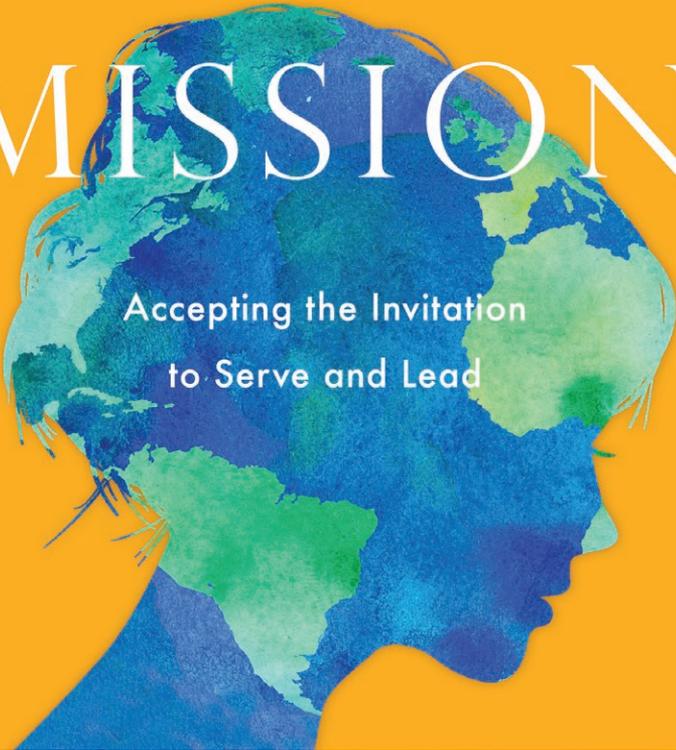


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WOMEN IN GOD'S MISSION



Accepting the Invitation
to Serve and Lead

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CHAPTER ONE

GOD'S AMAZING DAUGHTERS

For me it is an adventure that I never ever dreamed or imagined it could be. I find myself doing things that are beyond my wildest hopes as a young mother—thirty years ago. I sometimes pinch myself and say, “How come I get to live here in this crazy colorful country, to share life to some degree with these amazing people? What a gift in my life—what a blast!” I feel so very privileged that I can cooperate with God in people’s lives—and that I can actually make some difference!

AUDREY IS AUSTRALIAN AND WORKS IN LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT IN A RESTRICTED-ACCESS NATION IN ASIA¹

Susana is Ecuadorian, and the mission she serves and leads focuses on multiplying communities of Christ-followers among the least reached people groups in the world. Describing serving and leading in God’s mission she said,

In my journey I have learned many lessons; some the hard way. I have made mistakes, but God has extended grace and has allowed me to grow through mistakes and hardships. When I began my leadership journey, I thought I was a tough girl. I thought I could do anything and conquer the world—no obstacle seemed too hard to overcome. I had passion and faith, so God and I could do anything.

I tell you, I don't think I have ever cried so much as that first year of leadership with my mission. I realized I wasn't as tough as I thought I was, or as cool. I fought many battles on my knees, and those tears in my secret place with God strengthened my soul. I also learned never to take the glory for myself because God hates a prideful heart.

Susana explained that she is still on a journey “discovering new things with God day by day, by his grace.” She said, “I believe as children of God we should have a sense of destiny and seek God to know what his plans are, and be available and willing to fulfill his plans for our lives.”

God's Invitations

I am amazed at how God constantly pulls many of his daughters into roles of service and leadership they never fully imagined. His invitations arrive in a variety of ways. They come during times of personal prayer and Scripture reading, or they arrive through a friend or colleague or pastor who needs help, and the person sees in us giftedness that can further God's purposes. They reach us when our hearts are breaking over something in the world that is not right. We want God to fix it, but his response is to ask us to get involved in unexpected ways.

How do you respond in these moments? Some people are bold, like Susana was as a young adult, accepting God's invitation with confidence. My response is often different. I am frequently bewildered by them. *You want me to do what? Really? Are you sure? But there are so many other people who are better qualified!* And so the dialogue goes until I take what are often anxious initial steps down a path that seems daunting or even impossible. Later, *after* I

have accepted God's invitation to serve and lead, I find myself growing and developing in new ways. As time passes, the roles begin to feel normal and obvious. What was once scary for me often becomes fun. *Well of course I would do that. It makes sense. It's how I'm made.* I wonder if God laughs when he hears those thoughts in my head or comments like these coming out of my mouth. My confidence grows until the next invitation comes that stretches how I see myself, and then the pattern of self-doubt and questioning easily repeats.

