
“Sowing the seeds of liberal thought”: Unitarian Women Ministers in Nineteenth-century South Dakota

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Their numbers were few and their resources limited, yet for a brief and exceptional time in the late nineteenth century, a small group of women ministers of liberal religious faith flourished in South Dakota and neighboring states. With conviction and zeal, these clergywomen of the Western Unitarian Conference founded and led churches and proclaimed a message of religious freedom, reason, and optimism. “Our success gives me courage to undertake anything and to hope for everything,” wrote the Reverend Eliza Tupper Wilkes in 1888 after forming a tiny but resolute congregation in Miner County.¹ Wilkes, the organizer of numerous mission churches in eastern Dakota Territory and western Minnesota and Iowa, had been ordained in Rochester, Minnesota, in 1871 as one of the first women ministers in the Universalist Church.² Eighteen years later, the community of Unitarian female clergy expanded as four women, all with ties to Wilkes and ministry in South Dakota, were ordained within a three-week span in October and November of 1889. The stories of these women—Eliza Tupper Wilkes, her sister Mila Tupper, Caroline Bartlett, Helen Putnam, and Blanche Pentecost Bagley—shine a revealing light on the opportunities and obstacles encountered by women who strove

1. Quoted in *Unity* 21 (21 July 1888): 282.

2. Catherine F. Hitchings, *Universalist and Unitarian Women Ministers*, 2d ed. (Boston, Mass.: Unitarian Universalist Historical Society, 1985), pp. 149–50. Although ordained as a Universalist, Wilkes later identified with the Unitarians. In 1863, Olympia Brown, a Universalist, became the first woman to be ordained with full ministerial standing. Eight years later, Celia C. Burr Burleigh was ordained as the first Unitarian woman minister.

to forge careers in the late nineteenth century. With gender roles in flux and an emerging spirit of reform taking hold, they pursued their callings on the western prairies, committed to an unorthodox faith, social action, and community service.

The last quarter of the nineteenth century was a transformative period in American culture, with social, economic, scientific, and religious developments and theories profoundly challenging traditional beliefs. The emergence of evolutionary theory and biblical criticism triggered theological dilemmas and debate. While many Protestants stayed with conservative doctrine, others turned to liberal theology. To keep faith alive, radical liberals believed, they had to strip away that which did not stand up to scientific scrutiny. Accordingly, biblical criticism displaced claims of inerrancy, and a focus on human virtue and progress prevailed over the concept of original sin. Liberals promoted intellectual freedom, open-mindedness, and ethical behavior.³

At the same time, the effects of mass immigration, industrialization, and urban development led to reassessments of the church's social mission. While Protestant branches responded in diverse ways to theological challenges, they increasingly supported various social-reform efforts (a commitment that would produce the Social Gospel movement at the turn of the century). Women, already networked through church groups and with common concerns for children and families, played a central role in these efforts. For mainline Protestant women in the nineteenth century, socially acceptable reform work conformed to conventional notions of women's roles. This domestic feminism included involvement in benevolent and missionary societies, moral reform, and temperance advocacy. Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian, and Congregationalist women all played key roles in these reform activities.⁴

3. For background on religion in the late nineteenth century, see Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *Religious History of the American People*, 2d ed. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2004), pp. 763–84, and Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr., *A Critical Period in American Religion, 1875–1900* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Fortress Press, 1967).

4. Janet Zollinger Giele, *Two Paths to Women's Equality: Temperance, Suffrage, and the Origins of Modern Feminism* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995), pp. 37–47, 81, 84; Ruth Bordin, *Woman and Temperance: The Quest for Power and Liberty, 1873–1900* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Temple University Press, 1981), pp. 168–70.

The mainline churches, though, did not as readily endorse causes and ideas that were more controversial. It thus fell to women who stood outside of or resisted orthodox conventions to lead the charge for causes such as equal rights and public roles for women. Only as education and opportunities for women increased would widespread opposition to suffrage begin to abate even among women themselves. In the meantime, women of liberal religious faith, notably Unitarians and Universalists, as well as Quakers with their longstanding traditions of egalitarianism, boldly stepped forward in support of women's rights.⁵ "The last decade has brought nearer the time when it shall be as good a thing to be born a woman as a man," exulted Mary A. Livermore, renowned suffragist, lecturer, and Universalist, in 1888.⁶ The commitment to women's welfare and rights and the pursuit of higher education and careers was indeed on the rise. Even so, the notion that women's proper sphere was limited to home and family persisted, and relatively few white, middle-class women did, in fact, work outside the home.⁷

In the West, a shortage of manpower and need for community building contributed to increasing opportunities for women. Still, many professions and avenues remained closed. In religious folds, Unitarians and Universalists were among the few denominations that ordained women, and even in these groups, women tended to be assigned to remote locales where male clergy were reluctant to settle. Here, the women took on the arduous task of founding and caring for struggling congregations, accepting the challenges of continual travel and meager salaries.⁸

5. Giele, *Two Paths to Women's Equality*, pp. 4, 132.

6. *Unity* 21 (3 Mar. 1888): 12.

7. For analysis of American women's roles in the nineteenth century, see Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," *American Quarterly* 18 (Summer 1966): 151-74, and Linda K. Kerber, "Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History," *Journal of American History* 75 (June 1988): 9-39. Census records show women constituting 14 percent of workers in 1870 and 17.7 percent in 1900. Over the same period, the number of women in the professions increased from 6.4 percent to 10 percent of working women. Joseph A. Hill, *Women in Gainful Occupations, 1870 to 1920*, Census Monograph 9 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1929), pp. 41, 52.

8. Cynthia Grant Tucker, *Prophetic Sisterhood: Liberal Women Ministers of the Frontier, 1880-1930* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), pp. 3-4. For perspectives on

The faith that these clergywomen embraced adhered to no formal creed. Distinctive to Unitarianism was a rejection of the Trinity and the divinity of Christ and the elevation of reason and conscience. Unitarians were never uniform in their beliefs, however, and controversies between radical and more conservative factions arose in the nineteenth century, with the western women ministers inclining toward the radical wing. Their focus, they emphasized, was not the rejection of traditional Christian beliefs but the advancement of freedom, tolerance, and individual conscience.⁹

The numbers and reach of Unitarians in the western United States would never rival their sway in New England, where the denomination flourished in the early 1800s. Unitarianism traced its roots to sixteenth-century Eastern Europe, where anti-Trinitarian beliefs emerged during the Protestant Reformation. The teachings of the fourth-century priest Arius, who claimed that Christ was less divine than God, were also influential. In America, Unitarianism developed distinctively as a reaction against Calvinism and revivalistic impulses. Greatly influential in shaping American Unitarianism were Boston preacher William Ellery Channing's defining sermon on "Unitarian Christianity" in 1819 and the organization of the American Unitarian Association in 1825.

Like Unitarianism, Universalism had European influences but evolved uniquely in America. Instituted in the late eighteenth century, Universalism drew a more rural, less elite following than that associated with Unitarianism, at least in the eastern United States. At the core of Universalist beliefs was the concept of universal salvation. Both denominations, which would eventually merge in 1961, were firmly rooted in the tradition of religious liberalism.¹⁰

women and the West, see Susan Armitage, "Women and the New Western History," *OAH Magazine of History* 9 (Fall 1994): 22–27; Elizabeth Jameson, "Women as Workers, Women as Civilizers: True Womanhood in the American West," in *The Women's West*, ed. Susan Armitage and Elizabeth Jameson (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), pp. 145–64; and Julie Roy Jeffrey, *Frontier Women: "Civilizing" the West? 1840–1880*, rev. ed. (New York: Hill & Wang, 1998).

