

# The Ecumenical Lineage of American Clergywomen: 1863-1985

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## Introduction

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This article proposes to examine the impact of nineteenth-century clergywomen on the ordination of mainline Protestant women in the twentieth century, based on insights gleaned from a remarkable nineteenth-century scrapbook of clergywomen, lay preachers, and laywomen. My research on this material has led me to explore the mentoring relationships that developed between clergywomen as individuals and through their association with the Women's Ministerial Conference. The Conference was an ecumenical organization that provided mutual support to isolated clergywomen and advocated women's ordination through newspaper articles and lectures.

The focal point of this article is Rev. Nellie Mann Opdale (1861-1941), a Universalist minister for forty-seven years and editor of the *Universalist Herald* for twelve years. As we examine her relationship with other clergywomen and with the Women's Ministerial Conference, a complex portrait of mutual support, mentoring, and encouragement among clergywomen emerges from the faded ink and silent photographs these embattled women pastors left behind. Reverend Opdale's influence on the small Georgia community she served during the last years of her life affected the area so profoundly that forty years after her death, a Presbyterian congregation in the county was willing to accept a minority woman as their pastor because their memories of Rev. Opdale were so positive.

## The Scrapbook Women

In the late 1980s, I was given a discarded nineteenth-century scrapbook found by a friend at the Brenau University annual book sale in Gainesville, Georgia. The scrapbook consisted of a set of cabinet cards, with one autograph trimmed from a letter set in the center page. Many of these nineteenth-century women had the title 'Reverend' or 'Lay Preacher' in front of their names. The autograph on the center page was in barely legible nineteenth-century script. There was no name of an owner or compiler of the scrapbook. However, my friend told me the scrapbook was donated to the library by a woman preacher many years ago and it was compiled for her by one of her friends. As a young minority woman living in an area dominated by Newt Gingrich and struggling to find a Presbyterian congregation willing to let me preach in their pulpit even one Sunday, I treasured the scrapbook. I had never heard of these women, and I falsely assumed that they had wanted to be ordained but had been denied by their churches. A hundred years ago, the ostracism directed at any woman seeking ordination in the South would have been intimidating. Actually, the ostracism and isolation was devastating in the 1980's! I would periodically take the scrapbook off the shelf, look through the faded pictures, and whisper, "We made it."

In 2008, I took the scrapbook to the library at the United Theological Seminary in Dayton, Ohio for assistance in preservation. The head of the library, Dr. Sarah Brooks Blair, suggested researching the names of the women in the scrapbook. Within minutes we discovered these women were in fact ordained. They served parishes throughout the United States. These clergywomen were active and influential in the abolition, suffrage, temperance, World Peace, kindergarten, and other reform movements in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The autograph in the center of the scrapbook was authenticated as the signature of Julia Ward Howe.

How did this scrapbook end up in North Georgia? Why had I not heard of these clergywomen in my American church history classes, or my social and intellectual history classes? Who would compile such a group of ordained women from different denominations, with comments on their effectiveness in the pulpit? Quakers,

Universalists, Seventh Day Adventists, Spiritualists, and Unitarians, all gathered in a scrapbook in a way that suggested intimacy, connection, and friendship. Why was Julia Ward Howe at the center of it all? Who would dare to cherish the autograph of the author of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" in the heart of Dixie at a time and in an area active with the Ku Klux Klan?

As I researched my 'Scrapbook Women' and attempted to find the scrapbook's provenance, I inadvertently discovered unexpected links from the probable owner of the scrapbook to myself. Rev. Nellie Mann Opdale (1861-1941), the Universalist pastor in Canon, Georgia and editor of the Universalist Herald from 1928 to 1941, knew the clergywomen in the scrapbook through their joint connection with the Women's Ministerial Conference (1874-1915). Rev. Opdale was active in that organization during the years she served the Universalist church in Marlboro, Massachusetts. She became the secretary of the Women's Ministerial Conference during its final years, and thus would have known, corresponded with, and worked with Julia Ward Howe. The probable compiler of the scrapbook was her friend Dr. Abby Adams. I served a Presbyterian church in the same county where Nellie Mann Opdale served, but since she died in 1941, and I began serving a Presbyterian (USA) church there in 1985, we obviously never met.



