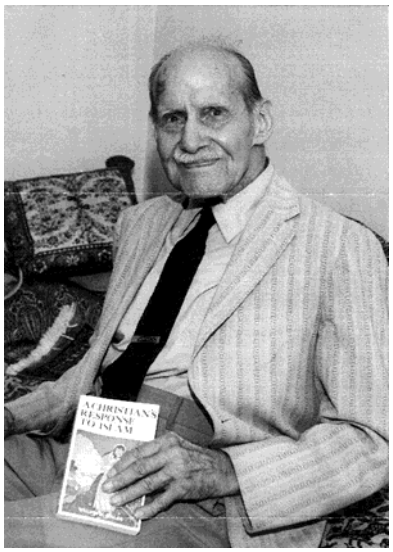
William Miller of Iran 1892-1993



William Miller was born on December 12, 1892 in Middlesboro, Kentucky, where his father, Henry Miller, was the pastor of the Presbyterian Church. After serving in Kentucky until 1901, his father moved to Virginia with his family to pastor a church at Rockbridge Baths (near Lexington). In the manse of this town William spent his boyhood years with his younger brother Francis. He was home-schooled by his very gifted mother, who prepared both boys to go to university.

William loved Jesus from a very early age and became a communicant in the church when he was seven. He joined the church mission group for young people called the Kemper Band, named after Charlotte Kemper – a missionary in Brazil. Each member gave two cents a week to missions in Brazil. It was here that William's interest in missions began to develop.

William went to Washington and Lee University in Virginia in 1908 aged 16! He became an active member in the YMCA of which he later became president. He was an athlete and rowed for three years in the university boat. He had a good academic record. He graduated in 1912 and stayed on another year to get an MA. During that year he served as president of the student body. Later, in 1932, his alma mater awarded him a DD degree.

During the school year 1913-14 William taught English in Marion Institute, Alabama. During the Christmas vacation, he attended the Student Volunteer Movement's missionary convention in Kansas City. In 1913 about 5000 students gathered at this convention to consider the needs of the world. Robert Speer and John Mott spoke. William was deeply impressed by the messages of Samuel Zwemer. After he returned to Marion he signed the declaration card of the SUM: **"It is my purpose, if God permit, to become a foreign missionary."**

In September 1914 William went to Princeton Theological Seminary to prepare himself. There he joined others similarly called to missions. In the class of 1918-19, 20% of the graduates went to serve the Lord Jesus in overseas missions.

In 1916 William was invited by the Inter-Collegiate YMCA to interrupt his studies for one year and become secretary for the Middle Atlantic States YMCA in colleges/universities. In this position William spent the year travelling and presenting the message of missions to thousands of students. At the end of this time he was ill for a while. He returned to Princeton in January 1918 and graduated that summer. He stayed at Princeton for another year because Samuel Zwemer had agreed to give a year of lectures on Islam and Muslim evangelism. By this time William was sure God was calling him to the Muslim World and he applied to join the Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church of the USA. They wanted him to go to Iran (then called Persia). He requested to be sent as near to the Afghan border as possible. He was sent to Meshed. In eastern Afghanistan, Tajikistan and up into Central Asia there was no Christian witness.

In June 1919 he joined about a hundred other new workers in New York for a few days of orientation and lessons on language and cultural acquisition. In 1916 William was ordained in the Southern Presbyterian Church, but this church had no workers among Muslims. It was with the full approval of the "Southern" Church that William joined the "Northern" church. For the rest of his life he was loyal to both.

William sailed from New York on September 25, 1919 with eight other workers assigned to Iran. They went across the Atlantic, through the Mediterranean, then the Black Sea, through the Russian canals to the Caspian Sea and finally arrived at the Caspian port of Enzeli on November 5, 1919. By this time William had learned a number of Farsi phrases – the first of which was, "Thank you". The group then went to Tehran. William stayed in Tehran until June 1920 learning Farsi and teaching English in a mission school for boys as well as doing evangelistic work as he was able.

In June 1920 William travelled by horse-drawn cart to Meshed – 560 miles east of Tehran to join 6 workers already there doing medical/evangelistic work. [Holistic Ministry isn't new!] In Meshed William continued to study Farsi until he was able to preach and teach with great fluency. He began to share the Gospel in the hospital and out in the city. He made journeys with a donkey (for the books) over the mountains to Nishapur together with an Iranian believer. It was in Nishapur that William baptized several BMBs (Believers from a Muslim Background) – his first in Iran.

In December 1921 the two doctors and their wives accompanied William on a 600-mile journey south with a horse-drawn cart to a town called Seistan (close to the Afghan border). This journey was made because it was thought that the Russian Bolshevik army invasion of Iran was imminent. They spent several months in Seistan doing medical/evangelistic work. William was the busy selling Farsi literature and talking to all who were interested to hear. There was no invasion and so William and the others returned to Meshed.

