

'Women, forgive us': A German case study

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This article offers insight into the image of women in German conservative congregations, especially in the Brethren movement. It also describes the author's personal journey to a position of strongly supporting female preaching and female leadership in churches. The article combines empirical facts and personal insights. It gives examples of androcentrism in German academic theology. The case study is on the Brethren movement in Germany and their teaching on women, which was very much influenced by certain Pauline texts from the New Testament. Unfortunately, 'women's role in the church' became the shibboleth for biblical correctness. While living and working in this context, the author discovered inconsistencies in practice, which finally led to this paradigm shift.

Contribution: It is argued that if women are not allowed to participate publicly in the church services, it is like driving a car with four cylinders but turning off two cylinders.

Keywords: women's role in churches; Brethren movement; evangelical; androcentrism; feminism; shared leadership; Germany.

Introduction

This article describes a personal journey.¹

Stop! As I write this first sentence, doubts pop up in my mind: this should be an academic article, so I should leave out personal information. But isn't it already a typically masculine attitude to leave out personal issues? For centuries, men have separated 'academic thinking' (objective world, relevant) from 'private life' (irrelevant to academics). Katharina Zweig is a female professor of computer science. In her book on artificial intelligence, she deals with 'hard' facts such as the Dijkstra algorithm (Zweig 2019:61), big data and data mining, but she also relates her personal experiences in a biochemical laboratory (Zweig 2019:31–37) and shares stories from her family life – right in the middle of the 'hard' facts (Zweig 2019:55, 59). Another example is the psychologist Maja Storch, who used to give lectures at the University of Zurich. In her book, she reflects on her teaching style (Storch 2002:134–139). In the beginning, she copied the style of her male professors, presenting 'objective science', pure theory (Storch 2002:134). But she felt uncomfortable with this and finally decided to make her lectures more true to life and connect the theory to the everyday experiences of the students (Storch 2002:138).

Of course, today there are also male authors and male lecturers who combine science and personal experiences,² but it seems to me that this approach is more common among women, and this forms the crux of this article: male scholars need female colleagues because they can and should learn from each other. Life and academic research are linked to each other, often intertwined. The examples in Lämmlin and Scholpp (eds. 2001) showed how the theologies of German-speaking practical theologians have been shaped by their biographies.

After this preliminary remark, I will continue with my personal story. The article describes my journey of discovery that we actually need female preachers, female church leaders and female theologians. I will neither discuss the different dogmatic positions on female pastors nor will I do an exegesis of the relevant biblical texts, because it has been done over and over again already. Instead, I will reflect on the experiences I have had in Germany and in German-speaking groups

1. Many thanks to the four anonymous reviewers for their careful reading and good comments. Your comments were very helpful in improving this article.

2. I have argued elsewhere (Kessler 2021) that linking theory and praxis is essential in teaching leadership. Often students can bring in their own case studies.

Note: Special Collection: Women Theologies, sub-edited by Sinenhlanhla S. Chisale (Midlands State University, Zimbabwe) and Tanya van Wyk (University of Pretoria).

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in conservative congregations during the time period 1982–2006.³ Methodologically, this article belongs to the category of participant observation (Strydom 2005). However, it must be mentioned that I did not become a participant with the intention of doing this research. Since 1982, I was simply a participant and later I started reflecting on my observations. The writing style is similar to Beth Allison Barr's book *The Making of Biblical Womanhood* (Barr 2021). Barr is a US professor of history, and in her excellent book she combines insights from history with the personal steps she had to take. My article is also a combination of empirical facts and personal insights and experiences.

The title of this article, 'Women, forgive us', is copied from a fairly new German website,⁴ in which Ronsdorf (2021), a man from the Brethren movement, explains why he ended up with a new understanding of women's role in church. The reader might be surprised about the subtitle 'a German case study'. From the outside, one might think that gender equality has been fully achieved in Germany, because for 16 years we had the female chancellor Angela Merkel, who was then often called 'the most powerful woman on earth'. Actually, Germany has made progress on gender equality. And as shown in Gause (2010), the German mainline Protestant churches have become quite open to female pastors and female leadership; for example, their first female bishop was elected in 1992. But especially in conservative Christian circles, there are still ongoing discussions about the role of women in church. In January 2022, at our Academy of Christian Leadership, we received an email from a German business consultant who regarded it as a given, empirically provable (!) fact that men are better suited for leading than women: 'On average, men are better equipped for leadership and want it, while women in the majority neither want it nor really feel comfortable there' (XXX 2022).⁵ This statement is an example of how feminine leadership is still under discussion in Germany. Some publications on leadership asserted that a good leader must have certain characteristics that are perceived as very masculine attributes (Kessler 2019). Once this masculine yardstick is erected, people argue that women do not fulfil these criteria to the same degree as men.

