

# A Brief Biography of Julia Chester Emery

September 24, 1852 - January 9, 1922



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*We find great cause for thankfulness to God. - Julia Chester Emery*

Julia Chester Emery was National Secretary of the Women's Auxiliary, now called the Episcopal Church Women, from 1876 until 1916. She was a modest and self-effacing Victorian lady who was so careful to stay out of the limelight that it is difficult today to piece together all the things she did to advance the missionary efforts of the church and to enable women's ministries. She led in the effort to get canonical status for deaconesses. She invented and brought into being the United Thank Offering. She was the indefatigable "Miss Julia" to a whole generation of missionaries, both men and women. Her entire life was focused on devotion to this one cause: the spread of Christ's kingdom among all people.<sup>1</sup>

Julia Chester Emery was born in Dorchester, Massachusetts, on September 24, 1852, to Captain Charles Emery and Susan Hilton (Kelly) Emery. The Emerys had eleven children—eight daughters and three sons—and Julia was the fifth born. Unfortunately, two of the daughters died quite early in their lives and one of the sons drowned as a young man. The two remaining brothers both became Episcopal priests, one serving in California and the other in New Hampshire.<sup>2</sup> The six daughters all spent some part of their lives working for various aspects of The Episcopal Church, from editing the journals to the Women's Auxiliary. Julia's mother also became an integral part of the work that Julia would undertake, by hosting missionaries at her home in New York City. While the family became dedicated Episcopalians together, her father was raised Unitarian and her mother was a Congregationalist.<sup>3</sup>

Not much is known about Julia's childhood because she was a very private woman. Julia Chester Emery was baptized at St. Mary's Episcopal Church in Dorchester in June of 1853 and was confirmed by Bishop Eastburn at the age of 13. She graduated from Dorchester High School, but also spent time at a normal school (a high school with the focus on training women to be teachers) in Boston and spent six months at St. Catherine's Hall in Augusta, Maine. She was quite disciplined about balancing her schoolwork and life at home. She would dedicate a certain amount of time each evening to her work, and then set it aside at the end of that time so she could fully participate in her family life. This practice of keeping strict boundaries between work and home would follow her throughout her career.<sup>4</sup> While she was in high school, her English teacher was quite focused on Milton even though the class was supposed to be studying Shakespeare. Julia "led a rebellion" by asking all of the students to leave their Milton text at home and only bring their Shakespeare book with them to school the next day. They all did so and when the teacher asked them to take out their books, they all pulled out Shakespeare, and he had no choice but to move to a new topic.<sup>5</sup> These few stories that remain from Julia's childhood are important because they illustrate how she went about her work throughout her life, with an insistence on boundaries and with quiet rebellions.

Telling the next part of Julia's life requires telling about the work of her sister, Mary Abbot Emery, as the first secretary for the newly formed Women's Auxiliary of The Episcopal Church. Mary Abbot Emery was selected to serve as the first Secretary of the Woman's Auxiliary of the Board of Missions, which had been

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<sup>1</sup> Daily Prayer, [www.forwardmovement.org](http://www.forwardmovement.org)

<sup>2</sup> Tomes, Margaret A. 1924. *Julia Chester Emery : Being the Story of Her Life and Work*. New York: Woman's Auxiliary To The National Council Protestant Episcopal Church, p. 19.

<sup>3</sup> Tomes, 16

<sup>4</sup> Tomes, 16

<sup>5</sup> Tomes, 16

established by the General Convention in 1871 to unite and support the immense amount of mission work being undertaken by women's groups. Susan Lavinia Emery, another sister, was also working at Mission House as the associate editor of *The Young Christian Soldier*, and when Susan resigned in 1874 Julia Chester Emery took her place. Mary Abbot spent her tenure organizing what was called "box work," the collection and distribution of supplies to missionary families. She also created a grassroots network to keep women informed of the work that was happening and which places still needed support.<sup>6</sup> Mary Abbot inspired and connected women's organizations and built a foundation of support for missionaries and mission work until 1876, when Mary Abbot left her position to marry Doctor A. T. Twing, secretary for domestic missions on the Board of Missions. Julia Chester Emery left her associate editor position and, at the age of 24, became the secretary for the Women's Auxiliary. Another Emery sister moved to New York to take over the position Julia vacated.

