

**Thomas Jefferson Memorial Church-Unitarian Universalist**  
**“The Iowa Sisterhood”**  
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### **Introduction**

I entered the ministry some thirty-seven years ago. Many changes have taken place in these four decades. The most obvious change is in the number of female ministers. When I was in theological school at Duke University my class was mostly men and a few women who were encouraged to go into religious education and not the parish ministry. Things are completely different now. In the 1980's and '90's women began entering theological school in record numbers. In 1999 women became the majority of our ordained ministers. I am proud of our Association for encouraging and welcoming women into the ministry. Universalists and Unitarians have been ordaining women for over one hundred and fifty years.

Many of our modern-day women ministers have been inspired by the story of female ministers who lived in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Today I would like to tell the story of a group of these women known as “The Iowa Sisterhood.” Women like Leslie Takahashi-Morris, former minister of this church, and Alane Cameron Miles and Jeanne Pupke in Richmond, and Jennifer Ryu in Williamsburg learned about these women in church or in theological school and looked to them for wisdom and courage to continue their work.

When I was working on my doctorate in the early '80's and was looking for a thesis I was encouraged by the editor of the UU World, David Parke, to tell their story. I was in Philadelphia at the time and didn't feel I had the resources to complete the important task. What I didn't know at the time was that someone else was already deep into the work. It was Cynthia Grant Tucker, a professor at Memphis State University. For thirty years now she has been telling the story of these women and through her work these women have been an inspiration to me and most of my colleagues. Today I would like to tell this story and look for guidance from these women today.

When I first learned of the Iowa Sisterhood many questions came to mind. Why the Midwest? Iowa is not viewed as the hotbed of liberalism in 2009. Why did women flourish in ministry in Iowa in the 1890's? Who encouraged these women? What difficulties did they encounter? What was the nature of their ministry? What theology did they preach? How did they impact the churches they served? What was their relationship with the males in their churches? Probably the most important questions, why did they stop serving as ministers? Finally, what can we learn from them today?

### **The Pioneers**

What is the Iowa Sisterhood? Why did they emerge in Iowa? The Iowa Sisterhood was a group of female ministers who emerged as organizers of small churches in Iowa in the 1880's. Their influence spread throughout the Midwest, so much that by the end of the century the Western Conference of the Unitarian Association was controlled by this group of approximately 20-25 women. They held every office in the Conference including President, organized, and built and paid for over 20 new churches, attempted to organize many more church congregations, influenced the theology and architecture of these churches, and stirred a controversy in the American Unitarian Association that would continue for decades.

We all know that the first female ministers did not emerge in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Quakers and Baptists had encouraged females to preach in England several centuries before. But we also know this was not encouraged and in fact caused great concern in Protestant churches both in England and America in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The first woman to be ordained in the U.S. was Antoinette Brown who attended Oberlin College and graduated in 1853. Unfortunately, the administrators of Oberlin who accepted women as students did not feel they should be ordained as ministers. The same could be said for most divinity schools in America in the 1970's. This is why they steered women toward religious education.

Antoinette Brown was a Congregationalist so when she graduated she began looking for a church. She was called by the Congregationalist Church in South Butler, New York and was ordained by them. She immediately ran into difficulty. Her denomination would not recognize her ordination. She was frustrated in

South Butler, left the congregation and became a Unitarian. Today both of our denominations claim the first female minister to be ordained in the U.S.

The Universalists rightly claim Olympia Brown, no relation to Antoinette, as the first woman to be ordained by a denomination, June 25, 1863. The story of these two women is a fascinating story of courage and bravery. Charlotte Cote, in her book, Olympia Brown: The Battle for Equality, writes of the difficulties experienced by Olympia to break the gender barrier after the Civil War. She writes about her frustrations at St. Lawrence University, another pioneering school in the area of education for women. Cote writes:

There were times when (Olympia) felt isolated and lonely. . .Some of her classmates were friendly and helpful, but two of them were quite contrary. They delighted in belittling her simply because she was a woman. “What church will hire a woman preacher?” they taunted. “Who would ever go to hear a woman preach?” One of their favorite strategies was to get beneath her window at night and mimic her voice, which was soft and high-pitched. This practice grew increasingly painful to her because she knew of no way to improve her voice. (p. 54)

These men would also criticize her sermons required each week. “One of the nicest remarks they ever made about one of her sermons was, “Well, it was very good but I should hardly call it a *sermon*.”

