

1 “Into the Spotlight: How Louise C. Kleuser Worked for Adventist Women”

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INTRODUCTION

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10 “Louise Caroline Kleuser was one of the most illustrious women leaders of the Seventh-
11 day Adventist Church.”¹ So wrote Bob Spangler, editor of *Ministry*, in his 1976 obituary
12 for Miss Kleuser. Eulogies are panegyric, yet it was no exaggeration to say that “Saint
13 Louise” (as Spangler crowned her) ranks highly among women in the church leadership.
14 Kleuser was a Bible worker, pastor, associate secretary of the General Conference
15 ministerial association, conference youth director, author, and seminary lecturer—as
16 well as the first woman to graduate from the medical cadet corps as a second lieutenant.
17 Her research was the foundation for one of the best-received compilations of Ellen
18 White’s writings: *Evangelism* (1946). Kleuser reviewed theological papers, defended the
19 Adventist-Evangelical Conferences that birthed *Questions on Doctrine*, published
20 poetry, and even wrote a hymn.²

21

22 The careful reader will notice that Spangler inserted the word “women” between
23 “illustrious” and “leaders,” rendering the sentence more awkward to read. Whatever
24 Spangler’s reason for this insertion, it reminds us how women like Louise Kleuser i are
25 often seen (if they are “seen” at all) as “also rans” rather than as key players in the
26 development of the denomination. Though much work has been done in recent decades
27 to uncover and tell the stories of Adventist women, those stories have yet to penetrate
28 popular narratives of Adventist history.

29

30 In service of the larger objective of seeing Adventist women’s stories integrated into our
31 denominational histories, this paper focuses on Louise Kleuser.³ In **act one**, we will
32 acquaint ourselves with Louise Kleuser’s life, focusing on the critical role women played
33 in her development. In **act two**, the paper will examine how Kleuser helped Adventist
34 women from her positions as teacher, administrator, and author. Finally, **act three** will
35 look at the question of women’s ordination in connection with Kleuser as well as some
36 lessons we might be able to glean from Kleuser’s legacy of service.

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¹ Spangler, Robert. “In Memoriam.” *The Ministry* 49, no. 6 (June 1949):

48. <https://cdn.ministrymagazine.org/issues/1976/issues/MIN1976-06.pdf>.

² Hymnary.org. “Holy Day, Jehovah’s Rest, Day Which God,”

n.d. https://hymnary.org/text/holy_day_jehovahs_rest_day_which_god#pagescans.

³ For those looking for a more complete treatment of Kleuser’s life, see “Kleuser, Louise C.” in the *Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists*. You can also listen to a more in-depth episode about her on the Adventist History Extra (subscription-only) podcast (released September 2023).

ACT ONE: SHAPED BY WOMEN

1
2
3 Louise Kleuser was surrounded by women. Born in Barmen, Germany, she was the
4 second of five daughters. Her father died shortly after moving the family to New York
5 City, leaving Louise with her sisters, her mother, her aunts, and her grandmother. “By
6 this time,” she reflected, “Mother was the head of our home.” Attending Christ Lutheran
7 Church in Manhattan, Kleuser’s first role model was an ordained deaconess by the name
8 of “Sister Regina.” “Before I was fifteen I wanted to become a Lutheran Deaconess,”
9 Kleuser would later write.⁴

10
11 **Conversion.** One day, another woman entered the Kleuser women’s life: Mrs. Hilbert.
12 Hilbert was likely a local Seventh-day Adventist Bible worker who took to knocking on
13 doors offering Bible readings. She showed up at the door of Marie Drevermann—
14 Louise’s aunt—and was undeterred when Aunt Marie stuck her head out the window
15 and barked: “Now what do you want?” Another female Bible worker, Auguste Meyer,
16 worked with Louise’s grandmother, who died shortly after accepting the Adventist faith.
17 This was the unlikely foothold that ended up with Louise Kleuser being baptized into the
18 Seventh-day Adventist Church in November 1909.

