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Floating Christian Endeavor as a Model for Mission to Migrants

Abstract

This article explores how the little-known history of the Floating Societies of Christian Endeavor can provide a useful model for modern mission approaches to mission among transnational people, especially migrant workers, who seldom settle in an area long enough to be effectively reached by traditional church planting methods. Evangelizing and discipling people on the move is not a new problem for the church, but one which was addressed in the late 19th century and early 20th century in attempting to reach sailors for Christ. The model developed by the Floating Societies of Christian Endeavor were flexible, lay-led movements that leveraged traditional mission outreach to sailors coupled with the innovative youth organization of Francis E. Clark and the Christian Endeavor Movement. A similar model is suggested for work among migrant worker communities for today’s church, albeit with some warnings from the historical problems of the Floating Christian Endeavor.

Keywords: Migrant workers, mission, Floating Christian Endeavor, transnationalism, seafarers

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Introduction

Mary Jenkins, later Mrs. Mary Marsh, told the story in 1922 of how early in her life she had worked with Madison Edwards, who had an active ministry with sailors on government ships. She recalled how one day in church the wind suddenly shifted direction and Madison Edwards came up to her and told her there was a ship that was going to leave with the wind, and they had Christian Endeavor pins for some of the sailors on board. Mary and Madison left in the middle of the service and chased down the government ship in the small mission boat. They climbed over the side of the ship and held a quick service and gave out small New Testaments along with Christian Endeavor pins for those who had recently signed the pledge. Mrs. Marsh later remembered, “Two of those lads never came back. One was badly hurt in a shipwreck. He broke his leg and injured his chest. He gave his little Testament to his shipmates and said, ‘Take it back to Woods Hole and give it to Madison Edwards, and here’s my pin, give it to Miss Jenkins.’ I think Mr. Edwards has the little water-soaked Testament in his collection of sailor mementos.” Such a story summarizes well the impact and influence of the Floating Societies of the Christian Endeavor, which sought to reach young men in the dangerous and hard work of life at sea with the Good News of Jesus Christ.

While the history of this movement is a fascinating story in its own right, it also presents a model of mission that may prove valuable for new mission fields in today’s rapidly globalized world. This model would be especially useful for those whose jobs are transient, who live and move frequently to different areas; people for whom an organized church in one stable location are unreachable, and yet who are some of the people most in need of the gospel message. In examining ministry to people like migrant workers, or people who work on vessels at sea, we seldom consider history as a source for effective models of ministry. This paper hopes to present such a model from the past and argue that it may provide a modern effective way to do ministry among some of the least evangelized people on earth.

Floating Societies of the Christian Endeavor

In 1890, only nine years after Dr. Francis Clark founded the Christian Endeavor Society in Portland, Maine, a small local Christian Endeavor society met in Falmouth, Massachusetts. One of the members was Madison Edwards, the young son of a captain of a lighthouse relief vessel, who had felt a call to ministry and began preaching on board ships when he was sixteen years old. Also at this meeting was the society’s young secretary, Miss Antoinette Palmer Jones, a young unmarried seamstress who lived with her parents near the telegraph office. The society met in the First Congregational Church of Falmouth, and the young
people in this group had earlier offered to help Madison Edwards if he needed them for his work with sailors in nearby Woods Hole. If he needed help, he would telegraph Miss Jones because of her proximity to the telegraph office and she would gather available members of the society to come and assist him. On this particular evening, Madison Edwards and Antoinette Jones discussed the design of the Christian Endeavor Society, and thought about how it might be altered to work with young men on board ships at sea as a sort of lay-led floating church. They drew up plans for such a group, and Antoinette Jones wrote to the Boston headquarters of the Christian Endeavor Society and received permission to try out their idea. On May 12, 1890 the first Floating Society of Christian Endeavor was started on the Revenue Cutter Dexter, and about a month later Antoinette Palmer Jones was named the superintendent of the Floating Christian Endeavor.
Madison Edwards, co-founder of the Floating Societies of Christian Endeavor

(Edwards image in the author's personal collection)