9. Tucker, *Prophetic Sisterhood*, pp. 138–40.

10. For an overview of Unitarianism and Universalism, see Mark W. Harris, *Historical Dictionary of Unitarian Universalism* (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2004), and David Robin-

Allied with Universalism and Unitarianism, Eliza Tupper Wilkes became the first woman minister to found a congregation in Dakota Territory. She settled in the village of Sioux Falls in 1878 with her husband William Wilkes, a lawyer and later a judge. The couple raised five sons and a daughter while taking an active part in the cultural and spiritual life of the growing community. Born in Maine in 1844, Eliza Wilkes grew up in Iowa after her family relocated there in the early 1850s. She and her four younger siblings had a strong role model in their mother, Ellen Smith Tupper. An authority on the culture of bees, Ellen Tupper edited and wrote for several journals, including the *American Bee Journal* and later the *National Bee Journal*, and lectured at Iowa State Agricultural College. All four daughters would pursue notable careers. Middle sisters Kate and Margaret worked as educators, and Eliza and youngest sister Mila served as ministers.¹¹

Eliza Wilkes graduated from Iowa Central University, a Baptist college, in 1866, prepared to become a missionary abroad. Troubling internal questions about doctrine concerning the fate of the "heathen," however, provoked a radical shift in her outlook. Rejecting the concept of eternal punishment, she converted to Universalism with its belief in salvation for all and, to the initial distress of her family, resolved to enter the ministry. Wilkes was encouraged in her decision by Universalist minister Augusta Chapin, social reformer Mary Livermore, and

son, *The Unitarians and the Universalists* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1985). In 1890, Unitarians formally numbered only 105 out of a total church membership of 85,490 in South Dakota and 55 out of 59,496 church members in North Dakota. No Universalists were recorded in either state. The figures for Minnesota and Iowa were 1,349 and 1,238 Unitarians and 1,093 and 829 Universalists, respectively. Massachusetts, by contrast, had 34,610 Unitarians and 7,142 Universalists in 1890. U.S., Department of the Interior, Census Office, *Report on Statistics of Churches in the United States at the Eleventh Census: 1890* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1894), pp. 38, 43.

11. *Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader*, 10 May 1909; Hitchings, *Universalist and Unitarian Women Ministers*, p. 149; Frances E. Willard and Mary A. Livermore, eds., *American Women: Fifteen Hundred Biographies with over 1,400 Portraits: A Comprehensive Encyclopedia of the Lives and Achievements of American Women during the Nineteenth Century*, rev. ed. (New York: Mast, Crowell & Kirkpatrick, 1897), 2:726, 774-75; Elizabeth Wagner Reed, "Ellen Smith Tupper, 1822-1888," in *American Women in Science before the Civil War* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1992), pp. 181-88; Mrs. E. S. Tupper, "Why I Became a Bee-Keeper," *Prairie Farmer* 19 (18 Feb. 1867): 100-101.



Eliza Tupper Wilkes, founder of the All Souls Unitarian congregation in Sioux Falls, worked to spread the Unitarian message through the Post Office Mission and visits to small communities in the surrounding area.

Quaker traditions of women as preachers. She served Universalist and Unitarian congregations in Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Colorado before arriving in Sioux Falls. There, where the last three of her children were born, Wilkes combined home and family duties with community involvement, including the organization of the Ladies' History Club and the public library. She continued her ministry by preaching occasionally in local churches and fostering a small group of liberal believers. She also became actively involved in Unitarian Post Office Mission work throughout the region.¹²

The task of the Post Office Mission was to distribute liberal religious literature to isolated free thinkers. *Unity*, the weekly publication of the Western Unitarian Conference, described the propagandistic outreach work and its aims: "Into a neighborhood out on the western prairie the mail bags carry at regular intervals for a few months the printed page containing the thoughts of Channing, Clarke, Herford, Gannett, Jones, Blake or some other prophet of rational religion, and very soon the desire comes to hear the spoken word, the desire for cooperation in the things of the spirit, and the missionary finds his or her way to the little outpost and the Sunday Circle is formed, which is the embryo of the future church."¹³

The promotional efforts of the Post Office Mission drew praise from its beneficiaries in South Dakota. "I don't know how I could have endured the lonely, dreary life forced upon a woman on these wide stretches of barren prairies," wrote one appreciative recipient, "were it not that the P.O. Mission has brought me so much that has cheered and strengthened and raised me out of self."¹⁴ Another Dakotan

12. Mila Tupper Maynard, *A Mother's Ministry: Glimpses of the Life of Eliza Tupper Wilkes* (Los Angeles, Calif.: J. F. Rowny Press, 1917), p. 8; Hitchings, *Universalist and Unitarian Women Ministers*, p. 149; Willard and Livermore, *American Women*, 2:774-75; Dana R. Bailey, *History of Minnehaha County, South Dakota* (Sioux Falls, S.Dak.: Brown & Saenger, 1899), pp. 403-4, 740; Douglas Chapman, "Dakota Territory's Eliza Tupper Wilkes: Prairie Pastor," *Papers of the Thirty-second Annual Dakota Conference on History, Literature, Art, and Archaeology* (Sioux Falls, S.Dak.: Augustana College, 2000), pp. 104-7.

13. *Unity* 21 (21 July 1888): 276. The writers referred to are, presumably, William Ellery Channing (1780-1842), James Freeman Clarke (1810-1888), Brooke Herford (1830-1903), William Channing Gannett (1840-1923), Jenkin Lloyd Jones (1843-1918), and James Vila Blake (1842-1925).

14. Quoted in *Unity* 29 (26 May 1892): 102.

described the pleasure the publications brought to those who had dreaded the long winter for fear there would be no books. In communities without a regular pastor, receiving the tracts enabled Unitarians to conduct their own services while awaiting occasional ministerial visits. The Post Office Mission extended to larger towns such as Sioux Falls and Huron as well, where Unitarian tracts were distributed in railroad stations and reading rooms.¹⁵

Wilkes's mission work entailed frequent visits to scattered communities in southern Dakota Territory, Minnesota, and Iowa. In a letter to Grindall Reynolds, secretary of the American Unitarian Association, Wilkes described her full schedule of missionary activity and her frustration at not being able to visit all who eagerly desired the liberal message. "If only I could multiply myself," she lamented.¹⁶ For Wilkes, the essence of ministry was instilling joy and hope. These attitudes, she believed, would naturally grow out of an all-inclusive liberal faith. "Our simple message is intended for the weakest, most despondent children of the All-Father," she wrote. "I wonder not that they who believe in man's total depravity and fall, his everlasting condemnation, should hesitate to approach the lowest prodigal; but for us with our faith in man, with our message of hope and good cheer, where can we hesitate?"¹⁷ Wilkes quoted with delight the words of a Dakota farmer who had found solace in liberal religion: "Knowing that God is a being not of anger but of love, I look up to the stars with only joy and thankfulness."¹⁸

Many, admittedly, did not find the liberal message consoling. Despite Wilkes's missionary efforts, converts did not flock to the Unitarian faith. For orthodox Christians, the lack of hierarchical structure and absolute truths and the denial of basic Christian doctrines chafed against their deepest beliefs. For those, however, who struggled with

15. Ibid. 21 (2 and 9 June 1888): 188; *ibid.* 23 (23 Mar. 1889): 30; *ibid.* 23 (20 July 1889): 166; *ibid.* 23 (1 and 8 June 1889): 109.

16. Wilkes to Grindall Reynolds, 31 Mar. 1887, American Unitarian Association, Letterbooks, 1822-1902, bMS 571, Andover-Harvard Theological Library, Harvard Divinity School, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.

17. Quoted in *Unity* 19 (2 Apr. 1887): 66.

18. Quoted *ibid.* 22 (9 Feb. 1889): 318.

the judgmental or supernatural elements of traditional Christianity and sought to reconcile modern scientific theories with their faith, liberal theology could indeed be liberating.

Immersed in her mission work, Wilkes sought a full-time minister for the emerging Sioux Falls congregation and welcomed the appointment of Caroline Julia Bartlett, a young woman of dynamic personality and ability. Born in Hudson, Wisconsin, in 1858, Bartlett wrestled from childhood with traditional religious beliefs. She questioned the doctrine of the atonement and "anything which I did not feel to be in keeping with the character of a just and loving God." Like Wilkes, Bartlett found the idea of eternal punishment especially troubling, and a Unitarian sermon heard at the age of sixteen proved transformative.¹⁹ As she listened to the Reverend Oscar Clute preach on the

19. Caroline Bartlett Crane, "My Early Religious Struggles," p. 1, in 1934 typescript recollections, Caroline Bartlett Crane Collection, Western Michigan University Archives and Regional History Collections, Kalamazoo (this collection is hereafter cited as Crane Collection).



