

**Women in the Mission of the Church  
Their Opportunities and Obstacles throughout Christian History**  
**Leanne M. Dzubinski og Anneke H. Stassen**  
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Associate professor of intercultural education at Biola University Leanne M. Dzubinski has together with associate professor of humanities and history at Indiana Wesleyan University Anneke H. Stassen written this book on women in church throughout Christian history. The combination of the authors' experience in academia and profession lay the ground for a thoroughly researched study of women in mission and church.

The book gives a general overview of women's contributions in mission and serving before the beginning of Christianity. A main character of the book is the narrative presentation of a great number of women that have influenced Christianity through different roles. The book is structured in three parts which represent different time periods: first the early church, secondly late antiquity and the Middle Ages, and thirdly the period since the Reformation. Further, the different parts are structured in chapters based on the numerous roles played by women in church in the specific periods: Patrons, missionaries, apostles, widows, martyrs, virgins, scholars, desert mothers, deacons, mothers, sisters, empresses, queens, nuns, beguines, mystics, preachers, activists, Bible women, evangelists, and church founders. The focus on the roles played by women, clearly reveals women as actors in the history of Christianity. Additionally, each chapter is introduced by a timeline where the most important events are highlighted, which helps to get an overview of the period under investigation.

In every chapter there are narratives of specific women, by name, and their important roles in church. The narrative aspect of the book makes it exciting and easily accessible for different readers, while at the same time it gives a good impression of women's opportunities and obstacles in the Christian work across different time periods. Not least, it highlights women as leaders playing important roles in the history of the church, despite often facing gender-based obstacles. The book title *Women in the Mission of the Church – Their Opportunities and Obstacles Throughout Christian History*, truly encapsulates its intent, content and context which is to contribute to the field of gender and Christianity. Our impression is that it acts as a collective audit of who, what, when and how women have conquered over their impediments, not only as overall heroes but also in their own interpretation of their victories. They took individual credit, such as in the case of slave women Blandina, Perpetua and Felicitas

who were martyred, giving the reader an understanding of their personal views and on how they conceive their death. These women would otherwise be considered lost by being killed, but for them, it was an interpretation of their love for God and the image of Christ through humility up to the point of death.

This book proves that women are not missing in church historical records but were marginalised to the peripheries of historical accounts. Bringing these women to the fore, not just as names but with their biographical sketches truly serves as a baton among scholars, both female and male. It can contribute to build upon and enlarge the front for women inclusion and recognition in churches, lest they are forgotten, and previous shortfalls recur. The book imposes the presence of women in the history of Christianity in an unequivocal manner that measures the volume of their facilitation to the growth of the Christian faith. Interestingly, the book also captures non-Christian women who supported the faith despite their convictions, thus fairly crediting without marginalisation. This is a useful addition to the roles played by women for Christianity in different period, which makes it a rich resource book for students within theology, history, or human sciences. It also has the potential of inspiring women and men serving in ministries.

The book is a useful tool for revisiting and studying the discourse of women in church. If you, for instance, are interested in the topic of women deacons, you will find a description of deacons in the different periods. In chapter two, women deacons in the early church are described in a manner that shows how women's identities, roles and status interpretations changed in different times. Women, both single and married, could through their roles as deacons in this period contribute to the early development of the church. Later, deaconesses were used for female deacons to separate between male and female. In chapter three, Radegund is given as an example of a deaconess in the early middle age. She was one of King Clothar's wives but left her husband and persuaded Bishop Medard to ordain her as a deaconess. In her life as queen and even after she left her husband, she established monasteries, dispersed charity, and influenced political affairs. In chapter seven, we can read about the deaconess community at Kaiserswerth established after the reformation by Theodore and Friederike, inspired by the early church office of deaconesses and by Elizabeth Fry and British women caring for prisoners in England.

Amazingly, the book has managed to cover wide geographical areas from Europe, North and South America, Africa, China, India and so forth, highlighting impressive works of women from antique to the nineteenth century, attesting to the authors' commitment rather to go 'wide' than 'deep.' This width is a gallery presentation of women as the foundation of Christianity, demonstrated by Mary mother of Jesus who also acts as a building-block figure, cornerstone, and pillar of the Christian faith. The book thus unlike many other, includes and recognises women from colonial, slavery, and prophetic movements, as an indication of the authors' commitment to equal representation of women from different backgrounds of denominational, ethnic,

status and so forth. It is additionally impressive that the authors did not only present the actors and their obstacles but also indicated possible problem causes, providing the reader with contextual understanding of the actors' era. Revealing obstacle origin points to the extensive scholarship research involved in designing this book as a source material.

The main shortcoming of the book is related to its strength. While it gives an overview of an extensive period and insights into many roles taken by women, it does not go into a depth of the different stories. The narratives, in general, stays at a descriptive level and with few references, often only one, to tell each story. The lack of several references to tell the different stories might lead to the stories becoming less nuanced. However, the stories together clearly show the wide spectrum of roles taken on by women in different religious contexts throughout times, in Catholic as well as Protestant churches, in denominational as well as non-denominational organizations, in western as well as non-western churches and faith organisations. It would have further enriched the book readers if the authors' wide scope included some women of the Reformation including Martin Luther's wife Katarina von Bora's agency in the birth of Protestantism. Christian Lutheran women such as Argula von Grumbach were instrumental in confirming women in academia as well as their intellectual abilities. Argula for instance confronted church elders and the university of Ingolstadt against their religious discriminatory policies against Lutherans, thus exposing her scholarship.

In the conclusion, the authors summarise their main points in seven arguments: Women passing the baton of religious leadership, theological contributions made by women, limiting women's leadership, women have turned constraints into assets, women have preserved even to death, women have challenged cultural notions of womanhood and diversity of vocations in the kingdom of God. A main point that is raised is that women have often been the origin of movements and awakenings, but often they have been put aside by men, some of whom were supportive in the beginning, when these movements have become too large and important. This does not, however, change the fact that women have contributed through theological reflections and spiritual and physical care for their fellow human beings. One such example is Abiodun Akinsowon (1907-1994) who was one of the first women to establish an African Independent Church (AIC). She started a prayer society with her uncle, Moses Orimolade, who later claimed to be the sole founder of the society. Even though she was allowed to teach women in the society, she was not considered its co-founder. In similar ways, the women initiating mission work in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were exposed to males aiming to close them down and take control. With increased bureaucratisation, there has been a tendency to put women aside and give overpower positions to men. This was also something that was experienced by women preachers in America after the Reformation, described in chapter 6.

In closure, the authors make the point that many did not grow up with narratives of women leaders in church and mission, a reason why many are not aware of these names and roles. This book is an important contribution in that sense. Through presenting short stories about the lives of numerous women who made a difference in the history of Christianity, the book draws a picture of active women and their voices. The stories have the potential to contribute to change the discourse about women and the tendency of overlooking women's roles. The narratives justify that women have been active holders of leadership positions. The narratives also have the potential to inspire women that face today's gender-based obstacles in mission and church. In fact, the narratives show that women were inspired by women of former generations. An example is how stories about virgins in the early and medieval church like Thecla were told at the anniversaries of their deaths. Keeping narratives alive inspired women in new contexts. Also, women described in the Bible, such as Deborah, Esther, Mary, Mary Magdalene, Phoebe, Priscilla, and Lydia, worked as inspiration for women leaders. On the overall, the book has met its aim as set out by the authors and inspires readers to strive in keeping Christian women determined to see their value in the church of God.