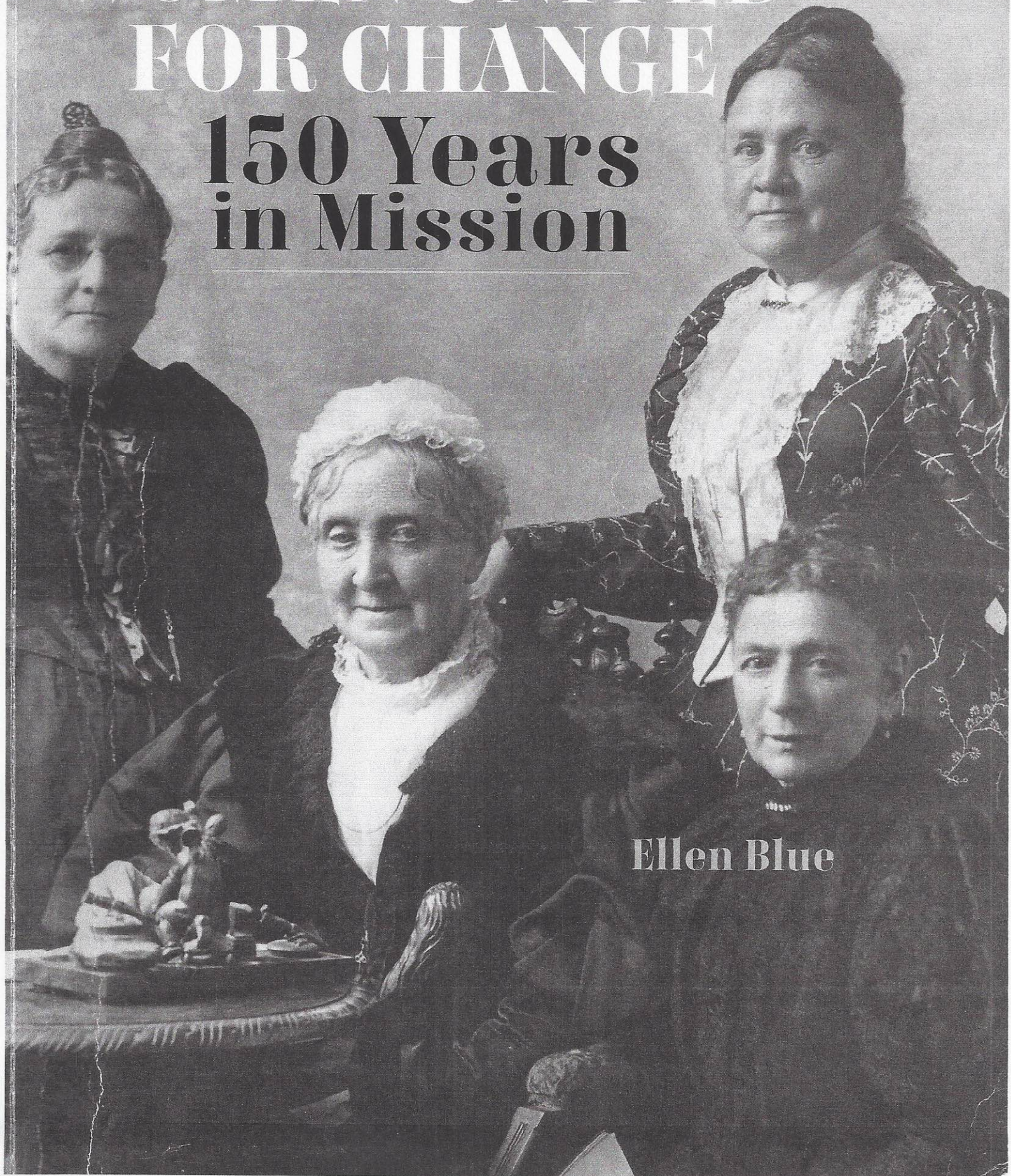


# WOMEN UNITED FOR CHANGE

## 150 Years in Mission



Ellen Blue



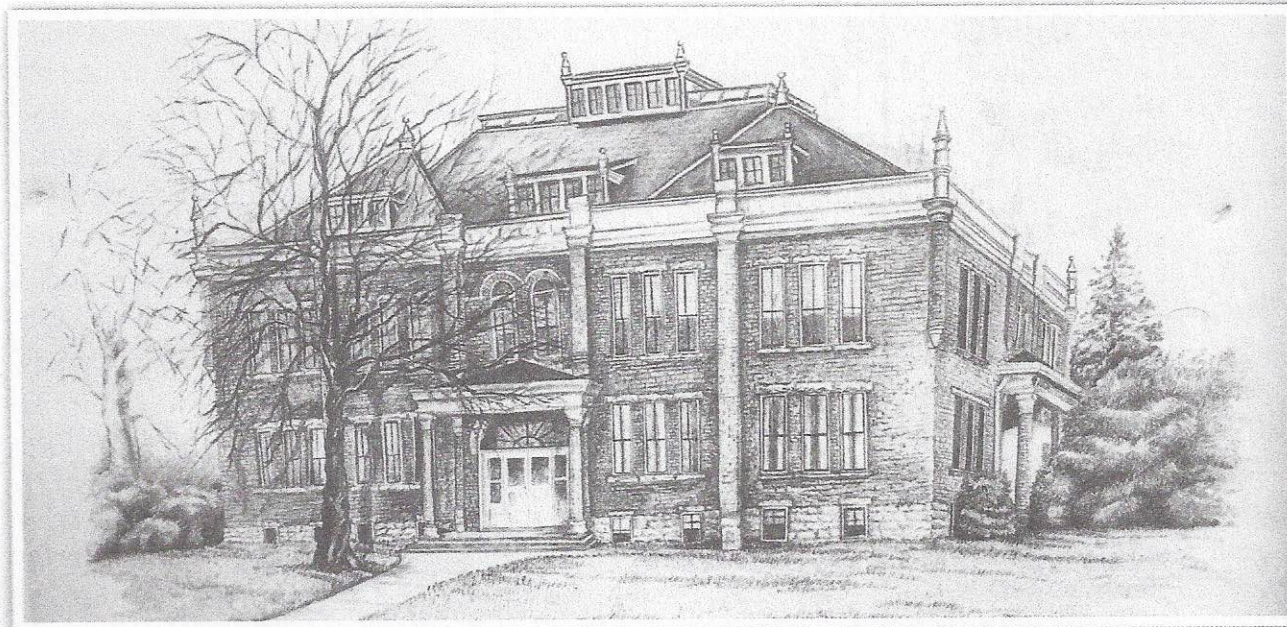
relations and worked to push their denomination toward racial equality from the early twentieth century onward.

On February 1, 1960, more than half a century after the founding of the Woman's Parsonage and Home Mission Society (WP&HMS), the home mission organization for women in the MECS, four black students from the North Carolina Agricultural and Technical Institute began a sit-in at a Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina. The next day, those male students were joined by women from Bennett College, a school for female African Americans that was supported by the Woman's Division. Though Bennett students were arrested, they were "encouraged and supported in their civil disobedience by the president of Bennett College, Willa Player, and also by Susie Jones, both of whom brought sandwiches to the incarcerated students and pledged that their activism would not impede their graduations." The Woman's Division itself issued a statement that praised the students' par-

ticipation. It urged "Methodist women across the country to support student participants and to be in contact with law enforcement agencies to ensure students' legal rights were protected."<sup>10</sup> The willingness of the earliest members to challenge what was wrong in the wider culture—and in parts of the church—lived on.

Bennett College was only one of hundreds of educational institutions around the world, far too many to list here, that were beneficiaries of the societies' support. Many followed a pattern of opening as an elementary school, then adding high school instruction, and later becoming a college. Colleges for women offered the first chance for thousands of those whose gender kept them out of other schools to obtain a degree. Other institutions educated both women and men of color.

For the 1960–64 quadrennium, the Woman's Society of Christian Service (WSCS) published a guide to the organization. It explains what



