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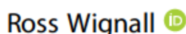
OPEN ACCESS 

Becoming a "Gospel Woman": agency, youth, and gender at a Charismatic church in Brighton and Hove, UK

Ross Wignall

ABSTRACT
This article explores the paradoxical gendering of charisma in the lives of congregation members at a Charismatic Pentecostal church, the Church of Christ the King (CCK), in Brighton and Hove, UK. Gender is discussed as a 'hot potato' at CCK, a point of divergence and negotiation. I show how these dialogues are shaped by specific symbolic and embodied forms of gendered imagination and practice, which often operate counter to gender norms outside the Church. Looking at the intersection of youth and gender at the Church, I show how countercultural opposition serves to underwrite a culture of service and submission, which buttresses patriarchal authority and cements gendered hierarchies within the Church. As I argue, the overlooking of the relationship between religious leadership and gender is increasingly challenged by the younger generation bringing together self-making processes from both the sacred and the secular realm.

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Introduction

> And What Accords For Young Women? Submission in our culture only has negative connotations but not in the biblical sense. We worship a Godhead, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit all in relationship. A submissive and gentle spirit is so countercultural in some contexts (including Brighton) that it can adorn the gospel strikingly and silence objections. Learn how to be a Gospel Woman by following Jesus. (Virgo 2009)

It's a warm sunlit evening in late May. The auditorium of the Church of Christ the King (CCK)—a converted electrical goods store—is milling with people. Some are congregation members, others are members of the general public, here as part of an event for Brighton Festival, an annual celebration of the arts in Brighton and Hove. After a series of different performances, including big band numbers and virtuoso jazz, the glamorous figure of Lou Fellingham takes the stage. Fellingham is a celebrated international performer and

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worship leader, part of the Fellingham family who are involved in various musical ventures across the Christian World and founding members of the Church and the New Frontiers Network (NFI) of Evangelical churches. Fellingham walks onto the stage, leading a gospel choir, looking like the star performer she has become, sporting bright red platform shoes and a fashionable outfit of skinny jeans and polka dots as well as bright red lipstick that stands out against the choir behind her, who are all dressed in black. The choir, made up of mostly women with a smattering of men, launches into a series of doctrinally saturated gospel numbers strangely at odds with the rest of the evening, which has so far possessed no overtly Christian content.

At one point this conversion to Christian modes of expression is underscored when Fellingham turns to the audience and urges them to 'praise the Lord' and celebrate God, before turning back to lead the choir once more. The atmospheric shift is further reinforced when a young rapper jumps on stage, apparently unprompted, and joins in the choral worship ('praise to the G-O-D') and is completed when Fellingham's father-in-law, Dave Fellingham, who is leading the big band, plays a modified version of a Motown classic that swaps the gloomy lyrics of the original for positive affirmations of God and Jesus. Some of the audience look entirely uncomfortable during the final phase of this performance, obviously not expecting the dramatic change of gear, yet most are singing along or tapping their feet in time. Even so, at the heart of this shift is the young, glamorous figure of Lou Fellingham, who exhibits a form of youthful dynamism, combined with acute femininity and a euphoric sense of worship, tying together the disparate members of the audience with the power of her presence and the universal appeal of her music.

In this article I analyse this event as an instance of awkward '*genre*-crossing', where the ongoing efforts of CCK to attract new followers and slot into Brighton's culture were temporarily exposed. Brighton is traditionally noted for its hedonistic party-going atmosphere and alternative politics and spiritual practices. However, a recent surge in Christian Evangelism in the UK has aided a parallel growth in Brighton, with churches such as Vineyard establishing a local foothold and helping to revitalise the city's Christian networks while incrementally appropriating followers from other denominations. Underpinning this growth is CCK, a Brighton-born church which has established itself as first a national and now a global presence on the vibrant Evangelical scene. Attracting around 1,000 worshippers every Sunday in two services, the Church is a vital part of the local spiritual landscape forming part of the 'new evangelism' of British Christian life (Kay 2007, 15) as it tries to attract a more diverse and younger congregation through accessible sermons and a strong online presence (cf. Hunt 2019, 10).

