mission, Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: Perkinpine and Higgins, 1860), 10-11.

⁵No mention is made of the Bedford Street Mission in any of the reference works on Philadelphia Methodism: Harold C. Koch, *The Leaven of the Kingdom: the Amazing Growth of the Philadelphia Conference, 1767-1968* ([Ephrata, PA: Science Press], 1983); John McEllhenney, "Methodism in Philadelphia," in *Invisible Philadelphia: Community through Voluntary Organizations*, ed. Jean Barth Toll and Mildred S. Killam (Philadelphia: Atwater Kent Museum, 1995), 180-188; and Francis Tees, et al, *Pioneering in Penn's Woods: Philadelphia Methodist Episcopal Annual Conference through One Hundred Fifty Years* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Conference Tract Society, 1937).

period also appears more prevalent than antebellum studies.⁶

The purpose of this article is to provide a sketch of the nineteenth century history of the Bedford Street Mission and the urban and ecclesial context out of which it was born and flourished until the 1930s. The early years of the Bedford Street Mission will be given more focus than the later years, since the Mission became less of an explicitly Methodist effort by the 1880s. Much work remains to be done to more fully understand how Protestants – and especially Methodists – interacted with the wider political and social realities of the city of Philadelphia in the mid-to-late nineteenth century. Bedford Street Mission offers one window into better understanding Methodists' role in the city through an assessment of their involvement with impoverished Philadelphians.

PHILADELPHIA'S SOCIAL WELFARE CONTEXT

Protestant involvement in social welfare efforts among the Philadelphia poor has a long history prior to the establishment of the Bedford Street Mission in 1853. In unsystematic and informal ways, most Philadelphia churches helped the poor in their midst. As needs arose, caring pastors and church members tried to meet them as best they could, just as most churches do today. Formal and systematic initiatives among Protestants to confront the problem of poverty in Philadelphia began in 1713 when the Quakers opened the first almshouse in the city. Other churches followed suit in subsequent years, often in response to dramatic events which worsened the situation of the impoverished in Philadelphia.

The 1793 yellow fever epidemic was one of several events which prompted renewed attention to the plight of the poor. The heroic work

⁶For an introduction to the social welfare history of Philadelphia see Priscilla Ferguson Clement, *Welfare and the Poor in the Nineteenth-Century City: Philadelphia, 1800-1854* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1985); Allen F. Davis and Mark H. Haller, eds., *The Peoples of Philadelphia: A History of Ethnic Groups and Lower-Class Life, 1790-1940* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998); Simon P. Newman, *Embodied History: The Lives of the Poor in Early Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003); O. A. Pendleton, "Poor Relief in Philadelphia, 1790-1840," in *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 70:2 (April 1946), 161-172; A.G. Roeber, "J.H.C. Helmuth, Evangelical Charity, and the Public Sphere in Pennsylvania, 1793-1800," in *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 121:1-2 (January/April 1997), 77-100; and Billy G. Smith, *The "Lower Sort.": Philadelphia's Laboring People, 1750-1800* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990).

of Richard Allen and other African Methodists in helping fever victims is well known by historians.⁷ Following the fever outbreak, in 1794, the First Baptist Church established a special fund for the support of orphans, and the Quaker-led Female Society of Philadelphia for the Relief and Employment of the Poor began an industrial school to give women and children needed skills to support themselves. The War of 1812 and the economic depression that followed it was another crisis which increased the number of impoverished people in Philadelphia, and prompted renewed calls for action from Philadelphia Protestants.⁸ Historians have counted as many as eleven new charities established between 1815 and 1830 and another ten established in the 1830s.⁹ Several of these new charities were led primarily by Protestant women, and many were ecumenical in nature.¹⁰

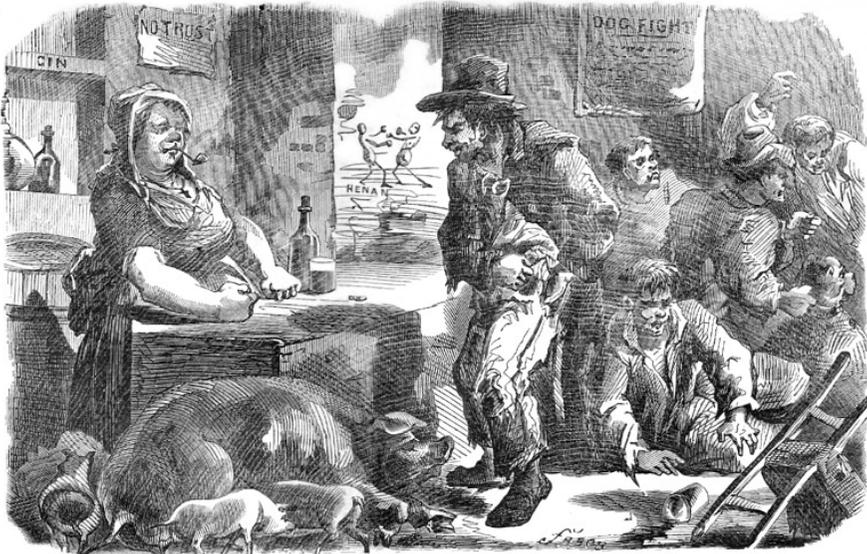
The first Methodist institution in Philadelphia to be formally established for the sake of poor relief was most likely the Home Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church for the City and County of Philadelphia. Founded in 1835 by young men from Union and St. George's churches, the Home Missionary Society established five Sabbath-schools in six years throughout the city which they had very methodically subdivided into twelve missionary districts. Several of these Sabbath-schools eventually became local churches. The work of the society revolved around preaching in streets, markets, and wharves in addition to providing food and fuel for the poor, tract distribution, and Sabbath-schools. Missionary John Street in 1842 noted – perhaps in overworked exasperation – “[t]he poor from almost every part of the city

