

Article

Reclaiming Voices: We Sent Women First

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Abstract: “We sent women first” could well describe Australian Baptist mission history. Australian Baptist State associations were formed in the crucible of 19th-century history, shaped by divisive issues of their British Baptist heritage and the colonial influences as each pursued an independent identity. Mission work in Bengal, India, inspired by William Carey, the BMS and BZA traditions, was the common factor, and in the six independent Australian Baptist Missionary Societies, women were sent first, starting with two from South Australia in 1882. The first man (also from South Australia) joined eleven of these women for their first ‘Convention’ in 1887.

Keywords: gender roles; zenana; ‘Paradise of Dissent’; South Australia; Bengal; Five Barley Loaves; cheaper option; migrants and currency lasses; cultural captivity

1. Introduction

We sent women first could well describe Australian Baptist mission history (Cupit et al. 2014). Australian Baptists were formed in the crucible of Nineteenth-Century migration history, shaped by divisive issues of their British Baptist heritage and the complex colonial influences as each Australasian colony pursued an independent identity (Manley 2006). Women were more available in Baptist churches, for at the time, there was a lack of trained ministers for the churches that had formed. Women themselves were receiving more education, and there was an increased development of factory-produced food, which freed daughters from domestic duties and provided alternative options for employment.

Mission work in Bengal initiated by William Carey, the Baptist Missionary Society (BMS), with its iconic Serampore Trio of Carey, Ward and Marshman and the Baptist Zenana Mission (BZM),¹ were the common influences for the six colonial Australasian (Australian and New Zealand) Baptist Mission Societies. Women missionaries were sent first, starting with two, Marie Gilbert and Ellen Arnold, from South Australia (SA) in 1882. Then, in 1885, there were the ‘Five Barley Loaves’ (Ellen Arnold, Alice Pappin (SA), Ruth Wilkin and Marian Fuller (Victoria) and Martha Plested (Queensland)). The following year, they were joined by Rosalie Macgeorge (New Zealand). The first man, Arthur Summers, also from SA, travelled out to India with Annie Newcombe and Jessie Clelland (Victoria), Faye Denness and Agnes Pearce (SA) to join the first ‘Convention’ in 1887 on their arrival. Two years later, in 1889, nine of them, representing five different societies, negotiated their independence from the BMS when they were visited by A. H. Baynes (BMS General Secretary) from Britain and George Kerry, their BMS advisor from Calcutta. The BMS agreed to redeploy their missionary couples to other work. Small was beautiful, and it was to be a bite-sized area they could attempt.

In 1898, which was 16 years later and a time when it seemed men would be able to have the majority vote at that annual Convention, Ellen Arnold wrote a short review for readers in Australia of the changes that came with the presence of so many men.² Based on this article and other of her writings, the voice I want to reclaim is that of Arnold (1856–1931), a migrant from Birmingham, England, to Adelaide, SA, via New Zealand and Melbourne. Also, this article will refer to the perspectives of her women colleagues.

She was a pioneer, along with Marie Gilbert, of this group of eleven Baptist women missionaries from Australia and New Zealand who reached Bengal, India, in 1882 before



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any Baptist men from Australia were available to be sent to India. She was sent under the ministry of Rev. Silas Mead from Flinders Street Baptist Church.

Although Arnold (1883) was repatriated for ill health in 1883, after less than two years in India³, she was eventually to serve there for 49 years. In 1897, when men missionaries had eventually achieved a majority at the worker's Conference, she wrote a defence advocating a legitimate but different way single women worked.⁴

2. Australasia in the 1800s

Despite Australasia⁵ having some of the oldest human communities on the globe with their deep attachment to country and distinctive spiritual perception, it was not until British and other European explorers were sailing into unknown southern territories of Oceania that there was any chance of Australia or New Zealand being a “new home of British Baptists” (Thompson 1982, p. 2).

The American War of Independence in the 1770s–1780s pushed Britain to look for other recipient destinations for their convicts. The First Fleet was sent to Sydney in 1788 with 850 convicts and their guards. Some free settlers later were able to buy their passages. Tasmania was settled in 1830. The last convicts arrived in New South Wales (NSW) in 1852 and in Western Australia in 1868. By then, the colony of South Australia, settled in 1836, was struggling economically to survive.

Plans for the settlement of South Australia were different. There were to be no convicts, only free migrants:

In 1834, the South Australian Colonisation Act was passed in the United Kingdom, leading to the British colonisation of land that is now the state of South Australia. The 1834 Act empowered the King to establish South Australia as a British Province, initially as a commercial and administrative partnership between the British government and the SA Colonisation Commission. The province was to be designed for migrants, not convicts and was to be funded by the sale of land to the wealthy and to investors. This money in turn would partially fund the transport of labourers and other workers to the colony. The South Australia Act of 1842 repealed the earlier Act and made South Australia an official British Crown Colony. The South Australian Company, formed in London in 1835, made a significant contribution to the foundation and settlement of South Australia. It was founded by George Fife Angas and other wealthy British merchants. Its immediate purpose was to encourage the purchase, in advance, of land in the planned colony.⁶

South Australia was proclaimed as a colony on 28 December 1836 at Glenelg by Governor Hindmarsh.

Douglas Pike, in his definitive research on the founding of South Australia, called his book *Paradise of Dissent, South Australia 1829–1857* (Pike 1967). A promised freedom of religion for Dissenters, or Non-Conformists, was attractive to many from Britain, including Baptists.