As I discuss, in its efforts to reach out to a younger audience, CCK actively situates itself at the vanguard of attempts to bridge the gap of perception and

practice between the homogenising realm of the Holy Spirit and the secular, or heterogeneous, public world beyond their congregational boundaries (Aune 2008, 286). While the Church attempted to 'hack' God into popular music through changing the words of a song and using contemporary art forms, the wider world of Evangelism is changing its methods, too, rapidly adapting to suit the technologically diverse world it engages with. In this sense, as head pastor Joel Virgo's words above iterate, Evangelical identities are formed in an imaginary liminal space straddling different worlds, perpetually recreated above and against the array of forces represented by sometimes hostile disbelievers, a secular state, and burgeoning forms of competing religiosity (see Aune 2008, 286; Hunt 2019, 11).

I explore these intersections by looking at the key battleground of gender and gender equality, taking a relational view of femininity and feminine agency. Although much work has been done around women's roles in the church, a limited number of studies have paid attention to the ways young women graft their subjectivities out of a range of gendered interactions, not only in dialogue with the forces of secularisation, but within their own congregations (see e.g. Avishai 2008; Day 2009; Martin 2001; Sharma and Aune 2016). Figures like Lou Fellingham are central to this negotiation, helping define Charismatic forms of femininity that both translate into the secular world and help bring in potential new recruits. Her story also contains the complex paradox of Charismatic feminine agency and spiritual authority, whereby a woman cuts her way in the world but is always under the supervision and control of male leadership (see Martin 2001, 52). However, within these strictures, social scientists have shown that women help define and structure church life, finding empowerment in a variety of surprising and not-so-surprising ways (see Brereton and Bendroth 2001; Ingersoll 2003; Sharma and Aune 2016).

This article attempts to support this view by presenting a holistic portrait of gendered life at CCK. Firstly, I examine how male leaders depict gender at the Church, showing how femininity is defined and delimited in relation to forms of masculinity. I then relate the femininity represented by figures such as Lou Fellingham at CCK to the life of one young congregation member, showing how the details of her life as a successful blogger and religious writer illuminate the perpetual struggle for autonomy and stability within Church life, mediated by a pervasive culture of leadership, service, and willing submission.

CCK's Background

Founded in Brighton by Terry Virgo in the late 1970s, CCK emerged as part of the influential 'house church' movement operating as flagship church of the New Frontiers network of neo-Charismatic churches.[1] The 'house church'

movement was part of a wider Charismatic renewal that espoused the *pneumatic* gifts of the spirit (Kay 2007, 16). Charisma itself can comprise gifts which Weber (1968) would call magical (prophecy, glossolalia, divine healing) and non-magical (word of wisdom, word of knowledge, serving, exhortation), but with leading, teaching, and pastoring seen as key pillars of Charismatic leadership (Kay 2007, 16).

New Frontiers has grown steadily with a focus on considered church planting and the creation of new church communities. Originally termed "Coastlands", the growing network of churches on the South Coast of England was initially overseen by Virgo before becoming New Frontiers in the late 1980s and driving Charismatic growth in England through the "Downs Bible Week and Leadership" conferences, events especially popular with middle-class young people (Kay 2007, 75).[2] New Frontiers had also been good at embracing new techniques and technologies, including cell groups, the Alpha Course, and a cutting-edge online presence (cf. Virgo 2001; Hunt 2019, 10). Figures like Lou Fellingham and the band "Phatfish" have helped further raise its profile on the international stage, becoming an important part of the global Charismatic circuit and, more broadly, the growing transnational network of Evangelical exchange and consumption. Generally, despite its appeal to inclusion and diversity, the majority of the congregation and leadership team at CCK is white middle class and, despite forging strong international links and attracting students from the two universities in the city, remains stubbornly homogenous.

Methodology and rationale

Based on a series of interviews with Church members between 2008 and 2016 and a period of ethnographic research, this study forms part of a wider project attempting to re-address the role of Charismatic churches in a steady revitalisation of British Christian culture. A regular attendee at CCK, although not as a congregation member, I spent six months with CCK in 2009 carrying out participant observation and interviews. Despite an overwhelmingly white middle-class catchment and leadership team, the Church also pulled in people from all over Brighton and Hove, in some cases laying on dedicated transport for low-income areas, as well as building a strong network among the itinerant student population.

