

Prophetic Sisterhood: How Early Women Ministers
Shaped Our Faith

Sermon Reprint by Rev. Tess Baumberger
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By 1887, Eliza Tupper Wilkes despaired of ever finding a minister for the small church she had established ten years earlier in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. A Unitarian woman with “missionary zeal”, Eliza had started the church after thirty religious liberals in town approached her, asking for assistance.

Though not a minister herself, the mother of six agreed to help. She led services in her husband’s law offices while seeking a settled minister, and seeking, and seeking.... She found the male seminarians sent out from the East to be too academic and abstract. Pioneer people wanted a minister to preach, in plain and concrete terms, a theology suited to the frontier. She complained, “You cannot plant ‘eastern Unitarian churches’ in this soil.”

Then Eliza heard of the growing group of Unitarian women ministers forming in and around Iowa. Though the Universalists were the first to ordain women with full denominational approval in the 1860s, by the late 1800s the Unitarians had ordained something like seventy women as well.

As native Westerners, the self-termed “Iowa Sisterhood” understood their prairie parishioners better than those academic, citified Eastern men. Though less well-educated, these able women were warm, willing, organized, and down-to-earth. Eliza sought a woman like that to lead her church.

In answer to Eliza’s prayers, early in 1887 Caroline Bartlett Crane arrived in Sioux Falls to try her hand where male clergy had failed. Within a few weeks she secured a rented a chapel to hold the congregation’s worship services until the group could build a church of its own. Then she and Eliza worked quickly to raise enough

money to purchase a lot, and to begin construction.

Before the year was out, the congregation had a new, modern building made of pink quartzite (which was probably quarried in my home town of Dell Rapids, about twenty miles north of Sioux Falls). Eliza reported that a “happy company” filled the hall to hear the new pastor preach her first sermon from the new pulpit.

My favorite story in Cynthia Grant Tucker’s book *Prophetic Sisterhood* concerns the first time Caroline Bartlett Crane exchanged pulpits with a male colleague. She writes, “The Wilkses’ little girl Queenie was so thoroughly unprepared and scandalized that she cried out in a whisper that everyone heard – and many repeated for years – “Look, mama! There a man up there in the pulpit!”

Now of course sympathetic and supportive male Unitarians played an important role in the success of female ministers like Caroline Bartlett Crane. Among these “brother feminists” was an Iowa minister named Oscar Clute, who gave the Reverends Mary Safford and Eleanor Gordon the support they needed to found the first church they founded, in Hamilton, Iowa in 1879.

The Reverend Jenkin Lloyd Jones, secretary of the Western Unitarian Conference, was, in Grant Tucker’s words “the sisters’ most ardent and steadfast male ally.” A native of Wales, raised in Wisconsin, the free-thinking Lloyd Jones broke with the Unitarian establishment in many ways besides recruiting female ministers to serve the churches under his care.

He promoted the careers of radical (often Transcendentalist) ministers, who rejected “orthodox” New England Unitarianism in favor of a religion that looks remarkably like what we have today – less centered on Jesus and more focused on ethical action. When the American Unitarian Association objected to sending money to support such ministries, Jones suggested that the Western Unitarian Conference become independent, raising its own money to establish new churches. The Conference agreed, and that’s what happened.

Jenkin and his wife Susan Barber Jones served as equal partners in both their marriage and in their work for the Conference, which extended from Illinois to California. Together they authored several Unitarian tracts, and helped start the Western Unitarian Sunday School Society.

Given his egalitarian marriage and his life-long respect for women, Jones' support of the Sisterhood is perhaps not surprising. When male clergy refused to establish and serve frontier churches, Lloyd Jones sought out women ministers who were eager to do so. Quite rightly, Lloyd Jones saw these female clergy as the hope of Unitarianism in the central and western United States.

The women ministers did play a key role, despite the fact that they were few and far-flung. They shaped our movement despite the fact that within a couple decades most had lost their parishes. This loss happened for several reasons, including the militant misogyny of Samuel Eliot and others who took over the leadership of the American Unitarian Association at the turn of the 20th century.

