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“Hopeful Expectations or Frustrated Realities?: Were “19<sup>th</sup>-Century Women Ministers Symbols of Progress, or Marks of Institutional Conflict?”

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Rethink whole paper in light of clarified vocabulary about organizational dynamics and intercultural blending  
How much is this a paper about me and current ministry today?

Introduction

In the paper I want to observe and analyze denominational culture in which women first entered liberal ministry in the second half of the nineteenth century. More specifically, I want to compare the seemingly open environment Universalists and Unitarians provided to women ministers, as most modern historical views suggest, with the actual realities of how women ministers were recognized, appreciated, and integrated into denominational responsibility and power. My position is that the realities of daily life for our women pioneers were not nearly as rosy as modern perspective often suggests, as described for example by Cynthia Grant Tucker in *Prophetic Sisterhood* about women ministers in the Midwest. I also assert that our women pioneers entered ministry largely through their own agency, rather than through the historical view commonly suggested that Unitarians and Universalists gladly opened their doors and welcomes women ministers with open arms. The reality is that many early women ministers were tolerated but hardly embraced. For the most part, they achieved ordained ministry not because of invitational good will from congregations and clergy, but through their own agency.

Today my method of analysis of early women into our ministries is the theory of ‘loose coupling’ in ordination practice advanced by sociologist Mark Chaves in his 1997 Book *Ordaining Women*. To illustrate my premise of loose coupling among Universalists, I offer Lydia Jenkins (1824-1874) to illustrate experiences from a first-generation women ministers. I will suggest that her experiences in progressive social reform advocacy prior to ministry afforded her necessary tools in order to succeed in Universalist pulpits, yet these experiences also set her up for different expectations of Universalist reception of women than she actually experienced. I will also suggest that she entered Universalist ministry not primarily because of Universalism’s welcome of women but from her desire to reform and modernize habits of this denomination whose theology had transformed her life from the Calvinism she was raised in. As a minister, Lydia came to realize that a Universalist theology of acceptance of all God’s creatures did not necessarily translate into open inclusion of all in the workings of the denomination.

While not the most important fact about Lydia’s ministry, the one likely to attract most historical attention when my biography of Lydia appears, is it that she was ordained to ministry in 1860, three years before Olympia Brown, who we proudly celebrate as the first woman ordained in any

American denomination. How we have missed Lydia and celebrated Olympia is another whole story which I address in another essay but which has some ties to today's analysis as well. I realize examples from only one woman hardly confirms my analysis, but in this short paper I can also include only sweeping generalizations about other Universalist women ministers.

Finally, I will suggest that my methodology for analyzing nineteenth-century ministry has application today to consider whether various current social justice agendas promoted by Unitarian Universalists represent genuine commitment to reform, or stand primarily as symbols of religious and social progressiveness.

### Lydia Ann Jenkins HANDOUT

Steeped in the Baptist faith, Lydia Ann Moulton married Universalist Edmund Jenkins by 1846 and gradually converted to Universalism. Having inherited a progressive mindset from several Moulton ancestors, her whole life was given to learning, writing, publishing, and working to improve the world. – She said she never knew leisure. --- She probably met Edmund through their common interests in the social reform sweeping the Burned-over District of the Finger Lakes regions of New York state where they grew up --- hers focused on temperance and women's rights, his on abolition (he was a colleague of William Lloyd Garrison). Edmund was also a Universalist preacher, fellowshipped sometime in 1854 in New York. I believe Lydia was present at the 1848 Women's Rights Convention in Seneca Falls, although she was not a signer of the Declaration of Sentiments, and through the early 1850s she worked directly with leading women's rights reformers such as Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Ernestine Rose, Antoinette Brown, and Lucy Stone.

