



## **March, 2009 – Women’s History Month A Story for All Ages**

The Tapestry of Faith series of lifespan faith development programs is published online for congregations to use, at no charge. In honor of Women’s History Month, this original story by Polly Peterson comes from Toolbox of Faith, a 16-session program for grades 4/5 by Kate Tweedie Covey.

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### **Eliza Tupper Wilkes: Riding for Faith, Hope, and Love**

*A useful visual aid for this story is a U.S. map to show Reverend Wilkes’ extensive travel all over the country. Other visual aids might include pictures of Universalist circuit riders and pictures of frontier life and transportation modes of the mid-19th century.*

Imagine traveling by horse and buggy along dusty dirt roads in summer heat, fording streams, swatting mosquitoes, wearing clothes with long sleeves and a high collar. Or, making the same trip on icy roads, beginning in the dark of a cold winter morning, whipped by bitter wind, with sleet stinging your face.

Imagine that a church congregation is waiting for you when you reach your destination. You preach a sermon, lead the hymns, meet with the church officers, give counsel to troubled parishioners, and help organize a church supper or an evening discussion group. Then, at the end of a long day, perhaps you receive news of a death in another town and know that you must soon be on the road again, to comfort the grieving family.

A day like this might have been a typical Sunday for a Universalist minister in the group known as the Iowa Sisterhood. These ministers were among the first female ministers in the United States. They endured many hardships to bring liberal religion to the small communities that were springing up throughout the Midwest after the Civil War.

Eliza Tupper Wilkes led the way in this new style of ministry. This is her story.

Eliza Tupper was born in Maine in 1844. Her father was a Baptist minister, and her mother was a writer and editor. Her mother's job was very unusual. In those days, married women rarely had a profession outside of housekeeping.

When Eliza was five, her family moved to Iowa, a territory that had gained statehood only a few years earlier. People were flocking to this promising new state on the rolling prairie; its population had

doubled from about 75,000 when Eliza was born to more than 150,000 by the time her family moved there.

Pioneer life suited the Tupper family very well. A good high school education was hard to find on the frontier, though, so Eliza went back to Maine in 1860 to live with her grandfather and go to school. She returned to Iowa three years later and began studying at a new Baptist college. She wanted to become a missionary. After graduation, she took a job as a teacher in Mt. Pleasant, Iowa. While she was there, her ideas about religion began to change. The Baptist religion's teachings about hellfire and damnation no longer seemed true to her. To the horror of her family, she decided to join the Universalists. When she was baptized in her new faith, she quipped that she had "left the devil behind."

The Universalist church was the first denomination to welcome women ministers. This was lucky, for Eliza Tupper. Her interest in missionary work was still strong. Soon she began preaching from the pulpit of the Mt. Pleasant Universalist church. She moved to Wisconsin where she had her own pulpit as a minister. While in Wisconsin, she met William Wilkes, a young law clerk, and she married him in 1869.

The United States was a country on the move in those days. By 1869, you could take a train across the entire continent, from the east coast to the west. More and more people were striking out for new territories in the West. Young people like Eliza and her husband William had a world of opportunity before them. The couple first moved to Rochester, Minnesota, where Eliza was ordained as a Universalist minister in 1871. She served as minister there for three years. Then they moved on, to Colorado. William became a lawyer and Eliza, now the mother of a young son, organized a new Universalist congregation in Colorado Springs and preached there regularly to get it started.

The high altitude of Colorado Springs proved to be bad for Eliza's health, though. In 1878, the family was on the move again. They traveled to the Dakota Territory and settled in the frontier town of Sioux Falls. The family eventually had six children. Unlike other prosperous husbands in those days, Eliza's husband approved of her career. He willingly paid for household help and tutors for the children so that Eliza could continue her missionary work.

Eliza was interested in many kinds of social reform, but she dedicated her life most of all to the establishment of new churches. She knew that among the pioneers on the frontier there were many freethinking people who hungered to hear the liberal message, and there were few places to hear it.

From her home base in Sioux Falls, Eliza organized seven churches in South Dakota, Iowa, and Minnesota. Her plan was to turn each one over to another minister after it was established, as she moved on to establishing the next. But ministers were in short supply. Often she needed to serve several churches at once. Reverend Eliza Tupper Wilkes spent many years "on the circuit," traveling from town to town, ministering to as many people as she could. On Sundays, she often preached in Rock Rapids, Iowa, in the morning, then traveled fifteen miles to Luverne, Minnesota, for an afternoon service. Nowadays such a trip would be a quick drive on the highway. For Eliza, it was a long, arduous journey over difficult roads.

Eliza Tupper Wilkes was a trailblazer, but she was not alone. Other women were establishing Unitarian congregations in Iowa and the surrounding states. Women ministers encouraged other women to come into the ministry, and the "sisterhood" grew. They often faced people who were hostile to the idea of women in the ministry, but they proved to be so effective that their congregations in the Midwest and the West quickly grew.

After Eliza had started a new congregation, she always preferred to turn it over to another woman minister. She believed that women from the local areas were more competent as prairie pastors than the men sent out from the East. The women worked harder and were more willing to accept the low wages that struggling homesteaders could pay. They better understood their parishioners' lives and were more likely to talk about things in the same kind of way as the people they served — unlike some of the young men sent out to the frontier, fresh from college. Along with their religious message of optimism and hope, the women ministers tended to bring a comforting, homelike quality to church meetings that attracted both women and men. And, beyond their religious duties, they often organized cultural and social events that were much appreciated by people living isolated rural lives.

Eliza was delighted when Carrie Bartlett, a dedicated, energetic, and well educated young minister, agreed to take over the pulpit of the Sioux Falls Unity Church. Eliza had founded the church, and it was where her family attended services. On Sundays when Rev. Carrie Bartlett was not in the pulpit, Eliza or a guest minister from the Iowa Sisterhood would usually preach in her place. One Sunday, Rev. Bartlett traded pulpits with a male colleague instead. Eliza's little daughter, Queenie, was astonished. She exclaimed in amazement, "Look, Mama! There's a man up there in the pulpit!"

Women ministers were still very rare in the rest of the world. Even among Unitarians and Universalists, many people still disapproved of them. But for the young congregation of Sioux Falls, South Dakota, female ministers had become the norm, thanks to the dedication and hard work of a few courageous women.