

## CELEBRATING THE WOMEN'S GROUPS OF FIRST PARISH

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Thomas D. Wintle, with "voices of the past" readings by Barbara Penfield, at the First Parish Church in Weston, Massachusetts, on May 2, 2004. The readings were Acts 9:36-43 and John 10:22-30.

"Now in Joppa there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha . . . She was devoted to good works and acts of charity." (Acts 9.36)

### I

This story of Tabitha from the Book of the Acts of the Apostles is important for several reasons. That she was raised by the call of the Apostle Peter shows that the miracles did not stop with the death of Jesus, but miracles happened in the early church. This suggests that Easter is more than a one-time event. . . . But that was my sermon a couple weeks ago!

The story of Tabitha is also important because it is another evidence that women were included in the church from the very beginning.

We know very little about her, indeed all we know is the passage read this morning. Yet, isn't it interesting that her good works are remembered, and her name is spoken, two thousand years later, on the other side of the world? Churches are good at "remembering."

"Now in Joppa there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha . . . She was devoted to good works and acts of charity."

This morning we are remembering some other Tabithas -- some remarkable women who have been devoted to good works and acts of charity. Because of the impending change in status of the Benevolent Alliance this month, it seems to me important that the Church celebrate the nearly two hundred year history of women's groups at First Parish -- to hear some of their voices -- and to say "thank you."

### II

The story of women's groups at First Parish really begins on November 1st, 1814, when some 125 women enrolled in **The Female Cent Society**. This is the statement they signed:

"We the Subscribers, engage to appropriate one cent a week for the purpose of aiding in the support of missionaries and other instructors, and in purchasing Bibles and other religious books to be sent among the poor and destitute, and to give the same to the Evangelical Society of Worcester and Middlesex. Every lady who shall annually pay fifty cents in money shall be a member of this Society, and have a right to vote on all questions before the Society, and for every additional dollar thus paid, shall be entitled to an additional vote."

This fits in the "small world" category: the organization, which they were supporting, the Evangelical Missionary Society, was organized at my previous church, in Lancaster. It still exists. I am the president. We meet once a year at the Union Club in Boston to distribute the income from its endowment. The ladies' pennies have multiplied. The Society was organized to send missionaries to areas of central Massachusetts that were "destitute of good preaching." It now looks farther afield -- for example, it sends several thousand dollars to the church in Michigan where our former intern Peter Boullata is now the minister.

**The First Parish Ladies Benevolent Society** was organized on February 3, 1841. A committee of three were appointed to draft a constitution: Mrs. Joseph Field, wife of the minister; Mrs. Benjamin James, wife of the town doctor; and Mrs. Samuel Hobbs, daughter of the minister (sounds like a set-up to me!). They came up with:

“We the Subscribers, animated by the desire of Social, Moral, and Intellectual improvement, and wishing according to our ability to promote the cause of Charity and Benevolence among us, do hereby form ourselves into an association by the name of the Unitarian Female Society in Weston . . .”

The name Unitarian Female Society was changed in 1866 when the group was reorganized under the leadership of Mrs. Edmund Hamilton Sears. She was president from 1866 until her death in 1897.

Let me tell you something about Mrs. Sears. Some think that Judy Hoehler was the first woman minister of First Parish. But I think the first was Mrs. Sears -- the historians tell us that because of Rev. Sears' poor health, she really ran much of the church's work, and she continued to be a force in the church long after he died in 1876.

The benevolences of the Benevolent Society included helping families in town where a mother was ill or overwhelmed, money to churches in Washington and Manitoba, sewing clothing and quilts for needy families here and "a colored school in Gainsville, Georgia," scholarships at Hampton Institute, Virginia, and Tuskegee, Alabama; they organized tea parties and, for many years, parish fairs at the town hall.

Lest we think that the difficulties of getting people to meetings is a modern phenomenon only, hear these words written by the Secretary prior to the annual meeting in 1872:

“It is to be hoped that the goodly company assembled here this afternoon, have not come to the funeral of the First Parish Benevolent Society, though it might have been feared from the little apparent life in it for the past six or eight months, that it was rapidly approaching dissolution, and that by this time there would be no more to do but celebrate the obsequies and lay it among other buried treasure and memories of the past!”