⁷Jacqueline Bacon, “Rhetoric and Identity in Absalom Jones and Richard Allen’s *Narrative of the Proceedings of the Black People, During the Late Awful Calamity in Philadelphia*,” in *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 125:1 (January 2001), 61-90. C. B. Ashanin, “The Black Heroes of the Philadelphia Plague in 1793,” in J. S. Pobee, ed., *Religion in a Pluralistic Society: Essays Presented to Professor C.G. Baeta in Celebration of His Retirement from the Service of the University of Ghana, September 1971, by Friends and Colleagues Scattered over the Globe* (Leiden: Brill, 1976), 145-154.

⁸Clement, 27.

⁹J. Matthew Gallman, *Receiving Erin’s Children: Philadelphia, Liverpool, and the Irish Famine Migration, 1845-1855* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 60-61. The banking crisis of 1837 caused considerable unemployment in Philadelphia that lasted into the 1840s. Clement, 28.

¹⁰The Female Hospitable Society for the Relief and Employment of the Poor was begun in 1808 and was open to “females of every Christian denomination.” Presbyterian women likewise established, in 1812, homes for the assistance of widows and children. Pendleton, 161-165.



BEDFORD STREET GROGSHOP.

"Bedford Street Grogshop," an illustration from *Sorrow's Circuit*, dramatizing the vice and squalor the Mission sought to address.

seek my residence."¹¹ Prior to 1842, Street had been a foreign missionary in South America for the Methodist Episcopal Church.¹² The Home Missionary Society remained under the Philadelphia Methodist Conference auspices until 1845 when it became a more ecumenical endeavor. Street remained a missionary of the Society until 1859.¹³

The Home Missionary Society's combination of evangelism and social welfare efforts received criticism in its early years. From its inception the Society was being urged by some elite Philadelphians to follow the example of "social science" in Europe and to do away with the

¹¹Henry E. Dwight, *Fifty Years' Work in the Spread of the Gospel, Relief of the Poor, and Care of Destitute Children by the Home Missionary Society of the City of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1885), 12.

¹²Rev. J. Woolson and Rev. John Hersey served each for less than a year as missionaries prior to Rev. John Street. Although all appointed by the Methodist bishop, Woolson and Hersey apparently had great difficulty raising their own support (\$50 per month) for their missionary work, and each did not remain for longer than a year. It appears that Street did not have this difficulty. His service as a foreign missionary in South America perhaps had helped him develop a firm base of financial support. *Ibid.*, 13.

¹³*Ibid.*, 14.

evangelistic dimension of their work. An 1885 summary of their ministry noted that “all such advice seemed to the founders of the Home Mission Society rank infidelity – the atheism of the French Revolution.” They sought a different direction and began to “work in earnest” with “the Bible in one hand and a loaf of bread in the other.”¹⁴ Not all transatlantic innovations were seen as problematic by supporters of the Society. Late nineteenth century supporters of the Home Missionary Society drew direct comparisons between their own work with poor children and the work done by Emmanuel Wichern, pioneer of the “Inner Mission” (home mission) in mid-nineteenth century Germany. Wichern’s work in Germany may have also been an inspiration for the establishment of the Ladies’ German Home Mission Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church of Philadelphia in 1852. This organization, comprised of Methodist women from several Philadelphia Methodist churches, has also been overlooked by historians.¹⁵

There were several reasons, in 1853, for Methodists to decide to organize another mission for the evangelism and relief of the poor beside the now-ecumenical Home Missionary Society.¹⁶ The growing interest in revivalism in Philadelphia congregations taking place in the early 1850s may have been the most important factor. The history of American revivalism is replete with examples of revivalist enthusiasm leading to the establishment of new institutions. The nascent revivalism of the early 1850s eventually led to the 1858 revival which contemporaries sometimes called “Philadelphia’s Pentecost.” This revival had its formal beginnings at a noon meeting at Union Methodist Episcopal Church on November 23, 1857.¹⁷

¹⁴Dwight, 19.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 62. For information on the founding of the Ladies’ German Home Mission Society see *Christian Advocate and Journal* (New York), September 16, 1852. A women’s auxiliary organization to the Bedford Street Mission was also very important throughout the history of the organization in providing clothing for the poor.

