

Fire Across the Prairie

Humanistic Unitarian women and men brought a transforming vision to religion and public life in nineteenth-century Iowa.

By Rev. Dr. Sarah Oelberg

Editor's Note: This article condenses the extensive research behind the author's book-length study on the same topic. While the reader will recognize persons described in the well-known Prophetic Sisterhood, by Cynthia Grant Tucker, Reverend Oelberg's view is more panoramic, concentrating on the overall growth of humanistic Western Conference Unitarianism in Iowa, recognizing not only the women ministers who were primary drivers of that movement, but also noting the men who took part and their strong support for the women. This is a paper presented in October 2016 at the Convocation of Unitarian Universalist Studies in Bloomington, Minnesota.

Unitarianism came to Iowa with some of the first settlers. At the meeting of the Second Territorial Legislature in Burlington in 1840, a bill was proposed to incorporate a Unitarian Society in Burlington, to exist along with the already established Methodist and Presbyterian churches. The bill was passed and the prominent citizens who founded the corporation bought a lot and raised money for a church building, but the promise of a large flourishing church was not realized for lack of a minister. In 1843, two brothers from Massachusetts came to open a flouring mill. One, Charles Chauncy Shackford, had trained for the Unitarian ministry at Harvard and Union Theological Seminary. He had no plans to be involved with any church, however, having taken to heart the admonition of the minister who gave the prayer at his ordination to ignore the heresies he had just heard from Theodore Parker in his ordination sermon, "*The Transient and Permanent in Christianity*." Mr. Shackford was going to be strictly a businessman. It did not take long, however, for the members of the Unitarian Society to discover that there was a real Unitarian minister in town, and they prevailed upon him to take the pulpit. Before long, he was preaching to large numbers, and the first Unitarian church in Iowa was firmly established. Shackford followed in Parker's "heretical" style, setting the tone for the future of Unitarianism in Iowa.

Other churches soon followed, in the cities of Keokuk, Davenport, Iowa City, Des Moines and Council Bluffs, aided by ministers coming up the rivers from St. Louis. But the most remarkable start of a Unitarian church was not in a city, but in remote rural soil. In September, 1862, Rev. Stephen H. Taft from New York rode into Dakota City, the only town in what is now Humboldt County in northwestern Iowa, coming from the nearest railroad station in Cedar Falls, some 120 miles distant. He was looking for land on which to start a Unitarian colony. It was not an auspicious time to settle in such a virtual wilderness. What people had come because of the Homestead Act two years before had mostly already left, fleeing the Indian massacres in Minnesota, the panic of 1857, and the difficulties of the land. There were but 332 people in the entire county. All odd-numbered sections of land had been granted to railroad companies for railroads that were never built. Taft bought 5 sections from the Dubuque and Sioux City Railroad for \$1.25 per acre. In December (not a good time) he returned with his family and two others to start a colony in which there would be "freedom and unity in religion, temperance, and equal rights for all, both black and white, male and female." By the spring of 1863 there were about 50 colonists, and it

was decided to start a town, called Springvale, due to the number of springs there. Even while occupied with building, “educational and religious considerations became dominant,” and a formal Christian Union (Unitarian) church was established and a Sunday School begun.

In addition to preaching, Taft was busy building a store with a second story to serve the church as a permanent meeting place, laying out streets and parks, building a dam to power a sawmill and gristmill, establishing a school and newspaper, and building a house for his family. Nothing went smoothly. Some newer residents did not like what he was preaching, and started a Congregational church – a unique case where the “established” church was Unitarian and the “dissenting” church Congregational. It seemed everything went wrong, from floods to faulty land contracts; from drought and grasshopper plagues to tornadoes and the failure to attract the railroad.

But Taft, undaunted, carried on, and in 1869 began his dream to establish a liberal college in Springvale, to be the “Harvard of the West,” and contracted for 240 acres of land. Lots of problems, little money, all seemed hopeless. Taft went to a friend, Edward Everett Hale, who introduced him to other donors, including Wendell Phillips, James Freeman Clarke, and William Lloyd Garrison. The Humboldt College Association was formed in honor of the great German scholar, Baron Von Humboldt. The Rev. Robert Collier of Chicago and Frederick Douglass were members of the Board of Trustees. The school opened in September, 1872, with 111 students enrolled. At the dedication the name of the town was changed to Humboldt because Taft said, “the history of all successful Colleges shows that a noble institution of learning ... becomes more important than the town where located.” Before long, 400 students attended, and it became known as one of the best educational institutions in the west. Hard times continued, and money became scarce. Money from the east to support the college dried up, and after ten years Taft gave up and the school was closed, as was one of the most interesting and least known of Unitarian stories.

