

On September 16, 1919, the NBA Central Board voted to recommend that the Association enter UCMS.

The records show only token opposition to the move whereby NBA would be completely merged into UCMS. The intention was that the societies would merge ministries and resources into one common agency. The new society would promote, plan and administer all the foreign and home mission work, as well as the care of the orphaned and the aged, the support of higher education, the development of Christian education, the support of retired ministers and their spouses, the undergirding of church extension loans and planning, the coordination of denominational social action and education, the cooperation of state organizations, and the management of national assemblies. UCMS applied for its charter on June 20, 1920, and moved its headquarters to St. Louis. NBA became the Division of Benevolence of UCMS.

Early in the merger process, lawyers discovered that NBA's property titles and trusts would not permit a complete subsuming into UCMS. The price of surrendering all legal fiduciary responsibilities was too high. The Central Board then voted to make the UCMS its agent in the management of the Homes and in the collecting and disbursing of all funds intended for the Homes or for the Association. Only existing annuity, endowment and trust funds were excepted. The treasurer of UCMS was to give NBA's Central Board a periodic accounting of any permanent funds, especially bequests and annuities, which UCMS received in the name of NBA.

The history of NBA, the UCMS and the Division of Benevolence of UCMS from 1920 to 1933 is an important story not only for understanding the next 50 years of NBA development but also for a balanced interpretation of national life of the whole Disciple movement. Although all the principals involved are now dead, the archives portray fully the budgetary problems and the conflicting understandings of corporate responsibility.

Probably the greatest problem was one which earlier accounts have ignored, i.e., the time was wrong. As Sidney Ahlstrom has written, "The Great Crusade ended its march at the lawn socials of normalcy." The nation was surfeited with war and post-war idealistic campaigns. By 1922, the Interchurch World Movement was a failure and American denominations were left with huge debts to cover its administrative costs. NBA, UCMS, and many Disciple congregations insisted, with great integrity in difficult times, that the Disciple allotment be paid.

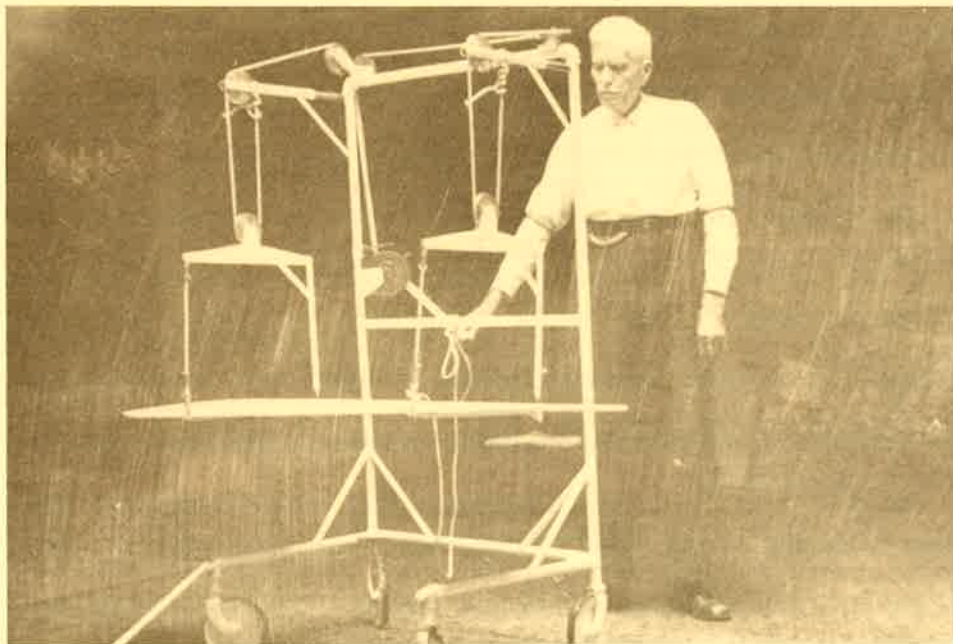
The 1920s and 1930s also saw a decline in church attendance everywhere. The Great Depression was almost a decade away, but rural America was in serious economic depression throughout the 1920s, a matter of special consequence to the predominantly rural Disciples of Christ. At the same time, denominationalism experienced strong resurgence, and local suspicion of liberal national leadership grew in all denominations. The decline in financial support which plagued the recently-joined societies also affected most major denominations during the Roaring Twenties.

That was the first and primary problem. Given the Disciple plea for unity and the heady optimism of 1918-1919, most of the denomination plunged enthusiastically into the new plan with the zeal of pilgrims who saw the Holy City at last. The carping of conservative critics simply strengthened the sense of divine destiny and made the advocates intolerant of any variation from the one standard. No one on the NBA Central Board, not even Mohorter himself, asked whether UCMS and the Division of Benevolence would follow the hard financial lessons that NBA had learned from experience and from Uncle Jimmie's

responsible stewardship. The answer was "No"; bequests, annuities, and funds given for specific projects would go into a common fund to be dispersed as the officers of UCMS saw fit.