With Madison Edwards’ abilities in connecting with sailors, and Antoinette Jones’ organizational abilities, the Floating Christian Endeavor became a huge success. By 1901 there were 6,000 members in 150 societies, and this included societies in the Japanese, British, and German navies as well as in the navy of the United States. The Floating Societies of the Christian Endeavor had survived war in the Spanish-American War, with members involved in almost every major battle of the war. George W. Coleman in his report before the annual International Christian Endeavor Convention on the work of the Floating Christian Endeavor, used the words of a popular advertisement of the day and compared the societies to Ivory Soap, claiming it was “99 and 44/100 percent pure, and IT FLOATS!” One of the Floating Christian Endeavorers to emerge as a hero for the Society from the war was Carlton H. Jencks, a sailor on the U.S.S. Charleston who had helped found the Christian Endeavor Seaman’s Home in Nagasaki, Japan, when he was eighteen years old. Shortly after, he transferred to the U.S.S. Maine as a gunner’s mate and was killed when the ship went down in Havana, Cuba on February 15, 1898. The idea of noble Christian youth fighting and dying in war stirred patriotic feelings both inside and outside the Christian Endeavor Society.
Despite such heroic images, life at sea was difficult, dangerous, and hardly open to Christian values. Port cities were notorious places for drinking, gambling, and prostitution. Sailors were typically young men, often not more than boys who had recently left home, and government ships at this time offered little to no religious services or time for the development of a Christian life. Members of the Floating Christian Endeavor pledged like others in the Christian Endeavor Society to meet frequently and to participate in worship, contributing more than just singing at every service. They wore Christian Endeavor pins on their uniforms to proudly proclaim their allegiance to Christ and the Church to whomever they met. In contrast to their fellow society members on land, such allegiance and loyalty tended to be met with cursing and insults, but they carried on and sought to bring others into the society. As one speaker noted,

Floating Christian Endeavor stands for faithful testimony on board ship. Its members are marked men. The little badge worn on the blue uniform speaks constantly to all on board, telling that one at least is not ashamed to own his Master and his Lord.
Floating Christian Endeavor knows no church save the church invisible. Differing from the Society on land, it is the fruit that grows directly from the vine, rather than from the branches. Its point of union is loyalty to Christ. Church organization is impossible afloat. Many most sincere Christian sailors are not members of any church.

It is a sufficient test of sincerity for a man on shipboard to be willing to take the pledge, and wear the pin of the Society. The hypocrite is a fungus which does not long endure the fire of persecution at sea. A Christian sailor is under constant observation. A thousand eyes mark every word, every action. There is nothing to be gained by a false profession of faith in Christ, therefore Christian sailors are usually true stuff. Unite these men, identify them, and you have organized a mighty agency for evangelization.8

When shipmates were moved to other ships, new societies formed and so the organization grew. Even more importantly changes were seen in the lives of the young men on board the ships.

It is only four months since the Floating Christian Endeavor Committee organized a Floating Christian Endeavor on that ship (the Thetis). Since that time the drunken brawls that had been so frequent on board and ashore have become a thing of the past, and in their places are substituted prayer meetings and revivals. I have been twenty-eight years at sea in the darkest scenes of vice with which a sailor is surrounded, and I am convinced that the exhortations of the members of the society are of wonderful influence - sufficient to soften any heart and inclining the hardest sailor to mend his ways.9

The success of the Floating Christian Endeavor was relatively short for a number of key reasons. First, the onset of World War I brought the complications of massive wartime movements and the ability to organize the societies on board ship may have become impossible. Second, the U.S. government increased its number of chaplains and other religious organizations such as the Y.M.C.A. also became more involved in ministry. Finally, Miss Antoinette Palmer Jones, the co-founder, speaker, organizer, and corresponding secretary of the Floating Christian Endeavor died in the influenza epidemic on December 15, 1918 at age 62 in the midst of the conflict. The unique system she had put into place fell apart in the middle of this time of conflict, and no other person could step up to fill her position. The Floating Societies of the Christian Endeavor faded into memory.
Floating Christian Endeavorer from the Solace (Courtesy of the Archives of the B.L. Fisher Library, Asbury Theological Seminary)

A close-up of his Christian Endeavor pin. (Courtesy of the Archives of the B.L. Fisher Library, Asbury Theological Seminary)
The Model of the Floating Societies of the Christian Endeavor