I had a similar experience when I was being considered for my doctoral program at Lutheran Seminary in Philadelphia. After I finished my sermon, when I was being judged by the faculty for entrance into the program, the first faculty member said, “I am not sure that was a sermon.” I knew that I needed a unanimous vote of the faculty to continue in the program, so I took a deep breath and said to myself, “Maybe I should have gone to Harvard.” I tried not to be defensive, and asked why it wasn’t a sermon. The professor said, “You didn’t go through the cross.” His view was that a sermon must mention Jesus Christ. Fortunately, for me, one of the other professors spoke up and said, “Would we expect that of a rabbi?” The policy of the school to accept one non-Lutheran a year, was being tested, and fortunately for me, they accepted me and for most of the faculty, welcomed a Unitarian Universalists. I found it ironic, three years later that I was the only member of my class to graduate and receive the doctorate degree. The program had a 40% drop-out rate, and most students who completed the program took more than three years. I saw this as a victory for tolerance and acceptance of different views.

The same can be said for Olympia Brown. One of the small victories in her training is the fact that Olympia returned to St. Lawrence the second year but the two men who belittled her did not. The story of these female ministers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century is full of courage and bravery but also of sorrow, defeat and bitterness. I will tell the sad ending to the Iowa Sisterhood in a few moments, but first more about their beginning.

The stories about Antoinette and Olympia were now history and many women found their lives an inspiration. Many young girls were shocking their parents with their dream of preaching from Protestant pulpits. Their parents were rightly concerned about how their daughters would be treated. Cynthia Tucker writes:

Not only did frontier parishioners face the problem of poverty, sickness, and climate, but they were regarded as heretics of the worst kind by their orthodox neighbors, the Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists, and Calvinist Congregationalists, all of whom had preceded them in the region. Non-Trinitarians were ostracized and persecuted; they were made the object of scorn at public revivals and had their businesses boycotted. (pp 4-5)

It is no wonder that in 1870 there were only five female ministers in the U.S. In 1890 there would be over seventy women of the approximately 101, 640 Protestant clergy in the 1890 census. Of the seven ordained women the Universalists had the largest number—32; the Unitarians were next with sixteen and the Methodists and Congregationalists combined for fifteen.

With all the barriers to climb, how would these numbers begin to change in less than 20 years? The first answer lies in the models to inspire others. The first women ministers in America would need strong encouragement to enter the mine fields ahead. This encouragement came from the Secretary of the Western Unitarian Conference, Jenkin Lloyd Jones, a radical in his own right, who challenged the control of Boston, and developed his own way of approaching liberal religion in the Midwest. We must remember that the Midwest was viewed as the western frontier at the time. The center of the Western Conference was originally in Pennsylvania, then it moved to Chicago.

The story of the rise and fall of the Iowa Sisterhood is also the story of the rise and fall of Jenkin Lloyd Jones and his challenge to the control of the Eastern establishment in the American Unitarian Association. That war continues to be fought in some of our Midwestern churches.

There are some other factors that contributed to the struggle of women in the ministry in our Association. The advent of women ministers in Iowa in the 1880's was partly a matter of necessity. The Harvard trained men in the East would not accept a call to the ministry for less than \$80 a month while the Iowa churches were paying closer to \$40 a month. I don't want to give our finance committee any wild ideas here especially during this budget time.