George Fife Angas (Hodder 1891) and David McLaren (Hughes 1937) were early members of the South Australian Company, and both were Baptists. Angas was very influential in early Dissenter developments in South Australia and in attracting colonists. He is most known for enabling German migration to South Australia. His promotion of the new colony to church communities was prolific. He was very involved in the anti-slavery discussions before SA was formed. Dissenters were attracted particularly by promises of unknown freedoms of worship not granted them in Britain (Pike 1967). This resulted in South Australia having one of the highest percentages of Dissenters or Non-Conformists in the British world, even though they did not reach a majority. Methodists, Congregationalists and Presbyterians were well represented. Baptists were mainly merchants and a source of young potential labour for the developing community (Hilliard 2024, p. 8). The city of

Adelaide is, even today, referred to as the ‘City of Churches’, much to the dissatisfaction of the present tourism advocates.

Angas’s vision was not just that South Australia be a place of civil and religious liberty but a headquarters for the diffusion of Christianity to the Southern Hemisphere. McLaren, as well as his work for the SA Company, pastored an early group of Baptists. Two of the earliest Baptists to the colony were William and Helen Harvey Finlayson; coming with a passion for reaching the Aboriginals but limited by language skills, they were invited by McLaren to work for the SA Company. One of their granddaughters, Ethel Ambrose, went to India as a missionary doctor with the Poona and India Village Mission (PIVM).

Those early Baptists who travelled to SA were described by later leaders in separatist terms. “They showed a most unhappy tendency to quarrel over their beliefs and practices and to separate . . . without really sufficient reason” (Hughes 1937, p. 25). Open or closed membership and open or closed communion were common, but their natural links with the Congregationalists were complicated, for they shared a common theology of churchmanship, with the responsibility of the whole local membership to discern the purposes of God, but they disagreed on believer’s baptism by immersion.

3. Immigrants and Currency Lasses

Early mission advocates were convinced that the experiences of migration were a bonus for prospective missionaries. They had experienced separation from loved ones, communities and churches. They had experienced months of uncomfortable sea travel. They were now living in much closer proximity to the great unreached mission fields of India, China and Japan.

The Arnolds, Alfred and Ellen Jane nee Seager, who migrated to South Australia in 1879, brought a family of eight children; Ellen, their eldest, was 20 at the time. Her father, a jeweller from Birmingham, came to Adelaide for the health of his wife. Ellen was an initial student of the first Teachers College in Adelaide in 1880.

Similarly, her colleague, Marie Jerome Gilbert, arrived in Melbourne with her mother and two sisters in 1864 on the *Champion of the Seas*. The passenger list records Carolyn Gilbert, matron; Marie Gilbert, seven years; Hannah, four and Louisa, one [month]. The family stayed in Victoria until Marie came to Teachers College in 1880 in Adelaide, accompanied by her mother and sister Louisa from Aberdeen Street Baptist Church, Geelong.

Of the first nine women who joined the work in Bengal, most were immigrants. Alice Pappin was the earliest exception in that she was born in SA (Schwarze 2024, p. 121) and so could be described as a “currency lass”, an affectionate term for the first generation of female colonialists born in Australia (currency lads was also used). Bertha Tuck was also SA-born. They all knew their family history of parents or even grandparents. The stories of shipwrecks and boring food supplied on board were part of their collective family memory, augmented by their travel to India.

4. South Australia and Silas Mead

Angas of the SA Company was also concerned for the pastoral care of churches, and in 1861, he and a group of SA Baptists arranged for the recruitment of a pastor for a Baptist Church to be established in the City Business District (as distinct from North Adelaide, which was more residential, and where there was already the North Adelaide Baptist Church). Silas Mead’s arrival in 1861 marked a new era for Baptist consolidation, co-operation and associational action in Adelaide. At the time, British Baptist interests still focussed on India, the jewel in the British crown, and the main object of their global support was the BMS work begun by William Carey.

Mead had trained theologically under Joseph Angus at Stepney College in London and alongside future Indian missionaries. But he was not content just to form an auxiliary for the London Society and send support to the BMS. The SA Baptists formed a denominational Association in 1863, and just a year later, on 10 November 1864, formed the South Australian Baptist Missionary Society (SABMS). At the time, there was no Australian

Baptist missionary society in other colonies nor attempts to unite Australian Baptists, no settled sphere for missionary work, and no workers accepted. But SABMS, and particularly Mead, after considering Samoa in the Pacific, arranged that BMS workers in India would enable the SABMS to take responsibility for work in the district of Faridpur (Furreedpore)⁷ in what was then called East Bengal.⁸ The SABMS work from 1864 was financing Indian workers who were supervised by the BMS missionaries from the nearby Barisal District or from Calcutta. Regular reports were received from their workers and published in the South Australian Baptist newsletter *Truth and Progress* (another of Mead's SA initiatives).

5. Victorian Baptist Developments

On the other hand, the traditions of Baptist missionary work had different roots in Victoria. BMS missionaries from India came to Australia, particularly Victoria, rather than going home to recuperate from ill health. James Smith (from Delhi) and James Chamberlain Page (from Barisal) both stirred up support for Bengal, India, and were catalysts for the particular societies formed in SA and Victoria in 1864–65. Page had reached an understanding that Victoria would concentrate on Mymensingh District while he would supervise preachers for the SABMS in Faridpur.

James Martin, the minister who came to Collins Street Church in 1869, was accompanied by his wife, Hannah. She had been a member of the BZM that had formed in London on 23 May 1866 by a group of women following the release of a pamphlet by Mrs. C.B. Lewis, "The Plea of Zenanas". Hannah Martin also had contacts with the BMS missionary wives who were supervising zenana work among Indian women. She had been part of the support in Britain, had brought out a hundred copies of the Lewis's pamphlet to Melbourne, and got in touch with the workers in Calcutta. She started an auxiliary of the BZM in Victorian churches to help finance workers. Marie Gilbert actually approached her with an offer of her service for the BZM, and Hannah Martin approached them, recommending her wholeheartedly. The BZM accepted Gilbert's offer, providing the financial support came from Australia, but Gilbert's home church, Aberdeen Street, Geelong, was involved in a building programme. Gilbert's application lapsed, and she moved to Adelaide and that first Teachers College.

