

Pentecostal Charismatic Christianity and the Making of Female Managers



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On a bright cold Sunday morning in June 2004, I drove past the Chris Hani Baragwanath Hospital and headed down the main road leading towards the centre of Soweto. I was filled with trepidation and excitement – I was going to my first service at Grace Bible Church and I wasn't quite sure how to get there. As I passed the iconic Soweto Towers, I suddenly came to a stand-still. There seemed to be an accident or some kind of traffic-jam ahead and I began to worry about getting to the church in time for the 9 o'clock service. The traffic crawled slowly forward and I noticed many young adults getting out of taxis ahead of me and all walking in the same direction on the same side of the street. They all looked well dressed and many of them were carrying bibles. I assumed that there were many churches in the area, but was wrong. As the traffic shuffled forward I passed a small sign saying 'Grace Bible Church' and soon saw that all the cars and pedestrians were turning off to the left down a small side street. After another twenty minutes I found myself edging into the enormous car park at Grace Bible Church, where friendly attendants showed me where I could park my car – at the far end of the sea of luxury 4 x 4's, dark sedans and trendy little city cars. Together with hundreds of people I made my way into the huge church complex and received a warm welcome by the ushers who showed me to a seat amongst 4500 other worshippers. As we were arriving the 4000 people who had been at the 7 o'clock service were leaving. The 9 o'clock service started punctually and was a slick performance that ended in time for the 11 o'clock service.

Entering the foyer of the church I noticed the word "Dream" above the door. It struck me as unusual for a church, but over the next few months I came to understand the word's layered meaning. The church was a place that encouraged people to dream, to reach out for a purpose and to develop their potential with the belief and trust that their life situation could change. This was a church that not only taught salvation in Jesus Christ but gave people the tools, teaching and support to become successful in their places of work. It helped people whose parents had been unemployed or semi-skilled labourers rise to management positions and realise their dreams of financial liberation and career success.

But why was a church playing this sort of role in South Africa and having a significant impact on the career opportunities of young men and women? In this article I will look specifically at young, black, professional women who attend one of two large Pentecostal Charismatic Christian (PCC) Churches – His People in the Northern Suburbs of Johannesburg and Grace Bible Church in Soweto – and explain how these churches are central in their career success. Firstly, both churches teach that every person has potential and that God has a unique plan for your life. Secondly, they give young women the cultural and social capital they lacked because their parents were unable to give it to them, but which they need to succeed in the world of work. Thirdly, the churches offer these women a variety of mentoring and support groups to help them deal with the high level of emotional stress they feel about their work and career success.

‘You have Potential’

The central mission of both churches is to make South Africa a Christian country in which everyone is a Christian, and all positions of authority throughout business, education, health care and politics are filled by Christians, who impose their

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Christian principles. These churches therefore devote a lot of attention to helping people develop the social and cultural skills they need in order to flourish in the world of work. There are business support groups in which they help people with everything from writing a CV to putting together a multi-million rand business plan. They give advice on getting loans for a business, negotiating a salary increase, improving a business that is struggling, buying a car or managing your staff at work. The advisory teams are made up of members of the churches who themselves have become highly successful millionaires, most of whom run their own businesses. In both churches, worldly success is viewed in positive terms as a symbol of God’s goodness and grace to his people. Christians should be successful because poverty is the work of the devil and the high levels of poverty and unemployment in South Africa

are explained both as the legacy of the devil’s work under apartheid and as the evil hold the devil continues to have on this country and many of those in authority. As Christians, people need to be freed from these shackles of evil so that they can realise their full potential.

