

ICUW: February 26 - March 1, 2009, Houston
Workshop: Saturday February 28: To Be Called 'Minister'
"Universalist Women in Ministry, from Beginnings to the Vote (1858-1920)"
Rev. Dr. Barbara Coeyman (barbaracoeyman@comcast.net)

Introduction

In this workshop, we want to discuss some of the women of our heritage who served ministry. This is the Convo workshop from the historical perspective. When I preach on UU history, I advocate history as spiritual practice — to consider how the past informs the present and influences the future — and I invite you listeners, whether you be congregants or ministers, to incorporate this historical perspective into your own faith life and your understanding of women in ministry, today and as we go forward into the future.

I am grateful to this conference. The theme of women in global partnerships has brought together us two scholars from different continents, and two historical views of women in ministry. From the get-go, we should name one learning from this global partnership that Ann Peart and I had — — that the published title of this session is not quite correct. I wrote it from my American perspective of ordination as the key to women's incursion in professional ministry, only to learn from Ann that British Unitarians don't ordain anymore. Instead they 'recognize' ministers, as she will tell you about.

So our subject is women in our heritages of Unitarianism and Universalism who were recognized as 'professional' ministers. Certainly, women throughout our histories have given much ministry — using modern vocabulary, many women of our past were actively involved in 'shared ministry' — take Julia Ward Howe and Mary Livermore as just two examples. Much lay woman's work was not paid or even recognized in the written records that become the tools of later historians. In contrast, over the past 150 years there have been continuing incursions of women into professional ministry: that is, women serving congregations and communities ministries who were paid for their work, and recognized as leaders at local, state, and national levels. In addition to their presence as women, their leadership also added what today we would call a feminist element: women in ministry changed the look and the content of our religious heritages.

Most of us are probably aware that the topic of women's ordination still remains a hot one in some religious denominations around the world. That Universalists and then Unitarians were among the first American denominations to recognize women's ordination we today take as one of the indicators of our progressiveness. On the other hand, both Unitarians and Universalists were not immune from gender backlash in the mid-twentieth century, as we will also illustrate in this session.

Powerful as we are as women historians, we can't tell you the complete history of women in ministry in one workshop session. I want to give you an overview of the American picture of women ordained into Universalist ministry, 1860-1920, with qualifiable as well as quantifiable information, and Ann will talk about _____ in Britain _____. We each offer prepared comments, after which we will comment on each others papers, and then open the floor for your questions and discussion. I also offer a printed handout, to make better sense of various names and numbers and to illustrate the large amount of published material on women in ministry. I will also add that one of my research methods is examining nineteenth-century Universalists periodicals and newspapers, which I've gone through rather systematically, and I can clearly attest to the presence and influence of women in the printed media of those early Universalists.

Meaning of Ordination in 19th-century American Ministry

From the earliest days of both Universalism (1770) and Unitarianism (1825), there has been a recognized leader called 'minister.' For instance, in 1837, the second year of reporting statistics, the *Universalist Register* listed 369 (men) ministers, and when Olympia Brown entered ministry in 1863 the total was 703. The 'minister' was understood to be different from congregants. Being 'called out' was signified through an act called 'ordination.' Obtaining ministerial status had different stages, as it does today in UU ministry: I won't go into details, but Universalists could be fellowshipped and licensed as well as ordained.

While the significance of ordination in the early nineteenth century was not much different from today, through roughly 1870 (the centennial of Universalism) the process of achieving ordination was substantially different because qualifications for professional ministry were relatively informal — shall we say, lax. It was easy to be declared a minister of Universalist gospel. For instance, E.R. Hanson reported of Augusta Chapin— the second Universalist woman to achieve ordained ministry—that she entered ministry under the ‘old regime,’ a method that required only one year of acceptable preaching to receive a letter of fellowship, that letter making it possible to enter ministry ‘at once.’ (Eat your heart out, anyone going to MFC soon). Additionally, through at least 1920, as far as I can tell, there were no strict educational requirements for ministers. One usually learned ministry through a mentor, and said training could be quite short. For example, in 1829, Thomas Sawyer, who became a prominent leader in the Universalist movement, found himself fellowshipped and ordained after just a few weeks of apprenticeship.

