

“Not for my sake, but for the church”

The Contributions of Three Female Pioneers to Church Leadership

Abstract:

This study examines the contributions of three female pioneers to the leadership of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Norway. This study presents an empirical analysis of the leadership contributions of the female leader of a faith-based organization, one of the first female Lutheran ministers, and the first female bishop, thereby contributing to a better understanding of female church leadership. The leadership role of these women can be characterized as symbolic change-making, as ideological, value-based, and relational community building. Despite resistance, the women were moved by their personal calling to assume a symbolic leadership role, embodying change in the church. They were reluctant to define a leadership position, but took steps toward a more inclusive and holistic church, infusing the organization with values such as compassion, equality, and justice, while fighting for social issues and working for outcasts. They displayed as well a relational and holistic orientation, building communities of sisterhood and family-oriented fellowship.

Keywords:

female leadership, church leadership, pastoral leadership

1. Introduction

She felt a deep connection with the population. When someone had lost some of theirs, she shared her grief with them, just as she took part in the joy of newborn life and children who were carried to baptism. This became her reality and life.
(Tønnessen 2014, 140, about Ingrid Bjerås;
my translation)

On 3 March 1961, in the Norwegian cabinet, it was decided that Ingrid Bjerås could be ordained as a female minister in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of

Norway. March 19, 1961, Bjerås was ordained in Vang Church in the Hamar diocese, saying, “It was not for my sake, but the whole church” (Bjerås 1966, 53; my translation). A century earlier, in 1868, a woman paved the way to become a female leader of a faith-based organization. Cathinka Guldberg established the education of women to become deaconesses and parish nurses in Norway (Espedal & Hovland 2012). At that time, becoming a deaconess was the closest a woman could come to leadership in the church. In 1993, more than 120 years later, Norway got its first female bishop. Rosemarie Köhn started studying theology before she knew women could become ministers. In Norway, she was the sixth woman to be ordained and the third female bishop elected in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of the world.

For over more than 150 years, these women were pioneers and church leaders. Guldberg was a leader of the Deaconess House for more than 50 years; Bjerås became one of the first female Lutheran ministers and led two congregations in northern Norway. Köhn became the first woman to lead a diocese. Despite challenges and resistance from a conservative elite, the women took a stance in accepting the position and forming leadership roles. They represented a symbolic change in and of themselves, and in their position, they contributed to a preunderstanding of female leadership in the church. This paper investigates the contribution of these predecessors to understanding female church leadership.

Much research has recently been published on church leadership and the role and practice of leaders without specifying the difference between women and men (Askeland 2016, Saxegaard 2009, Sirris 2018, Sløk 2008). However, there has been a call for more investigation into women’s leadership (Edgardh 2010, Keller & Ruether 2006, Ruether 1993, Russell 1974, Young 2000). Understanding female leadership is of interest particularly in a situation where the number of female ministers and bishops is increasing. In 2019, 36% of appointed ministers were women, compared to 31% in 2017 (The Norwegian Church Annual Report 2019).

This study builds on a comparative historical analysis of the leadership contributions of Guldberg, Bjerås, and Köhn. The data sources are primary sources, such as in-depth research interviews with one of the women (Köhn) and self-presentations and personal letters by the two others (Bjerås and Guldberg). Three recent biographies on the three women – Espedal and Hovland (2012), Tønnessen (2014), Espedal (2007) – were also analyzed and interpreted. These biographies must be understood as secondary sources because the life and words of the women are interpreted by the authors. The women’s own stories and life stories were compared regarding their context, characteristics, aim, mission, philosophy, and contributions to look for patterns of female church leadership.

These three women, pioneers in their respective positions, are to be viewed as predecessors of modern female church leadership. As a theoretical framework, this study leans on theories of church leadership, institutional leadership as well as

theories of Christian social practice. The qualitative approach of doing a comparative historical analysis allows to compare the different life stories regarding their context, themes, and contributions. Despite the long timespan of the contributions of the women, these pioneers broaden current theories of church leadership and can be characterized as symbolic changemakers, ideological and value-based, and relational community-builders. Their female contribution lies in their work for social issues as well as communities that maintain and modify the church as an institution.