Lydia resolved to preach the Universalist gospel, fully aware of the challenges she faced because of gender. She was encouraged by Edmund and many other ministers who offered her supply preaching. At the annual meeting of the Ontario Association of the New York State Convention in June 1858, she was approved for Universalist fellowship, and two years later the same association ordained both Jenkins. Lydia was the subject of much press, pro and con: in 1858 alone, for example, I have found 43 new releases about her. Comments about her dress, speaking style, Biblical exegesis, and women's right to be in the pulpit in the first place filled both Universalist and secular news. Curiously, by the time she and Edmund were ordained, press attention had calmed down so much that the single notice of their ordination has been missed by historians, a factor in how Lydia has slipped from published UU history.

Two factors that I cannot discuss in detail here which probably added both to conflict women experienced early Universalist ministry and the lack of Lydia's recognition in most modern histories is that the ordination procedure for Universalists in mid-nineteenth century was far from standardized, nor commonly understood. Lydia's ordination was not reported by contemporary press in part because some of her own colleagues, such as the famous editor Thomas Whittemore, were themselves confused about whether she'd been ordained or merely fellowshipped. Further, Universalists' 'bottom-up' polity contributed to confusion in understanding the method by which any Universalist was ordained. More description of mid-nineteenth-century Universalist polity regarding ordination can be found in my article on Olympia Brown's ordination.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Universalist organization: congregations in congregational polity

Lydia engaged actively in Universalist parish ministry for five years (1857-1862). She and Edmund were well received by many colleagues and congregations --- although it was said that she was by far the better preacher. Still theirs was a ministry largely of itinerancy and supply preaching around New York state and New England. Their longest permanent position at the Clinton church and Clinton Liberal Institute lasted at most one year and was not without challenges. Suffering fatigue and frustration from never being fully integrated into the Universalist 'system,' in 1863 the Jenkins redirected their focus to the alternative medical practice of watercure by attending medical school in New York City and in 1866 opening their own watercure practice in Binghamton. Lydia cut back significantly on her writing on Universalist topics and directed her writing focus instead to issues in alternative medicine and health. In particular, I appreciate her 1868 article on 'How to Cook Potatoes.' Lydia died in 1874 from complications after a fire destroyed their home and office. Edmund lived until 1909. Perhaps the combination of her short tenure in active ministry and less than full integration into the denomination explains her overall absence in modern UU histories. It should also be noted that the Jenkins did not have their first, and only child, Grace, until 1869, when Lydia was forty-four years of age. As illustrated by several other first-generation women's rights leaders in mid-century, child bearing was a factor in curtailing 'professional' work, even among the most ardent 'feminists' such as Cady Stanton and Antoinette Brown.

### Early Women Ministers and Challenges

Clearly, life for our pioneer women ministers was much more challenging than most modern historical views often suggest. I realize my focus on Lydia Jenkins in this short presentation offers insufficient data to create firm conclusions about the context of early women ministers. To offer just a snapshot at a more comprehensive view, through 1920 ca. 144 women were engaged in Universalist ministry, Unitarians slightly less at ca. 65.<sup>2</sup> Far more than male ministers, as I can best determine, women occupied part-time and shorter-term ministries, as well as supply preaching. I have estimated that the average tenures of ministries served was certainly less than five years. They also expanded ministry to be about more than preaching, within and outside the church. Many engaged in Women's Rights work while serving ministry --- Antoinette, Olympia, Phebe, Shaw --- and some turned to reform work more intentionally after leaving ministry.

A viable explanation for the challenges women ministers faced can be found in the theory of 'loose coupling' practice in ordination advanced by Mark Chaves. Loose coupling occurs when a denomination's (or any other organization's) formal policies and actual practices do not correspond. Chaves suggests that in any denomination which has no official position barring

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Region associations

State conventions

General convention

Careful annual statistics in universalist register

Briefly: mid 19<sup>th</sup> ordination requirement to serve Universalist pastorate; credentialing process gradually becoming standardized: 1850s: generally preaching, theological education, approval by credentialing group, such as congregation or regional and state conventions; great progress since days of apprenticeship of only a few weeks at beginning of century; introduction of women added to largely preaching responsibilities of male ministry;

