

Women in Religion—including Ours!

Rev. Dr. Roger D. Jones, preaching

March 25, 2018

Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Hymns:

#1008, When Our Heart Is in a Holy Place; #86, Blessed Spirit of My Life; #121, We'll Build a Land

Sermon:

Ever since colonial times in America, women have represented the majority of religious participants in religious communities and institutions. At no point in our history have men ever been in that majority. Religious historian Ann Braude has written that American religious communities have depended on women's presence, energy, and resources. Even in male-dominated U.S. religious organizations, women's presence has predominated.

In recent years, many people have worried or complained about what they thought was a decline in men's participation in congregations. Braude says, however, there has been little change. The story to be told is not a decline in men's numerical presence, but the enduring majority of women.¹

She says this is true across denominations of Protestant faiths—in the North and South; white, black or otherwise. It's true in Roman Catholicism, where there are more sisters in religious orders than there are priests or brothers, not to mention more faithful lay women than men in parish congregations.²

To be sure, it is paradoxical that women have sustained religious organizations that excluded them from the clergy and elected lay leadership and even suppressed their voices. Even so, Braude says, "There would be no [mostly male] clergy, no

seminaries to train them... no hierarchies to ordain them," unless women supported all of those necessary institutions. Women have provided the majority of "audiences for preaching, participants for rituals, the material and financial support for religious buildings, and, perhaps most important, [they have instilled] faith in their children."³

This rings true with my family's religious history. It was women who taught the faith.

My mother was born 100 years ago in a small town in Indiana. She was brought up by a mother whose religion was Christian Science. Based on healing through positive thinking, that fast-growing movement was founded in the 1870s by a woman in Boston named Mary Baker Eddy. Neither my mother nor any of her four siblings remained a regular Christian Scientist church goer as an adult. My mother left it when she married my father. She joined *his* church, the one in which Dad had been brought up.

It was a Main Line, middle-of-the-road Protestant church, with rough-hewn limestone walls, large round stained glass-windows, dark-stained wooden pews, and white people filling those pews. On Sundays Mom and I sat at the end of the third row from the front on the right-hand side. She showed me how to use the hymnal, when to stand and sit, and how to greet the minister in the receiving line after church. I watched over her shoulder as Mom wrote the check for the offering--\$20, I recall. One time in a sermon, the minister said something simplistic. Mom leaned over and made a sarcastic remark to me. We started giggling. We tried suppressing ourselves, but as soon as one of us would be still, the other would start up. Our bodies were shaking as we tried to keep quiet. She slipped out of the sanctuary until the next hymn.

Every month, my mom attended a women's group and a committee meeting at the church. She joked that they did not *want her* in the choir. One year she realized I was 13, the typical age to get baptized in our denomination. Even though I already had missed all but the final two Sunday

¹ Ann Braude, "Women's History Is American Religious History," in Thomas R. Tweed, *Retelling U.S. Religious History* (Berkeley, 1997: University of California Press), 87.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, 89.

school sessions to learn about what our faith was all about, I was permitted to go through this ritual. They would *not* have said no to Mom. My father attended now and then, including the Sunday of my baptism, but really it was rare that he come with us. It was the church of his childhood, but he was not the one who made us a churchgoing family. It was our mother.

In every Unitarian Universalist congregation of which I've been a part, female-identified adults have made up the majority of worshippers, volunteers, and elected officers. Braude, the historian, says there is no need to wring our hands as if there is a problem; it's just the way things are. No need to cajole those guys who aren't here very often. Yet there is one thing we can do. We could notice those men who are drawn to a UU church and who find value in participating in this community. We could say, "We're glad you're here." I can think of many male-identified UUs who have been devoted, involved, and appreciated members of the church. For example, our men's group meets tomorrow night. This week, our Program Council will hold a reception to celebrate our Grasshoppers—our volunteer ministry of lawn mowing. While UUSS can boast several women-identified Grasshoppers, it was two men who founded it here 15 years ago. More than half the current volunteers are male-identified. On Thursday we will honor *all* our Grasshoppers, people who don't mind getting dirty to make our campus clean and sweating a little to save us money.