Throughout Sub-Saharan Africa, Pentecostal Charismatic Churches are the fastest growing religious organisations, attracting thousands of new converts every year¹. Most of these churches are particularly influenced by Pentecostal Charismatic Christianity in North America and they, like the two churches in this study, use a diverse range of modern technologies such as sound systems, high-end TV screens and projectors to enhance their services, and the internet, facebook, and mobile phone technologies to communicate with their congregations. Through a variety of media, such as tapes of sermons, DVDs of church services and books, they are particularly well linked into global American PCC networks and the latest trends in PCC teaching. With their global connections, multi-media approaches and focus on the importance of personal success for the individual, these churches have been helping many people throughout Sub-Saharan Africa negotiate the moves towards modernity and individuality². Much of the popularity of these churches

stems from their message of prosperity theology, which promises that God will provide financially for all his people. In America and Sub-Saharan Africa a belief in God's mysterious ways is promoted. This leads to a trust that God will provide – not necessarily by ensuring that people get work, but through mysterious donations of money through the post and over the internet, or random acts of kindness from neighbours and strangers.

In South Africa the key message of His People and Grace Bible Church is not magical prosperity through the grace of God. They emphasise the potential in each person and encourage their members to realise the potential that God has given his people. They are encouraged to discern the life purpose or calling which he gives to each person. 'God has a plan for your life' is one of the most repeated phrases in both churches, followed quickly by 'You have God given potential' or 'realise your potential' or 'don't let poverty hold you from you potential'. The power of these statements in the imaginations of the 60 young women I interviewed and spent a year getting to know in home cell groups, at church services, at business workshops and chatting with them in their homes, at parties and over many cups of coffee, highlights the profound challenges the twenty- and thirty-something adults in South Africa face today.

This group of people can be divided loosely into two groups – those who went to school under apartheid and those who experienced their high school years as part of the 'New South Africa'. One of the dominant messages of apartheid that pervaded the worldview of the women I met was that as black people they had no potential and would never amount to anything much. The 'proof', they said, was in all the people they saw around them in townships like Soweto, where hundreds of able-bodied men and women walk the streets on any given day with no work and nothing to do. Why would they be any different? Under Mandela and Mbeki, strong public messages of the value of black people, their potential and their abilities were promoted. But for the young men and women who were starting to think about their futures and shape their senses of self during this time, growing levels of unemployment and HIV/Aids meant that many began to see their lives as having little potential and being short-lived. The promises of the government were just too far away, removed from their reality. One young woman, Norma, explained to me that it was all related to apartheid:

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You have been degraded so much through apartheid as an individual, you have been told that you are not intelligent. Then you're told that you are dirty. You are always on the receiving end of negativity. It breaks you down. It's almost as if there is a lack of emotional intelligence, but this is not a good word. You have no faith that you can actually do something. That lack of aggression towards life, lack of faith, life can get me down. Not feeling that I can achieve. People are living with this lie (Norma, 32, S, corporate consultant, H.P.).

Into this context come the churches. His People draw at least a third of their congregation from the university campuses in Johannesburg, while Grace Bible Church attracts people of all age groups living in Soweto. They encourage both young and old people to dream and to find ways to make their dreams of a better

future come true – because God is a God who sees the potential in all people and has a plan for everyone’s life.

Much work has been done on understanding the power of the imaged-self and the way in which our sense of agency, and ability to live out this agency, are affected by our perceptions of self – our imaged life-worlds³. What both the churches in this

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study do is to re-shape the imaged-self of members on a weekly basis through their sermons, which are 45 minute long, inspiring, moving, professional performances which feel more like motivational seminars than traditional sermons. Against the doubts of an apartheid-based upbringing, women in their thirties have come to see themselves as valuable people who can realise their potential. For the twenty-something group who attend more funerals than they do weddings, and who believe that only half the people in their class at college or university will get the job they want, this message is encouraging and often life-changing. But no amount of positive hope, agency and healthy sense of your own abilities is enough to ensure that a young person gets a job or is able to become successful.