¹⁶One can gain a sense of the formally established benevolent institutions in Philadelphia at this time from published lists of such organizations. Isaac Collins and John S. Powell, *A List of Some of the Benevolent Institutions of the City of Philadelphia and Their Legal Titles Together with a Form of Devise and Bequest to Them* (Philadelphia: Henry B. Ashmead, Book and Job Printer, 1859).

¹⁷Young Men’s Christian Association, *Pentecost; or, the Work of God in Philadelphia, AD 1858* (Philadelphia: Parry and MacMillan, 1859), 9. Historian Russell E. Francis notes that by the early 1850s revivalism was “beginning to return to favor” in Philadelphia after a period when it had been somewhat discredited by the Millerite eschatological exuberance and disappointment in the early 1840s. The ties between the Millerites and the

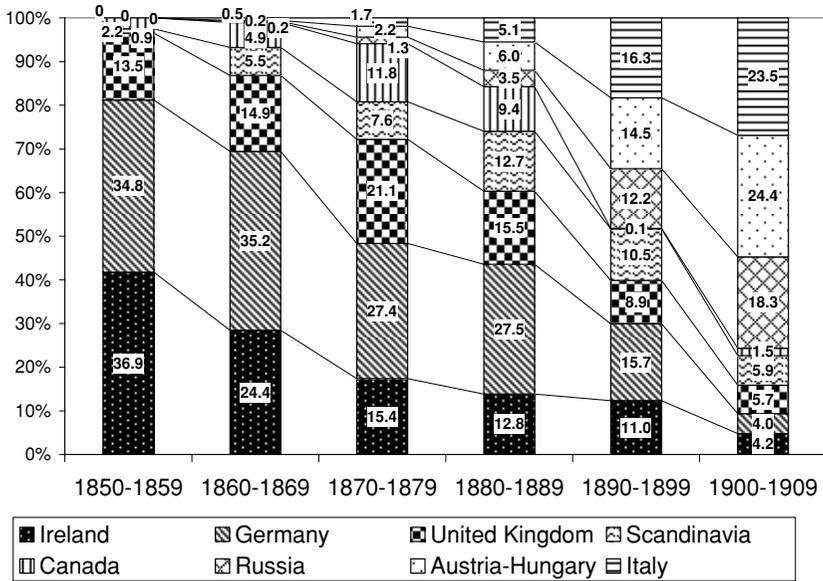


Figure 1. Percentage of U.S. immigrants by country of origin, 1850-1909¹⁸

Efforts in 1851 to begin a Philadelphia branch of the Young Men's Christian Association may also have inspired Methodists to begin the Bedford Street Mission in May of 1853. After returning from a visit to the pioneer YMCA institution in London in 1851, Presbyterian businessman George Hay Stuart began to muster support for a Philadelphia branch of the organization. Although he did not succeed in doing so until 1854, one may speculate that the increasing energy around the project was influential for the twelve to fifteen young men from area Methodist Episcopal congregations who gathered in the basement of Salem Methodist Episcopal Church to begin the Bedford Street Mission. The choice of name for the Mission in its early years, the Young Men's

Methodists were significant in New England. It is less clear how strong these ties were in Philadelphia. On the New England history of Methodist involvement with Millerites see Glen Alton Messer, "Restless for Zion: New England Methodism, Holiness, and the Abolitionist Struggle, Circa 1789-1845" (Th.D., Boston University, 2006), 248-253.

¹⁸The figures utilized to construct this graph were obtained from David Ward, *Cities and Immigrants: A Geography of Change in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 53. Statistics for Canadian immigration between 1886 and 1893 were not recorded and thus the representation above in this regard is slightly misleading.

Central Home Mission, and the founders' initial desire that it be an ecumenical endeavor, are further clues which suggest a possible connection between the founding of the YMCA and the Mission.¹⁹

The tumultuous changes posed by immigration and growing poverty in Philadelphia the decade prior to 1853 also served as a call to action for Methodists as they observed the crises unfolding in their city. The 1840s and 1850s were a time of substantial immigration to the United States from Europe.²⁰ The history of the Bedford Street Mission's work with immigrants follows the national trends, as they moved from working primarily with Germans and Irish in the 1850s, to working mostly with Italians by the early 1900s. The Roman Catholic Church in the Philadelphia Diocese responded to immigrant growth by establishing fifteen new churches between 1845 and 1855.²¹ The growing numbers of Roman Catholics, of course, was seen as a threat by many Protestants in the city of Philadelphia who responded with vigor to their ecclesial competitors in the anti-Catholic riots of 1844. The precise nature of Methodist involvement in these riots requires further research.²²

African Americans were also prevalent in the neighborhood at the time of the Bedford Street Mission's founding in the 1850s, and were frequent visitors to the Mission for evangelistic services and material assistance. In the 1840s there were approximately 20,000 blacks living in Philadelphia, nearly half of whom were recent migrants to the city. These newcomers had not been warmly welcomed by Philadelphia

¹⁹Russell E. Francis, "The Religious Revival of 1858 in Philadelphia," in *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 70:1 (January 1946), 61; Sewell, 366.

²⁰Irish immigration to Philadelphia due to the potato famine has been well documented by Mathew Gallman.

