

## **Prophetic Sisterhood**

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### **Introduction**

“Though they fought hard against being silenced and shoved aside, the women in this biography ended up in almost total obscurity, their presence expunged from the record by a conspiracy of forgetfulness. It was only by chance that their story was not lost forever but slowly began to resurface in 1973, when one of the ministers’ memoirs turned up in an archive in Memphis, Tennessee, six hundred miles and a century downriver from where it all began (Cynthia Grant Tucker, “Prophetic Sisterhood,8).”

“Prophetic Sisterhood - called to only the small or shakier congregations that the men would not take...and regarded by the denominational leadership as a blotch on their image and best kept on the organizational sidelines, the women in ministry were a largely unnoticed presence whose existence came to be known primarily through the efforts of a still smaller group who banded together on the frontier in the 1880s and 1890s (Ibid., 3).”

### **PROPHETIC SISTERHOOD (Part 1 – Getting Started)**

It all started in the Mississippi River town of Hamilton, IL in 1871 under an apple tree in the Gordon family orchard. There, two young women in their early twenties, Mary Safford and Eleanor Gordon pledged to spend their lives together serving the world as a team. They grew up on neighboring farms and had been best friends since childhood. They would routinely meet underneath that apple tree and would share their hopes and dreams with one another.

Tall, slender and pretty, with long brownish-blond hair, Mary Safford, born in

1851, was a natural leader and organizer. Her parents took her to be somewhat of a novelty act when she'd preach to them from their backyard tree stump along the banks of the river. Little did they know that by age 28, she'd be a fully authorized Unitarian minister and the de-facto leader of a radical movement of liberal women Unitarian ministers preaching throughout the Midwest.

Born in 1852 and recently selected to be the assistant high school principal in Hamilton, Eleanor Gordon lacked the physical presence of her best friend but her intellectual abilities, resourcefulness and unyielding determination helped her navigate through the sea of difficulties that she and Mary would face as Unitarian ministers.

In 1871 they founded the Hawthorne Literary Society in town. Along with the other members they would discuss books, poetry and would occasionally feature guest lecturers--their favorite being Oscar Clute, the Unitarian minister of Keokuk, IA, just across the river from Hamilton.

Although Oscar Clute was considered to be a relatively conservative Unitarian by Western Conference standards, his orthodoxy, when compared to that of other preachers in Hamilton, was considered to be suspect and radical. Mary and Eleanor loved him and with time, it was Rev. Clute who encouraged these two women to found a Unitarian church in town. He also sent off a letter off to Jenkin Lloyd Jones, the head of the Western Unitarian Conference, informing him of two young, gifted women who had the potential accomplish great things.

A year after starting their congregation in little Hamilton, weekly church attendance averaged 150 and sometimes topped 200. Mary Safford was planning the services and Gordon was organizing almost everything else. They were also starting a second satellite congregation eight miles out of town.

Jenkin Lloyd Jones then came to town to witness the activities first hand. He came away captivated by their ability, energy and enthusiasm and realized that he could not let such talent slip away. He was looking for ministers who could not only found new congregations but also maintain established ones that were having trouble keeping their ministers.

Jenkin Lloyd Jones then made them an offer. He asked them if they would be willing to go to Humboldt, IA, 300 miles northwest of Hamilton, IL, to help a promising young congregation there that had been having trouble keeping its minister. The town also happened to be looking for principal for its school. With employment opportunities for both women, they realized that this was there chance to begin living their pledge to “serve the world as a team.” Soon, they were off to this new place on the frontier; two women, alone, knowing no one else, ready to fill roles and duties of positions traditionally dominated by men.

### **PROPHETIC SISTERHOOD (Part 2 – Coming to the Front)**

On June 29, 1880 Mary Safford was ordained at Humboldt’s Unity Church. Since the interior construction of the new church had not yet been finished, people filled the hall using makeshift pews while many stood outside and peered in at the ceremony through open windows on the warm summer evening. Feminist Cordelia Throop Cole delivered the charge to the minister. Drawing upon the Bible story of David and Goliath, she encouraged Miss Safford to trust her instincts by saying that “Rather than trying to wear a man’s armor, trust in your own simple sling and the slender woman’s arm would reach its target (Ibid., 24).

