
In 1911, Anne Zernike was the first female minister to be ordained in the Netherlands. She entered the ministry in the Mennonite congregation of Bovenknijpe in the province of Friesland. Her ordination was commemorated with a symposium in October 2011, organized by the Doopsgezinde Historische Kring and the Vereniging voor Nederlandse Kerkgeschiedenis. On this occasion, the present volume was presented.

The introductory chapters provide an overview of the gradual acceptance of women ministers in the various Protestant denominations during the twentieth century. Intellectual biographies of female pioneers and self-portraits of more recently appointed female incumbents (ranging from 30 to 60 years old) reflect their ambitions and views on the ministry. Despite the thoroughness of this work, its composition entails the risk of repeating pieces of information. Indeed, several facts and developments (and even a photograph, no. 1, on pages 29 and 132) are recycled in the volume. Also, for instance, the quota for women students, imposed by the Remonstrant Brethren between 1938 and 1946, is mentioned several times. This, however, touches upon a crucial conclusion that can be drawn from the volume as a whole. The quota reflected a reaction to the fact that women ministers were not called to larger religious communities and therefore occupied smaller benefices intended for starting (mostly male) officeholders. It aptly illustrates, therefore, that with the ordination of women the battle for the pulpit was only partly won. Their formal entry to the ministry was usually followed by various more or less subtle forms of discrimination and exclusion. Or to put it differently: being ordained in some churches did not mean that women were guaranteed a thriving ecclesiastical career or affluent benefices. Conversely, being barred from the pulpit in others did not imply that women could not fulfil executive functions or exert any influence there.

This is aptly illustrated by the lives of the pioneering Nicolette Bruining (1886–1963), Willemien Suze Wiardi Beckman (1906–1988) and Frederika Wilhelmina Rappold (1890–1975). From 1926, Bruining cultivated her theological talent and organizational skills in the Liberal Protestant Radio Broadcasting Company (VPRO). She recognized that this new medium complied with values that liberal Protestants held dear: individual freedom, autonomy, religious rationality, and tolerance. The Remonstrant vicar Wiardi Beckman co-managed a large city congregation in The Hague, but invariably fulfilled
less preaching engagements than her male colleagues. It took several years before she was scheduled to preach on feast days. This gave Wiardi Beckman the impression, as Marthe de Vries points out, that she was allowed to participate in the congregation management without actually having any official business there. Tjaard Barnard explains that Rappold was highly appreciated as a minister, but nevertheless had to put up with epithets such as “the general” or “head nurse.” Such sexist characterizations clarify that pioneering women vicars embodied the reversal of the gender relations that were deemed socially and culturally appropriate in post-war Dutch society.

Gender mattered, and it still does; the self-portraits of women who have entered the ministry over the past two decades inevitably lead to this conclusion. This is, by the way, what makes this volume interesting reading for all those dealing with equality and diversity on no matter what work floor. Angela Berlis—ordained priest in the German Old-Catholic Church in 1939 and currently professor of Church History at the University of Bern—explores the question of religious authority. As does Lutheran minister Ilona Fritz, who is convinced that women officeholders always need to work harder and show more results than their male colleagues in order to be taken seriously. Hesitations towards female vicars are often enforced by sensitivities of the women involved. According to Berlis, the authority of women vicars relies upon the willingness of the religious community to uphold both publicly and privately the shared principles of gender equality and equivalence.

Theologically trained women gained authority more easily in liberal Protestant churches that endorsed the pastoral and administrative autonomy of the local congregation. This tallies with the theoretical position of Marc Chaves, American sociologist of religion, which Margriet Gosker elaborates upon. Free-thinking and local autonomy were the constituents of the ordination of Anne Zernike in 1911. These, however, also explain why it took several decades before women were able to follow suit in the more hierarchical and formal Dutch Reformed Church (Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk; in 1957) and the Calvinist Churches (Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland; in 1969). Here, initial theological and biblical objections gradually lost their impact as these churches adapted to general social and cultural norms.

What is regrettably missing from this commendable volume, is a concluding assessment that reflects upon general developments in church and faith in the Netherlands during the twentieth century. To my mind, the lives of the pioneering ministers touch upon two relevant tendencies. First, the rapid increase of the loss of faith in Dutch society where twenty percent of the population was already unchurched in the inter-war period. Was the ordination of women