Let us start with some examples from German academic theological literature before I share my personal story.

Examples of androcentrism in German academic theology

My first contact with a feminist approach to scholarship was in the year 1988, when I did my PhD at the University of

3. As remarked by one reviewer, I use the binary concept of men and women. I am aware of the discussion that gender binary is a social construction (Kessler 2020; ed. Schreiber 2016; Wetter 2010). However, during the time period 1982–2006 this had not yet become an official topic in those conservative congregations. Therefore, in this article I do not enter into this debate.

4. See <https://www.frauen-vergebt-uns.de>

5. Since I do not want to embarrass the author, I have left the authorship anonymous (XXX). The author of this e-mail is known to me. Actually, this e-mail was one of the things that motivated me to respond to the call for papers for this special issue, which I received three days later. The original German quote is: 'Im Durchschnitt betrachtet sind Männer für Führung besser ausgestattet und wollen es auch, während Frauen in der Mehrheit für Führung besser ausgestattet und wollen es auch, während Frauen in der Mehrheit weder wollen noch sich dort wirklich wohlfühlen'.

Cologne. My major was in mathematics and my minor was in philosophy. I chatted with a female student who told me that she would like to do research on feminist philosophy, female contributions to philosophy. I had my doubts about her approach. As a trained mathematician, I believed very much in the existence of truth, and my understanding was that if a statement is true, it does not make any difference whether it is discovered by a man or a woman. True is true. I never doubted that women could become excellent scientists. But I could not imagine that the gender of the researcher might have an influence on the result. Later, the following examples convinced me that gender sometimes has an influence.

Three examples demonstrate androcentrism in German theology. The term 'androcentrism' goes back to Perkins Gilman (1911), who investigated masculine mindsets claiming universality. The examples chosen are well-known books on biblical anthropology, written by German male authors.

Stendebach 1972

In a male-dominated environment, it can easily happen that a male author writes about 'human beings' but automatically, maybe unintentionally, has only 'men' in mind. A blatant example is the following quote from the Catholic Old Testament scholar Franz Josef Stendebach. Stendebach (1972) intended to explain the – true – theological statement that according to Genesis 2, the human being is totally dependent on God:

Above all, however, God creates for the human being the help of the woman who is like him ... The human being here is anything but independent. His habitat, his world, his woman [!] as his personal counterpart, food and clothing, they are all gifts of God to him. (p. 23)⁶

Stendebach claims to write about human beings as such, but his awkward formulation creates the impression that he is writing about men only.

Wolff 1973

In 1973, the Protestant theologian Hans-Walter Wolff published a very important milestone, *The Anthropology of the Old Testament* (Wolff 1973). It was a fresh approach, and it helped theologians to gain a new perspective on biblical anthropology. Wolff studied several parts of the human body: the throat, the breath, the heart, the ear, etc. and showed the links between their original meaning and their symbolic meaning. Schroer and Staubli (2005:13) argued that although Wolff claimed to explore the Old Testament view on *human beings*, he actually took a very masculine perspective. This is proven by 'the fact that he overlooked the organ of the womb, which is central to the metaphor of God' (p. 13).⁷ According to Schroer and Staubli (2005:58) the womb (uterus) is the

6. Original German quote: 'Vor allem aber schafft Gott dem Menschen die ihm gleichgeartete Hilfe der Frau ... Der Mensch ist hier alles andere als unabhängig. Sein Lebensraum, seine Welt, sein Weib als sein personales Gegenüber, Nahrung und Kleidung, sie sind alle Gaben Gottes an ihn'. For translating the German quotes into English, I use www.DeepL.com (sometimes modifying it a bit).

