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### Review of A Time to Heal: Missionary Nurses in Churches of Christ, Southeastern Nigeria (1953-1967). by Martha E. Farrar Highfield

McGarvey Ice  
*Abilene Christian University*

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*A Time to Heal: Missionary Nurses in Churches of Christ, Southeastern Nigeria (1953–1967)*, by MARTHA E. FARRAR HIGHFIELD. Los Angeles: Sulis Academic Press, 2020. 332 pp. \$19.95.

Highfield narrates the work of a handful of nurses and physicians—all of them evangelists—who were among the phalanx of postwar missionaries from Churches of Christ and pioneered medical missionary work from backdoor nursing to a fully functional stand-alone hospital. They experienced in a unique way the implications of the debate over church support for institutions such as schools and hospitals. They experienced the political upheaval within Nigeria that overwhelmed their work and forced them from the country. They fashioned a theological rationale for their work in which suffering abounded in overwhelming scale, scope, and urgency. Highfield documents the decisive role missionaries played in promoting missions and illustrates how Christian colleges sustained interest and served as recruiting centers. Her narrative illustrates how these relational networks then provided missionaries with spiritual, emotional, financial, and theological resources necessary to carry out their charge.

She also narrates—clearly and candidly—how missionary life consisted of far more than preaching sermons or teaching classes. They hauled cement, repaired autos, negotiated peace among rival tribes, were often targets for manipulators, and suffered from being at the mercy of self-dealing politicians. All the while they remained on call almost constantly by being physically, spiritually, and emotionally available for locals and for each other. Her narrative documents the activity of women who considered their work of physical healing to be thoroughly evangelistic. They labored with that self-awareness, and their work intersected with concerns of Igbo women such as plural marriage, female circumcision, and birth control. As such, it is a fascinating window into how American nurses and physicians worked at the intersection of Christian theological imperatives and African tribal identities and religious worldviews amid cultural and language barriers in a postcolonial political situation. Highfield unfolds how the postwar medical missions work emerged from prewar Churches of Christ contexts and how its practitioners moved it from the periphery into its own as a viable and widely supported institutional manifestation of Christian witness. Highfield thus breaks new ground for the history of Churches of Christ in the postwar period.

The story is arguably more Restorationist than readers might first assume. In their minds, the commitments these nurses and physicians cherished aligned with the those of the first Christians: to love God with the whole person, to sacrificially serve and extend mercy to all, and to declare the work of God in Jesus Christ explicitly and fearlessly to all. Highfield also reveals the extraordinary humanity that characterizes all such endeavors: the stress of work in unfamiliar contexts over long periods at the outer limits of knowledge, skill, and experience; the frustration of making do with meager or uncertain financial support; the interpersonal friction among a team, every member of which must not only be strong-willed enough to even attempt cross-cultural or transnational medical missionary work, but also committed enough to obey what they knew was the call of God upon their best in terms of time, talent, intellect, and

strength. Highfield does not shy away from these stories; rather she candidly describes failures, missteps, heartaches, and trouble.

Highfield, as a trained and credentialed nurse and professor of nursing, a child of Churches of Christ, and a participant in the mission she describes, is well suited to write a book such as this. Nancy Ammerman noted in the preface to her *Baptist Battles: Social Change and Religious Conflict in the Southern Baptist Convention* (Rutgers, 1990) that “the elements of systematic analysis and autobiography are not often brought together in scholarly work . . . [and can] be a dangerous mix. All I can promise is that my own involvement may give passion and life to the story and that my sociological discipline may yield insight that my involvement alone would not have revealed.” Highfield supplies insightful commentary on the medical practices of the mission. Likewise, her firsthand experience afforded her a trove of primary sources without which no history can be written, much less one as richly and as thoroughly grounded as this one. Beyond that, it afforded her a closeness to the events so that she is able to move decisively to their meaning. She does not merely chronicle events; she explains them by drawing from personal memory, academic training, facility with analytic writing, and access to sources. The narrative is crisply paced. It does not wander or meander, but each chapter fills its place in a story that neither drowns in detail nor suffers from romantic embellishment. It is meticulously documented and footnoted from a remarkable array of sources, amply indexed, and occasionally punctuated with appropriate photography.

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*At the Blue Hole: Elegy for a Church on the Edge*, by JACK R. REESE. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021. 242 pp. \$21.99.

Stan Granberg’s 2018 case study on Churches of Christ published in the Great Commission Research Journal disclosed numerous sobering statistics related to this primary tributary of the Stone-Campbell Movement. In the opening decades of the twenty-first century, congregations in the Churches of Christ were growing older, becoming smaller, and closing at a rapid rate. This two-century old American denomination finds itself racing rapidly toward the edge of a cliff, leaving many to wonder if it might soon fall off into extinction. In *At the Blue Hole: Elegy for a Church on the Edge*, Jack Reese seeks to lead Churches of Christ away from the edge, inviting them on a journey back to the springs from which their movement first sprang to life on the American frontier. With the skill of a master storyteller and the bluntness of an OT prophet, Reese walks with members of his own church family to the place where their story began. He shines a light on the daunting challenges facing Churches of Christ in the twenty-first century and offers a hopeful and redeeming path forward.

As Reese writes early in his narrative, he is not a disinterested observer to the story of Churches of Christ. A lifelong member and leader within Churches of Christ, Reese has ministered in congregations since the 1970s and has taught preaching, worship, and ministry at three universities, including Abilene