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MESSENGERS OF HOPE

by Stephen Pedersen

In April 1907, Hope College’s Anchor newspaper ran a rather curious letter submitted by one of the college’s most accomplished alumni nearly a year prior. The letter, penned by the Reverend Doctor John Otte, came all the way from China to herald a birth within the Hope College community. This was no ordinary birth announcement; instead, Otte and three other missionaries scattered throughout Asia claimed parentage of a new alumni association, the Messengers of Hope. Meant to unify the college’s sizable alumni community operating in Arabia, India, China, and Japan, the Messengers of Hope set themselves to a much more ambitious purpose than merely a friendly association of former schoolmates. Instead, the Messengers sought to enliven what they perceived to be flagging missionary zeal among Hope’s current and future students.

Finding themselves in need of new recruits to build upon their successes but unable to make an impact from the other side of the world, the Messengers banded together to turn their location into an advantage. Decades before advances in air travel made global leisure travel a possibility, missionary work provided the surest approach for the common person to get a taste of life overseas. The Messengers of Hope, many of whom no doubt signed up with the same ambitions in mind, sought to take full advantage of this sentiment by providing students with a glimpse of the Far East in the form of a museum on Hope’s campus. By providing the college with a steady stream of curiosities from around the world, the Messengers hoped to capture the imaginations of a new generation to carry on their work.

Reverend Otte’s familial metaphor was not far off the mark in this, as the call to missions among Hope students during this period represented far more than a personal choice made by certain students. Dating back to the town’s first settlers, Holland served as a hothouse of missionary activity for the Reformed Church of America for much of its early history. The community’s status as a deeply religious enclave partially explains this sentiment, but the drive to proselytize among Holland’s residents gained special weight. Van Raalte himself placed enough weight on missionary work that he volunteered to go to South Africa in that capacity soon after the founding of Holland. Although he was eventually convinced to remain in Holland, Van Raalte’s endorsement was merely the first among many. Although the early community did not possess the resources to support a broad missionary network, the settlers felt strongly enough about the missionary imperative that in 1864 they commissioned the keel of a missionary ship to be laid in Lake Macatawa. Although

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In this issue of the Quarterly, current and former student archival assistants have penned our two articles. Stephen Pedersen is a senior and has quite an eye for research and writing. He was my natural choice when it came to researching and writing a complete and readable history of the Messengers of Hope. His writing speaks well of Hope’s training of scholars and we know he will do well with his future Ph.D. work. Michael Douma, another of our former student archival assistants, has just finished his Ph.D. work in history and is our translator of 19th and 20th century Dutch language materials. His translation work and writing are, again, a fine example of a Hope education and what working at the Joint Archives of Holland can do for stimulating intellectual endeavors in the field of history. I consider myself blessed to have worked with them and watch their love of history grow with the use of our collections.

Geoffrey D. Reynolds

Messengers of Hope (continued from page 1)

it never came close to completion, the ship served as a symbol of resolve to the first generation of Holland missionaries soon to depart. Hope College, which graduated its first class soon after, served as a finishing school for the majority.

Reverend Enne Heeren, who departed for India after graduating from Hope three years after the laying of the keel, became the town’s first missionary. Although it can hardly be said that Reverend Heeren’s decision sparked a rush of recruitment among his classmates, Hope turned out a steady stream of missionaries over the ensuing decades, the majority of who headed for one of four postings in Asia. By the time that the Messengers of Hope came into being, twenty-three alumni had spent time somewhere in Asia, with many still in the field. Making use of their varied educations, Hope’s missionaries established a series of schools and hospitals, enabling them to care for both their fledgling communities of converts, as well as the surrounding populations.

Otte himself proved particularly adept in this regard, as his efforts led to the establishment of three hospitals in China alongside a support network of other services. Although Otte and his colleagues could draw from local sources for some help in staffing and did so frequently through the use of training programs, each held out hope for staffing and funding increases throughout their activities. Retirement played a part, as several missionaries found that life abroad was not to their liking and returned to the United States within a few years of their departures. The perils of life in the field served to further winnow the number of active evangelists. Several of Hope’s first missionaries, Otte among them, died in the field, leaving a void of both manpower and experience. Otte’s case is particularly indicative of the difficulties faced by missionaries in this era. Having sent his family away to Grand Rapids for the sake of the children’s education in 1906, Otte saw them only once more before contracting the bubonic plague through his work in one of the missionary hospitals and passed away in 1910. His youngest daughter dedicated herself to missionary work in his honor and met a similar fate two decades later. Although the majority of Hope’s missionary alumni remained at their posts for far longer than the Ottes, the relatively small number of missionaries active at this time made such attrition incredibly costly for the fledgling missionary stations springing up at this time.

