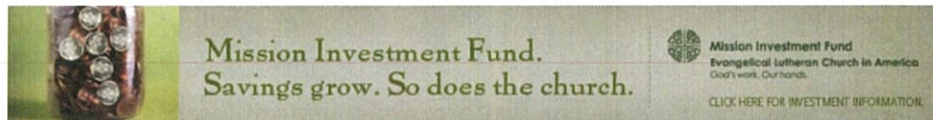


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## Women and the Reformation

By Kathryn Kleinhans (<https://www.livinglutheran.org/author/kathryn-kleinhans/>) | October 21, 2015



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How did – and does – the Reformation affect the lives of women? If this relationship was documented on Facebook, the status might be, “It’s complicated.”

The Old Testament tells us that both men and women are created in the image of God (Genesis 1: 27). St. Paul writes that in Christ distinctions of class and gender no longer matter (Galatians 3:28). Reformer Martin Luther insisted that all Christians, not just some, share by faith in the same spiritual priesthood. Nevertheless, the Reformation had mixed results for women.

At the beginning of the 16th century, women’s life choices were limited. Living as a single, independent woman was simply not acceptable. Most women transitioned from being under the authority of their fathers to that of their husbands and then, if they outlived their husbands, that of their eldest son.

Some women joined convents, but this was often their parents’ choice rather than their own. For example, 12th-century mystic Hildegard of Bingen was the tenth child in her family; her well-to-do parents gave her to the convent as a tithe (10 percent of their assets given to God). Katharina

von Bora, Martin Luther's wife, was sent away to a convent at the age of 5, when her father remarried after her mother's death.

During the middle ages, the celibate life of a nun, monk or priest was seen as a "higher calling" than the married life of ordinary people. The Reformers rejected this idea. Instead, they praised both marriage and parenthood as worthy callings for all Christians. For centuries, the church had taught that the primary purposes of marriage were reproduction and providing an acceptable outlet for sexual desire. Reformers like Luther and Calvin promoted a new understanding of marriage as loving, faithful companionship.

The good news in this is that the Reformation recognized and celebrated the value of women's status as wives and mothers. At the same time, however, by closing convents, the reformers eliminated the option that had provided some women the opportunity to receive an education, exercise leadership, and live in a supportive community of other women.

Nevertheless, the reformers promoted education for all boys and all girls, which was astonishing for the time. Previously, education had been available only for boys of higher social or economic status. The Lutheran emphasis on reading the Scriptures for oneself sparked an emphasis on literacy – for everyone. Luther encouraged communities to establish and support schools and encouraged parents to send their children – boys and girls – to school rather than keep them at home to work.

However, education for girls was much less extensive than for boys. Girls attended school fewer hours a day than boys and for fewer years, with skills geared toward reading the Bible, managing a household and teaching the faith to their children.

In short, we can see some progress for women in the Reformation of the 16th century, but not as much as we might like. Yet the vision for an educated laity did benefit women. By the second generation of the Reformation, more than 90 percent of pastors' wives were literate.

Today things are still complicated for women, in the U.S. and around the world.

Depending on which statistics you accept, women in the U.S. still earn only two-thirds to three-fourths as much as men for the same work. According to the 2014 Global Gender Gap Report of the Geneva-based World Economic Forum, the U.S. ranks only 65<sup>th</sup> of 142 countries in terms of wage equality. The same report found that girls and women have equal access to education in only 25 of 142 countries.

Seventy-seven percent of the church bodies in The Lutheran World Federation ordain women, but women in those countries report that women pastors often do not have equal access to decision-making roles or to opportunities for higher education beyond a theological diploma.

Since October 2014, I have had the privilege of leading a series of seminars in Wittenberg, Germany, for women from Lutheran churches in the Global South and the former Eastern bloc, funded through ELCA member gifts to *Always Being Made New: The Campaign for the ELCA*.

The theme of the seminars is “The Reformation and the Empowerment of Women.”