Julia Chester Emery, affectionately known as Ms. Julia, was less assertive than Mary Abbot, but as demonstrated through her childhood stories, she was disciplined, savvy, and able to organize people around a common project. Julia also had a strong belief in the church's missionary role in the world, ultimately quite indicative of the missionary zeal and fervor in the United States at that time. She is often describe as being soft-spoken and gentle of manner, but it was her hard work, persistence, and political mind that allowed her to grow the work of the Women's Auxiliary to meet the needs of bishops around the world.<sup>7</sup>

Two very important programmatic additions came to The Episcopal Church during Julia Chester Emery's leadership: the sending, support, and care of women missionaries and the development of the United Offering (later the United Thank Offering) to fund missionary efforts not provided for under the Board of Missions budget. Through the work of the Women's Auxiliary, Julia Chester Emery funded and opened numerous mission training schools for deaconess training or for a college-aged recruitment and training program. Under Julia Chester Emery's direction, women led schools, worked as nurses, and supported missionaries around the globe. When asked once how it was possible that she trained all of the workers, she replied, "I do not try to train them, I love them."<sup>8</sup> Her friend and biographer, Margaret Tomes writes: "She loved first of all her Saviour, she loved His Church and His children, and wanted all to know Him and be members of His Kingdom. No one was ever too small and insignificant nor too great and conspicuous but could find a place in her loving heart."<sup>9</sup> Not only did Emery recognize the need to send women into the world, she also recognized the need to support them after they returned home. Many women came home when they were no longer able to keep working, and because they were not married the care of these women often fell upon families. Julia Chester Emery, through the United Thank Offering, set aside money to create a trust to support missionaries upon their retirement. This fund changed the lives of those who served and the lives of their families. During the forty years she served, she visited every diocese and missionary district at least once, in the hopes of offering support and encouragement and in the hopes of sharing the story of the work of the missionaries with the wider church through her submissions to *The Spirit of Missions*.<sup>10</sup> It was through her storytelling efforts that Julia was able to inspire "specials" or unique fundraisers to support specific missionary needs beyond the United Offering.

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<sup>6</sup> Donovan, Mary Sudman. "Zealous Evangelists: the Women's Auxiliary to the Board of Missions." *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church*, December 1982. p. 374-375.

<sup>7</sup> Donovan, 377

<sup>8</sup> Tomes, 26

<sup>9</sup> Tomes, 27

<sup>10</sup> Tomes, 28

In 1908 she served as a delegate to the Pan-Anglican Congress in London and remained for the opening of the Lambeth Conference, gaining entrance to a garden party for the delegates where she met the Royal Family.<sup>11</sup> On July 4, 1908, she convinced a friend to join her at Victoria Station to try to make their way to Lambeth. When she was spotted by some of the US Bishops, they gladly paid her way to Canterbury. Once there, she needed to find a way into the Cathedral. She found a verger, and after talking to him for a while, he offered to let her into the service without a ticket if she met him at a certain door shortly before the service was to begin. From there, American Bishops helped her to attend the garden party as a member of their family.<sup>12</sup> This story illuminates Julia Chester Emery's love for the church, spirit of adventure, determination, and how well respected she was by the leaders of the church. After Lambeth, she traveled around the world, visiting missions and missionaries in China, Japan, Hong Kong, the Philippines, Hawaii, and all the dioceses on the Pacific Coast before returning to New York.<sup>13</sup> Many whom she travelled with commented on how well she travelled, which was often attributed to Emery being the daughter of a ship captain. Others commented on how she was always writing, either in her journal or articles to share for *The Spirit of Missions*. For her, travel was done "with hope for enlargement of vision, opening up new occasions for service, acceptance of new tasks."<sup>14</sup> Dr. H.W. Boone, one of the first medical missionaries sent by The Episcopal Church, shared this story of when Julia visited his mission location on that trip around the world.