After that brief historical introduction, it now becomes important to describe the model Edwards and Jones developed from 1890 to 1918. The model essentially consisted of two types of “Floating” societies: shipboard and land-based societies. As described in 1897,

The organization is two-fold- the regular “floating societies” on land composed largely of Endeavorers interested in this field of missionary work and the societies on individual ships. The latter are always small, and through the constant changes of sea life are generally transient... All naval vessels have chaplains, but the chaplain is an “officer” and the seamen are only men, so there is a gulf there that cannot be bridged to establish genuine fellowship with the chaplain. The Christian Endeavor societies accomplish this, and when officers are members the barriers of rank disappear in the meetings.

Shipboard societies have already briefly been described. These were simply lay-led Christian Endeavor societies that met on U.S. naval ships. They had fewer committees than other Christian Endeavor Societies, by nature of their work they were all male, and their signed pledge included abstinence from alcohol, which was not in the regular pledge. But other than these minor differences they were essentially the same. The land-based societies were still called “floating” societies, but they were organized in churches, missions, and reading rooms around the U.S. that were already committed to work among seamen. This network frequently involved women who collected reading material, made hats, socks, mufflers, sweaters, and other items for the use of sailors, organized meals and clean entertainment for sailors when the ships were in port, and made comfort bags (which frequently contained needles, thread, and other essentials for ocean life along with a New Testament, a religious pamphlet, and perhaps a personal letter). These land-based societies would also lead shipboard visitation, religious services in port, visit sailors in local hospitals, and generally help meet needs as they arose.

This dual approach to ministry created an amazingly effective network. When a ship, say from Boston, arrived in a port, such as San Francisco, the shipboard Floating Christian Endeavor Society would already know of the existence of any land-based Floating Christian Endeavor Society, and that land-based society would be ready and willing to meet the needs of their members on board the ship, who they could easily identify by their Christian Endeavor badges. The land-based societies helped encourage and strengthen the shipboard societies wherever they came together. If the shipboard society was out at sea, it could operate effectively...
on its own, knowing that support would most likely be available if needed in the next major port.

In this dual model, there is one element which is stable, supportive, and ready to spring into action, while being aware of the needs of the migratory societies. The other element is spiritually self-sufficient, with its own local leaders, but is also aware that when they might be at their weakest that there is a supporting network of societies already aware of their potential needs, spiritually behind them, and ready to support them as needed. When the Floating Christian Endeavor faded away following 1918, the individual elements of the land-based societies essentially become separate units continuing to minister to sailors who came into local ports in the traditional way ministry to sailors had been done, but the essential network fell apart, and the shipboard societies never reorganized.

While traditional ministry models to migrant peoples have frequently developed networks of stable, non-transitory bases from which to do mission, few have attempted anything like the model presented by the Floating Christian Endeavor, which pairs such a network with moveable lay-led ministries that travel with migratory people, and on occasion tap into the resources of the stable non-transitory bases. I would argue that the short history of the Floating Christian Endeavor was not due to the model on which it was structured, but rather the lack of the technology needed to make such a model effective. Antoinette Jones had to keep her entire organization moving based on simple correspondence, which often could not include the ship-based societies, and yet she grew the organization to a global network of over 6,000 members. With modern communication technology and a more secure infrastructure, such a model offers great promise for missions to migratory people in today’s world.

The dualistic model is fairly simple. Figure 1.1 shows four non-mobile bases and their various connections with each other in a basic network of relationships. It also shows one mobile base and its temporary connection to a non-mobile base with which it is in close proximity. Figure 1.2 shows the same network and the one mobile base, now separated from the non-mobile base. In this case, the mobile base must act as a self-contained unit. In terms of ministry, it means it must conduct its own services and meet the needs of its own members until such a time as it can reconnect with another non-mobile base in the network (Figure 1.3). One thing this model demands, which was absent in the Floating Societies of the Christian Endeavor is a well-developed discipleship program, which could develop lay-leaders quickly in the mobile bases so that these individuals could lead the mobile units when there is no non-mobile base available.
Figure 1.1
Basic Structure of the Floating Christian Endeavor Model of Mission

Figure 1.2
The Moveable Unit of the Model Operating Independently
The Need for Mission in Modern Migratory Transnationalist Networks

