

Grace Stephens: Breaking Down Gender Barriers in India

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Legacy Stories

Grace Stephens. Photo: Board of Foreign Missions of the Methodist Episcopal Church, courtesy UMC General Commission on Archives and History

Grace Stephens was an Anglo-Indian missionary serving in Madras, India, for the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society, a predecessor organization of United Methodist Women, in the late 19th and early 20th century. She was a native of India, and in April 1886 was appointed by the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society to be a zenana worker. "Zenana" means "of the women," and in the Hindu context refers to the part of a house reserved for women.



She built trust with the women—and stood up to many men—in order to offer education and community, teaching the women English and Tamil and how to read and sew, and in so doing she broke down gender barriers. She soon oversaw an orphanage, a boarding school, day schools and Sunday schools along with her zenana work.

"She knows how to fight the good fight of faith," wrote the Rev. W. Raju in 1900 about Stephens, "and to lead Christians into deeds of holy daring for Christ and his Gospel. Her Christian life is full and complete because God governs her heart."

Stephens was the only woman from Asia to attend the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh, Scotland, in 1910, and one of only 200 women. She knew the Christian faith could transform women's lives and made it her life's work. Centuries later United Methodist Women continues to put faith, hope and love in action thanks to the example and legacy of foremothers such as Grace Stephens.

Compiled from "Address to Mission Forward Symposium April 19, 2010, St. Louis, Missouri" by Dana L. Robert, *The Story of the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church* by Frances J. Baker (1895) and *The Gospel in All Lands*, volume 21, number 7 (July 1900).

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