She and Eleanor began planning services, running the Sunday School and evening programs. They decorated and cleaned their church, built the fires and

hauled firewood up and down stairs. All week long they visited parishioners in their homes and made themselves and their home available for consultation at any hour of the day. They then began recruiting lay ministers to lead services while they established a new congregation in Algona, IA, 28 miles away.

The church in Humboldt, led by these two women grew faster than expected.

Ms. Tucker writes:

“On Sundays, when the farmer’s horses and buggies jammed the sheds outside and the people milled about before and after the services, it was plain that Unity Church was the town’s fastest growing attraction. The combination of the preacher’s novelty, pulpit power, and charm drew in new members steadily until the weekly attendance started to strain the little church, which could seat no more than three hundred at most (Ibid., 25).”

In the early 1880s, the church in Humboldt, IA essentially became a de facto women’s seminary. Women with a desire to serve as ministers flocked to Humboldt.

The Sisterhood first expanded when the 26-year old Michigan native Ida Hultin became the fulltime minister at the Algona church started by Safford and Gordon. Ms. Hultin faced numerous roadblocks to become an ordained minister under traditional circumstances. Harvard did not admit women and the Meadville Theological School was too far and restrictive for her attend. Her passion for liberal religion and ministry however drew her to Safford and Gordon.

In 1885, Safford and Gordon moved on to the congregation in Sioux City, IA and the young Marion Murdock took the helm of the Humboldt congregation.

Marion Murdock knew she wanted to be a minister from the age of eight. She'd routinely find a prominent spot and begin preaching to whoever would listen. Her mother was a liberal Universalist while her father was a prominent legislator and judge.

Marion's family provided her with the financial flexibility to attend Meadville and in 1885, she became the first woman to finish a Bachelor's of Divinity at Meadville.

A full 10 years prior to the ordination of Mary Safford, Eliza Tupper Wilkes, an ordained Universalist minister, had been preaching and founding liberal congregations throughout the upper Midwest. Typically, after spending a period of time in a given place, she'd request a minister from the AUA, to replace her while she moved on to start another new congregation. She was repeatedly disappointed with the male ministers arriving from the east and often complained to the AUA that "you cannot plant eastern Unitarian churches in this soil (47)." After starting a promising congregation in Sioux Falls, SD, her prayers for a capable minister were answered with the arrival of Caroline Bartlett Crane.

Caroline Bartlett Crane, six years younger than Safford and Gordon, and coincidentally, also from Hamilton, IL soon followed in their footsteps.

Ms. Tucker writes of Caroline Bartlett Crane:

"...as a young child [she] rebelled against the religion she learned, having never been able to think that a God worth caring about could inflict pain as arbitrarily as the orthodox church suggested. She had flatly refused to swallow the teaching that unbaptized babies and heathens were sent to hell and that Jesus, for whom she felt deep affection as a human being, had been involved in anything as "impossible" as the Resurrection. She had agonized over the Crucifixion, and never could see what good it did and rejected it wholesale along with the

Atonement. Something inside her insisted that God's power make sense in everyday life, but when she aired her objection and tried to explain them in Sunday School, she was either ignored or rebuked. Unable to silence her private revolt, she had about resigned herself to being damned when her father took her to hear Oscar Clute deliver a Town Hall lecture [in Hamilton]...Clute's words had dissolved all her fears on the spot and from that moment on, she wanted to be a Unitarian minister (Ibid., 41)."

Her father discouraged her at every turn however and after college, she took a job as a journalist at various places throughout the Midwest, eventually settling in Sioux Falls, SD. Throughout her relatively brief journalism career, she kept in touch with Oscar Clute and she eventually crossed paths with ETW who validated her calling and encouraged her to accept a call to ministry to the Sioux Falls, SD church.

### **PROPHETIC SISTERHOOD (Part 3 – Lengthening the Cords and Strengthening the Stakes)**

Despite the deep and fulfilling nature of their work, these women, in pursuit of their dreams and passion for liberal religion, paid a deep price. Moving from place to place, in mostly rural areas, could result in a deep sense of loneliness. Generally being shunned by the congregants and colleagues of orthodox denominations as well as the male colleagues within the Unitarian denomination didn't help. This profound sense of loneliness and isolation drew them to one another which led to the development of a true "Sisterhood". Anytime they could meet with one another they would. They'd huddle around wood burning stoves to share ideas, share stories, share their problems, share their faith. Their common sense of feminine purpose, despite the many obstacles and roadblocks, also strengthened their sense of resolve and fortitude. They would reveal this sense

with a saying that would often appear on their orders of service, “Lengthen the cords and strengthen the stakes!”