At the age of twenty-nine, Caroline Julia Bartlett became the full-time minister at the Unitarian church in Sioux Falls. Among her first tasks was to secure funds to build All Souls Church, completed in 1888.

evolution of religion, Bartlett found her religious anxieties eased and resolved to become a Unitarian minister. "All my clouds had been lifted, my questions answered," she recalled, describing the experience as the turning point in her life.²⁰ When Bartlett's family discouraged her from pursuing the ministry, she deferred her aspirations and entered Carthage College in Illinois. She completed her degree in just three years, graduating in 1879 as valedictorian of her class and subsequently working as a teacher and journalist.²¹

Bartlett spent nearly three demanding years as a reporter and editor at the *Minneapolis Tribune* and as city editor at the *Oshkosh (Wisconsin) Morning Times*, breaking gender barriers and "getting experience with a vengeance," before returning to her original aim of entering the ministry.²² Her determination earned her the reluctant but ultimately unqualified blessing of her father, with whom she shared a close relationship, her mother having died in 1883. While homesteading on a claim south of Ellendale in northern Dakota Territory, Bartlett began preparing for her chosen vocation. "My experience of solitude and meditation on that wide, treeless prairie had little of loneliness in it," she recollected. "I have never, before or since, felt such nearness to the Heart of Things."²³ In the fall of 1886, she presented herself to the Iowa State Unitarian Conference as a candidate for the ministry and in January 1887 accepted the Sioux Falls post as her first ministerial calling. Not yet ordained, she described her time in Sioux Falls as a self-imposed novitiate.²⁴

As Bartlett began her ministry, services were held in the law office of William Wilkes and his partner R. J. Wells and then, as attendance rose, in the Adventist church.²⁵ An expanding congregation and the vi-

20. Crane, "The Story and the Results," p. 7, in ca. 1923 typescript autobiographical sketch, Crane Collection.

21. O'Ryan Rickard, *A Just Verdict: The Life of Caroline Bartlett Crane* (Kalamazoo: Western Michigan University, 1994), pp. 30-38.

22. Crane, "The Story and the Results," p. 10.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 12. Sioux Falls belonged to the Iowa State Unitarian Conference until November 1887, when it joined the newly formed Minnesota State Conference. *Unity* 23 (1 and 8 June 1889): 109.

25. *Sioux Falls Daily Argus*, 10 Dec. 1886, 15 Jan., 5 Mar. 1887.

sion of Reverend Wilkes and Bartlett of a church home soon led to building plans. "If I must go from door to door to beg I will do it before we give it up," wrote Wilkes of her commitment to a church of their own.²⁶ Vigorous fund-raising efforts resulted in the purchase of a lot in March 1887. Resources were limited, however, prompting Wilkes to travel east "to interest some one, every one in our Dakota field." She found audiences receptive and secured a loan from the American Unitarian Association along with sufficient contributions to bring the project to fruition.²⁷ The Sioux Falls congregation celebrated the completion of their church, named All Souls, at a worship service in February 1888 and again in April at the official dedication. Situated on the corner of Twelfth Street and Dakota Avenue, the church seated two hundred and included a library, Sunday school room, "cosy little parlor," and a fireplace on which the word "Unity" was carved.²⁸

In her first sermon in the new church, Bartlett focused on the architecture as a symbol of the church's central mission of service. "There are no steeples and gothic arches pointing solemnly heavenward," she emphasized. "Our little church nestles lovingly down to earth, as if it knew it belonged there and loved its mission in this work-a-day world."²⁹ Coverage of the dedication service in the *Minneapolis Tribune* similarly called attention to the homelike appearance of the church, with its comfortable chairs, green and gold carpet, and yellow Madras curtains.³⁰

The connection between church and home was a recurrent theme of the western women ministers. Although these women were pursuing nontraditional roles, they were by no means opposed to domesticity. Rather, they upheld home and family as foundational and sought to reflect the values of love and hospitality in their ministry. For unorthodox believers who lived in rural regions where they often faced

26. Wilkes to Reynolds, 31 Mar. 1887.

27. Ibid. See also *Sioux Falls Daily Argus*, 21 Mar. 1887; *Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader*, 10, 27 June 1887.

28. *Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader*, 27 Feb. 1888. The formal dedication took place on 25 April 1888. *Unity* 21 (12 May 1888): 150.

29. Quoted in *Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader*, 27 Feb. 1888.

30. *Minneapolis Tribune*, 26 Apr. 1888.

Located at the corner of Twelfth Street and Dakota Avenue, All Souls Church was constructed of native stone and featured an inviting, homelike interior.



harassment and ostracism, the sympathy and support of the women ministers was a godsend, historian Cynthia Grant Tucker contends. The traditional female roles of nurture and empathy combined with leadership and business skills to comfort and inspire confidence. The women pastors succeeded so well, Tucker suggests, specifically because they rooted their ministry within the familiar framework of domesticity.³¹

Eliza Wilkes's sister Mila Tupper expressed her views on the issue of women as clergy in an address to the National Council of Women of the United States in 1891. Men and women were equally, if differently, fitted for ministerial work, she asserted. Further, given men's long dominance in the field, women's influence was especially important. "The Church needs the home-maker," Tupper declared. "It needs all the mighty resources of sympathy and tenderness that the blessed experiences of sister, mother, or daughter have given woman. . . . We are all brothers and sisters in a common family."³²

31. Tucker, *Prophetic Sisterhood*, pp. 5, 64.

32. Tupper, "Women in the Churches," in *Transactions of the National Council of Women of the United States: Assembled in Washington, D.C., February 22 to 25, 1891* (Philadelphia, Pa.: J. B. Lippincott, 1891), p. 107.

In the absence of Bartlett and Wilkes, other female clergy often filled the Sioux Falls pulpit. Eleanor Gordon of Sioux City, Iowa, was among the network of women on call. On one occasion in April 1887, Gordon chose as her theme "The Modern St. Theresa," examining the position of women in the professions and higher education. In her sermon, she denied that women were inferior to men and urged women to take control of their own lives rather than allowing others to shape their destinies. Gordon was heartened at the trend toward female education and predicted that in a few years all colleges would be open to women as well as men. Other frequent guest preachers in Sioux Falls were Marion Murdock, who held a bachelor of divinity degree from Meadville Theological School in Meadville, Pennsylvania, and her sister Amelia, both based in Humboldt, Iowa.³³

Mila Tupper also supplied the pulpit while on summer vacation from her studies at Cornell University, where she graduated in 1889. Tupper had been born on a farm near Brighton, Iowa, in 1864 while her oldest sister Eliza was in college and had moved with the rest of the family to Lincoln County, Dakota Territory, at the age of twelve. Although primarily educated at home, she attended two terms of school in nearby Beloit, Iowa, taught by her sister Kate, and received college preparation at the normal school in Whitewater, Wisconsin, before entering Cornell. Tupper converted from the Baptist denomination to Unitarianism as a young woman, her sister Eliza having paved the way. An incident in 1888 demonstrated Tupper's dedication to her ministerial duties. She had been scheduled to conduct services in Madison on a Sunday morning but was delayed and did not arrive in Sioux Falls, some forty miles to the south, until seven o'clock on Saturday evening. Undaunted, Tupper set out with a team of horses and traveled all night, reaching Madison at 5:00 a.m. and serenely performing the morning service.³⁴

33. *Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader*, 18 Apr., 16 May 1887, 11, 29 May 1889. Murdock received her degree in 1887. *General Catalogue of the Meadville Theological School, Meadville, Penn., 1844-1920* (Meadville, Pa.: Meadville Theological School, 1920), p. 113.

34. Willard and Livermore, *American Women*, 2:726-27; *Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader*, 1 Sept. 1888.



Mila Frances Tupper, a younger sister of Eliza Tupper Wilkes, assisted with the All Souls congregation. A strong proponent of women's suffrage and social justice, she went on to fill pastorates in Indiana and Michigan.

