

E. Stanley Jones Had a Wife: The Life and Mission of Mabel Lossing Jones, 1878–1978

KATHRYN REESE HENDERSHOT

The recently released book of the same title (Scarecrow Press, 2007) is essentially the first biographical study of the extraordinary yet largely unheralded life of Mabel Lossing Jones, wife of the famed evangelist E. Stanley Jones. Mabel was an American pioneer in mission, education, and evangelism in the early to mid-1900s, primarily in India. Here, she emerges out of the shadow of her celebrated husband as a multifaceted woman leader of the world Christian movement.

Upon her commissioning to India in 1904 by the Women's Foreign Missionary Society (WFMS) of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Mabel served at the Khandwa Girls' Orphanage and later trained teachers at the Lal Bagh School in Lucknow, India. After receiving her master's degree from the Upper Iowa University, she was singled out in June of 1909 by the British colonial government to start a teacher training school in Hawa Bagh, which proved to be a sweeping success.

Then came a yearlong furlough followed by her return to India as a missionary for the Methodist Episcopal Church and marriage to E. Stanley Jones in 1911. The couple immediately proceeded to their assignment in the Sitapur District, which is where Mabel established her life's work in what was to become the Mabel Jones Boys' School.

Egalitarian faith

Mabel's faith was the driving force behind her life choices and commitments. She viewed all people as morally equal, and, thus, dealt equitably with people from a wide variety of backgrounds. We find innumerable interactions with men, women, youth, boys and girls, Indians, the British, Americans, Hindus, Muslims, Christians, beggars, Indian officials, British officials, Methodist officials, missionaries, servants, educators, military personnel, the wealthy, the poor, the sick, the confused, the lonely, the lost, and those in crisis, all of whom were treated impartially. She lived out Paul's proclamation in Galatians 3:28: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (NKJV). Mabel believed that the "promise of the Father"¹ placed her on equal footing with men.

Confining herself to a "woman's role" or an "American role" or a "missionary role" was not necessary because she was secure in her identity as a servant of God. She was not out to make a name for herself or compete with anyone. Her sense of self-worth and identity gave her the freedom to accept others as significant human beings.

Mabel's Quaker background appears to have been a major factor in her egalitarian views. Her grandparents were devout Quakers, and she was an avid reader of Quaker sermons and Quaker biographies at an early age.² Egalitarianism had been modeled

for her in her home church, St. Luke's, where women taught men in Sunday school and were an active part of the leadership of the church.³ Gender equality was also one of the foundational tenets of her alma mater (the coeducational Upper Iowa University⁴) and of the WFMS, which originally sent her to India. Kay Rader (Commissioner, Salvation Army) put it this way:

To my mind, one of the most graphic evidences of Mabel's sense of her selfhood or personal identification [came through her own words]: "What did I go to India for? Housekeeping? I'd be doing it all the time. There is no electricity and the servants need the money." This is a statement of her view of herself. Not missionary wife/wife of a missionary, [but] simply missionary—who happens to be married.⁵

Mabel was at ease with the ten Hindu men and the ten Muslim men with whom she sat on the District Municipal Board for twenty years—the only woman, the only Christian, the only American. She was at ease with those serving on the board of the Boy Scouts, the governing board of Isabella Thoburn College, and the committee of the All India Women's Conference (non-Christian, Hindu, and Muslim women) as well. Her company was sought out by British officials, Methodist bishops, Sitapur merchants, and Indian rajas. Granted, status trumped gender in her environs, but her counsel was freely given to anyone who desired it. Mabel and Mahatma Gandhi were regular correspondents on matters of education and discipline for more than twenty years.

Another area in which Mabel demonstrated her egalitarian nature was with the boys in her school. Although they were born into different castes, and certain tasks belonged to specific castes, Mabel insisted that, in her school, everybody had to do everything.⁶ All boys were given rotating job assignments that included a month working in the field, a month taking care of the hostel, a month drawing water, a month gathering fuel, and a month cooking food. The boys also learned to respect women by having women teachers.

Mabel's daughter, Eunice Mathews, tells us that Mabel had a clear understanding of the women's liberation movement, but she did not become formally involved:

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Perhaps the reason she did not need the women's liberation movement was that she was in fact already a liberated woman.

It would not have occurred to her to question her right to do any task she felt mentally or physically capable of accomplishing as long as she was convinced there was a need to be filled.⁷

In her later years, Mabel came to a quiet, wholesome place of enjoying her own company. James Mathews quotes Mabel, "But a day to myself is cherished more than gold: time to discover lost values, to enjoy one's own company.

