



Reverend Hannah Powell And Friendly House: A Universalist Mission In Appalachia

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Abstract

Universalism has had a checkered history in Appalachian North Carolina. Since the establishment of the first church in the post-Civil War era, there have been periods of great interest and growing membership interspersed with years of decline and neglect. One of the most vigorous periods of Universalist activity in this area was during the 1920s and 1930s under the leadership of Reverend Hannah Powell. With the backing of the Woman's National Missionary Association (WNMA), Powell reinvigorated a defunct congregation—Inman's Chapel, in Haywood County—and directed many social service projects benefiting her congregants. For fifteen years she ministered to the spiritual, physical, educational, and social needs of several hundred isolated Appalachians. Her life and work are all but forgotten.

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PHOEBE POLLITT AND CAMILLE N. REESE



Universalism has had a checkered history in Appalachian North Carolina. Since the establishment of the first church in the post-Civil War era, there have been periods of great interest and growing membership interspersed with years of decline and neglect. One of the most vigorous periods of Universalist activity in this area was during the 1920s and 1930s under the leadership of Reverend Hannah Powell. With the backing of the Woman's National Missionary Association (WNMA), Powell reinvigorated a defunct congregation—Inman's Chapel, in Haywood County—and directed many social service projects benefiting her congregants. For fifteen years she ministered to the spiritual, physical, educational, and social needs of several hundred isolated Appalachians. Her life and work are all but forgotten.

Hannah Jewett Powell was born in Clinton, Maine, in 1866 into an impoverished logging family. She left home at sixteen and worked her way through Colby College and Tufts Divinity School. She graduated in 1899 and over the next twenty-two years served as a Universalist minister in various rural parishes in Maine. Powell also taught school, lectured for the YWCA, and was a fund-raiser for the WMNA. When the Board of the WMNA asked her to reestablish and lead the Inman's Chapel congregation she agreed.¹

In 1921, at age fifty-five, Powell arrived in Haywood County. The area was experiencing difficult economic times. Since the close of the World War I, Suncrest Lumber Company, one of the area's largest employers, had reduced its operations. Numerous local families felt the cutback, as men lost their jobs. Hard hit was a small community named Sunburst, which had grown up near Inman's Chapel around a sawmill on a railroad spur of the Suncrest

Company. Sunburst was six miles from the nearest paved road and ten miles from a doctor's office, public school, or major store. Life was hard and money was scarce.

Powell and her new parishioners shared a history of rural poverty and the experience of belonging to a logging community. She brought to Haywood County enthusiasm, the backing of the WMNA, and the years of experience of social activism. She quickly reestablished regular Sunday worship at Inman's Chapel, and her sermons were so well received that many local families soon rededicated themselves to Universalism. The congregation, according to one account from 1922, was made up of the "mountain farmers and their families, the mill workers and theirs and usually a group of men from the logging camp." That same year a visitor reported 150 people attending a morning service—so many that they filled the little chapel, and some people for lack of room had to stand listening at the open doors and windows.²

In 1922, the adult Sunday school students numbered 50, and 60 children were enrolled in the youth program. In addition to church and Sunday school, a choir, a women's organization, and a young adults group were organized. Powell also began home visitations. She "traveled on foot over trails and foot bridges, up creeks and mountains, in seeing the sick and the shut in and the old, as well as the well."³ Inman's Chapel was again the site of Universalist holiday celebrations. Thanks to donations from Universalists from across the country, solicited by the WNMA and through articles Powell wrote to Universalist magazines, in 1921 "80 children received Christmas gifts, while Christmas cards went out to those too aged and infirm to come to services." Each child attending the Chapel as well as other needy people in the area received clothing, books, toys, and gifts. The following Easter, two babies were christened in Inman's Chapel while 130 people enjoyed dinner on the grounds.⁴

A special church activity Powell sponsored in her first spring in Haywood County was calling on the women of the congregation to participate in the national congregational day of prayer for missions. On a snowy and cold March afternoon, twenty-six women came to the church. Dividing the world into seven sections: India, Europe, China, Japan, Africa, Islands of the Sea and America, Powell or other volunteers gave short talks about Universalist mission work in each section. Scriptures were read in Burmese as well as in English. Hymns were sung, candles representing each part of the world were lit, and prayers were said for Universalist missionaries. According to Powell, the women felt connected to the great body of Universalist women around the globe "who were everywhere praying for missions."⁵

Powell was not satisfied to concentrate solely on church-centered activities. As the historian Russell Miller has noted, "Powell tackled with determination the multitude of problems she found, convinced that something should and would be done, and by the late 1920s had literally accomplished miracles."⁶ She believed social service work was a sacrament and method of prayer. In this Universalist spirit, Powell inaugurated many community improvement programs over the next fifteen years. Although Powell had been described as a whole social services organization in herself, she asked for and received assistance. Powell opened her home to other Universalist women willing to work and live with the Haywood County Universalists. Living quarters were cramped. With the help of the WMNA, almost an acre of land was purchased and a new building, serving as both manse and community center, was completed in 1929. Known as "Friendly House," it was used for a wide variety of purposes.