<sup>2</sup> Reported by Hitchings; the Unitarians first ordained a woman, Celia Burleigh, in 1871

women, it is relatively easy to open the door to women's ordination, without necessarily having a practical plan for how women may acquire responsibilities and influence on par with male ministers. Such differences or disconnects between policy and practice can lead to uncertainties and conflicts. Chaves also proposes that ordination of women under any circumstances --- loosely coupled or not --- becomes laden with symbolic significance which may or may not reflect actual practice. This is certainly the case with Olympia's ordination, which today has come to symbolize historical Universalists' liberal position toward women. Conflicts also arise when the symbolic significance does not align with the practice. That is, even though Olympia and other women qualified for Universalist ordination and may have even been lauded for their accomplishments, they were not guaranteed equal status male ministers in denominational leadership and decision-making.

In the words of Chaves, "(Often) Denominational rules regarding women's ordination --- whether those rules are inclusive or exclusive --- neither reflect nor shape the tasks and roles women actually perform in congregations as closely or directly as might be expected. Rules and practices .... are only loosely coupled." At least two significant consequences of 'loosely coupled' ordination habits may emerge. One, the mere act of ordination will not guarantee full clergy rights. Two, a congregation which says it welcomes ordained women with an 'equal but different' stance is not practicing true gender equality. That is, ordination for any marginalized class may not necessarily represent the full acceptance of these classes by a denomination.

Following Chaves' theory, I suggest that these early Universalist women ministers have been recognized for the symbolic significance of Universalists' progressiveness --- by their contemporaries as well as by modern students of history --- but not necessarily for their genuine integration into ministry. Some cantankerous male ministers agreed that a woman as talented as Lydia should be allowed into ministry, but one gifted woman could not convince them that women categorically should become ministers.

#### Lydia Jenkins, Skilled Reformer

It is no surprise that the first incursions of women into liberal ministries occurred in the geographical areas they did --- New York state and Massachusetts --- and more specifically that the first boundary breakers of ordination, Lydia and Antoinette Brown, came from New York's Burned-over District. Yet even in socially progressive central New York, women ministers met resistance and challenge from their religious institutions, including Unitarians and Universalists. This is not so surprising when we realize that among American cultural institutions, religious practice is often among the last to accept change. Women's call to religious equity had been articulated as early as the 1848 Declaration of Sentiments at the Women's Rights Convention in Seneca Falls, yet women reformers were still grappling with the conflict between gender equity and religious practice as long after as the publication of *The Woman's Bible* in 1895.

When Lydia Jenkins entered the pulpit in 1857, she came with at least a decade of experiences from her work in social reform groups. Lydia and Edmund were what I call 'multiple reformers:' called to many areas of reform work. Lydia also identified herself as an 'ultraist:' that is, a promoter of the most radical style of benevolence.<sup>3 4</sup> To support my application of

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<sup>3</sup> Lydia Jenkins, 'Ultraism,' *The Lily* (Nov. 1, 1849); Hewitt, *Women's Activism*.

Chaves' loose coupling analysis to Lydia's ministry, let us consider two important activities Lydia's engaged in before ministry to explain the progressive expectations and tools she brought to Universalism and how these expectations were out of alignment with Universalist practice. First, the secular influence of the Women's Rights movement, and, second, the sacred grounding from a Quaker meeting known as the Congregational Friends.