By 1900, we had Mary Safford, Eleanor Gordon, Ida Hultin, Marion Murdock, Eliza Tupper Wilkes, Caroline Bartlett Crane and perhaps a dozen others who were founding and ministering to congregations throughout Iowa and the Dakotas.

Ms Tucker writes:

“Indeed, when the century came to a close, there was scarcely a liberal pulpit in Iowa and the contiguous states that had not at some time had a woman conducting its services, and any liberal brother who so much as hedged on the issue was taking the risk of putting his reputation and contract in jeopardy (Ibid., 121).”

In Caroline Bartlett Crane’s church, there seemed to be something amiss the first time she exchanged pulpits with a male colleague. The Wilkeses’ little girl Queenie had been so thoroughly unprepared and scandalized that she cried out in a whisper that everyone heard – and many repeated for years - “Look mama, there’s a man up there in the pulpit (Ibid., 47).”

“Indeed, the Unitarians’ East Coast bureaucracy, while forced to admit that the women had built an impressive record in church expansion, was nonetheless adamant that their presence was doing more harm than good (Ibid., 5).” Many treated them as a bad joke (Ibid., 122).

Universalism had always been, for the most part, a denomination where churches were founded in remote, rural areas. The Sisterhood, under the direction of the Western Unitarian District, was essentially following this model as

well. By 1900 however, the focus of Unitarian growth, under AUA head Samuel Eliot, was toward universities and urban showcases – not the rural areas. The depression of 1893-1898 did force people from the rural areas to urban centers in efforts find employment so maybe there was justification for Eliot's plan.

Also, in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the ministry had been perceived as a non-masculine profession but that began to change by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Masculinity did become a focus of our culture at that time. (Think rough-riding, big-game hunting Teddy Roosevelt's popularity for starters. Think JP Morgan, Rockefeller & Carnegie.) By the onset of WWI, it definitely seemed to be a man's world. Then, during the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and in response to this emphasis on masculinity in our culture, women began organizing around the suffrage movement and other direct social causes, rather than the ministry. They saw these roles as more effective vehicles for change.

At this time, many of the women of the sisterhood began to feel increasingly marginalized in the denomination and many left the ministry to participate in larger social movements of the day. And with this, the burgeoning movement of women as minister subsided until the relatively recent push in the past few decades which has led to approximately one out of two ministers within the Unitarian Universalist denomination being female.

We like to talk about heroes. We like to talk about the great, famous Americans who went before us and blazed a trail for us to follow. We think of our nation's founding fathers like George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, we think of astronauts like Neil Armstrong, we think of other heroes like Jackie Robinson, as we should, ...but we don't think of people like Larry Doby. Who was Larry Doby? He was the 2<sup>nd</sup> African American to play Major League Baseball. He joined the Cleveland Indians the very same year that Jackie Robinson joined the Dodgers; just 11 weeks later. Larry Doby faced much the same adversity as Jackie



Robinson – yet we forget about people like him. Also, we remember singular heroes and tend to forget about the many people who put them in the position to be heroic. We forget about many of the people who languished in prisons, who never had their voices heard, who died on battlefields in long-forgotten places.

Forgotten heroes – there is a well-known poster that you can get on the UU website entitled “100 UUs who made a difference.” Sadly, not one single member of the prophetic Iowa Sisterhood is shown there – truly evidence of a conspiracy of forgetfulness...And I believe and I know that these women were truly heroic Unitarian Universalists. Truly.

### **Ministers of the Iowa Sisterhood**

Mary Augusta Safford  
Eleanor Gordon  
Florence Buck  
Mary Collson  
Caroline Julia Bartlett Crane  
Adele Fuchs  
Marie Jenney Howe  
Ida Hultin  
Mary Leggett  
Rowena Morse Mann  
Mila Tupper Maynard  
Amelia Murdock Wing  
Marion Murdock  
Anna Jane Norris  
Margaret Titus Olmstead  
Elizabeth Padgham  
Gertrude Von Petzhold  
Helen Grace Putnam  
Eliza Tupper Wilkes  
Helen Wilson  
Celia Parker Woolley