2. Theoretical Framework

In the last two decades, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Norway, as well as the Church of Sweden, has gone through several reforms. In Norway, the introduction of new church laws (1996) separated the church from the state (2017). The new regulations have enhanced discussions on responsibility and leadership, especially investigating church leaders' roles and characteristics (Askeland 2016, Saxegaard 2009, Sirris 2018, Sløk 2009). Despite increased research interest, however, only a few studies have included a description of female church leadership, analyzing what contributions women might make to the church.

Church leadership is understood as "a special concern for the preservation of the Christian identity of the community in constantly changing circumstances" (Carroll 1991, 97). Concerning church leadership, we include here women's experiences (Enarson & Morrow 1997) and take into consideration that women have other approaches to leadership than men (Dalen & Almås 1997). Generally speaking, research has identified women as being more collaborative and cooperative and less hierarchical and authoritative (Fisher 1999). Scholars have highlighted female leaders bring forward long-term strategic thinking and important future perspectives to enable life-giving services (Ward 2008). Others point to the gifts that women bring to leadership such as emotional sensitivity and empathy (Rosener 2011). I do not engage here in a theological discussion of the female ministry nor do I analyze the differences in biology, but rather investigate the contribution of women to church leadership. Within the feminist theology tradition (Ruether 1993, Russell 1974, Young 2000), women's experiences are claimed to be of importance to understanding the ministry and leadership of the church (Keller 2006).

In establishing a theoretical framework for understanding female church leadership, I use interdisciplinary lenses. A theoretical framework of institutional leadership provides a perspective for understanding leadership under complex and changing circumstances (Besharov & Khurana 2015, Selznick 1957). To lead an organization, a manager has to be conscious of more than the formal system of rules and objectives; the leadership task lies in seeing the organization as a product

of social needs and pressures. As such, Selznick (1957/1984, 28) describes institutional leadership as being “[about] the promotion and protection of values.” As such, leadership can be understood as part of “the work involved in governing, adapting, and reforming organizational institutions” (Kraatz 2009, 60).

Studies investigating church leadership tend to highlight leaders in the church as taking roles as conductors and integrators as well as protecting and promoting the organization’s values (Askeland 2016). The competencies of leaders in the church are addressed as both general and professional (Sirris 2018). An ecclesial leadership model considers the church as an antihierarchical organization promoting an ideal of equality (Sløk 2009). For church leaders, this means engaging in self-leadership: performing pastoral self-leadership, leading organizational members to lead themselves, or engaging in the construction of the organization’s past, present, and future (Morvik 2016, Sløk 2008).

Theories of Christian social practice highlights the gender inequality of the church as founded in two different images of the church: a patriarchal image and an image of a vital church with a range of activities for which women and men are special guardians of the weak and poor in society (Edgardh 2010). Ecclesiologically, the church was closely modeled on a male image. However, feminist theologians have applied the perspectives of women gathering in faith communities and in being people of God (Fiorenza 2015, Ruether 1993). A Norwegian study identifies the role of women and men in ministry as different. Women’s style can be viewed as “living the message,” while men “deliver a message” (Dalen & Almås 1997, 51).

As a point of departure for this study, I take Saxegaard’s perspectives on church leadership to open a way to identify women’s leadership contributions. Church leadership is described with three different roles: symbolic, strategic, and interactive. The church leader’s role comprises more than just standing in front of the congregation and leading the services and the religious lives of the members. Leadership, for the minister, means being a liturgist and a preacher, communicating a message. As such, the symbolic church leader represents the transcendence of religion, belief in the church, and the administration of the sacraments (Saxegaard 2009). Strategic leadership goes beyond preaching and serving the masses. It requires the continual development of the regulative framework, identity, and value foundation. Additionally, a church leader should be interactive, in dialogue with colleagues, church members, and other professionals (Saxegaard 2009). Thus, this paper asks the following questions: How do women in the church shape their roles and how do they contribute to church leadership?

3. Research Setting and Methods

To analyze the contribution of the female church leaders, a comparative historical analysis was conducted leaning on Mahoney and Rueschemeyer (2003). A historical analysis encompasses changes in a specific instance, for example, of gender and class (Davidoff & Hall 2013) or changes in a relationship (Smith 2004). To identify a general pattern of women's contributions, I analyzed and compared sequences of life stories and events in their lives to find characteristics of their leadership. The study covers a long timespan of 150 years of women from various historical periods. However, the study is based on a hypothesis of there being a common pattern of women developing leadership roles in changing circumstances. An overall abductive approach was used to iterate between an overarching pattern of the leadership as performed and the empirical and theoretical data sources (Dubois & Gadde 2002). This approach allowed going beyond the theories of church leadership to identify the women's contributions.