Despite the focus on youth and inclusion, at CCK, debates around leadership and eldership are precisely where the gendered boundaries of Church authority are re-inscribed and I was keen to understand female perspectives on these processes. As in many Evangelical churches, there are a number of female leaders in various positions at CCK, but they are prohibited from leading worship, teaching men, becoming elders or indeed having any authority over

men in a straightforward translation of biblical gender roles (Gallagher 2003, 9; Gallagher and Wood 2005, 135).

Consequently, I set out to explore the fissure between lived reality and doctrinal direction, asking how women experience this separation and how it links to their notions of gender beyond their life in the Church. Thus the first part of the article outlines some of the broader doctrinal and working positions on gender in the Church, while the second part focuses on one young woman's narrative to explore some of the tensions and ambiguities in her experience of everyday Evangelical life at CCK.

A 'hot potato': versions of femininity and the vocation of leadership at CCK

At CCK, women form an integral part of the organisational operation, playing important roles and occupying positions of responsibility. Still, the subject of male-only eldership is greeted by many as a controversial 'hot potato', largely because it is at odds with wider cultural notions of gender based around equality and universal suffrage, forming an added element of negotiation with discourses generated in secular culture. In secular domains, versions of femininity have long been under review, challenging both patriarchal positions of traditional dominance and feminist paradigms of the emancipated female subject (Davis 1997, 7; Martin 2001, 54). More broadly, social scientists have shown how the female body can be caught in dominating systems of control but can also be a subversive source and site of resistance to male domination, reinvigorating notions of female empowerment and self-determination (Davis 1997, 7; see Butler 1990, 7–10). In feminist theory, everyday practices embed the body in structures of power that co-ordinate the deployment of symbolic and material subjection and it is through the adaptation of bodily practices that symbolic domination can begin to be destabilised (Hodgson 2002, 256; Butler 1990, 7–10). In this context, embodied female agency itself becomes highly unstable and fragmentary, subject to re-interpretation by both actors and authority in the negotiation of female role-playing (Hodgson 2002, 17).

Feminine involvement in church life has been further complicated by the shift in congregational perceptions of the role of leaders and the vocation of leadership (Aune 2008, 287; Gallagher 2003, 9; Gallagher and Wood 2005, 135–139). Traditionally, the role of the pastor was seen as constitutive of his actual identity, therefore giving him social standing and recognition (Hunt 2001, 102). As the older generation of clergy fades away and general societal trends have a greater influence on the Church, the professionalisation of the clergy, in a generic sense, breaks down this direct perceptual link, rendering the position gender-neutral and arguably opening the door for women to preach and lead (ibid).

However, as recent public debate has shown, this symbolism is still infused with relevance for congregation members and informs the limits of their lifeworlds, pivoting on wider issues of identification and self-definition (Brereton and Bendroth 2001, 209–212; Warner 1990, 15–18). Particularly for younger women incubated in a broader secular culture, a focus on traditional gender roles can prove alienating, making it problematic to find a proper 'fit' for themselves within a patriarchal church structure (Aune 2002, 286; cf. Sharma and Aune 2016, 13-16). In a recent study of a New Frontiers church in the UK, Kristin Aune found that prioritisation of traditional gender roles led to "family-oriented congregations" where single women felt marginalised (Aune 2008, 286). In her long-term study, single women seemed to be disproportionately disaffiliating from the church over time due to a combination of factors, "but the lack of fit between their feminist orientations, their lives as single women (mostly in full-time work or study or juggling care commitments) and their marriage-focused congregation stood out" (ibid, 285).

While Aune's argument is compelling, in this article, I explore how a young Christian woman might fashion a serviceable sense of provisional womanhood, which incorporates elements of *both* feminist and Evangelical discourse. As a number of feminist studies of religious groups have shown, the situation is often deeply complex on the ground as women exert powerful measures of agency from *within* systems of patriarchal control and domination (Brereton and Bendroth 2001, 209; Griffith 1997, 209–210). In her work with Egyptian mosque-goers for example, Saba Mahmood (2001) famously queried the often deployed conflation of agency with resistance and self-actualisation, noting how docility, passivity, and devotion may constitute complex forms of religious agency which defy simple categorisation. She offers a framework which recognizes that "agentival capacity is entailed not only in those acts that result in (progressive) change but also those that aim toward continuity, stasis, and stability" (Mahmood 2001, 220).