²¹Gallman, 158.

²²It appears likely that Methodists were both supporters and critics of the anti-Catholic rioting that occurred in 1844. A Philadelphia nativist newspaper, in a number of articles published a month after the Kensington riots, refers to several Methodist churches which held mass meetings to support the victims of the "Kensington (Irish) riots." The announcements made clear that Roman Catholics were not welcome at these events. The Wesley Church - Carpenter Street (Southwark), Brickmaker's Methodist Protestant Church (Kensington?), and Ebenezer MEC (Moyamensing) are all mentioned as sponsoring anti-Catholic meetings in 1844. It appears that the Brickmaker's MP Church had not yet been constructed and the meeting was to be held in the open-air. The first Protestant fatality of the anti-Catholics riots was named John Wesley Rhinelander, suggesting at least some Methodist ancestry. See *The Native American*, June 15, 1844; Michael Feldberg, *The Philadelphia Riots of 1844: A Study of Ethnic Conflict* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1975). Puzzlingly, Feldberg claims that none of the rioters were found to be members of Philadelphia Methodist or Presbyterian churches.

residents. Between 1829 and 1849, African Americans were victims of at least five major riots. The densest concentration of African Americans in Philadelphia in 1848 was between Fifth and Eighth Streets and South and Fitzwater Streets – an area which directly surrounded the Bedford Street Mission.²³

The publication of two books on Philadelphia poverty and the problem of drunkenness in America also suggest renewed concern over such problems in Philadelphia at the time of the Bedford Street Mission's founding. *The Mysteries and Miseries of Philadelphia*, published in 1854, vividly portrayed the dismal life of the poorest Philadelphians. Although not focused on the Philadelphia context, the famous temperance book by Philadelphia resident Timothy Shay Arthur, *Ten Nights in a Barroom*, also published in 1854, was widely read throughout the country for several decades.²⁴ The scenes which he describes in a fictitious small town in America could have easily been observed in Philadelphia's "Five Points." An 1862 annual report from Bedford Street Mission notes that within a two block radius of the Mission there were 130 grog shops or taverns.²⁵

The growth of disease epidemics at this time was yet another glaring example of the problem of poverty in Philadelphia a few years prior to the Bedford Street Mission's founding. After a period of decline, Philadelphians saw an increase in the death rate in their city beginning

²³A picture of a street scene on St. Mary's Street in 1875 suggests a neighborhood that was at least 60 percent African American. See Edward Strahan, *A Century After: Picturesque Glimpses of Philadelphia and Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia: Allen, Lane and Scott, 1875), 185; Elizabeth M. Geffen, "Industrial Development and Social Crisis, 1841-1854," in Russell F. Weigley, ed., *Philadelphia: A 300 Year History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1982), 309, 352-355. It would be interesting to compare the ecclesial experience of Italian immigrants with African American migrants in Philadelphia in the nineteenth century since the period of intense migration (from the 1890s to 1920s) was similar for the two groups. See Robert Gregg, *Sparks from the Anvil of Oppression: Philadelphia's African Methodists and Southern Migrants, 1890-1940* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 119-120. See Gregg for a map showing the concentration of African Americans in all of Philadelphia's wards from 1900. By the early 1890s a Union AME Church member, Annie M. Hall, had begun an Industrial Missionary Association which provided sewing instruction and other types of assistance to area blacks. It is not clear if similar AME organizations were in existence in Philadelphia's "Five Points" prior to the Civil War of a similar nature to the Methodist Episcopal Bedford Street Mission. The Mother Bethel AME congregation was located just four blocks to the north of Bedford Street Mission.

²⁴Arthur lived in Philadelphia from 1841 to 1885. Geffen, 335.

²⁵*Sixteenth Annual Report of the Bedford Street Mission* (1869). Temple University Libraries, Urban Archives, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

in 1850. The poor were especially hard-hit by these scourges as epidemics of cholera, smallpox, and yellow fever swept the city between 1849 and 1853. Other diseases were perhaps even worse:

In 1852, when smallpox killed 427 persons, 433 died of scarlet fever, 558 of dysentery, and 1204 of tuberculosis. Malarial fevers were prevalent in the area between Broad Street and the Schuylkill and in the low, flat lands to the south of the city between the rivers. It is estimated that more than ten times as many people died of malaria and tuberculosis as died of cholera, but they died gradually and quietly...²⁶

As early as 1847, the area where the Bedford Street Mission would be located was known as the “infected district,” and was characterized by considerable overcrowding.²⁷ One missionary of the Bedford Street mission, writing in 1859, noted that “in some houses there are from ten to sixteen families stowed away, whilst many others have eight and ten; and in some places I know of two and three men and their wives living, cooking, eating, and sleeping in one room.”²⁸