While all this was going on, Taft decided his church should be formally affiliated with the American Unitarian Association (AUA). In 1878 this was finalized, and dedicated to “the one true God; rational religion; a free and joyous piety without formalism; free and earnest thought; fearless study of the truth; an ever advancing knowledge; the loving service of humanity; and the upbuilding of personal character.” Taft decided it was time to build a real house of worship. For the next two years, he “preached one day of the week, worked building the church 6 days, and solicited for work, materials and funds every day.” Even before the building was completed or furnished, Taft invited the recently formed Iowa Unitarian Association (IUA) to hold its annual meeting in Humboldt in May, 1880. The IUA was formed in 1877 by three prominent laypeople, and three ministers – Oscar Clute, Sylvan Hunting, and John Effinger. Two years later a constitution was adopted which began:

After being ordained a Unitarian minister in 1841, Charles Chauncy Shackford was warned against following his vocation because of the nefarious influence of Theodore Parker, who in fact had delivered his most famous sermon, “The Transient and Permanent in Christianity,” at Shackford's own ordination. Taking the warning to heart, he emigrated to Iowa to go into business. Unitarians there, however, soon persuaded him to serve them as a minister. He did so -- very much as a follower of Theodore Parker.

This set the tone for Unitarianism in Iowa.

WHEREAS, Entire freedom is necessary to the growth of religion in the souls of men; and
WHEREAS, creed-bound organizations are an obstacle to human progress and happiness;

RESOLVED, That we hereby unite ourselves into a permanent society for the purpose of building up free churches, based on practical righteousness, in the state of Iowa.

The 1880 IUA meeting in Humboldt was the first general meeting of the IUA, attended by all the ministers and many laypeople from all over the state. The newly built Humboldt church was dedicated; Miss Mary Safford gave an outstanding sermon on “The Sword of Truth,” and Jenkin Lloyd Jones, the new Western Conference secretary, had his first meeting with Unitarians in the region, and gave his vision for Western Unitarianism – it would be more open, more accommodating, more liberal and more involved with social concerns than Eastern Unitarianism was, proposing “truth, righteousness and love” in individuals, and “freedom, fellowship, and character” in churches.

The high point of the conference was the ordination of Miss Mary Safford to the Unitarian ministry. When the conference ended, there was a general feeling of euphoria, that they had begun something that would make an impression on the world, a sort of militant liberalism. Rev. Taft suggested the newly ordained Miss Safford, who had made such an outstanding impression, be called to serve at Humboldt – it was time for him to retire. She came, with her childhood friend, Eleanor Gordon, who became the principal of the high school, while Safford served two churches, the one in Humboldt and a new one in Algona. Both prospered, with many members and new programs, both social and educational.



Mary Safford

Eleanor Gordon

Photo by Carrie Chapman Catt. Courtesy of the State Historical Society of Iowa

After three years, the churches had grown enough that a full-time minister was needed in each, and Ida Hultin took over in Algona. In 1885, a new church beginning in Sioux City requested Rev. Safford, and she left Humboldt, taking Miss Gordon along as parish assistant, with the understanding she would begin her own study for the ministry. Rev. Marion Murdock, an Iowa native who had studied in Boston, Oxford, Italy and Germany, and was the first woman to receive a B.D. degree from Meadville, came to Humboldt with her sister, Amelia, as parish assistant. The Humboldt church became the “vital core” of Iowa Unitarianism.

Mental and religious freedom went along nicely with the other freedoms the Iowa pioneers sought. For them, religion was part of historical process, it was in the here and now, sympathetic to culture and ready to come to terms with it. It was to advance learning rather than perpetuate religious beliefs; to show how to live without the authority of the church; to bring together historical scripture and

present society; to move people's hearts and minds to public service; to adopt science as a partner in the search for truth; and to recognize that things evolve and that change is part of the unfolding of the universe.