If you can't endure this it is time to wonder why."⁸ Here we see that Mabel's egalitarian commitments extended even to herself. Indeed, Mabel had a distinctive quality about her. "She did not fit into any stereotyped

patterns. She was a very able person who developed according to her own instincts in many respects."⁹ I do not believe that Mabel would have described herself with the term "egalitarian" or "liberated," but she clearly modeled such a way of life. Egalitarian beliefs were embedded in her being.

Egalitarian friendships

Mabel's efforts followed a missiology of presence. As her daughter explained, "Jesus Christ is present when his servants are present. When they are most evident as servants, he is most evident as Lord."¹⁰ She was approachable and made herself available to the people—all the people who crossed her path—living among them and learning their languages and ways. She made bridges of friendship with all levels of Indian society and built on what they already understood. Because of her extraordinary command of their languages (Hindi and Urdu) and their sacred writings (the Koran and the Bhagavad-Gita) as well as Christian Scripture, she was able to engage comfortably in deep and meaningful dialogue with the people she met. This enabled her to win their trust. She lived life alongside them, entering into their thoughts and feelings. Her daughter notes:

She kept confidences and gave them her undivided attention. . . . While she lived in Sitapur, educated non-Christians from the town were frequent visitors. The British officials often came, for they enjoyed her conversation and often used her as a counselor for their frustrations. Indian officials sought her out as well.

The town merchants would use any excuse to come to the house to talk with her. Missionaries from other towns would ask to spend a few days at the house for relaxation and the rejuvenation of spirit she seemed to give them. It was as good as a visit to a psychiatrist, for they could see their problems in true perspective. Her knack of helping people solve their problems was highly regarded by her colleagues. The bishops too, recognizing her astuteness, often came to ask her help and advice.¹¹

Mabel did not parade her religion or force it upon others. Eunice observes, "She was a great believer in people seeing how the

Christian life might be lived, and they could copy and emulate it. The way she went about her work . . . she did not alienate the people. They trusted her completely—knowing that she was not going to rush in there and demand this or that."¹²

She understood what E. Stanley wrote in *Christ of the Indian Road*: "The Hindu has this reservation: he does not feel that a religious experience should be shouted from the housetops, he feels that to do this would be indelicate and would take away its bloom and beauty."¹³ She therefore incorporated indirect meth-

ods of evangelism in her quiet, determined way, as well as the more direct methods with her boys: "We need prayer helpers. 'It's not by might, nor by power,' nor by money alone, can we win India. It will be by His Spirit

working in us—and in you."¹⁴

Sacrifice was a given for Mabel. She sacrificed much, and in innumerable ways, for the boys and for India. Her vision to establish and maintain a boys' school that would produce fine young men of Christian character who would impact India for Christ had a price, which she willingly and faithfully paid. Her life illustrates the courage and faith necessary to face famine, disease, floods, political unrest, and cross-cultural challenges along with the general hardships, disappointments, and loneliness of serving in a foreign environment. We see the sacrifice this woman missionary made, as well as the wisdom and resourcefulness that were necessary to face personal crises and to care for and counsel others. Many missionaries were moved quite frequently—she remained. More than a generation came to know her as she became an established figure. Other missionary leaders would come and go—she stayed. Whenever the bishops thought of moving her, they thought twice.¹⁵

An egalitarian pioneer

Several distinctive qualities characterize Mabel's pioneering mission and the professionalization of women's work. The most obvious is that she established an all-female teaching staff for a primary boys' school in India in the early 1900s. In effect, she took the Progressive Era overseas and not only pioneered a new work of progressive education, but also did it in a new context, culturally and socially. She built a sense of community at the boys' school and in Sitapur as she remained in that community for the greater part of thirty-five years, enduring its hardships of extreme heat, famines, floods, plagues, political unrest, two world wars, and lengthy separations from her family, an amazing testimony of her perseverance and commitment. The monetary contributions she raised through personal correspondence and the enduring presence of the Mabel Jones Boys' School in Sitapur to this day are both evidence of her outstanding administrative abilities.

Mabel expanded the perimeters of the original "woman's work for woman" missiological practice into a more pronounced "world friendship" model, thus weakening the emphasis on separate spheres for men and women. Brouwer concurs:

In the period between the two wars, the phrase “woman’s work for woman” increasingly fell into disuse as a way of representing women’s work in overseas missions. Departing from the separate spheres approach of an earlier generation, some women in the mainstream Protestant missionary enterprise entered work worlds where their colleagues and clients were mainly men.¹⁶

These were the years that Mabel’s relationships with the merchants of Sitapur were taking root, the time when she began sitting on civic boards with men and interacting with British officials and Indian rajas. Thus, we see Mabel as a pioneer in the professionalization of women’s roles in mission. She updated mission practice on the campus of the boys’ school and then took it off campus and into the marketplace, the municipal building, the social affairs of the community leaders, and the educational system of India. She was open to new challenges and not afraid to mix with people of a different gender, class, race, or religion. In doing so, she provided us with a missiology of freedom—freedom to be who God created us to be, freedom to follow his Spirit outside of the confines of what had been considered by society to be woman’s work.