### **The Women's Ministerial Conference (1874-1915)**

The Women's Ministerial Conference, the brainchild of Julia Ward Howe, met intermittently for over forty years under her leadership. Meetings generally occurred in conjunction with the anniversary meeting in Boston.<sup>1</sup> Mrs. Howe, a well-known and popular lecturer, Unitarian lay preacher, and author, was a celebrity during her lifetime. An amazing organizer, she was central to the founding of local and national groups such as the American Woman Suffrage Association and the Federated Women's Clubs.<sup>2</sup> She championed the cause of women entering the ordained ministry. In a 1909 address to the Women's Ministerial Conference, Julia Ward Howe shared her ardent support for women's ordination and her rationale for founding the conference. To quote:

"I had a great interest many years ago [for] women in the ministry. I was new in the field of women's larger life. I was impressed with the importance of religious life, and believed in the power of association. I believe that women ministers would be less sectarian than men; and I thought that if those of different denominations could meet occasionally and compare notes, it would be of value. But I found it hard to get them together. . . The purses of women ministers are probably light, and that makes it harder for them to attend conventions."<sup>3</sup>

Julia Ward Howe did not mention the crushing load of responsibilities many pastors carry, which prevented them from leaving their parishes to attend the conference.

The conference operated as a safe place for professional mentoring, a group where women could honestly express their feelings about the undercurrent of opposition and negativity they faced in their parishes, their denominations, and their communities.<sup>4</sup> The sense of support and connection with other women pastors extended beyond those who could attend the meetings. An example of this connection and support has been preserved in the papers of the conference.

In October 1913, Rev. Albertie Stimson Phillips wrote to Rev. Florence Kollock Crooker, mentioning the importance of the connection she felt with other clergywomen through the Women's Ministerial Conference. In her letter, she apologized that she could not attend the annual meeting, but wished to join and send any dues or fees necessary. Rev. Phillips then shared with Rev. Crooker the sad fact that only seventeen of seventy ordained Universalist clergywomen were actually serving churches. Rev. Phillips had written to "several prominent ones asking questions about their ministry." The clergywomen to whom she wrote were all members of the Women's Ministerial Conference. She finished her letter candidly expressing her surprise "at the strength and the source of the opposition I meetâ€¦ I expected opposition from the people but not from the clergy."<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps as a response to the needs of younger, inexperienced clergywomen for assistance and advice, Rev. Nellie Mann Opdale suggested that she lead a Q&A session during the 1915 Women's Ministerial Conference instead of giving a traditional lecture. As an experienced clergywoman currently active in parish ministry, Opdale could offer practical guidance on the complex problems and difficult issues younger clergywomen faced. She suggested that the questions be submitted in advance so they could be organized. An in-depth response could then be given.<sup>6</sup> These letters indicate the Women's Ministerial Conference offered mentoring, support, and advice to younger less experienced clergywomen and were sensitive to the lack of professional and collegial advice clergywomen received from male ministers.

From my examination of the records of the Women's Ministerial Conference, I believe its impact has been underestimated. In an era where religious, social, and cultural forces opposed women's ordination and gender equality, this ecumenical organization offered nurture and support to otherwise isolated women fighting lonely battles in impoverished parishes with little or no collegial support within their denominations. Actual conference attendance may not correlate with influence and impact. As Rev. Albertie Stimson Phillips' 1913 letter attests, simply knowing the organization existed gave her hope and provided access to the greater wisdom of more experienced clergywomen. Perhaps the women of the Conference and the clergywomen of the liberal tradition provided assistance and support in ways they could not imagine, much less quantifiably measure.

