Women, leadership, and movements: A critical look at the past, present, and future

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"I had people from an evangelical church in the US ask me about one of our women leaders. I said, 'I don't know. She's leading, and people respect her. What I see God doing in the network, I didn't read about in a book. I'm just telling you what's fresh from the oven.' They asked if a man will replace her, and I said, 'I don't know! But they respect her as a leader.'" [1]

New indigenous movements to Christ are taking place in many parts of the world today, especially in Asia and Africa, generally described as church-planting movements or disciple-making movements (Garrison 2004; Farah 2021).[2] Millions of Christians in these movements worship in non-traditional "house" or "underground" churches. Some prefer to call themselves "disciples," as in the book of Acts with numerous references in chapters 6, 9, 11, 13, 14, 21, 18, 19, and 30. Others prefer the phrase "followers of Jesus," like the Apostle Paul's self-description as "a follower of the Way" (Acts 24:14). These terms contrast with the word "Christian," a descriptor first assigned to Jesus' disciples by others, not by themselves (Acts 11:26 and 26:28).[3]

Given the realities of governmental favoritism, nationalisms, legal restrictions, and social hostilities related to religion around the world, it is not surprising that many Christian minorities around the world choose to affiliate with underground or house church movements. These individuals are often omitted from official governmental counts and are not reported as Christians in censuses nor social scientific surveys. Nonetheless, they constitute real communities of Christians existing outside of what Western observers might consider "traditional" forms of Christianity. There is significant diversity among these movements in terms of their origins, worship, practices, and languages. However, some movements share a common characteristic – women in prominent leadership positions.

For example, since 2009, Ruth has planted 18 generations of indigenous churches in East Africa – that is, she has planted churches that have planted new churches, which in turn have planted other new churches, for 18 generations of reproduction. As a businesswoman, she connects with people through agriculture and moneylending, working within both oral and written cultures. Through discovery Bible studies, she teaches people about the prophets of the Bible, the miracles recorded in Scripture, and how Jesus is different from other prophets. Many people become Christians after three or four months of study and several are then chosen to become leaders of newly formed churches. These groups grow, make new disciples, and begin to function as authentic churches. Monthly training is provided for people of all ages, and to date 80

[1] An African leader of multiple movements (name withheld for security reasons), in private conversation with Dave Coles, June 2023.
[2] Portions of this article are inspired by or derived from Zurlo 2023.
[3] While acknowledging the complexity of self-identification and the rationale of certain terms and phrases, this article uses "disciples," "followers," "Christians," and "members" interchangeably.

Christian leaders have been trained to guide these indigenous churches. None of this work has been hindered by the fact that Ruth is a woman.[4]

Although discussions continue related to the counting of movements (see, for example, Long 2020 and Rhodes 2022) reliable verification exists for at least hundreds of them (Farah 2021), which include disciples from Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist backgrounds. One of the most thorough assessments reports 1,035 "rapidly multiplying groups that have surpassed four generations of church planting in multiple streams," which together comprise 74 million Christians (Long 2020, p. 40).

Such movements are not new. In India, the phrase "mass movements" was used to describe conversions of Dalit and tribal communities from Hinduism to Christianity from the 1870s to the 1930s. Over this period, according to the national census, India's Christian population quadrupled in size from 1.2 million in 1872 to 6 million in 1932. J. Waskom Pickett's (1890–1981) study, *Christian Mass Movements in India*, continues to be one of the best empirically researched works and most thorough discussion of such movements (Pickett 1933; see also Pachuau 2014; Ashok and Robinson 2010). Another well-known historical example of hidden Christians occurred among upper class Nadar women of Sivakasi, Tamil Nadu, India from 1917 to the 1970s (Kent 2011). Hundreds of women privately contextualized their Christian faith with Hindu rituals and culture to gain autonomy, albeit limited, in a highly patriarchal society. These women had received the Christian gospel through Anglican *zenana* missionaries in the late nineteenth century (see Zurlo 2023; Seton 2013).[5] Today, other movements include Khrist Bhaktas in India (San Chirico 2023) and disciples in other places where Christianity is illegal or difficult to practice publicly such as Iran, Algeria, and numerous other Muslim-majority countries.