The need for mission to migratory people did not die out in the early 20th century, and the issue of how to do mission with migrating people remains with us today. As early as 1976, migrants were being divided into three categories: new migrants (those migrating for the first time), return migrants (those who return to the place of their birth—often referred to today as transnationals), and repeat migrants (those who migrate more than once). For many ministries the work involving migrating people has been focused on helping new migrants, and even repeat migrants settle in to their new society and adjust. Helping them find housing, jobs, learn the local language; locate social services, education and medical care, and integrating them into local communities of worship. This is a great ministry for refugees or other migrants who have to relocate to a new country for economic or political reasons. Academic research has increasingly focused on transnational immigrants, people who have moved to a new cultural environment, but continue to maintain social, economic, and personal contacts with people in their homeland on a regular basis. Ministries, such as churches rooted in their traditional cultural practices and ethnicities, help to work out the unique issues people in this community often face. However, very few successful missionary efforts have been aimed at another type of migrant, those who live in a constant state of migration. This would include seafarers, or sailors, which continue to work in our world today,
as well as agricultural farm workers who migrate from place to place depending on
the harvest and the work available. It is to this group of mobile migrants that I think
the Floating Societies of the Christian Endeavor have the most to offer as a model
for mission.

First, it is important to realize the needs of seafarers still exist. The
International Labour Organization, in its report on International Labour Standards
on Seafarers sums it up this way,

An estimated 90% of world trade makes use of maritime
transport, depending on more than 1.2 million seafarers
to operate ships. Many seafarers ply waters distant from
their home. Seafarers and shipowners are often of different
nationalities, and ships often operate under a flag different
from their origin of ownership. Seafarers are also frequently
exposed to difficult working conditions and particular
occupational risks. Working far from home, they are vulnerable
to exploitation and abuse, non-payment of wages, non-
compliance with contracts, exposure to poor diet and living
conditions, and even abandonment in foreign ports.\textsuperscript{11}

In looking at the distribution of seafarers by their nations of origin, we see the
following distribution of the top nations, which make up 44.9% of the total number
of seafarers today:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nation</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>21.86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>8.26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>5.81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>4.13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>4.30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>3.56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>3.26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>1.48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>1.22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>1.03%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korea</td>
<td>0.85%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This shows that seafarers are a large population of people from mixed backgrounds,
but often coming from non-Christian nations, with very specific needs as migrant
people. They are perhaps one of the least evangelized groups today because of the
nature of their work. They are constantly on the move, and ministries based solely
in port cities can only provide temporary answers to spiritual and social ministry
needs. A model of floating, lay-led churches, connected to a network of shore-
based ministries could be one model to reach this population of 1.2 million with the Good News.

Second, such a model also has a potential to work with migrant agricultural workers. A description of this community can be summed up in the following,

Between 1 and 3 million migrant farm workers leave their homes every year to plant, cultivate, harvest, and pack fruits, vegetables and nuts in the U.S. … Migrant farm workers are predominantly Mexican-born sons, husbands, and fathers who leave what is familiar and comfortable with the hopes and dreams of making enough money to support their families back home; feed themselves; purchase land and a home; and – like many immigrants who came before them – ultimately return to their homeland. While others come from countries such as Jamaica, Haiti, Guatemala, Honduras, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, and other states in the United States their aspirations remain the same. They are young, averaging about 31 years of age. Some arrive as single men, while others leave their families behind while they seek work, and others travel and work with their families. For those who travel without their families, once they realize that they will need to maintain their U.S. earning capacity, they would much rather have their families settle with them in the U.S. More than half of all farm workers – 52 of every 100 – are unauthorized workers with no legal status in the United States… (S)acrifices range from separation from their countries of origins, families, and what is familiar to learning to navigate a foreign land where little is known about them and whose customs, language, foods, and ways of life are different from what they know.13

Other challenges face them as well, as is laid out in a report from the Southern Poverty Law Center.14 They note that 41% of the immigrant workers they surveyed had experienced wage theft from employers, only 37% reported receiving appropriate aid for on-the-job injuries, often subjected to exposure to toxic pesticides and not made aware of services or rights they may have, these workers are often the most marginalized workers in the United States.

