

# Roundtable: Reflections from Women in Theological Leadership

## Introduction

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Recently, significant positive shifts have happened in society in the perception of women and in opportunities given to women. While the evangelical community is catching up with this trend, changes have not been as extensive within as outside. Although women have contributed so much to the Church throughout history, the importance of the role of women in the Church, particularly in leadership, remains trivialized. Women who are blessed with skills traditionally associated with men continue to face challenges of finding places to serve within evangelical institutions because of pressures imposed by culture and by misguided theology. We are often told that only specific tasks can be given to us, and thus, we have to step aside and let men lead. In particular, we are usually told that we cannot be teaching pastors. In addition to these barriers, women who do attain leadership often suffer prejudice, wrong expectations, and stereotypes. As a consequence, the journey of most women who lead in Christian ministry is lonely.

Given this reality, we in the faith community must continue to exert effort to provide spaces where the voices of Christian women can be amplified. We must especially listen to women who hold or have held leadership positions, as their voices can provide a healthy critique of the prevailing culture within the Church. Their voices will also encourage women who are confused because of the incongruity between their skills and the restrictions imposed on them.

The Women's Forum hosted by the Asian Theological Seminary in Manila, the Philippines, in 2019 was a response to this need for women leaders' voices to be heard. ATS was a fitting venue for this Forum in two ways. First, as an inter-denominational seminary, ATS has faculty, staff, and students who represent different strains of evangelicalism from different parts of Asia and beyond. The diversity of traditions represented at ATS requires us to practice constant dialogue, especially to engage voices that are usually relegated to the margins. Second, one of ATS's main goals is to transform harmful trends in the Church and society through theological education – transformation that must include listening to the voices of women. The Forum was historic for ATS because, so far, it is the first and

only forum where all the speakers are women in theological leadership.

Therefore, ATS was more than delighted to provide space for 8 women theological leaders to share their reflections, with the hope that our students and members of our community would listen, reflect, and discern their role in advocating for wider participation of women in leadership. Over the course of an evening, the 8 women were interviewed in panels of 2-3 each on themes that were especially appropriate for their personal experiences. (I served as one of the interviewer-moderators.) The 8 short reflections that follow here are condensed, edited versions of what each woman said that evening (distilled from an audio transcript).

The 8 speakers are from four continents: Africa, Asia, Latin America, and North America. Their insights reflect some of the unique implications of their cultures for their experiences, showing how women from different cultures may face varying struggles.

All of the panelists are also members of the *Women's PeerLeader Forum (WPLF)* hosted by *ScholarLeaders (SL)*. SL initiated the *WPLF* as a response to the reality that Christian Majority World women leaders in theology face multifaceted pressures, especially loneliness. The *WPLF* is an avenue for these women to share experiences, counsel, and encouragement.

As a woman who is beginning my own journey in theological leadership, I gained invaluable insights from these women leaders. I, too, navigate complex roles as educator, scholar, wife, and mother, in a culture where the role of women in theology continues to be questioned. I am very pleased that these reflections are now published. Hopefully, they will encourage more women in ministry and will challenge more men to advocate for women's inclusion – in theological leadership in particular and ministry in general.

## A Kenyan Perspective

Emily Choge Kerama  
*Moi University, Kenya*

### *Why Should Women Be in Theological Education?: Imago Dei*

It is important for women to be in theological education because we are all human beings. Human beings are created in the image of God, as Genesis 1:26 clearly states. God made us in his image, both male and female. So I believe that, if we are to see fully the representation of God's image in life, in service, and in participation in the work of God, we need to have women in theological education. We will not see God's image fully represented if half of that image is not participating.

### *The Kenyan Context: Education Is for Boys*

In Africa, the hindrances that keep women from participating in theological education are mainly cultural, from a patriarchal context where women do not receive education in general. In the 1950s, when missionaries came and established schools, parents mainly sent boys to those schools. Parents thought that girls would leave home, be married, and not benefit the family. This attitude affects theological education today. Women are not educated in general, so they are not able to pursue theological education.

When girls eventually were able to go to school (and also, now, to theological schools), a new hindrance became a misguided interpretation of theology: women should only teach other women and children and not become pastors for everybody. Denominations in Kenya opened theological institutions, but women who were accepted were not given the opportunity to become pastors or even, in some cases, to receive full training.

When I entered theological education before getting married, people would first ask me where I was from in Africa. Their second question was always, "Are you married?" I would of course say, "No." "Do you have children?" Again, "No." They would say, "Something is wrong with you." So, in addition to the hindrances of African culture and theology, single women have a bigger gap to try to fill.

### *Personal Story: Overcoming Physical Disability & the Value of Mentoring*

My journey in theological education began at home. I was born into a pastor's family: my father was a reverend in the Anglican Church. My mother was a second generation Christian. I was born with a physical disability, so I have an artificial leg. In earlier days, if my parents had not been Christians, their traditional biases would have been against a child with a disability. Parents used to believe that a

child with a disability should not go into public and must stay hidden.