THE BEGINNING OF BEDFORD STREET MISSION

Descriptions of life at Bedford Street Mission in its earliest years come primarily from *Sorrow's Circuit or Five Years' Experience in the Bedford Street Mission, Philadelphia* written by missionary Benjamin Sewell in 1859, and published shortly after the start of the 1858 Businessman's Revival. One of the pastors who provided an “introductory letter” noted with the melodrama typical of the book that he hoped the fundraising for Bedford Street Mission would help the “Five Points” of Philadelphia, “this moral plague-spot of our city, and this reproach to our land, be speedily renovated, and its desert wastes be made to ‘blossom as the rose.’”²⁹ Indeed, if fundraising is any measure of an organization's “blossoming,” the Bedford Street Mission was a clear success. It averaged two thousand dollars per year in the first five years, to over thirteen thousand dollars by 1874-1875.³⁰

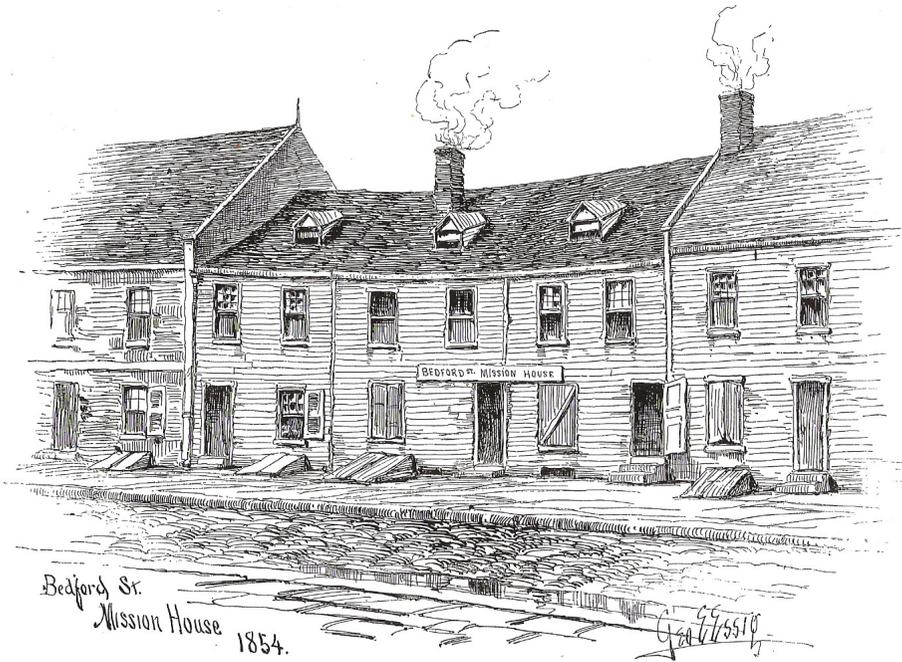
²⁶Geffen, 319.

²⁷Gallman, 90-120.

²⁸Sewell, 323.

²⁹Ibid., 39.

³⁰This dollar amount is even more striking in light of the 1873 economic depression that still plagued the country. Strahan, 190. Annual income for the Bedford



An image of the original building which housed the Bedford Street Mission, acquired in 1853, from a 1917 Annual Report.

Its humble beginnings in 1853 did not portend a ministry that would survive and thrive for nearly a century. Initially, the missionaries of the Young Men's Central Home Mission had no building from which to preach but simply spent their time at seven preaching stations – two on the wharves, four in the vicinity of Bedford and Baker Streets, and one on Gray's Ferry Road. At the latter preaching station the preacher often reported as many as five hundred people gathered to listen to him.³¹ Preachers were not always received this well in the rougher neighborhood around Bedford Street. "The first attempts at preaching in Bedford and Baker Street stirred up considerable excitement, and not a little opposition. Curses and foul epithets were freely bestowed on the

Street Mission in the first two decades was reported in the *Twenty-Second Annual Report of the Bedford Street Mission* (1875). Temple University Libraries, Urban Archives. Methodists in the 1850s provided most of the Mission's financial support but even in these early years the Quakers provided about half as much as area Methodist churches. Sewell, 352.

³¹*Christian Advocate and Journal* (New York), May 11, 1854. Gray's Ferry Road (now Avenue) runs south of South Street near 22nd Street.

preachers, and their Bible. Stones and mud were occasionally thrown at them; and so serious at length did matters become, that the Board of Managers were compelled to apply to the Mayor of the city for a Police-force to maintain the peace.”³²

As the winter approached in 1853, it was agreed that a house ought to be obtained for the sake of the mission, but they were not particularly fastidious about their choice of rental property:

It was one of those old dilapidated frame hovels, the lines of which are neither perpendicular nor horizontal; the ceiling was just high enough to permit one to stand upright when the head was uncovered, and the floor so patched, rotten, and creaky, that it made a very precarious footing indeed; added to which, it had been used as a receptacle or storehouse for old bones and filthy rags, and, of course, was rather unpleasant to the olfactory sense; in fact the place was literally in such bad odor, and so strongly suggestive of typhoid, etc., that the brethren who had rented it were not thanked for their pains.³³

In spite of its problems, the Board of Managers decided to keep the house and quickly saw it filled with residents of the neighborhood on Sunday evenings. “Many of the poor creatures, in their degradation, had sunk so far below the brutes, as to have lost all sense of personal cleanliness; their filthy rags serving them for a covering by night as well as by day, till they dropped piecemeal from their bodies.”³⁴

