

12/13/09 Sermon

"Prairie Pioneers"

Rev. Paul D. Daniel, Minister

My sermon today is meant to honor the prophetic words and deeds of historic UU women who changed the nature of our ministry. These women, limited to traditional female roles, were determined to broaden their vision and service beyond our hidebound, male dominated, Boston faith. They wanted to be ministers and not just the wives of ministers.

Starting in the mid-1800s, many of these heroic women migrated to serve small, rural and prairie churches. Others were born in the Midwest and sought to minister to their own communities. They formed a band of courageous preachers and pioneers that spread the good news of Unitarianism across the prairie frontiers.

Today, their small numbers have blossomed to represent over 52% of our contemporary ministry. In the process, they offered a feminine perspective to a male preserve. Today, no other religion in our country offers more opportunity to women – truly something to be proud of.

Women today hold many prominent positions in our denomination. Our last two moderators have been women. And woman have, although not successfully, been viable candidates for the presidency of our faith.

Women have served to expand the vision of our religion, deepen our family-centered values, and enrich our corporate worship and congregational life. We have become more inclusive of women, but the struggle continues to fully open our ministry to more people of color and ethnic minorities. In this area, we poorly mirror some major Christian faiths rather than lead them.

The "feminization of our ministry" began in the 19th Century when women heard the call of Walt Whitman:

*Afoot and light-hearted, I take to the open road,
Healthy, free, the world before me,
The long brown path before me, leading wherever I choose.*

*Henceforth, I ask not good-fortune – I myself am good fortune;
Henceforth, I whimper no more, postpone no more, need nothing,
Strong and content, I travel the open road.*

Cynthia Grant Tucker, in her book, *"Prophetic Sisterhood,"* wrote, "These women were hungry to do the work of the spirit, to carry a message of hope and love to the prairies. They already served in the guise of ministers' wives, missionaries, deaconesses, and all-round lay workers. They proved to be ambitious and capable, able to run their churches, engineering social outreach and virtually doing what ministers did without the recognition or the salaries."

Sounds familiar, doesn't it?

Our Universalist ministry opened to women due to the freedom of the plains and to a shortage of male preachers after the Civil War. Further, as a creedless faith that did not exclude women, Universalism would not justify excluding women.

Similarly, since Unitarians did not believe in original sin, women were freed from an inferior status because of the "sin of Eve." They were then able to become fully credentialed ministers. Along with that relaxed credentialing after the Civil War, doors opened wider for women to assume new public service roles.

From the moment women entered our clergy, they became a leading force championing the needs of family. But, change came slowly and with great difficulty. For decades, their numbers were sparse and opposition fierce. By the 1870s, there were only five women in our ministry and, twenty years later, only 70 were ordained.

They formed what was known as the "Western Sisterhood" – later called the "Iowa Band." In the following two decades, women in our movement grew to become the primary voice of liberal religion in the Midwest.

They were committed, writes Tucker, to "a ministry that went beyond once-a-week pulpit appearances. They devoted themselves to raising church families during the week, to advancing the concept of a 'Church home' beyond popular metaphors that few male clergy addressed. Their sermons, worship services, Sunday school programs, and church socials supported the practical needs of families and home, as did the down-to-earth architecture, utilitarian furnishings, and domestic use of interior space of the churches these women designed and built.

"Their new focus gave the historically male pastorate a new shape the women wore well. They successfully eased people's anxieties about putting women in charge of churches. Women rose to the task and proved they

were able to build strong congregational lives, impressive membership growth, and financial prosperity.”

They suffered much hardship and privation as they went about their work of seeding new churches from Iowa to the Dakotas. Their success was due to a blend of business management, sound preaching and maternal care – ideally suited for those parishioners in the West who had broken with the Orthodox Churches in New England.

One prophetic example of these women was Mary Augusta Safford. Born Presbyterian, she became an exemplar of this new breed. At the age of six, she started her ministry on her farm as a “tree stump” preacher. Her parents hoped that she would give up this foolishness and assume her rightful church position “in the kitchen and praying from the pews.”

But, Mary had other ideas. Like many of our children today, she was precocious. She read her father's books on the heretical ideas of Darwinism, biblical fallibility and abolition that set her mind and imagination ablaze.

She associated herself with her neighbor Eleanor Gordon and together created a new fire storm of faith. Their intellectual union led them, in their twenties, to pledge themselves to spend their lives together serving the world as a team. With the encouragement of a local Unitarian leader, they started their first church in Hamilton, Illinois.

Soon after, they attracted the attention of Jenkins Lloyd Jones, secretary of the Western American Unitarian Association, who encouraged them to be ordained and to serve a new church in Humboldt, Iowa – which they did with distinction from 1880-1885. Mary had a long and distinguished career and, in her retirement, helped to found and lead the Orlando, Fla., church from 1910-1927.

Tucker writes that Safford believed that “true religion must first of all be free religion, free from irrational dogma that discouraged personal growth. She held that the human souls would evolve, not in solitude but through community. People would make their common tasks divine by doing them in the spirit of love and helpfulness. Through her years of service, Safford did just that, helping her congregations be the kind of religious communities in which individuals could evolve and thrive together.”

She died in 1927, but left behind a legacy of competent women who served as ministers in her image. Her understanding of the need for love and community in building a church community still inspires us here in UUMAN. The courage she showed, the determination she brought to her work, the

faith she showed in herself and in the “pastorate of all members” set a rarely equaled standard.

She pioneered the idea that a theology of “dailyness” that was paramount to creating a meaningful church where the ministry could be shared with the congregation. Lay people needed to be encouraged to share their voice and wisdom from the pulpit and to participate in peer grouping like our small group ministry today. She understood that all generations were welcomed to become celebrants of the spirit.

In the words of Tucker, the “Iowa Sisterhood” knew that to serve the spiritual and communal needs of their parishioners, they would have to “start seeking their texts in the life of the parish, past and present, and build on the theology that they discover among the congregation. This theology of doing and being that women clergy articulated, required that we recognize and honor our history as the ground of a meaningful faith.”

Their narrative reminds us that we are all part of a timeless community of courageous dreamers, with a shared vision and hope for a better world. May we continue to be worthy of their pioneering work.