The financial crunch began immediately. Budgets before unification had been inflated by the war and by the 1919 boom in giving. UCMS had no assets, had to put a promotional system in place, was confronted by the results of maintenance needs delayed by WWI, and was forced almost immediately to help cover the debt of the defunct Interchurch World Movement.

Almost every year in the 1920s, UCMS confronted a deficit in its operating budget and had to ask the Central Board to pledge NBA assets to cover sizable short-term loans from St. Louis banks. Inflation was on the increase at home



Andrew Sebring, a resident of the Illinois Christian Home, was an inventor of note. Working in his room or at times in a larger space, he fashioned several devices to aid in the care of residents. Pictured at left is a contraption he rigged with ropes and pulleys to lift patients.

Sebring is thought to have produced the first devotional film used by The Christian Church. Note the film rewind equipment mounted on his dresser.

He also constructed 5-foot models of each of the NBA Homes for display.



and abroad, and widespread socio-economic dislocation was daily increasing the demands on its limited resources. The budget year was changed, staffs were pared, and even the headquarters was moved from St. Louis to Indianapolis to save \$10,000 in annual rent.

Two ways that UCMS sought budgetary relief disturbed the quarterly meetings of the NBA Central Board. First, UCMS officers began using, as general operating funds, bequests and annuities which had been committed to NBA but were undesignated as to use. The justification for the practice was that the operating expenses of the 12 NBA homes were paid out of the UCMS budget. This problem was intensified by the refusal of the UCMS treasurer to inform NBA of these annuities and bequests, and by the later insistence of the president that UCMS had never officially accepted NBA's 1921 statement of agreement.

The second problem was the straw that broke the camel's back. Almost every year through the '20s, UCMS had sought and obtained sizable special appropriations from NBA funds. In addition, some years the NBA Central Board made special appropriations to increase the budget of the Division of Benevolence or to support UCMS in hiring representatives to raise money for the Homes, only to later discover that the budgets were not increased or field representatives not employed. In fact, UCMS insisted on reducing the individual budgets of the Homes by a commensurate amount for any funds or goods received by individual Homes from non-Disciple and community sources.

The situation became impossible in the early '30s. NBA had been giving special supplements to the Homes for several years and maintaining the physical plants. In desperation, UCMS demanded a precise accounting of just what trusts NBA held that could not be delegated to UCMS. About the same time, the Society began to insist that the Homes raise more money locally while putting serious restrictions on where or how they could seek the funds. Individual budgets were reduced beforehand to make sure that funds were raised locally. The situation became so serious in early 1931 that the General Secretary and the Central Board feared that the Homes would begin to sever their connections with the denomination.

Dissolution of the union was inevitable; in fact, it is amazing that it was so long in coming. In 1930, UCMS ordered three Homes to raise all their budgets from local non-Disciple sources and almost half of the operating budget of all Homes to come from local non-Disciple sources. Soon NBA changed its letterhead to read "The National Benevolent Association, affiliated with the United

Cleveland Christian Home



Christian Missionary Society," much to the consternation of UCMS.

In 1931, UCMS decided to put six homes on regional support while denying them access to the churches for support. At the same time, UCMS was seeking NBA's guarantee for a \$100,000 loan which it hoped to get in St. Louis. Negotiations between the two agencies were prolonged. Finally, UCMS' inability to support the Homes and its need for the \$100,000 loan prevailed. As of July 1, 1932, all of the Homes were put on regional support and NBA was made solely responsible for raising funds and administering the 13 benevolent institutions of the Disciples of Christ. The Pittsburgh International Convention of 1933 formally severed the connection begun so optimistically in 1920.

A third factor also played a key role in the breakdown of the union, although it might not have been so influential had the budget problems been less insurmountable. Most of the officers of UCMS were old "missionary board" people dedicated to defending the cause of missions, especially foreign missions, against all competitors. The cry of the orphan was a powerful competitor for funds, as CWBM's earlier effort to pre-empt NBA's Easter appeal had shown. As funds became more constricted throughout the '20s and early '30s, the gut reaction of these officers also became more constricted. It is easy to trace the steady decline in the pages devoted to benevolence by *World Call* and other denominational papers. This same constellation of reactions forced The Pension Fund, The Board of Church Extension and The Board of Higher Education to separate from UCMS during the same period.

It seems easy from a distance of 50-plus years to fix the blame. The temptation to do so is increased by the fact that NBA was treated as an "Independent" pariah at both national and state levels for years. But to do so is to misunderstand the situation. Part of the problem resulted from the fact that in the idealism of the founding, the two agencies never realized that they held differing views of their responsibilities and relationships to each other and to the Homes. But more than that, wonderful dreams of the Kingdom of God die hard, especially when they are pure and have been confronted constantly by carping attacks. The Beloved Inasmuch Commander-in-Chief did not live to see the shipwreck of his dream on the rocks of economic reality, but he must have foreseen its coming.



THE GIFT AND THE GIVER

UCMS headquarters in St. Louis