My Story

I would rather focus on the stories of others, but I know some readers might want to know a little about mine. For me life started as a shy kid born into a large family that greatly valued humor. My siblings usually seemed so comfortable in a variety of settings, while I on the other hand was an anxious soul who had an uncanny knack of imagining everything that could go wrong and often thought it might. Looking back, I still wonder at God's invitation to me. Working full time in his mission is a journey filled with adventure, risk, and unfolding mystery. Decades later, I still feel like the unlikeliest of candidates for such an invitation.

I came to personal faith in Christ the summer after I graduated from high school, and once that happened God's invitations came frequently in a variety of ways.² They included areas such as serving and leading in campus ministries, leading young adults and singles' ministries in congregations, being a missionary accountant, traveling throughout Asia and leading finance operations for my mission organization, being a global mission researcher and missiologist, being an author, being a conference speaker (often for audiences of male

executive directors of mission agencies), leading executive retreats, being a consultant on an executive team of a large global mission, teaching graduate students who were preparing to be missionaries and ministers, and the like.

The invitations never seem to stop. They involve starting new ministries, traveling to a wide variety of nations, and being willing to let God work on parts of my character so he can accomplish his will through me. I believe accepting God's invitations are essential for genuine, ongoing discipleship. The types of invitations vary from person to person, but the stretching process we encounter as we accept them shapes us in tangible and eternal ways. It is often by journeying with God down these frequently unexpected paths that we grow in our ability to trust him, and we begin to develop more fully into the people he desires us to be. And, in this process of accepting God's invitations throughout the course of our lives, his purposes in the world are furthered in significant ways.

Why Write This Book?

For both men and women it is easy to come up with reasons for not accepting God's invitations. Whether as young adults or later as we age, full schedules, insecurities, being too focused on our own goals, or caring more about pleasing others than God can make it difficult to remain attentive to God's plans and purposes for our lives. I also think there is something innate in the human psyche that likes to feel safe; yet responding to God's invitations can sometimes trigger opposite feelings. From my perspective it seems harder for women to accept God's invitations to serve and lead, for family and societal expectations often create additional gender challenges we have to

navigate. For many of us, the process of accepting and living out God's invitations is more complex.

For example, a number of women mentioned the sentiment shared by Jacqueline, a North American leader. She has been involved in a variety of ministries throughout her life such as pioneering new campus ministries in closed nations and leading women's ministries, short-term missions, and church ministry overseas with her husband. She said,

I think in many cultures, there is an understanding that there is a different way women gain credibility than men that has always been important for me to accept and acknowledge. Part of that is men are given credibility when they are given their jobs; they can always lose it, but they are given it. Women are given their job, and then they have to prove their credibility. Earning credibility for women is hard, and they can lose it very quickly.

Reflecting on her years of ministry in a variety of contexts, Megan said, "I've been told you are too young. I'm not assertive enough. I'm too assertive. You get all of these contradictory messages. You have to be in that sweet spot that is acceptable, and I don't think men have to do that. It's a tighter box for women." While these specific complexities are not something all women have to navigate, around the globe women face a wide variety of unique challenges because of their gender.

However, despite these challenges, when women accept and live into God's invitations, he uses their lives in amazing and remarkable ways. This book shares the stories of women who have accepted God's invitations, and it highlights what they are experiencing and

learning on their journeys as they serve and lead. It will encourage women at different stages of their lives, and will enable men who care about them to better understand what they need, so together we might all reach our full potential. My goal in writing is to foster better understanding between men and women, so when we labor together in God's harvest fields we might be more fruitful. I agree with Carolyn Custis James when she writes, "Men *belong* in the discussion about women—not as observers or merely 'to understand women better' . . . but as *participants* with a vested interest in the conversation and without whom the conversation is incomplete. The full flourishing of God's sons requires and even depends on the full flourishing of his daughters."³

What About Theological Controversies?

In some parts of the body of Christ there is much controversy about the role of women in ministry, but in other parts it is not debated. These differences take place along theological and denominational lines and are influenced by context and culture. Many books are written to argue for specific theological or cultural positions. As I have read and reflected on many of them, the categories they establish often are quite polarizing, and frequently they do not capture the complexity of what God is doing through women in his mission around the globe.