Some of the seminar participants are pastors, and some are laywomen, but most report gender-based discrimination not only in their countries but also in their churches. In Zimbabwe, Pastor Lindie Kanyekanye reports, “a real woman gives birth to boys.” If not, the man is likely to take another wife – even if he is Christian! The Malagasy women agree: In Madagascar, sons are valued because of their own worth; daughters are valued because of the bride-price they will generate for the family. Nima David, from India, knows a man who says he has no children; in fact, he has five daughters, but to him they don’t count.

## **Strong women from the past**

How can learning about the Reformation make a difference? It’s useful to consider not only the impact of the Reformation on women’s lives but also the impact of women on the Reformation. Reflecting on these past leaders can help us draw both information and inspiration for our lives today.

We can’t pretend that Martin Luther shared our views about the equality of men and women. His writings show some ambivalence. In his commentaries on Genesis, for example, Luther sometimes describes the subordination of women to men as part of God’s created order, while at other times he identifies subordination as the result of sin.

Nevertheless, for his time Martin Luther was remarkably progressive. While he married for practical reasons, he came to love and respect his wife, Katharina von Bora, very much. Katharina, also known as Katie, was a former nun, one of a group that Luther had helped to escape from their convent after they wrote to him asking for assistance.

Scholars today describe Katie not just as a housewife but as the manager of a mid-sized business. In order to feed a household consisting of family, student boarders and frequent guests, she purchased land, raised crops and livestock, made her own beer and wine, and handled all the household finances.

Participants in the ELCA International Women’s Seminars are inspired by Katie’s strength and her accomplishments, but they do not see her as unique. Pastor Julinda Sipayung from Indonesia comments, “This is just like the women in our country! When the men don’t make enough money to provide for the family, the women go out to work, too.” Her colleague Pastor Darwita Purba agrees, as do seminar participants from Tanzania and The Gambia. Despite traditional beliefs that women belong in the home rather than in the workplace, these women’s experiences confirm the reality that, in practice, the line between domestic and economic responsibilities is often blurred.

Katie was such a good provider that Martin Luther chose to leave everything to her in his will – a move that was unheard of at that time, when it was assumed that a widow needed a guardian to act on her behalf. While the authorities, including Luther’s friends, refused to honor his wishes, Luther’s desire to make his wife his heir is remarkable.

Katharina Schütz Zell is another 16th-century woman from whom we can take inspiration. Even as a child, Katharina Schütz believed that a woman could live a holy Christian life without joining a convent. At first she chose to live as a single woman in her family home. Later she chose to marry her pastor, Matthias Zell, who was one of the first preachers of reform in Strasbourg, France.

Katharina Schütz Zell was not the typical pastor's wife, because much of her ministry took place outside the home. She was incredibly active in social ministry: visiting the sick and imprisoned and arranging for housing and support for hundreds of refugees. For her this was not just a personal expression of her faith but a public ministry of the church. Although Katharina was a laywoman, her husband referred to her as his assistant minister.

Katharina also wrote extensively, even corresponding with Martin Luther. One of her earliest published writings was a defense of the marriage of pastors. Matthew Zell's marriage at a time when priests were required to remain celibate had prompted gossip and threatened to undermine the credibility of his preaching. Katharina insisted that she was not writing as a wife in defense of her husband but as a Christian in defense of another Christian; all Christians, including women, had the responsibility to stand up for the truth and to defend their neighbors from slander. Keeping silence in the face of injustice, she wrote, was not acceptable.

By today's standards, Katharina's theology is classified as Reformed rather than Lutheran, but she resisted such labels. To her mind, all Protestants were working together for reform. A shared commitment to the gospel and the authority of the Scriptures was more important to her than doctrinal differences. She even preached at the funeral of two women whom no Christian pastor in Strasbourg would bury because the women supported believers' baptism rather than infant baptism.