The word “church” here refers to the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Norway. It is well known that the first female minister in Norway was Agnes Nilsen, ordained in the Methodist Church in 1954. Both Bjerkås and Köhn were theologians and ministers. Guldberg was a leader of a faith-based organization with a strong affiliation with the church. The education her organization provided was viewed as a first step for women to become diaconal workers and leaders of this work in the church (Jurisson 2006).

3.1 Short Description of the Three Women

Cathinka Guldberg (1840–1919) is regarded as the founder of Norway's first nursing school. Through the Awakening Movement, Guldberg received a calling from God to take care of the poor, whereby calling here is understood as a personal religious calling connected to her faith. Later she received a formal calling from the committee of the first deaconess institution to return home to become the first leader of a training institution of deaconesses (1868). She was not outspoken on her leadership position or her skills, rather her leadership took the form of motherhood for the pupil sisters (Ebbell 1940, 135) it is claimed, through the “actions, the mother spoke” (ibid, 104). Although it has been 150 years since Guldberg became the head of the organization, her legacy is still mentioned in the strategic plans of the contemporary deaconess hospital when discussing their actions (Value Foundation and Strategic Goals 2021)

Ingrid Bjerkås was the first ordained female minister in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Norway. She began studying theology late in life after having been a housewife for several years. She experienced a personal, religious calling during World War II, which led her to oppose the Norwegian military leader, Quisling,

and the German Nazi leader, Terboven. In 1952, upon studying theology, she was older than the other students (Tønnessen 2014, 80). Although her theology was claimed to be one of a “housewife,” she is said to have become a reformer of the church (ibid, 139). After massive resistance, she was ordained in 1961 at the age of 60. She took a job as a minister in a congregation in northern Norway, a position no male ministers had applied for, in the Berg and Torsken congregations.

Rosemarie Köhn was the first female bishop in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Nordic countries, consecrated on 20 May 1993. Köhn supported Bjerkås in her fight against the massive resistance toward female ministers. On 20 August 1969, she became the sixth female minister to be ordained in Norway. She got a position as a faculty member at the University of Oslo, teaching theology students Hebrew. Later, she became the principal of the Seminary of Practical Theology. She did not aspire to become a leader, but others claimed that her teaching the future ministers of the church opened the way for her to become the first female bishop. However, she was not elected without a fight, which she herself called “a witchhunt” (Espedal 2007, 136; my translation).

3.2 Data Collection

For this project, the author used a mixed set of sources to collect data. Table 1 gives an overview of the data sources. To get an in-depth understanding of the women’s contribution as church leaders, I applied primary and secondary sources of the women’s lives as well as archival sources and research interviews. A primary source such as life-story interviews (Atkinson 1998) with Rosemarie Köhn was applied. The five interviews, lasting 1–2 hours, were recorded, transcribed, and coded in Nvivo. Cathinka Guldberg’s Christmas letters to deaconess sisters all over the country were read, analyzed, and subjected to thematic analysis. Additionally, one letter was included in which Guldberg stated her thoughts about leadership (letter to leader Bruun, 2 August 1868). Guldberg’s self-presentations and personal calling to become a deaconess taken from her biography, written in 1940, were included in the data material (Ebbell 1940). In addition, Ingrid Bjerkås’ autobiography (1966) was read and thematically coded.

For the aim of this paper, I also analyzed secondary sources, such as interviews conducted with a former principal of the deaconess house with extensive knowledge of Cathinka Guldberg (2010–2011). 19 hours of transcribed interviews with the principal were read.

Table 1 Overview of data sources and strategies for analyzing the data.