In reality the female ministers were just as competent as the men of Boston and they were being inspired by the same liberal thinkers who were leading the reforms on the East coast—William Ellery Channing, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Theodore Parker. Their heroes were Ben Franklin, Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Paine. They were true rationalists. As Tucker explain, they believed:

God had created the universe to run by natural laws and did not perform miracles, or intervene in people's daily lives and that nothing was served by believing in Christ's divinity, people's corruption, or the Bible's status as divine revelation.

With their forbears these women believed in the Jeffersonian affirmation of ethical living as the basis of Christianity. They challenged biblical infallibility, supported abolition and the new Darwinian theories. Many of their sermons challenged the Apostle Paul's views toward women. They were women truly ahead of their time.

All historical movement require leaders who inspire others to follow their example. The leaders of the Iowa Sisterhood were Mary Safford and Eleanor Gordon. As with Luther and Wittenberg, Germany, the women needed a place to focus their dedication and practice their religion. The unlikely place to start this 19<sup>th</sup> century reformation was Humboldt, Iowa. Mary Safford and Eleanor Gordon were raised on farms, but both aspired to enter the ministry.

Encouraged by Jenkin Lloyd Jones, the women started a church in Humboldt in 1880. Why Humboldt? It was a pocket of the most liberal dissenters surrounded by staunch evangelicals. Humboldt was founded by Stephen Taft, a former Methodist who founded a colony dedicated to "freedom and unity in religion," temperance, social responsibility and equal rights for all, blacks and whites, males and females, alike.

On June 29, 1880, Mary Safford was ordained by the new Humboldt Unity Church. Unity was one of the names the women chose to label their churches. The motto of the church was that used by the Western Conference: "Freedom, Fellowship and Character in Religion; truth for authority, not authority for truth." These female ministers were the forerunners of the egalitarian movement that has continued in UU churches. Other names used by their churches were: "All Souls," and "Peoples" churches showing their egalitarian influence.

Of the female minister to follow in the Midwest between 1880 and 1890, all would be influenced if not recruited by Mary Safford and Eleanor Gordon. Unity Clubs often existed in their churches which emphasized the role of education in the church. In addition to full Sunday services the women would attract many people to hear lectures and take part in discussions patterned after the Transcendental Club of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Margaret Fuller in Boston.

Mary Safford turned out to be a tremendous organizer and fundraiser for Liberal Religion. One parishioner characterized the ministry of Mary Safford and Eleanor Gordon this way:

When Mary Safford's charm and emotional appeal did not reach . . . the heart of the practical businessman, the scientific knowledge, touch of humor and "hard common sense" of Miss Gordon appealed to his reason and opened his purse.

In the five years they were to serve the Humboldt Church they paid off all but \$300 of the \$1500 they borrowed to build the church. They wouldn't have needed the congressional bailout money. No foreclosure necessary.

In addition to the building goals they set out to achieve, they also reached out to serve their community. They contributed to organizations to help abandon and destitute women, the humane society, the Unitarian Women's Conference, and the Post Office Mission to reach the un-churched.

One of their goals they set out to achieve was to become independent of Boston. They were suspicious of these men who they felt patronized them and discouraged them from fulfilling their mission of equality. They felt the men of Boston did not understand the Midwest, and their traditional theology was too conventional.

Without Boston's encouragement they recruited other women and created a web of support for each other that was sadly lacking in the larger Unitarian community. Safford and Gordon would welcome the young women in their home, encourage them to continue their education, and tutor them when needed to learn the work of the ministry. They aspired to start a seminary for women ministers that never got off the ground.

Humboldt became the hub for a network that would spread through the Midwest and finally West. Some of the women went to Colorado and California. Women such as Ida Hultin, Anna Norris, Margaret Titus Olmstead, Estella Elizabeth Padgham, Helen Grace Putnam, Helen Wilson, Celia Parker Woolley and Mary Colson became a part of their sisterhood. Between these women we can count over 200 years of service to the denomination in very difficult circumstances, in cities such as Sioux City, Algona and Perry, Iowa, La Porte, Indiana, Beatrice, Nebraska, and Moline, Illinois.