But because of their faith in God, my parents took me to school. No schools were nearby, so when I was six, they took me to a place where I could access school. They sent me away from them when I was so young because they saw hope in this child who was disabled – and a girl at that. Through that experience, I learned to depend on God because I was very lonely. I didn't know why I was far away from my parents and couldn't see them for three months at a time. But when they visited me, they pointed me to God. They told me about God, and they told me that God was close to me even when I was far away from them. So that began my journey of faith. I thank God for parents who were caring, who were able to see beyond cultural and physical barriers. They broke through those barriers so that I could go to school.

As I grew older, I had this feeling that God was calling me to be a teacher – at first, just to be a high school teacher. I went to a public university rather than a theological school. There, I saw that professors, especially those in religion and philosophy, powerfully influenced students. They looked down on students who were Christians; they bashed us for giving in to colonialism.

So I felt I needed to teach at the university level so that I could help students who had faith in God to grow, to withstand these pressures. So that's why I went to theological school.

During my years of study, I learned that our relationship with God is a key part of our journey. I learned that my walk with God has to be natural throughout, not just on Sundays, but day-to-day. Finding a Christian group at university helped me learn the basics of the Christian life. I learned constantly to be in prayer, to be in the Word of God, to be reaching out, and to have fellowship with other Christians. I learned that I needed to have people in my life who would help me grow, and that I needed to be helping others in their walk as well. Mentoring helped me to continue to grow in my faith.

As a result, I now teach at a public university and help students explain why they have faith. For almost 40 years, I've taught Bible and theology in this public university setting.

*Advice: Nothing Is Impossible with God*

My advice to people who feel a call but face barriers is: Believe in God. Don't be hindered. You may face barriers of culture, of tradition, of theology. But God is greater. Nothing is impossible with God.

## A Mexican Perspective

Dinorah Mendez  
B.H. Carol Institute

### *Why Should Women Be in Theological Education?: Soteriology*

Not only did our God create both men and women at the beginning, but when he planned to redeem humanity, he made the plan of salvation for everyone, for men and women. Jesus Christ died for men and women alike. The New Testament often mentions that salvation is for all humanity, for all human beings.

If salvation is for women as well as men, women must be equipped to fulfill their purpose in the Kingdom of God. Furthermore, within theological education, women's points of view are necessary because salvation is also for women: salvation blessings flow through women as well as men. Women's perspectives are God's meaningful gifts to everyone.

### *The Latin American Context: "Caudillos"*

In Latin America and particularly in Mexico, Evangelical churches are deeply influenced by pre-Spanish and Spanish cultures that were very male-centered. The family (and society as a whole) is led by "caudillos." A "caudillo" is normally a man who heads the social and/or family hierarchy. He doesn't allow members of the community or family to give opinions or to take part in decision-making. Decisions are made arbitrarily and authoritatively. This is leadership in Latin American culture.

Though Evangelical churches see Jesus's model of servant leadership, Latin American cultural influences often overcome the Biblical model. Culture overwhelms Biblical interpretation. So we have pastors who function as "caudillos." Even if a church says it has congregational government with checks and balances, it often functionally gives all authority to the pastor. Suddenly, the pastor has total power over the church. In that case, very quickly, women cannot speak, teach, or do anything that the pastor doesn't allow.

So the things that happen in society happen in the Church and the family. For this reason, in Latin America, women don't work. They don't have abilities to participate fully in society and the Church. Culture overwhelms Biblical beliefs.

### *Personal Story: Facing Singleness*

I grew up in a Christian family. I received Christ when I was 11 years old. At 15 I received his call to serve full time. But before I went to seminary, I completed university and went to Mexico City to work – I thought I no longer wanted to go

to seminary. I wanted to be a professional. But I give thanks to God for several mentors, my pastors and counselors, who pursued me. They arranged interviews for me with people in the seminary so that I could see all my career options.

Thanks to them, I continued to work but also began to study. When the earthquake hit Mexico City in 1985, I saw God disarranging my organized life. I realized that I had to enter full-time ministry. I earned a Bachelor in Theology. Then, the professors at the institution where I was studying called me to be a professor. That was a surprise. I had never thought that I would serve as a professor of theology. This calling raised questions for me because at that time, only pastors and missionaries were in ministry. I had never thought about professors being in ministry, but God had a plan – and now for 30 years, I have been faculty at that same seminary.

I am still single. Many cultures stigmatize single women (and perhaps singles in general). Furthermore, Christians often stigmatize single or childless women. Recently, my denomination was grappling with writing a statement about the LGBT community. I was part of the commission working on this subject. During the meetings, someone said, “God created marriage, so the purpose of human beings is to be married.” Someone else mentioned 1 Timothy 2:15, which talks about how women will be saved by bearing children. I responded, “Oh, well, then I will be condemned to hell because I don’t have children. And what will happen to the people who cannot have children at all?” So I challenge believers not to say that God created human beings for the purposes of marriage and childbearing. We must think of our sisters’ and brothers’ particular circumstances before we speak.

Women face this kind of prejudice in the Church. When I first started teaching, because I was so new, students thought they could disrespect me for being an unmarried woman. I told one of them, “You can go out of the classroom and come back when you have a better attitude.” That was enough for him. Now that thirty years have passed, these situations are less frequent.