The primary voice and leader of this movement, was Jenkin Lloyd Jones, who became the missionary secretary of the Western Unitarian Conference in 1875. Jones believed in "the religious prospects of the West," and thought there was a "higher mission than the preservation of organizations." His mission was rooted in his love of the Midwest, his devotion to a religion which matched the freedom, independence, individuality, and strong moral character he found there, and his belief that the true measure of a person was how that person lived, rather than what they believed. He felt most religions interfered with living a good moral, independent, and responsible life, getting caught up in creeds and details. He wanted to "open up the West" not only in terms of settlement but to free individuals to be the best they could be, unhampered by religious strictures. To the Iowa pioneers who came looking for a better life, for renewal and hope, for new horizons, this was a powerful message.

What happened in Humbolt and later throughout Iowa did not happen in a vacuum. Modernism encouraged Biblical criticism and a more moderate approach to religion. The frontier psychology made people self-reliant and daring. Science was advancing, free thought was challenging sacerdotal authority, and Darwinism struck directly at the infallibility of the Bible. Traditions and truisms were toppling all over, especially in northwest Iowa, where Easterners already familiar with democratic ideals were seeking more freedom, independence, and autonomy.

In 1878, Jones founded a magazine, *Unity*, a weekly periodical to be a voice for the radically modernist Unitarianism of the West, stressing an absolutely creedless "ethical basis for religion" – or non-religion, as some perceived it. With this seeming acceptance of even atheists into the WUC, ministers and laypeople alike, battle lines were drawn which would separate the Western churches from Boston, and also cause dissension within the WUC itself. Yet, all the Iowa ministers except Oscar Clute embraced it. Those who followed Jones' ideas were called "Unity men (and women)." The Iowans had their own magazine, *Old and New*, which was started in 1891 by Arthur Judy, the minister in Davenport, and distributed to Unitarians across the state. It helped them keep up to date on state and national issues, current literature, and news from the various churches, the IUA and the WUC. The scope of its articles was amazing, considering it was done by already busy ministers in their "spare time." Judy, a strong believer in Jenkin Lloyd Jones, was the primary editor for several years, after which Mary Safford and Eleanor Gordon took turns at the job. Other ministers and laypeople made contributions. For the most part, the Iowa ministers preached and wrote on the subject of religion – not theology. They spent little time splitting doctrinal hairs or interpreting specific Biblical passages or theological constructs, but rather spoke to the practice of a broad-minded, free, and rational religion in people's lives. *Old and New* was one of the main sources of light, and sometimes heat.

Jones urged state associations to carry out missionary work, believing in spreading the gospel as far and wide as possible, and the need for the WUC and individual states to be independent. The IUA was the first state association formed under his stewardship, and he gave it his undying support and attention, coming often to the state to speak at conferences, preach at churches, lecture on Browning and Emerson, help churches start Unity clubs and religious education programs, and support and befriend ministers and lay people alike. He was a faithful friend to the women ministers, and they, in turn, were

loyal to him. Arthur Judy was the main interpreter of the Iowa vision, but the women were the inspirers who turned the vision into a mission, and then into a model of the life well-lived. To them, more than to the men, the vision was all-important, for it defined who they were, and their unique role in liberal religion.

Yes, the women. By 1877 there were several women serving churches in northwest Iowa, and Marion Murdoch invited them to come to Humboldt to discuss their parishes and problems and share ideas. In addition to Marion and Amelia Murdoch, Mary Safford, and Eleanor Gordon, there were Eliza

Nowhere more than Iowa did women serve so well and acquire so much authority. They did so because of their ability and their dedication to what they saw as a worthy cause. By 1900 they outnumbered their male colleagues and ran the state association and much of the missionary work. Women gave 135 years of ministry to the state between 1880 and 1910. Their male counterparts, by and large, accepted, supported, and even admired them.