The cholera was raging, and was especially virulent on the steamers on the Yang-tse River. The secretary of the Methodist Board, visiting their missions, had just died of it on one of the steamers. I felt it my duty to warn Miss Emery, and I said that her life was too valuable to be sacrificed, and begged her not to go up the river to visit the mission stations. She looked up with a quiet smile, "This is what I am here for." She said, "I am here to visit our missions. I must go up the river. Give me written directions how to avoid the disease and I will follow them." She went up the river and came through safely, though people were dying on the steamer. I write this to illustrate her calm courage and her faith in her Lord and Master when she was doing his work.<sup>15</sup>

Julia Chester Emery's commitment to all missionaries was so strong that when the Board of Missions determined they needed to cut the salaries of the missionaries to balance the budget in the late 1880s, Julia offered to cut her salary so the decrease would be less for the missionaries and suggested the other secretaries do the same. Dr. Langford, the General Secretary, was able to raise the money so no salaries were cut.<sup>16</sup> Julia went on to travel around the globe a second time to visit all of the mission stations that were supported by the United Offering, so that she could continue to raise funds for and awareness about their work.

When Julia Chester Emery took over leadership of the Women's Auxiliary in 1876, there were 13 active diocesan branches. When she resigned in 1916, there were 92 diocesan branches,<sup>17</sup> which shared a vision and commitment to the Church's mission. These branches of the Women's Auxiliary were often inspired through letters, which were copied by hand, sent from New York to the dioceses, copied again, and then sent to each parish. The Women's Auxiliary grew to be a powerful force in The Episcopal Church, contributing 10% of the overall budget of the Board of Missions. With increased financial resources, strong

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<sup>11</sup> Tomes, 32

<sup>12</sup> Tomes, 34-35

<sup>13</sup> Holy Women, Holy Men: <https://diobeth.typepad.com/files/holy-women-holy-men.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> Holy Women, Holy Men: <https://diobeth.typepad.com/files/holy-women-holy-men.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> Tomes, 41

<sup>16</sup> Tomes, 52

<sup>17</sup> Tomes, 47

networks, and the support of many, the Women's Auxiliary found themselves under the scrutiny of the Board of Missions. After the sudden death of Dr. Twing in 1882, the Reverend William S Langford became the General Secretary. He was concerned about the growing power of the Women's Auxiliary, fearing that their willingness to fund the special projects of missionary bishops threatened the Board of Missions' ability to set priorities and determine strategy. Langford proposed that the Auxiliary be reorganized under the Board of Missions constitution, "accurately defining the relations between itself and this Board, mapping out with tolerable precision the field of labor proper to such an organization, and providing for the annual and triennial election of officers." The resolution was adopted and put on the agenda for the 1886 general meeting of the Board of Missions.

Emery and her sister Mary Abbot Twing, who was now the Honorary Secretary, were suspicious of Langford and did not want the Auxiliary further defined by the Board of Missions. The Emery sisters formulated a strategy that stressed the Auxiliary's present contribution to mission work and suggested further means to enhance that contribution. At the 1886 general meeting, both women presented their annual reports. Emery noted a long list of special gifts that local auxiliaries had contributed but was careful to say, "while the various diocesan branches expressed freely their individual preferences and their gifts, they are constantly reminded that they are expected to contribute regularly to the pledged work of the Board." She went on to praise the educational and spiritual value of the special links between individual auxiliaries and specific missionaries, and she ended with a pledge to encourage members to give systematically to the work of the Board. Mary Abbot followed with a detailed plan to reorganize the Auxiliary to increase its responsibilities by registering all women who performed any type of church work, voluntary or paid, in a systematic program of education and training. Confronted with this extensive and well-developed plan, the Board of Missions took the Anglican via media and simply endorsed the present work of the Women's Auxiliary to "not only assist the Board and making its regular appropriations, but also to aid all missionary work of the Church." Mary Abbot proceeded to carry out most of the activities recommended in her report, funding them through money she raised privately and events sponsored by diocesan auxiliaries.<sup>18</sup>