Although primarily focused on the neighborhood near Bedford Street, the Mission was influential in the establishment of at least one church in a neighborhood nearly twenty blocks away. When a church building formerly occupied by the Baptists became available in 1854 near the vicinity of the Mission’s successful Gray’s Ferry Road preaching station, the managers of the Bedford Street Mission began a Sabbath School in the building and soon Pitman Chapel, a Methodist Episcopal Church, was founded at 23rd and Lombard. The Methodists claimed that in this neighborhood “[t]here was not a free seated church within six squares of this point. Churches for fashionable people with rustling silks and fine broad-cloths were plenty; but there was no place for a man with a check shirt, or a woman with a shilling a yard gown.”³⁵

³²Sewell, 14.

³³Ibid., 15.

³⁴Ibid., 17.

³⁵Ibid., 302. The Pitman congregation later built a brick church at 28th and Dickinson Streets. Pitman Methodist Church closed in 1952. Koch, 48.



An image of the building erected by the mission in 1856-1857,
from the book *Sorrow's Circuit*.

Two years after the establishment of Pitman Chapel, in 1856, the Bedford Street Mission celebrated a cornerstone laying ceremony for a new and much-improved three-story building of their own at 619 Bedford Street. Perhaps in part to appeal to potential donors, the building was said to have been "similar in design" to the Five Points Mission in New York.³⁶ Reverends John Chambers, M. D. Kurtz, Andrew Manship, W. Kenney, and Dr. Francis Hodgson were among the clergy who offered remarks at the ceremony.³⁷ The house was completed in February of 1857 and contained rooms for the Dorcas Society to provide clothing needs for the poor, rooms for worship services and Sunday School, and a third floor reserved as a day school for neighborhood children who could not afford other schools. Apparently, a separate building (of unknown location) was utilized for the education of

³⁶*Christian Advocate and Journal* (New York), May 11, 1854.

³⁷Sewell, 376.

neighborhood black children. A member of the Wharton Street Methodist Episcopal Church (near Third Street) was responsible for the construction of the new building for the Bedford Street Mission.³⁸

Early reports about the Bedford Street Mission mostly contain stories of how the missionary helped poor neighborhood residents, but one is also struck by the intensity of anti-Catholic rhetoric in the 1859 text, *Sorrow's Circuit*. The willingness to go to blows with Catholics may have diminished somewhat from the 1844 riots, but anti-Catholic animosity remained strong. Stories are told of encounters with Catholic priests which seem to mostly have the purpose of raising the ire of the reader. In one case the missionary came to visit a dying woman where

Death's work was already well nigh done. The Priest pettishly inquired why they had sent for him at so late a period; gave me a scowling look, as much as to say, "You meddling heretic, what are you here for?" – And then turned away, without even administering a word of rebuke to the drunken woman that occupied the same wretched room or leaving a loaf of bread to satisfy the hunger of the starving children of the now dying mother. This kind of work was beneath his cloth, and could safely be left to the Missionary sent there by the *heretics* of the "Young Men's Central Home Mission;" he caring but little who fed or clothed the people, so that they remained in allegiance with the *Holy Catholic Church*, and entrusted to *him* the care of their souls and *their money*.³⁹

Such vitriol was not reserved solely for Philadelphia's Roman Catholic priests but was also utilized to condemn members of the Philadelphia business community in a bit of Methodist muckraking. The missionary told of an encounter with a young woman he sought to take away from a tavern and place in an asylum – most likely Philadelphia's Magdalen Asylum. In doing so, he learned that the director of the asylum

³⁸Sewell, 379.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 59. Such venomous remarks toward Catholics by Methodists were commonplace in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. For a review of this literature see David Butler, *Methodists and Papists: John Wesley and the Catholic Church in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1995); Donald L. Kinzer, *An Episode in Anti-Catholicism: The American Protective Association* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1964); Alvin P. Stauffer, "Anti-Catholicism in American Politics, 1865-1900" (Ph.D., diss., Harvard University, 1933). Chapter Four of the author's doctoral dissertation addresses anti-Catholic organizing in Boston in the late nineteenth century; Hartley, 165-204.



Rev. Benjamin Sewell, who ran the Bedford Street Mission in the 1850s, and in 1859 published *Sorrow's Circuit*, chronicling its early history.

was also the owner of a Philadelphia brewery which supplied the beer for the tavern out of which he had taken the woman. He also criticized owners of distilleries and breweries who remained active members of prominent churches in Philadelphia. "For if it is true, as the Bible asserts, that 'no drunkard shall inherit the kingdom of heaven,' what will be the doom of that man, who, for the sake of gain, carries on a business, that results in the ruin of thousands and tens of thousands, both for time and eternity?"⁴⁰ Even the Philadelphia police force did not escape condemnation from supporters of the Bedford Street Mission. Reverend Sewell tells the story of a woman lying on the street near the corner of Baker and Spafford streets while police simply leaned against a lamp post "looking on with indifference."⁴¹

⁴⁰Sewell, 61-65.

⁴¹Ibid., 253.