It is worse when your own colleagues disrespect you for being a woman. Such disrespect was especially painful for me: my own Mexican colleagues disrespected me. When the missionary faculty at the seminary hired me, they immediately respected me as an equal. At that same time, they also appointed another Mexican, who was the same age as I – and yet he received more respect than I did from my Mexican colleagues. I was a woman, inferior.

So women in theological education, especially single women, will face many problems. You don’t have a husband, so your colleagues and students may think that something is wrong with you: “You are bossy; you have a bad character.” But they don’t recognize that you are a servant called by God, and they don’t recognize that you have spiritual gifts with which to serve God.

Now, I am nearing retirement. I will return to my hometown, live with my mother,

and diversify my ministry across different institutions. I will dedicate myself to writing. I will also care for my mother because I am an only child. But I am happy to do that. As I reflect, I am satisfied: many Mexican pastors are among my alumni.

*Advice: Never Give Up Your Call*

My advice to women in theological education: never give up your call. If you are called by God, even if you face many obstacles, never give up, because we will account for ourselves to God, not to people. If people criticize you, if people discourage you, that doesn't matter. The God who called you equipped you and gave you opportunities to serve him. Nothing else matters – only that you are sure that you are serving God. You are in the place that God wants.

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## A Filipino Perspective

Athena Gorospe  
*Asian Theological Seminary*

Editor's Note: The "María Clara" stereotype was developed by Filipino novelist Jose Rizal, as Athena mentions. María Clara is a character in one of Rizal's most famous novels, *Noli Me Tángere*, published in 1887. In Filipino culture, she is often held up as the ideal woman – beautiful, courteous, demure, self-effacing, and reserved.

### *Why Should Women Be in Theological Education?: The Church*

How many church members are women? In the Philippines, it's over 50%. Can a male pastor fully understand the needs of the women in his congregation? Will he understand what women go through when they give birth? Or other challenges women face? Future pastors need women teachers who can give them unique perspectives – perspectives peculiar to women – so that they can minister more effectively to the women in their congregations, teach men to begin to understand the women in their congregations, and affirm the women in their congregations.

Furthermore, to whom did God give the gifts of the Church? Just to men? We read Scripture: it's all given to the whole body of Christ. The gifts of the Spirit are distributed to all, to men and women. Now, let's say that some of the gifts are given only to some women. If you don't allow these women to exercise these gifts, then the whole body does not grow into the fullness of Christ. That's the goal: that the diversity of gifts would help the Church grow into the fullness of who Jesus Christ is. But if some women are not able to exercise their gifts, then the Church will not mature. Therefore, it's so important for women to be able to exercise their gifts, even in education and formation, for the whole Church.

## *The Filipino Context: The “María Clara”*

The Pauline view of women influences many Filipino Evangelicals. Evangelicals only preach about women from Paul, not from any other part of Scripture. However, Scripture gives diverse views of women, and it’s important for us to look at that range. Even Paul, in Corinthians, says, “Women should be silent in church,” but in another part of Corinthians, he says, “Women can prophesy.” And in Galatians 2:28, Paul emphasizes that as the Church matures, it expresses increasing oneness: all sectors of society – men and women, different races, different economic situations – have the same status in Christ, are affirmed in Christ. So even Paul has diverse views, tied to contextual situations. In addition, Jesus affirmed women. And the Old Testament portrays women prophets. It is a hindrance to cling to one view of women from Scripture.

Yet who is the ideal woman in Filipino society? Because of Rizal’s influence, the ideal woman is the María Clara – one who is silent, meek. She does not speak out. She suffers endlessly even though she faces so much injustice.

But we wonder: Is that really the ideal woman in the Bible? How about Deborah? How about Esther? How about Jael, or Manoah’s wife, or Hannah? Even Mary, the mother of Jesus? None of these women are the meek, silent, suffering type. We need to question our stereotypes.

At the same time, women in the church don’t have to quarrel with everyone. The Church will see our gifts as we exercise the gifts that women truly have, and it will begin to understand that we should not neglect women’s voices, their contributions, their gifts, their leadership.

### *Personal Story: Called to be a Missionary?*

I thought I was called to be a missionary to China, so I started to take extension classes at Asian Theological Seminary (ATS) (not at the seminary itself, but near my home). On an exam for my first class, the professor wrote, “I wish you would go for further studies, lady theologian.” That sparked my interest to go to ATS for residential courses. My first course was Greek, taught by a woman. Looking at her, I said, “I want to go for further studies.” I graduated with an MDiv. Before I graduated, ATS’s Dean told me, “We need faculty in Old Testament. We want to send you for further training and to consider you as future faculty.” So I joined ATS’s faculty.

Now, what happened to my missionary-to-China plan? At the time, I was going to a Chinese church. My Chinese name means “Get China,” “Get Asia.” But my pastor said, “It will take you forever to learn Chinese, when you could actually be in a seminary where you can train many Asians so that they can go back to their home countries.” And indeed, I have had Chinese students at ATS, and they have gone back to China. So my vision broadened: it’s no longer China but all of Asia. That’s

why I'm at ATS.