As chief administrator, Eliot worked to centralize the power of the Association in Boston, and to return the renegade Western Conference to the fold. By that time, Jenkin Lloyd Jones had resigned as secretary of the Conference, and so was not in a position to advocate for the sisterhood.

Here's what was happening. Contrary to Thomas Jefferson's prediction that Unitarianism would soon grow to be the religion of the land, it was losing membership by the end of the 19th century. As Calvinism waned in more mainstream religions, so did a religion that rose up against its bitter dictates.

In an effort to revitalize Unitarianism, leaders sought to build a "manlier ministry" by dislodging female ministers from their pulpits and preventing new women from the taking up the ministry in the first place. This was a conscious effort to undermine and eliminate women in the ministry.

It's tempting when reading this history to run around crying "foul!" and ranting

about sexism. However, things are rarely that simple. It was not just sexism that drove these early women ministers from their churches. Grant Tucker writes that their congregations' indifference to what they preached also played a role.

As women, these ministers were sensitive to oppression. They were indeed a "Prophetic Sisterhood" who preached that both people and institutions (including Unitarianism) needed to make radical changes toward true equality. The Reverends Mary Safford and Eleanor Gordon said the keys to saving society were personal sacrifice and service toward others.

Unlike Universalists, who took this "Social Gospel" message to heart, and several prophetic Unitarians who also worked for social justice, Unitarians at the time were not much given to social justice, as a general rule. They were wealthier and in general more complacent about inequality. Over time, the Sisterhood's prophetic sermons drove younger members to the more mainstream churches whose theologies had softened over time, and who did not goad their members toward acting for equality.

By the early 1900s, through both active dislodging and passive attrition, most of these women had left parish ministry. Many became what today we would call "community ministers" – working for causes like pacifism and voting rights, or establishing settlement houses in urban centers that ministered to poor people. Some of the women died in poverty, having been stripped of position and power by men.

This is not to say that some men didn't fight for their cause. US President and Unitarian William Howard Taft interceded to help Clara Cooke Helvie, the only woman the Unitarians ordained between 1906 and 1917, to find a position.

And you can bet that some of those prophetic women went out fighting. Our heroine from the Sioux Falls church, Caroline Bartlett Crane, compiled a record of the ways women were excluded, and published an expose detailing exactly how Unitarians had neglected their female talent.

In summary, with regard to women's rights, our religious ancestors took a huge

step forward and then a big step back. This history is as bold and exciting as it is infuriating and sad. We have every right to be proud of the early ordination and settlement of women ministers in our tradition. We also have cause to mourn the forces that drove them from their pulpits.

It is important both to celebrate and to mourn this history. Grappling with the difficult parts of our past, and coming to terms with it, is an important part of growing up. After all, the past is part of who we are - as individuals, as churches, as a religious tradition, and as a nation.

It seems to me that the more we can acknowledge, learn from, and integrate difficult past experiences, the more we can turn the lead of painful experience into the gold of wisdom. Spiritual practice and religious community both work this sort of alchemy (an old science that tried to turn lead into gold). As spiritual beings in religious community we are called to transform our selves and our institutions. And if that sounds a bit like what the Prophetic Sisterhood preached, that's no accident.

Let us take a few moments now to reflect on this history- what we might learn from it, how it might apply to our own lives.

(pause, then sing #8 Mother Spirit Father Spirit)

With regard to women's rights, our religious ancestors took a huge step forward and then a big step back. This history is relevant in many ways to the world as we know it today. This story of the rise and the fall of the Prophetic Sisterhood reminds us that oppression does not die easily and that the march toward equality is not linear.

Having women ministers back then did not mean sexism was dead, any more than having a black president today means racism is a thing of the past. Every time there is a leap forward, there is a recoil as people push back. However, the other lesson of this history is that liberty once won is more easily regained, and exceeded. Every movement toward equality leaves an impression, a path future generations can follow to greater effect.

Though nearly all of the female ministers of the Sisterhood lost their churches and their power, their stories survived. These stories survived despite efforts to obliterate any record of their existence. I believe that even if we had lost all of their words and stories, they would still have affected our religion as it is today. Their stories are in the walls, in the blood and bones of our faith. If we didn't know about them, the only difference would be that we would not give credit where it was due.