BEDFORD STREET MISSION AFTER THE CIVIL WAR

The mission of the Bedford Street Mission continued during the Civil War years with little change, but after the war ended, the Mission appears to have received a new infusion of activism from area Methodists.⁴² In May of 1866, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* published a lengthy article, "Two Hours' Visit to Bedford Street," seemingly re-introducing the Mission to its readers.⁴³ Evangelism remained important at the Mission in the years following the Civil War, but increasingly one discerns a gradual move away from such work. For example, in 1866 an annual report dutifully recorded 4,850 pages of tracts distributed by the Mission. The number of conversions was listed as 28. One searches in vain for similar details ten years later.⁴⁴ Instead, one observes a focus on improving the social welfare of neighborhood residents by providing baths, schooling, lodging, meals, fuel, healthcare, and other forms of charity. In the early 1870s the annual reports indicate that the Mission during some years provided a day school for over five hundred children, as many as ten to fifteen thousand baths, six thousand loaves of bread, and over 3,000 meals. In 1871 a separate building a few doors down from the Mission (at 613 Alaska [Bedford] Street) was rented to serve as a hospital for neighborhood residents and was named the Bedford Street Mission Hospital and Dispensary.⁴⁵ In 1873, the Mission relinquished control of the Bedford Street Mission Hospital and Dispensary to the Board of Health to be utilized as a temporary hospital for the increased number of fever victims in the city. In the early 1870s, the Bedford Street

⁴²Brief reports about the Bedford Street Mission appear in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* during the Civil War. Its missionary, Benjamin Sewell, left the Mission to enlist as a chaplain with the 29th Pennsylvania Regiment. Rev. Jeremiah Beckwith succeeded Sewell as missionary during the war. *Philadelphia Inquirer*, December 19, 1861, November 11, 1862, and October 28, 1863. The annual reports between 1860 and 1866 for the Bedford Street Mission are absent from Temple University Libraries, Urban Archives. *Sorrow's Circuit* provides the history of the mission from 1853 to 1859.

⁴³*Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 17, 1866.

⁴⁴*The Thirteenth Annual Report of the Bedford Street Mission, Philadelphia, March 15, 1866* (Philadelphia: Bryson and Son, Printers, 1866), Temple University Libraries, Urban Archives, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

⁴⁵Today, this might be best described as an outpatient clinic. In a two-month period only eight persons were said to have been received into the hospital while over 800 patients had been treated. *Philadelphia Inquirer*, June 24, 1871.

Mission annual reports identify standing committees for the day school, hospital, and baths. Its priorities in social services were clear.⁴⁶

In 1866, the Bedford Street Mission also welcomed a new, famous (and infamous) missionary, John Dixon Long, who had been the subject of considerable debate in Methodist circles just a few years earlier. It is possible that Long's notoriety alone may have helped the mission to expand its fundraising and social welfare missionary activity. In 1858, Long had been charged with slander of another clergy member at the Philadelphia Annual Conference because his book, *Pictures of Slavery*, had exposed the practice of slavery among Philadelphia Conference Methodist preachers.⁴⁷ Long, together with his wife and family, served as missionary of the Bedford Street Mission from 1866 until 1882.⁴⁸ He had bravely criticized the hypocrisy of Philadelphia Conference Methodist preachers holding slaves in the 1850s, and the victory in the Civil War and the abolition of slavery had proven the justice of his cause. Like other social reformers of the post-Civil War era, Long likely viewed the dire poverty of industrial cities as the next great injustice to attack – albeit now with somewhat less youthful ambition.

In contrast to the controversy which Long prompted earlier in his ministerial career, his work with the Bedford Street Mission is mostly characterized by quiet and faithful service. In 1871, however, Long was physically assaulted by a member of the Board of Managers on a Philadelphia street after a brief dispute.⁴⁹ The particular nature of the argument remains unknown, but the board member in a subsequent meeting was dismissed from the organization. One may speculate that Long still had a penchant for speaking the truth plainly which had gotten him into so much trouble during the 1858 Philadelphia Annual Conference.⁵⁰

⁴⁶See annual reports from 1870 to 1875. *Twentieth Annual Report* (1873).

⁴⁷See Hannah Adair Bonner, "Abolitionist on Trial: Rev. John Dixon Long and the 1858 Philadelphia Conference," in *Annals of Eastern Pennsylvania*, #5 (2008), 3-25.

⁴⁸*Fourteenth Annual Report of the Bedford Street Mission, April 24, 1867* (Philadelphia: Bryson and Son, Printers, 1867). *Twenty-ninth Annual Report of the Bedford Street Mission, 1882*. Temple University Libraries, Urban Archives. It appears Mrs. Long was responsible for inaugurating the free baths ministry at the Mission. Strahan, 191.

⁴⁹According to meeting minutes of the board of managers, Long had referred to a Mr. Barton as a "blackguard." Offended, Barton called Long a liar and punched him.

⁵⁰Meeting Minutes for January 11, 1871, *Bedford Street Mission Meeting Minute Book, 1870-1882*. Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.