What seems critical is the variety of mentoring and support that individual clergywomen offered to younger women seeking to follow the lonely and difficult road into parish ministry. This cross-generational mentoring and support became a professional matrilineal heritage that crossed denominational and theological lines, from Congregational to Universalist to Presbyterian women ministers. Here we see the mentoring that Rev. Antoinette Brown Blackwell gave to Rev. Olympia Brown in the 1850's and 1860's, and the mentoring that Rev. Olympia Brown offered to Rev. Nellie Mann Opdale in the 1880's and 1890's. This led to the pastoral legacy of Rev. Opdale in northern Georgia, which opened an opportunity for me to serve a Presbyterian congregation in 1985.

### **Mentor, Mother, Minister**

During their lifetimes, Antoinette Brown Blackwell was considered the first woman ordained in the United States (1853) and Olympia Brown the second (1863). I will leave the current controversy over primacy to other historians, and concentrate on the mentoring Rev. Blackwell offered to Olympia Brown as she struggled to achieve Universalist ordination and serve as a parish minister.

Antoinette Brown Blackwell (1825-1921) first felt called to ordination at the age of eight. After completing her undergraduate and theological work at Oberlin and preaching and lecturing intermittently for two years, she found a Congregational congregation in South Butler, NY willing to extend a call as pastor. When the Congregational clergy in her area refused to ordain her, a nearby Methodist preacher ordained her.<sup>7</sup>

The newly ordained pastor loved the work of parish ministry. Unfortunately, strong resistance to her pastoral service due to her gender rapidly exhausted her physically and emotionally. Antoinette Brown Blackwell resigned after 10 months due to the toll of the stress on her health. Moreover, the negativity she experienced affected her personally and theologically. Reverend Blackwell did not serve another church for decades.<sup>8</sup>

Antoinette Brown married Samuel Blackwell in 1856, started a family, lectured, and wrote articles and books. She became a leader in women's suffrage and other reform movements. Reverend Blackwell became a respected member of the intellectual elite. To paraphrase Phyllis Tickle, Blackwell 'outgrew the pulpit,' utilizing her literary and intellectual power to reach far beyond the confines of a small church.<sup>9</sup>

After many years adrift theologically and denominationally, Antoinette and her husband Samuel Blackwell became Unitarian. Reverend Blackwell's Congregational ordination was ultimately recognized by the Unitarians in the 1870's as she officially transferred to the Unitarian denomination. Unfortunately, few opportunities to serve a Unitarian parish were available. Antoinette Brown Blackwell settled for occasional preaching. Her last chance to serve a parish occurred in 1903, when for one year she became the organizing pastor of a new congregation in Elizabeth, New Jersey.<sup>10</sup>

Olympia Brown (1835-1926) was one of the young women inspired and mentored by Antoinette Blackwell. While growing up on a farm outside Kalamazoo, Michigan in the early 1850s, Olympia Brown read newspaper accounts of Antoinette Brown Blackwell's ordination. When she entered Antioch College, she organized the students to extend an invitation to Rev. Antoinette Brown to lecture and preach -- a shocking and radical action in pre-Civil War America! The lecture, sermon, and personal interaction with the would-be clergywoman impacted her deeply. She reminisced: "it was the first time I had heard a woman preach and the sense of victory lifted me up. I felt as though the Kingdom of Heaven were at hand." [11](#)



OLYMPIA BROWN  
*Acquaintances, old and new, among reformers*  
by Brown, Olympia (1835-1926) 1911 • Google Books

Charlotte Cote summed up Brown's thought processes: "How could she tell people the truth about the doctrine of endless punishment that it was false and that there was no such place as hell? Surely people would rejoice to hear such words, she thought, little knowing how tenaciously they clung to old beliefs. The answer, clearly, was to become a minister".[12](#) Olympia Brown persevered through the prejudice, bigotry, and male chauvinism at the Universalist seminary at St. Lawrence University. She received her degree and was ordained in 1863.