In most religions, the most visible positions of leadership are those of ordained clergy. The clergy has been male-dominated for centuries. Our Unitarian Universalist faith tradition has moved faster than other American denominations to ordain women, starting with Olympia Brown as a Universalist pastor in 1863. However, women clergy did not rapidly increase as a share of all UU ministers until the 1970s.⁴ The past few decades have seen a transformation for us. By now, more than half of our UU clergy are female. Women have led some of our largest congregations. I am sure it is

thanks to that feminist progress and female courage that now we also have many more ministers who able to serve congregations openly as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender ministers.

Here at this congregation, we've been a bit slow. Our first ordained female minister was the Reverend Eileen Karpeles, who served us as an interim or transitional minister for a year and a half starting in 1989. By then, UUSS had been existence for 120 years! Later ministers were the Reverend Richele Russell, the Reverend Dr. Shirley Ranck, the Reverend Lyn Cox, the Reverend Connie Grant, and the Reverend Sydney Wilde. Most of them were part-time clergy, and all were here temporarily, some by plan but others by an unexpected or unwelcome turn of events.

And the longest-serving female-identified minister--in the entire 150-year history of UUSS--is the one we have now, the Reverend Lucy Bunch. She's nearing her five-year anniversary here. I give thanks for Lucy's gifts. To her efforts and her energy I attribute much of the success of our building project and relocation and move back home, the improvement of our staff's performance and morale, our growth in membership and in our diversity, and the vitality of our many programs. She's awesome. Of course, I recruited her, so that makes *me* ... brilliant. But this is about *women's* religious history today.

Looking again *beyond* our denomination, it's amazing that women have accomplished so much in religions that have excluded them from many roles. As Braude writes, women provide most of the "audiences for preaching, participants for rituals, [and] material and financial support for religious buildings [and operations]." And women figure out ways to assert their power, even when officially denied it. I know a man who serves part time as an assistant pastor at a church in a very conservative denomination. In their faith tradition, women are not allowed to be clergy, and I'm not even sure if they can be elected to the governing board. *But he told me an instructive story.*

The senior pastor of their church and his wife had moved the senior pastor's aged mother to

⁴ See Helen Lutton Cohen, "Leaping from Their Spheres: The Impact of Women in Ministry on Unitarian Universalism,"

UUMA Selected Essays (Boston, 1998: Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association).

their town and into their house to live with them. Of course, his mother was a faithful Christian worshipper at his church. One Sunday morning, in response to his awareness of changing styles in church life, the pastor tried out something new. He wore a suit-jacket and trousers, and an open-collar dress shirt. No necktie. He figured this would make him seem accessible and more approachable to younger adults, all in service of the Gospel message. By the time the pastor got home that afternoon, his mother already had received 17 telephone calls from other women in the church. *Going without a tie was/ unacceptable.* His mother made sure this verdict was heard and heeded. His experiment ended the day it began.

Of course, this is a humorous illustration of informal communication—gossip. It is a story of people not speaking directly to the person with whom they have a disagreement, but instead speaking *about* that person to others. This is called triangulation, and it's dysfunctional and harmful to communities. However, it seems to me that in a tradition where the pastor is always male and where male authority can't safely be challenged in a direct way, those ladies exercised what power they had. And for them it was very effective.

In U.S American history, women and other categories of people who are vulnerable and excluded from formal positions of power have been able to establish parallel structures for themselves in order to have an impact. Examples are church women's groups, caucuses by LGBT students or students of color at universities, and so on. All can be bases of power and influence.

Our congregation's parallel organization of the longest stretch of time in our history is the Unitarian Women's Alliance. It was founded here in 1911, four years before we even had a permanent church home. Some women from the church would gather at a member's home for a meeting one morning every week. In a few more decades, Alliance meetings would move to a monthly basis, and would take place at the church, as they do now.

