

Significant Prayer Event #4 “*The Haystack Prayer Meeting*”
Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?”
And I said, “Here am I. Send me!” Isaiah 6

“We can do this, if we will” Samuel Mills

As you know, I am writing the fourth in a series of articles on what I am suggesting were the Ten Most Significant Prayer Events in US history. The idea for this series of articles came as a result of my reading James P. Moore’s book *One Nation Under God: A History of Prayer in the United States*. I chose to write these articles not only because of the treasures that I discovered in Moore’s book, however, but because of a treasure that he forgot. The Haystack prayer meeting of 1806 was perhaps the most important prayer meeting in the history of the country, with an influence on millions and upon my life in more than one dimension. Incredibly it is not mentioned by Moore in so much as a footnote.

On a hot Saturday afternoon in August, 1806, five students at Williams College in Massachusetts met in a field under a maple tree to discuss pioneer British Baptist missionary William Carey and a booklet he had written. They were overtaken by a sudden thunderstorm and had to huddle underneath a haystack for shelter. The discussion continued under the haystack, with the leader of the group, Samuel Mills speaking passionately about the need to take the gospel to Asia. Harvey Loomis, another one of the five, objected that there was still much work to do in America and that overseas work was too dangerous and should wait until Asia was “civilized.” They took the matter before the Lord in prayer, and in that moment something was unleashed in their hearts that would change history. Samuel cried out, “We can do this, if we will!” By this he meant, not that they themselves could create a missionary movement in their own strength but rather that because God was calling them to this service, if they decided to be obedient to His calling, then they would be able to do what God set before them.



Three of the five young men at the Haystack Prayer Meeting. From left to right: Rev. Francis LeBarron Robbins. Born 1787, at Norfolk, CT, died April 6, 1850, at Enfield, CT. Rev. James Richards. Born February 22, 1784, at Abington, MA, died August 3, 1822, at Calyon, India. Rev. Harvey Loomis. Born 1785, at Torrington, CT, died January, 1825, at Bangor, ME. Not pictured are Byram Green (1787-1865), the last surviving member of the group who in 1854 returned to Williams College to mark the

spot where the prayer meeting occurred so a suitable memorial could be raised there; and Samuel Mills (born in 1783 at Torrington, CT and died off the coast of Gambia in 1818)

Within six years their commitment under the haystack had borne fruit. In 1808 Mills and Richards had formed a society they called “The Brethren” which they took with them from Williams College to Andover Seminary. The society there came to include Luther Rice and Adoniram Judson. In 1810 their seminary professors counseled the young men to make an appeal to the Association of Congregational Churches in Massachusetts. This Association formed the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) which in 1811 received a large bequest and rushed to commission and send out its first missionaries before the outbreak of the War of 1812.

The Scriptures suggest that among the most powerful prayers that Christians can make are prayers in which we yield ourselves to God and ask Him to accomplish His purposes through us. Such prayers open the possibility of God accomplishing great and heroic tasks through us, and become the channel of God’s blessing in dramatic and lasting ways. Prayer is often trivial, though sometimes urgent, but it always seems momentary, forgotten once the request has been granted or the occasion for it has passed. However, a “Here I am, send me,” kind of prayer, especially one made in the company of similarly committed individuals, can bring about changes felt generations later.



The first five missionaries sponsored by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions were ordained on February 8, 1812, in the Tabernacle Church, in Salem, Massachusetts: Adoniram Judson, Samuel Nott, Samuel Newell, Gordon Hall, and Luther Rice—the last two were at Williams College at the time of the prayer meeting and were influenced by Samuel Mills. Judson and Rice soon sailed for India with their wives. Photo at The Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, MA

Consider five completely distinct (and nearly unrelated) ways that my life is touched by the Haystack prayer meeting 200 years later.

