

The Woman in the Church

Dra. Elizabeth Conde-Frazier - March 8, 2025

Early on in the Protestant church, lay women had the sociedades which taught them the practices of democracy: voting, reporting, calling and running meetings by using Robert's Rules of Order at meetings, creating and controlling budgets, and many times raising the funds for their activities. These practices were part of a missionary endeavor that had as its purpose the americanization of its converts more than religious liberation. Nonetheless, it gave women an arena where they could form directive bodies and boards, they nurtured the faith of their sisters and of children and youth. At the same time, women were entering the work force and dealing with lack of educational opportunities, advancement opportunities and exclusion in managerial positions. But the fact that, in the church, they were able to practice a sense of agency and to use that agency to navigate the barriers of patriarchy and to renegotiate their roles at home, created in church women a different identity.

DOING MISSION: CREATING A SPACE OF ATREVIMIENTO

In the Bible we have the story of Deborah and other women playing pivotal roles in a battle and winning that war because of their bravery and atrevimiento in the place of the men who approached the battle with fear and great trepidation. In similar fashion, women in the church have gone into communities that no one else wanted to go into because they were difficult. They have started ministries in these communities as missionaries because they would not call them pastoras and they planted ministries of trust in these communities. They brought schools and youth programs to the communities so that the church became a tree that holds the soil so that it will not erode, trees that give fruit of life in places of death. Transformation has taken place in broken churches and hard communities where mujeres misioneras/missionary women established the roots of an incarnated gospel. Of course, once the ministry became a viable ministry, the men would be named as pastors of the congregation that these women birthed and too many times there wasn't the recognition of their labor and sacrifice. Instead, the church structures continued to build on the work of the women and to name the men as the accomplishers of the work. In some cases, where women actually started a movement or new church council, once the men took over, they forbade the leadership of women.

Women also filled in when men were not present thus continuing the work of God in that congregation. Women became fierce administrators, preachers, and builders of sanctuaries using their entrepreneurship, executive management, and teaching skills. We have always done fund raising- whether it is selling pasteles/tamales or getting stores to donate things for a children's program. Where would programming be if there were no women in the church?



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What has been the motivator for women? It has been compassion. Once a woman understands with the spirit of compassion what the need is, the imagination of compassion kicks in and she begins to innovate, to co-create with God. We see ourselves as using our sense of agency to participate in fulfilling the purpose of God in a particular situation or community. Whether we are resolving an argument, healing, forgiving, donating, volunteering, starting a new program, envisioning a new way to help others, taking care of the earth and all its creation, we are birthing new life into the world. This is what it means to co-create with God.[1] We give birth to a new future. Not just any future but one that is connected to all things and therefore cares for, nourishes the very earth from which we come as we share DNA with other life forms of creation. God's love constrains us (2Cor 5:14). In fact, constrain is a word that means it forces us; It makes us move forward, motivates us and then guides us. Compassion is caring that helps to develop empathy which is based on our ability to grasp the experience of another. "Empathy allows us to step back from our own feelings, while disavowing them, to put ourselves in the place of another by vicariously grasping that person's emotional experience." [2]

Now we can confront injustice because we are seeking the well-being of our neighbor based on our capacity to grasp his or her experience. Humility is the lens through which we see this.

We launch ourselves according to the urgency that is informed by solidarity. That is why, despite the norms of society or the structures of the church, we have dared to do work not designated for women, such as prison chaplaincy or pastorship, or to commit ourselves to tasks of perseverance, such as lobbying or healing work for addicts. Before there was Casa Crea, Teen Challenge or anything like that, there was Mama Leo (Leoncilla Rosado), who turned the church benches into hospital beds for addicts to quit cold turkey. Children from poor communities, orphans, abused people, have been cared for and healed by women. AIDS patients who had been thrown out of jail so they would not have to be cared for have been embraced and accompanied by women in the church, such as Brixaida Marquez, who with her own money opened a house for them and recruited other women as volunteers, giving them care 24 hours a day.

REMAKING ECCLESIAL STRUCTURES AND THE FOUNDATIONS THAT ANCHOR AND SUPPORT THEM

These are the spaces of daring innovations. Remaking structures and the ideological pillars that anchor and support them in light of the injustices in the ecclesiastical structures, women have made a biblical/theological evaluation along with their observations and critical thinking and where they have found that there are contradictions of the spirit, women have taken paths prohibited by the policies of the structure such as preaching from the pulpit itself instead of from the floor, they have exercised the pastorate without hiding behind their husbands or being married. The congregation has recognized and confirmed the authority of women in that space because of the gifts that are clearly seen in them and because of the fruits that their pastoral work bears.

[1] ([1](<https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-1-d&q=theology+of+co-creation>)).

[2] Leonard M. Hummel, "Heinz Kohut and Empathy: A Perspective from a Theology of the Cross." *Word and World: Theology for Christian Ministry* (Winter 2001): 64-67.



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On some occasions, women have risen up to challenge the very constitution of the church that has not allowed the ordination of women. This is what Ana María Falcon did using the basis of Pentecostalism, believing that it is the Spirit who gives the freedom for the complete execution of the gifts, regardless of whether it is a woman or a man, young or old (Joel 2:28; Acts 2:17-18). She claimed that women do not need a covering from a man but from God. Among the mainline congregations, women stood out in their leadership and were given a place to carry out their administrative ministry. Whenever a woman has such a position, she does so knowing that she needs to do it in an exemplary way to keep the door open for others in the future. A man does not need to carry that weight as part of his leadership mantle. Therefore, women have initiated changes that built their denominations since they were forming the structures differently with greater fidelity to the scriptures, separating them from the practices of the culture and creating a society according to the values of the basileia.

WOMEN IN THE CHURCH AND THE DOING OF THEOLOGY

The basileia is important for the theological work of women. In doing feminist theology, women place at the center not the orthodoxy of the church body but the basileic principle of life—abundant life: Jesus' promise in the gospel of John, "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life and have it in fullness/abundance" (Jn. 10:10). It is important to note that Jesus not only brings life in contrast to the thief, but Jesus does not impose that life on us. Jesus offers it and, using our own agency, we accept it. Feminist theology is a theology of formation and not of brokenness and deformation and it comes from who we are in the church: our callings, the spiritual formation that guides us and the work and fruit of that work. Women in the church have brought a wealth of ministry and we offer a theology of life.

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