

# **Warrior Girls: Violence Against Women and Gender-Based Activism in a Pentecostal-Charismatic Church in Stellenbosch**

by

**Danya Marx**



*Thesis presented in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Public Sociology and Social Anthropology in the Faculty of Arts and  
Social Sciences at Stellenbosch University*

Supervisor: Dr. Ilana van Wyk

[March 2021]

## **Declaration**

By submitting this thesis electronically, I declare that the entirety of the work contained therein is my own, original work, that I am the sole author (save to the extent explicitly otherwise stated), that reproduction and publication thereof by Stellenbosch University will not infringe any third party rights and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it for obtaining any qualification.

March 2021

Copyright © 2021 Stellenbosch University  
All rights reserved

## Abstract

Levels of gender-based violence (GBV) in South Africa are unacceptably high, and manifest in a social context marked by patriarchal forms of power, authority, family organisation, and religion (Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, 2016: 8). Gender-justice movements, particularly in response to violence against women (VAW), have become increasingly vocal both nationally and globally. In a country where a large majority of South Africans identify as Christian, a faith that is often described as patriarchal (Robbins, 2004: 132-133), some churches have joined these movements. This study looks at how a South African Pentecostal-Charismatic church, Hillsong Stellenbosch, alongside other local branches of the church, reacted to the issue through its women-centred development and VAW-justice programmes. These programmes were Hillsong's *Sisterhood* women's ministry, their *ShineWomen* women's development course, and the *WAR* (War Against Rape) campaign. I used participant observation to explore and gain insight into how these Hillsongers understood gender-based activism through a faith that is viewed as restrictively patriarchal.

Activism at Hillsong was overtly spiritual, a fact that shaped the church's perceptions of what women's empowerment and VAW activism looked like. Hillsongers believed that God could change the world, but that they also had a role to play in the process. Towards this end, Hillsongers focussed on strengthening Christians in order to partake in spiritual "warfare" through transforming themselves. This transformation was often gendered, with the church's programmes highlighting specific ideals regarding the role of women, as well as men, in the Christian mission of healing the world and ultimately bringing God's Kingdom down to Earth. The ways in which these Hillsongers used words and physical space to "confess" prosperity and dominion also played an important role in the creation of this new world. Through this phenomenological study, I aim to provide secular activists with a deeper understanding of Pentecostal-Charismatics' gender-related activism in the hope of expanding the conversation about VAW activism between both religious and non-religious groups. In this way, I hope to further extend the space in which both forms of activism can exist as different ways in which differently-situated women react to VAW.

## Opsomming

Die vlakke van geslagsgebaseerde geweld (GGG) in Suid-Afrika is onaanvaarbaar hoog en manifesteer in 'n sosiale konteks wat gekenmerk word deur patriargale vorme van mag, gesag, familie-organisasie en godsdiens (Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, 2016: 8). Bewegings wat hul beywer vir geslagsgeregtigheid, veral in reaksie op geweld teen vroue (GTV) het toenemend hul stem dik gemaak, nasionaal en wêreldwyd. In 'n land waar 'n groot meerderheid Suid-Afrikaners hulself as Christene identifiseer, 'n geloof wat dikwels as patriargaal beskryf word (Robbins, 2004: 132-133), het sommige kerke by hierdie bewegings aangesluit. In hierdie studie word gekyk hoe 'n Suid-Afrikaanse Pinkster-Charismatiese kerk, Hillsong Church Stellenbosch, saam met ander plaaslike takke van die kerk op die kwessie gereageer het deur vrouegesentreerde ontwikkelings- en (GTV) geregtighedsprogramme. Hierdie programme was Hillsong se *Sisterhood*-vrouebediening, hul *ShineWomen*-ontwikkelingskursus vir vroue, en die *WAR* (War Against Rape)-veldtog. Ek het 'n mengsel van onderhoude gebruik en ook deelnemers waargeneem om te ondersoek en insig te kry in hoe hierdie Hillsong-lede geslagsgebaseerde aktivisme verstaan deur 'n geloof wat as beperkend patriargaal beskou word.

Aktivisme by Hillsong was openlik spiritueel, 'n feit wat die kerk se persepsies oor hoe vrouebemagtiging en GTV-aktivisme lyk, gevorm het. Hillsongers het geglo dat God die wêreld kon verander, maar dat hulle ook 'n rol in die proses moes speel. Met dié doel het Hillsongers hulle daarop toegespits om Christene te versterk om aan geestelike 'oorlogvoering' deel te neem deur hulself te transformeer. Hierdie transformasie is dikwels geslagsgetrou. Die kerk se programme het spesifieke ideale oor die rol van vroue sowel as mans beklemtoon in die Christelike missie om die wêreld te genees en uiteindelik God se Koninkryk na die aarde te bring. Die maniere waarop hierdie Hillsongers woorde en fisiese ruimte gebruik het om welvaart en heerskappy te "bely", het ook 'n belangrike rol gespeel om hierdie nuwe wêreld te skep. Deur hierdie fenomenologiese studie beoog ek om sekulêre aktiviste 'n dieper begrip te gee van Pinkster-Charismate se geslagsverwante aktivisme in die hoop om die gesprek oor GTV-aktivisme tussen godsdienstige en nie-godsdienstige groepe uit te brei. Op hierdie manier hoop ek om die ruimte verder te vergroot waarin albei vorms van aktivisme kan bestaan – as verskillende maniere waarop vroue in verskillende situasies op GTV reageer.