Preaching was the principle item in the job description, although women ministers broadened the work of ministry (Prophetic Sisterhood), to include reform, children’s education, and pastoral care. (Eventually they were even recognized for their theology, as expressed in the publication of their sermons, although the work of theology remained largely male.)

Because the work of ministry was largely preaching, through ca 1850, the American cultural convention of ‘separate spheres,’ which included the notion that public speaking was only the domain of men, meant that women ‘should’ not become ministers. While women did not enter Universalist ministry until the 1860s, my reading of the early decades of Universalists is not that they were not accepting of women’s ministry. Indeed, women offered much to congregational life, and their work as writers was particularly recognized, as evinced by the several Universalist women’s periodicals listed on the Sources list. It was the entry into public speaking — not into ministry — that was really core to holding women back from becoming Universalist ministers. For example, around 1810, Maria Cook suffered disparaging comments because she dared to preach the Universalist gospel in public, and when Lydia Jenkins began supplying pulpits in 1857, she was criticized initially not for theological views, but because she dared to speak in public. The influential Universalist publisher Rev. Thomas Whittemore initially resisted Jenkins’ ministry on principle, until he was moved by her persuasive public speaking.

One final point about the process of declaring someone a minister. Declaration of ministerial identity in Universalism was very much a localized matter, just as Universalist polity in general was at least during the entire first century of its existence as a denomination. In fact, the Universalist denomination hardly ever had anything like a coherent national organization and the real power came from the bottom up: congregations were organized in regional associations, and associations might participate in state conventions. It was only in the move toward the 1870 centenary that the national General Convention came to have significant presence, and how much actual influence it had is subject to different historical interpretations. In the matter of ministerial status, ordination could be granted from various levels: from congregations, from seminaries, from associations, or from state conventions. I don’t recall ordinations from the General Convention, but there may have been some.

Tighter Standards Helped Women Enter Ministry

In mid-century, several factors motivated Universalists to realize the importance of tightening up the professionalizing of ministry — still, of course, applying only to men. There was a great need for more ministers to serve this very appealing, quickly growing theology. Also, there was an even greater need for better compensation, so that those in the ministry would stay in the ministry. I can cite only two of these professionalization steps.

Universalists founded colleges and seminaries to offer Universalist-oriented education for prospective ministers. All schools admitted women. Tufts College in Boston opened in 1852 as the Universalist first school of higher learning and in 1869 opened its seminary, later to be named Crane Theological School. St. Lawrence University opened in upstate New York in 1856 and its seminary, Canton Theological

School, in 1858. Buchtel College in Ohio opened in 1872. Lombard College in Galesburg, IL, was chartered in 1857, its Ryder Divinity School open to women later in the century. (The Unitarian seminary at Meadville, PA, opened in 1868 and the first woman graduated in 1873. Boston School of Theology accepted women in 1871.)

Paralleling better education, in its second fifty years, 1820-70, the Universalist denomination realized the need for better internal organization generally if it were to remain viable in American culture, and even to continue to exist at all. Translated into ministry, this meant a variety of other more clearly defined standards for acceptance into ministry and, on the other end, de-fellowshipping as circumstances required.

I maintain that women breaking the gender barrier into ministry during this transition period of the 1850s and 1860s is no coincidence. Tightening up procedure for ministry worked to women's advantage. That is, if qualifications were identified and women met the qualifications, it was hard to deny them ministerial status based on personal impressions and agendas from the men who dominated the credentialing bodies. Chavez suggests that a denomination is willing to ordain women as long as no official position bars them from being ordained.

