

Mini-History: Florence Kollock Crooker



Woman Minister Married.

From The Chicago Times-Herald, June 19.
The Rev. Florence Kollock, for twenty years a minister, and for twelve years pastor of the Englewood Universalist Church, was married yesterday to the Rev. J. H. Crooker, a Unitarian minister, of Helena, Mon. The ceremony was performed by the Rev. John Hilton, at the residence of the bride's sister, Dr. Jennie Kollock, in this city. After a tour through the lake region they will go to Helena.

The New York Times

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An article in the New York Times dated June 22, 1896 starts with the headline "**Woman Minister Married**". This might sound like pretty un-remarkable news to us today, but recall that there weren't a lot of woman ministers in 1896. And the article was of special interest because a very well known Universalist minister, the Reverend Florence Kollock had married a distinguished Unitarian minister, the Reverend Joseph Crooker. Shockingly, the Universalist bride was not converting to her husband's Unitarian religion. Two years after their late in life marriage, the Crookers moved to Ann Arbor where Joseph Crooker became the 3rd minister of our congregation, succeeding his mentor Jabez Sunderland.

Florence Kollock Crooker definitely fits today's service theme. She spread the Word -- Universalist ideals and also Women's Rights-- westward, and through other parts of the country as well.

Although she remained a Universalist minister, she did sometimes preach from the Ann Arbor Unitarian pulpit and she spoke at Unity Club lectures. She did not play a large role in the running of our church like Eliza Sunderland did.

She was a pioneer in multiple ways. One quite obvious way-- she and Joseph Crooker served as a flesh and blood prototype. Over 60 years before the merger of the Unitarian and Universalist denominations this UU couple worked together to establish both Unitarian and Universalist churches. During her seven years in Ann Arbor,

Florence served as a missionary to both the Universalist and Unitarian denominations. This was the first time those positions had ever been combined.

Florence was also very much a pioneer of women's rights. Born in a log cabin in Wisconsin to liberal Universalist parents, Florence and her sisters were treated as equals to their brothers and urged to pursue careers. Her oldest sister became a physician; Her sister Jennie was the first American woman to graduate from the University of Michigan Dental School. Florence went into the ministry and spent 14 years in Englewood, Illinois growing a congregation there into the largest Universalist church in the Chicago area and leading two building projects. She was very active in the women's suffrage movement and in 1884, testified before a congressional committee on suffrage.

The word "obey" was not included in Reverend Kollock's wedding services.

You have probably heard of some of her good friends-- [Julia Ward Howe](#), Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Susan B. Anthony -- They all spoke at her Englewood church.

The Reverend Florence Kollock was a pioneer as a **woman** minister in a time when most denominations did not ordain women and she was a pioneer as a liberal **Universalist** minister. She was very charismatic and money-savvy; She had a knack for reviving failing congregations and getting them back on financial track. Although some found her Universalism too liberal, her preaching attracted many different types of people, including Swedenborgian, Quaker, Catholic and Jewish members and many who had thought they would never join a church at all. Her church was especially noted for the unusually high number of men in attendance. She was fond of saying that if there were more women ministers, there would be more men in the pews.

Once when she was asked to explain women in ministry. She replied:

“Why should there be women ministers?” The answer is plain: “For the same good reasons that there is a male ministry.” To the mother, sister and daughter she carries with her a peculiar favor and irresistible influence of the authority of a high priestess, and through this she leads and guides, she comforts and consoles, and thus the community and individual comes to realize “Why a woman minister.” Is their ministry acceptable? The reply to this is geographical. Acceptable, yes, from the Mississippi Valley west to the Pacific coast. Let New England speak for herself.

Florence's brand of Universalism was very innovative in the 19th century and sounds surprisingly modern to us now. She is credited with bringing social reform directly into a church context, something we now take for granted but that seemed quite new at the time. In her widely quoted description of "The Church of Tomorrow", she foresees a time when churches differ in the way they are organized and in their specific doctrines but are alike in their embrace of diversity, their practice of tolerance, and in their shared ethics. The Church of Tomorrow will have *unity of spirit and cooperation for holiness*.

Florence saw the Universalist movement as freeing religion from its emphasis on dogma and creed and bringing religion into a new era of social outreach and caring communities; a new kind of religion that would have Universal appeal to people everywhere and that would be well served by women in ministry. Her *Church of Tomorrow* from 100 years ago sounds a bit like our church Today.

Presented by Sandy Simon
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