Bennett College, one of hundreds of educational institutions around the world that were beneficiaries of the MECS societies' support. United Methodist Women continues to support Bennett College today.





Photo: Norton

Students from Bennett College join the sit-in at Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro, NC, 1960.

committees are needed in the local groups and how those committees should accomplish their tasks, but it deals with much more than this. It covers basic leadership skills, including practical information on exactly how to run a meeting efficiently. A new leader could learn how to prepare for a meeting, how to arrange the room, how to use the gavel correctly, and even particular phrases to use in certain situations.<sup>11</sup> Overall, it is impossible to overstate the impact that our women's organizations have had in training leaders for the church and the world. You'll find material about women who have gone on to leadership roles in the larger church, as well as in government, education, and business, throughout this entire volume and especially in Chapter 6.

### Overview of the Book

The beginnings of both foreign missionary societies and the home mission societies in the predecessor denominations are recounted in Chapter 2, "The Formational Years." Society

members encountered serious resistance from churchmen who disapproved of women organizing and who disagreed with the kinds of ministry the women had organized to do. Nevertheless, the women persisted, and they offer a powerful witness to us today.

One of their achievements with immeasurable impact was making space within the churches for the work of deaconesses. Although not officially recognized as a lay order until the 2016 General Conference, deaconesses organized in the late nineteenth century, and ever since, their ranks have been filled with women who have engaged in some of the most interesting and significant ministry in United Methodist history. The deaconess office provided the first place in our tradition for large numbers of women to perform full-time ministries of service and justice. Having created better lives for women and children for more than a century, deaconesses continue in ministry on behalf of United Methodist Women today.