Movement leaders have come to different conclusions about the best and most appropriate ministry roles for women. Although it is impossible to know what share of movements are led by women, a significant number have women leaders as part of the movement's natural growth and immediate needs. These Christians practice their new faith in a specific context, serving and leading as they understand to be biblically appropriate. Yet, many denominations disapprove of women's pastoral leadership of churches. The question of women's leadership in movements matters. This article does not attempt a biblical exposition of complementarianism versus egalitarianism nor does it present a theological treatise on men's and women's roles in churches. Rather, it offers a descriptive analysis of women's roles in emerging movements by considering examples from history and the present. How might women's leadership within emerging movements today be challenged as these movements grow and potentially institutionalize? This article aims to provide historical context to that question to help Christians think clearly about the future as it relates to women's leadership roles.

From sect to church

Every world religion and Christian denomination began as a movement, and it was not unusual for women to be founders and cofounders. Examples include:

- Ellen G. White (1827–1915), United States, Seventh-day Adventists

[4] Story used with permission.

[5] In the mid 19th-century, women in India and Bengal lived in *zenanas*, secluded areas of homes restricted to women only. British women missionaries developed *zenana* missions to reach otherwise unreachable women, providing them education, healthcare, literacy, practical skills, and Bible studies. The Church of England Zenana Missionary Society existed from 1880 until it was absorbed into the Church Missionary Society in 1957.

- Catherine Booth (1829–1890), United States, Salvation Army
- Mary Lee Cagle (1864–1955), United States, Church of the Nazarene
- Grace Tani (1870s/1880s–1958), Ghana, Church of the Twelve Apostles
- Christiana Abiodun Emmanuel (1907–1944), Nigeria, Cherubim and Seraphim Church of West Africa
- Alice Lenshina Mulega Mubisha (1924–1978), Zambia, the Lumpa Church

Although not every religious movement survives infancy or the teenage years, the processes by which a sect becomes a church are always under way (see, for example, Finke and Stark 1992). As a movement grows in number, it also grows in organization, structure, and expectations for members. The process of institutionalization always brings change to the movement. Instead of meeting in tents in the woods, for example, members meet in buildings in the city. Instead of leaders who read the Bible and preach extemporaneously, ministers receive formal theological education and advanced degrees. Instead of being decisively counter-cultural, they become mainstream and dictate culture.

Christian history contains numerous examples of movements that were born, grew, and thrived under female leadership, but as the movement institutionalized or after the female leader died, leadership transferred to men. Women generally lost freedoms and opportunities provided by small, emerging sects in the institutionalization process. In other words, in the shift from sect to church, women's leadership disappeared.

Women in leadership: Historical examples

Recent research has challenged the notion of women's passivity in the Greco-Roman world; indeed, many women owned property, ran business, and held leadership roles (Hylen 2023). Sociologist Rodney Stark highlighted the importance of women in early church growth. Women flocked to Christianity because it offered a higher status denied to them in the Greco-Roman world; even higher-class women became Christians. Although men outnumbered women in the Greco-Roman world due to female infanticide and abortions that often led to the death of the mother, Christian communities did not engage in such practices that caused increased deaths of women. Christians placed a higher value on marriage and family, which helped raise the status of women. As the early church contained more women than men, Christian women often married non-Christian men, which caused so-called "secondary conversions" where husbands converted because of their wives' influence, which provided a steady stream of converts growing the church. More Christian women also meant higher birth rates, and higher birth rates generally means faster growth. Christianity offered women closer to equal status (though not entirely equal) to men, giving them a place to exercise gifts of service and leadership (Stark 1996).

However, as Christianity institutionalized in Europe, that relative gender equality disappeared. Over time and by the fifth century, Christian male leaders and theologians "had accepted and restated the most denigrating traditional views of women. All that was inferior or evil they [male Christian leaders] associated with the female; all that was good and superior with the male" (Anderson and Zinsser 1988, p. 79). Any gains that women had achieved by affiliation with Christianity were nearly gone by the ninth century: "In the end, European women, like the women before them, would live in a culture whose values, laws, images, and institutions decreed their inferiority and enforced their subordination to men. Female subordination was the most powerful and enduring tradition inherited by European women" (Anderson and Zinsser 1988, pp. 83–84; see Zurlo 2023, p. 84). Women not only lost leadership in Christian communities, but

they also lost public-facing opportunities outside of the home. The mainstreaming of Christianity led to the marginalization of women (Kontouma 2012; see also Barr 2021; Dzubinksi and Stasson 2021).