6. Visit of Panchanon Biswas—The "Real Live Indian" Christian

The first convert resulting from the South Australian work in Faridpur, Panchanon Biswas had studied in Serampore and then returned to work in Faridpur for the SABMS. He met Mead, who visited Faridpur following his first wife's death in 1874. Later, Mead invited Panchanon Babu to visit Adelaide in the summer months of 1881. He was heard by Ellen Arnold at Flinders Street Church. Arnold wrote later, "I heard him say that they wanted a school in Furreedpore so immediately the thought came 'There's hope for me yet' and perhaps I could be self-supporting and so no burden to the society, [I] told God about it and left it".⁹ She said nothing to Mead until she discovered that Marie Gilbert had already offered to go and women in the Church were telling Arnold she should accompany Gilbert. Biswas went on to encourage mission interest and support in the other States, encouraging the women particularly to be concerned for the women of India and to support such work.

7. The Pioneers—Marie Gilbert and Ellen Arnold

Both Gilbert and Arnold, young schoolteachers who had very limited teaching experience, were bought out of their financial bonds to the SA Education Department. The rules were that for the provision of their training, teachers had to agree to teach for three years or refund a pro-rata amount. It cost the SABMS GBP 48 for Gilbert and presumably the same for Arnold. They were given a few weeks of medical observation at Adelaide Hospital, organized by Dr Hone, one of the doctors from Flinders Street Baptist Church.

They were farewelled at Flinders Street Baptist Church (FSBC) on 26 October 1882. Both refused to sit on the church platform or speak and left Mead to read their written messages. Women speaking could not have been the issue; maybe it was youthful reticence

or expected modesty, for by this time, Mead had hosted meetings at FSBC with Emilie Baeyertz, a converted Jew, and also booked the larger Adelaide Town Hall for meetings, but that is another story (Gooden et al. 2023, pp. 94–96).

Gilbert and Arnold departed on 28 October from Glenelg, arriving in Ceylon (modern-day Sri Lanka) on 14 November 1882, then Calcutta on 5 December 1882. They were just in time to attend the Decennial Missionary Conference for India/Burma (Anonymous 1883). This was a conference of 475 mission representatives from 27 Societies to which women had been invited for the first time. They heard some of the most current thinking on zenana mission work. Ellen, in her hand-written diary, wrote “At 10 a.m. the ladies meeting—all lady missionaries, who gave first class addresses which were ‘to the point’. We gained much knowledge as to methods of work and were impressed with the desirability of missionaries obtaining medical knowledge”.¹⁰ Also, “. . . An additional ladies meeting in the evening. Rather flat, owing to some old men getting up & holding forth without saying anything . . .”.¹¹ It was significant that Punchanon Biswas met them again there and the three of them were registered at the Conference as representing SABMS.

Mead had arranged for them to live with Rev. George and Mrs. Marie Kerry and family in Calcutta, attend Bengali Language classes while living on the BMS compound and learn how to work in that context. Meanwhile, a house was being built under Punchanon Biswas’s supervision for them in Faridpur. Arnold and Gilbert moved to Faridpur in January 1884, where they were nurtured by Punchanon Babu, his wife and family and the other SABMS preacher, Kailash Chandra Mitra, who, after years of working alongside Arnold, wrote her Bengali biography. In Arnold’s first letter from Faridpur¹², she is full of excitement at the people they were meeting: students, people of the British community (who came for a noon service on their first Sunday), Bengali enquirers and questioners. She and Gilbert prayed as one or the other met and spoke to a wide range of individuals. Their basic consistent message was the need for specific, persistent prayer, for which Arnold was prepared to supply them with details in all letters she sent.

But all too soon, Arnold was sick, having to return to Australia an invalid, while Gilbert stayed in Faridpur, continuing with contacts, visiting homes and learning more Bengali. Ellen’s sister, Mary Arnold, on a visit that was to have been with her sister, stayed with Gilbert for company for a while. Mary later served in Kerak, Jordan, and there were numerous items for prayer for her included in *Our Bond*.

8. The Arnold Crusade

What a disappointment! But how providential! On the way to Australia, the ship took Arnold via Sydney, and she was able to contact Baptist women about zenana work. Eventually, in Adelaide, the medical advice was against her early return to India. But as soon as Ellen was well enough, Mead, her minister, seized the opportunity and wrote “Mr Mead’s Circular” and sent it out to every Baptist Church in the Australian and New Zealand colonies. His vision was that missionary societies in each of the colonies would take responsibility for an adjoining district in East Bengal, India. He addressed it to pastors, deacons, superintendents, Sunday school teachers and Baptist and Christian churches of Australia, New Zealand and Tasmania, which was an interesting view of the colonial history of the area.