You see, the Sisterhood shaped today's Unitarianism in many ways. For one thing, in their womanly wisdom they "did church" in very different ways than their male counterparts. Rather than seeing their ministries as beginning and ending with the Sunday sermon, they saw their work as extending throughout the week in pastoral care and enrichment programs.

They worked to create faith communities that were homes for the spirits of their parishioners, safe havens from the religious persecution they faced in everyday life. They planned programs throughout the week to nourish and sustain the lives and the minds of their congregants. This is a model of church life that we see today, and it is partly due to the work of these women.

Beyond influencing how we "do church" these women contributed to the evolution of Unitarian Universalist theology. In their preaching, these women integrated new ideas from science. Like many of their male colleagues, they brought together theology and science, including the new theory of evolution, in ways that were creative and imaginative.

The Sisterhood also helped lay the foundations for the evolution of religious humanism out of the liberal wing of Western Unitarianism. Mary Safford and Eleanor Gordon absorbed the idea that God is "collective humanity," from their mentor Theodore Parker. They took this definition of the divine as collective humanity with them to the frontier and applied it in their churches. They liked the idea that congregations should spend less time in prayer and more time engaged in ethical action – which you could see

as a humanistic form of devotion or prayer.

It is not at all surprising to me that decades later, the three male Unitarian ministers who laid the foundations for Religious Humanism in our country first met one another at a meeting of the Western Unitarian Conference. Not only that, this meeting took place in Des Moines, at a church once served by Reverend Mary Safford. There are clear links between the humanism so prevalent in today's Unitarian Universalism and the theology practiced and preached by the Prophetic Sisterhood.

Not only did members of the Sisterhood incorporate scientific and humanistic elements into their (and hence our) theology, they also explored different and more inclusive images of the divine. In an address to the World's Congress of Representative Women in 1894, Reverend Mary Safford said,

“... those who worship God alone must be led to realize that the Eternal is mother as well as father to all human beings; that they must be led to see that the words, “As one whom his mother comforteth, so will I comfort you,” have as deep a meaning as those beautiful words, “Like as a father pitieth his children so the Lord pitieth them that fear him.”

She was advocating for female images of the divine! In 1894! Safford went on to say, “We must do away with the exclusive use of masculine nouns and pronouns when speaking of the Eternal, that in the all-wise, all-loving one every yearning of the human soul may find fullest satisfaction.” These are ideas that may seem radical to many people today, and she said them over 100 years ago. What a woman!

Mary Safford believed these changes in theology and religious language would come about as a natural result of men and women serving in ministry together. She would be pleased, I think, to know that over half of Unitarian Universalist ministers are now female, and that the feminization of both our clergy and our laity has indeed affected both our imagery and our language about the Divine.

The Sisterhood would also be pleased that through the efforts of a later generation of feminists, both men and women, our current hymnal uses inclusive

language. Not only that, many of us find female images of the Eternal comforting and powerful.

Though we have come far in our quest for gender equality, we have not yet achieved its full measure. Though over half our ministers are women, there still is a “stained glass ceiling.” Most of the largest churches in our denomination are served by white men, and most of the smallest churches are served, part time, by women.

Still, in large part, Mary Safford’s vision has come to pass. In the end the wisdom and the witness of the Prophetic Sisterhood are apparent in our faith today. They show in the model of church life that we adopt, and the theology that inspires us.

May their wisdom also live in our commitment to ethical action toward a goal of equality. In their memory, in their honor, let us take up the cause of justice, working to create a world where every person, regardless of gender or sexual orientation, class, creed, country or color, may express the gifts of their natures and share their wisdom.

We know from this history that we may encounter opposition on the way. There may be setbacks, but we must not give up hope. What the story of the Sisterhood tells us is that liberation once won is more easily regained, and exceeded. Every movement toward equality leaves an impression on the world, a path future generations can follow to greater effect. Moreover, history informs us that liberty regained is more likely to endure. So may it be.