An egalitarian walk of holiness

Mabel’s life story gives us an inspiring example of someone who lived out the theology of holiness of heart. Diane Leclerc expounds powerfully upon what the holiness walk entails for women in her book *Singleness of Heart*. Leclerc analyzes John Wesley’s theology of holiness to say that “women are as likely to struggle . . . with a tendency to ‘relational idolatry’ (placing responsibility to children and/or husband above both their responsibility to God and a proper sense of self).”¹⁷ She proceeds to assess that “[Phoebe] Palmer’s ‘altar theology’ enabled women to overturn ‘relational idolatry’ and move toward an authentic sense of self in relation to God.”¹⁸ This is the lifestyle exemplified by Mabel Lossing Jones.

Leclerc shares further on how holiness is manifested in women’s lives: “To be empowered through the sanctifying grace compelled women to enter the sphere of society and effect change. . . . [S]anctifying power meant empowerment to speak.”¹⁹ We certainly see that this was so in Mabel’s case. “Sacrifice could mean a ‘giving up,’ but also ‘a willingness to’ . . . sacrifice meant being *courageous* in the secular sphere. . . .”²⁰ In light of this perspective of holiness, we see that Mabel was fulfilling her calling, not as a personal *right*, but as a *responsibility* to God. Henri Nouwen may well have had a woman missionary such as Mabel Lossing Jones in mind when he penned, “To live in the presence of God, however, is to live with purity of heart, with simple mindedness, and with total acceptance of his will. That, indeed, demands a choice, a decision, and great courage. It is a sign of true holiness.”²¹

An egalitarian marriage

The Joneses had an informal but firm premarital understanding that her call to mission would remain as vital as his.²² Mabel had

been commissioned and serving in India for seven years before marrying E. Stanley Jones. The authority in the Jones home was Christ—not the male, not the female, and not the child. They did not focus on individual pleasures, although there were many along their journey, especially their vacation times together in the Himalayas. Each focused on Christ and on nurturing his children as he brought them across their paths. They were not an isolated entity as some families in our Western culture tend to be. They reached out to others in their devotion to Christ. Mabel made a home for thousands of Indian boys as well as cared for her own family. She superintended the mission at the Sitapur Boys’ School and held a strong voice in the issues of mission leadership with the Methodist bishops and mission board in spite of the prevailing gender-inhibiting mood of the day.

According to Laure Anne Cocks, author of *Constraints Encountered in Ministry Activity: Single and Married Women Missionaries*, husbands play key roles in the lives and ministries of their wives.²³ E. Stanley empowered Mabel in the early years of their marriage and mission, first by accepting her call to be as valid as his, and, second, by working tirelessly for several years getting the boys’ school physically up and running, thereby creating an environment that encouraged her development and achievements. She did the same for him by holding their mission on keel for several years in the mid-1900s during his total breakdown (physically, emotionally, and spiritually). Mabel then released him to follow his evangelistic calling, although it meant seeing very little of each other for months at a time and her taking full responsibility for raising their daughter.

The relationship between E. Stanley Jones and Mabel remains veiled because both were very private. In a letter to Dr. Sutherland at the Board of Missions, Mabel wrote, “Do please make the Board understand our marriage relation is a private one. . . .”²⁴ In a letter to friends after Mabel’s death, her daughter Eunice describes Mabel as a “very private person.”²⁵ Rumors that theirs was not a “good” marriage have come to me, personally, from a number of noteworthy Methodists. The criteria for such an evaluation vary from person to person, and one almost has to read between the lines, which could be as speculative as playing detective without all the clues. It is clear that Mabel and Stanley had quite an unusual relationship throughout their married life. They were separated for months or years at a time due to his speaking tours and his World War II years in the United States. According to Richard Bailey, journalist of the Washington area news service of the United Methodist Church, “The charge they did not have a good marriage, which persisted over the years, is unfounded. Their marriage was different only in a style which didn’t fit traditional patterns.”²⁶

Eunice remembers her mother saying, “She would rather have E. Stanley Jones for two weeks a year than any other man she knew fifty-two weeks!”²⁷ James Mathews believes, “Theirs was a Kingdom marriage. It did not mean that they sat across the table at breakfast every day for sixty years. But, they both lived for higher ends.”²⁸ E. Stanley himself affirmed, “We have both been doing what we were called to do. Of course there was a price to

be paid by both of us to make my evangelistic travels possible. . . . This was costly to my family and to me.”²⁹

Conclusion

Mabel Lossing Jones was an outstanding woman who warrants the attention of the entire mission-minded community, male and female alike. Her holiness lifestyle challenges us to a whole-hearted Christian walk. Her egalitarian example informs us of a powerful, practical, and personal perspective on missiology. Her life story provides us with an understanding of a woman missionary who related graciously and powerfully in the social and professional arenas, successfully and sacrificially administrated a boys' school for more than forty years, gave herself tirelessly to community projects, and was the devoted stabilizing influence in her family. Why her story has not been well known until now is a troublesome question, but it is now a great joy to tell of the example set by this remarkable woman.