A similar pattern emerged in early Evangelical history. In the United States, two-thirds of participants at the Cane Ridge revival in Kentucky that sparked the Second Great Awakening (1790s–1840s) were women and children (Westerkamp 1999). Methodist and Baptist churches made the greatest gains in membership during this time. Methodists looked to Susanna Wesley (1669–1742) – the mother of John and Charles Wesley – as a spiritual leader, and women were active in Methodist ministry in the 18th century. The first woman Methodist licensed to preach was Sarah Crosby (1729–1804) in England as early as 1791. However, women in Baptist churches lost agency as their churches grew and institutionalized after the Second Great Awakening.

Hearkening back to uniquely Puritan notions of biological differences between men and women, post-revival Evangelicals saw women by nature fundamentally different from men, and thus inferior (Zurlo 2023, p. 127). In new Evangelical churches, women were not allowed to preach, teach, pray aloud, or vote in congregational affairs, even though they were filled with the same Spirit as men in the revivals and became highly engaged in public ministry. Women lost their agency in the transition from sect to church (Zurlo 2023 p. 254).

One of the most notable examples of the gendered sect-church dynamic is Aimee Semple McPherson ("Sister Aimee," 1890–1944), founder of the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel (see Blumhofer 1993). She began a healing ministry in 1921 and founded the Angelus Temple in Los Angeles in 1923. The Temple became the largest congregation at the start of the twentieth century, valued at $1.5 million (the equivalent of $27 million in 2024), with services in five languages. The growth of Sister Aimee's organization dovetailed with that of the Pentecostal movement. However, it morphed into an Evangelical institution led mostly by white middle-class men, a far cry from the example set by Sister Aimee. Despite its early commitment to female ministers, the denomination grew rapidly while men filled the ranks of the leadership in the institutionalizing movement. After her death in 1944, Aimee's son, Rolf McPherson, took over as president of the denomination, leading for 44 years. There have been no female presidents of the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel since Sister Aimee.

Evangelical women at the turn of the twentieth century faced a similar fate as Sister Aimee. Historian Janette Hassey detailed the experiences of women in several emerging Evangelical networks under the leadership of D.L. Moody, A.J. Gordon, W.B. Riley, and J.R. Straton. These and other Evangelical leaders advocated for female pastors and preachers, as did Wesleyan Holiness leaders. As a result, at the turn of the century, many Evangelical women had theological education, pulpits, and pastorates open to them for the first time in history. However, the perceived emerging threats of theological liberalism and first-wave feminist demands for equal rights shifted the tide away from female church leadership (Hassey 1985). Women were squeezed out of leadership roles with the institutionalization of what would become the Fundamentalist movement (think the Fundamentalist-Modernist debate of 1925). The conservative backlash against changing social values was largely directed toward women. The last Fundamentalist pamphlet advocating for a women's right to preach was in 1926 (Hassey 1985).

Women's loss of leadership in institutionalizing movements is not unique to Western contexts. In the nineteenth century, Bible women – trained indigenous evangelists largely in Asia and sub-Saharan Africa – did the work of male evangelists, pastors, and church planters without

overt foreign association, giving a level of access not available to foreign missionaries. These local female Christian leaders were utterly essential for spreading the Christian message amidst societal gender divisions, which assisted in the greater response to Christianity among women. Their ministry of door-to-door evangelism was so effective in Korea, for example, that the institutionalization of Christianity was seen as detrimental to women's leadership. Christianity was initially a home-based movement, thus in the woman's domain. When Christianity became institutionalized and more public, women lost the ability to be leaders and have equal opportunities to men (Hertig 2002; Zurlo 2023).

In Kenya, Gaudencia Aoko (1943–2019) co-founded Legio Maria (Legion of Mary) with Simeo Ondetto, the largest schism from the Catholic Church in Africa. The movement initially allowed women priests, but they were phased out by 1979. In El Salvador, Guatemalan Carmen Mena Fuentes (1911–1961) was the principal leader among indigenous Guatemalans of the Prince of Peace Church (Martin 1993), which is one of the largest denominations today and now under entirely male leadership. In China, Christianity initially grew rapidly under Communism with the flattening of traditional Confucian hierarchies that opened new opportunities for women to lead. In the late twentieth century, 80% of rural house church leaders and evangelists, as well as 70%–80% of members, were women (Aikman 2006). It can safely be said that most Chinese house churches today would not exist without the leadership of women. Deborah Xu (1946–), for example, was a major leader of the Word of Life house church network, founded in Henan province and now present throughout China (Xin 2011). Known as the "aunt" of the network, Xu was a prominent theologian, evangelist, and teacher.