Over the course of my career, I've noticed this assumption that single women have lots of time because they don't have children. Married women tend to rely on single women for everything. Even when I was still living at home with my parents, my brothers used to drop their kids off and expect me to take care of them, thinking that I had all the time in the world.

Similarly, in the seminary, married faculty expect that their single colleagues will do more work. So single women are often overworked. And the problem is that because a single woman doesn't have a family, she doesn't know how to put a stop to this situation. Married people go home, and they have children, a spouse – they play with the children, they do things as a family, and therefore they have a break. But because single women don't have those demands, they just keep working. And then, because a single woman produces so much, her colleagues think that she's superwoman. But she's not really. It's too easy to neglect one's spiritual, emotional, and physical well-being because one doesn't have those rhythms that are present for married people.

#### *Advice: Spiritual Disciplines*

I find it very, very important to maintain the spiritual disciplines, to have a rhythm in terms of prayer and study of the Word and keeping a journal. For me, the Word is so important; I hunger for it. I have time with God in the morning, as well as evening prayer. I light a candle, and that's my signal that this is now my time to sit before God.

Nature is also important. It's good to go away, to spend time with God in nature. Physical exercise – swimming, going for walks – nurtures the spiritual life.

Finally, fellowship is important. *ScholarLeaders* decided to fund a gathering – the *Women's PeerLeader Forum*, of which I'm a member – to encourage women who are lonely in many ways. We act as peer support to each other – we share our lives, our struggles, our prayers. We learn from one another's contexts and grow. I hope that other women will find similar peer support.

## An Ethiopian Perspective

Seblewengel Daniel  
*Evangelical Theological College  
Ethiopian Graduate School of Theology*

### *Why Should Women Be in Theological Education?: The Spirit's Gifts*

One of the greatest challenges for women in theological education, whether students or faculty members, is that people ask you why you are there. In no other discipline would you be asked, “Why are you here? What are you doing here? You know that the Bible doesn’t allow women to be this or that. Why are you here?”

The Church should understand that women have the right to serve the Lord. Service is an act of worship, so when the Church denies women the opportunity to serve, it denies women an act of worship. Those who do so will be held responsible by the Lord. One woman, a gifted teacher, wanted to teach, but the elders would not let her teach. She asked them, “Why has the Spirit given me this gift? He has not given it to me to use in the kitchen.”

We have to recognize that it is the Lord who gives gifts. I didn’t ask for the gift of teaching and counseling, but I have both. Why did the Lord give me these gifts? If the Lord gives gifts to women, it means he wants them to serve, so if we have a problem with women using their gifts, we should ask the Lord. Should the Spirit stop giving gifts to women?

To deal with these attitudes, I don’t argue with people. I just do what I’m called to do. I don’t waste my energy and time trying to change people’s minds. I know that I have a calling from the Lord, so I just do what I am called to do, and I try not to get discouraged.

### *The Ethiopian Context: Family Roles*

In Africa, women face certain expectations in the home: cook, clean, take care of the children. That’s our job description, so if you’re a woman who’s a professional, you must also try to uphold these domestic expectations.

But when husbands care for the children or do housework, they shouldn’t think that they are doing their wives a favor. That attitude among men is common. Men want to help, but even the term “help” reveals that they think that household chores belong to women, and men’s responsibilities for the house are secondary.

Of course, I believe in seasons of life. When children are very young, mothers should be more available – that’s natural. But apart from that, housework should

be divided between husband and wife. And when the husband does his chores, he's not doing a favor for his wife – it's his household too. When he takes care of his family, he's taking care of *his* family. Yet when men do housework, they expect a lot of praise – when women do these backbreaking jobs all the time, and they don't expect praise and recognition.

*Personal Story: Learning to Let Go*

My parents have six children, three boys and three girls. Our father never showed favoritism, so I don't feel inferior as a woman. Despite African culture, because I was empowered as a young girl, I never feel inferior. I may feel inadequate in other ways, but never as a woman.

For me, the greatest challenge is not the culture. It's myself. I expect so much from myself. I used to try to do it all, but when I was preparing to get married, my mother told me, "Seble, don't do everything. You have to allow your husband to help you. If you don't let him help you at the beginning of your marriage, for the rest of your life, you're going to end up doing everything."

I gave birth to our first boy in Ghana [when I was studying at the Akrofi-Christaller Institute]. My mother traveled to Ghana to help us. She saw that I would not let my husband hold the baby because *this is my baby*. I would say, "No, no, no, I don't like the way you're holding him." Then I would take over. So my mother said, "Seble, listen to me. You're going to be holding this baby for a long time. Let him hold the baby. The baby will not die." She told me to stop criticizing my husband for everything: "Let him be a father in the way he knows."

Another time, I asked my husband to dress our six-year-old daughter. He put on her outfit, and I didn't like it. I was tempted to change it. I looked at him and at what he had put on her – and I decided not to do that. We may think that this is a very small thing, but it's actually huge. If we constantly correct our husbands, they will let us do everything. And why would you ask them to help you if you're going to end up criticizing them each time?

