

THEY TOOK A STAND

Unitarian Universalists have been leaders in affirming the worth, dignity, equality, and potential of each human being, and then acting on these principles. Yet, we, as others, are subject to unrecognized social prejudices current in the larger society. Witness the case of Olympia Brown, the first woman to be ordained as a minister by any denomination in America.

In 1860, after a thorough education at Mt. Holyoke and Antioch colleges, Olympia Brown felt the call and sought a career in the liberal ministry. She applied for admission to all the liberal theological schools. "From the Unitarian School at Meadville [Pennsylvania]," she writes in her autobiography, "I received the reply that they would like to have me for a pupil, but their trustees thought it would be too great an experiment. I now wrote to St. Lawrence University, the Universalist Divinity School, situated at Canton, New York. Mr. Ebenezer Fisher, the President, replied that I would be admitted and would have all the opportunities that the school afforded, but he felt called upon to state that he did not think women were called to the ministry. 'But,' he said, 'I leave that between you and the Great Head of the Church.' This, I thought, was just where it should be left, and I could not ask anything better."

Some of her fellow students at St. Lawrence, obviously all male, had great difficulty accepting Brown's presence, but others were quick to befriend and support her, and the professors were fair. Pulpits in the area opened to her. But at the time of her graduation and ordination in 1863, Universalist ministers voiced the fear to each other that the ministry would be 'swamped with women who would bring down the price of preaching.' Yet, President Fisher had somewhat overcome his earlier opposition and the ordaining committee voted her into fellowship as a Universalist minister in full standing.

Reflecting on this episode years later, Olympia Brown said of those who accepted a female pioneer into their profession: "They took that stand, a remarkable one for the day, which shows the courage of those men." The mark of these ministers is not that they were without a long-bred prejudice, but that they were also pioneers in responding to the call to strive to overcome it.

Ref.: *Olympia Brown: An Autobiography*, in *The Annual Journal of the Universalist Historical Society*, vol. 4 (1963), pp. 26-30.