7. Original German quote: 'die Tatsache, dass er das für die Gottesmetaphorik zentrale Organ der Gebärmutter übersehen hat'.

second-most frequently mentioned internal organ in the Old Testament after the heart. 'But although this concept occupied such a central position in the biblical anthropology, many male biblical scholars and theologians have completely disregarded it' (p. 58).⁸

Moltmann 1971/2005

The third example is an insight by the well-known Protestant theologian Jürgen Moltmann, who published *Der Mensch* in 1971. In a later reprint, Moltmann (2005) acknowledged his one-sidedness in the foreword:

In 1971 I still spoke quite undifferentiatedly of 'the human being' and thought that I, as a man, could say everything necessary about it. The book was then also published in English with the one-sided title 'Man'. I was cured of this error by feminist theology, which I encountered in 1974 through my wife Elisabeth. It became clear to me that ... a realistic anthropology can only be designed by women and men ... I critically recognized the limits of my male perspectives and perceived the enrichment by female perspectives besides. (p. 9)⁹

Moltmann's statement is correct: in order to free theological anthropology from one-sided male dominance, we need contributions from both male and female theologians.

Today, 34 years after my chat on the Cologne campus, I would encourage the female student of philosophy to do her master's dissertation on female philosophers.

The Brethren movement

Joining a Brethren assembly

My family background was nominally Christian; we belonged formally to the mainline Protestant church but did not participate in church life. That changed when I came in contact with a youth group belonging to the Brethren movement. In 1981, at the age of 19, I had a conversion experience and finally became a member of this congregation. Outwardly, there was probably not much change, since I had never been involved in drug abuse, crime or other questionable activities. But this conversion led to a shift in my mindset; it was a sort of paradigm shift in the Kuhnian sense (Kuhn 1962). From the point of Christian teaching, I considered myself as a freshman, a novice. The people in the congregation knew the Bible quite well, and I did not. So I accepted their teaching without questioning it. I was taught that my infant baptism would not count as real baptism, so I was baptised again. I was taught that women should not teach in church, so I took that seriously, although I had had good experience with female teachers.

8.Original German quote: 'Aber obwohl dieser Begriff im biblischen Menschenbild eine so zentrale Stellung einnahmen, haben ihn viele männliche Bibliker und Theologen völlig außer acht gelassen'.

9.Original German quote: '1971 habe ich noch ganz undifferenziert von 'dem Menschen' gesprochen und gemeint, dass ich als Mann dazu alles Notwendige sagen könne. Auf Englisch ist das Buch dann auch mit dem einseitigen Titel "Man" erschienen. Von diesem Irrtum hat mich die Feministische Theologie geheilt, die mir ab etwas 1974 durch meine Frau Elisabeth begegnete. Es wurde mir klar, dass ... eine realistische Anthropologie nur von Frauen und Männern entworfen werden kann ... Ich habe die Grenzen meiner männlichen Perspektiven kritisch erkannt und die Bereicherung durch weibliche Perspektiven daneben wahrgenommen'.

The Brethren movement has about 40000 members in Germany.¹⁰ The Brethren movement started in Dublin, 1820, but then the English Brethren movement became very influential. The movement is sometimes called the Plymouth Brethren because the first meeting in England was held in Plymouth, 1831. Characteristics of the Brethren movement are, among others, a strong emphasis on the Bible, rejection of the concept of clergy and celebration of the Lord's Supper each Sunday. It is also typical of Brethren to call themselves simply 'Christians', avoiding any classification such as 'Lutheran' or 'Reformed'. A negative feature of this movement is a tendency towards splits and separations (Ischebeck 1929; Jordy 1979). The most famous separation took place in 1848, when George Müller and others distanced themselves from the arising exclusivism of John Nelson Darby (Jordy 1979:33). In the following, their movement is called 'Open Brethren' in contrast to the 'Exclusive Brethren'.

The German Brethren movement consists of three groups of similar size.¹¹ These are the 'Exclusive Brethren' and two subgroups of the 'Open Brethren' movement. One subgroup consists of assemblies that have joined the Baptist Union (*Bund Evangelisch-Freikirchlicher Gemeinden*). The other subgroup is outside of any national federation and is therefore called 'Free Brethren'. Note that this only refers to formal independence. Whether there is freedom *within* these assemblies is another topic. In 1980, the Brethren congregations that belonged to the Baptist Union founded a network in order to strengthen their Brethren identity. This network was originally called the *Arbeitsgemeinschaft der Brüdergemeinden* (AGB) and renamed as *ChristusForum Deutschland* (ChristusForum 2022).

