

CHAPTER X

THE WORKERS

THE growth of a state, free and mighty, as are these states of the Northwest, is a grand event. It stands forth as the result, not of one cause, but of a thousand. Prominent among them, to say the least, is the gospel of Jesus Christ, the message of God to man by his Son. It is the preaching of this gospel, with the influences and institutions it includes, that, entering into the individual, domestic, social and civil life, gives character and prosperity to the state. To prove a proposition like this is no part of the present object; nor, with the history of our country before us, is it needful. It is to the preachers, teachers and upholders of the gospel in Iowa, we are bold to affirm, that she is in no small degree indebted for what she is.

Somewhat prominent among these are the Congregational ministers and churches of the state. With here and there an exception, these churches have all felt the fostering care of the American Home Missionary Society,—a society which is more than its president, its executive committee and its secretaries. Be it ours, then, in this chapter, to set forth the workers here; not the home missionaries only, but

their helpers also—all who have given or prayed in aid of this work, or sympathized with them in it. If home missions can show a record of honor in Iowa, let the honor be shared by all who should participate in it, and let the joys of it be widespread and mutual.

The grand central figure, however, around which the picture must be drawn, is the home missionary himself. Look at him as he is, or rather as he was, twenty-five years ago. We have a young man without family, and, with possibly here and there an exception, without friends, in the new territory to which he has come. His property inventories a few books, the clothes he wears, his trusty horse and a debt at the seminary. On a beautiful morning, as beautiful as the light, which is glorious, and the air, which is bracing, can make it, he is riding out from his home over the prairies into the surrounding settlements. He is in the ardor of youth, yet all things just now seem neither very bright, beautiful nor hopeful. The prairies, at first so fascinating in their novelty, by familiarity have grown tame and unattractive. They are now actually dreary, with their verdure stiffened by the frosts of autumn or burned to blackness by autumnal fires. The poetry of Western life and home-missionary labor is fast changing to fact. The fires of a new experience are passing over him. What wonder now if his ride be somewhat lonely, and his thoughts flow in a serious, almost saddened, mood, as he queries with himself,—

"What do I here? I came here to preach, but there are no meeting-houses and no churches. But few people care about my coming, going or staying. Among them all, who is there to lean upon? Nothing is organized. The materials are heterogeneous and discordant. There are no counselors near, no precedents, no established customs. With some denominations there are set rules and directions; the way is marked out: this is of some advantage, at least. Some denominations, too, are popular; mine is not; is, indeed, but little known, and many are prejudiced against it. I am to work here alone. In case of sickness or general failure of health, what then? Foreign missionaries are provided for in this respect, but home missionaries are not. Who is so little supported from without as a home missionary? Who is put so much upon his self-reliance? And on whom does the whole work in which he is so engaged hang? And now, an inexperienced youth, what do I here? What is my life-work to be?"

Oh, from the depths of how many hearts have these questions come up here in Iowa, and in all the newer missionary fields of the West! How often, having left home and friends, church-steeple and the sound of church-going bells, behind him, and gone towards the setting sun till he found himself single-handed and alone on the very frontiers of civilization, has the home missionary in perplexity asked, "What do I here?" And how often has the question found an

answer in some moment of loneliness and sadness, when, in the absence of all human stays and sympathies, the soul has been thrown upon God, and, for the time, the whole being, the whole world even, has become as the Holy of holies, filled with the divine presence!

Then it is seen that there is work enough anywhere; and there are faith and courage to do it. It is thus that to the lonely missionary rider there springs up a light, and visions brighter than the brightness of the morning. God never seemed in his fulness to fill all things more than now in the surrounding solitudes. In a few years he sees that the virgin soil around him, with as yet no trace upon it save here and there a bridle-path, is to take on the fruits of husbandry and toil; homes are soon to cover it; the silent forest is to be peopled, and the rivers' banks are to be thronged with artisans. For the people's need, for the glory of God, and that the land may be Christ's, he sees that spiritual seed must here be sown and spiritual harvests reaped. "Here," he exclaims, "is my work! With God for my counselor, and taking the customs, precedents and rules of his Word for my guide, here will I live and labor, and here will I die."

Yes, noble Iowa, many are the germs of life labor that thus have been set within thee! Out of them, many are the years of patient toil and work that have been given thee by those who brought salvation on

their tongues, whose feet trod the rude dwellings of thy pioneers, who, in the ruder schoolhouses, first gathered thy children together to teach them the ways of the Lord, and whose very lives have flowed out into the industry, the thrift, the virtue and the integrity of thy people. When as a young man thou rejoicest in thy strength, forget not by what powers thy sinews have been knit, from whom, in a measure, at least, the currents of thy life have been fed.

Iowa owes a debt even to the humble home missionary; but not to him alone, for with him, in him and through him, she has felt the power of thousands besides. That missionary entered upon his work with a commission,—a businesslike document, sending him out, perhaps, to find a field, or a place in which to make one; drawing out, somewhat in detail, the nature of the duties enjoined, with the requisition of quarterly reports to be made, and the promise of pecuniary aid in a certain sum stipulated: all duly signed by accredited agents,—the secretaries of the Home Missionary Society. Accordingly, laboring through the months of the first quarter, hunting up the lost sheep of the house of Israel, sowing seed as he may beside all waters, with somewhat of trembling at the little accomplished, he makes his first report, and labors on.