Tupper later captured the significance of what had become almost commonplace in liberal congregations of the Midwest. Recounting a conversation with Wilkes's young daughter Queenie, she wrote, "I once asked my little niece what she meant to do when she grew up. 'Oh, make the beds, wash the dishes, and help mamma preach.' Her

brother then asserted that he also was to help mamma preach. His sister looked surprised a moment, and then said, condescendingly, 'Men do preach sometimes, I guess.'"³⁵

At All Souls in Sioux Falls, the attention to domesticity that characterized both the church building and its leaders was integrated into programs and services, as well. Soon after taking up her Sioux Falls ministry, Bartlett established a Sunday school, Ladies Unity Circle, and Unity Club. The Unity Circle, committed to raising funds for the Sunday school and charity, held sociables, suppers, and musicales; the Unity Club, drawing men and women from within and beyond the church's membership, met regularly in homes and in the church parlors to discuss social, political, and literary topics. The club tackled, in turn, the "Indian question," the jury system, foreign immigration, prohibition, current social conditions, and the influence of the press on public morality. Among the literary figures studied were James Russell Lowell, John Greenleaf Whittier (with whom Wilkes corresponded), and sister poets Alice and Phoebe Cary. In November 1889, the topic for debate was equal suffrage, with Wilkes's husband William leading the affirmative side.³⁶

The perception that granting women the right to vote would undermine the authority of the church deterred many mainline churchwomen from embracing the cause. In South Dakota, suffragists received little or no help from the state's major denominations in the early years of the campaign. Such lack of support was not an obstacle for Eliza Wilkes and other Unitarian ministers, however. Wilkes, a long-time advocate of voting rights, served as an officer in the National Woman Suffrage Association and president of the Minnehaha County Equal Suffrage Club, participating in the program when Susan B. Anthony lectured in Sioux Falls in June 1890. Bartlett, too, favored equal suffrage, having converted to the cause while covering a convention of the American Woman Suffrage Association in Min-

35. Tupper, "Women in the Churches," p. 102.

36. For accounts of Unity Circle activities, see *Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader*, 6 Apr. 1887, 24 Oct., 11 Dec. 1888, 7 Feb. 1889. For Unity Club meetings, see *Sioux Falls Daily Argus*, 1 Apr. 1887, and *Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader*, 8 Apr., 17, 31 Dec. 1887, 9, 25 Feb., 8 Oct. 1888, 18 Feb., 6 Mar., 27 Nov. 1889.

neapolis in 1885. There, she met national suffrage leaders Anthony, Lucy Stone, and the Reverend Anna Howard Shaw, all of whom became revered mentors.³⁷

The causes of suffrage and temperance were often intertwined. In November 1887, women gathered at the polls in Sioux Falls to monitor a vote on prohibition. When some criticized the female presence, Wilkes defended the women's efforts to counter the influence of saloons and lend order and respectability to the voting process. "Women have been taught all their lives that they must be content to use influence instead of the vote," Wilkes observed. "You must pardon them if they have learned the lesson too well. . . . Until women have the right to express their will directly at the ballot as men do, they cannot be condemned for exerting all [the] influence they can command indirectly." Their experience at the polls, she hoped, would give women new courage to work for suffrage.³⁸

Backers of suffrage and temperance worked closely, if warily, together. While many members of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) came to see the vote for women as the only way to ensure the passage of prohibition, suffragists increasingly became concerned that collaboration with the WCTU would hurt their cause by alienating the "liquor interests." In South Dakota, attempts by national suffrage leaders to separate the suffrage cause from the WCTU were largely unsuccessful, with disputes arising between the national and state organizations.³⁹

For Wilkes and her fellow Unitarian clergywomen, however, the causes of suffrage and temperance were equally vital, and both re-

37. Dennis A. Norlin, "The Suffrage Movement and South Dakota Churches: Radicals and the Status Quo, 1890," *South Dakota History* 14 (Winter 1984): 310; Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joselyn Gage, eds., *History of Woman Suffrage*, vol. 3, 1876-1885 (Rochester, N.Y.: Susan B. Anthony, 1886), p. 956; *Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader*, 18 June 1890; Crane, "The Story and the Results," p. 9.

38. *Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader*, 11 Nov. 1887. For information on prohibition by local option, see Alvin John Brunn, "The History of the Temperance Movement in South Dakota to 1917" (master's thesis, University of South Dakota, 1948), pp. 32-33.

39. Bordin, *Woman and Temperance*, p. 121; Cecelia M. Wittmayer, "The 1889-1890 Woman Suffrage Campaign: A Need to Organize," *South Dakota History* 11 (Summer 1981): 199-225.

ceived their active support. A founding member and president of the WCTU in Sioux Falls, Wilkes delivered a number of prohibition lectures, including addresses in Valley Springs and Luverne, Minnesota, in 1889.⁴⁰ Bartlett likewise spoke out publicly in favor of temperance. In February 1887, she was among the speakers addressing an audience of thirteen hundred at a temperance mass meeting in Sioux Falls, where she based her message on the negative effects of alcohol on drinkers' offspring. In a subsequent lecture, Bartlett declared, "Nobody can be friends to the saloon and at the same time a friend of law and order, and public or private decency."⁴¹

The clergywomen's sense of social mission extended to the prisons, as well. Wilkes and Bartlett regularly took turns with other members of the Sioux Falls clergy preaching each Sunday at the penitentiary chapel. The *Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader* described one weekly service where Bartlett delivered the sermon and then presided over a formal dinner, the table decorated with bouquets of flowers from the penitentiary gardens. The four-hour-long event "was made pleasant with song and elevating conversation," reported the newspaper, and was successful in raising the spirits and morale of the inmates.⁴²

Although men heavily outnumbered them, women, too, were incarcerated in Sioux Falls and were included in ministerial services. In November 1888, the penitentiary warden reported a total of eighty-one men and three women. The next year, sixty-nine men and four women were incarcerated within the penitentiary walls. At a meeting of the Women's Western Unitarian Conference, Bartlett spoke of the rewards of women's prison ministry, describing the redemptive effect of a touch of the hand and a warm heart.⁴³ Preaching in Sioux Falls on

40. *Rock County Herald*, 27 Sept., 18 Oct. 1889. The alcoholism of Wilkes's eldest son Paul gave her firsthand knowledge of its effects. Wilkes to Jenkin Lloyd Jones, 17 Sept. 1901, Jenkin Lloyd Jones and Western Unitarian Conference Papers, Meadville-Lombard Theological School Library and Archives, Chicago, Ill. (this collection is hereafter cited as Jones Papers).

41. *Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader*, 4 May 1889. See also *Sioux Falls Daily Argus*, 21 Feb. 1887. For accounts of other temperance lectures, see *Unity* 20 (12 Nov. 1887): 130; *ibid.* 23 (11 May 1889): 87; *Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader*, 29 Oct. 1888.

42. *Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader*, 24 Sept. 1888.

43. Dakota Territory, *Fourth Biennial Report of the Directors and Warden of the Dakota Peni-*

the future of Unitarianism, she stressed, "This is the church which offers to the oppressed and the poor and the degraded, the way of life."⁴⁴

Through her writings and sermons, Bartlett left a substantive record of her Unitarian beliefs. At the core was her view that all persons should be free to develop and pursue their own religious convictions. She emphasized that Unitarianism imposed no compulsory or uniform creed, no "mere formula said over for form's sake,"⁴⁵ and affirmed her commitment to "a church whose creed is first a desire for the truth, second an absolute toleration of all honest opinion."⁴⁶ In her sermons, Bartlett upheld the rational basis of Unitarianism. Although she accepted the transcendence of religion over science, she nevertheless believed that rational or natural religion was largely confirmed by scientific discoveries. Physical science was overturning belief in a literal six-day creation and miracles of every kind, she maintained, while the science of criticism was just as surely destroying claims of biblical infallibility.⁴⁷ Bartlett rejected the doctrines of the Trinity and the Immaculate Conception. Jesus was a "majestic soul," she believed, whose teaching and example were matchless,⁴⁸ but who was divine only in the sense that he was animated by the "Divine spirit" and submitted himself wholly to the "Divine will." All persons had the spark of divinity in them, she asserted, in that they were created in God's image and insofar as they followed and obeyed God's will.⁴⁹

Bartlett had no criticism for "those to whom the old faith . . . still seems true and comforting." She saw her mission as one of ministering to those whose faith had been shaken, preaching to them of the

entiary at Sioux Falls, Dakota (1888), p. 5; South Dakota, *Report of the Trustees and Warden of the Dakota Penitentiary at Sioux Falls, Dakota* (1889), p. 7; *Unity* 23 (25 May 1889): 97.