So most of the challenge comes from myself. I'm learning to give myself a break, to let go. I'm learning to let my husband be a father to our children and help around the house, and not correct him in everything he does. We don't have to be perfectionists. If the house isn't clean, that's ok. If everything isn't in order, that's fine. If the kids don't shower every day, that's fine too (as long as it's not humid!). Most of the time, women put the burden on themselves – we want to do everything ourselves, our way, at our time. So I am working on myself to let go and let others help. I encourage other women to challenge themselves in this way also.

*Advice: Remember that the Lord Is With You*

Women are very strong: think about what we – mothers, wives, single women – can do during a short period of time, in one day. But when men are unkind to us, not only our husbands or fathers but also our colleagues, that is so discouraging. So I challenge men to show kindness to women in the household, the workplace, wherever.

To women, I say that it is wonderful to have supportive fathers, husbands, children, or churches. Even if you don't have any of that, though, remember that the Lord is by your side.

## A Palestinian-Israeli Perspective

Rula Mansour  
Nazareth Evangelical College

Editor's Note: Below, Rula says, "Education has come to replace land." The idea of education replacing land as an inheritance for Palestinian-Israelis is a foundational shift, given the importance of the concept of land as inheritance in the Middle East.

### *Why Should Women Be in Theological Education?: Unique Perspectives*

Seminaries should encourage women to publish because women's voices are key: their perspectives as mothers, wives, and singles feed the way they understand theology, practice it, teach it, and write it. So seminaries must not delete women's perspectives or discourage them.

Women need time, encouragement, and support to make these contributions. Theological institutions should send women to international conferences and universities; these experiences will in turn enrich the sending institutions. As they have a higher profile, women faculty will grow in teaching, in faith, in perceiving God's will. Institutions should also recognize women's gifts – I don't mean their gifts of the Spirit, necessarily, but personal gifts or skills related to their gender. These gifts differ from men's, and they can enrich the whole team, so seminaries should give women formal positions and look at them as full, equal partners.

### *The Palestinian-Israeli Context: Women as Second-Class Citizens in a Three-Fold Minority*

When I say that I am a Palestinian-Israeli, people say, "Oh, then you are Jewish." I say, "No! No! I'm not Jewish. I'm a Palestinian Arab." Then people say, "Oh, then you are a Muslim." I say, "No! No! I'm not a Muslim. I'm a Palestinian-Arabic Christian." Then people say, "Okay, we understand – you are a Muslim who converted to Christianity." I say, "No. We have been Christian since the beginning. My family has been Christian for centuries."

Evangelical Christians in Palestine are a three-fold minority. We are a minority within the Jewish community; we are a minority within the Muslim community; and most Christians in Israel are Catholic or Orthodox, so Evangelicals are a minority within the Christian community.

This status affects theological education. Because we are such a minority, not much theological education is available. On top of this, not many women study theology because Middle Eastern culture is patriarchal. Patriarchy shapes the Church as well as society. Women are not allowed to be pastors, even though they are a majority in the church (in our church, 70% of the members are women). Thus, because Evangelical Christian women are second-class citizens in a population that's a three-fold minority, very few women seek theological education. At the same time, for Evangelical Christians, education has come to replace land. Thus, many women, especially Christian women, are highly educated – but not in theology.

If we look to the future, I think that Christian Palestinian women have great potential to become theological educators. But we face the demands of being mothers and wives. Of course, those roles are a blessing – but they hinder the community from accepting us as theological educators.

How do Christian Palestinian women deal with these challenges? Persistence. Even as a minority, women are so influential. They do almost everything except preach – logistics, Sunday school, etc. Women may not have formal power, but they have informal power.

### *Personal Story: A Resilient Marriage*

When God called me to leave my job as a public prosecutor and study theology, I was not looking for a job; I was not looking to study; I already had a Master's. But because I felt God's calling, I decided to put all my effort there. Whenever I grew discouraged, I asked, "What's it all about? It's God calling. I know that God is with me." God has supported me at every step.

God gave me the support of my father, who taught me that I could fulfill my dreams through hard work and perseverance. This, too, is related to being a Palestinian woman and a Christian – because you are part of a minority, you must study hard, work hard, so that you can succeed.

The primary support God gave me is my husband, who has always believed in my calling. My church also supported me when I did my PhD, and so did my kids. They understood, "Mom is doing her PhD, so she studies all the time. That's fine. Someday she will finish," and thank God, I did. I insisted on working hard so that I could finish before my children became teenagers.

Through my career, I have found that life has seasons. Sometimes, a wife puts more time into the family and the husband less; other times, the husband puts in more time and the wife less, depending on what each one is doing and what God's calling is for them.

At the beginning of our marriage, we were both working very hard. I was a public prosecutor; my husband started a new business. We worked like crazy. When we started having kids, we had three boys, each three years apart, so they were all very young at the same time. But I couldn't leave my job and go home because I'm a woman – I have to work hard to make everybody see that I'm a professional. So my husband left his work and ferried the kids to school, fed them, etc. He would go back to work when I came home – we did shifts. This was crazy; it was very hard. Eventually, my husband and I sat down and talked. He said, "It's either your career or my career. We can't both have careers and a family." God seemed to be speaking to us. So when my kids were in elementary school (the oldest was six; the others were still so young), I quit my job.