In establishing their institutions, it could perhaps be said that these early missionaries were overly optimistic regarding the number of recruits that they could expect to follow in their footsteps. This was not for lack of effort or intent on the part of Hope’s student body, however. In its early days, Hope turned out an enormous number of future ministers relative to its size, with several of these men eventually going overseas. A substantial number of female graduates made their way into missions as well, often as partners with their husbands. At one point, Hope College stood as the largest contributor of missionary personnel as a percentage of its population in the entire country. Graduating classes in those days did not commonly reach into the twenties, however, and what appears to be a mighty host of missionaries amounted to twenty-three evangelists between the school’s founding and the advent of the Messengers of Hope in 1907. The roll of active missionaries at that time numbered even fewer through deaths and retirements, leaving less than twenty people to cover missionary operations spanning four of the largest countries on the world’s most populous continent. In order to operate as intended, each of the four missionary stations required the equivalent of Hope’s entire missionary presence in Asia in order to fulfill all of the teaching, preaching, and health care duties taken on by stations. Given enough time, native converts could and
did fulfill a portion of those duties, particularly in China, but the need for more hands preoccupied missionary leaders throughout the period.

Out of this need sprang the Messengers of Hope. Recognizing that Hope represented their best chance to establish a steady pipeline of educated recruits who shared a common denominational bent, the Messengers set about addressing their colleagues at the college in a number of ways. The building of the museum claimed pride of place in both the association’s constitution and a good deal of the early dialogue, but the process of bringing together the required items soon proved difficult. Although Hope itself offered to cover the cost of shipping the required items in order to make the effort more economically palatable for their alumni overseas, it does not appear that the college received a great deal of immediate response. The Messengers’ annual reports rarely mention the contribution of items from any of their members, with the few recorded instances of these curios actually arriving do not portray them as sizable gifts. The collection, which resided in Van Raalte Hall for much of its existence, eventually did come together, but most missionaries do not appear to have engaged significantly with the program. Cost no doubt became a factor here among the more frugal Messengers, but it would seem that time and convenience played far greater roles in limiting the number of items that came to reside in the new museum. Given the number of difficulties that the Messengers had in generating their other project, an annual newsletter, it is not difficult to see why.

The Messengers of Hope annual, which contained an account of each member’s activities as well as organizational business and membership listings, met with difficulties from its inception. Contributions in the form of both annual dues and articles submitted by members constantly fell below the expectations of the group’s officers, whose article reproaching negligent members soon became a consistent feature of the annual. It could be argued that this indicated a lack of interest on the part of the broader Hope expatriate community, but the responses submitted by many of the more recalcitrant members indicate that workload most likely played a greater factor in the annual’s uneven submission process. Given the volume of work and correspondence that each missionary found themselves subjected to in the operation of understaffed mission stations, it is not surprising that some should forget to submit an account of their activities on occasion. Others, particularly those serving their first year overseas and occupied with language training, expressed amazement that anyone would care to read what they had to say, as they found it to be exceedingly mundane. The collection of a dollar annually in dues, worth about twenty times its current value in that era, presented similar problems but was often submitted by neglectful members a year or two later with a note of apology.

This is not to say that all members found themselves unable to consistently contribute to the cause. Several missionaries made regular appearances in the annual, with Samuel Zwemer being the most prominent. Co-founder of the Arabian mission section, which boasted presences in Iraq, Bahrain, and Egypt, Zwemer represented one of the group’s staunchest contributors. That Zwemer recognized the need for promotional materials is not surprising, as his missionary efforts among a largely Muslim population did not receive the support of the RCA’s Board of Missions until after it became well established. Although the number of converts Zwemer made never rivaled those of the other missions, Zwemer himself became so famous in the West that he spent nearly as much time traveling for promotional purposes as in residence at his mission station by the end of his work. This knack for promoting the missionary cause would serve Zwemer well, as he went on to become one of the most famous missionaries in the world and a professor at Princeton. The rest of the Messengers, while devoted to their field, did not share