44. Quoted in *Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader*, 3 Mar. 1890.

45. Quoted *ibid.*, 26 Sept. 1887.

46. Quoted *ibid.*, 3 Mar. 1890.

47. Bartlett, *Natural or "Revealed" Religion: A Letter to a Friend, October 21, 1888* (Yankton, D.T.: Press and Dakotain Print, 1888), p. 8, Crane Collection.

48. Bartlett, *The Sacredness of the Present Time: A Sermon Given in All Souls Church, Sioux Falls, Dakota, Sept. 1, 1889* (Sioux Falls, D.T.: All Souls Church, 1889), p. 8, Crane Collection.

49. Bartlett, *Natural or "Revealed" Religion*, p. 12.

loving God she perceived in nature and history, a God compatible with the revelations of science. “[We may be] overcome by a homesick yearning for the faith which nurtured us,” she granted, “but the thing to do is to be true to ourselves. . . . Let us have silence awhile, if we must. Let the spirit brood, and sing not a borrowed song. . . . Then, after a time, out of the dumb struggle will break forth a new paean, because the heart *must* worship!”⁵⁰

Bartlett freely took up the volatile topics of the day in her sermons, including the controversial views of the famed orator and agnostic, Colonel Robert G. Ingersoll. While applauding his attack on “superstitions” such as the fall of man and the doctrine of eternal punishment, she criticized Ingersoll’s derisive attitude toward the writers of the Bible. It was unfair, she protested, “to heap ridicule and contempt” upon those who “wrote out their ideas of God as he seemed to them.”⁵¹ Tackling the problem of evil and Ingersoll’s charge that an infinitely powerful and good God would not allow it, Bartlett argued that people would be “senseless machine[s]” if they were not given moral freedom to choose their own paths.⁵² Most wrongs and evils could be avoided through obedience to God’s laws, she concluded, and contended that Ingersoll was greatly mistaken to view happiness as the aim of existence. “I think that not happiness but character is the real end,” she wrote.⁵³

In the fall of 1888, Bartlett turned to another widely discussed subject—the newly published novel *Robert Elsmere* by Mary Augusta Ward, the niece of poet and cultural critic Matthew Arnold. The best-selling book told the story of an Anglican clergyman suffering a crisis of faith and ultimately abandoning orthodox Christianity for liberal beliefs. Bartlett offered her views on the novel in a sermon subse-

50. Bartlett, *Sacredness of the Present Time*, pp. 11–12.

51. Bartlett, *Truths and Errors in Col. Ingersoll’s Method and Argument: A Discourse Delivered December 16, 1888* (Sioux Falls, D.T.: Dakota Bell Publishing, 1889), pp. 6, 8, Crane Collection. Robert Green Ingersoll (1833–1899) was a popular presence in the late nineteenth century, traveling the country on frequent speaking tours.

52. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

53. *Ibid.*, p. 13. Bartlett later formed a friendship with the Ingersoll family after Colonel Ingersoll visited Bartlett’s church while lecturing in Kalamazoo, Michigan. Crane, “The Story and the Results,” pp. 17–18.

quently published as “a letter to a friend.” Reading the book would address many religious problems, she advised, pointing to the liberating faith that sustained the title character even on his deathbed.⁵⁴ Predictably, Bartlett’s positive reaction to the novel contrasted with that of the Reverend Frederick Gardiner of the Episcopal church, who, the *Argus-Leader* reported, gave the book a careful reading but “refused to accept as good the reasons which induced Robert Elsmere to reject the miraculous features of the Christian religion.”⁵⁵

While Bartlett preached in Sioux Falls, Wilkes ministered to the Unitarian Society in Luverne, Minnesota, organized in December 1886. In 1888, a church member noted in a report to the Western Unitarian Conference that plans were underway for a church structure to be built of Luverne red jasper. More gratifying, the correspondent attested, was the spiritual growth of the society, a development attributable to the inspirational influence of Wilkes. By 1889, the church reported a weekly attendance of between sixty and one hundred fifty people. The Unitarian Society did not win ready acceptance from Luverne’s orthodox believers, however. On Thanksgiving in 1889, the town’s other churches excluded the liberal congregation from a communal service, leaving the Unitarians to gather by themselves for worship and a Thanksgiving meal.⁵⁶

In the face of resistance to the Unitarian message, Wilkes strove to define and promote the sustaining power of her faith, preaching a sermon in December entitled “Why I Am Not an Agnostic.” She maintained her Luverne ministry while residing in Sioux Falls, typically taking the train to Luverne on Saturday morning and returning home on Monday. On Sunday evenings, she frequently preached to a congregation at Rock Rapids, Iowa, located fifteen miles south of Luverne and organized concurrently with the Luverne Unitarian Society.⁵⁷

54. Bartlett, *Natural or “Revealed” Religion*, pp. 6–7.

55. *Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader*, 19 Nov. 1888.

56. *Unity* 18 (18 Dec. 1886): 206; *ibid.* 21 (2 and 9 June 1888): 183; *ibid.* 23 (1 and 8 June 1889): 109; *Rock County Herald*, 29 Nov. 1889.

57. *Rock County Herald*, 20 Dec. 1889; *Unity* 20 (12 Nov. 1887): 130; *ibid.* 23 (1 and 8 June 1889): 109; Mrs. F. K. Bradley to B. F. Gue, 4 Oct. 1893, Bradley Letters, <http://www.rootsweb.com/~ialyon/diaries/bradley.htm>.

In June 1887, Massachusetts native Helen Grace Putnam temporarily assumed leadership of the Rock Rapids congregation, preaching in the courthouse throughout the summer before returning to Meadville Theological School to complete her studies. Putnam, born in Dorchester, Massachusetts, in 1840 and raised in Beverly and Boston, was an only daughter. Well educated and having lost her parents and two older brothers in adulthood, she supported herself by giving music lessons and serving as editor of *Country Week*, a publication of the Boston Young Men's Christian Union. Active in the Unitarian Church, Putnam held a leadership position in the Women's Auxiliary and, in her forties, decided to enter the seminary.⁵⁸

Upon graduating from Meadville in 1888, Putnam returned to the Midwest. After a few weeks of guest preaching at All Souls Church in

58. *Lyon County Reporter*, 1 July, 30 Sept. 1887; *General Catalogue of the Meadville Theological School*, p. 57; Hitchings, *Universalist and Unitarian Women Ministers*, pp. 123–24; *Christian Register*, 16 Jan. 1896.



Helen Grace Putnam worked to maintain the Unitarian congregation in Huron, which disbanded in 1889 due to lack of funds. She then traveled the region spreading the Unitarian message until her death in 1895.

Sioux Falls, she settled in Huron, where she had accepted a call as pastor of the Unitarian "Sunday Circle." The Huron congregation had been organized the previous June by the Western Unitarian Conference through the efforts of Wilkes and functioned as a subparish of the Sioux Falls church, with Bartlett making periodic trips to preach in the town's Grand Army Hall.⁵⁹ The turnout on these Sunday mornings and evenings was large and enthusiastic, prompting *Unity* to comment on the "vigor and hopefulness" of mission work in Dakota.⁶⁰ With energy and a commitment to a broad and rational faith and social reform, Putnam strove to maintain the momentum.