In 1922 Robert Speer and the other mission strategists visited Meshed travelling with horse-drawn vehicles. They brought great encouragement. William continued making evangelistic tours with one or two Iranian believers and with a donkey. The tours especially focused on Khorasan Province where there were very few believers.

On one of the journeys William contracted relapsing fever and became very ill. As he didn't recover his health over several months, he was advised to return to the USA. So he left Meshed in December 1922. He joined his mother and brother Francis in England and eventually got back to America in October 1923. He underwent surgery in New York and spent several months resting. During this time he spent some months in the spring of 1924 studying Arabic at Hartford Theological Seminary under Dr. Duncan MacDonald. Later he said that this time of study was of immense value to him.

In the summer of 1924 William met Isabelle Nicholson, a young widow with 3 young children called Mary, John and Dorothea. For a long time Isabelle had felt God had called her to work overseas. She agreed to marry William and take her family to Persia. They married on November 12, 1924 in Germantown, Pasadena where Isabelle's family home was situated.

William, Isabelle and the three children sailed January 3, 1925. After visiting England, France, Switzerland and Italy they sailed to Egypt and then to Palestine. They then crossed the desert from Damascus to Baghdad in a vehicle (there were no roads). They went from Baghdad by car to Tehran arriving at the end of March. They stayed in Tehran until September and then travelled again by car to Meshed. [The First World War introduced mechanization to transportation in the Middle East and this largely replaced horse-drawn carts!]

While Isabelle studied Farsi and taught her children, William began again his evangelistic tours in Meshed and the surrounding area. He began to write in Farsi the history of the church in the Roman and Persian Empires up until the coming of Islam. He also began commentaries on various New Testament books.

In 1927 he made a very difficult journey overland through Russia and Eastern Europe to Geneva. From there he brought his mother back to Meshed to help in the teaching of the

children. In Meshed two children were born – William Jr. (March 30, 1926) and Flora (January 14, 1928).



Town of Meshed

A small church of BMBs had come into being in Meshed. William helped in preaching and discipling in this church. Once he was invited to Tehran to speak at a week of evangelistic meetings in the Evangelical Church (Presbyterian). This was the first such series of meetings to be attempted in Iran to which Muslims were invited. Many Muslims came night after night and a number said they wanted to become followers of Jesus. This was at a time of increasing freedom in Iran. As the result of this "mission" many other churches began to conduct public evangelistic meetings each year.

In the summer of 1928, the three Nicholson children returned with William's mother to the USA for further schooling. In the spring of 1931, William, Isabelle, William Jr and Flora returned by vehicle to the Mediterranean and then by sea to the States. William was asked to be the Secretary of the Student Volunteer Movement for the year 1931-32. He was given permission to accept this appointment. In this capacity he visited many colleges and universities challenging students to dedicate their lives for overseas missions – especially in the Muslim World. He was one of the speakers at the Student Volunteer Movement convention in 1931. A daughter, Elise, was born to the Millers on October 31, 1931.

The Millers returned to Iran in October 1932. Their mission asked them to serve in Tehran. William was the pastor of the Evangelical Church. For several years he did much preaching teaching and pastoral work. This included many weeks of special evangelistic meetings in Tehran. William was also asked by other churches to run evangelistic meetings. He was then appointed by the Synod to train Iranian evangelists.

In order to train believers from both Muslim and Christian backgrounds in evangelism, William established a "School of Evangelism" in North Tehran near the Alborz Mountains. Three months training was given each summer until 1962 to both men and women from different parts of Iran – all under the leadership of William. The school was called "The Garden of Evangelism". In addition, there was a 9-month course for those who had been through the 3-month course and then had proved to be evangelists. Graduates from the

9-month course were then employed with a salary by the Evangelical Church and sent out to various cities in Iran. They distributed literature and toured the villages spending time with seekers and discipling BMBs. Where there was an existing church, they taught evangelism to church members.

In Tehran, William continued to write commentaries in Farsi. The following books were published: Romans, Luke, Acts, 1 Corinthians and John. Also published was 'The History of the Early Church in the Roman Empire and in Iran' and several other books in Farsi.

On October 10, 1934 a third daughter, Margaret, was born to the Millers in Tehran. After their leave of 1939 Isabelle and the children remained in the States. German submarines closed the Atlantic to American shipping, so William returned to Iran via the Pacific. It took him four months to reach Tehran. He arrived there in February 1941.

In August 1941 Iran was invaded by Russian and British troops and later by American troops. Iran was now under the control of foreign powers and as a result there was much more freedom to evangelise. William spent many months travelling to most parts of Iran to distribute literature and show 'lantern slides' of the life of the Lord Jesus. Government schools were open to speak about Jesus. There were even opportunities to preach to Muslim government officials.