As a general rule one can say that the 'Exclusive Brethren' are more conservative and the AGB assemblies are more liberal than other Brethren assemblies. Of course, the so-called 'Exclusive Brethren' would not use this name for their assembly. They often call themselves something like 'the Christians who meet at the YYY', YYY standing for the location where they met.

I was a member of two Brethren congregations; the first period was from 1982 to 1991, and the second was from 1997 to 2006. I visited many Brethren congregations as a guest speaker, and from 2000 to 2006 I also attended the annual meeting of the AGB pastors.

The role of women in the Brethren movement

Today, the designation 'Brethren movement' could lead to the false assumption that women cannot become members at all. Women always could become members, and in many cases they have contributed to the flourishing of a congregation. However, they had to submit under the

10.The following short summary mainly relies on the sources (Brüderbewegung 2022; Holthaus et al. 2003; Ischebeck 1929; Jordy 1979, 1986).

11.See Brüderbewegung (2022).

Brethren teaching on the role of women in a church, and this is why Ronsdorf (2021) asked these women for forgiveness.

As a general observation, four Bible verses have been utilised to justify and demarcate a women's role within a Brethren community (Figure 1)¹²:

1. 1 Timothy 2:12: 'I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man' (ESV).¹³
2. 1 Corinthians 14:34: 'the women should keep silent in the churches'.
3. Deuteronomy 22:5: 'a woman shall not wear a man's garment, nor shall a man put on a woman's cloak, for whoever does these things is an abomination to the Lord your God'.
4. 1 Corinthians 11:5: 'every wife who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonours her head since it is the same as if her head were shaven'.

In the Brethren movement, 1 Timothy 2:12 was interpreted to mean that a woman should neither preach nor lead in the congregation. 1 Corinthians 14:34 led to the conclusion that women should not pray publicly during Sunday services or during prayer meetings where the whole community comes together. Some congregations have applied Deuteronomy 22:5 in such a way that women are not allowed to wear trousers, especially not on Sunday when the church meets. 1 Corinthians 11:5 led to the injunction that women should have long hair and cover their heads during Sunday services as soon as a man prays.

As we see, it was mainly Pauline texts that were used against women. Thus, unfortunately, some women have developed an aversion to the apostle Paul: 'I hate Paul!' (Barr 2021:39). In her historical overview, Barr (2021:119) explained that in previous centuries, these Pauline texts were not as prominent in sermons as they were in some conservative churches in the early modern world. 'The emphasis on Pauline texts by early modern reformers was born into a secular world already supported by a gender hierarchy' (Barr 2021:123). Often, conservative Christian circles are afraid that the zeitgeist might enter the church. They do not realise that their teaching, which they consider the truly biblical one, is already influenced by another zeitgeist, the zeitgeist of the 19th century. The tragic is that 'historically, women have always been subordinated to men, but now their subordination became embedded in the heart of evangelical faith' (Barr 2021:154).

In the 1980s, the various congregations within the Brethren movement differed in their understanding of the four given verses. Usually, the congregations did not have a written statement about women's role in the church, as observed by

12. Barr (2021:39) presented a similar list of Bible verses in her church context, which also includes the Pauline verses on the household such as Ephesians 5. I do not include these verses in this article, because I focus on official church life, leaving out the private household.

13. Bible quotations are taken from English Standard Version (ESV). The German Brethren movement used its own German translation, 'Elberfelder Übersetzung', which I do not use here, because it is in German. However, the differences between ESV and Elberfelder translation are not relevant in these four verses.

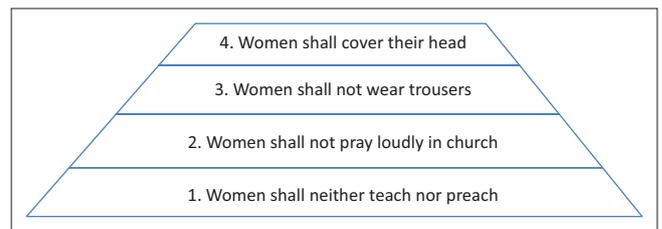


FIGURE 1: Hierarchy of rules for women.