19
20 **Colporteur.** The Kleusers then moved to Connecticut in the hopes of planting a
21 church. Here Louise worked with another Louise—Louise Mueller—in colporteur work
22 (selling Adventist books). Louise Kleuser ranged a territory from Stamford, Connecticut,
23 and one hundred miles along the coast into Rhode Island. As the work grew, Louise
24 eventually placed in charge of “a group of young women colporteurs.”⁵

25
26 Kleuser received additional training from Hetty Haskell (1857-1919), Loretta Robinson
27 (1857-1933), and Ellen “Nellie” Sisley-Starr (1854-1934), when they spoke at workers
28 meetings. Kleuser would go on to pay homage to these women in her later writings.

29
30 **Bible Work.** The president of the Southern New England Conference, J.E. Jayne, had
31 noticed Louise’s success and persuaded her to become a Bible worker (like Mrs. Hilbert)
32 in New Haven. When the local evangelist had to stop to deal with a death in the family,
33 Kleuser gamely took over and pastored two churches, teaching Sabbath school, speaking
34 for a week of prayer, and assisting with the church building campaign. Declaring herself
35 “a husky ministerial intern,” she also continued knocking on doors as a Bible worker.

36
37 **Conference Leadership.** Let’s fast-forward: Kleuser spent 1914 to 1941 working for
38 three conferences in the northeast: Southern New England, East Pennsylvania, Greater
39 New York. She always headed two or three of the following departments at each post:
40 education, missionary volunteer (youth), Sabbath school, and home missionary.

41
42 **Translation.** In 1936, Kleuser was tasked with being a German translator for a notable
43 Adventist woman who was to tour the United States *en route* to the general conference
44 session in San Francisco. Hulda Jost headed up the Adventist church’s welfare ministry

⁴ GCA, Silver Spring, MD. “Louise C. Kleuser,” PC 8. Box 6853.

⁵ *Ibid.*

1 in Germany and had arrived in America to talk about her work—with the blessing of the
 2 Nazis. What followed was over 140 speaking engagements where Jost sang Hitler’s
 3 praises while an increasingly uncomfortable Louise Kleuser translated.⁶ An article in
 4 *The Denver Post* lauded Jost as “a loyal backer of Hitler.”⁷ This prompted Kleuser to fire
 5 off a letter to the General Conference president, James McElhaney:

6
 7 “Our sister is positively playing with fire. . . . Getting a perspective of Sister Jost’s
 8 whole propaganda, I feel she may bring to us in the future far more
 9 embarrassment than we can trust our brethren right close up to the problem in
 10 Europe, to now see.”⁸

11
 12 **General Conference.** Louise Kleuser was called apply her experience as a Bible
 13 worker to a global scale when she was invited to join the General Conference ministerial
 14 association in September, 1941. As Bible instructors (as “Bible workers” were officially
 15 known after 1942) were often women, Kleuser was able to help educate hundreds, if not
 16 thousands, in how to give Bible studies. After seeing how women stepped into ministry
 17 during the Second World War, Kleuser believed that “women need to lead out in
 18 evangelism.”⁹

19
 20 “God has indicated that Seventh-day Adventist women throughout the world will
 21 give Bible readings until the gospel work closes. It is this conviction that made me
 22 see the importance of a trained womanhood for the proclamation of our message.
 23 I have recognized its urgency and was guided into serving the cause in an
 24 evangelistic way.”¹⁰

25
 26 **Conclusion.** Louise Kleuser was a woman who was raised, inspired, and mentored by
 27 other women. She devoted her life to training men and especially women to do ministry,
 28 impacting thousands of Adventist women over the course of her career. Her vision was
 29 to see a “trained womanhood” playing an important role “in an evangelistic way.”
 30 Kleuser owed her life and career to the women in her life: from her mother who raised
 31 her to Sister Regina who showed her the difference a deaconess could make; from the
 32 two Bible workers (Mrs. Hilbert and Ms. Meyer) who studied with the Kleuser family to
 33 her grandmother who encouraged her to join the Adventist church in spite of her
 34 mother’s opposition; to the legion of Adventist women from whom Kleuser drew
 35 inspiration, such as Loretta Robinson, Hetty Haskell, and Nellie Sisley-Starr. Without
 36 this long list of women, Louise Kleuser likely never would have become a Seventh-day
 37 Adventist, nor devote her ministry to working with and for Adventist women.