Ellen, armed with maps, papers, curiosities, posters of Hindu gods and boundless enthusiasm, set off—Tasmania, New Zealand, New South Wales, Queensland, Victoria and Tasmania again. While she was in Queensland, the church leaders wrote:

First, let us say that Miss Arnold is worthy of the confidence of all our churches, and all should render her all the help in their power. Indeed, it is not Miss Arnold they are helping, for she is now doing our work, and setting our missionary society on its legs. To the South Australian friends we are under great obligations for their sparing and sending Miss Arnold to us; and the best things that would please them would be the knowledge that the Queensland Churches had made Miss Arnold’s visit a striking success in the raising of funds for our missionary

society, and above all in lifting us up into sympathy with Christ in His efforts to save men. From the programme of the visits arranged, . . . it will be seen that, so far as possible, all our Churches will be visited. Miss Arnold will in all probability leave here for Sydney on Tuesday, the 7th of July, and her final meeting will be held at Wharf-street Church on the Monday previous. The Committee of the Queensland Baptist Missionary Society ask that all the churches will do their best to make every meeting fruitful in results that may be seen in the glory of God, the quickening of believers, and the conversion of the heathen.¹³

This is an incredible claim of her exposure to the Queensland Baptist churches and can also be made for most Baptist churches in all the colonies, including New Zealand, in the period 1885. This real-life missionary was given a preaching and teaching role. Arnold was given a good hearing in nearly all Baptist churches, and through her, societies were formed. She met several women willing to go overseas. Her travels became known as ‘The Arnold Crusade’. For her visits, she had a mandate to raise funds, not for the SABMS but for their own Society. Any funds given her were to put a second storey on the Faridpur house so the Australasians could bypass living in Calcutta and perform their language study and cultural and ministry orientation away from the capital city. She raised enough money for that project and to cover all her deputation expenses.

Arnold was asked by the Victorian Baptist Missionary Society to interview the women who were offering to them. She was very happy with her contacts with Ruth Wilkin and Marion Fuller. In Queensland, Martha Plested, who had only arrived in the colony to join her sister within the year, being certain of the call of God, was ready at Arnold’s meeting to indicate she would join the group in Adelaide if Queensland would send her.

9. The Five Barley Loaves—Ellen Arnold, Ruth Wilkin, Marion Fuller, Martha Plested and Alice Pappin

By the time Arnold was permitted to return to India, there were four new recruits: Marion Fuller and Ruth Wilken for the Victorian work in Mymensingh, Martha Plested to commence work for Queensland Baptists and Alice Pappin, another South Australian, from North Adelaide Baptist Church. New South Wales had not been able to find someone suitable, nor had New Zealand, but they had both formed their own Missionary Societies.

The five women gathered in Adelaide, had their studio photos taken and were farewelled in a great service in Flinders Street Church. This time, they all spoke, for Arnold’s experience of speaking in so many churches around Australasia had confronted her reluctance. Mead addressed them and the 1000 in the audience. He was convinced of the role of women in the spread of the gospel:

God best knows how the Christian women of America, England, Scotland, Ireland, and Australasia ought to be doing at this hour a hundred times more than they are doing for the evangelization of their sister women in heathendom. They might do it. They ought to do it. They ought to do it at once. In Christ Jesus there is no fundamental difference of sex. Undoubtedly woman’s special mission is to women the wide world over. Seas, oceans, mountains, and political divisions should not constitute barriers to the devotion of women to women’s salvation in this day of the printing press, of the steamship, of the railway, and of telegraphs. Awake, awake Christian women of our Saxon race to the imperious needs of your sister women in heathen darkness, and go ye into all the world of womankind to preach the gospel to every wife, mother, daughter, sister.

Mead outlined the purpose of this special gathering in the FSBC in Adelaide as small beginnings to much bigger results. And so sparked the iconic image of Australian Baptist missionary work—the Five Barley Loaves. He went on:

To-night we are bidding farewell to five women going to the millions of women in what I shall designate the Australasian Missionary District of East Bengal. What

are these among so many? Possibly in some degree what the five loaves Christ blessed were to the hungry thousands around Him in Judea.

He then described how this could work out for the women in the local Baptist church congregations, even with the limitations of the early days of colonisation:

...but how many Australian Christian women are left behind? thousands upon thousands. You may be and ought to be Zenana Missionaries though you stay behind in our dear Australia. I do not bid you to take ship for India. Live on in this fair Australia—one of the brightest and happiest lands on the face of the globe to live in—live on here, I say, Christian women, but let your hearts' sympathies go to India.

Let these five sisters understand that five thousand go with them onboard the "S.S. Clyde" next Saturday afternoon—five thousand warm and earnest hearts. We can be with them in Furreedpore all through the next twelve months and any number of months afterwards in spirit if not in body. Hold yourselves responsible ye Australasian sisters for the evangelization of every woman and child in Furreedpore, Mymensing, Comillah, Pubna, and Sylhet.¹⁴ No one else will be likely to evangelize them unless you do. Let us consider ourselves and our fellow colonial workers as an army of brave assaulters of that stronghold of idolatry and uncleanness in those Indian districts.¹⁵

10. Why Women, and How Did They Work?

At this early stage (1885), there was an attempt to describe a justification for starting the work with women. Arnold was aware of the following discussion:

As men missionaries cannot carry the gospel to the women of India whom it is so important to reach; as women missionaries can visit the homes of the people, conduct schools for girls and superintend the native preachers' work amongst the men of the country; as it costs less to support a European woman than a man; and as the work in these colonies is as yet young and funds are scarce it is advisable for each colony to send out Zenana missionaries as speedily as possible, to accept the offer of housing and training them by South Australia, and to build a house for their occupation in their own district as soon as may be. The option of engaging and dismissing native teachers and preachers, with the assistance of the secretary of the London Baptist Missionary Society, resident in Calcutta, should be allowed to these ladies, and they should be requested to use their own judgement in organising the work. (Gooden 1998, pp. 126–46)

It was an initial plan, a method for beginning. Culturally there was work that the men could not do in India, but which needed to be done and done to the point of conversion. They did not accept the concept that winning the men would have a trickle-down effect on the women. But also, for struggling new missions, single women would be a more affordable option based on the assumption that zenana missionaries would remain single.