Lindörfer (2011).¹⁴ The unwritten doctrine became visible through practice. And if new members did not follow this practice – intentionally or unintentionally – they were admonished by the leading brothers. Figure 1 shows the hierarchy of rules for women in the German Brethren movement. In the 20th century, no German Brethren assembly allowed women on the pulpit (this has changed in the meantime!). At that time, the majority of Exclusive Brethren were very serious about all four points, whereas the AGB assemblies were only concerned about the first rule. As a rule of thumb, one could say that if a congregation was serious about No. x, it would also be serious about the numbers below x. But, again, this is just a rule of thumb. In those days, I also visited assemblies which allowed public prayers by women (No. 2) if their heads were covered (No. 4).

In 1982, I became a member of a 'Free Brethren' congregation, which was very strict on Nos. 1 and 2, but quite flexible regarding Nos. 3 and 4. I was taught that the verses regarding clothing had to be understood as a cultural rule. For example, 1 Corinthians 11 applied to the custom in New Testament times of wearing a veil. And as there are nowadays special trousers for women, these trousers would not fall under the verdict of Deuteronomy 22:5.¹⁵ So this middle way actually gave us a good feeling. We were able to distance ourselves from two extremes, since we were neither as conservative and narrow-minded as the Exclusive Brethren, nor as liberal as the mainline Protestant churches, which would even allow women to become pastors. Being right in the middle made us confident. I remember having a chat with a girl from the Lutheran church who was just finishing high school. She told me that she felt a call from God to become a pastor. I told her that, most probably, this call could not come from God because of 1 Timothy 2:12. I never met this girl again but I sincerely hope that she did not listen to my advice!

The problem was that the teaching on women had become a touchstone for true biblical faithfulness (Stenschke 2019:12). Like the shibboleth in the book of Judges 12:5–6, the role of women in the church was used by people to judge whether a congregation was truly faithful to the Bible. Conservative Christians have feared the effect of a 'slippery slope of feminism destroying biblical truth' (Barr 2021:131). Once women were allowed to preach, many other unbiblical practices would also end up being allowed.

14. In her master's thesis, Lindörfer (2011:76–85) described the perspective of the Brethren in the former German Democratic Republic. She noticed that there were hardly any official publications on the understanding of the female role (p. 76) and thus collected individual statements in order to develop a picture.

15. The same argument was used by female students of a Bible school linked to the Brethren movement (Reimer 2008:68).

Discovering inconsistencies in practice

In the beginning, I just accepted what I was taught in the Brethren congregation. But over the years, I discovered more and more inconsistencies that finally led to another paradigm shift in my thinking. Of course, over time I learned that the Bible verses listed above are not as straightforward as we were taught. For example, although 1 Corinthians 14:34 tells women to be silent in the church, the same letter gives rules for when a woman prays or prophesies (1 Cor 11:5). Although 1 Timothy 2:12 seems to ban teaching by a woman, it is evident from Acts 18:26 that Priscilla taught Apollos. As explained by Stenschke (2019:7), there are many debates about 1 Timothy 2:8–15. I will not discuss these exegetical controversies here. Instead, I will take the perspective of a participant who has observed several inconsistencies in the practice of applying these verses in church life. My observations come mainly from the context of the Brethren assemblies in Germany, so I cannot claim universality. But it is likely that readers from different countries and different churches will find similarities to their own experiences.

All the men were allowed to pray but none of women

The Brethren congregation I attended was proud of the fact that everyone could contribute to the worship. This was seen as an important symbol of general priesthood. When the congregation met for the Lord's Supper on Sunday morning, there was no planned liturgy. During the worship services, brothers of the congregation would take turns reading a passage from the Bible, speaking a prayer or suggesting a hymn to be sung. Any man could rise to speak, regardless of his spiritual maturity. I personally enjoyed the liberty to contribute right from the beginning.

But unfortunately, at least half of the participants were not allowed to contribute anything because they were female. Then a young man who had grown up in a Muslim family joined our congregation. As a result of a congenital disability, his intelligence and ability to speak were limited. But he was male – and thus he had the right to pray aloud. I remember complaints from the women who recognised the irony of the situation. These women had been active in the congregations for many decades, leading Sunday schools for children and many other things. They were 'mothers in Christ' but not allowed to pray publicly in the church, whereas this boy without any Christian background, with a very limited understanding of Christian faith and limited speaking ability was allowed to lead the congregation in prayer. I am not saying that this boy should not have prayed. But the whole situation was an insult to the women, and some women started to complain, for good reason.