Data sources	Strategies for analyzing the data
<i>Primary sources</i>	
Interviews with Rosemarie Köhn (5 interviews, 7.5 hours).	Recorded, transcribed, and coded in Nvivo
Letters from Cathinka Guldberg (14) to the sisters (five from the period 1906–1917 and nine letters undated, probably from the same period). One letter on leadership was written by Guldberg.	Read, coded in Nvivo
Autobiography of Ingrid Bjerckås (1966) (173 pages).	Read, coded with Post-it notes
<i>Secondary sources</i>	
Interviews with a former principal about Cathinka Guldberg (19 hours).	Recorded, transcribed, and read
Biography of Cathinka Guldberg written in 1940 (206 pages).	Read, coded with Post-it notes
Biography of Ingrid Bjerckås (209 pages).	Read, coded with Post-it notes
Biography of Rosemarie Köhn (268 pages).	Read, coded with Post-it notes
Articles and documents of the deaconess house such as annual books, reports, and anniversary texts (100 pages).	Read, coded with Post-it notes

Archival and secondary sources such as the three biographies of the three women were read and assessed for critical factors such as time and authenticity. When reading the biographies, I employed narrative, thematic analysis to theorize from the cases rather than from the components of the story (Riessman 2008). The focus in this approach lies on the content of what is being said. I established a list of thematic codes after the first reading and compared them with the codes of the primary sources. The final list included codes such as life philosophy, aim and calling, religious awakening, theology, resistance, leadership, women’s rights, political and social engagement, church work, preaching, motherhood, community, and working conditions. In the second reading of the biographies, I wrote the thematic codes on Post-it notes and placed them as codes in the text. Even though most of the texts were not produced specifically for the aim of this study, a common pattern of female church leadership did emerge.

3.3 Data Analysis

By iterating between the text and the thematic codes, it was possible to look for structure in the narratives and the characteristics of the women’s leadership. Epiphanies, or notions of significant events, were identified (Denzin 2014, 12; see Table 2). Table 2 includes aims and calling, mission, leadership philosophy, and characteristics of leadership. The criteria for the quotes and descriptions were that they be expressed by the female leaders themselves or by the authors who

were close to their stories. Aims and calling here are connected to the women's personal initiative to take a leadership role; mission is connected to the women's self-understanding of taking a leadership role. Often, the line running between having a mission and leadership philosophy is close, but here leadership philosophy is differentiated from mission to deepen the role of the mission. In the first three themes, the author searched for findings of the women's own expressions and perceptions. The last theme, describing the characteristics of female leadership, stems mostly from depictions by others.

Table 2 An overview of the three female church leaders' aims, callings, missions, and leadership characteristics.

Themes/codes	Cathinka Guldberg	Ingrid Bjerkås	Rosemarie Köhn
Aims and calling	Guldberg receives, as she says, a personal calling from God to become a deaconess. She says this leads her to take care of the sick and poor (Ebbell 1940, 35).	Bjerkås receives a religious calling during World War II to study theology. She does not follow this with "violence nor power but with spirit" (Tønnessen 2014, 32; my translation). In this position, she says she wants to reach out to all people (Bjerkås 1966, 115).	Köhn receives no clear personal calling but grows into a belief her aim is to study theology. Upon assuming the role of a bishop, she says this is a natural thing that follows women being ministers (interview June 6, 2007).
Mission	In a letter to a sister, Guldberg says her mission is to be a mother of the sisters in life and words; however, she also says she is reluctant to use the term "mother" (Ebbell 1940, 136). Instead, she says, it is the spirit of Jesus she will follow (Ebbell 1940, 114).	Bjerkås says she has not read any words of Jesus of women not being worthy of preaching the Gospel. She takes inspiration from women being witnesses of Jesus' resurrection (Bjerkås 1966, 56). After taking the exam in theology, she says she feels obligated to use it (Bjerkås 1966, 39). "It was a nice thing to show a woman could be a minister, to show that we can succeed" (Bjerkås 1966, 57; my translation).	Köhn says her life mission was to form the church. She says the time was mature, and she wanted a church that was open to discussing different relevant themes. She says her mission was to give people value, to give them something to believe in (interview June 17, 2006).