Fast forward to 2011, when the magazine of the Women of the ELCA changed its name from *Lutheran Women Today* to *Gather*. Why? The organization's leadership learned that other Christian women were also reading and benefitting from the magazine, especially women in churches that are full communion partners of the ELCA and do not have women's magazines of their own. *Gather*, together with its tagline, "For Faith and Action," would have pleased Katharina Schütz Zell, as would the commitment to our unity as Christians across denominational labels.

But pastors' wives were not the only women who contributed to the Reformation. Argula von Grumbach was a strong advocate for reform based on her study of the Scriptures. Astonishingly for the time, her parents had given Argula her own copy of the Bible when she was 10 years old. Her first publication was a letter in defense of a university student who had been imprisoned for possessing illegal pamphlets promoting reformation theology. A woman from a noble family, Argula attended several imperial assemblies at which the cause of reformation was discussed. She was a prominent enough figure that when Luther mentioned her in letters to other reformers, he used only her first name. Unlike the two Katharinas, Argula did not have a supportive husband. In fact, her husband lost his position as a government official because he was unable to keep his wife quiet. His disapproval of her activities did not stop her.

We can praise women like these as exceptional figures, but none of them thought of herself as heroic. Each was simply living out her faith as she felt called to do, within her own circumstances.

## **Strong leaders in the present**

How does this legacy of strong women of the Reformation live itself out today? Faith continues to empower women leaders around the world.

Pastor Paulina Hlawiczka, who serves two congregations of the Lutheran Church in Great Britain, reports that in her native Poland Katharina von Bora is used as an example against women's ordination. "Why don't you marry a pastor?" she was told. Convinced that God was calling her to be a pastor rather than to marry one, Hlawiczka needed to leave Poland in order to be ordained. Today she prays and works for change in her home country and church.

The woman whom Forbes has ranked the most powerful woman in the world for nine of the last 10 years is also a Lutheran. German Chancellor Angela Merkel was raised as a pastor's daughter in the former East Germany, where being a Christian typically had educational and political disadvantages. As a teen, she chose to be confirmed, despite the significant social pressure in East Germany to go through the alternative communist "youth dedication" rite instead.

Merkel does not speak much about her faith in public, but it clearly motivates her. In response to questions from a theology student on an Internet blog in November 2012, she wrote: "I am a member of the Evangelical Church. I believe in God, and religion is also my constant companion and has been for the whole of my life." She described belief as a framework for her life and how she sees the world. "We as Christians should above all not be afraid of standing up for our beliefs," she said.

In a very different part of the world, Liberian Lutheran Leymah Gbowee was one of three women awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2011 "for their nonviolent struggle for the safety of women and for women's rights to full participation in peace-building work." In 2003, Gbowee organized a group of Christian women – and then built a coalition with Muslim women – to protest against Liberia's corrupt government and end their country's long civil war. It was Gbowee's faith that motivated her courageous action, she told the Women of the ELCA Triennial Convention in 2011, and that same faith should motivate all of us to rise up, get out of our comfort zones, and work for justice in God's world. "The God we serve is not a God of halfway [but] a God of wholeness," she said, and "[God] who called you will equip you."

Back in Wittenberg, Pastor Kanyekanye from Zimbabwe echoed this sentiment when she said, "We have a voice that is more powerful than we can imagine." Some of the participants in the ELCA International Women's Seminars were not raised Lutheran – or even Christian – but became Lutheran in response to the good news that they encountered in word and in action



through the Lutheran church. This is true even of some who are now pastors. These women are living testimony that the gospel continues to create faith and transform lives even 500 years after the beginning of the Reformation.

The powerful message of God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ is not "old news." It is a life-giving treasure that we have received and that we are called to share. As ELCA Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton reminds us, "We are church, we are Lutheran, we are church together, and we are church for the sake of the world." And that "we" is all of us – women and men, clergy and lay, young and old. Maybe it's not so complicated after all.



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