My desire is not to argue for one theological position over another. I have chosen this approach because I deeply value the contribution of women *across* the various theological and cultural spectrums. As I have followed God in mission I have come to know women from many different nations, cultures, denominations, and churches.⁴ In each context there are differing beliefs about what women can and

cannot do in ministry, yet regardless of differing gender restrictions they always find ways to reach out with the love of Christ. As a result, God's purposes are furthered and individuals, communities, and the world are impacted and changed for the better. I genuinely marvel at the beauty of God's work through women who faithfully accept his invitations to serve and lead, *especially* when diverse cultures and theological streams are shaping their engagement in mission. I believe God works through their diversity to draw more people to himself, and I believe he is proud of his daughters who step out in faith so the world might come to know him.

Who Are the Women in the Research?

The women whose thoughts and stories will be shared throughout this book were born and raised in approximately thirty countries, and they have served in mission in many additional nations. They are from different generations and are serving and leading in many types of ministries. However, a significant thread holds the diverse sample together. Each woman mentioned is deeply respected by others who work with her in God's mission. Just as there are excellent male leaders, but some men are not good leaders, the same situation applies to women. I like to learn from men who are respected leaders, and I want to learn about leadership from women who are deeply respected as well. Their stories and insights should shape and inform the broader dialogue about leadership in general, and leadership in God's mission specifically.

Many books have been written about the mission of God and leadership, so the goal of this book is not to repeat that material but rather add to what has already been published. For this book I define serving and leading in God's mission as "influencing others toward

God's purposes in the world." Women in this research used the words *serve* and *lead* interchangeably, depending on their theological and cultural backgrounds. Yet each was influencing others toward God's purposes. To honor their voices, these same terms are used in this text as well. Further details about how I selected their stories and how the qualitative research was conducted is available in the appendix.

Many women around the globe qualify to be included in a book like this. However, because of time and space constraints, aside from historical examples mentioned in this chapter, the stories and insights from approximately ninety-five women form the basis for what will be shared in the following pages. There is not enough space to unpack each of their stories, although I greatly wish that was possible. Instead, when I share lengthier quotes, I try to provide more information about their context. For quotes highlighted at the beginning of each chapter, I provide a bit more information about them in the notes at the end of the book. Others I could only highlight briefly.

Many of these women shared their thoughts with incredible candor and honesty over a cup of coffee or tea, and I will do my best to try to pass along their ideas and sentiments in a similar way. I hoped to share their quotes in ways that aligned with how words are spelled in their countries; however, my publisher required that spelling align with US norms. And I always capitalize pronouns that reference God, but formatting guidelines required I use lowercase pronouns. I ask for patience as I make these accommodations for my publisher.⁵

How Are Women Serving and Leading?

What types of invitations does God extend to women in his mission? While there is no way to capture the fullness of this question in a

single book, I will try to highlight some of the ways they serve and lead. What follows is a glimpse from the New Testament, from more recent mission history, and from my research with women in our current era, along with how they feel about their involvement in God's mission.

A glimpse from the New Testament. Women highlighted in the New Testament led and served in a variety of ways.⁶ At times their influence was immediately evident, but sometimes their stories of obedience in difficult or unusual circumstances inspired faithful leadership in future generations. Since other books have been written about New Testament women, I will only highlight a few examples to set the stage for our discussion.

I am always awed and deeply inspired by Mary's courage in Luke 1:26–2:20. Through an angelic messenger, God shared with her such a risky ministry invitation. He asked if she would be willing to be the mother of the Savior of the world, which would mean extreme risk of personal scandal and harsh judgment by many who would never comprehend God's purposes. How did this brave young woman respond? "May your word to me be fulfilled" (Luke 1:38). Early in Christ's ministry we see him interacting in an unprecedented way with a woman from Samaria, even directly revealing to her who he was (John 4:1-42). As a result of his dialogue with her, she became the catalyst for leading a community to Christ! In Scripture we see other women leading through philanthropy and funding aspects of Christ's ministry on earth (Luke 8:2-3). Another was encouraged to take a seat at the feet of the most exceptional of all theologians, an unprecedented privilege for a woman in that era. She was offered the invitation to learn about the mysteries of God and was praised for her desire to grow and develop in this way (Luke 10:38-42).

If these things are not remarkable enough, there's more. This all-wise and all-powerful God, who could have used any number of different strategies, invited a group of women to be the first to proclaim the astounding news of Christ's resurrection. Jesus could have easily revealed himself first to Peter (John 20:6) or better yet to John, the disciple who remained faithful to Christ throughout the torment of his crucifixion (John 19:25-27). That is what leaders from that era and many Christian leaders today would expect, but God chose a different strategy. He chose to bestow this greatest of theological and missiological honors on women (Luke 24:1-10; John 20:11-18) even though legal courts in that culture marginalized their testimonies.