Putnam's time in Huron coincided with the city's spirited but unsuccessful campaign for capital as Dakota Territory prepared to divide and officially enter the Union as South Dakota and North Dakota in November 1889. Despite billing itself as the center of population, agriculture, and rail transportation—indeed, "the very center of centers" and "the rightful place for the capital of South Dakota"—Huron nevertheless lost the race to Pierre in the 1 October 1889 election.⁶¹ The October election also included a vote on prohibition, an issue Putnam actively supported and which passed with 54 percent of the vote.⁶²

The community's reception of the unorthodox beliefs of the "Huron lady preacher" was not always cordial, as illustrated by a caustic critique of Putnam's election as president of the county's WCTU group that appeared in a Huron church publication. "If the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, of Beadle County, sitting under the presidency of an Arian heretic, who denies Jesus Christ, were to call itself the Woman's Hebrew Temperance Union, or the Woman's Deist Temperance Union, or the Woman's Atheist Temperance Union, or the Woman's Ingersoll Club," read the diatribe, "nobody could find any fault with it on the ground of consistency. We shall not be sur-

59. *Daily Huronite*, 22 Jan. 1889; *Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader*, 18 July, 29 Dec. 1888; *Unity* 21 (30 June 1888): 243; *ibid.* 22 (1 Dec. 1888): 190.

60. *Unity* 21 (28 July 1888): 294.

61. *Daily Huronite*, 28 Sept. 1889. See also 15 June, 3 Oct. 1889. The scenario would be repeated in 1890 when Pierre was voted the permanent capital.

62. Brunn, "History of the Temperance Movement," p. 38.

prised to hear that the Woman's *Christian* Temperance Union, of Beadle County, has adopted 'Robert Elsmere' as part of the Canon of Holy Scripture, or has canonized Tom Paine."⁶³

Putnam described other opposition from conservative believers, writing, "Our number is small but the Evangelicals fear us and fight against us as they would the devil. Indeed, presumably, we personify that fearful antagonist."⁶⁴ When the Huron *Presbyter* accused liberal thinkers of "sacrificing Christian charity in the interests of a theory that does violence to all Christian life and fellowship," Putnam protested vigorously. Naming poets Oliver Wendell Holmes, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, William Cullen Bryant, James Russell Lowell, and John Greenleaf Whittier and progressing through a list of leading authors, historians, philanthropists, and politicians, including three United States presidents, Putnam identified all as Unitarians and exemplary citizens. "These are only a few of the illustrious names who belong to a class of men and women whose lives and religion may safely be judged according to Jesus. 'By their fruits ye shall know them.'"⁶⁵

Reaction to Putnam's ministry was not entirely negative. Initially engaged as pastor in Huron for only three months, Putnam won accolades from her congregation and a promise to renew her ministry for a year, provided they could stay afloat. "Our numbers have increased and the interest has widened and deepened and the movement is talked of in other towns," wrote the secretary of the local Unitarian society, attributing the success to their minister's willingness to accept a tiny salary and travel frequently.⁶⁶ Representative of Putnam's mission work while in Huron were her visits to small towns like Northville in Spink County, where, according to Putnam, "liberal thought was never preached before" but audiences eagerly received

63. Quoted in *Unity* 23 (10 Aug. 1889): 190. Political philosopher and deist Thomas Paine (1737–1809) gained the reputation as an atheist after the publication of his *Age of Reason* (1794–1795), in which he sharply criticized the Bible and traditional religion.

64. Quoted in *Unity* 23 (6 July 1889): 150.

65. Quoted in *Daily Huronite*, 14 Sept. 1889.

66. Quoted in *Unity* 23 (27 Apr. 1889): 70.

the "Gospel of Rational Religion,"⁶⁷ and Aberdeen, where two hundred gathered to hear a discourse entitled "Unitarianism: Is It a Dangerous Doctrine?" The talk had been widely advertised, Putnam noted, and estimated that the crowd contained only about a dozen liberals.⁶⁸

Despite Putnam's efforts, the Huron congregation's monetary situation continued to worsen. In October 1889, nine months after hiring their "self-sacrificing minister," the society regretfully accepted Putnam's resignation, which had become necessary because of their financial inability to maintain her. They conveyed their "entire and profound satisfaction with her work in sowing and rooting deep the seeds of liberal thought."⁶⁹

In 1889, Carrie Bartlett, too, bade farewell to her congregation. After leading the Sioux Falls Unitarian church for nearly three years, she had accepted a call to Kalamazoo, Michigan. On a Sunday morning in early September, a standing-room-only audience packed All Souls Church for their popular pastor's final service. Playing up the sentiment of the occasion, the *Argus-Leader* described Bartlett's dress, a creation of "pure white with a bunch of pansies at the throat," her voice, which "trembled somewhat," and the sight of many handkerchiefs raised to congregants' teary eyes. Bartlett's leaving would create a void not easily filled, the article concluded. She had earned the enduring respect and regard of her church and community, and her departure would be "a distinct and deeply felt loss to Sioux Falls."⁷⁰

Bartlett would carry out a ten-year-long ministry in Kalamazoo, where she took up the challenge of reviving and healing an inactive, divided congregation. Her efforts were rewarded with a growing and enthusiastic membership. In 1894, she presided over the building of a new "People's Church," which accommodated a free public kindergarten, a school of domestic science and manual training, a women's

67. Quoted *ibid.* 23 (23 Mar. 1889): 30.

68. Putnam to Jenkin Lloyd Jones, 8 Oct. 1889, Jones Papers.

69. Quoted in *Unity* 24 (16 Nov. 1889): 86. Putnam discussed the financial situation in a letter to Jones, 1 June 1889, Jones Papers.

70. *Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader*, 2 Sept. 1889.

gymnasium, a day nursery, a cafeteria for working women, and a literary club for young African Americans.⁷¹ An admiring editorial in the Western Unitarian Conference publication cited Bartlett's success in "establishing an absolutely free, non-denominational, undogmatic, neighborhood, seven-day working church." In a sweeping statement, the writer further credited her with undertaking "the most interesting and significant work . . . of any minister in America."⁷²

In Sioux Falls, the search for a successor to fill the vacant pulpit at All Souls focused first on Marion Murdock, to whom the congregation issued a call. Her decision to continue her pastorate at Unity Church in Humboldt, Iowa, however, led to the selection of James Edwin Bagley and his wife Blanche Pentecost Bagley in the fall of 1889. The newly married couple had met at Meadville Theological School, where both had graduated the previous spring. Blanche Bagley, born in England in the 1850s and educated in private schools in London, had moved to Chicago in 1882 after graduating from college in Avenches, Switzerland. Raised in the Church of England, she converted to Unitarianism and enrolled at Meadville with encouragement from her sister Edith and brother-in-law Frederick B. Mott, himself studying for the Unitarian ministry.⁷³

The third weekend in October 1889 was an historic occasion for both the Sioux Falls congregation and the Unitarian Church. On the evening of 17 October, both Bagleys were ordained at All Souls. The joint ordination of a husband and wife was certainly remarkable and perhaps unprecedented. At the ordination, Eliza Wilkes, ever committed to the welfare of her Sioux Falls church, offered the invocation and presented the ministerial candidates, while Helen Putnam read the scriptures. Reverend Jenkin Lloyd Jones of Chicago, the editor of *Unity* and an influential promoter of women's ministry, preached the ordination sermon to a filled house.⁷⁴

71. Crane, "The Story and the Results," pp. 16–17.

72. *New Unity* [37] (6 Aug. 1896).

73. *Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader*, 29 May, 12 Oct. 1889; *Unity* 24 (7 Sept. 1889): 6; Willard and Livermore, *American Women*, 1:42–43.

74. *Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader*, 18 Oct. 1889; *Unity* 24 (9 Nov. 1889): 78. A contemporary publication hailed the Bagleys' ordination as "the first of that kind in the history of the

Blanche Pentecost Bagley served with her husband James Bagley as Julia Bartlett's successor at All Souls Church. The couple's joint ordination in 1889 was an historic event for Unitarians.



