

BOOK REVIEW

Sue Anderson-Faithful & Catherine Holloway, *Women and the Anglican Church Congress 1861-1938. Space, Place and Agency* (London: Bloomsbury, 2023), pp. 259. £85.00hbk/£28.99pbk.

doi:[10.1017/S1740355324000123](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740355324000123)

The Church Congresses played a significant role in the Anglican Church of the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They supplied both an organizational nexus which brought together the Church's leading figures and provided many voices, both clerical and lay, with the opportunity to set the tone of its mission. Equally as importantly, the congresses enabled a platform for women in a Church that institutionalized male authority and excluded women's contribution from its routine of worship. Anderson-Faithful and Holloway's book is thus timely in both its resurrection of a neglected institution and in situating the congresses as a sphere within which women carved out an influential role. Though both Sean Gill and Brian Heeney visit the congresses in their surveys of women and the Church, neither has been able to give full account of their role in the way this work achieves. The authors illustrate how the visible presence of women from 1861 became an audible one when, in 1875, the novelist Charlotte Yonge became the first woman to have a paper read. From 1881, women spoke on the platform for the first time and specific meetings for women were held annually. In total, women gave 294 papers across the lifespan of the congresses and 178 women spoke from the platform. A central argument of the book is that the congresses provided a gathering point and a venue of sociability for the myriad networks of women that existed both within the Church and beyond it. The book's fourth chapter is particularly successful in illustrating the overlapping contours – religious, philanthropic and political – that were brought together at the congresses and the way in which these were cross-fertilized through the connections forged there. This is therefore a story featuring the leading women of the day, including the renowned purity campaigner Ellice Hopkins, the author Louise Creighton, the educationalist Elizabeth Wordsworth and the trade unionist Gertrude Tuckwell. A range of viewpoints, religious and political were brought together in this way, along with a range of diverse institutions from the Primrose League to the National Union of Women Workers.

Furthermore, the authors indicate how the congresses played an influential role in shaping institutions beyond the congress, through women advocating certain causes from the platform. For example, the congress provided an impetus for the

adoption of the Mothers' Union as a diocesan organization and through the endorsement of women's contributions from the platform, it also enhanced the cause for a wider sphere of opportunity for women's higher education. Through widespread coverage in the national and provincial press, this voice could be heard widely. An important shift is located by the authors from a 'first generation' of clerically aligned female speakers – often wives of bishops – to a 'second generation' of women, especially from the 1890s, who were called upon to contribute by virtue of their own 'professional' expertise. This ranged from temperance and purity campaigners to trade unionists and doctors. 1913 is situated as a turning point in the place of women at the congresses with a far greater number of female speakers heard and a new found centrality to the discussion of women's place in, and work for, the Church. In the eye of the storm raging over suffrage, this illustrated the way in which the Church Congress was plugged into the central political and social issues of the day. The roles of women and men in society and religious conceptions of femininity and masculinity were frequently debated at the congresses across the period. Dented rather by the First World War, it was in 1918, the authors argue that a more radical questioning of the status of women's sacramental authority within the Church was first heard. Prominent at 'fringe' events held to coincide with the main event, Maude Royden, the suffragist and campaigner for women's ministry, used the congresses as an opportunity to advocate for women's ordination. At one such fringe meeting organized by the League of the Church Militant in 1920, she proved so popular that hundreds had to be turned away from the venue for lack of space.

However, somewhat surprisingly, the 1920s also witnessed the decline of women's participation at the congresses. Though the authors suggest that this coincided with the expansion of opportunity for women to participate in other venues, this striking change is left somewhat unaccounted for. Perhaps this question could have been taken up again in the concluding chapter on the 'legacy' of the Church Congress. Though these concluding remarks gesture towards Anglican women's ordination in the later twentieth century, an opportunity is missed to situate the congresses within the mid-twentieth century world in which they came to an end and to consider the longer *durée* of women's place within the Church. Nonetheless, this is a highly stimulating work which should be recognized as an important contribution to our understanding of women's role within the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Church and far beyond. It also illustrates the many further avenues that exist for research into the Church Congresses more broadly as they have not attracted historical attention equivalent to the central role they played in shaping the Church and wider society of this period.

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