6 “Louise Kleuser to J. L. McEhlany,” n.d. <https://perspectives.ushmm.org/item/louise-kleuser-to-j-l-mcehlany>.

7 *The Denver Post*. “German Welfare Leader Lauds Hitler’s Work on Denver Visit,” April 19, 1936.

8 “Louise Kleuser to J. L. McEhlany,” n.d. <https://perspectives.ushmm.org/item/louise-kleuser-to-j-l-mcehlany>.

9 GCA, Silver Spring, MD. “Louise C. Kleuser,” PC 8. Box 6853.

10 *Ibid.* The “highest ideals of Seventh-day Adventist womanhood” was also a subject of the first issue of *Keynote* (November, 1937), a publication by and for women working in the General Conference office. Kleuser became a sponsor of *Keynote* shortly after joining the Ministerial Association.

ACT TWO: PAYING IT FORWARD

Kleuser's new position at the General Conference ministerial association led to her teaching at the seminary (in Takoma Park) from 1944 until at least 1962.¹¹ She wrote a course called "The Bible Instructor", which she made available to Bible teachers at denominational colleges with the note: "It is equally important for young men and women."¹²

The first two lessons in the Bible instructor course seemed to have been drawn from her fifteen-page history of Bible work in which Kleuser deliberately included women's stories alongside that of men.¹³ Kleuser noted that there were no paid Bible workers in the early decades of the church, and so one must "read between the lines of the *Review* or *Signs* articles."¹⁴ Following A.W. Spalding, she gave credit to Angeline Lyon Cornell alongside her husband, Merritt. From Spalding, Kleuser apparently secured the names of "the wives of missionaries who were tied in with their husbands' evangelism." On this list were Adelia Patten Van Horn, Maud Sisley Boyd, Nellie Starr, Eva Hankins, and Ellen Lane, whom Spalding apparently called "a minister in her own right." We might surmise that in preparing to teach this class, Kleuser read Spalding's *Footprints of the Pioneers*, noticed how Spalding mentioned Angeline Cornell, and then wrote Spalding to learn about other notable women in the early Adventist church. Kleuser then incorporated their stories into her history of Adventist Bible instructors.

Kleuser mentioned other women—besides those Spalding had mentioned—such as Jennie Owen McClelland and Helen McKinnon. "As we reach the year 1900 in our research," Kleuser noted, "we find no difficulty in listing a growing group of remarkably well-trained personal workers among our sisters."¹⁵

Louise Kleuser also mentioned a colporteur in Berlin named "Sister Dieben."¹⁶ This Sister Dieben apparently brought the three angels' message to the attention of Crown Prince Frederick of Germany, who "at times met one of our colporteurs in the royal garden for the chief purpose of fulfilling prophecy."¹⁷

Kleuser gave much of the credit for the formation of Bible instructors to Stephen Haskell. He was "a man with real vision and organizing abilities" and "a patriarchal

¹¹ Some of the courses Kleuser taught were "Fundamental Techniques in Bible Work," "Bible Work in City Evangelism," and "Meeting Objections." See *The Seminarian*, January 2, 1949 and March 4, 1950.

¹² GCA, Silver Spring, MD. "Louise C. Kleuser," PC 8. Box 6853.

¹³ This manuscript was also adapted for an article in *Ministry*. See Kleuser, Louise C. *Ministry*. January, 1949 (vol. 22, no. 1).

¹⁴ GCA, Silver Spring, MD. "Louise C. Kleuser," PC 8. Box 6853.