Teaching young males but not teaching adult males

If one raised the question of *why* a woman should not teach, the answer would often refer to 1 Timothy 2:14: 'Adam was

not deceived, but the woman was deceived'. It was then argued that women were more easily seduced, and they would then mislead the whole congregation in their sermons. Just for the sake of the argument, assuming that this stupid prejudice was true, then the question arises: why were these women allowed to teach the children in the Sunday classes? If one fears that women would be more open to heresies, they should certainly not teach little children. It would be less dangerous to let them teach male adults who can think critically and are thus able to recognise false teaching – instead of teaching children who, at that age, take almost everything at face value from the teacher.

My Omsk experience

In the year 2001, I was invited to teach in Omsk, a city in Siberia, Russia. Omsk is the centre of the German-speaking diocese *Evangelische-Lutherische Kirche Ural, Sibirien und Ferner Osten* (ELKUSFO 2022). In square mileage, this is the largest Lutheran diocese in the world. The 120 churches of the ELKUSFO consist mainly of Germans living in Russia. Some of these German families were forced by Stalin to settle east of the Ural Mountains. Many of these Lutheran churches call themselves 'Brethren churches' because they are led by lay brothers. This was a safeguard against persecution of Christians under Stalin. Stalin would send the pastor to prison, but he could not afford to imprison a whole group of lay members, who were often gifted and diligent farmers. These Brethren churches have nothing to do with the Brethren movement mentioned here. But there at least two similarities: the leadership is exercised by a group of (male) lay members and their theology is conservative.

In many congregations of the ELKUSFO, only women attended the Sunday services. Now a problem arose: what do you do if there is no man available, but the women have to be silent in church? These churches then developed special rules. If a man read a Bible text he would stand *behind* the table, which was a sort of holy table. If a woman read a Bible text because there was no man available, then she should stand *beside* the table. And if a man happened to be in the assembly, he should read the Bible text – even if he was not a believer.

This Omsk experience really set me thinking. It led to another paradigm shift in my mind. I was quite sure that it could not be the intention of 1 Timothy 2:12 to allow a nonbelieving man to speak in church instead of a committed Christian woman.

Timothy 2 – To obey or not obey

In the German Brethren movement, it was the custom to fold one's hands while praying. In the 1980s, it was not the custom to lift one's hands because this was typical of charismatic churches. And in those days, the Brethren movement was quite sceptical towards the charismatic

movement (although both movements strongly believe in guidance by the Holy Spirit!). Now, the interesting issue is that the second chapter of 1 Timothy also has a commandment for men: 'in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands' (1 Tm 2:8). This statement is just four verses ahead of the ban on teaching by women (verse 12). And it is a clear command: '[m]en, lift your hands while you pray'. Now, it always surprises me when men who are very strict on verse 12 just ignore the commandment of verse 8 or have an explication for why verse 8 does not have to be understood literally.

I was wondering why two verses on church order that belong to the same chapter are treated so differently. Obeying 1 Timothy 2:12 became the shibboleth for true faithfulness to the Bible, whereas 1 Timothy 2:8 was simply ignored.

Celebrating Frau Dr Wasserzug

Frau Dr Gertrude Wasserzug, as she was called by her admirers, was an influential German evangelical theologian (1894–1992, Holthaus 1999). She was one of the first women in Germany to study theology and philosophy at a university. Together with her husband, she founded a Bible school in Beatenberg, Switzerland. After the death of her husband, she taught the (male) students Bible and Christian dogmatics. She authored more than 50 books and 100 articles. Wasserzug strongly advocated dispensationalism and translated the Scofield Bible into German. As dispensationalism was quite popular within the Brethren movement, Wasserzug also became popular with the Brethren movement, and many Beatenberg students came from the Brethren movement. Obviously, this was already in some tension with the Brethren ban on teaching by women. Later, Wasserzug moved to the Bibelheim Haus Felsengrund in Zavelstein, Black Forest, where she taught until her death in 1992 (Haus Felsengrund 2022). Altogether, she did impressive work and had a profound influence.