The Bagleys' ordination coincided with the semiannual meeting of the Minnesota Unitarian Conference, to which Sioux Falls now belonged. On 18 October, conference attendees reassembled in Luverne for the ordination of Putnam, who was soon to take up missionary work in North Dakota. "Think of it, three women ordained in two days," marveled Putnam, referring to herself, Blanche Bagley, and Carrie Bartlett, who was ordained on the same day in Kalamazoo. "Surely *we* are coming to the front," she concluded.⁷⁵ Wilkes delivered the prayer at Putnam's ordination. Also participating was Eleanor Gordon, herself ordained the previous May in Sioux City, Iowa, in a ceremony noteworthy for the presence of eight ordained women. The dedication of the Luverne church on Sunday morning rounded out the eventful weekend. Reminiscent of All Souls in Sioux Falls, Luverne's Unity Church had a homelike appearance, complete with par-

world" (Willard and Livermore, *American Women*, 2:43). Three months later, a second joint ordination of a married couple took place. Held in Chicago, the ordination service for Meadville graduates Lila Frost and Leslie Willis Sprague featured an address by a rabbi, prayers by James Bagley, and words of welcome and benediction from Blanche Bagley. *Unity* 24 (25 Jan. 1890): 166.

75. Putnam to Jones, 8 Oct. 1889.

lors and a fireplace. Wilkes again had been instrumental in raising funds for a new building, and the church was dedicated debt free.⁷⁶

In Sioux Falls, Blanche Bagley, though in residence for only a year, took an active part in the church and community. She often led the evening services at All Souls and occasionally gave the morning sermon, her titles including "The Love of God," "Prejudice," and "Education and Culture," in which she advocated for a higher standard of education for all people. "As education banishes superstition and ignorance," she declared, "the humbug of false creeds and unmeaning ritual will be done away with, and the one God reign supreme in the universe which He has created."⁷⁷ While serving the Sioux Falls congregation, Bagley gave birth to a daughter, Marion, in May 1890. Bagley joined fellow liberal women believers in supporting women's suffrage, serving as cochair of the local Equal Suffrage Association and introducing Susan B. Anthony and Anna Howard Shaw when they spoke in Sioux Falls (Anthony in November 1889 and Shaw the following spring).⁷⁸

The issue of women's suffrage was "the topic uppermost now in our minds in South Dakota," wrote Putnam in 1889.⁷⁹ In 1885 and again in 1889, Dakotans agreed to vote on the issue at the first general election following statehood. National and local activists canvassed South Dakota in 1890, contending with extreme weather, long distances, scant encouragement, and strong opposition. Putnam, a committed advocate of women's suffrage, was among the workers who traversed the state in support of the amendment. Despite the zealous efforts, only 32 percent of voters in the November 1890 election favored suffrage. Not until 1918 would South Dakota women receive the vote.⁸⁰

76. *Unity* 23 (1 and 8 June 1889): 110; *ibid.* 24 (12 Oct. 1889): 46; *ibid.* 24 (9 Nov. 1889): 78; *Rock County Herald*, 11, 25 Oct. 1889; *Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader*, 18 Jan., 15 Oct. 1889.

77. Quoted in *Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader*, 30 Dec. 1889. See also *ibid.*, 26 Oct. 1889, 23 May 1890.

78. Willard and Livermore, *American Women*, 2:43.

79. Putnam to Jones, 8 Oct. 1889.

80. Susan B. Anthony and Ida Husted Harper, eds., *The History of Woman Suffrage*, vol. 4, 1883-1900 (Rochester, N.Y.: Susan B. Anthony, 1902), pp. 553-57. In October 1889, Putnam signed a petition urging the organization of a state association to work for equal franchise. *Daily Huronite*, 9 Oct. 1889.

Putnam was unflagging in carrying on her primary work of ministry. In late 1889, she established herself in Jamestown, North Dakota, her base for the next three years. From there she journeyed far and wide, addressing Unitarians and newcomers to the faith in schoolhouses, churches, shanties, and dugouts. Among the South Dakota communities visited were Ipswich, Mina, Bowdle, Castlewood, Clark, Montrose, Miner, and Mitchell. In 1890 alone, Putnam logged more than four thousand miles and penned over one thousand letters, delivering sermons and lectures to audiences ranging from single families to crowds of over two hundred, as well as performing funerals and weddings. She commonly heard the refrain that good crops would help to ensure regular services, but hard times prevailed in the 1890s, a period marked by economic depression, drought, and crop failures.⁸¹

Through her letters, Putnam provided a glimpse of her missionary activities—days spent traveling across the prairies to visit scattered liberal families and nights spent in remote sod shanties. Typical of Putnam's nonstop ministry was her impromptu preaching to an audience of sixty to seventy people awaiting the arrival of an evening train.⁸² Although her expenses exceeded her salary, she labored on, taking heart at the positive response she received from many communities, if not from the orthodox clergy. Putnam described a Sunday afternoon service she held following "an intensely orthodox sermon" preached by the town's Presbyterian minister that same morning. The minister had informed Putnam that he considered her an "arch-heretic" and had prolonged the morning service in the apparent expectation that the audience would be too tired to attend her afternoon address. The tactic failed to have the intended effect, however, for Putnam preached to a packed schoolhouse. "The men brought in seats from their wagons and some stood on the doorsteps to listen to that 'strange and dangerous doctrine,'" she noted with satisfaction. "It is good to carry our gospel where it is so needed."⁸³

81. *Unity* 25 (24 May 1890): 107; *ibid.* 25 (3 July 1890): 154; *ibid.* 27 (15 Jan. 1891): 166. For accounts of Putnam's travels, see *ibid.* 26 (25 Sept. 1890): 30; *ibid.* 26 (9 Oct. 1890): 46; *ibid.* 27 (30 July 1891): 190; *ibid.* 28 (10 Dec. 1891): 120; *ibid.* 32 (7 Dec. 1893): 222.

82. *Unity* 25 (24 May 1890): 107; *ibid.* 26 (12 Feb. 1891): 198.

83. Quoted *ibid.* 25 (3 July 1890): 154.

Putnam received primarily positive coverage from the South Dakota press. The *Mitchell Daily Republic* praised her as an able speaker who held the attention of a large audience, and the Castlewood newspaper announced that she would be gladly welcomed whenever she returned. Never one to shy away from controversy, Putnam provided a spirited reply to an attack upon Unitarian beliefs by an Ipswich, South Dakota, minister in the *Ipswich Gazette*. The exchange sparked interest in the Unitarian message, prompting the editor to request a Unitarian sermon for his newspaper once or twice a month.⁸⁴

In August 1893, a destructive fire in Jamestown burned down the Metropolitan Hotel where Putnam roomed, destroying most of her possessions, including books and papers, pictures, furniture, and the lantern and slides she used to illustrate lectures on her extensive European travels. Undaunted, she expressed thankfulness at having been able to save her clothing. Putnam relocated to Fargo, North Dakota, after the fire and in January 1894 received a call to Detroit (later renamed Detroit Lakes), Minnesota. Soon thereafter, her health began to fail. Her voice nearly gone, Putnam nevertheless continued her missionary work almost to the time of her death in November 1895.⁸⁵ "A useful life has been ended, one that was animated by high aims, quick to respond to all calls of human sympathy, keenly interested in the questions that most beset thinking men and women," a Fargo newspaper eulogized.⁸⁶ "Not only did she preach and distribute good literature," read a tribute in the *Christian Register*, "but also made soup for the sick, or a toy for a child, sang songs for sinking hearts, and, if occasion offered, would play a whole sonata of Beethoven to some delighted soul."⁸⁷

The end of Putnam's ministry was part of a general loss of women

84. *Ibid.* 25 (3 July 1890): 154; *ibid.* 25 (10 July 1890): 162; *ibid.* 26 (25 Sept. 1890): 30; *ibid.* 32 (7 Dec. 1893): 222.

85. *Jamestown Daily Alert*, 14 Aug. 1893; *Unity* 31 (24 Aug. 1893): 313; *ibid.* 32 (26 Oct. 1893): 126; *ibid.* 34 (10 Jan. 1895): 620. In the 1890s, Putnam also served as secretary of the Minnesota Unitarian Conference. *New Unity* [36] (10 Oct. 1895): 507.

86. *Fargo Argus*, 29 Nov. 1895, reprinted in *Detroit (Minn.) Record*, 29 Nov. 1895.