### **Sad Ending**

Until recently we did not find the sisterhood in our history books. What Cynthia Tucker learned from her research is that the UUA did what they could to discourage these women in their ministry, would not recommend them for pulpits and most of them were forced to retire early.

Many were left frustrated and bitter toward the Association they worked so hard to develop. Their life stories were not told in the AUA. Many were lonely and tired of the struggle after only a few years. When the call came for them to join the Women's Suffrage Movement most responded. Others felt they were appreciated more in the social settlement movement that took place during the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Hull House in Chicago would become their center of action—not Humboldt. As Tucker concludes: "They remained a tiny and spread-out dissenting minority who wrestled daily with terrible feelings of loneliness and inadequacy." (p. 5) They found their parents and society often frowned at them because of their decision to enter the ministry, colleagues often rejected them or failed to affirm their ordination, and the AUA set barriers against their success in the ministry.

I cannot imagine the internal struggle within these women. Many worked eighteen-hour days to accomplish their goals. They were also discouraged from ministry by their sisters in the suffrage movement. They wanted them to fight for the most important cause of the era—women's right to vote. Add to this the desire of some to marry and have children, it all added up to frustration, conflict and for many burnout. Many of them married the church. It became their total existence.

All they had was their dreams of what liberal religion ought to be and their support for each other. Their web of friendship, support and love made it possible for most of them to continue the struggle. Marie Jenny described the Sisterhood as a "wide spread web whose little centers" fastened by women and joined by a common thread spun out of their "service and sympathy." You can see why the women who have made the decision to become ministers in this era find the Iowa Sisterhood an inspiration today.

The words of one of our minister during the Civil Rights struggle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century resonates with the lives of the Sisterhood. Jack Mendelsohn wrote:

A Unitarian Universalist minister is a person who continually runs out of time, out of wisdom, out of ability, out of courage, and out of money. We are hurtable. Our tasks involve great responsibility and little power.

The next chapter in the story of these women should not have been a surprise. Most chose to get out of the ministry. Between 1906 and 1917 no women were ordained into the Unitarian ministry. Our Association would be less for it. The suffrage movement would benefit. The new masthead for the Unitarian magazine promised its reader, “A Verile Optimism in Religion.” It would take another fifty years before their example would be followed by many women in our Association.

I blame the Association for the delay. I also blame our country. We became more masculine in our approach to life. The ultimate symbol of this was Teddy Roosevelt, our leading “Rough Rider.”

### **Conclusions**

We cannot change the past. We can only change how we act in the present and plan for the future. As the Civil Rights struggle has been an inspiration for many in our country, including our new President, I ask that we look back to the Iowa Sisterhood for guidance today.

I have asked Wendy Repass to help me with this part of the sermon today. In a few moments I will ask her to speak about what she wants from her church community today inspired by the Iowa Sisterhood.

I want to say first what I hope from this church:

- I want this church to welcome all people wherever they are in their life journey. I want a church where boys and girls are encouraged to be their best selves, and choose the career that best suits them, not what society expects of them.
- I want a church that is willing to deal with the difficult issues that face all of us. I want our churches to be safe havens from predators, where parents can know that their children will be safe here. I want our church to be a place where boys and girls can learn about responsibility in sexuality, and can be free to be who they are and what they want to become.
- I want a church that can provide comfort and support for those who have been abused in their past, or maybe facing abuse in the present. We can support safe houses, and battered women’s shelters. We can support SARA, the organization that has helped guide us through our recent events. Their services are free. I hope one day we will add them to our list of organizations we support with our Sunday offering.
- I want a church that can become knowledgeable about and help fight domestic violence, child abuse, rape and incest. We need to know the dangers of the internet.
- I also want a church in which individuals who have made mistakes, may have betrayed their friends, and disappointed themselves, can be given the opportunity for forgiveness and reconciliation.

Thank you.