

A Critical Evaluation of the Role of Women in the Church in Ghana

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ABSTRACT

Women are more involved in church activities than men. In spite of the involvement of women in the church, women are still marginalised and the church still not clear about the leadership role of women. As such, evangelicals are divided into those called the “egalitarians” who believe that women should not be restricted but be involved in all facets of church ministry. The other group dubbed the “complementarians”, are convinced that women should be restricted to only supportive functions in the church. These groups use the Bible to justify their views. In Ghana, the different denominations have their approaches to the matter. In general, churches are now accepting women into the sacred ministry and leadership positions more than before. In the mainline churches, although few women are found in leadership roles, women serve in participatory and complementary roles. In contrast, the Charismatic churches in Ghana have generated the way for women to participate in various levels of ministry and church administration in the church. Women have found fulfilment in the comradeship the churches offer.

Introduction

The percentage of women in the church continues to exceed that of men, yet the church remains unsure about the leadership role, if any, of women in the church. As echoed by a number of writers “though women dominate the pews, they are absent from the power structures.”¹ This topic has become the forefront of ecclesiastical thought and life. According to Stanley Grenz and Denise Muir Kjesbo, evangelicals are divided into two clearly defined groups: “egalitarians” and “complementarians”. Egalitarians believe that all facets of ministry ought to be open to women, whereas complementarians are convinced that women can only serve in supportive functions in the church. Two organizations were formed to promote trans-denominational discussion and cooperation with those who have similar leanings. They are, The Council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, and later, Christians for Biblical Equality.²

Each of the two groups support their different interpretations of what the role of women in the church should be by appealing to the Bible, theological conviction, and practical considerations.³ The two groups agree that the history of the church presents a secondary role for women in the churches, but they differ as to the extent that women have been marginalized. Complementarians seem to emphasize the male authority in the church and they relegate the extent of women leadership seen in the Bible to be the exception and not the norm. Thus they use history to buttress their stand. Egalitarians, however, emphasize the historic examples of women in leadership and use these precedents to support their position. An examination of the Bible is appropriate at this juncture.

¹ Philomena Mwaura, “Unsung Bearers of Good News: AIC Women and the Transformation of Society in Africa,” *Journal of African Christian Thought* 7:1 (2004): 38-44.

² Stanley Grenz & Denise Kjesbo, *Women in Church: A Biblical Theology of Women in Ministry* (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 20-21. *Towards an Ecclesiology of Vulnerable Mission*, " *Ecclesiology* 10 (2014): 235.

³ Grenz & Kjesbo, *Women in Church*, 36.

Defence from the Bible

Samuel Bacchiocchi, admits that women played vital roles in both the private and religious spheres of ancient Israel. He rightly notes that women participated in the study and teaching of the law to their children, and they also ministered at the entrance of the sanctuary offering prayers and vows to God. They were in the prophetic ministry of exhortation and guidance. With all the above however, Bacchiocchi asserts that the story of creation gives us the principle of “equality of being and subordination in function.” He adds that the “principle of male leadership in the home and in the public worship was threatened then, as it is today, and would have been easily lost had it not been for the laws found in the Old Testament which distinguishes between the roles that God has called men and women to fulfil.”⁴

Bacchiocchi, who obviously leans towards the complementarians, also notes that in the New Testament we see Jesus rejecting the prejudices against women and treating them as human beings. He rightly notes that the women followed Jesus in His ministry and catered for His physical needs. Women were loyal and devoted to Jesus. Yet, in spite of His revolutionary treatment of women, Bacchiocchi notes that Jesus did not choose any woman as one of His apostles. This, Bacchiocchi argues, strengthens the position that there was an established distinction of roles in creation, best characterized as “equality of being and subordination in function.” He notes that this pattern is also followed by the apostolic churches where women joined the churches in large numbers, attended worship services, looked after the needy in the church, shared in the prophetic ministry and yet “there is no scripture that they were ever ordained to serve as priests in the Old Testament or as pastors/elders/ bishops in the New Testament.”⁵

⁴ Samuele Bacchiocchi, *Women in the Church: A Biblical Study on the Role of Women in the Church* (Michigan: Biblical Perspectives, 1987) 39-40.

⁵ Bacchiocchi, *Women in the Church*, 61.

An example of Egalitarian leanings among authors is found in Stanley J. Grenz & Denise Muir Kjesbo's book on Women in the Church. The authors insist that God's purpose for women in creation is not to establish her role as submissive to men; it was the fall which brought about male domination. God intended that men and women share in His image, and for women and men to serve together in all aspects of church life.