An image of the Bedford Street Mission School that appeared in Edward Strahan's 1875 book, *A Century After: Picturesque Glimpses of Philadelphia and Pennsylvania*.

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The year 1875 was a watershed year for the Bedford Street Mission, when a new constitution was approved by the Board of Managers. The new constitution made it clear that the Philadelphia Conference bishop no longer had oversight of the organization. The number of Methodist churches which supported the work likewise declined after 1875, even though J.D. Long continued on as missionary for a number of years after this.⁵¹ In 1880, supporters of the Bedford Street Mission welcomed the founding of a new Charity Organization Society in Philadelphia, which sought to systematize (and secularize) social welfare across Philadelphia, as it had done in several other cities.⁵² This

⁵¹*Constitution of the Bedford Street Mission*, amended Dec. 9th 1875, Bedford Street Mission records, Temple University Libraries, Urban Archives; *Twenty-eighth Annual Report of the Bedford Street Mission* (1881). Temple University Libraries, Urban Archives.

⁵²The first Charity Organization Society was established in Buffalo in 1877. See Arthur M. Schlesinger, *The Rise of the City, 1878-1898* (New York: Macmillan, 1933), 350-54.

is also the first year that not a single Methodist Episcopal Church is mentioned as a donor to the organization.⁵³ By 1889, the missionary staff person was no longer called a "missionary" but rather a "superintendent."

The "culture" of the Bedford Street Mission had changed in other ways as well. For example, in its earliest years one finds considerable anti-Catholic sentiment expressed by the Mission's supporters, but by 1871 one finds the name of the prominent Roman Catholic banker, Anthony Drexel, on the list of Bedford Street Mission's Board of Managers. There was likely still considerable anti-Catholic feeling among Philadelphia Methodists at this time and they certainly desired to convert Roman Catholics to Methodism, but the Mission was changing enough that Drexel's presence – and his money – were now less of a problem than they would have been in the 1850s.

By the early 1890s many other religious social welfare organizations found their way to the neighborhood which was "frontier" ground for Protestant missionary efforts forty years earlier.⁵⁴ "Christian Socialist" Walter Vrooman and his Conference of Moral Workers and the University Settlement House had established themselves just a few doors down from the Bedford Street Mission, and were involved in similar work as the Mission.⁵⁵ By the late nineteenth century, there were also other Methodist ministries among the growing Italian population in South Philadelphia.⁵⁶ Those ministries would have likely pointed to the Bedford Street Mission and its legacy of activism and concern in the neighborhood in order to prove their commitment to the people with whom they worked.

Some new initiatives at the Bedford Street Mission were begun in the first decades of the twentieth century, though most of the Mission's work remained much the same as it had been in previous years. One of the most striking changes was the establishment of a new

⁵³*Twenty-seventh Annual Report of the Bedford Street Mission* (1880). Temple University Libraries, Urban Archives.

⁵⁴In 1904, a Roman Catholic priest listed a half dozen Protestant outreach efforts among the mostly Italian residents of this neighborhood See Richard N. Juliani, *Priest, Parish, and People: Saving the Faith in Philadelphia's Little Italy* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2007), 200.

⁵⁵Bedford Street Mission scrapbook, unattached envelope with newspaper clippings, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia. On Vrooman see Harlan B. Phillips, "A War on Philadelphia's Slums: Walter Vrooman and the Conference of Moral Workers, 1893," in *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 76:1 (January 1952), 47-62.

⁵⁶Juliani mentions several of these Methodist outreach efforts. Juliani, 175-180.

summer home for poor children in Clementon, New Jersey in 1909. Every two weeks during the summer, a new group of poor children from Philadelphia would arrive on the grounds of this home and receive “unrestricted fun in the open under sympathetic supervision.”⁵⁷ It is not clear what happened to the Bedford Street Mission in the early 1930s. The last annual report for the Mission which has been preserved is from 1933, but it is possible that its work was absorbed by one of the many social service organizations which dotted the neighborhood.

CONCLUSION

The Bedford Street Mission provides an excellent window through which to view collaborative urban ministry efforts performed by Methodists in Philadelphia from 1853 to 1933. The Bedford Street Mission responded to changes in the nature of poverty and the identity of the impoverished during its history, and followed a rather typical pattern of increasing secularization in the nature of its work. The history of the Bedford Street Mission, however, is far more than a simple tale of secularization. In fact, to focus too much on this dimension of its history would be to miss the point of the organization and the motives of the people who served there.

It is through the stories of the people who worked at the Bedford Street Mission, and those who were served by the organization, that one gains a deeper understanding of Methodist attitudes toward poverty, the interrelationship of evangelism and social welfare, immigrants, African Americans, and Roman Catholicism. The Bedford Street Mission and its surrounding neighborhood never received the notoriety of New York City’s Five Points area. Nonetheless, it grappled with many of the same problems as other northeastern cities and remains an important part of the stories of Philadelphia Methodism and the Church’s work with the impoverished which continues to this day.

⁵⁷“Bedford Mission Provides Outings,” *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, July 8, 1922.



A photograph of the Bedford Street Mission building, from a 1920 annual report. The building still stands, and is today a private residence.