

Recalling U.S. missionary beginnings

by [G. Jeffrey MacDonald](#) in the [February 22, 2012](#) issue

When America's first ordained foreign missionaries sailed from Massachusetts toward India 200 years ago, they launched a movement to spread the faith and created America's most potent export: Christianity.

That message reverberated through nine "Judson 200" commemorative events in February in and around Salem. Speakers recalled how the course of history changed with Adoniram Judson and four other missionaries.

Religious

liberals and conservatives, both of whom lay claim to Judson's legacy, held separate events. One event celebrated the recent merger of two evangelical mission societies, CrossGlobal Link and the Mission Exchange, representing some 35,000 missionaries.

Participants

embraced a shared heritage as exporters of American ideas and weighed its modern-day implications. "The essential idea [in foreign missions] is that a person born in Pakistan is every bit as human and to be valued as much as a person born in North America or England," said Rodney Petersen, executive director of the Boston Theological Institute, a consortium of nine area theological schools.

Judson's 1812

departure with his wife Ann Hasseltine Judson marked the start of a new era of American and Christian influence. To support them a missionary-sending agency was born: the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM). Similar organizations soon took root, sending thousands of missionaries to all corners of the globe. By the mid-20th century, America was sending more missionaries than any other country.

America still sends the most: 127,000 of the 400,000 foreign missionaries sent in 2010 came from America, according to the Center for the Study of Global Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, which is based outside of Boston.

The

Judsons left a giant mark. Denied admission to British India, they continued on to Burma (modern-day Myanmar), where they created a grammar system, translated the Bible into Burmese and won converts to the faith. Christian communities survive to this day in Myanmar; Judson Sunday is commemorated by Burmese churches every July.

Yet it was

local Burmese, not missionaries, who most effectively spread Christianity among the villages, according to Todd Johnson, who directs the center at Gordon-Conwell. That history resonates today, he said, as mission agencies debate whether Western missionaries are still needed in developing nations.

"Some mission groups are saying there's no reason missionaries should ever go [abroad from America anymore]," Johnson said. "They say you can support hundreds of indigenous missionaries for the same price as a single Western missionary. That argument has gained a lot of traction among donors and other people."

Events

are planned at Tabernacle Congregational Church—a United Church of Christ congregation that was the site of the original commissioning—with officials representing the UCC's Wider Church Ministries division, which traces its roots to the ABCFM.

The celebrations reflect just

how many strains of Protestantism claim the Judson heritage. The Judsons started out as Congregationalists, but they became Baptists en route to Asia.

Scholars, meanwhile, are recalling missionaries'

impact on American culture and foreign policy. Missionaries who went abroad to start schools and establish hospitals laid the groundwork for a

modern America that sends billions abroad each year in U.S. foreign aid, Petersen said.

"It's part of the American character to go out and help people," said Clifford Putney, assistant professor of American religious history at Bentley University. —RNS