The book identifies women leaders in the Old Testament; discussing the role of Meriam (Moses' sister, who functioned as part of a leadership team with Aaron and Moses, with Moses clearly in the position of the senior leader); Deborah (who served as one of the highest leaders of her people, the Israelites, as a Judge and Prophetess); and Huldah (the most widely known female Prophet whose contemporaries were Zephaniah and Jeremiah) to demonstrate the fact that despite the male dominance among the Hebrews, the Old Testament faith installed in Israel the seed of an “egalitarian strand unparalleled among surrounding nations.” They add, however, that with the coming of Jesus, God acted decisively “to liberate men and women for full fellowship with himself and each other.”⁶

In the New Testament, Grenz & Muir Kjesbo's book rightly acknowledges that Jesus' dealing with women was contrary to the cultural norms of His day. For Jesus, all people were important, whether they were men or women. He interacted with them freely. “He touched and was touched by women, even those who were ritually unclean (Mt. 9:18-26) or whose morals were questionable (Luke 7:36-50).”⁷

They caution that the exclusion of women from the 12 apostles should not blind us to the importance of the presence of women as Jesus' followers. Jesus was accompanied by several women: the ones He healed and those who contributed to His upkeep (Mt. 27:55-56; Mk 15:40-41). They stress that Christ indeed came to make all things whole.

⁶ Grenz & Kjesbo, Women in Church, 71.

⁷ Grenz & Kjesbo, Women in Church, 73.

“With the coming of the saviour, a new dispensation dawned which erased the effects of the fall. So, because the church is Christ's community, we can no longer relate to each other on the basis of the old social distinctions.”⁸

The Ghanaian Context

Christians in Ghana comprise about 68% of the population. The mainline protestant churches (that form 18.6% of Christians) and the Catholic Church (which constitutes about 15.1%) are also referred to as the Missions Churches because these were Ghana's response to Christianity following Ghana's first contact with Western Missionaries.

The Pentecostal churches are in themselves varied. The Pentecostal and Neo-Pentecostal⁹ strands of Christianity (which form 24.1% of the Christian population) are the largest groups of Christian churches in Ghana. The term AIC is used by most theologians to describe independent groups of Christian churches under indigenous leadership. Jenkins posits¹⁰ that the usage of the term AIC made sense in colonial times when small churches were compared to the missionary initiated churches like Catholics, Methodists, Anglican, etc. presently in Ghana however as the colonial empires have ended and all churches are autonomous and indigenous in their leadership, the term may thus be seen as redundant and as such, challenge of scholars to develop suitable terminology to designate the phenomenon. “Hence, the acronym, AIC may stand for a number of things: African Initiatives in Christianity; African Independent Churches; African indigenous Churches and

⁸ Grenz & Kjesbo, *Women in Church*, 176.

⁹ Neo-Pentecostals form the “National Association of Charismatic and Christian Churches (NACCC) in Ghana. They are also known by other authors as AICs.

¹⁰ Philip Jenkins, *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in Global South* (Oxford University Press, 2006)

African Instituted Churches”.¹¹ In this paper, the term will be used to refer to non-mission-initiated churches.

In the past century, the AICs have represented the fastest growing form of Christianity in Africa, and Ghana is not an exception. The tremendous growth in membership of these churches is so overwhelming that one author has characterised it as “African Reformation.”¹² Ghana's Charismatic churches¹³ were mostly the result of Charismatic revivals within the Mission churches which came about through the young people who had been nurtured in the Christian student movements and other parachurch evangelical associations like the Scripture Union. These churches are Pentecostal in nature and have been, to a large degree, influenced by developments in international charismatic groups, especially in North America.¹⁴

The different denominations of Christians have responded to the role women play in the church differently. The varying attitudes to women have implications for their functions and status in relation to church administration and ministry. The AICs¹⁵ present the most excitement in the study of the role of women in the church in Ghana. They have given and continue to give women the “impetus to become bearers of the freedom of the Spirit, thus reducing the sharp divide along the lines of gender, age and religious status.”¹⁶ These churches have the following common characteristics, putting emphasis on some or all of them: a faith gospel; the gifts of the Holy Spirit; speaking in tongues; healing;

¹¹ Mwaura, “Unsung Bearers of Good News,” 39

¹² Allan Anderson, *African Reformation: African Initiated Christianity in the 20th Century* (Africa World Press, 2001), 17.

¹³ This term is used interchangeably with neo-Pentecostal churches. Charismatic churches are seen as distinct from the classical Pentecostal churches like The Church of Pentecost (CoP) and the Assemblies of God (AG).

¹⁴ Mwaura, “Unsung Bearers of Good News,” 39.

¹⁵ I am here using the term to include Charismatic churches in Ghana.

¹⁶ Mwaura, “Unsung Bearers of Good News,” 38.

prosperity and deliverance. They also have prominent roles for women and the youth, and they use media technology in evangelism.