### Women's Rights Advocacy

Through her work in Women's Rights in the early 1850s, Lydia gained national prominence and acquired many tools for enacting change. There is no documentation that she attended the first Women's Rights Convention in Seneca Falls in July 1848, yet living nearby, perhaps as close as either the towns of Lyons or Port Byron at that time and engaged in activism as she was, it is hard to imagine that she was not there.<sup>5</sup> Soon thereafter she became active on committees, advocacy groups, and speaking engagements with other prominent women reformers, including Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Antoinette Brown, Ernestine Rose, and others.<sup>6</sup> With them, she attended conventions, participated in canvassing to secure signatures on petitions for the state legislature, and served on lecture circuits throughout the northeast and Midwest. Habits such as public speaking, countering pushback, and inspiring others to join her cause, served her well in ministry. Lydia's most immediate inspiration for merging religion and reform was Antoinette Brown, ordained to ministry by a Congregational Church in South Butler in 1853. Our modern histories of early women ministers would do well to emphasize much more the influence of the Women's Rights movement as an influence on women's incursions into ministry in the nineteenth century. Lydia also drew the attention of prominent male reformers such as Samuel May, Theodore Parker, Horace Greeley, and William Lloyd Garrison, many of them Unitarians and Universalists.

To date I have documented Lydia's attendance at seven state or national Women's Rights conferences between 1852 and 1855. To illustrate her involvement: at the National Women's Right Convention in Cleveland in October 1853, she delivered a lengthy address to the convention that called for women's equal access in education, employment, and teaching.<sup>7</sup> As far

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<sup>44</sup> We know most about the reform agendas Lydia advocated in this period from her essays in the *Lily*.<sup>4</sup> Grounded in her education and interest in science and women's health, she spoke against tobacco and alcohol. She advocated for comfortable women's dress (she wore the Bloomer dress on at least one occasion of public speaking). She spoke for healthy parenting and nurturing of children (I infer that her childhood home was not a happy one). Within her overall advocacy for Women's Rights, she was a staunch promoter of women's education: her first essay in *Christian Ambassador* was on college education for women.<sup>4</sup> She quickly became a central player in the women's temperance movement in New York state and nationally. Many historians consider the temperance movement in the 1830s and 1840s as the stepping stone to advocacy methods that stood them well as they transformed their work into agitation for Women's Rights. Lydia also was a leading figure in the early phase of the Women's Rights movement. What she learned about networking and advocacy from her reform collaborators --- women and men --- stood her well in the next phrase of her life as she dared to break gender barriers in Universalist ministry.

<sup>5</sup> While only one hundred signed the Declaration of Women's Rights, estimates are that about three hundred attended this first convention.

<sup>6</sup> Sylvia D. Hoffert. *When Hens Crow: The Woman's Rights Movement in Antebellum America*. Bloomington (Indiana University Press, 1995), 15, includes Lydia in the group of twenty-three men and women who Hoffert labels as the 'vanguard' of the early phase of Women's Rights..

<sup>7</sup> *Proceedings of the National Woman's Rights Convention held at Cleveland, Ohio, on Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday, October 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, and 7<sup>th</sup>, 1853*, 10 – 19.

as I can tell, Lydia was not involved specifically in suffrage advocacy, which did not take a firm hold until after the Civil War, by which point Lydia had moved on to water cure medicine. In the early 1850s, I have also found that she was present at five state or national temperance meetings. In keeping with her science orientation, Lydia also participated in networks of vegetarians, phrenologists, and proponents of alternative medicine such as water-cure. That is, from these experiences with other reformers, she brought to Universalism an enthusiasm for instigating change which I expect bumped up against an institution, even in New York, with a history of avoiding radical positions, engaging in long discussions about educational innovation before taking action, and assuming conservative financial postures toward ministers, to name only a few areas of possible incompatibility with an ultraist feminist reformer.

### Congregational Friends

Lydia also acquired tools for radical reform through sacred practice. For several years in the early 1850s, she and Edmund attended meetings of the Congregational Friends and Friends of Human Progress in Waterloo, a radical Quaker meeting committed to moving even further away from many of the practices of traditional Christianity than their Hicksite Quaker predecessors had been.