As Chinese Christianity grew, it became more urbanized and attractive to the middle class, as well as to men. Pastor's wives have authority and leadership as coworkers alongside their husbands and often receive formal theological and leadership training. However, they bear a double burden of expectation as church leaders related to matters of filial piety, such as caring for one's parents, elders, and ancestors (Nation 2017). Also, some Chinese house church movements are now discussing potentially joining Western denominations that hold to complementarian Reformed theology that places women in subordinate positions to men. The movement from sect to church has challenged gender dynamics in ways that disproportionately impact women.

In Pentecostal/Charismatic Christianity, women were highly active in revivals around the world. Pandita Ramabai (1858–1922) and Jashil Choi (1915–1989) ignited revivals in India and Korea, respectively. Women also served as missionaries spreading the Pentecostal message, such as Julia Hutchins in Liberia and May Hoover in Chile. Women also founded new Pentecostal movements, like Christinah Nku (1894–c.1980) in South Africa and Agnes Okoh (1905–1995) in Nigeria. The Pentecostal message theoretically cuts across gender with its theology of accessibility to the Spirit for all believers in Jesus Christ. The prophet Joel (2:28–29) was explicit in his inclusion of women: "And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days."

The biblical narrative suggests that women have the same access to spiritual power as men, and this has indeed been the perception among most Pentecostal movements throughout history (Zurlo 2023, p. 232). However, it is common for women to begin movements but have their leadership transferred to men, especially their husbands or sons. While widely recognized as having spiritual power and authority, women in these movements are often denied institutional power and authority (Stephenson 2011; Zurlo 2023).

Women in leadership: Contemporary examples

The examples presented in this article from the United States, China, sub-Saharan Africa, and the Pentecostal tradition, as well as numerous others in the historical record, provide undeniable evidence that the institutionalization of Christian movements across time, geography, and theological tradition has proven largely detrimental to women's leadership opportunities (see Muir 2019; Barr 2021; Dzubinski and Stasson 2021). Generally, movements today hold a high view of the priesthood of all believers and celebrate the Holy Spirit's presence and power in the lives of followers of Jesus. This can be seen in their willingness to allow both men and women to inductively study Scripture for themselves, and their encouragement to both women and men to obey Jesus' command to make disciples (Matthew 28:18–20). This includes the subordinate verbs in the original Greek, related to making disciples: going, baptizing, and teaching to obey all Jesus' commands. Many of the movements also encourage baptism to be performed by the person who brought a new disciple to faith – which of course, in many cases, is a woman.

For instance, in Iran, high governmental restrictions on religion and social hostilities against religion (or against religious adherence that does not conform to the officially promoted forms of Islam) both play a major role in catalyzing women-led movements. Culture clearly has a major role, as well, where a sex-segregated movement is more likely to grow and be sustained in a largely sex-segregated society. On-the-ground estimates of Christians in the country range from 300,000 to more than two million, though these larger figures are often unsubstantiated (see Johnson and Zurlo 2019). It is extremely difficult to track the size of Christian communities since many people practice in secret. Yet, tens of thousands of Iranians have likely converted to Christianity since 2002, mostly young people looking for an alternative to the Iranian regime and Islam. Women are highly engaged in leadership, teaching, and spreading the faith in Iran, and make up the majority of house church members (Open Doors 2023, SAT7 2020). These Christian women face double discrimination due to their religion and sex.

Indigenous missionary efforts in Thai villages have resulted in networks of rural churches that are 72% women, most of whom are in their 50–60s with low levels of education (eStar Foundation 2023). These women are discipled, baptized, trained, then appointed as leaders of rural churches, which then repeat the entire process of evangelism again in another village. With so many women in the movement – and with no foreign theological positions that demand otherwise – it is natural, logical, and effective for women to lead.