Themes/codes	Cathinka Guldberg	Ingrid Bjerkås	Rosemarie Köhn
Leadership philosophy	Guldberg asks others to pray for wisdom to lead (Ebbell 1940, 120). She uses the biblical deacon Phoebe as a role model, well-known as a helper and a patron (Jahnsen 1913). She says a leader should have “open eyes and not [act] unfairly. The leader should know each sister personally and not be dominant” (Guldberg, in a letter to Bruun, 2 August 1868).	In the sermon for Bjerkås on her ordination day, bishop Schelderup says she should find courage in Christ and “the light he finds for you” (Tønnessen 2011, 41; my translation). She herself says she is humble: “I must not bring shame to the church. I hope I will be a patient and humble person pointing to something else rather than myself” (Bjerkås 1966, 51; my translation).	“In a leader’s role, it is all about being a person who walks together with others. Certainly, a leader has to make decisions. Early on I led the children to march in the streets. But as a leader, I am working on establishing good communities. It is of importance to have ‘open ears’ to listen to everyone” (interview June 6, 2007; my translation).
Characteristics of leadership	Guldberg is described as being a relational leader who focused on the sisters’ work. Self-sacrifice is her driving force, and she was commonly known as “Mother Guldberg.” She served the sisters as well as the poor, children, elderly, and prisoners (Ebbell 1940, 146). As a way of recognizing the sisters’ work, she shook hands with all the sisters after their working day (Ebbell 1940, 73, 136).	Bjerkås’ focus was on forming her role as a minister. Her theological approach was called a housewife’s theology (Tønnessen 2014, 139). In this, she was preaching a love-based Gospel, claimed to be uncomplicated. She had a social engagement; she was righteous and politically engaged (Tønnessen 2014, 131). She was named “our mother” and said to have “melted” with the community. She talked about freedom, equality, and brotherhood to build the community (Tønnessen 2014, 127, 154).	Köhn was not explicit about being a leader but engaged more in realizing the understanding of an open church. Her favorite bible verse was that we are all one in Christ (Gal. 3:28). She took inspiration from the prophets of doom, compelling social justice for all men, rich and poor alike. As such, she fought for the right of homosexual ministers to become pastors of the church (Espedal 2007, 79, 95).

From Table 2, it was possible to identify the characteristics of the three women’s contributions to an understanding of female church leadership. In turbulent situations, often against great resistance, the women showed courage to think the impossible, to consider women being leaders. As such, these women became symbolic changemakers, the change being their own careers. They were humble in expressing their leadership role, but they took up positions of becoming and being

a minister of the people and a “mother” to both the sisters and the community. What emerged from the analysis was a strong value orientation toward being more ideological and value-based in realizing the church than being strategic; and more aiming at building communities than being interactive, which are characteristics of church leadership described by Saxegaard (2009). These findings are elaborated on further below.

4. Female Contributions to Church Leadership

To understand the role of these women and their contributions, I will first describe the institutional context in which they, despite resistance, became ministers and leaders. Church leadership is described as a special concern for the preservation of the Christian identity of the community under constantly changing circumstances (Carroll 1991). Further, I present the aims, missions, and philosophy of the women in taking leadership positions before discussing their contribution to the understanding of church leadership.

4.1 Institutional Context

All three women experienced theological and dogmatic resistance as well as practical argumentation against their role as leaders. For Guldberg, the strongest argumentation came from a German deaconess leader. President Zoellner stated, “To lead a house of deaconesses was not perceived as something to be bestowed upon women (Jahnsen 1919, 138–139).” The calling of women was generally seen to be homemaking (Martinsen 1984). This argumentation was supported by Norwegian deaconess leaders. However, they encouraged women to become nurses, a profession said to be close to women’s compassionate and emotional abilities (Espedal & Hovland 2012, 160).

Bjerkås’ path to the ministry was said to be “dramatic” (Tønnessen 2014, 86). When she was ordained, six of the nine bishops protested, arguing that this was against their interpretation of the New Testament. They asserted their right to refuse any participation in female ministry (Tønnessen 2014, 93). 30 years later, when Köhn was nominated to become a bishop, the bishops were more open and tolerant. Then, it was the Christian press that “hunted” Köhn (Espedal 2007, 137), searching for controversial news and printing reports of Köhn’s “sexual teaching,” of her being in favor of self-determined abortion, sex before marriage, and homosexual partnership, teachings she herself said she was not aware of (interview 17 June 2006).

4.2 The Aim, Missions, and Leadership Philosophy of the Women

The first two leaders, Guldberg and Bjerkås, had an explicit experience of a personal and religious calling from God to move toward being a leader and a minister. Later, Köhn said it was a position to grow into. Nevertheless, all three of them accepted their formal calling to take up their role in the office. The two first leaders pointed to the notion of their following the spirit of Jesus and the aim of taking care of the poor and sick or the people of the congregation. Köhn saw the opportunity to form the church, to make it more open, for the church in her opinion is a place that should give people worth and something to believe in (interview 17 June 2006).

