

Good and Mad: Mainline Protestant Churchwomen, 1920–1980.

By Margaret Bendroth. New York: Oxford University Press, 2023. x + 246 pp. \$83.00 cloth.

While the phrase “church lady” may conjure images of *Saturday Night Live*’s Dana Carvey with pursed lips in a gray wig and prim cardigan, Margaret Bendroth would like readers to imagine “churchwoman” as something entirely different: thoughtful, educated, loyal, ecumenical, and on occasion, even angry.

This engaging and comprehensive book is a natural outgrowth of Bendroth’s career of writing on Protestant women and their churches. As befits a past-president of the American Society of Church History, Margaret Bendroth writes church history at its best, combining finely grained attention to her primary sources with new efforts to address U.S. religion in its international context. Mining the relevant denominational archives and periodicals in addition to collections at the World Council of Churches, the National Organization for Women, and elsewhere, Bendroth weaves together stories of women from Congregationalist, Methodist, Presbyterian, Baptist, and other mainline churches. *Good and Mad* moves chronologically through the heart of the twentieth century. Interspersed among the chapters are “portraits” that are not simply stand-alone vignettes of remarkable women but also move the plot along. Bendroth has the daunting task of introducing us to women we think we already know, and she meets this challenge with wry humor. Her well-crafted writing highlights the pathos of events that seemed to frustrate her subjects at every turn. She knows her subjects so well she can speak their language, ventriloquizing churchwomen’s belief, for example, that Fundamentalists’ incessant talk of “sex and sin seemed, well, unnecessarily vulgar” (23).

Margaret Bendroth opens her story with her churchwomen feeling adrift after the passage of women’s suffrage. Unmoored by the rejection of the Victorian understanding of gender, they sought a new understanding of their role in the church. Bendroth demonstrates, as only a historian who has thought deeply with her subjects can, a rich understanding of her churchwomen’s commitment to the middle ground. A portrait of Helen Barrett Montgomery traces the male backlash against the triumph of women’s missionary movement—and its fundraising prowess. Bendroth unfolds this dismantling of women’s missionary organizations in the name of Christian unity. Modern efficiency moved women out of the role of missionary and fundraiser and into the role of church secretary. Rejecting outdated models like Ladies’ Aid societies and uncertain about their place on gender-inclusive boards, women focused their energies into what Bendroth calls “grassroots ecumenism.” They founded new organizations such as United Church Women, which crossed theological and racial boundaries. “Friendship” replaced “sisterhood” as the rhetorical and strategic bridge between groups of women, although class and racial barriers persisted. Mainline men had undergone their own soul-searching through attempts at remasculinizing the church, resulting in efforts to redefine the role of “layman.” On the world stage, the American churchwomen agreed that pressing for women’s ordination was too divisive, but Bendroth uncovers their surprise that their European sisters considered them too conservative on gender issues. Working denominationally and ecumenically through the World Council of Churches, churchwomen pressed a new strategy of “cooperation” among women and men. But by the 1970s, American churchwomen reluctantly admitted that this cooperation had not achieved their goals of shared decision-making and

power. They had much to learn from Jewish, Catholic, and secular women's enthusiasm for women's liberation. Bendroth concludes with her subjects' poignant realization that their mantle had passed to a new generation – a generation of women who failed to consider churchwomen as pioneers or their methods as worthy of imitation.

In *Good and Mad*, Margaret Bendroth takes seriously Ann Braude's 1997 charge to write a woman-centered history of the mainline churches. As a result of this new perspective, Bendroth argues that the mainline church's story in the twentieth century is less about decline and more about resilience; it is less Northern and liberal and more interracial and international than we realized. Bendroth deftly addresses persistent bugaboos in the field of women's history. Acknowledging the myth of feminization, she nonetheless recognizes the fear of feminization as a powerful animating force in church life. Bendroth refuses the temptation to assume that the teleology of women's restlessness was seeking the pulpit. And when she does turn to ordination, Bendroth argues that women's call for ordination was to the altar as much as to the pulpit, that is, driven by a desire to celebrate the Eucharist as much as to preach.

It takes reading between the lines to sense these churchwomen's anger, perhaps because they were so good at hiding it: "It's possible that Cynthia Wedel was incandescently angry . . . [but] she didn't say" (179, 182). As a result, the "good and mad" heuristic is more persuasive in some cases than others. More convincing is Bendroth's explanation of why churchwomen were not angrier. She writes poignantly of her subjects' optimism, and how she herself has shared this "certain kind of hope, belief in the power of persistence" that women's dogged efforts could still transform the church and the world (186).

Good and Mad succeeds in filling a gap in the existing literature on Protestant women between the Social Gospel and the final push for women's ordination. Alas, the \$83 price tag will be cost-prohibitive for most students, but we should urge our libraries to buy the digital and hardcover versions of this title and hope Oxford releases an affordable paperback. It merits a place alongside classics like Catherine Brekus's work on early women preachers, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham on the Black church women's movement, and Dana Robert's works on missionary women. It belongs on syllabi not just for classes on women's religious history but also surveys on Christianity in the U.S. Since women have always formed a majority in the church, shouldn't we know their story?

Jenny Wiley Legath
Princeton University
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***Righting the American Dream: How the Media Mainstreamed Reagan's Evangelical Vision.* By Diane Winston. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2023. 256 pp, \$35.00 cloth.**

In 1983, President Ronald Reagan spoke at the annual meeting of the National Association of Evangelicals. "Freedom," the president began, "prosper when religion is vibrant and the rule of law under God is acknowledged." He insisted that the