One of the earliest projects of Friendly House was to establish the first Universalist kindergarten in North Carolina. Powell recruited Universalist women both locally and nationally to be teachers there. Activities included songs, games, Bible stories, and arts and crafts. Serving as a model for good parenting and providing a safe place for children to stay while parents were working, the kindergarten was a long-lasting and well-loved part of the Friendly House Mission.

In the summer of 1929 Friendly House began a summer school program for the older students in the community. Academic remediation and preparation, vocational skills and cultural pride taught through handicrafts were the mainstays of the summer programs. Older students were expected to help with the younger ones, and graduates came to help as often as their work and family obligations permitted.

Powell did not neglect the needs of her adult congregants and neighbors. She established a large lending library, with books donated by Universalists across America. In 1928, she established the Pioneer Night School, where she and her co-workers offered interested adults a general education including instruction in reading, writing, hygiene, and health. The students' dedication to the school was high; in the winter of 1933, Powell proudly noted on two nights with the thermometer at close to zero, "we had twenty and twenty-two in attendance [out of twenty five enrolled] . . . several of . . . [whom] had walked three miles."⁷

Powell did not neglect the needs of her African American neighbors, who by law and custom were not allowed to participate in Friendly House pro-

grams. Ruth Dowling, especially, ministered to the small African American community around Sunburst. For years, she provided kindergarten and summer enrichment activities for these all-but-forgotten children.⁸

The extent to which the local community accepted Powell is exemplified by comments, in 1928, from the daughter of the founder of Inman's Chapel. Mrs. Lou Mann noted that "Miss Powell is persona grata anywhere in the county. She visits all the schools, is always asked to speak, knows all the officials and is trusted by them. The clergy are still somewhat aloof but the lay folk have taken her in. Her influence is beginning to be counted on and reckoned with."⁹

Attendance, activities, and programs at Inman's Chapel and Friendly House flourished throughout the 1920s. Then the Great Depression rapidly changed everything. Many local families left the area looking for work in the cities. The donations of books, supplies, and financial contributions from the WMNA and loyal supporters quickly diminished. Powell, now in her sixties, increased her pleas for contributions by traveling to Universalist Churches around the country. These travels, however, took a physical toll.

As the Depression wore on and Roosevelt's New Deal Programs were established, the government increasingly provided philanthropic services formerly left to religious and charitable organizations, such as Friendly House. In 1936, at age seventy, Powell announced her retirement. She planned to live out her years not at Sunburst, but in Sunset House, a Universalist retirement home in Maine.

Finding a successor, however, with sufficient stamina and commitment was difficult. Over the next nine years, the congregation went through three leaders. With the fate of Inman's Chapel and Friendly House in question, Powell returned to Haywood County in 1945 to try to get her beloved North Carolina mission back on solid footing. Her address to the North Carolina Universalist Convention in 1945 brought financial donations and a volunteer assistant, Mrs. Lillie Belle Brummit. Miller provides this account of her speech:

Suddenly this towering figure swept down the aisle of the church—wearing a long, flowing black dress, just barely above the floor . . . her eyes blazing with a fire that compelled the attention of every soul in that house. Her voice rang out loud and clear about the conditions at Inman's Chapel and what could and must be done about it.¹⁰

Unfortunately, no suitable replacement for Powell could be found. In 1948, the WMNA severed its connection with Inman's Chapel, saying it was not a "fertile field" for Universalist work.

Inman's Chapel and Friendly House are still standing today, desolate and unmarked. There is no active Universalist congregation in the county. Few remember the contributions made by Reverend Hannah Powell and the WMNA made to the people in this rural community more than a half century ago.

Notes

1. Catherine F. Hutchings, *Universalist and Unitarian Women Ministers* (Boston: UUHS, 1975).
2. Mary Grace Canfield, *Report to the Women's National Missionary Association* (Boston: UUA, 1922).
3. Stanley Manning, "In the Land of the Sky," *Universalist Leader*, Dec. 23, 1922.
4. Hannah Powell, Untitled Submissions, *Universalist Leader*, Jan. 28, May 27, 1922.
5. Hannah Powell, Untitled Submission, *Universalist Leader*, Mar. 18, 1922.
6. Russell E. Miller, *The Larger Hope: The Second Century of the Universalist Church in America* (Boston: UUA, 1985), 374.
7. Hannah Powell, Untitled Submission, *Universalist Leader*, May/June, 1933.
8. *Haywood County Heritage* (Canton, NC: Haywood County Genealogical Society, 1994).
9. John Van Schaik, "Universalists in the Mountains of North Carolina," *Christian Leader*, 31:1542-1544.
10. Miller, *The Larger Hope*, 374.