Drawing on the work of Mahmood (2001), Orit Avishai argues in her study of Jewish women that depictions of women in conservative religions often lock their informants into a "(false) dichotomy that pits agency against complicity", which fails to capture the "complexity, ambiguity, and transience of religious traditions as they come in contact with competing ideas about women, gender, family, and sexuality" (Avishai 2008, 429). As an alternative, Avishai offers a 'doing religion' framework which focuses on the ways women perform and adhere to religious doctrines in their own ways, incorporating a range of everyday practices such as observance, compliance, and sometimes resistance and protest (ibid). However, she cautions against focusing on the moments of 'resonance' rather than conflict and including sometimes apposite "articulations of hesitation, ambivalence, and desires for stability and change" in our depiction of religious subjects' narratives (ibid).

For Bernice Martin, the ambivalence of Pentecostal women's experience remains a significant *lacuna* in our understanding of Evangelical lifeworlds. Noting how women gradually remake Evangelical organisations to suit them better as "their extensive religious discourse steadily feminizes the Pentecostal understanding of God" (Martin 2001, 54), she asks for more complete analyses of the tensions between gender equality and gendered practice in church life and "the relation between formal and substantive reality" (ibid, 61) in what she calls the "Pentecostal Gender Paradox". This paradox rests on probing the tension between "the *de jure* system of patriarchal authority in church and home" and the "*de facto* establishment of a way of life which decisively shifts the domestic and religious priorities in a direction that benefits women and children" and serves to counter-balance the excesses of patriarchal power (ibid, 54; see also Ammerman 1987, 138–144; Ingersoll 2003, 151–155).

Habitually, these forms of feminine empowerment and agency are expressed in terms which parallel feminist discourse while paradoxically rejecting the mainstream forms this discourse takes (Ingersoll 2003, 1–7). In her study of the US-based "Women's Aglow Fellowship", Marie Griffith (1997) uses the life stories of Evangelical women to illustrate how women both help drive the Pentecostal movement in America and play an important part in developing the role of women more generally. Central to her study is the overturning of feminist characterisations of the American religious right as anti-feminist and anti-women's rights, demonstrating that "those subservient women are supremely woman-centered in their communal spirituality, encouraging their spiritual sisters to achieve greater self-esteem and to love themselves whether or not they experience the love of men" (Griffith 1997, 209). Griffith calls on us to view Evangelical women as cultivating an "enclave of opposition" as a mode of "cultural resistance" against perceived social injustice where "the ideology of submission to authority" can be viewed as "subversive … within the context of the wider American society where (according to evangelical women's worldview) savagery and moral breakdown are increasingly the norm" and within which "[t]he disciplines of prayer, of marriage, of conformity to Aglow rules and scripts, mean safety, integrity, and accountability to these women; and within such a realm they may well feel not simply virtuous but free" (ibid, 211; cf. Ingersoll 2003, 151–155).

Overall, these studies demonstrate the need to examine Evangelical womanhood in relation to *both* dominant or 'hegemonic' ideas of masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 829–835) *and* co-produced 'hegemonic' forms of femininity as well as simultaneously attending to multiple less dominant forms and sub-categories of gender identity. In the next section I begin this process in the case of CCK by building a picture of the way a discourse of patriarchy is framed by the male leadership of the Church before exploring how CCK women experience and discuss it themselves.

'Gifted women': interpreting feminism at CCK

> Aren't men considered superior to women in Christianity? (Ruth Preston, young leader, blog post, 5 April 2010)

Despite the changes documented above, at a time when the wider religious community is very publicly wrangling over notions of gender, CCK maintains a tacitly stern and clear-cut line: women may not be elders. Male-only eldership is held up as a cornerstone of the New Testament vision of church, where men have the overall spiritual authority of the church, teaching and pastoring from the highest positions. However, as Ruth Preston's comment above indicates, the subject positions are more fluid than they appear, open to negotiation and commentary. Indeed, women, as one informant points out, can do anything else and generally do, getting involved in pastoral work, youth work, social action work or simply hospitality. As leaders, women are highly valued, playing important roles as small group leaders, worship leaders, and in the highly esteemed role of elders' wives, who some see as invaluable support to the eldership team itself.[3]