Brown faced extreme opposition from clergy and laity, men and women. Dejected, Brown wrote to Antoinette Brown Blackwell for advice. Olympia lamented, "People do not readily accept a woman minister, but I thought perhaps you might know of a church where I can preach." Blackwell offered sage advice. She suggested: "You do not need to preach in the Universalist pulpit. As long as you have oneness of general views as well as grounded convictions of your own, you can preach wherever you find a pulpit. To be forever talking to those who believe precisely as we do may be to edification, but it was not Christ's way [who] was always seeking to save the lost."[13](#)

Determined to serve within the Universalist church regardless of the intense opposition, Brown ignored Blackwell's advice and spent another year seeking a call.[14](#)

Here we see mentoring through example and personal relationship. Olympia Brown reached out across denominational lines to the only other female minister she knew. Antoinette Brown Blackwell responded candidly and with realistic wisdom. The headstrong and stubborn Olympia Brown felt free to reject this advice. She chose the more difficult path into denominational parish ministry. The two women remained friends and colleagues, however, working together in both secular and religious arenas throughout their lifetimes. Both Antoinette Brown Blackwell and Olympia Brown lived to see the Nineteenth Amendment ratified, and exercised their right to vote.

Antoinette Brown Blackwell ultimately preached to a national audience through successful lecture tours and literary endeavors. Olympia Brown's pulpit remained smaller as she became consumed by the crushing responsibilities of small struggling congregations, only to be "rewarded" with an unfair forced resignation from one church, and "theft" of most of her meager salary from the next. In spite of such roadblocks, both clergywomen served as a beacon of hope and repository of support, mentoring, and guidance for women who followed them into the ordained ministry.

Olympia Brown began her first full-time church in Weymouth Landing, Massachusetts in 1864. This congregation supported her increasing involvement in the women's rights movement, giving her a four months' leave of absence to lead the Kansas campaign for passage of a woman suffrage amendment. This tour was arranged by Lucy Stone and Henry Blackwell, sister and brother-in-law of Antoinette Brown Blackwell.[15](#) Olympia Brown also met her future husband, John Henry Willis, while serving this church.[16](#)

Olympia Brown also faced community opposition and prejudice during her time at Weymouth Landing. When Abraham Lincoln was assassinated in 1865, the male ministers and the congregations of the village refused to allow her to participate in the community memorial service. Her response was characteristically frank: the Universalists of Weymouth Landing Massachusetts held a separate memorial service.[17](#)

Through hard work and sheer determination, Brown learned how to deal with conflict and opposition. She successfully grew her congregation. After six years she accepted a call to the Universalist Church in Bridgeport,

Connecticut, supposedly a bigger and more open-minded congregation, the home church of showman PT Barnum. Unfortunately, she found there a buzz saw of opposition and conflict.

The leader of the opposition to her pastorate was James Staples, who played the role of what we now call a "church antagonist."<sup>18</sup> Church antagonists are people, "who, on the basis of nonsubstantive evidence, go out of their way to make insatiable demands, usually attacking the person or performance of others. These attacks are selfish in nature, tearing down rather than building up, and are frequently directed against those in a leadership capacity."<sup>19</sup> Staples relentlessly worked to destroy Reverend Brown's ministry in Bridgeport. He deftly maneuvered the congregational, ecclesiastical, and legal systems to gradually push Brown out of the church by 1876.<sup>20</sup>

It is extraordinarily difficult for a pastor to professionally and emotionally survive such a vicious, prolonged attack. Many pastors leave pastoral ministry after such a humiliating and heart-breaking experience. However, Rev. Brown demonstrated amazing resilience by finding after a two-year search another church to serve. In 1878, she visited the Universalist Church of the Good Shepherd in Racine, Wisconsin. The church was in danger of closing due to a series of poor pastors, financial mismanagement, vestry ineptitude, and a general lack of interest. Reverend Brown relished the challenge and believed the Racine community would provide business opportunities for her husband. That year John Henry Willis and Olympia Brown moved their family, professional, and business interests to the bustling Lake Michigan port town of Racine.<sup>21</sup>

