

YOURS FOR THE GOOD CAUSE

The Universalist Church of the Good Shepherd in Racine, Wisconsin, was having trouble paying its bills and keeping its ministers. In 1852, the Rev. Alfred Barry led the effort to construct a new church building, but Barry left two years later to become State Superintendent of Schools. The next pastorate turned out to be an unhappy one, and decline set in. By 1856 the church debt had grown to \$3,000, a very substantial sum for that day, virtually the cost of the new building. The congregation called the able and energetic Rev. Henry Webster, paying him \$800 a year, which was beyond the means of the church, but hopes for growth failed to materialize, and the debt rose. Webster and successor ministers left due to low pay, which got down to \$500. Further short frustrating pastorates did nothing to build the church. In 1868 the Vestry solicited a loan from the ladies of the congregation. They organized themselves as the "Willing Workers," whose fund raisers kept the doors open, if only with lay preachers in the absence of a settled minister. In 1875, the church called a dynamic young minister, the Rev. Silas Sutton, offering him the exalted salary of \$1,500. Yet within months the Vestry had to inform him that financial stringency forced a cut in his salary of a third, while they desired him to preach separate sermons on Sunday evenings as well as on Sunday mornings in hopes of attracting new people. Rather than doubling his preaching commitments on less pay, Sutton accepted the call from a more affluent church. The Vestry were disheartened. Many thought the church was lost.

A lay leader, Abner C. Fish, put his last hopes in a call beyond the accepted norms of the day that a minister should be male and not too politically radical. He wrote to the Rev. Olympia Brown, the fiery suffragist and the first woman minister ordained by the Universalists, then in Connecticut and seeking a settled ministry. Soon the Racine church received the following letter:

*Bridgeport  
Feb. 14, 1878  
Bro. Fish,*

*Yours just rec. I infer that there is no objection to a Sunday's service in Racine, therefore I shall be there one week from next Sunday, Feb. 24<sup>th</sup>. You will oblige me by giving the proper notice. I will preach morning, afternoon, or evening or all three as the people may desire.*

*Yours for the good cause.  
Olympia Brown*

She came, preached morning and evening, brought in the suffragist spirit, won the hearts of the congregation, and had a very successful ministry. The 25-year burden of debt was greatly lessened, in part as Olympia Brown lent a portion of her \$1000 salary to the cause. A call outside the norms paid off. And, the Church of the Good Shepherd now bears her name.

Ref: Charlotte A. Coté, *Olympia Brown Unitarian Universalist Church Chronicle, 1842-1992* (Racine: Olympia Brown Unitarian Universalist Church, 1997), pp. 16-33.

Will

Frank