To cite just a few of these earliest women pioneers in the first half of the century: There were isolated examples of Universalist women preachers such as Maria Cook and Sally Dunn. They may have broken the ice for the more 'formal' incursions of women into professional ministry, as did the ordination of Antoinette Brown (later Blackwell) as a Congregational minister in 1853. The first Universalist to do the actual hard work of breaking glass ceilings was not Olympia Brown, but Lydia Jenkins, who started preaching in 1857 and achieved fellowship in 1858 (although some newspapers reported that she was ordained, which was probably incorrect). Jenkins endured the immediate reactivity from other Universalists such as Thomas Whittemore, and prevailed, going on to an active career of co-ministry with her husband until they opened a medical institute in Binghamton in 1866. While Olympia Brown's achievement of ordination was a break-through, then in 1863 it did not nearly convey the great stature we moderns attribute to it. For one, Jenkins had broken the gender ice among Universalists. Two, in part coming while the nation's attention was centered around the Civil War, the ordination did not receive the national attention modern histories have suggested it did. Olympia Brown was ordained in what I read as a fairly quick and quiet ceremony by the St. Lawrence Association in June 1863 and went on to serve parishes as settled minister — that is Brown's more important contribution, that we tend to overlook. And — as you can see on the list of women ministers on p. 2 of the handout — her ordination set off a chain of other ordinations of Universalist women — although how much relation others had to her, I'm not sure — Augusta Chapin, for one, did not, but Phebe Hanaford did (Brown was serving in Connecticut when Hanaford was ordained). It is also worth noting that around 1870, by which time it appeared that women ministers were there to stay, there was a some backlash in the Universalist press: luckily short-lived, the conversation paralleled the criticism that emerged when Jenkins stepped into ministry a dozen years earlier. After that backlash, as I read the newspapers, up through the 1920s then, women moving into Universalist ministry happened relatively uneventfully. (post-1920 backlash)

Certainly, it took more than a list of qualifications to check off to become a minister. It also took desire to want to shift the paradigm in the first place. Some of that desire came about because of new attitudes opened up through the Women's Rights movement. Another un-coincidental factor in women entering Universalist ministry was that the earliest women in ministry — Antoinette Brown in 1853, Lydia Jenkins in 1858, and Olympia Brown in 1863 — were located in central New York State, where Women's Rights was born with the first Convention at Seneca Falls in 1848. It is a whole lot easier to break glass ceilings when you've got the wider culture backing you up, and that our Universalist foremothers tended to be involved socially and political certainly helped them move into ministry. I can't elaborate here on the involvement of ministers in suffrage work, but Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton included many Unitarians and Universalists, lay and clergy, in their rosters of cohorts. After leaving parish ministry in 1888, Olympia Brown went on to an even longer career in the Wisconsin Suffrage Association and the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA). (Hitchings (5) notes the

parallel and subsequent careers of many women ministers, in medicine, education, social reform (esp temperance and suffrage) and more. This notion of women into ministry was part of a bigger cultural package.

One additional factor of the Women's Rights spirit that, in my reading of historical facts, contributed to the success of women entering liberal ministry, was the proclivity to network: to create connections and support for one another. The Iowa Sisterhood of Unitarian ministers is probably our best-known example. Again, without time for details, proximity to one another was an important factor for Universalists as well: my handout lists the areas with the most ordinations of women: New York, Illinois, Ohio, and Maine. In my work on early women in Texas, I've also observed similar networking.

This networking spirit also led to organizations such as the Women's Ministerial Conference, an interfaith group started by Julie Ward Howe—a lay woman—in 1875. Women ministers were also active in the Universalist Women's Centenary Association, founded in 1869. Another symptom of their awareness of the importance of networking and of the historical significance of their incursion into ministry, were the several dictionaries and encyclopedias on women ministers. (See Bibliography) While compilations of biographies of men ministers were published from time to time, directories of women were much more comprehensive and written from what we would today call a feminist viewpoint. My compilation of statistics come from: ER Hanson's *Woman Worker* of 1884; Phebe Hanaford's *Women of the Century*, Hanaford herself the third Universalist woman ordained to ministry; and unpublished directories by Clara Clark Helvie. The 20th counterpart of these collections is Catherine's Hitchings 1985 compilation, in which she draws on these historical sources and more.