Previous male pastors at the Church of the Good Shepherd had been lazy, incompetent, or in poor health. Undaunted by the challenging circumstances there, Brown went about growing the church, correcting financial mismanagement, and managing the unrealistic expectations of the vestry.<sup>22</sup> Among her initiatives, she immediately began a lecture series, inviting Unitarian and Universalist luminaries such as Julia Ward Howe, Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Phoebe Hanaford (one of her proteges), and Mary Livermore to lecture or preach. She became the president of the Wisconsin Suffrage Association, a position she held for almost 30 years. A local high school senior Nellie Mann, claimed that Rev. Brown had a profound influence on her life and on the lives of the young people in the congregation. She said, ". . . [The church under Olympia Brown] was a veritable school for advanced thinking. Her democracy, based as it was on a broad and deep foundation of culture, was really amazing; she truly was a 'friend of man' [sic], and all classes and conditions of people easily recognized it."<sup>23</sup>

Nellie Mann became a protege of Rev. Brown. After high school graduation, Nellie taught school in Racine. Both women were deeply involved in woman suffrage, temperance, and other civic and church causes. Olympia Brown officiated at the marriage of Nellie Mann to a promising attorney named Julius Opdale in 1884. Their friendship continued after Nellie and Julius moved to Eau Claire, Wisconsin.<sup>24</sup>

Olympia Brown brought new vigor to the Church of the Good Shepherd. Her husband established a thriving publishing company. They provided generous financial support to the church and civic causes. Unfortunately, the church records indicate that the Board of Trustees (the successor counsel to the vestry), took financial advantage of their woman pastor. Year after year they did not meet their financial obligation for her already meager salary, offering IOUs and notes they never repaid. Disgusted, Olympia Brown finally resigned in 1887. The official reason she gave for her resignation was her desire to work full-time for woman suffrage.<sup>25</sup> After stabilizing and growing two congregations, she was repaid with severe mistreatment in both churches. Rev. Olympia Brown never again served a church full-time.

Meanwhile, on the other side of Wisconsin, young Nellie Mann Opdale was receiving a painful and humiliating lesson in "the school of hard knocks." Once they settled in Eau Claire, Nellie learned that Julius was not the up and coming attorney he pretended to be during their courtship. He was in fact a corrupt and unscrupulous attorney whose financial mismanagement and lack of fiduciary responsibility was so egregious that he became the first attorney to be disbarred in and by the state of Wisconsin.<sup>26</sup>

Julius and Nellie then moved to Florida, where ostensibly Julius was to seek treatment for his tuberculosis. Soon, however, Julius began practicing law in Florida and became involved in a scheme to sell undesirable Florida land to unsuspecting Yankees. Meanwhile, Nellie became pregnant and gave birth to a son with severe

birth defects. Julius's tuberculosis progressed, and his health dangerously deteriorated. Early in the spring of 1892, Nellie boarded a train to Racine with her husband and child, both of whom were dying. The family moved in with her parents. Julius died within a month of returning to Racine, leaving Nellie deeply in debt. Their unnamed son died five months later and was buried next to his father in the Mound Cemetery.<sup>27</sup>

Larnard and Jeanette Mann, Nellie's parents, paid all of Julius Opdale's debts and supported their daughter in her grief.<sup>28</sup> Rather than allowing Nellie Opdale to languish in grief and despair, Olympia Brown encouraged her to become the Wisconsin State Lecturer for Woman Suffrage for 1893.<sup>29</sup> In March 1893, Olympia Brown's husband John Henry Willis died suddenly of a stroke. Olympia took over the publishing business, earning enough money to pay for her children's college education.<sup>30</sup> She also began serving the small Universalist church in Mukwonago, Wisconsin part-time on the weekends.<sup>31</sup>

