

THE STRENGTH OF MORAL FIBER AND SPIRITUAL POWER

Although the Universalists had ordained women before, the first woman ordained into the Unitarian ministry was the Rev. Celia C. Burr Burleigh. She was born in a small town in western New York in 1826, and early became an active Unitarian layperson. She frequently contributed articles to Unitarian magazines. She was an active leader and president of her local Women's Suffrage Association. Eventually, her involvement in the Unitarian movement became so intense that she felt drawn toward the Unitarian ministry. Her husband offered his strong encouragement, but William H. Burleigh, a poet, soon succumbed to death, severing the "marriage of co-equal hearts and minds." Celia Burleigh, heeding a call and inspired by her husband's faith in her and in a free religion, pushed forward her preparation for the Unitarian ministry. Great support for Celia Burleigh's calling also came from her former minister, Rev. Dr. John W. Chadwick, a very prominent Unitarian minister of that day. Finally, on October 5, 1871, she received ordination from her home church, the Unitarian Church of Brooklyn, Connecticut. Julia Ward Howe delivered the charge to the congregation

Rev. Burleigh immediately entered upon the active ministry. Here is a sample from her sermons. "Life is a school not for the education of faculty, but for the making of character." "Feeble souls are defeated where strong ones lay the foundations of success. Human nature is the crowning fact of creation. Individual character is all we have with which to confront eternity."

Two months after her own ordination, Rev. Burleigh participated in the ordination of the second woman Unitarian minister, Mary H. Graves. Celia Burleigh served the Unitarian pulpits of Brooklyn, Connecticut, and Danville and Syracuse, New York, but her ministry was cut off by a fatal illness. After a budding ministry of only four years, two of which under the weight of increasing pain, she died in Syracuse on July 25, 1875, at age 48. But in those few years, she exhibited for her congregations then, and for us today, what a later observer called her "remarkable strength of moral fiber, spiritual power, and charm of personality," a fitting epitaph for the first Unitarian woman minister.

Ref: Catherine F. Hitchings, *Universalist and Unitarian Women Ministers* (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Historical Society, 1985), pp. 38-40; Clara Cook Helvie, "The First Unitarian Woman Minister" *Unitarian Universalist Christian*, vol. 27, Nos. 3-4 (Autumn-Winter 1972), pp. 39-42.

Will Frank