Nevertheless, the Benevolent Society continued on. And evidently there was enough interest, that a second group was organized twenty-some years later. **The Women's Alliance** was organized on November 16th, 1898. The Alliance was the Weston branch of a nationwide Unitarian organization, called "The National Alliance of Unitarian and Other Liberal Christian Women."

The minutes from the meeting of January 23rd, 1899, include these words:

“The business being transacted, the President introduced Mrs. Emily A. Field, a Recording Secretary of the National Alliance, who gave a most helpful talk on the work of the Alliance.

A growing and continued interest in the Alliance is steadily manifested by the great increase in membership and by the importance of its work extending, as it does over all the country.

‘The objects of the Alliance are primarily

To quicken the religious life of our Unitarian churches and to bring the women of the denomination into closer fellowship.

To promote local organizations of women for missionary and denominational work and to bring the same into association.

To collect and disseminate information regarding all matters of interest to the denomination and to diverse ways and means for more efficient usefulness.’

To further these interests, the Religious Study Class, the Cheerful Letter Exchange, and the Post Office Mission have been established. The work as it comes in a broad way, is the missionary work and besides what the Alliance is doing in the way of denominational co-operation and sympathy it is maintaining two missionaries in the South, Mr. Dukes and Mr. Gibson, and it has churches almost wholly dependent on it for support; in some cases, sympathy and fellowship can do more than money. Often help is asked for one church because it is ‘a heritage,’ though old and feeble, and for another because it is new and struggling.”

In addition to social events and teas, the Women's Alliance began with a great interest in sending Unitarian tracts and literature to ministers struggling to start new churches. Edith Coburn's minutes of February 24th, 1902:

“Miss Andrews reported for the Post Office Mission 44 postals, 132 sermons, and 13 packages, Christian Registers, sent.

Since Dec. 16th, the Cheerful Letters exchange has received 23 letters; sent: 21 letters, 100 Magazines, 156 papers, 3 Calendars, Clippings and silk pieces, 2 Christmas packages of books, papers, and magazines, 8 books, 20 Perry pictures and 2 sheets of pictures to be cut out.”

The two organizations continued side-by-side for a half-century, the Benevolent Society seeming to be the larger one. Eventually, in 1951, the two organizations decided to merge. No one can describe that better than Gertrude Hanson, wife of the minister, Miles Hanson:

“In the autumn of 1928 I came from England as a bride; I vividly remember my first Sunday in Weston. I went to church with Miles, early of course, and found Dave Perry already there – he was an usher that morning. As I chatted with Dave before the congregation assembled, he sensed my nervousness at being the new wife of the minister. And wondering what would be expected of me. Dave said in a kindly way, ‘Don’t worry, you will never have to do anything but come to church on Sunday mornings, sit in the minister’s pew, and listen to your husband’s sermons.’ This was very comforting, and just about what Miles had told me – but – how wrong they were! I had only been in Weston a few months when a delegation from the Ladies Benevolent Society came to call on me – saying that their annual meeting was due, and they wanted me to be President.

Of course I said, ‘Impossible!’ I knew nothing of their benevolence. I was scared to death of all the sedate and proper old ladies who met to sew and disburse their funds – and – I hated to sew. My refusal meant nothing to them, they insisted it was my duty as the minister’s wife – so – I feebly consented, only to find out later that this was a misstatement on their part. Also a minister’s wife whom I admired greatly scolded me severely for having taken this office – telling me that ministers’ wives should never hold any office in church affairs. Well this information came a little late, but at least I could go away feeling that I had done my duty and would never again have to preside over any women’s group.

In the summer of 1951 I went to England for a family celebration - full of anticipation for the good time ahead and feeling very virtuous for having served the Ladies Benevolent Society as their President not only once, but for two different periods. My peace of mind was shattered one morning when I received a formal letter from the First Parish in Weston stating that the Ladies Benevolent Society and the Women’s Alliance have been legally and properly united and that I had been appointed President. This was most unwelcome news. I know that I should have felt honored to have been chosen as the 1st President – but I had not been consulted and I had no chance to say ‘no, thank you.’ Presiding over church meetings was not one of my favorite occupations, and frankly I didn’t know how I should steer this double-headed monster. I had had no experience with church work before coming to Weston.