In addition, Elder John Hosier notes that women tend not to express the desire to become elders, although female preaching is becoming much more widespread, particularly in more liberally inclined Charismatic communities in countries such as South Africa, noting that his introduction of females leading worship some years ago has altered the face of service at CCK:

> When I came here, we had never had a female worship leader. I changed that. I may have done something that reflected throughout the movement… Worship leader is not carrying the ultimate spiritual authority for the meetings, be they male or female. Which brings them security; if something happens, the elders have to pick them up. (Personal interview, 5 August 2008)

The elders are clearly used to handling this difficult issue and render it in slightly different terms. Chief Administrator Neville Jones (aged 55) is makes two interesting points. Firstly, for him, the concept is so naturalised as to be unnoticeable and, secondly, the power of women in the Church in alternative roles renders the point moot anyway. However, after working for 16 years in the secular, financial world, he predicts difficulties as the Church grows, particularly when it approaches the world of non-Christians:

> Women can do anything else in the Church. We have female directors of charity, a female company secretary… As we increasingly impact a culture in Brighton that is non-Christian, we are going to have to teach into it, there are some women who struggle with it now in CCK. […] If you've got a very gifted senior pastor's wife, perhaps more introverted in her character, it would frame how they function. (Personal interview, 5 August 2008)

For the elders at CCK, the question of femininity is becoming more complex as the Church expands and doctrinal homogeneity becomes more difficult to

maintain. Leadership becomes a potential way of moderating or 'framing' attitudes to women, held by both men and women, by modelling successful gendered relationships and dynamics that are rooted in biblical interpretation and applying them to the constants in daily life.

Nonetheless, as women press for power in line with their secularised positions, it will seemingly become more difficult for Charismatic elders to maintain operational distance between men and women. Steve Horne (aged 38) is an elder who understands this dilemma well. Having served as a nurse, he was subject to inverted forms of gender stereotyping in the secular world. For him, gendered roles are crucial to the development of a stable identity, forming a secure platform for expressions of agency and leadership:

> Before, I just trusted what the elders said. Then I started to get pressure from a woman once, so I had to work it out for myself. And came to a place, realising what would help men to be men, women to be women. The first thing is to help them feel safe. Then they come alive in leadership. (Personal interview, 10 August 2008)

He discusses how women brought up 'in feminist paradigms' tend to challenge this vision of gender roles too thoroughly, along with poor fathers, breaking apart traditional marriage structures and damaging family relationships. He also notes that, when men and women take on responsibility, they bring different abilities to leadership:

> My wife is in charge of Counselling. She has an ability to hear. An empathetic gift. She is much more articulate, more patient and more disciplined. She has a capacity for emotional people that I just don't [have]. There's a wisdom about people in women, that there isn't in men. There are some things that women have that men don't. We made a deliberate choice in having couples as small group leaders. Women teach more intuitively. (Personal interview, 10 August 2008)

What is striking is that Horne's characterising of women positively inverts much older gender stereotyping that negatively assign feminine traits, such as emotion and empathy, to female identities (Hodgson 2002, 18; cf. Gallagher 2003, 4–10; Gallagher and Wood 2005, 136).

Elder Dave Fellingham (aged 62) is of a different generation to Horne but also discusses his wife's role, noting how active she is in Church life and using similar gendered characteristics:

> She has a pastoral role; hospitality is a very big thing, too. She is very, very hands on, she ran the women's group. She has a very important role. We have so many gifted women, loads of things they can do, everything else is totally open to them… Women are more intuitive, she is my eyes and ears. She is helping to disciple new Christians. (Personal interview, 10 August 2008)

In Fellingham's view, the role of women is integral to the development of the Church as a whole, creating a sense of balance and augmenting the absorption of newcomers and the development of new leaders. Visions of

gender are robustly born out of the friction between the dichotomous visions of gendered subjects, incorporating a constellation of gender-specific characteristics that is fostered by the Church and consumed by the congregants. For Fellingham, gender at CCK, like CCK church history, becomes defined through direct contact with the secular world, gaining credibility from its countercultural re-inscription of traditional roles and bodily practices. Consequently, as the boundaries between Charismatic domains of influence and other domains become more permeable, CCK leaders remain aware that they may have to adapt more readily to changing versions of gender, allowing the barriers erected around female power, agency, and authority to become more permeable in kind (Hunt 2001, 108).