Movements have not framed their position on women's roles in terms of the contemporary Western debate between egalitarian and complementarian positions. To the extent movement leaders comment on the roles of women in their communities, they generally frame their descriptions in terms of the priesthood of believers, the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit, and their best attempt to apply the Scripture in their context. For example, Indian leader Victor John, working within a movement among the Bhojpuri people, highlights the role of women in leadership as one of its most unique and important features, much like that of first-century Christianity: "Indian society has traditionally (and up to the present in many ways) held women in low esteem. The Bhojpuri movement in radical contrast, holds women in high esteem and involves them in leadership" (John and Coles 2021, p. 258). He illustrates this as follows:

> Gender issues are a huge problem in north Indian society. Men and women treat each other very differently after accepting Christ than they did before. They now exhibit love and caring that defies all previous customs and traditions. Men and women share equal

> responsibility in sharing the good news and carrying it forward. They also share equal responsibility in multiplying disciples, leaders and churches. (John and Coles 2019, p. 45)

He further describes,

> We view women and treat women as equal partners in the good news and in the ministry. This is counter cultural and intentional on our part. Our stand from the very beginning has been that men and women are equal. Just as God calls men, he calls women as well. If men can make disciples, women can make disciples. So we have many women who are leaders and church planters in the movement. They have discipled people and won whole households. We have no problem with appointing women as leaders in the church. The head of our organization is a woman, a wonderful servant leader. (John and Coles 2019, p. 196–197)

The catalysts of another movement in South Asia described the role of women similarly:

> Female leaders have emerged in disciple making streams facilitated by male leaders. Female leaders have also multiplied and developed other female leaders. In fact, female leaders make up a key component of the work, possibly up to 30-40% of the core leaders of the movements. Women, even young women, lead house churches, plant new churches and baptize other women (Walker Family 2019, p. 127).

A summary of case studies from a family of movements in Southeast Asia states, "I built a leadership team for the province—a band of leaders consisting of six brothers and one sister. Resti, the only female among the seven top leaders, was chosen as head of the Spiritual Multiplication department" (Trevor 2018, loc. 2251). Missionary Pam Arlund and researcher Regina Foard offer multiple case studies from around the world that showcase the abilities of women leaders who perform all the same duties as men (Arlund and Foard 2021). Women lead in prayer and worship in both the home and publicly, they are part of decision-making bodies, and they fulfill the duties of pastors, apostles, evangelists, and teachers. From the beginning of a particular movement in Uganda, women were empowered to start and lead Bible studies, establish and pastor new churches, and be involved in leadership – all in contrast to broader gendered cultural norms.

Among another movement in India, around 60% of affiliates are women and 80–90% of leaders are women (Arlund and Foard 2021). In these village churches, women leaders have been able to maintain their traditional gender roles in addition to serving in new leadership positions in the movement, such as in offering prayer for villagers. Finally, among a particular Muslim movement in China, Arlund and Foard state that the appointment of women as spiritual leaders and pastors was never questioned. It was modeled from the start that women were just as capable as men to be leaders, especially if they were already spiritual leaders of their homes.

Conclusion

The legitimacy of some church-planting movements has been called into question because of women's leadership roles in them (Anonymous 2022). This is an undeserved critique of women who put their lives at risk to become followers of Jesus and lead others to do the same. This critique also does disservice to the historical record, which shows that women have always been

leaders of emerging movements. History also provides numerous cautionary tales of the impact of institutionalization of a movement on women's empowerment.

At the turn of the 20th century, key Fundamentalist leaders advocated for a woman's right to preach. Women have been utterly critical for the growth and survival of movements in the face of competing religions, persecution, and shifts in political power. There would be no twentieth-century shift of Christianity to the global South, nor its tremendous numerical growth, without women working as indigenous evangelists, raising their children in the faith, and spreading the message of Jesus among their local networks. The topic of women leaders is far more complex than a Western discussion of complementarianism versus egalitarianism. That reductionistic dualism becomes especially unhelpful in places where Christians are persecuted minorities and denominational differences matter far less or are even nonexistent. There is also a potential danger of Western Christian leaders imposing particular positions on secondary issues, such as women's leadership, onto growing movements in the global South. One reason these movements have flourished is their freedom to develop, teach, and promote indigenous theology, leadership, discipleship, and exegesis in ways that make sense in their cultural contexts.

Further research is needed on women-led movements that provide thick descriptions of their contexts, challenges, responses, and opportunities. Several questions arise when looking toward the future. What will happen to current women- led movements if they become bigger and more institutionalized? Will they follow the historical trajectory of erasing the contributions of their early female pioneers? Or will they chart a new path where women continue to be considered equally created in the image of God as men, able and anointed to serve *and* lead? A positive future is possible in which women continue effective ministries as disciple makers and movement leaders, in mutual encouragement with men, realizing their full capacity for service and leadership.

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