Tupper Wilkes and her sister Mila, Caroline Bartlett, and two from Nebraska. There were other women (Ida Hultin, Helen Grace Putnam, Florence Lounsbury Pierce, Celia Parker Wooley, Elizabeth Padgham and Margaret Olmstead the most prominent) who came to serve Iowa churches for various periods of time before World War I, but none had the effect or success of the original female ministers. Nowhere else did women serve so well and acquire so much authority. They did so because of their ability and their dedication to what they saw as a worthy cause. By 1900 they outnumbered their male colleagues and ran the state association and much of the missionary work. Between 1880 and 1910, 135 years of ministry were given by women in the state.

By and large, these women were accepted, supported, and even admired by their male counterparts, especially those who, like the women, were dedicated to the vision of Jenkin Lloyd Jones. Speaking as much from their own experiences, lives, and hearts as from texts, they exhorted their parishioners to be the “better and best” that they could. What they preached was an expansion of Jones’ vision, taking it into the world through social service and missionary work. Mary Safford said, “Religion is leading the human soul into the wide universe, teaching it to see and hear and feel what is there. Our external world depends largely on our moral development; the world is what we make of it.” Her motto was “religion is a life, not a creed,” and it is “...morality on fire with love for humanity and whatsoever is pure and true and beautiful. It can be expressed only in terms of life. Whatever or whoever teaches the way of life is the most effective minister of religion.” And Eleanor Gordon added, “the church...is man’s varied attempt to picture the Ideal Perfect and make it manifest in the lives of all.”

There were some who complained that the Iowa vision was not a theology at all, but rather a non-theology. This prompted Rev. Leon Harvey to reply: “We do not lay any stress upon theological statements. We have gone through the stage of controversy and realize, that even the noblest definitions of the deep verities of religion necessarily fall short and that each person must in the end interpret these eternal realities according to his own mind.” The church’s special work, said Safford, was “the development of individual character, through the teaching of a religion which finds expression in noble, upright lives.”

It is instructive to note that in their definitions of religion, and their descriptions of what religion should be, the Iowa ministers, with the one exception of Oscar Clute, did not include any particular belief, even a belief in God, as a requisite for being a religious person. In order to do this, they had to redefine some of the basic tenets of religion in order to make their case. This redefinition included such areas as Biblical interpretation, where they found the Bible to be the historical writings of those in a

particular time and place rather than the revelations of a distant God. It also included accepting Jesus as a man and teacher who revealed truth through example in his life; adopting the scientific method as compatible with religious quest and science as a partner in the search for truth; and accepting Darwin's concept of evolution.

This led to two primary foci of the religious function. One was the social gospel, which "illustrates much of liberal purpose, even when not explicitly identified." Although some of the Iowa ministers used the church as an institution to accomplish particular social aims, and all the women were strong suffragists, most did not see the church qua church engaging in direct efforts, but as the way to affect attitudes of its members so they would work to change society. For them, the authority of religion came from its capacity to inspire to public service. They worked hard to establish good libraries and schools and to start hospitals for the insane and mentally retarded. Even small-town churches took on "projects" – prison reform in Anamosa, mental health in Cherokee, Indian famine relief in Ida Grove, temperance in Humboldt, vocational education in Algona, and so on. That these towns now have facilities and reputations for these areas attests to the success of the Unitarians in lobbying, fundraising, and educating about certain issues.

All but one of the Iowa ministers agreed that a person need not believe in God to be religious. They viewed the Bible as writings from a historical time and place, not revelation from God, and Jesus as a man and a teacher who taught through example. They saw science as a partner in the search for truth and accepted evolutionary theory. Worship was seen as working in community to become better selves.

The other concern was morality. Without the fear of eternal damnation to motivate people, they tried to retrieve the morality of Jesus as a human ideal, and to exhort people to follow his example as a guide for their own lives. Although in many ways the Iowa Unitarians flirted with secularism, they consistently separated religion's practical value and moral power from any other institution in society. It was the church's job to build character, to elevate morality, to inspire people to public service and to better the human lot.