We also see God using Lydia's response to open a significant door for the advancement of the gospel into a new region of the world (Acts 16:14-15, 40). Paul respected Phoebe's leadership so deeply that most historians believe she was the courier of the book of Romans, meaning she was most likely the first to read and answer questions about what Paul had written to believers in that part of the world. Scripture records Paul's glowing endorsement of her character and partnership in the gospel (Romans 16:1-2). We see the gifted woman Priscilla, who traveled and taught with her husband and Paul. She was influential in pioneering the ministry in Corinth, Ephesus, and Rome (Acts 18:1-3, 18-26; Romans 16:3-4). Paul writes of his deep respect for her and says that she courageously put her life at risk for him. Paul also praises the sincere faith of Timothy's mother, Lois, and grandmother, Eunice, and acknowledges how important their influence had been in shaping Timothy for his current leadership role (2 Timothy 1:5).

A glimpse from mission history. I find the stories of these women in the New Testament so deeply encouraging and motivating, yet I

also have a sense of awe when I ponder even a small sample of women from a more recent era who accepted God's invitations to serve and lead. Susanna Wesley, for example, fruitfully mothered two of the greatest missionary leaders in church history, John and Charles.⁷ We occasionally hear of Catherine Booth who is described as being an amazing and fiery preacher. With her husband, William, Catherine cofounded the Salvation Army, a major evangelistic and mission movement of the era.⁸ We read with wonder how Harriet Beecher Stowe used her writing gifts in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to influence millions to join the fight and end slavery in the United States.⁹ We find hope and inspiration in Harriet Tubman's story as we learn how she fearlessly helped lead the Underground Railroad. After escaping from slavery, she put her life at risk many times so others might have freedom.¹⁰

We marvel at how God used a woman with the significant disability of blindness to pen lyrics and hymns that convey some of the deepest theological truths: Fanny Crosby's songs are still used frequently in worship services around the globe.¹¹ We are amazed by Amy Carmichael, a young girl from Ireland, who sought to rescue at-risk children. She remained in India for fifty years, refusing the privilege of returning to her homeland, and her writings continue to fuel a passion for mission in future generations.¹² There is Lottie Moon, the Southern Baptist missionary who served in China, whose life and ministry have been the inspiration for exceptional levels of philanthropy for mission work around the globe.¹³ We know about Corrie ten Boom, the Dutch watchmaker, who with her family helped to free many Jews during the Holocaust.¹⁴ We remember the depth of courage Elisabeth Elliot displayed when she returned with her daughter to the tribe that killed her husband. She was filled with a

tenacious desire to see them have access to the Word of God in their own language so they might know the risen Lord.¹⁵ There is also the remarkable and humble Albanian woman Mother Teresa, who founded and led the Missionaries of Charity and ministered to “the least of these” initially in India, and then in many nations.¹⁶

Less well known are the “Bible women” from the Middle East, Italy, Japan, Sudan, India, Bulgaria, Korea, China, and so many other nations in the world. When Western missionaries went to new countries to spread the gospel, they frequently hired local women called “the Bible women.” Their individual names have rarely been mentioned in history books, and instead are buried within newsletters and field reports in mission archives.¹⁷ They came from every sector of society, comprising women who had once been prostitutes, women cast out of their homes for not being able to bear sons, wives of seminary students and pastors, and women from the highest echelons of society.¹⁸ What is recorded reveals they were incredibly adept and fruitful in ministries such as evangelism, teaching, discipleship, worship, preaching, church planting, pastoral care, and medical mission.¹⁹ As one mission historian explains, “The role of Bible women in building Christianity through the world has been one of the most remarkable aspects of world evangelism in the past century.”²⁰

A glimpse from our era. As we transition to discuss how women are serving and leading in our era in God’s mission, the word *influence* is important because in the midst of diverse contexts and cultures many formal roles and positions are less available to women because of their gender. What follows is an attempt to capture the scope of what the women included in the research for this book have done or what they are currently doing in God’s mission. These categories are displayed to show the diversity and breadth of their service and

leadership. They serve as single women, as married women whose husbands do different work, or as co-leaders with their spouses. The order their ministries are portrayed is not a reflection of the value or importance of their work.