There is a delightful poem about Mission Miss Sahibs that Arnold introduced to the Australian Baptist supporters written by ALOE, A Lady of England, Charlotte Marie Tucker, a successful author, who in her 50s went to India as a self-supporting missionary. She did not ever return to England and died in 1893 (Gooden 2019, pp. 273–89). It describes the lives of single women missionaries and outlines their expected behaviour. It concludes with an important N.B.:

N.B. Let all Mission Miss Sahibs single remain. For if not, they step out of their proper domain, and can never be Mission Miss Sahibs again.

On the other hand, single men were expected to marry and would need financial support for a wife and children and, therefore, would become more and more costly. Payment was based on needed finance to live and work and allowances, not wages for services.

Yet this was more than the traditional BZM role where the BZM pattern was based on expected supervision by missionary wives as legitimization for the sending of unmarried women and widows. This initial plan did endorse an on-the-spot supervisory role of native preachers, and even the women were to be trusted in establishing work. They could hire and fire preachers with advice/agreement from Calcutta. This resonated with Arnold's thinking, for later in her life, she was seen by the Bengali Baptist Church as their missionary icon. She was their friend. Later, she saw her role with Bengali pastors as a confidant and advocate for them with her colleagues and the mission at home rather than as a boss.¹⁶ Later in her career, she was the one who strongly advocated for the East Bengal Baptist Union to have its own work and lived not on the mission compound at Pabna but as the only missionary with her Bible women in a simple house at a village of Ataikola. It is interesting that she is the one Australian missionary who the resulting Bangladesh Baptist Church Fellowship celebrates with Ellen Arnold Day on the anniversary of her death.

Today, such a policy may be interpreted as racial superiority, culturally insensitive, and colonialist. But for its time, it was the culturally captured view that single women as recipients of the Gospel were responsible for spreading that good news. They had a part in the overall mission and, in fact, could be the initial phase in developing work in areas that were so uninformed, unevangelized and unreached.

That memorandum also has a hint of federalism, which was not a reality at that stage for Baptists in the church life in the various states of Australia, nor was it politically so. Political federation was much discussed for years before Australia federated at the beginning of the Twentieth Century. And Arnold was a strong supporter of federation for the mission work. However, Baptist leaders were being encouraged to recognize co-operation as the way to see the commencement of 'work from the colonies' even as they were struggling to maintain their own growth.

That endorsed call of 1885 was, virtually, as follows: send your own women and accept South Australia's offer of initial housing and the guidance that can be given by their two women (who, after all, had only two years' experience!). Moreover, there was the help of SABMS's trusted 'missionary', Punchanon Biswas, who was their first convert and a theologically trained worker. It was a call to some measure of agreed methods, with each having bite-sized responsibilities that were in geographic proximity within East Bengal.

The final statement that the women "should be requested to use their own judgement in organising the work" is a recognition of experience and giftedness and that what had already happened with Arnold and Gilbert justified them also sending their own women who could also be trusted.

Therefore, the arguments can be summarized as follows:

- Women have a crucial role in missions, even if it may take them longer to fulfil.
- Their role is more than just a traditional role of teaching women: they are competent to work with native agents. They need to win women to Christ.
- Single women are cost-effective.
- Australasian Baptist resources are limited.
- The women are not on their own; they have the help of other experienced missionaries.
- They can use judgement in organising the mission—they are trusted to establish the work (Gooden 1998, pp. 126–46).

11. One Household to Several

So, the response came, and the Five Barley Loaves boarded the *Clyde* and got to know each other. They soaked in the experience/advice of the more experienced Arnold, whom they had all spoken to somewhere during her 'Crusade'. They enjoyed praying, chatting, and interacting with other passengers. They were on the lookout for opportunities to commend Christ to fellow travellers. They were rather disconcerted when they were unexpectedly disembarked in Ceylon for five days so that the *Clyde* could go and rescue passengers from a nearby wrecked *Indus* and so were delayed reaching Bombay. They then

faced 60 hours of train travel to Calcutta without receiving special instructions sent from Calcutta for their journey.¹⁷

Of course, Gilbert had come to Calcutta, excited to meet them. But she was the conveyer of unwelcome news. The additions to the house were not complete, and four of them would need to stay until January with the Kerrys in Calcutta while Arnold went with her to Faridpur. It was an interesting household as they learnt of their new setting.

Then, unexpectedly, Gilbert, who had been on her own, requested time off to do what she felt was some much-needed medical study. She believed that responding to women's medical needs was a means of contact even more fruitful than visiting and teaching. She was sent to study in Edinburgh, UK.

Eventually, upon return to India, Gilbert became independent of any society and spent her life in Calcutta. But she shared much of the work from time to time, filling in when there was sickness, coming to Conventions and following up with people, particularly students in Calcutta. She eventually died there on 27 June 1926 after almost 46 years of service with hardly any leave. Her voice also deserves recovery, but it is not as accessible, for she mainly disappears from Australian Baptist records.

The five women spent eighteen months in language study, living in one household at Faridpur, visiting the zenanas in the Hindu homes, seeking ways to engage but continually yearning to find their own town, their own work and their own women. Ruth Wilkin was asked to go to Calcutta to look after Mrs. Kerry's girls' school while she accompanied her husband on a deputation visit to Australia and New Zealand.

Eventually, the women separated to work in different towns, sometimes alone, usually in pairs. Fuller and Wilkin went to Mymensingh, where there was a BMS couple. Arnold went to Comilla with Plested for New South Wales, also to join a BMS couple. Both these couples were reassigned by BMS, and gradually, men joined the 'Band'. Plested went later on her own to Noakhali, and Denness went to Comilla. Pappin stayed in Faridpur.