¹⁵ GCA, Silver Spring, MD. "Louise C. Kleuser," PC 8. Box 6853.

¹⁶ This "Sister Dieben", according to Kleuser, later married J. Christiansen, first mate and captain of the *Pitcairn* during its first two voyages.

¹⁷ GCA, Silver Spring, MD. "Louise C. Kleuser," PC 8. Box 6853.

1 type.”¹⁸ Yet, at an 1883 Michigan camp meeting, Haskell said that “men and women are
2 wanted.”¹⁹

3
4 Nevertheless, Kleuser recognized that the church needed to move past Haskell’s
5 methods because times were changing and that “it takes more than an array of proof
6 texts to beat off these [devilish] assaults” the church was facing at the midpoint in the
7 twentieth century. Advocating for “up-to-date methods” and equipping “both men and
8 women,” Kleuser wanted the future of Bible work to include a “blending” of professional
9 Bible instructors with lay volunteers.

10
11 Kleuser believed that the best days of Adventist womanhood were ahead. Kleuser
12 believed that evangelists’ novel use of felt and black light to illustrate their talks “had
13 brought woman’s talents into the spotlight.”²⁰ She went even further. After noting how
14 women stepped up when men were drafted during the Second World War (she mentions
15 Finland, where perhaps a dozen women functioned as ministers)ⁱ, Kleuser envisioned a
16 time coming when “women need to lead out in evangelism.” When that time comes, “the
17 Bible work training already begun in many lands will come to the front.”²¹ In other
18 words, Louise Kleuser believed her Bible instructor training prepared women for an
19 even greater service in the Seventh-day Adventist Church than they could otherwise
20 have.

21
22 Bible work was a good fit for women who weren’t permitted in other areas of church
23 ministry. Kleuser, as noted, believed it was a steppingstone to future usefulness in the
24 church. But it was also financially beneficial for women. Ministers’ wives wouldn’t have
25 to “work for free” alongside their husbands.²²

26
27 **BIBLE WORK IN RETROSPECT.** Bible work did not progress to the glory Kleuser
28 had hoped. Toward the end of her life, she asked: “What happened to the woman Bible
29 instructor during the last 20 years? A question that definitely deserves an answer!”²³
30 Kleuser noted that “the peace period between War I and War II records great activity in
31 lay women teaching talent.” Bible work, she says, enabled women (“especially our young
32 women”) to lead in a ministry that “carried great respect and profound influence.” The
33 Bible instructor “was an exemplary woman in any church” and “her word counted and
34 she was loved by young and old.”²⁴ Why, then, did women turn away from Bible work if
35 it afforded them a privileged position in the church? Kleuser blamed cultural changes in
36 the post-war world for pushing women towards college and then towards teaching and
37 secretarial jobs at the expense of Bible work. Nevertheless, Kleuser renewed her call for
38 women to become Bible instructors.

39

¹⁸ I believe she intended this as a compliment.

¹⁹ GCA, Silver Spring, MD. “Louise C. Kleuser,” PC 8. Box 6853.

²⁰ “Life Sketch of Miss Louise Caroline Kleuser,” January, 1966. p. 16. GC Archives, Col. 6856.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 17.

²² Kleuser, Louise. “Our Veteran Bible Instructors,” *The Ministry* 30, no. 5 (May 1957): 35.

²³ “What Happened to the Woman Bible Instructor During the Last 20 Years?” GC Archives, Col. 6856.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

1 **PUBLISHING WOMEN.** While men and women worked as Bible instructors, Kleuser
 2 routinely highlighted the role of female Bible workers. In the “acknowledgements” of her
 3 book, *The Bible Instructor*, Kleuser acknowledged “both men and women” Bible
 4 instructors but named 26 women in special appreciation. Kleuser certainly might have
 5 filled the book with her own ideas and anecdotes from her extensive experiences. But
 6 she used of the chapters were written by these 26 female Bible workers.
 7 Kleuser also used her role as an editor of *Ministry*—a journal for Adventist clergy—to
 8 pay tribute to Adventist women. After a regional paper, *Atlantic Union Gleaner*, marked
 9 Auguste Meyer’s 50 years of employment, Kleuser penned her own ode to Meyer in
 10 *Ministry*, ensuring that pastors and church leaders around the world were aware of
 11 Meyer’s feat, which “may well be unique in the denomination.”²⁵ Kleuser highlighted
 12 Meyer’s impact by favorably contrasting it to pastoral ministry: “Miss Meyer has seen
 13 many pastors come and go while she has remained unmoved at her post.”

