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EVANGELISM IN AFRICA: CORRESPONDENCE OF THE BOARD OF FOREIGN MISSIONS, 1835-1910



The records of the Board of Foreign Missions (BFM) of the Presbyterian Church provide valuable information on social conditions in developing nations and on efforts to spread the gospel during the nineteenth century. Among the missions' responsibilities was the establishment of indigenous churches, educational facilities, hospitals, orphanages, and seminaries. The majority of the material in this collection consists of incoming correspondence from the mission field and outgoing correspondence from the Board headquarters. Other primary sources include diary accounts, sermon manuscripts, receipts of sale, and field accounts.

Date Range: 1835-1910

Content: 39,986 images

Source Library: Library of the Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia

Detailed Description:

The nineteenth century has been described as the "Great Century" of Protestant missions, when the Gospel was sent to more peoples than ever before. The Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America was an active participant in this phenomenal expansion. After its founding in 1837 it brought the Christian civilization to peoples on four continents.

Christian missionaries directed their attention to unexplored regions in the 19th century, greatly expanding their endeavors. Colonialism brought increased knowledge of Africa and Asia, and the European and American churches extended their work into these areas. Missionary activities were important in the political, economic, educational and social reforms of many countries. The spreading of medical knowledge, the building of hospitals, missionary schools, the promotion of Western learning, history and international law were some of the examples.

Presbyterian mission work in Africa commenced in 1833 and throughout the 19th century expanded to several different areas therein. These included: Liberia, 1833-94; Corsico,

1850-75; Spanish Guinea, 1865-1924, 1932; Gaboon, 1871-92; Ogowee, 1874-92; and the Cameroon, 1889-1972.

The men and women of the board served a variety of native peoples. Their letters, intended to be reports from the field, are far more than dry discussions of mission business. Ranging in length from single fragments to reports of over twenty pages, they describe the indigenous peoples and cultures, tribal factionalism, cultural differences and mores, and the many problems and achievements of the work. The letters often become personal and even anguished, as the writers disclose their fears, worries, and hopes. Isolated in sometimes dangerous frontier areas, the missionaries faced countless hardships and reversals. Loneliness at times surfaced, and problems of health seem to have been ever present.

They also reveal attitudes about the indigenous peoples which, at first glance, appear contradictory. The missionaries combine an indestructible belief in the native people's potential to rise into the Christian civilization with the absolute intolerance of his heathen culture. Nothing of the aboriginal heritage was worth preserving. The goal was not to express Christian truths through native forms, but to achieve total victory over the corrupting past. Once a native had accepted Christ and an idealized civilized way of life, however, he was to become a member of the Christian civilization enjoying equality with his white brothers.

The letters include much discussion of aboriginal culture, so the collection invites studies of various native peoples from anthropological perspectives. Though the ethnocentrism of the writers often detracts from their perceptions, much can be gleaned on native ways and personality. Acculturational approaches could prove especially useful, as the missionaries were often preoccupied with ongoing developments within the tribes and with the varying native responses to white cultural intrusion.

The collection can serve as a source for a multitude of other studies. The relationship between missionaries and their home and adoptive country governments call for deeper investigation. The Presbyterian Board, like many other missionary bodies, actively cooperated with the local government in what was seen as a two-pronged drive to Christianize and civilize the natives. Some of the letters throw light on the complex relationship between missionaries and their home government. The missionaries could be scathing critics of their compatriots and at times of their government. They saw themselves as protectors of the natives, and they seem to have had little difficulty in reconciling these potentially conflicting roles.

At a time of changing attitudes toward women in society, the board missionaries brought their own concepts of ideal Christian womanhood. They demanded radical changes in the sex roles of the natives. The collection can therefore serve as a source for women's history and the history of the relationships between the sexes. And because of the personal nature of some of the letters, they provide a means of investigating missionary psychology and motivations. Even quantitative approaches should prove fruitful-the letters contain a wealth of statistical information on mission church and school membership and on financial and other matters.

Publisher's Note: This collection comprises, in its entirety, the Primary Source Media microfilm collection entitled *Board of Foreign Missions Correspondence and Reports, 1833-1911 (Africa Missions subset)*.