Reports have it of those early Victorian staff (Fuller and Wilkin) as they contemplated the task of presenting Christ to the huge district of Mymensingh with its three million people (as it was then) and as they lost colleagues from ill-health or death that they were awed at the immensity of their task. Pleading with their Victorian committee to send out more workers, they offered to surrender most of their allowances, providing it secured them further colleagues. This was their constant plea—send more workers. The women also argued that they should not have to wait for the presence of men in order to open work in new towns. Another issue for them was housing. They wrote a joint letter to all their Missions, pointing out that houses for zenana women should be sufficiently distanced from any married couple so that Indians would not misconstrue their relationships.

12. More Staff—Rosalie Macgeorge and the Jubilee Five

More women came to join them. Rosalie Macgeorge was from Dunedin, New Zealand. She arrived in 1886, accompanied by Rev. and Mrs. Kerry, who had been on a visit to Australia and New Zealand. Macgeorge came with the expectation of finding a suitable location for New Zealand Baptist work (with the advice of the BMS advisers in Calcutta). She spent her initial time at Faridpur. Eventually, NZBMS settled on the towns of Brahmanbaria and Chandpur. Sadly, while traveling on her way home on leave in 1891, at the end of her five-year term, Macgeorge died in Sri Lanka and is buried in Kandy. She was the first death of the group. The next death followed in 1894, another New Zealander, Hopestill Pillow (who arrived in 1889), and then that of Marion Fuller of cholera at Mymensingh in 1897.

Another four women, Jessie Clelland and Annie Julia Prout (Victoria) as well as Agnes Pearce and Fanny Denness (SA), travelled to India with Arthur Summers in 1887, and they were known as the Jubilee Five. Summers, the first man, went to live with BMS missionaries for language learning and orientation. He eventually opened a second centre for SA at Pubna while the four women joined the group at Faridpur.

Denness, although from Flinders Street, Adelaide, was designated to work for New South Wales at Comilla, and Prout from Victoria was connected to the New Zealand work as the needed companion for Rosalie Macgeorge. She later married one of the Baptist ministers, H.H. Driver, in New Zealand, was the driving force for support of the NZBMS from Dunedin and started a training institute for women missionaries.

So, our eleven women are Marie Gilbert (SA), Ellen Arnold (SA), Marion Fuller (Victoria), Ruth Wilkin (Victoria), Martha Plested (Queensland), Alice Pappin (SA), Rosalie Macgeorge (NZ), Fay Denness (SA but for NSW), Jessie Clelland (Victoria), Agnes Pearce (SA) and Annie Newcombe (Victoria for NZ), and the first man was Arthur Summers, whose fiancée, Annie Hearne, was waiting in Adelaide for him to pass his language requirements. She was also from Flinders Street Church. When Summers and eight of the women met for Convention in Faridpur in 1889, they were visited by the BMS Home Secretary, C.H. Baynes and Rev. Kerry from Calcutta. Baynes wanted to come to an understanding of the relationship of the colonials with BMS. The decision was reached that BMS would withdraw their workers from the towns where the Australasians were working!

‘The Band’ was a common way of referring to the whole group, men and women. They met for Convention once a year, and they started to send a hand-written circular letter around the group with instructions for the next recipient. By the time, the letter got back to the writer, their previous pages were to be removed and new ones added. The first letter was one from Rosalie Macgeorge with news that a doctor was advising her to go home. The group corresponded about what they would name it and eventually decided on *Our Bond*. In 1889, this became a printed means of news for their supporters as well as themselves. It was printed at the BMS Press in Calcutta, and an editor was appointed at the annual Convention. Arnold was appointed as its first editor. This gave a field perspective, unedited by the committees at home. Those home committees published their own mission publicity.

13. Comings and Goings

Over the next decade, eight more women were recruited before the next man (Abia Neville) arrived. He was also from Flinders Street but was sent out by the Victorian Society. He referred to Summers and himself as ‘the two fish’. He was to marry Ruth Wilkin, after he finished language study. He was followed by Dr. Cecil Mead, who married Alice Pappin (Gooden et al. 2023, pp. 217–18). Both these women were older than their husbands.

That next decade saw the loss of a few of the women. Jessie Clelland returned home within a year, broken in health. Fay Denness also returned home sick and resigned when she could see no possibility of an early return so somebody else could be sent to Comilla. Marion Fuller died in Mymensingh and is buried in the mission compound there. Agnes Pearce married Kedall, a British civil servant at Cuttack, and moved to live in Mayurbanj, where important leprosy work was developed. By 1897, there were 13 zenana workers and 5 wives.

By then, the Societies had been able to have trained and sent out several men. The men were usually single as they came out to study the Bengali language for two years, then they could be joined by their fiancées and marry. In a couple of cases, as has already been stated, they married women who were already in India. By 1897, there were 16 men, with 3 of them arriving that year.

14. Arnold’s Response to Perceived Attitudes to the Zenana Work in 1897

At this time, Arnold went into print in a fascinating article titled “From a Zenana missionary’s point of view” (*Southern Baptist*, 13 January 1898, p. 16). She wrote:

Some evil-disposed brother used to call our meeting a hen convention, but he cannot do that now, for the men outnumber our Zenana missionaries this year.