One Saturday, the printing presses broke, forcing Rev. Brown to stay in Racine. Needing a substitute preacher to go to Mukwonago, she sent for Nellie Opdale, who happened to be in town visiting her parents. Nellie resisted the request, but Brown insisted and gave Nellie a book of sermons, one of which she could choose to read to the congregation the following day. Nellie found the sermons unacceptable. She spent three hours that night writing a sermon that detailed how her Universalist faith had helped her through the trials and tribulations of her life.<sup>32</sup>

One may easily imagine the power of that sermon! How amazed that small congregation must have been, to hear a young widow detail how Universalism had eased the unfathomable grief of her heart and soul, delivered with the ease and grace of an experienced orator!

The Mukwonago congregation and Olympia Brown urged Nellie Opdale to study for the Universalist ministry. Rev. Brown became her teacher and mentor, and Nellie received both educational and practical training through an apprenticeship in parish ministry, perhaps equal or superior to any training offered at any seminary open to women at the time. She received her license to preach in 1894 and was ordained to Universalist ministry in 1895. The Reverends Brown and Opdale shared duties at Mukwonago for a year. Olympia Brown then resigned, urging the congregation to call Rev. Opdale as their pastor.<sup>33</sup>



The mentoring and supportive relationship between Olympia Brown and Nellie Mann Opdale indicates a deep level of trust, and a desire to teach the art of ministry to a talented protégé. The fact that Rev. Brown stepped aside and encouraged the younger woman pastor to take her place suggests a level of cooperation and sacrifice not often seen among clergy.

There was a synergistic relationship between the cause of woman suffrage and the call of clergywomen to serve. At a time when formal training in public speaking was denied to most women, they nonetheless found opportunities to learn and practice public speaking in the suffrage, temperance, and other reform movements. Nellie Opdale's oratorical and management skills were developed and polished on the suffrage speaking circuit. She learned how to deal with discourtesy, disruptions, and rejection by overcoming unruly anti-suffrage crowds. Nellie Mann Opdale had the talent, the gifts, hard-won training, and 'the call' to ministry. She was well-prepared for the rough path that was parish ministry in her time.

### **A Clergywoman's Career in Parish Ministry**

After four years in Mukwonago, Rev. Opdale received a call in 1898 to St. Paul's Universalist church in La Crosse, Wisconsin. St. Paul's was the largest and most prestigious Universalist pulpit in Wisconsin. Under Nellie's service, the church grew to over 200 members. As an accomplished "wheelwoman" (bicyclist), Rev. Opdale's bicycling demonstrated to the congregation and the community her independence from female stereotypes.<sup>34</sup> She was accepted by the other ministers in La Crosse, and she participated in the community memorial service in 1901 when President McKinley was assassinated. She worked continuously, using vacation time to preach at other churches, lecture, or audit summer classes at Harvard College in Cambridge,

Massachusetts. Despite this pastoral success, Rev. Opdale faced growing opposition in her church apparently because she was female. The stress of the conflict and the strain of constant pastoral work caused health problems that interfered significantly with her work. She resigned from St. Paul's in 1902. [35](#)

That same year Nellie Opdale accepted a call to the Universalist church in Orono, Maine, the location of the University of Maine. After six years in Maine, she moved in 1908 to Marlboro, Massachusetts to serve the Universalist church there. During this nine-year pastorate, Opdale became a leader in the Women's Ministerial Conference, serving as secretary in its final years. She chaired the Fellowship Committee both in Wisconsin and in Maine, and earned a certificate in psychology from Clark University. Nellie's next move was to Newark, New York in 1917, where she served the Universalist church for two years. [36](#)