Yet it seemed that God was preparing me for something new. I started to look for PhD programs. I began my PhD part-time from home, though I did travel to Oxford (U.K.) twice a year. This situation was excellent: I was available as a mom but also working on my PhD. I could study at night, and during the day, I could be with the family. So: life has seasons. I had to accommodate my family. But my husband and I chose this together as we talked, planned, and prayed.

Then when I began my dissertation, I needed focus to write. It was impossible to write with three kids at home. My husband and I talked and prayed again, and God opened the way for me to go to the States: Eastern Mennonite University invited me to be a visiting scholar. My husband said, "If this is what you want to do, and it will let you finish your PhD, then we will all go together." So we all moved to the States for two years. My husband ran his business from home, and I went to the library for 11 hours a day. At the end of two years, I was done. We returned to Palestine – my husband worked very hard at his business; I had a more relaxed time at home with the kids. So life has seasons, and it's important to have a healthy marriage in order to plan well together.

Even more important is a right relationship with God because when He plans, everything goes smoothly. Everything is not perfect, but you will see God lifting you up when you face a barrier. I don't say that there's no discouragement or tiredness: sometimes I would cry and say, "God, how can I start this chapter?" But I can look back and see God lifting me up, walking with me, and putting His hand on my whole family. So our work starts with God and ends with God. He leads the way, and He is faithful to the end.

*Advice: Exercise & Communal Prayer*

I exercise three times a week – that’s a must for me. Find something you enjoy, anything that makes you move physically, walking, running, whatever.

Also, I’m committed to a prayer group once a week. When I say “prayer group,” I mean four hours of worship and prayer with precious sisters in Christ. We are committed to support one another, to share with and strengthen one another. We study the Bible, but mostly we pray. Every time, I come out full of energy, stronger spiritually.

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## A Korean Perspective

Jung-Sook Lee  
*Torch Trinity Graduate University*

### *Why Should Women Be in Theological Education?: The Next Generation*

I want to be in leadership in theological education for the sake of the next generation. I want young women to be more prosperous and more active, to express themselves in God’s calling.

When I was a PhD student, I encountered a moment when I considered quitting. I was studying at Princeton Theological Seminary (USA). I had had two babies. After I gave birth to the second, I was very weak. This forced me to stop and consider. I wrote a letter to my professors saying, “Thank you so much. You have done so much for me, but now I have to quit.” My advisor was a pioneering woman herself. When she received the letter (she was the first person to whom I sent it), she said, “Would you think one more time before you send it to everyone else? You can always quit. Just consider one more time.” So I did. My first child is a daughter; the second, a son. I looked at my daughter. She was only 2 years old. As I looked at her, I thought about 20 years later, 30 years later. If she were in my shoes, what would she do? What kind of decision would she make? I realized that I should not give up because of my children.

So as Academic Dean or Vice President or President, I often faced challenges, but I always thought about the people who would come next, especially the women. I wanted to show them that they could succeed. In my career, I was often the first woman to take an administrative role. I was the first woman president of Torch Trinity. As the first woman, I faced many expectations – and some praise as well – but also extra difficulty. Yet now, as I reflect, I find that it was a rewarding experience. In history, we see so many who ran their race, finished, and are now witnesses. I believe that I have become one of them.

### *The Korean Context: Communications & Decision-Making*

Generally, it is said that women are better in communications, better in details, and better in sacrifice. These observations are quite true but not always true. Not every woman is like that – there are personal differences, of course. But usually, we women do believe in verbal communication. We like to make sure that we are understood. Such clear verbal communication can really be a blessing in an institutional setting. Women can communicate discreetly – we can email people or talk to them outside formal meetings so that we can get people’s opinions.

The other side of this strength, though, is that women like to have more meetings. They like to be sure that all the committee members are heard. That’s a good thing, of course, but sometimes, it can also reveal a woman’s lack of confidence in decision-making. A woman might want to be sure that a decision is made democratically by everyone else; she doesn’t want to be responsible for it. And sometimes, male faculty will say, “Just make a decision! Make a decision.”

I had to think about this because when I became Academic Dean, the man in the role before me had been quite authoritarian, and here I was, being very democratic and gentle, seeking consensus. I realized that there was some truth in my male colleagues’ advice: some decisions I had to make by myself. I had to be responsible for what I was building.

### *Personal Story: A First Woman*

I have just finished my term as the fifth president of Torch Trinity Christian University in Seoul. Altogether, I have served as an administrator for almost 15 years. I first was called to be Academic Dean in 2005 at quite a critical time for my school: it was just a small English-language school, but the then-president was a megachurch pastor as well. He had this grand plan of expanding the school by adding a Korean program and a lot of other things. He was quite ambitious. In my role, I worked hard to fulfill his dreams. Perhaps surprisingly, I was very happy to be busy. The school was also transitioning from American leadership to Korean leadership. I was happy to do whatever I could to make the school successful, ultimately, to please God.