"We need to talk more about manhood": relating to gender at CCK

> Look guys, you are men now; you have got to take responsibility for your finances, for your body odour, for getting a wife. Your mum won't find your girlfriend any more! (Steve Horne, 38, CCK Elder, personal interview, 10 August 2008)

At the heart of the gender debate at CCK is also the role of leaders as *provocateurs*, able to stand up to the encroachment of secular culture. Recently at CCK this discussion centred on the depiction of a 'weak' stereotypical Christian manhood set against the dominant strident form of masculinity embodied by figures such as Jesus Christ. As Elder Steve Horne put it, being manly is "not about being nice and being a peacemaker. It's about being aggressive and taking risks. We need men being prepared to make mistakes." (Personal interview, 10 August 2008) However, as I document elsewhere (Wignall 2016, 390), I spoke to the members of CCK in the midst of a leadership crisis, provoked by a fiery intervention from American evangelist Mark Driscoll who, styling himself after Jesus, urged CCK to become more aggressive and, in particular, urged young men to become more confrontational in their dealings with women.

Consequently, bound up in this spiritual call to arms is a parallel call to manliness, which reflects gendered discussion in CCK but also draws out that gender is inevitably constructed in the relations between different constructions of gender roles themselves, women playing an often overlooked role in the active construction of masculinity and manhood (Hodgson 2002, 5). As masculinities and femininities mutually reproduce and reinforce each other, particularly in systems of patriarchal dominance, a version of femininity centred on traditional biological essentialisms can buttress masculine authority and control (Hodgson 2002, 256).

Accordingly, at CCK, it is by talking to female members of the congregation that we can more easily witness the manufacture of dominant forms of masculinity. For instance, Carly is an enthusiastic member of the voluntary welcome team and has been a CCK member for over two years. She vividly

described an instance in her experience of CCK that has remained with her, which can help us think about the issues of masculinity as they appear at CCK. During her welcome course (see Hunt 2019, 3–10), which was held over dinner, a homeless man had joined the gathered attendees and, being inebriated, began to abuse them. Carly details how, as an example of good leadership, chief welcomer and elder Alan Preston stepped in to resolve the situation:

> He had a manly physical presence. He managed to diffuse the situation in a caring way but he had to physically remove this guy. He had a real sense of presence about him, real authority, but he wasn't intimidating. He was caring but strong and handled it really well. (Personal interview, 10 August 2008)

Carly captured the ideal man in action, exhibiting the behaviour associated with maleness in the context of CCK, with obvious resonances in wider arenas. In the next section I examine how the versions of masculinity discussed above dovetail with the iconography of femininity present in daily Church life. I interrogate these issues through the story of one leader's daughter exploring her own sense of womanhood in relation to men at Church, the Bible, and wider society, to show further how gender intersects with different realms of everyday life.

"It's what the Bible says": feminine agency and spiritual authority at CCK

> I think society says that women have been undermined for a very long time, and that might have been true, but the pendulum doesn't slip so far the other way that we have to be men. I just feel that I am served best by male elders and their wives, because it's a joint effort. (Ruth Preston, 22, CCK member, faith blogger, elder's daughter, personal interview, 10 August 2008)

As an articulate member of the Church, keen to expound on controversial issues, Ruth Preston offered her own view on Church matters relating to leadership, gender, and relations with the outside world. As a student with bright pink dreadlocks, she also seemed to embody the straddling of Church and secular ways of life, moving between these worlds and exposing herself to the ambiguities and tensions this movement creates. Aiming to take a Master's degree in intellectual history the following year and being a frequent blogger on faith matters, including gender, Ruth was also building a 'digital' charisma of her own, rooted in taking a stance on important issues for young people at the Church who are immersed in the outside world. Her statement (see above) reflects her sometimes provocative line which challenges gender practice within the Church but also recalibrates its position in contrast to dominant cultural norms outside the Church. As she states, her scripturally derived 'complementarian view of gender' offers enough room for female empowerment:

> Men should often be the ones at the front of church, leading our corporate meetings. However, for women in the Church, it is easy to try to emulate the elders in more ways than one, and even start to believe that ultimate spiritual development is serving Jesus through preaching and leading the Church, as this is the role model so readily displayed on Sundays. (Personal interview, 10 August 2008)

Contained within this statement is the paradoxical position of women in Evangelical churches as they develop their own sense of Charismatic leadership, where they are urged to 'be like men' while maintaining a defined sense of traditional femininity, a gendered form of the 'glass ceiling', which positions young women between their elders and the outside world (see Bielo 2014, 233–237; Martin 2001, 53).