1. On the ship over to India, Adoniram Judson looked forward to meeting the legendary William Carey, the Baptist shoemaker-turned-missionary who had inspired the Haystack prayer meeting six years earlier. In preparation for meeting Carey, Judson decided to examine the Scriptural texts regarding baptism, with a view to defending his Congregational practice of infant baptism to the elder statesman of missions. Instead, Judson became convinced of the practice of believer's baptism and became a Baptist—along with Luther Rice, his missions teammate. The decision to be baptized by an associate of William Carey was a risky one; it meant that Judson and Rice had to resign from the ABCFM. After Adoniram and Ann Judson established themselves in Burma, Luther Rice returned with the blessing of William Carey to seek support for the work from American Baptists. The result was the founding of the first American Baptist missionary society in the United States. I served a Korean-American-Hispanic Baptist Church that is completely committed to overseas missions—in fact, it is hard to conceive of a Baptist Church that doesn't care deeply about overseas missions—a clear legacy of the Haystack prayer meeting through Adoniram Judson.

2. In Burma, Adoniram Judson had many, many amazing adventures. One of his converts, a man by the name of Ko Tha Byu, was from a tribal group living on the border of Burma and Thailand (Siam, it was called back then). Along with George Dana Boardman, another Baptist missionary, Ko carried the message of the Gospel back to his people, one of the first Asian people groups to receive the message gladly. The Karen church became one of the great success stories of Protestant missions. This people group, however, has suffered incredible persecution and harassment ever since World War II. Many of them are refugees in Thailand, and in Burma they were for a time subject to genocide. Several years ago a former member of First Christian Church in Raymondville (where I pastored for six years), was very suddenly and surprisingly called into missionary service (he was in his middle forties at the time) and ended up serving among these Karen on the Thai-Burma border. Our involvement in his ministry is another strand of the Haystack influence on our lives.



The first recipient of “the Haystack Scholarship” at Williams College in 1959 was a student from North Korea who is pictured standing in front of the monument commemorating the location of the 1806 prayer meeting.

3. The ABCFM did not collapse after Judson and Rice resigned. Over the next fifty years the Congregational Missionary society sent out more than 1200 missionaries, and their reports in the *Missionary Herald* were eagerly read by thousands of believers of different denominations back home, inspiring other churches to send missionaries of their own. This missionary society changed its name after many of the Congregational churches merged with other groups to become the United Church of Christ. Later still, the board merged its operations with the Division of Overseas Ministries of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). In 1996 my sister Elena, who had been serving as a volunteer Disciples missionary in Paraguay, was appointed to a UCC position in Chile and was asked to relate to the Massachusetts Conference of the United Church of Christ. Every year she received teams of young people from the same areas in Massachusetts that the five participants of the Haystack meeting were also from, and she took youth from Chile to sing in the very sanctuary in Salem, Massachusetts where Adoniram Judson was commissioned to missionary service.

4. 80 years after the Haystack prayer meeting another college student by the name of Luther Wishard was inspired by the idea of College Students committing their lives to serve overseas. He began the Student Volunteer Movement, that from the 1880's to World War 1 mobilized more than 100,000 college students to take up the task to "evangelize the world in this generation." The effect of this movement was so great that Claude Hickman writes regarding it: "that moment in 1806 under the haystack was the spark for the greatest missionary movement that the world has ever seen." My grandparents, FJ and Alleen Huegel, answered the call of the Student Volunteer Movement and offered their lives in service to the Lord's work overseas, fifty years in Mexico and Latin America.

5. Today the mantle of the mobilization of College Students for Missions that was initiated by Samuel Mills and the other Haystack participants has fallen to InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. Once every three years, IVCF sponsors a very large missions conference for college students (known as the Urbana conference for the location where it was held for many years). The 2006 conference celebrated 200 years of the influence of the Haystack prayer meeting. I, too, made the pilgrimage to Urbana when I was in college, with my wife making the same trip three years later. In recent years, our sons, Jonathan, Evan, and Isaac, participated in Urbana. All of us made commitments to serve God, a commitment God has honored, not by sending us overseas, but by sending the overseas to us in the form of missionaries and immigrants that we have been able to share our lives and ministries with.

So forgive me if I quibble a bit with James P. Moore's excellent work on the History of Prayer in the United States. I hope that the omission of the Haystack prayer meeting was a mere oversight on his part. I would like to think that in God's eyes that group of young men huddled for shelter in the thunderstorm in August, 1806, began in their prayers one of the greatest developments in US History—a new Pentecost that would take the Gospel to the utmost ends of the earth.

In Christ, *Pastor David*