14
 15 Louise also paid tribute to Loretta Farnworth Robinson, an early Adventist Bible
 16 instructor from whom Louise had received training. Kleuser praised Loretta Robinson
 17 as “was one who set the distinctive pattern of the future Bible instructor.” Kleuser noted
 18 how Robinson gave Bible studies until her death: “It was as natural for her to do this as
 19 to live, and those who knew her well declare her to have been one of the denomination’s
 20 ablest Bible instructors.”²⁶

21
 22 **CONCLUSION.** Louise Kleuser used her influence as an author, teacher, and
 23 departmental director to highlight the work Adventist women were doing. Rather than
 24 writing *The Bible Instructor* herself, Kleuser chose to allow various women to write
 25 chapters in the book, allowing them to share in the spotlight. Kleuser constantly extolled
 26 women’s value in ministry and highlighted their work in her writings. Kleuser argued
 27 for equal pay for women, believed “Adventist womanhood has been and is a great
 28 blessing to the denomination,” and sought to include women in every aspect of her
 29 ministry.²⁷

30
 31 In Louise Kleuser, we see a path to strengthening the role women play in the Seventh-
 32 day Adventist Church. **First, mentoring.** Kleuser had a clear picture of the
 33 empowering and effective role women could play, both in the home and the church. She
 34 also devoted her life to being a trainer and mentor to other women. **Second,**
 35 **recognition.** Kleuser not only benefited from having women as mentors, but she gave
 36 them public credit. She also recognized the role women played in Adventist history,
 37 which she both published and taught to future and current ministers. **Third,**
 38 **platforming.** Kleuser used her position to give other women a voice. While Kleuser
 39 was in the spotlight, she did not hog the spotlight. Rather, she shared the spotlight.

40
 41 A personal reflection: Kleuser has reminded me that there is no Adventist history
 42 without women. If we were to remove women from her history of Bible work, it would be
 43 unintelligible. If we removed women from the stories we tell, would they be the worse

²⁵ See “A Remarkable Record,” *Atlantic Union Gleaner* 55, no. 24 (June 1956): 3. Cf. “Our Veteran Bible Instructors,” *The Ministry* 30, no. 5 (May 1957): 35.

²⁶ Louise C. Kleuser. “Origin of the Bible Work.” *Ministry* 22, no. 1 (June 1949): 16-17.

²⁷ Kleuser, Louise. “Our Veteran Bible Instructors,” *The Ministry* 30, no. 5 (May 1957): 35.

1 for it? Would anyone notice? As I look over my own work with the Adventist History
 2 Podcast, I realize how few of the stories I've told involve Adventist women. This wasn't a
 3 deliberate choice, since the published histories I relied upon didn't really feature
 4 Adventist women. If the Adventist history I do can be told without women, then it isn't
 5 good history. When I re-record my first season of the podcast next year, the stories of
 6 Adventist women will be indispensable.

7 **ACT THREE: THE ORDINATION PROBLEM**

8
 9
 10 In 1975, Konrad F. Mueller, a newly minted lecturer at Newbold College, asked Louise
 11 Kleuser the question that most interests modern Adventists. (Mueller, it should be said,
 12 was likely Kleuser's student at the seminary when he was enrolled in the late 1950s.)
 13 Mueller, a fellow German, asked Kleuser about her thoughts on the ordination of women
 14 to pastoral ministry. Mueller, our source about this meeting, later regretted that he
 15 didn't record her answer. Arriving at Newbold, he wrote Kleuser just before Christmas
 16 and asked if she might share her thoughts in writing. It's unclear if she replied to
 17 Mueller's letter, but some marginalia are of note:

18
 19 First, a handwritten note on the letter reads: "Show Eld. Don Yost. Reply later." This
 20 might suggest that Kleuser did indeed reply—or at least intended to reply. Don Yost was
 21 mentioned as Kleuser was in the process of donating a number of her documents to the
 22 archive he was establishing at the General Conference.