Although they did use the word God, and even spoke of the Kingdom of God, they consistently defined it as the ideal of living; reaching human fulfillment. As Mary Safford said, "if our choosing is determined by high ideals; if we choose wisely, religiously, the blessedness of life will deepen and increase. What is most worthwhile is a fixed inner purpose to seek first the kingdom of God, or in other words, to develop noble character, strength, and beauty of soul." And in her missionary sermon, which she preached all over the state in various forms over twenty years, she further separated what is important from dependence on God when she said, "We see man, not fallen from a high estate and utterly depraved, but slowly climbing from better up to best, revealing more and more of the eternal love as he leaves behind his selfishness and low desires and reaches out the generous helping hand to those about him. We see him envisioned by laws which do not change, hence reaping always what he sows, saved from sin and punishment not by the merits of another, but only through brave, persistent efforts to build up truth and love in his own being."

Worship, therefore, was seen as working in community to become better selves. It included education, self-analysis, and working together to achieve higher goals. Celia Wooley preached that worship should include an element of moral conviction, and the true spirit of worship is closely connected with the ability to think. Margaret Olmstead insisted that "the pulpit is not for lectures, but for sermons in which ethical elements are paramount...the purpose is to develop social consciousness, promote the spirit of togetherness, reveal the fact of brotherhood and the law of love in its highest

implications...all worship will have soul development as its aim.” To this end, the women in particular used literature, poetry, music, philosophy, science, and art as elements of the service, for they felt that to properly develop the whole person, to achieve the highest aims possible, one needed to know and appreciate many elements of life, aesthetic as well as practical. They had no time for ministers who simply “rode the pulpit” and preached the gospel. Mary Safford said, “It matters little just how, and when, and where, great truths dawn upon the soul; it matters...whether these new truths are welcomed and obeyed.”

From the very beginning of the IUA, it was felt that missionary work was important. John Effinger was the first “official” state missionary, followed by Sylvan S. Hunting and other men, but it was the women ministers, along with the ever-willing Judy, who most influenced the IUA as either presidents or field secretaries or editors of *Old and New*. They refused available monies from the AUA



Jenkin Lloyd Jones

because they felt the AUA was trying to influence the theology and membership criteria of the Western Conference. So the work was done by the settled ministers, especially the women. Safford particularly, using her considerable charisma and reputation, worked for church extension. At the end of her first year as field secretary she reported that she had given 152 sermons and addresses; attended 91 conference and committee meetings in 35 different places; travelled 13, 473 miles; wrote 1397 letters; served twice as chaplain for the state legislature; gave three college baccalaureate services; and officiated at one ordination, two installations, three weddings and eight funerals in different parts of the state, while contributing to *Old and New* and serving her own congregation in Sioux City, which Jenkin Lloyd Jones called “the best pastored church in the west!” Moreover, she and Gordon started churches in the small northwest Iowa towns of Rock Rapids, Cherokee,

Washta, Akron, and Ida Grove, and served all of them as full-time ministers, making the circuit each weekend while they were in Sioux City. They also established “preaching sites” in Westfield, Iowa; Wayne, Nebraska; and Luverne, MN, which they visited occasionally.

Some of these sites, as well as others throughout the state which were served by other, closer, ministers, came about as a result of Safford’s missionary sermon, which she preached all over the state in various forms. But several began because Unitarians from the East had settled in Iowa and requested established ministers to help them start churches. For example, my great grandfather, a Unitarian from Rhode Island, came to Cherokee, Iowa, to seek new horizons, heard of the Sioux City church, visited it, and asked Safford to help them start one in Cherokee. Either Safford or Gordon came on Sunday night, and often stayed over at his house. As long as they were available, the church thrived, but after she left, even though it had other ministers, it declined, and ended in the Great Depression, as did many others. Even Sioux City nearly went under, saved by loyal parishioners. Tiny Washta lasted the longest – into the 1960’s.

There were other efforts to reach out to isolated Unitarians and other liberals as well. Out-of-state speakers like Frederick Douglass, Jane Addams, Julia Ward Howe, Everett Edward Hale and others were invited to speak, and drew large crowds. In 1883, Arthur Judy, realizing there were not enough ministers to serve the several isolated towns where Unitarians lived, began the Post Office Mission. A kind of precursor to the Church of the Larger Fellowship, it sent out sermons, tracts, religious education materials and pamphlets to people all over the state, “resulting in hundreds of converts in rural areas.” His church in Davenport employed four secretaries to keep up with the work. Also, in the summers,

when churches took a vacation, ministers held “liberal picnics” all over, spreading the gospel in places it had never before been present. Mary Safford started a Unitarian summer school at Lake Okoboji which lasted until she left, when the others decided ministers needed a rest in the summer. So, following Jones' method of sowing the seeds of the “cheerful outlook” of rational religion broadly, and then nurturing it where it seemed to take hold, the IUA planted Unitarianism in places that would never have been touched by the AUA method of preselecting likely places, like large cities, state capitals, or university towns. Put all together, their combined efforts meant that the Unitarian vision was going out to thousands of Iowans.