I was surprised to find that I had a lot to give. I had never been officially trained in administration or management, and I was already in my 40s, but I had much to contribute. I had been to several different schools and observed many things. So I was grateful to the Lord that he had exposed me to many different schools, administrative styles, and programs.

As I finish my career, I see that change comes slowly. My generation was often the tipping point; many of us were the first women in our areas. Younger women won’t see this. They enter ministry later, and they find more opportunities and more open-mindedness. Still, they will not see as many possibilities as we could wish. So we must be patient. We must acknowledge that if we were in the positions men

have occupied, we might not always find it easy to make changes. We must be patient with others. The work of theological education all belongs to God anyway.

*Advice: Be Faithful, Be Fair, & Be Sacrificial*

First: Younger generations have more opportunities than I did. You younger women will be surprised by how much you can actually have, and give, and contribute because God has trained you. Yet you must be faithful with every little opportunity and responsibility you have. Be observant. Don't take anything for granted. Be conscientious. Nothing will be lost in God's Kingdom; everything will be used by his mighty grace. So be faithful.

Second: Be fair. Women need to be fair and responsible. Fairness is especially important for administrators. If you are not fair to every person in your organization, you will have to leave sooner or later. So walk by rules, by principles. Be responsible for what you have done, what you have said, what decisions you have made – whether you did these things alone or as part of a team. Maintain this for your whole career.

Finally, as others have said, we must not sabotage ourselves in the name of sacrifice. At the same time, we must not lose the virtue of sacrifice. Jesus wouldn't be Jesus without sacrifice. So we must not be too afraid of making sacrifices. Sometimes we may be able to say, "You can go over me. You can pass me by," as long as God's Word is manifested through us.

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## An Ivorian Perspective

Eliane Mensah

*Université de l' Alliance Chrétienne d' Abidjan (FATEAC/UACA)*

Editor's Note: Eliane mentions that she is "not even a member of the Christian Alliance Church in Ivory Coast." She makes this point because the seminary at which she teaches, FATEAC/UACA, is affiliated with the Christian [Missionary] Alliance.

*Personal Story: God Is Sovereign*

Our God is sovereign, and He shows His sovereignty in His choices, in the way He provides for everything He wants us to do. We just have to obey. In my case, from the beginning, the Lord's call on my life was very clear to me. But I didn't know exactly what to do with that call. I was praying for it to be clear because I had other possibilities, but I wasn't convinced by any of them. Then, when I met my husband, I knew that God wanted me to serve through Bible translation. So I began training alongside my husband.

Yet my path wasn't straight. For almost 11 years, I worked beside my husband, not on the Bible translation project itself but assisting him. I think that this situation was what God wanted – for me to help my husband and be beside him. During our work, we shared a burden: the great need for Africans to be trained at high levels as Bible translation consultants. Because of a lack of trained consultants, our project lasted too long. So I felt a burden that I needed to help train more people to be competent with Bible translation. We began to pray for that.

I saw my husband going forward, earning more training, and teaching. We were preparing to move to France so that he could do his PhD. Three months before we were scheduled to leave, I told my husband that I felt that I, too, should get more training and help to equip more Bible translators. So we told our supervisors that I also wanted to do a PhD, and within three months, they had found a full scholarship for me from a church in Malaysia. It was something completely unexpected. So my husband and I both went.

After we finished our PhDs, SIL [Summer Institute of Linguistics International] in Francophone Africa assigned us to be professors in the translation department of our seminary. I served with gratefulness; I really love my job because it is, for me, a way to say thank you to the Lord. So I didn't need to be told to do things officially; I did whatever came to hand with joy.

The seminary's translation department needed a department head. The president asked me whether I would consider taking this responsibility. After our conversation, I thought that maybe he would ask me to be department head formally, but for a year, he said nothing more. And then one day, he came and asked me whether I wanted to be Academic Dean for the whole seminary. That was very unusual: I'm not a theologian, nor am I a man. I'm not even a member of the Christian Alliance Church in Ivory Coast. I faced so many obstacles. But again, the Lord's call was very clear, saying that what He wanted me to do was not an opportunity to lift myself up or because of special skills I had but because of what He, the Lord, wanted to do. So I prayed and tried to depend on God as I stepped into that responsibility.

I can testify that the Lord has been very faithful. I took the responsibility of serving as Academic Dean at a very critical moment for our seminary because we were preparing to become a university. The seminary was undergoing so many changes; so many faculty needed to gain further training in order for us to earn government accreditation; we had to revise the curricula, etc. Yet now we have succeeded in this effort, and we have earned government accreditation.

*Advice: Pay Attention to What God Wants You To Be*

Ephesians 2:10 is my life verse, and from it I believe that whether we are men or women, we must remember that God has a plan. God has specific things for each

of his children to do. We have to learn to see our lives through the lens of what God wants for us, of what God wants us to be. To me, the fact of being a man or a woman is not very important because it is God who gives the gifts; God equips us to do our jobs.

We must follow what God wants us to do with our lives. We have to pay attention to what God wants us to be. It's not a matter of what we can do or what people will think of us. If God calls us to do something and we obey, He provides. So we have to be confident in the faithfulness of God in our lives and let Him glorify His name.