When I spoke to Ruth, she was clearly trying to navigate these subject positions in her own life, the caution in her blogpost above reflecting a sense of hesitancy in her aspirations to lead, as she discusses here:

> When I was younger I had an aspiration to lead, I think I have a capacity to lead but I don't feel ready. One day I would love to. I don't want to be an elder. I try to incorporate what they are saying into my life. I do also look at elders' wives. I want to be like that. My mum—she's the most amazing woman. (Personal interview, 10 August 2008)

Ruth's story is particularly interesting because she is the daughter of Alan Preston—elder, occasional preacher, and overseer of the welcome team, largely responsible for the assimilation of newcomers into the Church. Ruth's mother is also an active worker in the Church, helping in multiple capacities, occupying the nebulous role of 'elder's wife', who—some members told me—can be in some churches the closest possible thing to being a female elder. As Ruth discusses in her blog, for 'younger women' faced with 'a male dominated stage' at Church, female role models are especially important so that they do not end up turning "to the modern ideals of 'independent women' or with male role-models within the Church and female role-models in our wider society" (personal interview, 10 August 2008). For Ruth, this adds an extra layer of potential identifications for her own gendered identity and an extra layer of pressure to follow her parents in their beliefs and their models of both leadership *and* gender.

Supporting this, she told me that her spiritual life has been fraught with difficulty, complicating the normal experiences of youth, especially when she returned to Christianity after a three-year hiatus amidst attempting to forge a new life in Brighton and renewing her involvement in the Church. Her parents were supportive even while she struggled with her belief; it was in fact her father Alan Preston who thought she would be a good subject for study due to a combination of her experiences outside the Church and her renewed zeal within it. She was keen to emphasise this point herself, locating her vision of the Church in terms of secular feminism and discourses of gender at the Church:

> It's what the Bible says. I don't feel belittled by it, don't feel that my role as woman is diminished by it. In the Bible, there are clear examples of women in leadership, leadership is very different to eldership ... male and female roles are different and that's a beautiful thing… If there are women elders, blessed by God, then that's ok. But it's more biblical for men to take over. (Personal interview, 10 August 2008)

For Ruth, her femininity is bound to the potential notion of agency, anchored in male positions of authority. Nonetheless she stressed that this is not limiting in any way, emphasising the erroneous equalising of contemporary culture outside the Church, where gender roles have become confused with essentialised identities, undermining men, women, and the broader stability of gender relations.

Focusing on this issue, Ruth situated her own feminine empowerment in relation to challenging the secular *status quo* when addressing the recent controversy about the intervention of American preacher Mark Driscoll. In the following, she equates the ability to self-differentiate with being a good leader but also couches this tension in the confrontation between spiritual duty and secular life:

> I was quite challenged by that because I'm the next generation and I need to stand up to leadership and found that quite scary because it's so easy to depend on people. It's much easier in our culture to relax and chill, especially when you are standing up for something that the culture doesn't like very much. (Personal interview, 10 August 2008)

This means making 'hard' choices as opposed to relaxing (going with the flow) and 'easy' dependency. As she discussed, when she decided to return to the Church, it created issues with her non-Christian housemates:

> Brighton is much harder. I see the Church like a beacon. When I came back to Christianity it created difficult relationships with my housemates. I had to have new boundaries. I didn't think I was offending people; people feel like you are judging them when you are not, just because I don't want to go and get wasted. People were judging themselves. (Personal interview, 10 August 2008)

For young women like Ruth, the Church and figures like Lou Fellingham *are* beacons, not only of CCK but also of a Charismatic femininity which they can act out. Small acts such as abstinence from alcohol offer small resistance but complement the leadership modelling emanating from the Church, solidifying their role as a beacon to the faithful in an increasingly secular landscape and, in doing so, locating their own authentic femininity.