After her friend Dr. Abby Adams suffered a series of strokes, Rev. Opdale resigned her pastorate and moved to Chicago to care for Dr. Adams and to be closer to family. In 1921, three years after her "retirement," Opdale moved back to La Crosse to try to revive St. Paul's Universalist Church. Due to demographic changes, congregational conflict, and dwindling resources, the congregation was dying. [37](#) Nellie Opdale worked for six years to revive the congregation, but to no avail. She accepted a call to the Universalist Church in Canon, Georgia, with the understanding that she would also serve as the editor of the *Universalist Herald*. Knowing her departure was the death knell for St. Paul's, Rev. Opdale abruptly announced her resignation in November 1927 and left three weeks later for Georgia. [38](#)

Canon, Georgia is a hamlet at the edge of the Appalachian Mountains. In 1928, the boll weevil had devastated agricultural production and depressed the Southern economy. Northerners (ordinarily called "DAMN YANKEES") were generally distrusted and disliked. The Great Depression hit the next year, adding the specter of hunger, malnutrition, and starvation to the already depressed economy. Liberal religion was considered the realm of the devil by most of the local population. Women preachers would have been synonymous with witches. The Ku Klux Klan was active in the hills of North Georgia.

However, the Universalist Church was a safe haven of tolerance for liberal thought in a sea of suspicion, prejudice, and fundamentalism. Rev. Opdale soon became a beloved pastor and activist in the area. She was elected to the local school board and served as its treasurer. She personally registered every woman in Canon to vote, and then escorted them to the polls on Election Day. She brought life and energy to the congregation. After retiring from parish ministry around 1935, she continued to serve as editor of the *Universalist Herald* until her death in 1941 at the age of 80. [39](#)

I was ordained in the Presbyterian Church in 1981. I spent four years seeking a call to a parish in North Georgia. Most search committees would not interview me, and I was ready to walk away from the ministry and go to law school. Then a small church in the North Georgia hills invited me to serve as their pastor. The church accepted me without qualms, and acted like it was normal to have a woman serve as pastor. It took me a year to get up my courage to ask the Clerk of Session, Pauline Martin, why the church accepted me so warmly and naturally. I'll never forget her reply. Smiling, Pauline turned to me and said, "Now Honey, you're not the *first* woman preacher we've had in these parts. You're the *second*. The first one was so good -- why wouldn't we take you?" Astonished, I asked, "Well, who was the first?" She replied, "I don't remember her name, but she served on the other side of the county."

I did not know the name of the woman pastor who paved the way for my acceptance so long before, but I soon discovered her identity. The impressive clergywoman whose pastoral skills and community involvement paved the way for my acceptance at the Hebron Presbyterian Church in Franklin County, Georgia was Rev. Nellie Mann Opdale of the Universalist Church in Canon, GA. I now have the scrapbook that probably belonged to her, and that scrapbook led me to discover the importance of the Women's Ministerial Conference. I am indebted to her, and I thank God for her ministry. Her ecumenical outreach and impact on other clergywomen began with the Women's Ministerial Conference, continued throughout her life, and continued to influence the acceptance of women ministers over forty years after her death. It is my hope that additional historical research will reveal more stories of courage, perseverance, social action, and faith of the liberal women ministers and lay preachers who paved the way for the ordination and acceptance of mainline Protestant clergywomen in the twentieth century.

