Siblings Who Developed New Initiatives in Mission

Isabella Thoburn responded quickly when in 1866 her brother, James, a Methodist missionary in India, wrote, “How would you like to come and take charge of a school if we decide to make the attempt?”

Three years later, she began in earnest. When the Women’s Foreign Missionary Society was founded in 1869, the first missionary they appointed was Isabella Thoburn to India.

She began with six girls in one room in 1870. This developed into a boarding school, then a high school and in 1886 the college began. After her return to the United States, she helped grow the deaconess movement and founded the Deaconess Home and Training School and Christ Hospital in Cincinnati. At Thoburn’s death in 1901, the college she began in India was renamed Isabella Thoburn College, now the women’s college of Lucknow University.

James Thoburn, alongside his sister’s success, propelled the church to new growth and vitality. Initially, Thoburn invited the American Methodist maverick evangelist, William Taylor, to come to India and lead a revival and the expansion of Methodism. Taylor arrived in 1870 and for nearly five years, with the advice and support of Thoburn, established congregations in seven leading cities across India.

Thoburn himself, however, presided over an era of rapid growth of the Methodist Church in India, which included mass movements of converts into membership and expansion into Southeast Asia. In 1874 Thoburn began a 13-year pastorate of the flourishing church founded by Taylor in Calcutta. Thoburn initiated Methodist work in Rangoon in 1879 and in Singapore in 1885. In 1888, he was elected bishop, with responsibility for all of India, plus Burma and Malaysia. In 1899, he went to Manila to initiate Methodist work in the Philippines, which was added to his episcopal area.

Source: Gerald H. Anderson, in Biographical Dictionary of Christian Missions, with modifications.