Cultural Capital in an Age of Change

In his work on culture and class in France, the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu⁴, argued that there are four types of capital – economic, social (the networks of people we are linked into), cultural (knowledge, social understanding, skills) and symbolic – and that, to different degrees, these can be traded in order to acquire other types of capital. For example, we use economic capital to pay for our education and thereby gain cultural capital, which in turn is ‘traded’ to gain a job and further economic capital. Bourdieu’s work highlighted the importance of cultural capital in the lives of people who were successful in France. His research showed that cultural etiquette, correct and polite forms of social engagement, manners, mannerisms and accents all played a vital role in how people were perceived. He showed that, with education alone, people from a working class background were not accepted into the higher levels of French society – and without this social acceptance they were not able to gain access to high-powered jobs or other forms of social advancement. While French and South African societies are very different, and Bourdieu’s work does not engage seriously with social mobility, his understanding of the importance of cultural capital nonetheless opens up the ground to appreciate some of the struggles which young, black women who are moving into the largely white, male, English-dominated world of corporate South Africa have to face. They may have all the knowledge of law and be excellent lawyers, but without the correct cultural capital they will not easily be accepted and respected.

Most young, black women who work in professional careers in South Africa have far surpassed the job experiences of their parents. Their parents have not been in management positions and can give them little advice on how to deal with the politics of the business world. But at both His People and Grace Bible Church there are comprehensive mentoring programmes where more mature people mentor the younger generation, focusing their guidance particularly on the social aspects of work.

Leti, a 29 year old legal advisor at a large mining company says of these programmes,

It's not the actual work that is difficult. I know the law and I can read up on what I am not sure about, but what I found most difficult in my job was learning what is the 'correct behaviour'. How do I speak out as a woman in a meeting, and not sound aggressive or disrespectful? How do I know what all the innuendos mean, the subtle jokes, the right clothes to wear and the right way to speak? It's the Sunday services that have saved me. Pastor Sono just gives so much guidance on how to deal with people and situations.

Leti's story picks up on another important aspect – the young, black women I met did not generally lack cultural capital *per se*. They know how to be polite in society and speak respectfully to their elders, but this type of cultural capital has little value in the work space, where they are often managing men and women who are older than themselves. They need to learn a new type of cultural register and disregard many of the African cultural norms they have learnt; yet when they go back home they have to re-engage with an African cultural register – albeit a modern, trendy, township register. At both churches there are annual leadership conferences and women's conferences, which emphasise how to be an effective leader in the work space: how to communicate with people, manage people, motivate people, organise your time, and speak in the appropriate way in meetings. A lot of general business language is commonplace in the sermons of the pastors. They talk, for example, about having a 'personal vision', 'life goals' and 'meeting your targets'. For the young women I have met, whose parents never spoke like this, the churches have opened up a whole new language and demystified the work space. This business language also makes the world of work seem closer and more attainable to members generally, and gives them the sense that their church is modern, successful, relevant and in touch with society.

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Being 'in touch' at these churches goes further than just the language of the sermons: it also encompasses social networks, which in many ways are the backbone of both church communities. Through the bible study groups and prayer groups held in people's homes, the conferences, the leadership training programmes and the mentoring programmes, various different social networks are formed. These are particularly important for the members. Via these networks, and in notices given out at the churches, jobs are advertised or people are invited to interview. People hear about business opportunities and network with other people in their chosen careers. Several women have commented to me that by coming to church they feel 'linked in' to a network that they can trust and which will help them in their careers. About a fifth of the women I met had found their current employment through members of their churches. Once again, for young people whose parents are not linked in to social networks of people in management positions, the churches have become the only social network through which they can access the world of work which many middle and upper class young adults would instead access through the social networks of their parents.

The Stress of Success

Carmen, a 30 year old physiotherapist at His People, believes that success has caused many of her peers not only to experience stress at work, but also to feel alienation from their communities.

We are creating a society of young highly successful but over stressed black professional women who only excel in one area and become alienated in their own communities. They are like lost souls. Alienation is very difficult emotionally, never belonging.