- They serve and lead in respected mission networks such as Lausanne, the World Evangelical Alliance, the WEA Mission Commission, the Global Community Health & Education Network, and in a wide variety of regional and national networks.
- They are involved in pioneering new ministries that reach college students, families, and unreached people groups.
- They facilitate macrosocial change through organizations like UNESCO and the World Health Organization to serve underresourced and marginalized people groups in a variety of countries.
- They lead by serving on boards, providing governance to a wide variety of mission agencies and ministries.
- They are in executive roles as executive directors, vice presidents, national directors, general secretaries, area directors supervising work in multiple nations, and so on. Some boldly stepped into the roles without hesitation; others felt uncomfortable accepting these invitations because of their gender until their husbands encouraged them to take the positions.
- They have first-lady roles as wives of executive directors, a platform that enables them to influence in unique and fruitful ways.
- They are parenting and foster-parenting children, teens, and young adults, and they are influencing the next generation as grandparents.

- They serve and lead as church ministry directors or pastors in areas such as children's ministry, youth ministry, young adult ministry, lay-counseling ministries, worship, educational ministries, church planting, and the like. Some are ordained and some are not, and some co-lead in church ministry with their husbands.
- They are involved in advocacy and parachurch ministries that take a variety of forms, such as advocating for Bibleless people groups, ending human trafficking, promoting life and human dignity, rehabilitating the incarcerated, and so forth.
- They are engaged in hospitality and mercy ministries focusing on aiding the displaced and vulnerable by providing housing, refugee services, language ministries, summer camps for children threatened with gun violence, and so on.
- They serve and lead through medical ministries in a variety of ways, such as being a physician to orphans, providing healthcare to the homeless, ministering to people with eating disorders, integrating health and evangelism in communities ravaged by drug cartels, and providing relief in disasters.
- They have academic ministries serving as department chairs, academic deans, vice presidents, professors, and leaders of scholarship programs to equip missionaries. They work in seminaries as well as public institutions of higher education, seeking to influence and advance God's purposes.
- They engage in media ministries with a variety of artists and writers to create films, blogs, and social media resources for evangelism.
- They facilitate the development of leaders for a wide variety of diverse ministries across the globe.

- They research and publish, stretching the boundaries of knowledge to help mission practitioners, or they extend the reach of regionally respected theological voices so others around the globe might learn from them.
- They oversee a variety of operational ministries such as IT, finance, personnel, logistical planning for global events, and the like.

How Do They Feel About Their Involvement?

When asked how they felt about leading in God's mission, the word they used most frequently was *privilege*. Many like Aesha from South Asia who work in church planting elaborated with comments such as, "Being part of something so big is incredible. The fact that God invites me to be a part of his plans and purposes is both humbling and encouraging. I find purpose in what he has called me to be and do in his kingdom." Adalie, a European, is passionate about engaging the next generation in God's mission. She explained, "There are thousands of leaders around the world who sacrifice so the world will be reached. It is us together! Each of us playing our tiny part in the big world!" While the women in this research expressed challenges they encounter as they serve and lead, they never expressed regret that they chose to follow God to serve and lead in mission. Instead, Madhuri's statement was indicative of the tone and sentiment as they reflected on their journeys: "God in his mercy has chosen me. To be active in his work is the best investment of one's life."

Recognizing Global Sensitivities

Unlike the examples from the New Testament or the stories from mission history, the ministries of many of the women mentioned in

this book are still unfolding. While they are serving and leading in a variety of ways now, it is not yet clear what God might ask of them in the years ahead. They might need to get visas in sensitive locations, or they might be called to apply for positions in contexts that would normally be closed to someone with a mission background. Identifying them by name could put their lives and ministries, or those of their colleagues, at risk.

For that reason I have tried to be extremely careful in sharing their insights and stories. Most of the time I will use pseudonyms, and I will not mention their actual names unless they provided additional consent to do so and face minimal risk. If you read a troubling or sad story with the name of a person you think you know, any similarity is truly a coincidence. If there was any chance that a story had the potential to reflect poorly on any person or ministry, I exercised care and used pseudonyms because I want to honor rather than embarrass or shame men and women serving in God's mission. That is the intent of my heart because if we are careful to respect and honor one another, I believe we will be able to keep learning from one another.

Are You Ready for the Journey?

I hope the journeys of these women will inspire you to follow our risen Lord, remaining ever curious and open to how he might be calling you in the days ahead. Surely it is a remarkable privilege to be one of his children, to be given the opportunity to work with him in the world. May we too be found faithful, wholly fulfilling whatever unique callings he might have for us, that the world might see and come to know the kind and utterly spectacular God we serve!

Discussion Questions

1. Who is a woman in the Bible you admire? What about her story causes you to hold her in high esteem?
2. What in the stories of women from mission history surprises or inspires you?
3. Which areas of mission leadership do you find most interesting? Why?
4. Who are some women you know who are serving and leading in God's mission? Describe how God is using them to further his purposes in the world.

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