## Footnotes

- 1 This meeting has been named the annual meeting or the anniversary meeting (depending on the source) held in Boston.
- 2 From the biography of Julia Ward Howe, written by Joan Goodwin in the *Dictionary of Unitarian and Universalist Biography*, an online resource of the Unitarian Universalist History and Heritage Society.
- 3 "Women's Ministerial Conference," *Woman's Journal*, June 4, 1904. From the papers of the Women's Ministerial Conference, Andover Harvard Theological Library, Harvard Divinity School, Cambridge, MA.
- 4 Papers of the Women's Ministerial Conference, Andover Harvard Theological Library, Harvard Divinity School, Cambridge MA.
- 5 Papers of the Women's Ministerial Conference, Schlesinger Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 From the biography of Antoinette Brown Blackwell written by JoAnn Macdonald, in the *Dictionary of Unitarian and Universalist Biography*.
- 8 Antoinette Brown Blackwell, in the *Dictionary of Unitarian Universalist Biography*.
- 9 Personal conversation with Phyllis Tickle, August 2010.
- 10 Blackwell in *Dictionary of UU Biography*.
- 11 From the biography of Olympia Brown written by Laurie Carter Noble in the *Dictionary of Unitarian and Universalist Biography*.
- 12 Charlotte Cote, *Olympia Brown: The Battle for Equality* (Racine WI: Mother Courage Press, 1988), 45.
- 13 Cote, *Olympia Brown*, 1988, 62-63. This quote was written in 1878 or 1879.
- 14 Cote, *Olympia Brown*, 1988, 68.
- 15 Brown in *Dictionary of UU Biography*.
- 16 Brown in *Dictionary of UU Biography*.
- 17 Cote, *Olympia Brown*, 1988, 108-114.
- 18 See Kenneth Haugk, *Antagonists in the Church* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1988).
- 19 Haugk 1988, 21-22.
- 20 Cote, *Olympia Brown*, 1988, 113.
- 21 Charlotte A. Cote, *Olympia Brown and the Unitarian Universalist Church: The First 150 Years of Unitarian Universalism in Racine, Wisconsin* (Racine, WI: Olympia Brown Unitarian Universalist Church, 1997), 26-27.
- 22 Cote, *Olympia Brown and the Unitarian Universalist Church*, 1997, 27-28.
- 23 *Portrait and Biographical Album*, undated, Reverend Olympia Brown papers, Racine Heritage Museum, Racine, Wisconsin, p. 15.



24 "La Crosse Pastor Enjoys a Unique Distinction in her Field of Work; in Ministry past 31 Years", *La Crosse Tribune*, September 6, 1925, p. 5.

25 Cote, 1997, pp. 31-33.

26 Proceedings of the Disbarment of Julius H. Opdale, Eau Claire, Wisconsin, 1887. Where is this found?

27 Public Records, Racine Wisconsin. See also papers at the Racine Historical Society

28 Public Records, Racine, WI.

29 *La Crosse Tribune*, September 6, 1925, p. 5.

30 Cote, Olympia Brown, 1988, 136.

31 Cote, Olympia Brown, 1988, 136-137.

32 *La Crosse Tribune*, September 6, 1925, p. 5.

33 *La Crosse Tribune*, September 6, 1925, p. 5.

34 Papers of Nellie Mann Opdale and St. Paul's Universalist Church, La Crosse Historical Society Archives, La Crosse Public Library, La Crosse, WI.

35 Pastoral Record of Rev. Nellie Mann Opdale for St. Paul's Universalist Church, La Crosse, WI, 1898-1902.

36 *La Crosse Tribune*, September 6, 1925, p. 5.

37 *La Crosse Tribune*, September 6, 1925, p. 5.

38 "Rev. Nellie Opdale Resigns as Pastor of Local Church," *La Crosse Tribune*, November 21, 1927, p. 6.

39 Interview with Canon, GA local historian and church member Ellen Davenport, October 22, 2016.

### **Author's note**

The author is indebted to the following institutions and persons for their assistance in researching this article:

The Bridwell Library of Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, TX;

Dr. Sarah Brooks Blair, Director of the O'Brien Theology Library, United Theological Seminary, Dayton, OH;

The Andover Harvard Theological Library, Harvard Divinity School; the Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA;

Ms. Anita Doering, Archivist, La Crosse Public Library, La Crosse, WI; Olympia Brown Memorial Unitarian Universalist Church, Racine, WI;

Ms. Ellen Davenport, Canon Unitarian Universalist Church, Canon, GA.

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