All three of them experienced resistance in assuming their leadership role. They found the situation frustrating, but it did not hinder them to think the impossible and to take up their roles as minister, bishop, or leader. The women were explicit in their leadership philosophy. Guldberg, in a letter to the committee leader of the deaconess house, stated that the mission of her leadership was to have “open eyes and not [act] unfairly. The leader should know each sister personally and not be dominant” (2 August 1868; my translation). Bjerkås showed leadership by personally resisting Nazi sympathizer leaders during World War II (Tønnessen 2014). While fellow female students at the university were reluctant to fight to become ministers, Bjerkås actively took part in discussions about women’s rights, feeling obligated to use her theological education in support. Being the first female bishop in Norway and only the third in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the world, Köhn said her life mission was to form the church, to give people worth, and to give everyone something to believe in (interview 17 June 2006).

4.3 Characteristics of the Women’s Leadership

After looking at the three women’s lives, their experiences, aim, missions and philosophy, and their contribution to church leadership, I would characterize them as symbolic changemakers, ideological and value-based, and relational community builders. The common pattern of women’s leadership as well as the differences are poignant. Table 3 highlights the characteristics of the female leaders’ contributions to church leadership, which will be elaborated on further below.

Table 3 Characteristics of the three female leaders to church leadership

Symbolic changemakers	Ideological and value-based	Relational community builders
Symbols of change	Value-oriented leadership, promoting moral standards and values through social engagement	Working on relational dynamics, establishing the meaning of people
Creating a sense of purpose through motivating visions		Working together with others to change and maintain the community
Highlighting Biblical stories and role models to promote the meaning of their work	Addressing people's needs, presenting standards for behavior	Enhancing the common good of the community by promoting trust
Unconventional behavior, self-sacrifice, confidence, and optimism		

4.4 Symbolic Changemakers

The three women became symbolic changemakers of the church in two ways, first, by embodying the change of the church, and, second, by continuously working on their changing roles in a dialogue with the community, framing a new understanding of the leadership roles and the reality of the church. In this work, they introduced their visions of inclusiveness, described by Köhn as working to give people a sense of human dignity (interview 17 June 2006). They were not assuming leadership roles heroically but through unconventional behavior and self-sacrifice. Especially Guldberg and Bjerkås highlighted a humble approach to the role of being a leader; Köhn expresses more confidence and optimism. However, all three focused not on themselves but on the institution and their beliefs of the church.

In their work, they used biblical texts to promote their vision for people, and as such, they signaled their will to bring forward and maintain the identity of the church. Guldberg was inspired by the biblical deacon Phoebe to serve others in the congregations and found a mission in educating women to become nurses and deaconesses in hospitals, homes, and parishes (Espedal & Hovland 2012, 161). Both Bjerkås and Köhn used the biblical story of women being witnesses of Jesus' resurrection as an inspiration. Köhn's favorite bible verse was Galatians 3:28, stating that there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, as all are one in Christ Jesus.

Their leadership contribution was experienced as a symbolic change by others. The deaconess Elisabeth Fedde said of Guldberg: "Never before had I met such a woman! She is an ideal; I will strive to be like her" (Adriansen 2007; my translation). Furthermore, Köhn was elected as the century's icon by VG, a large Norwegian newspaper (Espedal 2007, 220).

4.5 Ideological and Value-Based Leaders

The women were guided by an internalized moral perspective. Through emotional appeals and behavior, they cared the oppressed and marginalized groups, led by values such as compassion, equality, and justice. Guldberg especially established a groundbreaking approach to take care of the marginalized with compassion (Ebbell 1940, 60). She was said never to pass a poor person sitting under the stairway of the deaconess house without talking to them (Ebbell 1940, 106), advocating self-reflecting questions such as “Who am I serving? – The Lord in his poor!” (Espedal & Hovland 2012, 107; my translation).

Bjerkås’ ideological and value-based goal was to take part in the social and daily life of her church members. She is the only among the three women who took a political stance supporting the Social Democratic Party. In a speech at the International Worker Day (May 1), she took the initiative to encourage people to use their skills and capabilities to take part in the life of the country, advocating social interventions to promote justice (Tønnessen 2014, 7). Bjerkås opened her own home for young boys, allowing them to go to school.

Köhn took another theological approach to being a leader. She took inspiration from the prophets of doom, especially the prophet Amos, enhancing God’s absolute sovereignty and compelling social justice for all human beings, rich and poor alike. Köhn interpreted the prophet as working on equality and justice for women and oppressed people and giving homosexuals better rights. In 1999, she reinstated a female pastor who had married a woman, even though the church had voted not to reinstate gay pastors living in partnerships (Espedal 2007, 183).