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## An American Perspective

Meritt Sawyer  
*Peninsula Covenant Church*

### *The U.S. Context: Men Need to Encourage*

In Silicon Valley, you see very few women as executive pastors. This can be very discouraging. I don't believe this problem has a magic bullet, but I know that a man encouraged me into my first management role as he identified a certain skill set in me. From his position of leadership, he advocated for me. Eventually, he stepped out of power and gave that position to a woman.

So we need to talk about the role of men in institutions. In order for women to step forward, we need women advocates, of course, but we also need male advocates who can help to open doors and then step aside. I'm so excited for this new generation because I'm seeing more men who will hand over power to women.

However, we need to recognize that we must do this in dialogue as individuals, in small groups, and ultimately in institutions. It's not simply a question of women being qualified and ready to take leadership roles – that's been true for a long time – but a question of ongoing dialogue with men. For that dialogue to happen, we need to see men who are ready to hand over power.

### *Personal Story: A Winding Path*

About 40 years ago, I was a very new believer. I had not grown up in a Christian home. I was newly married, and my husband and I had just returned to his home state, California. At that time, I began to struggle with the fact that Jesus is the Lord of all nations, not just of me in my moment. When I finally submitted to the Lord, I decided that I was going to be a missionary to India – I knew this for a fact. I told my husband that we were going to India to be missionaries. He had just joined a family business, completed business school, returned to California. Shaking

in his boots, he said, “I’m not feeling it. God just called us back to California, remember?”

That was the first moment in my life where I decided to recognize that God speaks to both of us collaboratively. I had to submit to God’s voice, even as I wondered what was happening. God blessed us as I worked in relationship with my husband, as he spoke to both of us.

Inevitably, God showed me that I would not have been a very effective missionary – I wasn’t up to the language or the culture. Instead, God showed me amazing men and women studying at Fuller beginning their PhDs. So I founded an organization to provide scholarships for these leaders from what people in the U.S. had been calling the “Third World.” Eventually, as my scholarship organization grew, I stumbled onto John Stott, who was doing something similar in the U.K. We merged our organizations, and God just kept growing that ministry, showing me how he could use me in ways that I could never have imagined.

It was an amazing privilege to be in that ministry, but the path was never straight. Women often talk about life seasons, and I fully believe that, but I also believe that the path is never straight.

Through this process, God called me into theological education, so I have dedicated myself to theological education through nonprofits. During this career, I have been a manager of men – at every stage, God has called me into positions in which I lead an all-male team. From these experiences, I have advocated for women. I have sought to hire women into positions of power. It’s a privilege to advocate for women and shine a light on what God is doing around the world.

Last summer, I thought I was moving into semi-retirement, when a church in Silicon Valley called me to be their executive pastor. When the man called me to offer me the position, I said, “No way!” The one thing I knew for sure is that I would never work for a church. But he said, “You’ll pray about it, right?” Here I was again. I thought this was so unfair because then I *had* to pray about it, and the next thing I knew, God was calling me to this role. So now every week, I run these meetings with the eight men who report to me. I continue to believe that women have a unique calling in these kinds of management positions.

*Advice: Be Confident; Avoid Self-Sabotage*

I encourage women to bring other women around them. I have an amazing group of women who each speak into my life and hold me accountable to what God has called me to be, and I try to do the same for others.

On another point: I am an executive administrator of a church; I have worked for 40 years. I have multiple degrees. I am qualified as someone who thinks strategically.

God has gifted me as a visionary. Does what I am saying make anyone feel uncomfortable? Perhaps I'm sounding too confident. But why is that? As a woman, I say these things about myself, and people become uncomfortable; if a man said these things to a conference of men, no one would blink. So I say to women: lean in to exactly who God has called you to be, and God will be faithful to you.

Why is it that we as women cannot have enough confidence in ourselves to recognize how God has gifted each one of us? I am gifted very differently from most women: I'm not as nurturing as some; I tend more toward the academic. Sometimes my husband is far better with kids than I am.

Women need to be fair with themselves in managing expectations. As women look at jobs, they need to be sure that they are being paid equally to what a man is being paid. They need to get the same administrative support that a man gets. As women, we tend to say, "Oh, I don't really need that. I can sacrifice that." But by doing that, we sabotage ourselves. Self-sabotage is one of the worst things women can do. Women should have these conversations before they accept a job.

So I want to encourage women to be confident and not to sabotage themselves.



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## **Eliane Mensah**

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## **Meritt Sawyer**

Meritt Sawyer co-founded FACT, which provided scholarships for people from the Majority World to do PhDs in theology. FACT is now part of Langham Partnership, which Meritt served as International Program Director. She is now Executive Pastor of Peninsula Covenant Church in California (U.S.A.). In addition, she serves on the boards of Fuller Theological Seminary, Christianity Today, Oxford Centre for Mission Studies, and ScholarLeaders International. She earned a Masters in Theology from Fuller Theological Seminary. She facilitates the ScholarLeaders Women's PeerLeader Forum.