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**The Anchor**

**MESSENGERS OF HOPE.**

*Hope Hospital, China, August 27, 1906.*

India (Banniga) came to China, and a new child of Hope was born. She is not very large as yet, nor has her birth been officially announced, but the attending physician (a Dutch-American-Chinese) vouches for the existence of the youngest, and has even dared to suggest a name, which must be adopted. The child is a new Alumni Association, an offshoot of Hope’s larger organization. Its parents were Banniga (India) and Warmshis (China). Its nurse was Boot, and the attending physician—the writer. Its birth has caused rejoicing everywhere, though in Japan (they being a little upper just now, as they whipped the biggest power on earth) is not quite as exuberant as the rest of us. Even the Filipinos have been heard from, and thus military celer has been given to its future.

But to come down to the point. A Hope College Asiatic Alumni Association has been formed. Its name will be “Messengers of Hope.” Its members—all of Hope’s graduates in Asia and Africa, and its object, the collection of objects of interest for Hope’s Museum, hoping in this way to stimulate the missionary zeal of our “alma mater.”

You cut the best part of Mrs. Otte’s last article for the Anchor, so, for fear of a similar amputation, and mutilation, I will have to say “time up,” and quit. Just print this in small type and thus make it look short.

Just one word more. How I pity those of our number working at home! Where on earth can a more happy field of labor be found than here in rejuvenated China? Four hundred millions of virtuous human beings on the move! Think of it! And we have the lever in hand to turn that movement on to the road that leads to the love of Christ. I am pretty lonesome without that little graduate of 1882, but in spite of this, I often feel like shouting, “O, God how good You were to send me here to China.”

J. A. OTTE, ’83.
In 2010, the Joint Archives of Holland acquired the papers of Petrus (Peter) Semelink (1828-1922), a Dutch-homeland immigrant, early West Michigan settler and benefactor of Hope College, Western Theological Seminary, and the Reformed Church in America. In the fall of 2010, I translated a selection of the Semelink letters, primarily those pertaining to Semelink’s philanthropic activities and his communication with RCA missionaries in India. These writings provide an interesting glimpse into the structure of the RCA and the minds of some of its missionaries. They also demonstrate the complexities of Dutch-American transnational connections and the difficulties of translation across cultures.

Born in Zutphen, Gelderland, Semelink immigrated to Vriesland, Michigan in 1849 with his family. En route, however, Peter’s parents and a sister died. The family had been bakers in the Netherlands, so Peter inherited a significant sum. Peter promised to take care of his two remaining siblings. According to the U.S. Census of 1850, Peter and his sister Janna lived with Peter’s older brother Berend on a 100-acre farm in Ottawa County. The censuses of 1870 and 1880 attest to the similar living situation, Peter and Berend were now accompanied by Peter’s wife Johanna Antonette. Berend died in 1891 and Johanna’s death followed in the next year. Through the years, the Semelink’s worked as farmers, but they also built a small fortune by lending out money for mortgages. They became involved in real estate as well and built a reputation locally as a lender who would forgive late payment. Peter was active in philanthropy already in the 1880s, but he increased his giving in the 1890s, after the deaths of his brother and his wife. In 1894, he established a scholarship fund at Hope College. He also provided funding for a building erected in his own name at Western Theological Seminary in 1895. In 1898, he gave $10,000 to the RCA’s Foreign Mission Fund. Indeed, education and foreign missions were his main interest.

In translating Semelink’s letters, I concentrated on correspondence addressed to Semelink in the 1880s and 1890s from the RCA’s missionary in India, Jacob Chamberlain. These letters were written in Dutch, and it appears that Chamberlain was quite conversant in this language. One letter begins in English, only to have the first two words crossed out to restart in carefully worded Dutch. Anglicisms creep into the language here and there. Sentence structure is long and complex, as befitting an era in which Dickensian syntax was popular, when prose that was lengthy and legal was the mark of a good education. It is possible that some of the letters were translated into Dutch from Chamberlain’s written English, and that the original English-language letters are missing. For
example, one letter notes that a "G. Niemeyer" was responsible for such a translation. At any rate, Chamberlain and other Semelink correspondents felt that it was necessary to correspond in Dutch with their Vriesland-based benefactor.