Women as Participants

Women still comprise a large percentage of active church members and are a sustaining force in almost all congregations. This is true for the main-line churches, the Pentecostal churches and the Charismatic churches. Among all the churches, however, the Charismatic churches stand out. They provide women a support network, which is important for personal development, particularly in women's spiritual, psychological and material lives. The sources of personal validation are especially vital for sick women, women who are childless, divorced or accused of witchcraft. Unlike the main-line churches, the Charismatic churches give single mothers as well as divorced or separated women positions in the churches.

Women enjoy the participatory worship in these churches, which include prayer, sharing testimonies, singing and leading praises, and dancing. In these churches, members are given the opportunity to be revived and to escape the challenges of life, and this is especially attractive to women who flock to these churches. Women in these churches feel that their spirituality is not overlooked. Women find fellowship and solidarity in times of need. They exchange ideas on how to run their families, how to be empowered in their businesses, how to grow spiritually, and provide support for other issues that concern women. Organised monthly and annual meetings and conferences are a feature in both Charismatic and main-line churches. Evangelism is also carried out through organised seminars and retreats.

Women as Leaders

Most of the main-line churches in Ghana followed their western counterparts in their tardiness and sometimes refusal to ordain women until the late 1970s. The Anglican Church still does not ordain women. The Presbyterian and Methodist churches admit very few women to that class of leadership. The older Pentecostal churches have not seen too many changes in the roles of women in leadership. As Quampa notes, “an

examination of the status of women in the Church of Pentecost in Ghana reveals a case of male domination.”¹⁷ He agrees with the explanation given by Ogbu Kalu, that although the prominence of women in leadership positions and their contribution to the movement was evident at the beginning of the Pentecostal movement, the situation changed when fundamentalists forced the restriction of women, based on certain Pauline verses in the Bible, thereby consolidating a patriarchal ideology.¹⁸

This is echoed by Ernestina Quist who says that with the growth of the Church of Pentecost in Ghana, there were “fewer opportunities for women to be leaders as society generally considers the woman’s place to be essentially home.”¹⁹ The Church of Pentecost which is the largest Pentecostal Denomination in Ghana with a total membership of over 800,000 cannot boast of a single woman among its 704 ministers. Only the Director of the Women’s Movement and her assistant participate in the annual General Council meetings; the highest decision-making body of CoP.²⁰

There are significant changes taking place in the Neo-Pentecostal, or Charismatic churches. These newer churches believe that all Christians have the ability to experience the Holy Spirit as prophesized by Joel (2:28-29) and reiterated by Peter on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:17-18). Both men and women are endowed with the ability to dream dreams, see visions, prophesy, preach, teach, exercise and heal. Consequently, women in the Charismatic churches work as evangelists, prophetesses and healers. Many of these women are

¹⁷ DelaQuampah, *Good Pastors, Bad Pastors: Pentecostal Ministerial Ethics in Ghana* (Oregon: Wipf&Stock, 2014), 114.

¹⁸ OgbuKalu, *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 147-48.

¹⁹ Ernestina Quist, *Roles of the Women of the Church of Pentecost in Ghana*” M. Phil diss, University of Ghana, 2002, 62.

²⁰ Quampah, *Good Pastors, Bad Pastors*, 115.

co-founders with their husbands or are Pastors' wives. Others are single women and mothers. The stigma attached to these marginalised women in main-line churches seems to no longer exist in the Charismatic churches.²¹

An example of a Charismatic church in Ghana is the Perez Chapel²², formally called World Miracle Church International (WMCI), founded by Bishop Charles Agyin-Asare in 1987. It has since grown with many branches worldwide. This denomination esteems women ministries highly. Perez Chapel ordains women, and by 2007 it had eleven female pastors. WMCI also permits women to carry out administrative duties. The founders' wife Rev. Vivian Agyin-Asare, is the co-founder and co-pastor of the organization, and she is also the head of the Women of Faith, formerly known as “Miracle Ladies” which is the women's ministries in the church.

Another example of a Charismatic church that ordains women is the one I am part of: All Nations Full Gospel Churches International (ANFGCI). It has one hundred and eleven churches globally, founded in 1986 by the Senior Pastor, Dr. Samuel and his wife Rev. Rose Donkor. Rev. Rose Donkor is in charge of the Women's Ministries. She deputizes for her husband with regard to the ministry and at decision-making meetings. ANFGCI also believes in the ordination of women, and to date, there are ten female pastors. In the denominational office the Chief Operating Officer (COO) is a female. The philosophy of the founder is “if God has anointed a woman, who am I to stop her from fulfilling her God ordained destiny?”²³

Although women are not found in the highest leadership roles in the older Pentecostal churches like Assemblies of God Church, Church

²¹ Mwaura, “Unsung Bearers of Good News,” 41.