Of course, there were churches in such places, and they had a great influence on the state's government, statutes, and future citizens. Many of the churches had members of the local governments and judiciary, as well as state officials. When Mary Safford went to serve in Des Moines, where her parishioners included several legislators, some judges, and even the Lieutenant Governor, her message of liberty, freedom, justice, and peace began to be written into the still evolving laws and customs of the state. Even today, there are remnants of the liberal ideals planted in Iowa in these years before World

Jenkin Lloyd Jones described 1880 to World War I as a time when "Liberal religion in Iowa was on fire."

War I. Eleanor Gordon took over the then struggling church in Iowa City, where she devoted herself to expanding the education of students at the state university through lectures, clubs, social occasions, and pamphlets so they would know and appreciate the liberal message and carry it into their communities after graduation. She felt a good liberal education was the foundation of good citizenship, and she did everything she could to spread the word.

There is so much more to tell about the extraordinary success of Unitarianism in Iowa from 1880 to World War I, a time which, as Jenkin Lloyd Jones said, “Liberal religion in Iowa was on fire.” It was a time of extreme dedication to a cause by an unusual number of ministers and laypeople, who strongly believed in a vision and a mission they shared. They had developed a message which, I contend, later became called Humanism, and were determined to spread and share it as widely as they could. It spoke to the times, the kind of people who came to the prairie and embraced its openness, and to the need for working together in such a place. It showed that finding new ideas and directions, trying new ways of learning and living, and working to serve humanity could be exciting and fruitful.

However, there comes a time when fires burn down; fires consume energy and can “burn out” those who feed them. The flames of Unitarianism in Iowa did not become merely ashes, but they did diminish considerably as conditions changed, key fire builders left or died, and new leaders seemed determined to dampen the remaining hot spots. So what happened? Many things. By 1910, the stalwarts of leadership, both lay and ministerial, who were willing to make such sacrifices to build the fires were gone. Mary Safford and Eleanor Gordon had retired, as did the ever-faithful Arthur Judy. Jenkin Lloyd Jones was also out of the picture, and his successors did not have the same vision or stamina. The “reconciliation” between the WUC and the AUA after the final solution to the “Issue in the West” meant the WUC no longer had the autonomy it previously had. Then in 1900 Samuel Eliot, who had shown an intense dislike for small churches, women ministers, and Midwesterners, took over as AUA president, and was not at all cooperative, withholding needed money, demeaning and refusing to ordain more women, refusing to send ministers to the rural churches and sending Eastern ministers who saw their jobs simply as serving one church by preaching and that was it. They had no appreciation for the continuing need for missionary outreach in such an area. There were other reasons as well. In the rural areas, doctors were few, and diphtheria and smallpox epidemics catastrophically diminished the

populations, as did World War I. New immigrants who did not understand the values espoused by liberal religion brought their own orthodox religions with them and were not receptive to the liberal message.

As we have seen, the golden era of Unitarianism in Iowa was the result of many factors – the timing of settlement, the makeup of the early settlers, the unpopularity of Iowa as a place for the settlement of Eastern ministers, opening the way for women and men who saw it as a place of opportunity; and the appropriateness of the message for the frontier way of life. But what contributed most to the success of Unitarianism during this period was that the people had a strong vision – a vision of humanity. They took this vision and breathed life into it, molded it into a mission, and made it a model for the well-lived life. They planted this vision throughout the state, in the smallest towns and largest cities. They fanned it with the winds of hope, joy and love, and kindled it with social activism. It was no accident that this vision was the beginning of Humanism, for it was when Humanism was well established within Unitarianism that the association had its most successful growth, especially in the Midwest. It was a vision of social responsibility and the divinity of humanity. It was a vision which inspired, comforted, motivated and connected those who heard it. It was imbued with the joy of those who adopted and spread it. To be part of this vision was to participate in an exciting movement, which people felt could and would bring great changes in their lives and in the society.

