

## Great Beginnings

Reflection for February 11, 2018

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In March of 1994, at the age of 28, I became a member of a church for the first time in my life. It was People's Church, the Unitarian-Universalist congregation in Kalamazoo, Michigan (yes, as the Chamber of Commerce assured, there really is a Kalamazoo). This was such an exciting time in my life. I had just moved to that small but vibrant city, my new career in architecture was finally on the right track, I found a welcoming and safe gay & lesbian social group, and I felt right at home at People's Church.

Over the following months, I settled into my new life and my infatuation with the church and denomination grew deeper as I learned of its profound and positive influence on the community and region, beginning well over a century earlier. I was especially intrigued with the minister that the congregation hired back in 1889: Caroline Bartlett, its fifth minister, and its first woman in that position. Rev. Lucy's sermon two weeks ago on her favorite periods in U/U history included the Prophetic Sisterhood, a movement in the late 19th century that encouraged women's participation in the ministry, of which Caroline Bartlett was a part.

Beginning this job as minister was likely a big life change for Bartlett. At age 31, this was just her second position as a settled minister after three years at a church in Sioux Falls, Dakota Territory, but upon her arrival in Kalamazoo, she hit the ground running. Soon, she led the church to begin the first free public kindergarten, a school of manual training and domestic science, a gymnasium for women, a day nursery, a cafeteria, and the Frederick Douglass Club for the "young colored people of the city." During that period, she said, "...this church cannot be a place where we are merely to come together once a week and enjoy our doctrine and congratulate ourselves that we have a faith free from superstition. We must do something for others, as well as for ourselves. And the more we have done for others, the more in the end, we shall find we have done for ourselves." She said this in the 1890s, as she promoted her church with programs for all people, regardless of color or creed.

Bartlett must have been quite a personality outside of her ministry, too. Before she began her ministerial career, she was a newspaper reporter, during which time she landed an interview with Mark Twain, thanks in part due to her experience as a riverboat pilot on the Mississippi. While she was at People's Church, she married Dr. Augustus Crane who was an early pioneer in medical radiology and ten years her *junior*. They married at a *surprise* ceremony during the New Year's Eve service at the church in 1896.

Sadly, Caroline Bartlett Crane had to resign her position as minister less than two years later due to health concerns, yet she went on to become nationally recognized as a leading proponent of sanitation and public health, helping to develop regulations for slaughterhouses and serving as a consultant on such issues throughout the United States for more than 30 years. Similarly, People's Church has continued to promote racial equality, women's suffrage, peace, LGBTQ rights, and much more in Southwest Michigan and beyond.

Clearly, these causes are not passing fads. They have endured for decades, and in some form, for millennia. They endure because without them, art and science would be crippled at best, and there

would certainly be no democracy. Lately, I've been fearing for the future of our country as our national culture seems to decay a little more each day. Perhaps you've been feeling it too. But I keep hope alive by being reminded that we made it through a civil war and came out of it with the help of people like Caroline Bartlett Crane and institutions like People's Church. Today our nation has many institutions, like UUSS, with its resilient, forward-thinking leaders, members, and friends like you. Let's keep the faith!