²² The name was changed in 2013.

²³ As a member of this denomination, it is a statement I have heard him repeat over and over again.

of Pentecost, and Christ Apostolic, women complement church leadership as healers, preachers, prayer leaders, song leaders, and heads of women organizations. Women also function as pastoral counselors and care-givers to other women in the congregation and vicinity of the church.

Many of the leaders in the Charismatic churches have undergone theological training, although most also draw from charismatic resources; they are deeply spiritual and subject themselves to long periods of prayer and fasting. They stress on morality, responsibility and pellucidity.²⁴ Asamoah-Gyadu, a leading scholar on the Charismatic churches in Ghana and a prolific writer on Charismatic churches, proposes that the traditional Pentecostal churches known as the “*Sunsum Sore*” (literally means, Spiritual Churches)²⁵ were “trail blazers in the acceptance of women not only as founders but also as 'spiritual authorities' of churches.”²⁶ In Africa, most of the traditional religions have women dominating the priesthood. Asamoah-Gyadu states:

On the one hand therefore, the dominance of women as founders of *Sunsum Sore* served to revitalise traditional notions of female religious authority through the institutional recognition of their priestly and prophetic powers acquired through their experiences of the Spirit. On the other hand, however it needs to be pointed out that the virtual dominance by prophetesses in the *Sunsum sore* by their women leaders as being the fulfilment of the Pentecostal promise rather than as any

²⁴ Mwaura, “Unsung Bearers of Good News,” 41

²⁵ These churches are older African independent churches which are now declining from the religious scene in Ghana.

²⁶ Kwabena J. Asamoah-Gyadu, *African Charismatics: Current Developments Within Independent Indigenous Pentecostalism in Ghana* (Leiden: Brill Academic, 2005), 57.

deliberate attempt to maintain continuity with traditional religion.²⁷

He also adds that the acceptance of women leaders is also in tune with scripture as stated above and endorsed by other authors like Brian Stanley. Stanley notes that where individual congregations have women assuming prominent positions of leadership, they ground their role in the “empirical evidence supplied by the apparent outpouring of the Spirit on them.”²⁸ Okure advocates for authorities who are God-fearing to caution that the “sustained practice of excluding women is in truth opposed to the expressed will of God.” She passionately states that “To continue to exclude women from certain Christian Ministries on the basis of reasons inspired by outmoded Jewish taboos is to render null and void the liberation that Christ won for us, and which allows no social and ritual distinctions between male and female, Jew and Gentile, slave and free, since all constitute one person in Christ (Gal 3:26-28).”²⁹

Restriction on women's role in the church is definitely a global problem which, as some authors have noted, has come about because of bureaucracy and societal hung-ups. Stanley Grenz and Denise M. Kjesbo have researched a few of the established denominations like the Salvation Army, and the Holiness churches, and even some Baptist churches and have come to the conclusion that institutionalization in America has led to the same “male-dominated leadership as it did in Britain.”³⁰ They add that several denominations that came out of the

²⁷ Asamoah-Gyadu, *African Charismatics*, 56.

²⁸ Brian Stanley, *The Global Diffusion of Evangelicalism: The Age of Billy Graham and John Stott* (Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 2013), 214-15.

²⁹ Teresa Okure, “Women in the Bible,” in *With Passion and Compassion: Third World Women Doing Theology*, eds. ViginiaFabelle and Mercy A. Oduyoye (Maryknoll, NY :Orbis Books, 1988), 55.

³⁰ Grenz & Kjesbo, *Women in the Church*, 55.

Holiness movements hail women like Aimee Semple McPherson and other women who shared leadership with the men in the church, yet, as the churches became more institutionalised and sought membership and inclusion in the mainstream of evangelicalism “many compromised their earlier enthusiasm for women leaders.”³¹

Conclusion

From the literature available on the role of women in Ghana, we can confidently say that things are not as depraved as they used to be two generations ago, nor are they as good now as they should be. In the main-line churches, although few women are found in leadership roles, women serve in participatory and complementary roles. In contrast, the Charismatic churches in Ghana have generated the way for women to participate in various levels of ministry and church administration in the church. Women have found fulfilment in the comradeship the churches offer. The Charismatic churches have also created more opportunities for leadership processes. In Ghana today, the main-line churches are changing policies to curb the exodus of their members to the Charismatic churches. They have introduced Charismatic practices like hand-clapping, healing services, drumming and dancing to their services. There is, however, one area where changes have been few and slow: the ordination of women to leadership positions.

³¹ Grenz & Kjesbo, *Women in the Church*, 54.

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