Women found fellowship with one another as they enjoyed refreshments, as they organized music, literary and artistic programs for the public, and as they held fundraising events. They shared reviews of new books with one another; they

discussed social issues like poverty, education, and public health. In the 1940s and 50s, they talked about world peace and the charter of the United Nations; meanwhile they served meals for church events. They always made money with food. In the early decades of the 1900s, the Alliance granted a lot of money to this congregation for church operations. In 1923, for example, the Alliance voted to give \$868 to the church. The Alliance had 241 dues-paying women as members that year—this was five times the number of members of the church itself!

I'll talk more about the Alliance in the fall, when our 150th Anniversary Planning Team will honor the women with a reception, including snacks made from a California cookbook of 1890. The book says its recipes were compiled and approved "by the Ladies of the Unitarian Society." Meanwhile, I hope you can take a look at the display case outside the restrooms over in the education building. A new Alliance member has made photo exhibit of the group's high points in history. All through its history, the Alliance has changed with changing times. For example, you don't have to be woman-identified to attend its programs now, and it no longer has an extensive committee structure as it did in much of the 20th century.

Starting in 1911, our Sacramento Alliance was a dues-paying chapter of the national Alliance of Unitarian Women, which had begun in 1890. Yet the Unitarian women were twenty years behind the Universalists. Having started in 1869, the Association of Universalist Women is believed to be the oldest religious organization of women lay leaders in this country. At the national level, those two groups merged to form the UU Women's Federation in the early 1960s.

By organizing within our denomination's decision-making structure, the UU Women's Federation was able to bring our attention to gender discrimination and sexism in our larger UU movement. A major milestone in liberal religious history took place in 1977 in a vote at our denominational UU gathering, the General Assembly, or GA. Thanks to years of work by UU women activists, GA delegates adopted a resolution

entitled “Women and Religion.”⁵ This resolution required the denominational administration (and urged our congregations) to conduct audits for sexism in our institutional processes and structures.

The resolution called on us “to avoid sexist assumptions and language in the future.”

A striking example of such language was the old hymnal. Here’s one, the “blue hymnal,” published in 1963 [*Hymns for the Celebration of Life*]. It was still in use in 1977 when the resolution came to the Assembly floor. In its hymns referring to humanity, it says “men,” “mankind,” “brotherhood” and “brothers.” Music and readings are divided into topical sections, and there’s a whole section of songs in the blue hymnal under the topic of “Man” and another called “Love and Brotherhood.”

There is always more to learn and more to be done in the area of gender-inclusion in our faith tradition. Likewise, we are learning in the present moment from UU leaders of color some of the ways that a dominant culture of whiteness gets in the way of justice and inclusion *within* our own movement. There is always more to learn and more to be done as we strive to embody our values in our practices.

There was resistance by some leaders in our denomination to calls for change back in the 1970s and beyond—resistance, impatience, unkindness, harrumphing and rolling of the eyes. Now, in hindsight, many of those changes appear to be “no big deal” anymore. Yet they were a big deal.

The uncertainty of change can cause discomfort or fear, especially if you got used to things being done in certain ways. Yet in a congregation that is growing in size, in diversity, and in awareness, an aspect of church life that may not suit the taste of one person could be just what causes a new person to feel acknowledged, welcomed, and *at home*. For some of us, choices or changes in language or processes are matters of taste or comfort, are greater matters for people who are marginalized. That is, for people whose identities mean they have less power and more vulnerability, the same changes could be matters of spiritual survival.

This coming Thursday is the anniversary of our founding: March 29, 1868. To those original 17 families who came together in Sacramento, this was thought of as a liberal Christian church. The mission of their church was, quoting now, “the worship of God and the service of Men.” Now, 150 years later, this is a congregation of various religious perspectives held together by our values and our covenant. For the past 17 years the mission of this congregation has read: “We come together to deepen our lives and be a force for healing in the world.”

This is the same congregation, but it is a new congregation. We have cause for deep gratitude for the people now among us and those who came before us—those of all genders and all ages, who have embodied our congregation and our faith. May we be ever grateful, as we carry it forward. Amen.

⁵ <http://www.uua.org/statements/women-and-religion>.