4.6 Relational Community Builders

The three women promoted trust through openness, sharing information and expressing their thoughts and feelings. All three of them worked on social relations to build the institution of the church as a community enhancing the common good. Early on, Guldberg stated in a letter that the relational dimension of leaders was to “know each sister personally.” She was commonly known as a mother to the sisters and was clear in letters that the community was built on the sisters’ lives and how they valued the needs of others (Ebbell 194, 108).

Bjerkås was inspired by the work of women in the sparsely populated fishing community where she was a pastor. She supported women in a female health group and worked and preached for better family conditions to build communities. She talked about freedom, equality, and brotherhood, and encouraged people to strive for better working conditions (Tønnessen 2014, 154). Köhn talked about not holding God in one hand and the world in the other but rather working for a viable church that engages in people’s lives (Espedal 2007, 91). She understood the Gospel of Jesus

to be about including the outcasts, the oppressed, and those who have heavy loads to carry (Espedal 2007, 97).

5. Discussing Female Church Leadership

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Norway has experienced several reforms and change processes, making it a relevant context to investigate the role of leadership in changing circumstances. This study investigated how three female predecessors shaped their roles as church leaders. I further discuss how the women contributed against the background of current theories on church leadership and identify questions for further research.

The three women did not stand on the barricades of society, using the arena to fight for women's rights; instead, they worked for the inclusiveness of women from within the church. Bjerkås was the most outspoken on women's right to become ministers, which Köhn took as a natural step. However, all three of them were humble in their position, for instance, Bjerkås in reflecting whether she would be a good representative of female ministers (Tønnessen 2014, 10). The women's focus was concentrated not on being there for their own sake but on taking the opportunity to lead the whole church to take new steps (Bjerkås 1966, 53).

Despite their modest positions on taking a leadership position, the women reformed the church as an institution (Kraatz 2009, 60). They became changemakers in the church by introducing women's experiences. The term "mother" was used to describe two of them (Guldberg and Bjerkås), bringing forward a symbolic female language of leadership. They found inspiration in the biblical words of women witnessing Jesus' resurrection and in preaching a love-based and family-oriented Gospel.

Instead of taking a strategic leadership position to develop the church's identity through a regulative framework (Saxegaard 2009), the women realized the church through everyday activities such as meeting people and relieving their pain. They took an ideological and value-based position of promoting a more holistic church, fighting for different moral issues (Selznick 1957, Askeland 2016). The women looked out for the welfare of others, fostering trust by building an ethical and moral standard for the community (Whitehead 2009). As such, they infused the organization with values such as compassion, equality, and justice.

These women as church leaders stood in an interactive dialogue with their colleagues, church members, and other professionals (Saxegaard 2009). Further, they took steps toward building a community of believers, and they engaged in the relational aspects of this work. They were conscious of the church organization as existing in interdependent relationships with others and laid the ground for relational transparency, listening to people, and enhancing their conditions (Walumbwa

et al. 2008). Partnerships of sisterhood, family-oriented congregations, and a holistic community including all people grew out of their work.

This study is limited by its small sample. Further research on church leadership should include more women. To understand more of the differences between men and women, a comparative study is encouraged. Future studies should also include contemporary women’s contributions to understanding the ministry of the Church and elaborate on the patterns of church leadership.

6. Conclusion

This study contributes to an understanding of early female leaders’ contribution to church leadership. The three women collected here were the firsts in their position, as a leader of a faith-based training institution of deaconesses, as one of the first female ministers, and the first female bishop. An analysis of their characteristics results in calling them symbolic changemakers, ideological, value-based, and relational community builders. This extends recent theories on church leadership, highlighting leaders in the church to be symbolic, strategic, and interactive. The female contribution is here one of being changemakers in themselves, value-based in taking care of the people in the institution, and enhancing the importance of building the community.

These women’s practical contributions as leaders were to realize the church through everyday activities. They took steps toward a more inclusive and holistic church, infusing the organization with values such as compassion, equality, and justice. Ideologically, they fought for moral issues in their interactions with people and working on relieving people’s pain, oppression, and inequality. The women did not do this in a heroic way – they did not work for their own sake but for the sake of the church as an institution.

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