

Our link with the church in the Near East

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In 1931, a year after my arrival in the Northwest, a clammy Scot sheep rancher near Williston invited me to visit another “clammy” Scot living 45 miles away. Said he as we were driving along, “His wife belongs to the Church of England. That’s the same as yours, isn’t it? But I think that she might be Turkish or Greek. She comes from around there.”

She did and thereby hangs a tale and the reason for its telling.

Mrs. W. Simpson (Maggie), whose ranch home Surredale is 10 miles north of Ray, ND, was born in Smyrna on the Gulf of Alexandretta, the extreme east of the Mediterranean. Neither Turkish nor Greek, she is the daughter of English parents and the grandchild of the pioneer Church missionary to that district.

While the Crimean War raged in S. Russia, England sent the Rev William Bucknor Lewis to care for the spiritual welfare of her sailors serving with the Mediterranean Fleet.

In 1856, hostilities over, he was appointed Consulate chaplain at Smyrna. A man of eager interests, the light round of duties connected with the Consulate chapel failed to satisfy him and touring the surrounding countryside, he stood shocked and aghast before the ruined, desecrated churches testifying to the ascendancy of the crescent over the cross, despite the repeated efforts of the medieval Crusaders. As so, armed with faith and zeal, mightier than any sword, he went out into the countryside and laid the foundations of the Church’s Near East Mission.

There may or may not be anything in the family tradition or dearly cherished crests, but William Lewis, priest and missionary, let his family motto, Amicus Omnibus, guide and rule his life and dying, bequeathed to the 4th generation the motive force of a “Friend to all Men”.

It was not long before he had restored services in the two little neighboring churches, Boujah and Bournabat, the same distance north of Smyrna. Between these places was a hilly stretch of badlands seven miles wide, along perilous trails of which the sure-footed Syrian donkeys found it difficult to travel. Among these hills dwelt the lonely men and women, Jew and Gentile, to whom he extended his mission of love and service.

Leaving a young English wife and baby son at Boudjah, he would ride for miles seeking here a group of lapsed Christians, there a family of Jews, to all he went as priest and friend.

The land was infested with brigand (it still is) as late as 1919. I was a guest in the home of one of the fiercest and when their nefarious exploits failed to bring in what they needed, they resorted to all kinds terrifying devices.

On more than one occasion, having watched the young priest ride out to Bournabat, they descended in force on the rectory and seeing the baby, forced the wife to give from her none-to-well replenished store the things that they needed.

Death to the child, the ever-present danger of kidnapping hanging over them, they worked on. Yes, they worked on, those two, adventuring in Christ's name, dedicating their own lives and even that of their son, to reestablishing the faith of the Master. Their work was hard and very slow, often months of discouragement, followed upon small successes, but they labored on until even the outlaws in the hills loved them and respected their faith.

When he retired, Mr. Lewis left his son (William Purdon Lewis) to carry on and the 2nd generation took up the work where the father had laid down it down. Only he added medical attention to spiritual ministry and very soon Greek and Turk alike, Christian, Mohammedan and Jew came to love him. He was the only man at that time granted safe conduct through the dangerous lands and so sincere was the regard of the bandits that his little children wandered unmolested on the hill slopes near their home.

As they grew up, he faced that painful family separation which is the lot of all of us that labor in far lands. He sent his children to England. Left a widow, she (Leila) moved into Smyrna where she went on with her church work until last year (1937), at the age of 85 "God's finger touch her and she slept".

The Lewis children invested with the spirit of Christian service studied in England and returned to the scene of their parents' devotion. One daughter (Helen) married a master in the American Mission School in Smyrna (Caleb Lawrence) and gave 35 years of her life to working side by side with him. They have just come to America and are enjoying a well-earned rest.

Two others, with their nurses training complete in Sheffield, England, undertook the care of mental cases in Lebanon Hospital, called in Arabic, Asfurieh, the home of nesting birds. Mrs. Simpson (Maggie) still speaks of the white road from Jerusalem to Damascus, beside which the hospital stood and along whose stretches Saul once traveled "breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord". From her window, she looked at the spot sanctified forever by the vision granted to the great apostle.

There she and her sister with a band of male and female native nurses, brought back to sanity men and women who, before the dawn of Christianity, would have been shunned as "possessed by devils".

Several years passed devoted to her medical mission work. Then came her marriage and her sojourn in Kimberley (South Africa) with her engineer husband, his illness and their long journey to N. Dakota. She nursed him back to health and together they built up their ranch home - and what is infinitely greater, have given to the world a 4th generation.

From generation to generation, the West gave to the East and the East has give back to the West.

Written in 1938 in N. Dakota.