I have no problems with the fact that she, being a woman, taught Bible and theology. (I have more problems with *what* she taught because I do not share the dispensationalistic approach.) I was just surprised when I visited *Haus Felsengrund* around 2006. Of course, I fully understood why they honoured the life and work of Frau Dr Wasserzug. In the bookstore a whole shelf was reserved for her books and it was titled 'Die Magd des Herrn' (The handmaid of the Lord). This setting, which was a bit reminiscent of the celebration of Maria in Catholic circles, was in strong contrast to the role of the women present. This guesthouse often served as a conference centre for the 'Free Brethren'. During my visit, the women did not pray aloud, did not give lectures and did not even participate in the discussions. And it seemed to me that the female staff of the house were not allowed to wear trousers while serving. I asked myself: *how could it be that the women attending were treated so differently from the way Frau Dr Wasserzug was treated?* In my eyes, this practice was very inconsistent.

Using all four cylinders

I list the above examples not to blame any specific person. I just collected different observations, and the inconsistencies that I discovered made me rethink the theological teaching about the role of women in church. Today, I am fully convinced that we need female preachers, female church leaders and female theologians.

I still like the practice of the Brethren movement of coming together for a meeting where everybody can contribute. It is reminiscent of the ideal described in 1 Corinthians 14:26: 'When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a tongue or an interpretation'. But I would prefer a situation where 100% of the assembly can contribute, and not only the male participants.

I would like to conclude with a metaphor used by French theologian Alfred Kuen when he was invited to the *Leipziger Rüstwoche* in 1986. This annual meeting was an important event of the Brethren movement in the former German Democratic Republic. Kuen compared the church with a four-cylinder engine and then asked the challenging question: 'Isn't it true that the church is moving so slowly ... because we have turned off two cylinders?'¹⁶ This metaphor bears the same message as the metaphor used by Mercy Oduyoye in Africa, 1989. 'She used the symbol of a flying bird to explain that theology without the faith reflections of women is like a bird with only one wing' (Van Wyk & Chisale 2022). Maybe some readers will prefer the metaphor of a bird instead of a four-cylinder car. But please keep in mind that Kuen was addressing a conservative male audience in East Germany. And for this audience the metaphor of a four-cylinder car was probably more appealing than the metaphor of a bird.¹⁷

My former colleague Werner May did an empirical study on the reception of Psalm 23 by men and women (May 2016:23). Psalm 23 is probably the most popular psalm among Christians. May asked 498 Christians: which verse of Psalm 23 speaks to you most? Each participant could click one verse. The overall winner was verse 1: 'The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want'. This verse was chosen by men and women on a similar scale. But for the second favourite, there was a difference depending on the gender. The majority of women voted for verses 3 and 4: 'He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake ...'. whereas the men preferred verses 5 and 6: 'You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows ...'. Reading this empirical result inspired an 'aha experience'. In the same year, a couple asked me to give a sermon for a wedding and to preach on Psalm 23. I was not so happy about their text choice because this psalm is so well known. How could I say something new about it? I then decided to focus on verse 5, especially on the

16. See Kuen (1986). The quote was taken from Lindörfer (2011:80): 'Ist es nicht so, dass die Gemeinde so langsam vorwärts kommt ... weil wir zwei Zylinder abgestellt haben?'

17. Interestingly, today there are engines that turn off one or two cylinders in order to save gasoline. But if they are turned off, the car has less power.

'overflowing cup'. This choice may have been unknowingly influenced by my preference for red wine. But I now learned from May's survey that my choice was a typically masculine choice, too. If gender has an influence on the selection of Bible verses used in sermons, it is *necessary* to have male and female preachers. Otherwise, we will only use two of four cylinders.

I am glad that in recent years, many congregations in Germany have turned on the two cylinders again, so that women can preach, teach and lead. That is also true of some Brethren congregations. I still believe in shared leadership in churches and shared preaching, which means leading in a team and having a team of preachers. I learned these two concepts from the Brethren movement. But I think it should be gender-mixed teams, because men and women often have different perspectives and thus can complement each other.

My wife and I are now members of a *Freie evangelische Gemeinde* where we both preach regularly. Currently, my wife preaches more than I do – and that is good because she is the only woman in the team!

It must be noted that even if women are allowed to preach and teach, they are often still excluded or stigmatised. More effort is needed to have the four cylinders running in a balanced way.

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Author's contributions

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