The dislocation is more than not fitting into their communities. For many of the young women the most difficult thing is that their career success comes at such a high price. They are dislocated from their wider communities but are also, more immediately, struggling to find husbands and settle down to create their own families. Zanele, a beautifully groomed, soft-spoken woman of 28, and branch manager at a bank, captured much of the pain of these women:

You have to work more than twice as hard, because you are black and young and a woman. And you put in such a lot of effort and then when you think you have nearly arrived it has taken such a toll on you. I have been asking what is all this for? I have all this money but I can't meet anyone because the men are all too scared of me and think I don't need them. All we want is someone to love us, a family to come home to. You want to take advantage of all the opportunities in SA but that is also demanding. So now I could give my children a better life but how do I get a family?

For the women in my study, the stress they experienced at work was linked to their ambition and the family expectations on them, but was also largely driven by their age. Most of these women achieved management positions before the age of thirty...

At both churches 80% of the women I interviewed were in management positions and 65% of them said that the greatest emotional stress in their lives was their work. This was in contrast with Beatty⁵, and Sears and Galambos⁶ who found that managerial and professional women in America experienced their jobs as emotionally stressful at times, but did not see it as the largest emotional stress in their lives. This is also in contrast to women in traditional 'female' jobs, who have far less control over their jobs and the methods

used to complete tasks and perform the work. For the women in my study, the stress they experienced at work was linked to their ambition and the family expectations on them, but was also largely driven by their age. Most of these women achieved management positions before the age of thirty – but, as I have already shown, they do not come from homes that are able to help them cope with the emotional demands of these positions and the daily social decisions a manager is required to make. This too is a legacy of apartheid. Amongst the women I met, 30% were in counselling, had been for counselling, or had stress related illnesses.

As these women worked through their stress, sense of vulnerability and disappointment at not marrying, many of them have begun to see these difficulties as opportunities for them to grow closer to God. Through the teaching and support of their churches they have begun to see themselves learning to depend on God, although materially and financially they have all the resources. As McGuire⁷ suggests, making sense of the past and motivating future actions are key ways in which religion helps people to make sense of their experiences, particularly experiences which are distressing.

Conclusion

Throughout this article I have shown that young, black women in management positions, women who are now enjoying more opportunities than their parents had under the apartheid system, are finding themselves making up for their families' lack of social and cultural capital through the teaching and opportunities the PCC churches offer them. For the vast majority of women I met it was not the actual job they found difficult, or the studying at university which they had struggled with, but it was the multiple networks of social and cultural power dynamics which they needed to negotiate on a daily basis in order to be accepted both at university and then in the corporate world. These issues were things they found very stressful and accounted for the high levels of emotional stress they reported feeling at work. These women, through their success, have all outgrown or outstripped the experiences of their parents, friends and communities, but in the workplace they are also often at sea in a new cultural world that they find difficult to negotiate and master. In place of this void, the PCC churches offer these women real and practical advice, counselling and mentoring, from the teaching in the sermons, through all the leadership training programmes, to the one-on-one interaction with older people who guide and encourage them. Both churches are building up in women a strong sense of their own self-worth, personal feelings of potential and an image of themselves as people who have calling, a life purpose and a vision. This, together with the cultural and social capital which the churches offer their members, makes them both attractive to young people seeking meaning in life and gives these young people a renewed sense of themselves as valuable individuals.

Collectively these PCC churches highlight the need for young women to be trained and counselled so that they can flourish in their chosen careers. But should these churches really be primary places in which young South Africans are being given the skills and capital they need to realise their potential? Should we not be thinking differently about what it means to be a university in South Africa and be offering not just knowledge in academic fields but also be giving our graduates mentoring, life skills and the capital they need to succeed? In the corporate world, do the existing leadership training courses, which so many staff attend, really address the needs of the young professional workforce? Should we not be offering 'soft skills' training in the work space that address the actual needs of our gifted young men and women, training based on research done in South Africa and which enables people from all backgrounds to feel excited about their work, stretched by the challenges but not emotionally drained by a cultural system they feel unsure of?

NOTES

- 1 Martin 2002; Gifford 1998; Anderson 2000
- 2 Martin 1990; van Dijk 1992, 1999
- 3 Archer 2004; Bozzoli 1991
- 4 1986
- 5 1996: 246
- 6 1992: 796
- 7 2002: 31

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