

Reprinted from the Christian Science Monitor, March 29, 2001.
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Women of courage and vision

By Elise L. Moore, C.S.B.

In fields ranging from physics to civil rights, six women are being honored this month in recognition of National Women's History Month. LaDonna Harris, political activist and Founder of Americans for Indian Opportunity. Shirley Jackson, physicist and first female African-American Ph.D. from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Maya Lin, architect and designer of The Vietnam Veterans' Memorial in Washington, D.C. Ellen Ochoa, engineer, inventor and first Hispanic female astronaut. Esther Peterson, consumer advocate instrumental in food content labeling and equal pay for women. And Lillian Smith, author and civil rights advocate honored in 1956 by the women who organized the Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott.

These women are recognized as "Women of Courage and Vision," the theme of this year's celebration. Each one has blessed countless others.

The National Women's Hall of Fame in Seneca Falls, New York, celebrates women year round and recognizes them for achievements of enduring value. Remarkably, few women have been inducted for contributions to religion. For generations the churches have been filled and fed by women, yet their achievements rarely recognized. In 1995, Mary Baker Eddy was inducted for making "an indelible mark on society, religion and journalism." Her groundbreaking efforts in founding this newspaper, preaching, publishing, and introducing the equality of women in church hierarchy resonate even today.

Little did Mrs. Eddy (1821-1910) know that her personal journey would blaze a trail for women in many Christian denominations. Chronically ill, she investigated every avenue for a cure. Along with other women of her day, she studied and practiced homeopathy and other alternative medicines. Her epiphany came through a physical healing. Unable to move three days after an accident, she asked for her Bible. She read one of Jesus' healings, and within moments walked into the next room, healed. This remarkable

healing set her searching the Scriptures for an explanation. Bible promises sprang to life. Eddy realized she had discovered the spiritual laws of God, which Jesus practiced and taught his disciples. She began healing spontaneously and consistently. She taught these Biblical principles to common folk in her community. Soon factory workers, housewives, and clerks were healing spiritually.

A physician recommended she write her ideas in a book. So in 1875 she published the first edition of "Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures." Some of the concepts were radical for the time - God as Mother as well as Father, and salvation for all. She wrote, "Love is impartial and universal in its adaptation and bestowals" (pg. 13). Some of her ideas were considered heresy. And her gender caused many churchmen to dismiss her without a hearing.

So, Eddy formed a church, The First Church of Christ, Scientist, in Boston, Massachusetts. Also known as The Mother Church, its branches developed worldwide, and she established that two "Readers" would conduct the Sunday services. Women were given equal opportunity to serve with men. Also, when she established monthly and weekly magazines, she sought women writers and editors, as well as men.

Today, her book, Science and Health, has sold over nine million copies in 17 languages. And two of the magazines she started carry directories of practitioners who practice Christian healing for the public.

As Mary Ellen Snyder, the chief of Interpretation and Visitor Services in Seneca Falls said of Eddy, "She fits the pattern of reformers, like Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, who at a time when women didn't take leadership roles, took a leadership stand." Eddy's contribution was also described by Myriam Contigulia on the opening of the Mary Baker Eddy exhibit at Seneca Falls. "She was an ordinary woman like the rest of us, who had a set of experiences that made her lead her life in a certain direction, and as a result became someone who changed society and people's lives and the way that they think. She showed by her example that women's potential was unlimited. That's a legacy worthy of recognition" (Monitor, March 9, 1998).