In due time, by the tri-weekly or bi-weekly mail, there comes to him a letter with the Society's imprint,—the first from New York. The twenty-five cents of

postage are paid, and the seal broken. There before him is his first missionary draft,—good, in the old times, as so much gold. It seems to him as almost sacred; for whence comes it? Of the West he has heard from his youth. He knows how the old folks at home, the fathers and the mothers, the brothers and the sisters, too, are praying and giving for the West; and now he is here, an almoner of their bounties. Through him is the answer of their prayers to find a channel; a new tie is felt between him and them.

These are allies in the work, recognized now as never before. He must be faithful at his post, to the duties of which he commits himself with a new consecration. This is not all. That first letter is no mere off-hand business note, with the simple authority to draw so much money. There is appended a message of cheer, of warm Christian greeting and encouragement. That message by the secretary's own pen is as the hand-grasp of a friend. By it, henceforth, the youthful laborer feels that there are loving human sympathies with him, as he stands in this holy brotherhood of the mission work. He, as a home missionary, the secretaries, the patrons of the Society, those who give and pray,—all are as one, and in one work.

Yes, ye donors,—ye men of wealth who have given your thousands, ye widows in Israel who have brought your two mites, all ye who have given or prayed,—in all the fruits of home missions at the West, you are sharers.

And you who with noble hearts have stood between the givers and the workers,—allow us who once were young, and now look back upon our quarter century of labors, to give expression to the debt of gratitude we owe to you, and especially to the senior among you, then in the prime of his life, and still faithful at his post. . Could his brief messages of cheer in missionary correspondence, scattered all over Iowa in her earlier days, be gathered together, what a volume they would make! Could it but be seen what courage and energy they inspired, how rich a reward would there be in it for him!

We do not wonder that our wives have said, in passing through the commercial metropolis, that “they would rather see Dr. Badger’s face than anything else in New York.” Nor will we forget his noble colleague of earlier days, now gone to his reward. Go on, then, brethren at the Home Missionary Rooms, in giving words of cheer. You little know what power there is in them sometimes in the hearts of those at the outposts of home missionary toil.

Pass on a few years in the young missionary’s career, and look again. Like others, he finds it not good to be alone. He takes a wife, begins a home. Children are in the household. The actual necessities of life draw hard upon a scanty income. Sometimes the burdens of sickness or misfortune are added. In spite of clerical financiering,—and there is no better in the world,—things are going hard,

But something is rolled up to the door. It is a barrel or box; nothing more, nothing less. Few things just now could be more; for it is a “missionary box.” Roll it in, and take off the cover. Out comes a dress or a cloak; here a vest, and there a coat; bundles of nice, warm flannel; little dresses, little stockings and tiny shoes, and toys even, for the youngest of the household; an old hat and old bonnets sometimes,—strange that such things should be sent!

A real relief is that box; for almost everything is in it,—many comforts, and often some luxuries and adornments, that make the prairie home brighter and more cheerful for months. Winter may come now. The lean, lank wallet may swell out a little; for less frequent now will be the drafts upon it. Real gala scenes sometimes attend the opening of these boxes, when the quiet study takes on the air of a dry-goods room or a clothing-store, when each is seeking to make out a suit for himself, and try it on.

Willie, with the cap adjusted and jacket on, is tugging at the shoes, and Kate at the stockings, while the mother is busy with the shawl, gloves, etc.

Of course, everything in the box does not fit at first, though afterwards generally made to do so; and somewhat grotesque are the figures arrayed in each other’s presence, to the merriment of all.

But hush! The articles are all taken off, folded up, and laid aside; the little ones are made to understand that they are gifts from kind friends far away;

and then there is a kneeling down around that box, God is thanked, and blessings invoked on the donors. Nor is a new consecration to the mission work forgotten.

Yes, ye far-off mothers, sisters, ye, too, are workers here. By the busy stitches that sewed these garments together, not only were your hearts knit more closely to the missionary cause, but the hearts of the missionaries were bound to it more closely as well. By these, in part, have the East and the West been drawn together in the fellowship of workers in a common Christian cause. They have also furnished a few threads, at least, in that web of national sympathy by which the East and the West and the North and the South are indissolubly one.

At every step of our young home missionary in his progressive work, he finds coworkers in it. He goes into his little Sabbath-schools, presenting books and pictures to a group of children with bright eyes and happy faces. They are the gift of Eastern friends. As the little flock of his gathering are at the communion table, he sees the pitcher and tumbler giving place to a communion set. This comes, perhaps, from his own old home church. In due time, another point is gained; and a happy day is it when a house of worship is secured,—a sanctuary of God, a home for the church. Here, too, help has come from abroad. How large the circle, how numerous the company, engaged in this missionary work!

But we must not forget the missionary's helpers in the field. We refer now not to his brethren in the ministry merely, to whom he is daily growing more and more attached by the sympathies of a common cause and service, but to the faithful few he finds among his own little flock, and the choice spirits, also, in the flocks of his brethren. Rare men and women there were and are in these missionary churches. What good days those were of old, when the brethren all knew each other, and when the churches knew each other too, somewhat; when we could travel over all the fields, and find a welcome everywhere from home to home! With such coworkers has our home missionary labored on from youth to age. Laborers have increased; churches have multiplied, and in them coworkers not a few. Again we say, in all that has been accomplished, "honor to whom honor;" and, with thanks to God for all, let all rejoice.