The precarious paradox: gendering the 'charismatic bargain' at CCK

Lou Fellingham's vibrant performance at the Brighton Festival underlined both the power of feminine figures at CCK and the precarity of their positions. As they perform traditional gender roles, whether as elders' wives or as

flamboyant worship leaders, they also inhabit roles prescribed by male leaders, negotiating their own subordination and subscribing to what we might call, following Weber, a deeply gendered 'charismatic bargain'. However, as I have shown, the established female leaders in the Church also offer inspiration to young leaders like Ruth, who are negotiating the 'charismatic bargain' on their own terms and in conversation with both the forces of broader secular culture and generational and factional tensions within their own congregations. As Lou Fellingham and CCK seek to attract a younger audience, they also provoke a re-examination of the gendered hierarchies within the Church, creating a powerful intersection between gender, youth, and contemporary digital culture, which threatens to destabilise ritualised Church traditions.

However, as Mahmood (2001, 220) reminds us, in Ruth's narrative is the articulation of both these tensions and ambiguities and their opposite—the desire for continuity, stability, and harmony. For Ruth, leadership is defined in the construction of these boundaries, with leadership conferred on those who not only challenge the encroachment of other worldviews but who also drive it back through their own actions. Charisma, in this sense, is generated through both the denial of the counterculture and the strategic deployment of a performative femininity, modelled and enacted through Church life. Leadership acts as the potential mode of cultural engagement, positively reinforcing Charismatic identities while portraying secular culture as unsaved, thereby constituting gender in the interstitial space between the secular and the sacred, where to lead is ultimately to serve.

Conclusion

Depictions of gendered roles within deeply conservative Evangelical churches are often portrayed as entrenching traditional and unequal gender roles. However, as studies such as Martin's (2001) have shown, these gender roles are more fluid and open to interpretation than is immediately apparent, with ongoing and sometimes heated negotiations occurring along the lines of both gender and generation. At CCK, as I have shown, versions of femininity are mutually reproduced in notions of masculinity siphoned from traditionalist models of family structure and vice versa, creating a powerful double-locking mechanism that perpetuates the gendered Charismatic subject. However, by using the story of one young woman in conjunction with discussions and representations of gender at CCK, I have shown that, by adapting her behaviour and belief to the doctrines of the Church, these sets of relationships become apparent as contingent, provisional, and performative, asking important questions about the role of womanhood in creating and reproducing gender hierarchies at CCK.

At the same time, in her efforts to become a 'Gospel Woman', Ruth's identity was also constructed in relation to her peers and wider secular society, placing it in the context of a 'fallen' secular femininity that accentuated her own sense of reclaiming a 'lost' idealised femininity that chimes with a homogenous and hegemonic form of dominant femininity in Church life. Figures like Lou Fellingham help represent and perpetuate dominant forms of femininity while also integrating elements of youth culture into their performative repertoire to appeal to prospective young leaders like Ruth and in doing so secure their own positions in the Church hierarchy.

Similar to the American Evangelical women in Martin's work (2001), for young women at CCK, this negotiation is particularly delicate, as they aspire to be like Lou Fellingham or, called to emulate their male leaders, they are also carving out spaces for their own agency, spaces driven by incessant dialogue between gender ideologies within the Church and gender discussions without. For Ruth, inscribed in her version of leadership are the specific traits of taking responsibility, of going against the grain, and of speaking from a minority position. These are all elements of being an Evangelical Christian in a majority non-Christian culture, but also elements of being and becoming a woman in a persistently patriarchal culture (see Ingersoll 2003). Only through an understanding of charisma as both conversational with and mediatised through the secular world can the power of leadership, and its capacity for gendering everyday behaviour, be fully appreciated as one aspect behind the further re-enchantment of the world.

Notes

1. The house church movement sought to recreate the New Testament form of worship and is conceived in opposition to so-called 'cathedral Christianity'.
2. 'Coastlands' is a biblically derived term for reaching new shores, which also served as a geographical reference for the coastal-based networks.
3. Small groups consist of 7–15 church members gathering regularly in a member's home.

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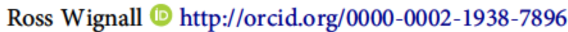
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