

Introduction

Finding Women's Voices



In 1893 an elderly woman named Antoinette Brown Blackwell stood before a large gathering of religious leaders. They had come from many countries and religious traditions to attend the World Congress of Religions in Chicago. She told this story:

A little boy and a little girl were discussing what they were going to do when they grew up. "I'm going to be a minister like my mamma," said the little girl. "What'll you be?" The boy reflected a while dubiously, but the calling nearest at hand won the day. "I'm going to be a minister, too," he said. Then the sister put on her small thinking cap, but after a few minutes she replied, seriously, "Well, I suppose mans do preach sometimes."¹

At that time, most clergy were male. This is still so today. Yet the contributions of women clergy have expanded dramatically in the past one hundred years. This is true of women in all walks of life. Increasingly society affirms and celebrates what women can do.

Antoinette Brown was born in New York State on May 20, 1825. She joined her local Congregational Church when she was nine years old. She always loved her church and she came to feel that God was calling her to be a minister. Yet everyone said that was impossible. The Bible and church tradition only allowed male priests and preachers.

Antoinette, however, did not give up. She went to Oberlin College, one of the few colleges in the 1840s where women could study theology. Although she did not graduate with a theological degree (because she was a woman), she became a popular preacher and writer. In 1853 a small Congregational church in South Butler, NY, formally called her as its pastor. As a consequence Antoinette Brown is remembered as the first woman ordained by a sizable recognized Protestant denomination in the United States.

¹Antoinette Brown Blackwell, "Women and the Pulpit," in *The World Congress of Religions: The Addresses and Papers Delivered before the Parliament . . .* Chicago: W.S Reeve Publishing, 1895, 551-556.

Unfortunately, Antoinette Brown found her early years in ministry difficult. She struggled with doctrinal questions. She encountered general social resistance to female leadership. After a short time she abandoned parish ministry for the lecture circuit. Still later she became a Unitarian.

In 1856 Antoinette Brown married Samuel C. Blackwell, brother of pioneer women physicians Elizabeth and Emily Blackwell. She was a good wife and mother. She devoted herself to raising five daughters. At the same time Antoinette remained active in social movements and kept informed about current issues. She gave speeches, wrote articles and published numerous books on science, art and literature. In 1897 one writer noted that Mrs. Blackwell had “by no means allowed the luster of intellectual gifts to grow dim from disuse.”

Antoinette Brown Blackwell was active in many of the earliest struggles for women’s suffrage in the mid-nineteenth century. She lived long enough to cast her vote for the president of the United States in 1920. She died in 1921 at the age of 96.

After the formation of the United Church of Christ in 1957 women in the UCC found the life of Antoinette Brown memorable. When a new Task Force on Women in Church and Society was formed in 1971, it established the Antoinette Brown Award. Since 1975 the Award has been given to two outstanding ordained UCC women at each General Synod.

Stories of the women who have received the Antoinette Brown Award remind us that God calls each of us where we are. God challenges us to reach beyond custom and expectations. Women’s ministries, whether lay or ordained, take many forms. By remembering the lives of this group of faithful women, all of us can be enriched and empowered to explore our own stories more deeply. The Bible says that in Christ Jesus there is neither male nor female. May God help each of us find our voices with that knowledge.

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Ordained 1964,
Antoinette Brown Award 2005