The Jenkins were able to attend this Quaker meeting because it was open to persons of all faiths, as stated in the call to attend the 1854 meeting: “The platform is ... broad and comprehensive, admitting the most perfect Liberty of conscience ... an assembly in which Christians, Jews, Mahammedans, and Pagans, men and women of all names and no name, may mingle the sympathies and feelings of a common nature, and labor together for the promotion of human welfare, with no other law ... but the LAW of LOVE ... in question of truth and good for themselves and equally for their fellow beings.”<sup>8</sup> 1854 was also the year the group changed its name to Friends of Human Progress, so to minimize the impression of being a sectarian association, as implied by ‘Congregational Friends.’

This group offered much cross-over with reformers Lydia knew from secular Women’s Rights work --- including Cady Stanton --- yet it provided the Jenkins a religious grounding, a means of non-sectarian religious association in its promotion of truth, piety, righteousness, and peace as grounding principles. The group provided an optimistic, progressive grounding for ultrasist activists looking for a religious grounding for their activism. Associating with these ‘Friends’ at this point in her life may have given Lydia something to hold on to as she searched for ways to resolve several tensions in her life, including those between science and religion. I suggest that the biggest influence on her call to ministry from Congregational Friends was Lydia’s experience of gender inequity in a religious context.

The Congregational Friends began in October, 1848 as a splinter group from the Genesee Yearly Meeting of Hicksite Quakers, through the leadership of many also central in organizing the 1848 Women’s Rights Convention. Thomas McClintock and Rhoda DeGarmo served as Clerks in the initial years. The meeting continued through 1880, although annual proceedings were published only through 1869. Their meeting was held each June in Waterloo and smaller groups met more locally at other times of the year. The Jenkins’ attendance at annual meetings in the early 1850s

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<sup>8</sup> *Frederick Douglass Papers*, May 20, 1854.

is documented, as is the presence of Edmund's brother Myron in 1849 and his sister Mary Ann for three years in the 1850s. Prominent Unitarians and Universalists numbered among other participants: for example, Theodore Parker in 1857 and 1858, Thomas Higginson in 1858, Samuel J May from 1858-1869, Caroline Dall in 1861, and Susan B. Anthony in 1857 and 1861.

In keeping with Quaker tradition, the Congregational Friends addressed many areas of advocacy: abolition, war, racism, education, women's rights, temperance, and overall inequality. Edmund seems to have been involved primarily with anti-slavery advocacy. Lydia served many arenas.<sup>9</sup>

In associating with Quakers, Lydia advocated social reform and experienced a denomination with women preachers. There is no documentation about when Lydia moved from Calvinism to Universalism, but some transitioning certainly must have occurred during these years with the Quakers. She also lived with a religious tradition in which women could become preachers. We should consider it more than coincidence that she heard her own call to the pulpit just two years after ending her active engagement with this Quaker group. As women began to walk through their open doors into ministry, Unitarians and Universalists might have done well to pay more attention to how the Quakers actually acknowledged welcomed as preachers.

### Conclusions

Lydia and other women came to ministry well-prepared to honor their call. Yet we must question how much they transformed their denominations deep cultures: was their presence symbolic as much as authentic? It is no surprise that after 1920 the overt opposition to women in ministry from many denominational leaders discouraged women from the call. It wasn't until Second Wave Feminism of the 1960s convinced young Unitarian Universalists and American culture in general that equity in religious practice was something to strive for. Still, true gender equity in Unitarian Universalism was decades more in coming, to include women an integral to organizational mindset and responsibility. We are mostly there, but there is still more work to do in authentic acceptance of men, women, and transgender ministers. In how many other arenas of congregational life might we ask if our intercultural mindset is creating mere symbols of progress or true integration of diversity.

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<sup>9</sup> *Proceedings of the Yearly Meeting of Congregational Friends*. Auburn, 1849-1861. Other prominent reformers attended these meetings, such as Susan B. Anthony (1857, 1861), Caroline Dall (1861), Frederick Douglass (1850, 1860s), Samuel May (1858-1869), Theodore Parker (1857-1858), Lucy Stone (1868), and more.