Notes

1. Acts 1:4.
2. James Mathews, “A Heart of Wisdom,” *New World Outlook* 39 (Nov. 1978): 34–35.
3. Mabel Jones, letter to Mrs. Hemsley, Oct. 1953.
4. *UIU Bulletin 1900-1906*, 11.
5. Kay Rader, remarks to author, 7 Dec. 2004.
6. Eunice Mathews, telephone interview with author, 1 Sept. 2003.
7. Eunice Mathews, Council of Bishops Wives Organization Speech, Pittsburgh, Pa., 1981, 14.
8. James Mathews, “A Heart of Wisdom,” 35.
9. James Mathews, interview with author, 2003.
10. Eunice Mathews, speech, 7.
11. Eunice Mathews, speech, 10–11.
12. Eunice Mathews, telephone interview with author, 1 Sept. 2003.
13. E. Stanley Jones, *Christ of the Indian Road* (Lucknow, India: Lucknow Publishing House, 1925), 120.
14. Mabel Jones, newsletter, 6 Nov. 1933.
15. James Mathews, interview with author, 1 Sept. 2003.
16. Ruth Compton Brouwer, *Modern Women Modernizing Men* (Vancouver, B.C.: UBC Press, 2002), 3.
17. Diane Leclerc, *Singleness of Heart: Gender, Sin and Holiness in Historical Perspective*, foreword Randy L. Maddox (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2001), xii.
18. Leclerc, foreword Maddox.
19. Leclerc, 124.
20. Leclerc, 126.
21. Henri Nouwen, *Show Me the Way* (New York, N.Y.: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1997), 76–77.
22. This information was found in the context of notes written during a student's interview of Miss Heafer (former colleague of Mabel's at the Girls' School in Jabulpore, India), c. 1930.
23. Laure Ann Cocks, “Constraints Encountered in Ministry Activity: Single and Married Women Missionaries” Ph.D. diss. (Deerfield, Ill.: Trinity Press, 1997), iii.
24. Mabel Jones, letter to Dr. Sutherland, 13 Feb. 1947.
25. Eunice Mathews, letter to friends, 27 June 1978.
26. Richard Bailey, “The World Famed Dr. Jones Marks 100th Birthday,” *Gaithersburg News*, 1978.
27. James Logan, *Theology and Evangelism in the Wesleyan Heritage* (Atlanta, Ga.: Kingswood Books, 1994), 196.
28. Logan, 202.
29. Stanley Jones, *A Song of Ascent* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1968), 82–83.

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Eli Stanley Jones (1884–1973) was an American 20th-century Methodist Christian missionary and theologian. He is remembered chiefly for his interreligious lectures to the educated classes in India, thousands of which were held across the Indian subcontinent during the first decades of the 20th century. According to his and other contemporary reports, his friendship for the cause of Indian self-determination allowed him to become a friend of leaders of the up-and-coming Indian National Congress party. E. Stanley Jones had a Wife: The Life and Mission of Mabel Lossing Jones. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2007. Herbst, Matthew T. "Regime Change, Occupation, and Aggressive Christianity: The Detroit Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church and the U.S. Occupation of the Philippines (1898-1903)." Methodist Church in Papua New Guinea. Papua New Guinea: University of Papua New Guinea, Library, 1975. Mavor, John E. Challenge in the North (three studies on Melanesia): The Work of the Methodist Church in New Guinea, Papua, the Solomon Islands and the Papua-New Guinea Highlands. Brisbane: Methodist Federal Board of Education, 1963. Methodist Philatelic Society. E. Stanley Jones' book "Growing Spiritually" has just been reprinted!! It has been called "a wise common-sense guide for ordinary people seeking an extraordinary commitment to Christ." E. Stanley Jones shared a link. 6 September. christianashram.networkforgood.com. Offering Jesus to more people in more places. IN ADDITION to the life transforming experiences that take place in every local Christian Ashram in the United States and Canada, God is opening the doors for college students to participate in Chris E. Stanley Jones. 5 September. Check out the new podcast from United Christian Ashrams. Matt Henson is interviewing Bob Tuttle recently published "In Our Time: the Life and Ministry of E. Stanley Jones. buzzsprout.com.