The said brother is unnamed. The meeting she is referring to is the Convention of the Australian and New Zealand Baptist missionaries held annually late in the year for fellowship but not for business because they were members of separate, independent

missions. It was held then because it was the cool season. Mid-year, the missionaries in India usually holidayed in the Himalayas, away from the heat. November or December was the one time in the year they got together, a chance to welcome new colleagues who tried to time their arrival in the cool season so they could attend Convention and meet the whole 'band'. Convention was a time for corporate worship, singing English tunes from the latest hymn book they could obtain, chatting, sharing prayer points and reporting on the year. Praying took up sessions, as did biblical studies. Papers were researched and presented on relevant topics. The Convention was held at the various stations at the invitation of the local missionaries with hospitality in the hands of the local missionaries. One wonders just who she had in mind as the evil-disposed brother and quite what was the implication of 'hen'¹⁸ at that time.

In looking at the statistics, there were nine Australian men and three from New Zealand, and of these, nine had arrived since 1896, so they had not yet finished their language study. She went on:

Oh, what freedom in prayer we used to have! what free and sympathetic telling of our work during the year, what pillow fights in the bedrooms—yes, your missionaries worked all the better, and carried lighter hearts from their fun—it used to be like schoolgirls coming home for the holidays.

Now! Well, of course, we have decorous meetings, and try to teach the young men how to behave (some of them have behaved so badly as to carry off several of the old Zenana missionaries;¹⁹ but we did not tell them to do that and hope in future the committees will see young men properly disposed of before embarking).

Obviously, Arnold was sensitive to the suggestion that the women did not know how to conduct mission work. She went on:

The brethren say we are [now] more business-like—we certainly take longer to reach conclusions. Perhaps the brethren talk more slowly! Well, no doubt, dear friends at home feel more satisfied, and think things will go on better now we have so many men. Especially married men, which some folks seem to think are the cure for all ills in a mission.

But she writes:

Some folks say I hate men. Well, that's not true, for I am very glad to welcome them to the work and am very thankful the men of this country should have the gospel preached to them. But does this mean that the women, the mothers of the race, who train minds for all life, are not to have it?

There was a strong sense among zenana missionaries that the hand that rocked the cradle was a significant influence not only in her family circle but also in world events.²⁰ She adds:

Look at it, dear friends! Taking the last three or four years, two women workers have left the field for every man added—that means that, in all our stations except two, where Zenana work has not started, work which was carried on amongst women and children has lapsed, and those women who received the news gladly have been left to go back to Satan from lack of workers. In fact, there is FAR LESS work for the souls of women and children going on in our stations now than there was three years ago. This is absolutely the fact, and it ought not to be.

There were important facts that Arnold claimed needed to be understood in that Indian context so that all had the opportunity to hear the good news of Christ. Methods had to differ. Women's work was labour intensive. She wrote passionately at length:

Bear in mind, only women can reach women here; also remember, while a great many men can read, very few comparatively of the women can do so; so, we must speak the message to them personally. The men can be gathered in crowds

in the markets and other places; the women must be sought out in their own homes and gathered a few at a time. Our brethren can get Bengali preachers to help them; but women assistants cannot be had in these country places, so we alone must tell the gospel message to our sisters. Our brethren can go to one place and work, in the cool of the day, but we must walk from house to house, sometimes quite a distance, in the women's leisure time, viz., in the middle of the day, and we have not, as a rule, equal physical strength to start with, so we break down quicker. . . . It is quite usual for a brother to have three, six, or more Bengali assistants, while we have none.

Different people and different situations needed tailored methods. Contextualisation was everyone's responsibility, as was the importance of verbal proclamation. Her list included personal communication to the few, in scattered places, at quite limited times of the day. Women's lack of reading ability was also a concern. She also passionately regretted the lack of suitable Bible women to assist in rural areas. Although, in later years, some found some very faithful widows who were her companions. She did not accept a trickle-down methodology as adequate, where it was thought that if the husband was won, he would communicate the faith to his wife.

She concluded her tirade with the following appeal:

. . . , to let the two works go on at all equally, six Zenana missionaries to every one man should be sent out from Australia; and I respectfully ask committees to aim at this, Churches to work and pray for it, Christian Endeavour societies and Sunday-schools to train for it, sisters to set their hearts upon it, and companies of God's children to constantly remember it before the throne.

She then added an interesting comment that women could be used sometimes to reach men. It certainly was her experience. She wrote:

I need not remind you that, in visiting the homes of the people, especially in the villages, we often cannot avoid quiet talks with the men, and so influence them too.

We have also Bible classes for the schoolboys, whom some of our brethren don't mind letting us tackle to save them the trouble (Bengali school boys are 'awfully naughty' you know).

Men usually were hovering as the women listened to their visitors. She certainly spent hours with young students and requested prayer for particular ones. Mozir's name was often mentioned; he was a Muslim schoolboy who she nurtured in his faith. As her ministry developed, she also realized the potential of the influence of older women in that age-affirming culture.

She finished her submission with a statement and a question, and it would seem to be a question that is receiving new currency in current research into the contribution of women to church history:

So candidly, looking at it all round, it seems to me the Zenana Mission is most important. Don't you agree with me? E. ARNOLD.

15. Arnold's Later Life

Federation of just the Australian missions was achieved in 1913, leaving the East Bengal Baptist Union to relate to two missions, one Australian and the other New Zealand. With typical white colonial Saxon mentality, that federated Australian Baptist Missionary Society²¹ celebrated 'their' Jubilee in 1932, 50 years from the sending out of Arnold and Gilbert in 1882, overlooking the years of foundations laid by Bengali preachers and sellers of Scripture. At that time, Arnold had just died in India. Our Bond records this report of Ellen's words:

It was on July 9th of last year that the call home came to Miss Arnold. Just a few more months and she would have seen the Jubilee. Indeed, she was to have

written, something for this special number, but she felt too weak to make ‘the effort, and contented herself with passing on this message, ‘tell them to preach’. That was her one word for all who came near her on those last days. **Preach! Preach!**

It seems fitting to couple with this message her last spoken words on Earth—words breathed faintly, yet clearly, **He will give victory!**

Arnold had weathered 49 years of service, much of it without the companionship of missionary colleagues. She had moved from one locality to another, Faridpur to Comilla to Pabna and finally ‘expelled’ to the village of Ataikola. She was not an enthusiastic committee attender, but she loved the fellowship of that annual Conference. She certainly could not be persuaded that she should retire to be with extended family in Australia in 1930. Against Mission expectations, she got on a ship in Perth and told the Mission she was on her way to live on Bengali Church property (not on the Mission compound) and to lay her bones down in Bengal. It would be cheaper than a funeral in Australia!