Looking at Statistics

Let us have a look at a few statistics on the first page of the handout. Statistics from different sources never jell exactly: details may vary, but the big picture is constant: Universalist women significantly changed the scope of American religious culture with their entry into ministry in the second half of the nineteenth century.

From these existing directories, I have noted 144 women in Universalist ministry, 131 of whom reached ordination, the first being Olympia Brown in 1863. Through 1920 my data indicates that 111 were ordained, but Hitchings suggests a much lower number of 88. While birth dates for 21 are unknown, roughly one third of these reported were born 1847-1867, supporting the data that the peak number of ordinations occurred in the 1890s, as listed at the bottom of that page. Ordinations were done by congregations, seminaries, state conventions and regional associations. It is also quite significant to note the drastic drop in women's ordinations in the 1930s and 1940s, although some of that may depend on my research, which has not gone much past 1920. Women did not return to UU ministry with any degree of priority until the 1970s, supported in part by the 1977 Women and Religion Resolution. Modern statistic-keeping may be not much more advanced than in the nineteenth-century Register: at best I could find only the number of women and men reporting UUMA membership in 2009, no more detailed information about gender's influence on power and influence in modern UU ministry.

Unitarians had slightly fewer women in ministry. Catherine Hitchings' directory reports 100 Universalists and 65 Unitarians. The first ordained Unitarian woman was of Celia Burleigh in 1871, followed by Mary Graves and Caroline Jones. While Americans generally seemed to be ahead of the Brits by a few decades, British Unitarian colleges seemed ahead of American institutions in admitting women, which possibly attracted Marian Murdoch and Florence Buck to Manchester College in 1891 (Hitch 4).

I have also indicated the number of women in relation to the total Universalist ministry as reported in the *Universalist Register* in five-year increments from 1875, the first year totals were reported in the *Register*. The peak period for women was around 1910: roughly ten percent of the total ministry.

Regarding education, of the 144 women, it seems that something like 37 had a college bachelors degrees. 10 seem to have done graduate study; two received PhDs. About 50 seem to have received a seminary degree. Some attended higher education but did not graduate. On the other hand, for some, such as Mary Billings and Phoebe Hanaford, having no advanced education seemed to have no bearing whatsoever on their achieving success as ministers. The largest number of seminary degrees to women was awarded by Canton School, with Crane offering the next most. Women ministers also attended Antioch College, Cornell, New York University, and University of Chicago, among other institutions.

To date I have not been able to track the types of ministry positions held by the women. Many were full-time settlements, but probably just as many were part-time and in one way or other, short-term, such as supply preaching. I have also not been able to track the length of time of their various ministries, but my sense is that women's ministries were relatively short, certainly less than five years on average. I also have no data to compare with men's ministries.

Conclusions

There is so much more I could say about early Universalist women in ministry. I have literally hundreds of pages of stories about and by women, as well as sermons, poetry, theology, religious education materials and more. I conclude this paper by reiterating my premise, that women's incursions into Universalist ministry significantly influenced and re-shaped liberal religion through 1920. The early acceptance of women, as well as feminist changes to both Universalism and Unitarianism, influenced what we are today as a free faith movement.

Today there is yet greater demonstration of gender equity in modern UU ministry: over fifty percent of the ministers are women. However, let us not be driven by numbers alone. Today as in past decades there is much more qualitative study to do about the relative roles, positions, income, and influence of women in UU ministry. These reports must wait for perhaps the next international convocation of UU women.