In Tehran William organised The Community Church of Tehran for military and government officers and soldiers who wanted to attend an English worship time. It started in William's home, but later a pastor was appointed and a building erected. This church had a fine witness until it was closed down in 1979.

William returned to the States in late 1944 as part of a large naval convoy to Norfolk, VA. He spent a few months with his family. In February 1945, he re-crossed the Atlantic and the Mediterranean in another convoy. Back in Iran he continued his evangelism tours and his training of BMB evangelists.

In 1948, William was invited by the Near East Council of Churches to visit Egypt, Syria and Lebanon and to speak to Christian background churches about how evangelism to Muslims was going on in Iran. He was very warmly received everywhere and he strongly encouraged all believers to be more faithful in sharing the Gospel with Muslims. He made many friends on this trip.

In 1949, just as William arrived back in the States to visit his family, his mother died. She had supported him so faithfully in prayer. He was able to attend the graduations of two of his daughters and to perform the wedding of one of them. He had a restful time at home with his family.

On returning to Iran in 1950, William lived in Tabriz in the north-west of Iran. There was a Christian hospital there and William focused on doing evangelism in Tabriz itself and in the surrounding area. He also preached in the little church in Tabriz. In 1953 William was sent to Resht for one year's evangelism in that town and area. During these years William continued to hold evangelistic meetings (a week at a time) in many parts of Iran. He taught in the "School of Evangelism" each summer. He continued to prepare literature for publication in Farsi and to preach in Tehran between 1954 and 1962.

Before leaving for his retirement aged 70, William's last service in Iran was on December 12, 1962. He had just completed a week of evangelistic meetings in Abadan (the oil area). He travelled overland to Beirut and then by ship to New York. There he joined his wife and daughter Mary in the family home in Mt. Airy, PA. There William and Isabelle lived until, after a long illness, Isabelle died on December 11, 1980. After a year, the family home was broken up and William moved into a Lutheran home in Mt. Airy.

From 1935 until 1962, the Millers had been supported by the Calvin Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia. William deeply appreciated their friendship, their prayers, their practical help in sending out prayer letters and their gifts. In return, William presented to Calvin Church two very fine Persian rugs specially designed depicting the Lord Jesus. They still hang in the hall of the church.

William wasn't idle in retirement! He was constantly speaking in churches, colleges and at conferences on the task of making the Good News of Jesus known among Muslim peoples. From 1963 to 1983 – aged 70-90 years – he spoke over 2000 times on Christian Missions in the Muslim World. He also published a number of books in English. These include:

Ten Muslims meet Christ, Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company
a book of biographies of Iranian MBBs.

A Christian's Response to Islam, Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co.

Tales of Persia, Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co.
A very good book for children

Your Muslim Guest, (FFM) a guide for westerners in building friendships that help you to share the Gospel inoffensively with immigrant/student Muslims

My Persian Pilgrimage, 2nd Ed. William Carey Library

The Baha'i Faith: History and Teachings, William Carey Library 1974

The Beliefs and Practices of Christians – this is perhaps his most widely used book. It is in Farsi, English, Urdu, Uighur, Croatian, Russian, Turkish, Tajik, Kazak, Malay and Albanian. One expert has said, *"For its size, it is the best book we can give to an interested, seeking Muslim reader"*.

In addition to speaking and writing, William was chairman of the Fellowship of Faith for Muslims in the States. For over 20 years he conducted special 'Days of Prayer' for the Muslim World at the WEC headquarters near Philadelphia. He was a board member of Interserve, USA. He also taught an adult Bible class in his church in Mt Airy for several years. In December 1983 he spoke to 18,000 students at a Campus Crusade Convention. He did this again in 1984 and 1985. He also travelled to the US Center for World Mission to teach on Islam. AWM used William in their Summer Institute on Islam. He regularly spoke at Iranian Christians International in their summer conferences 1980-84. ICI's director wrote, *"He may have touched as many Iranian lives since retiring as in all the years he ministered in Iran*".

A stroke on December 9, 1991, paralysed his right side for a time. He recovered enough to speak. He enjoyed visitors and enjoyed his 100th birthday on December 12, 1992 – 30 years after he left Iran! He died of heart failure on July 7, 1993 and is buried in the Stonewall Jackson Memorial Cemetery, Lexington, VA.

In his endorsement of **My Persian Pilgrimage**, Don McCurry comments:

"If ever there was a modern-day Apostle Paul it was William M. Miller of Iran. He was supremely gifted in evangelising Muslims. He went out and did it city by city, town by town, year after year, for 43 years.

Today our problem is not that we have tried Muslim evangelism and failed. It is that we have not stuck everlastingly at it. Miller will challenge you as few others to 'do the work of an evangelist, in season and out of season." (2 Tim. 4:2)