She went back to live in Ataikola village, refusing to return to the Pubna Mission compound when dying, even though her old friends, Drs. Charles and Laura Hope, were working there at the time. (Laura Hope, nee Fowler, was the first woman medical graduate of the University of Adelaide. She and Charles spent several periods working in the same towns as the SABMS to give a medical expression to the message. Today, we might term them tentmakers).

The final message of Arnold’s we must ponder is from a true copy of her Last Will and Testament signed on 5 March 1930 to be executed by the Secretary of the Mission and related to the Ataikola land.

It is my desire that girl’s school and dispensary be carried on there under Mission or Union supervision and that an old workers’ home be provided for Heronmay Das, her sister Shoronmoy Baul, Mono-mohini Coondoo and such like mission workers when no longer able for active service.

16. A Contribution That Has Lasted

In February 2024, at recent celebrations of the 125th Anniversary of the forming of the Pabna Baptist Church as part of the programme, the leaders of the Bangladesh Baptist Church Fellowship²² went 18 kilometres to Ataikola, where Arnold’s grave is alongside the highway. On the headstone, written in Bengali, is “**Jesus said, I am the way, the truth and the life. Ellen Arnold walked this way, taught this truth, lived this life**”. When Mozir, the Muslim background believer who had been led to Christ as a teenager by Arnold in 1905, heard the news of her death in 1931, he wrote a moving tribute to the ABM and described her as his “mother in the Lord”. I believe hers (and that of her women colleagues) is a voice not just worth reclaiming but also a life worth modelling.

17. Message and Its Significance

Church history inspires us to recognize God at work. World events, as they occur, open new possibilities and opportunities for followers of Jesus to recognize God’s universal plans for people as they are able to be fulfilled in new ways. The history of the Church is made up of so many strands that invite our recovery of forgotten or overlooked voices. God’s coincidences are important parts of the story. He works through people and history. Arnold was a strong advocate that women needed to hear the message of Christ’s redeeming love themselves, and if the means of doing that took longer, that was part of the responsibility of women on his mission. Also, Christian women were called to share Christ, not leave it to men.

Hers was not a lone voice. It was shared by most, if not all, her female colleagues. The situation in the Nineteenth Century in the context of India, with its social segregation of women away from any significant influence of unrelated men (including foreigners), created the situation where Arnold’s plea for both a longer period and for more women for the task was a significant contribution of the history of Baptists from Australasia.

But more importantly, the message of the particular role and responsibility of women following Christ needs to be reassessed and reaffirmed in our changing world. There are interesting new questions being asked of both past and present contributions in order that we gain the wisdom necessary to address our unrecognised cultural captivity in the rapidly changing world.

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Notes

- ¹ A zenana was the women's secluded part of the home.
- ² *Southern Baptist*, 13 January 1898, p. 16.
- ³ *Truth and Progress*, 1 November 1884, p. 124.
- ⁴ See notes 2 above.
- ⁵ Australasia is a descriptive term for the geographic region of Australia and New Zealand and some nearby islands.
- ⁶ <https://guides.slsa.sa.gov.au/southaustralianhistory>, accessed on 1 January 2024.
- ⁷ Various Anglicized spellings are found in mission literature of the period.
- ⁸ It became part of East Pakistan when India was partitioned by the British at Independence. Since 1971 it has been part of Bangladesh.
- ⁹ *Truth and Progress*, 1 December 1882, p. 145.
- ¹⁰ Ellen Arnold Diary, 1 January 1883.
- ¹¹ Ellen Arnold Diary, 2 January 1883.
- ¹² *Truth and Progress*, 1 April 1884, Supplement.
- ¹³ *Truth & Progress*, 1 November 1885, p. 135.
- ¹⁴ Variant spellings.
- ¹⁵ *Our Bond*, June 1890.
- ¹⁶ It is interesting that she is the one Australian missionary who the resulting Bangladesh Baptist Church Fellowship celebrate with Ellen Arnold Day, on the anniversary of her death.
- ¹⁷ *Truth & Progress*, January 1886, p. 9.
- ¹⁸ Australian use of the English language can be quite different from other English speakers and the Collins Dictionary gives the informal meaning for hen as a woman, but with different nuances for British English as gossip, foolish, and for American, older, busybody and gossip, whereas my Macquarie Dictionary merely suggests, the female of any bird.
- ¹⁹ As mentioned, two of the Five Barley Loaves were to marry later arrivals, Ruth Wilkin married Abia Neville, and Alice Pappin married Dr Cecil Mead, (Silas Mead's son). Both couples had to wait marriage until the men completed their two year's study and passed the exams!
- ²⁰ William R. Wallace's poem, *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle Rules the World* (1865) had been quoted at that Decennial Conference in 1882.
- ²¹ Federation for the mission was 1913, leaving the East Bengal Baptist Union to relate to two missions, the ABMS and the NZBMS.
- ²² The current name for the Church as it has lived through the changes of country and name.

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