To make such a model successful in our modern globalized world, it would need a strong network of stable ministries based in churches or parachurch organizations with an organized system of volunteers who can prepare to meet immediate needs, such as contacts with medical personnel, legal advisers, and local social service organizations. They need to understand the needs of the people they are serving in terms of personal contact, social interaction, and communication with family in foreign countries. On top of these types of services, the stable ministries should provide spiritual outreach and ministry, bringing new converts into a discipleship program that can be completed either online or in stages at the
next stable ministry in the network. Graduation from this discipleship program should lead to the individual becoming a lay leader in a migrating church, who can organize, teach, and lead spiritual gatherings even when there are no stable ministries from the network in easy reach. These lay leaders need to find a way to be easily recognized by others in the group, and learn to reach others in their immediate sphere of influence, whether other seafarers or other agricultural migrant workers. The discipleship program should be simple, designed for people who might have limited education, but who exhibit strong leadership abilities. It should be a program shared by all of the stable ministries in the network, so that if one person had finished module three in one place, they could complete module four in another location without entering a completely new curriculum. Such a model, like the Christian Endeavor should be non-denominational, interracial, multi-lingual, and flexible. Discipleship should focus on key elements of the Christian faith held by all groups involved in the ministry and not specific denominations.

It is also important to learn from the mistakes or problems faced by the historic Floating Societies of Christian Endeavor. Their network depended too much on the organization and leadership of one woman, whose unexpected death in a time of crisis led to its demise. Leadership of any new model should include an organized team that is flexible, yet committed to working with a migratory group of people. If one of the team leaves the group, it should be strong enough to survive until that person is replaced on the team. Preparations need to be made for various situations. It is still unclear to the author how Floating Societies on German navy vessels survived during World War I, or if they in fact disbanded quickly, since the leadership was from a nation at war with Germany. Political events can easily disrupt ministries that cross geo-political lines, and this needs to be considered carefully. Communication between groups was essential for the Floating Societies of the Christian Endeavor, even though it was only by letter perhaps once a year. With modern technological tools, it would be expected that communication could become a greater strength in any new version of the model. However, communication remains essential. Mobile groups need to be able to easily locate new stable units of the ministry, and any discipleship program with migratory workers would need to find some way to continue communication between teachers and students before the end of the program.
Conclusion

In our postmodern world, we seldom look to the past to help understand new ways to meet new challenges, but there are times when mission and Church history can provide useful models for current challenges. Rapid globalization and advances in communication and transportation has led to a tremendous growth of people moving around the planet. In facing the issues of migration or diaspora, we have found ways to reach those who have migrated to a new place and are seeking to settle down. We have also found ways to relate to those who have migrated but maintain contacts with their homelands as transnational people. But we still struggle to find a model for reaching those who never settle down, those mobile migrants who must constantly move for economic reasons. It is impossible for church ministries to move with them, and it is impossible to guarantee that there will be another similar ministry in every new place they go. The Floating Societies of the Christian Endeavor offer a model from the mist of history that might be worth reviving.

Stable ministries that serve as a support network can branch out in numerous churches or ministries in multiple places, while a discipleship program among the migratory peoples can train lay-led leaders to emerge from within the group, who can conduct a mobile church when traditional ministries are not within reach. Such a model could be applied to modern seafarers or agricultural migrant workers, or any other group of migrants who must be constantly on the move. Such a dual approach is practical and can take advantage of modern advances in technology not available to its historical antecedents. All that remains is to find an organizational team with the passion to develop such a mission, and a discipleship tool that can develop the lay-leadership needed for the mobile units.

End Notes

1 *Sea Breeze* (43:3) “Address of Mrs. Marsh” April 1922, pp. 44-45.

2 For more on the life of Madison Edwards and his other ministries, see *They Kept the Lower Lights Burning: The Story of the Seaman’s Bethel and Its Chaplains* by George W. Wiseman.


4 For more detail on the Floating Societies of the Christian Endeavor, see *A History of the Floating Societies of the Christian Endeavor* by Robert A. Danielson.

6 Ibid.


8 Speech by Navy Chaplain Robert E. Steele at the 1903 Annual Conference in Denver, CO. p. 136.


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