How could I tackle this new organization and combine these two groups of rather strong-minded Unitarian ladies to make a harmonious whole and keep everybody happy? Should the devotional aspect be emphasized, or the benevolent stressed, and what form should the new organization take? Needless to say I worried all summer.

On returning to Weston I bought a Robert’s Rules of Order, and took a few lessons in parliamentary procedure law – determined to do things legally and in the right order. One of the first things to be done was to find a suitable name – the one being used was the Women’s Organization of the First Parish Unitarian in Weston – much too long and cumbersome. As nobody seemed to have an idea for a name I suggested ‘Benevolent Alliance’ as being short and using the names of the two joint societies. Most of the members thought this suggestion good, but a few people objected on the grounds that this would be shorted to B.A., – and that would be mistaken for the Boston and Albany Railroad, which was always spoken of as B.A. However, the name was voted on, and we became The Benevolent Alliance. The Boston and Albany is now defunct I believe, but we are a flourishing organization, which I am happy to say did not die under my leadership, but each year has grown stronger and better. My monster turned out to be an immortal Phoenix, fabled to live for hundreds of years.”

And the rest, as they say, is history!

The **B-A** will have a celebratory tea and some reminiscences at their annual meeting on May 19. And Barbara Coburn has put a display about the B-A in the Field cabinet by the kitchen. One hardly knows where to begin trying to list all the good works the B-A has accomplished during its 53 years. Actually, in just the last nine years there have been make-overs of the library, the kitchen, the parlor, and more. It's not just that they've done so much, but it's the elegance that marks their projects that is so wonderful.

I picked a random year in the B-A archives -- 1966, the year I graduated from high school: this was their program year:

Church Suppers – first Wednesday of the month  
Board Meetings – second Wednesday of the month  
Regular Alliance Meetings – third Wednesday of the month  
Service committee sewing meetings – second and fourth Tuesdays

Oct. 6 – Know Your Church Committees  
Oct. 20 – Forum for discussion of a Church Addition (the Church School Wing)  
Nov. 3 – Film of New England Hurricanes  
Nov. 17 – Guidelines for Young People  
Dec. 1 – Spirit of Christmas in Song  
Dec. 15 – Changing Concepts of Christmas Art  
Jan. 12 – Annual Meeting  
Jan. 26 – The Negro in Suburbia  
March 2 – Gardens of Europe  
March 16 – Ways of Strengthening the Family  
April 6 – Science Vignettes, by Kenneth Germeshausen  
April 27 – My 21 Years in the White House, with Alonzo Fields, former chief butler at the White House  
May 4 – Family Camping: Fun or Folly?

### III

Something else struck me while going through the archives: if you ever helped organize the Christmas supper, or hosted a tea, or chaired "the Cheerful Letter Exchange" -- or if your mother or grandmother did -- you and they are in those archives, immortalized in the records. Thus we know, for instance, that the church supper on April 4th, 1973, was chaired by: Charlene Lynch, Marilyn True, Harriet Elliston, Olive Gross, Barbara Hall, Mazie Kim, Ellie Nelson, Lucy Rand, Linda Reynolds, and Gisela Schloemann. They served Spanish chicken with rice. 100 pounds of chicken at 59 cents a pound.

"Now in Joppa there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha . . . She was devoted to good works and acts of charity." Now in Weston there were hundreds, maybe thousands, whose names are in the Church's memory . . . they were devoted to good works and acts of charity.

The Church remembers . . . and says: thank you.

Perhaps we should close, my friends, by acknowledging that: there *was* a time when most women stayed at home, tended to hearth and home, and also church. It was never fair to say they did not "work," for they worked at home.

There *was* a time when women were restricted, by convention and custom, to certain activities. They might run social events at the church, and charitable work, and church school, but they were not officers of the church. Women had their separate organizations, almost parallel organizations, because they were not part of the institutional power structure. Today, of course, women run the church itself, and the role of women's groups has changed. Of course, to be honest, it is still largely the women who run the social events, and the charitable work, and the church school! But not exclusively.

And, again to be honest, there *was* a time -- as women entered the workplace and professions in great numbers -- that many women felt torn by impulses to career and home.

Social changes and transitions are always difficult, especially when once-cherished activities become less attractive, but perhaps the wonderful thing about the change in women's roles is that now there are CHOICES where once there were only conventions and customs. Freedom to choose is a good thing.

And for that the Church says: thank be to God.