Unitarian churches in Iowa grew from 4 to 21 over 20 years thanks to the strong vision and message of Jenkin Lloyd Jones, adopted by virtually all the ministers. Everyone in Iowa knew the Unitarians' vision and mission. A united message led to a united movement that could tackle social and political issues effectively. The Iowans expended time and effort to offer their vision to others, both through a paid field secretary and the work of loyal clergy and laity, using many methods to spread the word. It helped, also, that the vision was one of humanity and living in the real world -- a precursor of Humanism.

It was not just an individual vision, but a common faith shared by a wide variety of people, from farmers to businessmen, laborers to legislators, housewives to judges. It led to a belief that, together, they could transform a state – and to a large extent, they did. In addition to delivering the message, there were systematic attempts to influence state policy and politics. Not only were a disproportionate number of Unitarians serving in state offices and other influential positions, there was a concerted effort to make known the connection between liberal religion and positions taken on important issues. At a time when most churches eschewed political involvement, the Unitarians let it be known through the actions of their representatives, that rationality and freedom in religion led to certain kinds of conclusions. Again, results of this effort are still evident in this basically liberal state.

Some say that the Iowa experiment was a failure, or only an aberration which can never be repeated. Nothing which left such legacies can be considered a failure. Perhaps the unique combination of time, place, people and political climate will not occur again. But there are some parallels between the Iowa story and the present. Once again, the UUs have significant numbers of women ministers, willing to experiment with new forms of worship and new definitions of ministry. Once again, there are a number of people – now called the “nones” who would seem to be good candidates for our movement. Once again, there is some interest in de-Bostonizing the UUA and giving more autonomy to local and regional churches. And once again our nation and world are faced with dire consequences and strong challenges which religious liberals can rise to meet.

I suggest that a close study of the Iowa story can be instructive for the present and future of UUism in America. Certainly the success of growing from four to 21 churches in a 20 year period was

primarily due to the strong vision and message articulated by Jenkin Lloyd Jones and adopted by virtually all the ministers. Everyone knew what Unitarians stood for and saw how their vision became a mission. A united message led to a united movement. This unity meant that when they saw things that needed attention, both socially and politically, they were able to agree and tackle the issue together, which gave the effort great strength and success. It also meant that, because they so strongly believed in the vision, they were willing to expend time and effort to offer it to others, both through a paid state missionary (field secretary) and the work of loyal clergy and laity, using many methods to spread the word. It helped, also, that the vision was one of humanity and living in the real world – a precursor of Humanism.

In order to believe, there has to be something to believe in – something which is inspiring enough to capture one’s imagination, and rational enough to be believable. Its symbols need to be true and normative guides for thoughts, goals and behaviors. Without such a normative belief, or “vision,” there is very little to unite people in a common bond and cause. This is what the Iowa Unitarians had, and what, I believe, present UUs lack. In our apparent agreement to stand for nothing very much, to try to attract newcomers by accepting anything they believe, we have given up the most basic foundation of a vital religion.

The Iowa vision was more than just “Freedom, Fellowship and Character” in religion; more than “Truth, Righteousness and Love.” It was, as Jabez Sunderland accused it of being during the Issue in the West, “something more – broader and more advanced” than Eastern Unitarianism. This “something more” was its sense of community and of mission. If there is anything to be learned from the Iowa story, it is that if present UUs are to recover the kind of growth and excitement that existed then, they must also recover a “center,” a common sense of who and what they are. Never has the need been greater, or the opportunities better. We can learn from the past, if we but will, and the time will never be as good as it is now.

Rev. Dr. Sarah Oelberg is a retired UU minister currently living in the greater Milwaukee area and a new member of the MidAmerica Region History and Heritage Committee. This article based on her book Fire Across the Prairie: A History of Unitarianism in Iowa from Statehood to World War I, for which she is seeking a publisher.

Photos:

Eleanor Gordon and Mary Safford: Iowa Women's Suffrage Collection, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

Jenkin Lloyd Jones: Spartacus Educational, www.spartacus-educational.com.