23
 24 Second, Kleuser typed another statement on the front of the letter and addressed to
 25 "Elder McKee:" "This type of letter calls for my help too often these days! [unclear]
 26 interesting. But not my concer[n]. Just for your information. Kee[p?] it. Louise
 27 Kleuser."²⁸ This statement suggests that Kleuser might not have replied, and that
 28 Mueller wasn't the first people to ask her about the ordination of women.

29
 30 Mueller's letter makes it clear that Kleuser wasn't in favor of ordaining women. He
 31 characterized her position as that "such a step at the present time was uncalled for,
 32 because it would be born out of a spirit of rebellion." This line, like many others, was
 33 underlined in Kleuser's characteristic blue and red colored pencil, indicating that she
 34 read the letter carefully. When Mueller asked if Kleuser might write out her views, she
 35 wrote a question mark in the margin. Assuming that Mueller has roughly represented
 36 Kleuser's view on women's ordination, Kleuser didn't seem to believe that ordination to
 37 pastoral ministry was the best path for Adventist women "at the present time." Kleuser
 38 was apparently concerned that women's ordination be accomplished in the right spirit
 39 and judged that, in 1975, the motivation wasn't yet right.

40
 41 Perhaps Kleuser's reply on this question (to Mueller or anyone else) might yet turn up
 42 and help us to better understand her thinking on the issue of ordination. Certainly, it is
 43 an issue of great interest to present generations of Adventists. Yet it didn't seem to be of
 44 much interest to Kleuser, who continued to hope that women might continue to conduct
 45 successful ministry as Bible workers. That was the profession which, to Kleuser, seemed

²⁸ GCA, Silver Spring, MD. "Louise C. Kleuser," PC 8. Box 6856.

1 to promise the most advancement for Adventist women. Could it be that some of the
2 emphasis on “women’s ordination” today is due, in part, to the fact that fewer women
3 are serving in the roles Louis Kleuser once held? Bible work has all but collapsed as an
4 avenue for women to serve in full-time ministry and earn a respectable wage. And while
5 women are serving at all administrative levels of the church, they often occupy the same
6 positions that had been available to them a hundred years ago. In some respects,
7 ordination to pastoral ministry has become more important as a gateway to service in
8 the Adventist church.

9
10 Kleuser could sidestep the question of women’s ordination because she felt women had
11 other meaningful, important ways to serve. After all, Kleuser herself had pastored two
12 churches but preferred to train women for Bible work. Though Kleuser might not state it
13 as such, she was preparing female Adventists to be the church’s evangelists, pastors,
14 teachers, etc. with the men raptured off to war in another draft. She noted the work of
15 Elsa in Sweden.

16
17 Ordination to pastoral ministry is an important issue concerning Adventist women
18 today, but Louise Kleuser believed that there were other, equally important ministries
19 available to women. She lamented seeing them choose secretarial work, believing that
20 they had greater potential. Were she alive today, I don’t know what Louise Kleuser
21 might say about women’s ordination, but I do believe she would invite us to think bigger
22 than ordination; to push the church to create other pathways to leadership; to
23 encourage conference constituencies to consider women for departmental roles beyond
24 “women’s ministries.”

25
26 Again, the topic of women’s ordination to pastoral ministry is important. Personally, I
27 believe in women’s ordination. But if we consider ordination the height of what
28 Adventist women can achieve, then we risk missing the spiritual, energetic, and
29 courageous ministry of women like Louise Kleuser.