87. *Christian Register*, 16 Jan. 1896.

pastors in the 1890s. Among the Unitarian clergywomen with South Dakota ties, only Eliza Tupper Wilkes continued her church ministry into the twentieth century. This exodus mirrored a broader phenomenon; by 1900, the number of Unitarian women ministers nationwide had sharply diminished. One factor was opposition from the Unitarian leadership in the eastern United States. Never entirely supportive of women's ministry, the American Unitarian Association increasingly courted male clergy and sought to cultivate a manlier image. The reaction against women pastors extended beyond Unitarianism. Opposition to the ordination of women had permeated the Protestant denominations by the end of the century, driven in large part by concerns over the diminishing numbers and qualifications of men entering the ministry.⁸⁸ The idealization of masculinity and fear of an encroaching feminization became a nationwide absorption in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. President Theodore Roosevelt shared and shaped the national climate through his advocacy of a strenuous lifestyle and his projection of robustness and virility as America strove to "win the goal of true national greatness."⁸⁹

The demographic and social changes sweeping the country at the turn of the twentieth century inevitably influenced the career choices of women ministers. Shifts in population resulted in fewer congregants in rural areas, and liberals migrated to mainline Protestant churches that were increasingly accommodating, contributing to the decline of Unitarian clergy. The emergence of the Progressive Era reform movement and the corresponding Social Gospel movement proved pivotal. In the face of rapid industrialization and urbanization, Progressives, at once egalitarian and elitist, ambitiously sought to

88. Tucker, *Prophetic Sisterhood*, pp. 148–49; Paula D. Nesbitt, *Feminization of the Clergy in America: Occupational and Organizational Perspectives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 23.

89. Theodore Roosevelt, *The Strenuous Life: Essays and Addresses* (New York: Century, 1901), p. 21. See also Tucker, *Prophetic Sisterhood*, p. 148; Susan Lee Johnson, "A memory sweet to soldiers': The Significance of Gender in the History of the 'American West,'" *Western Historical Quarterly* 24 (Nov. 1993): 497–98; Gail Bederman, *Manliness & Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880–1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Arnaldo Testi, "The Gender of Reform Politics: Theodore Roosevelt and the Culture of Masculinity," *Journal of American History* 81 (Mar. 1995): 1509–33.

remedy the societal problems they perceived and renew the moral order. Social Gospelers, linking their faith to a moral obligation to reform society, redirected their focus from individual salvation to social salvation. Committed to social justice and the improvement of living conditions and public health, many former clergywomen turned primarily to reform work.⁹⁰

Bartlett was among those making the transition from the pulpit to civic reform. In 1898, two years after marrying physician Augustus Warren Crane, she resigned her ministry and directed her attention to urban sanitation, a new field in which she earned national acclaim. As a municipal housekeeper, she conducted inspections of water, food, waste disposal, and housing in cities throughout the country, providing constructive counsel and drafting successful legislation for improvements to public health and sanitation. In 1914, she and her husband adopted two children, Warren and Juliana. Until her death in 1935 at the age of seventy-six, Caroline Bartlett Crane maintained an active involvement in social reform and public service.⁹¹

As a committed proponent of women's suffrage and social justice, Mila Tupper similarly pursued reform throughout her career. After her ordination on 7 November 1889 in La Porte, Indiana, she served pastorates in Indiana and Michigan before marrying Rezin A. Maynard in 1893. In her later career, she devoted much of her time to lecturing and writing (including a book on the poetry of Walt Whitman).

90. Tucker, *Prophetic Sisterhood*, pp. 148, 169–70; Susan Curtis, *A Consuming Faith: The Social Gospel and Modern American Culture* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), pp. 2–3. For more on the Progressive Era, see Robert M. Crunden, *Ministers of Reform: The Progressives' Achievement in American Civilization, 1889–1920* (New York: Basic Books, 1982); Noralee Frankel and Nancy S. Dye, eds., *Gender, Class, Race, and Reform in the Progressive Era* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1991); Steven J. Diner, *A Very Different Age: Americans of the Progressive Era* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1998); Michael McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870–1920* (New York: Free Press, 2003); and Maureen A. Flanagan, *America Reformed: Progressives and Progressivisms, 1890s–1920s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

91. Crane, "The Story and the Results," pp. 18–26; Tucker, *Prophetic Sisterhood*, pp. 190–95. See also Rickard, *A Just Verdict*; Linda J. Rynbrandt, *Caroline Bartlett Crane and Progressive Reform: Social Housekeeping as Sociology* (New York: Garland, 1999); Helen Christine Bennett, *American Women in Civic Work* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1915), pp. 3–45.

Her identification with the Christian Socialist movement led to a break from Unitarianism.⁹²

Blanche Bagley, too, disappeared from the *Unitarian Year Book* at the beginning of the twentieth century, having relocated to France and then Canada after her husband's early death in 1899 at the age of thirty-one. In the fall of 1890, the Bagleys had left Sioux Falls for Massachusetts, where James Bagley served congregations in Haverhill and, later, Wollaston. Though not employed in an official capacity, Blanche Bagley preached occasionally in her husband's pulpit and took over his ministerial duties when he went to Europe in 1893 for a few months of needed recuperation.⁹³

Eliza Wilkes also suffered from ill health and divided her time between California and the Midwest in the 1890s. During these years, Wilkes ministered to congregations in Alameda, Oakland, Palo Alto, and Santa Ana, California, and also founded a congregation in Adrian, Minnesota.⁹⁴ Financial insolvency and a "multiplicity of churches" in the city forced the Sioux Falls congregation to suspend operations in the mid-1890s and donate their building for use as the city library.⁹⁵ In 1901, Wilkes and her husband moved permanently to California. She died in 1917 while visiting in Atlantic City, New Jersey.⁹⁶

The number of women clergy continued its downward spiral as the new century unfolded. "Their members dropped off precipitously," notes Cynthia Tucker, "and, by the outbreak of World War I, there was little evidence of the West ever having been woman's terrain."⁹⁷ Not

92. *Unity* 24 (16 Nov. 1889): 86; Hitchings, *Universalist and Unitarian Women Ministers*, pp. 104-5. Mila Tupper Maynard died in 1926.

93. Hitchings, *Universalist and Unitarian Women Ministers*, p. 15; *Unity* 30 (16 Feb. 1893): 206.

94. Hitchings, *Universalist and Unitarian Women Ministers*, p. 150; *Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader*, 17 Nov. 1890; Wilkes to Reynolds, 21 Jan. 1894, and Wilkes to George Batchelor, 28 Jan. 1896, American Unitarian Association, Letterbooks, 1822-1902, bMS 571, Andover-Harvard Theological Library; Wilkes to Jones, 17 Sept. 1901, Jones Papers; *Rock County Herald*, 14 Feb. 1890.

95. Wilkes to Batchelor, 12 Nov. 1897, American Unitarian Association, Letterbooks, 1822-1902, bMS 571, Andover-Harvard Theological Library.

96. *Sioux Falls Press*, 13 Feb. 1917.

97. Tucker, *Prophetic Sisterhood*, p. 147.

until the late twentieth century were women firmly established in the ministry. In 1999, women for the first time constituted over one half of ordained Unitarian Universalist clergy.⁹⁸

Despite their slim numbers and the broken progression of their ministry, pioneering clergywomen left an enduring legacy. Working under challenging conditions and within the constraints and ideologies of the times, these women of liberal faith remained true to their sense of mission. At the center was their message of hope and progress and their vigorous pursuit of equal rights and reform. Although the Progressive Era belief in human and societal perfectibility has since faded, the achievements of the era's reformers warrant continued attention. Upholding the importance of religious freedom and rationalism, character and fellowship, service and social action, these dedicated women blended ministerial and managerial skills with traditional domestic roles and reforming impulses, fashioning new careers and carving out a path for future generations to follow.

98. *New York Times*, 25 Apr. 1999. See also Dawn Sangrey, "The Feminization of the Unitarian Universalist Clergy: Impacts, Speculations, and Longing," *Journal of Liberal Religion* 2 (Fall 2000), http://www.meadville.edu/journal/2000_sangrey_2_1.pdf, accessed 26 Mar. 2008.

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