

UCC ROOTS

Remembering our History

October 2021

“Education By Women, For Women”

Much has been said about the accomplishments of the feminist movement that erupted in the 1970s in the secular world. Less is celebrated, however, about this same feminist energy in theological education and the church. Florence Amanda Fensham (1861-1912) has the distinction of being the first woman in the nation to receive a theological degree from a Congregational seminary. Her enrollment at Chicago Theological Seminary (CTS) in 1902 caused “considerable consternation.” But her excellent work earned the highest honors in her class, “raised the tone of the student body distinctly,” and opened the door for other women to enter.

Born in East Douglass, Massachusetts, she was educated in Europe at Mansfield College, and Oxford, Cambridge and Edinburgh universities. She was an accomplished biblical scholar and linguist. Her studies prepared her for teaching and missionary positions at the American College for Girls in Constantinople, Turkey in 1883 and the Dean of women at Beloit College from 1902. This passion for women’s education also positioned her as the key figure among Congregationalists to provide education opportunities for women. The culmination of her life’s work came through the creation of the Congregational Training School for Women (CTSW) in 1909.

The CTSW had roots in the ancient and often forgotten role of “deaconess.” This office was restored in the late 19th century by the Evangelical Synod, a forerunner of the United Church of Christ. While it advanced volunteer service with the sick, poor and homeless, many women sought more. Fensham’s new model expanded vocational opportunities for women, laying the groundwork for many contemporary paths to ministry for women in the United Church of Christ today. Prominent CTS professor Graham Taylor, said, “*She gave it all she had . . . she was its inspiration and initiative, its principal instructor and only administrator, its homemaker and outside representative.*”



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