After that resolution, Julia Chester Emery and Mary Abbot Twing understood that if they were going to continue to grow the work of the Women's Auxiliary, then they must find a way to control the funds that they raised. According to Mary Sudman Donovan, the establishment of the United Offering (which became the United Thank Offering) at the General Convention of 1899 helped them to accomplish this important task.<sup>19</sup> While the popular version of the beginning of UTO involves Ida Soule approaching Julia Chester Emery as though a stranger and suggesting the formation of the offering, it lacks accuracy. Ida Soule was a good friend of Julia Chester Emery and Mary Abbot Twing, so much so that they paid for her to join them at General Convention and have her room with theirs. According to Donovan:

My suspicion is that the threat that the Board of Missions might reorganize the Auxiliary at that General Convention had both convinced Emery that the Auxiliary must have a budget that it could control and that she must move with caution to develop such financial independence. Furthermore, in her research on women's ministries, Mary Abbot Twing had become convinced that the church must officially recognize and define a religious vocation for women in order to validate the many ways women were already serving. [...] Her efforts were successful; the canon on deaconess was approved by both the House of Bishops and the House of Deputies in 1889. Once that goal has been achieved, both Mary Abbot and Julia

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<sup>18</sup> Donovan, 379-380

<sup>19</sup> Donovan, 380

could shift their energies towards the raising of the United Offering. At the 1889 convention, then, Julia Emery announced that the offering collected by women would be used to build a church in Anvik, Alaska and to send a missionary work worker, Miss Lisa Lovell to Japan.<sup>20</sup>

The creation of the United Offering, in this light, shows how politically savvy the Emery sisters were and how dedicated they were not only to the mission work that they felt called to doing, but to ensuring that the women of the church had a voice in the work of the church.

Julia Chester Emery continued in her post through the Influenza Epidemic, World Wars, and massive change in the United States. She led the Women's Auxiliary through expansions to include college students and greater giving to the United Offering. When she resigned in 1921, she did so at the end of General Convention by handing a letter to the presiding officers as she was leaving to travel home. Later she told people that it was time for a new generation to lead this work. Although she resigned her post, she did not stop working. She immediately began working on a history of the first one hundred years of The Episcopal Church. She also organized a Pilgrimage of Prayer, which encouraged prayers for every diocese of The Episcopal Church and every mission outpost. Additionally, dioceses took turns holding special prayer events and celebrations to share the story of their missionary endeavors. The cycle of prayer remains with us today, as does noonday prayer among the staff of the Presiding Bishop, which began in Emery's office. Both are reminders of Julia Chester Emery's belief that prayer connects us and encourages us in our lives of faith.

Julia Chester Emery is a saint in The Episcopal Church, often remembered simply for her kindness and love of Jesus and for her 40 years of work as the Secretary of the Women's Auxiliary. Although she never wanted any credit for the work that she did, we cannot allow her modesty to keep us from celebrating her determination, skill, and love for both the women of the church and the people of the world. Beyond her work supporting missionaries and building up gratitude through the United Thank Offering, I think she would most likely want to be remembered as a follower of Jesus and a faithful servant of The Episcopal Church.

These days have been full of thankfulness to us in the Women's Auxiliary. We have been deeply thankful to our God for the privilege that He has given to the women of the Church in these last fifty years to serve him. We are mutually grateful to one another for the joy that we have had each with the other in the common service. [...] Fifty years is something to look back upon; it is something to look forward to. We do not know what lies before us, but we do know that the one thought we would carry away from such a gathering as this is that we want the one purpose, the one aim, the one object are hidden away, and in which everything that may cause dissent or difference may die - please let us make every effort of that future with one end in view - that each day we live, each work we do, each word we say, may give our Lord and Savior, the Master of us all, joy and light.

*Julia Chester Emery's address to the Jubilee Celebration of the Women's Auxiliary, 1921*

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<sup>20</sup> Donovan, 381