The context of the letters is essentially this: Chamberlain is thanking Semelink for his financial support for the mission and encourages his further gifts. Although Chamberlain recognizes the difficulties of the mission in India, he is eternally optimistic about its development and he assures Semelink that his financial support is well-placed. The best summary of the mission can be found in Eugene Heideman’s *From Mission to Church: the Reformed Church in America Mission to India* (Eerdmans/RCA Historical Series, 2001). These new translations provide an additional angle on Heideman’s story.

What we can learn about the Dutch mission in India can be obscure, however, by the walls between culture and time. Here we have an American in India (Chamberlain) reporting in Dutch to a Dutch-American immigrant about the struggles and successes of the Reformed Church mission. Chamberlain interprets Indian culture through Western eyes and transmits his findings in a non-native language. He makes it clear that his mission is not only an attempt to evangelize but also to impose Western values, to break down the caste system and reign in superstitions about health and welfare. In Chamberlain, we might recognize that archetype of an educated Westerner lecturing the heathen about the “White Man’s Burden.” Chamberlain never mentions denominations. In a world of comity, the disparity between the heathens (Hindus, Muslims and Animists) and the Christians was too great to worry about divisions within Christianity.

In 1891 and 1892, Chamberlain forwarded to Semelink translations of letters from Markus Zacheus, an Indian convert to Christianity who was influential in bringing Christianity to the villages around Madanapalle, India. The young Zacheus was first employed in this position in 1885. By 1892, he was responsible for preaching the Gospel in twenty-five villages surrounding his own. In his letters, Zacheus expressed his satisfaction that the railroads worked to the detriment of the caste system and that famines had been less frequent and less severe since locals had converted to Christianity. He strongly believed in the intercession of prayer and the blessing of conversion to Christianity since he had witnessed the spread of Christianity first hand. Such on-the-ground evidence was useful for Chamberlain in demonstrating his case to Semelink. The RCA’s mission was on the front line of Christ’s struggles to convert the peoples of the earth.

Peter Semelink was not one to give away his money without knowledge of how it was being used. Dr. G. John Van Zoeren recalled that Peter “Did not have a very pleasant disposition. He was suspicious of people and could easily make accusations.” He enjoyed long-term relationships. Jacob Chamberlain’s son L. (Lewis) B. Chamberlain, followed his father’s footsteps at the mission. His letter from 1899 demonstrates the importance of a physical connection between Semelink and the mission field and his ongoing relationship with the Chamberlain family. L. B. Chamberlain, like his father before him, must toe a difficult line in his writings. On the one hand, he feels compelled to complain about the situation in India, about the backwardness of the heathens and the failures of the government. But he must also talk of progress and the light of Christianity shining in the darkness. Chamberlain wrote about the paradoxes of India, about how foreign and far away this land must seem for an American. I have translated the passage as follows:

> It has the highest and coldest mountains in the world and its low plains are synonymous with heat. It has the most fruitful land with two or three harvests per year and yet famine appears all too often. The Khase Mountains have the greatest rainfall in the world, 500 inches in a year and drought is the greatest enemy. Its Gods and its dead are housed in the most beautiful temples and tombs crowned by the unequalled Pay Mahib, while the mass of the people live in the meanest huts. Its religion is at once the strongest enemy of Christianity and the weakest defence against evil. Its philosophy is the wonder of the past and its ignorance is a curse for the present.

L. B. Chamberlain also assured Semelink of the humanity of India, of the importance of operating the missions and savings souls.

To this land of contrasts you send your money, and I do not doubt, your prayers as well. It needs both. This letter accompanies 55 others, from Lepers and pupils. They tell of various sides of common life, so that one who reads them all can get a better idea of all the contrasts.

The letters from native Indians, although not preserved in Semelink’s materials, must have provided an important link to this foreign land, a tangible sign that his givings brought about fruit.

My translations cover just a fraction, perhaps less than 10% of the new materials received for the Semelink collection. Further correspondence demonstrates Semelink’s connections with family in the Netherlands, other missionaries in India and China, and with other friends and acquaintances in the RCA. For a farmer from Vriesland, Michigan, Peter Semelink was a well-connected man.