## Acknowledgements

I firstly want to thank my talented supervisor, Dr. Ilana van Wyk for being an endless fountain of knowledge, support, and encouragement during this two-year process. Thank you for your swift and positive feedback on my many drafts, and for offering a helping hand when times were tough.

Thank you to my friends and family who showered me with countless words of encouragement. You gave me the motivation to keep aiming higher. I am proud to have such a loving and supportive community.

I greatly appreciate the time and effort that many of my research participants put in to make this research process both enjoyable and informative. I admire the passion and dedication that you all have for your church and for making the world a better place.

I also want to thank the Mellow Foundation for an Indexing Transformation MA Scholarship that assisted financially with completing my degree.

## Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction .....	7
Setting .....	7
PC Christianity, Development Activism, and Gender .....	11
Methodology .....	17
Ethical Considerations .....	20
This Thesis .....	21
Chapter 2: Activism as Transformation .....	22
“End Times” and the Fallen World.....	22
Transformation of the Self.....	24
Reaching Out .....	28
A Pentecostal Paradox?.....	32
Chapter 3: Activism and Gender.....	34
Gender Work on the Body: Femininity, Consumerism, and Stewardship.....	35
Internal Transformation and Stewardship.....	38
Transformed Subjectivities .....	41
Self-Control – “I have the power of choice” .....	42
Hope and Resilience – “My decisions determine my destination” .....	43
Warrior Women and Men .....	45
Chapter 4: Activism and Confessions.....	48
Stirring God into Action and Saying the World Right .....	48
Speaking Positively About the Potential of Hillsong’s “Girls” .....	53
Prayer as Activism .....	54
Positive Material Confessions.....	56
Gifting Activism .....	57
Confessions and Spiritual Agency .....	59
Chapter 5: Concluding Remarks.....	62

Reference List .....	67
Appendix A: Consent Form .....	74
Appendix B: <i>WAR</i> Campaign Conversation Guide .....	78
Appendix C: HS <i>Shine</i> Quotes.....	79

# Chapter 1: Introduction

## Setting

Despite efforts to eradicate it, gender-based violence (GBV) in South Africa remains unacceptably high and marks one of the worst human rights violations in the country (Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, 2016; South African Faith and Family Institute, 2019). Such violence takes place in a social context marked by patriarchal forms of power, authority, family organisation and religion (Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, 2016: 8). Perhaps not surprisingly, gender-justice movements, notably those highlighting the issue of violence against women (VAW), have become increasingly vocal in South Africa. In a country where a large majority identify with Christianity (Anderson & Pillay, 1997: 227), a faith which is often described as patriarchal (Robbins, 2004: 132-133), some of these movements are church-based. Many gender-justice movements' work has dovetailed with political movements in the wider global community such as the #MeToo movement.

Christianity has a long history in South Africa, which started in 1737 when Georg Schmidt opened the first Moravian mission station at Genadendal (Elbourne & Ross, 1997: 33). Over the course of just over 280 years, a number of different Christian denominations have entered the country and established followings. Of these, three waves of Pentecostalism have entered South Africa; the first wave in 1908 (Anderson, 2005: 67), the second during the 1960s when "mainline" churches embraced various Charismatic elements in their worship (Anderson, 2005: 69) and a third wave, the so-called Pentecostal-Charismatic churches (PCCs)<sup>1</sup> (Meyer, 2004: 447), that gained popularity after apartheid came to an end (Anderson, 2005: 71).

During the late 1950s and 1960s in South Africa, mainline churches experienced a Pentecostal "awakening", which led to the establishment of a number of new and large independent Charismatic/neo-Pentecostal churches in South Africa. In the 1980s and 1990s apartheid South Africa, this Pentecostal movement in churches still largely served white congregations and were heavily influenced by the megachurches and preachers from America (Anderson & Pillay, 1997: 238). After apartheid, large numbers of black preachers from Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya and Zimbabwe streamed into South African townships to preach the prosperity

---

<sup>1</sup> Terms such as "Pentecostal" and "Charismatic" are often criticised by scholars as being too broad as to become meaningless (Corten & Marshall-Fratani, 2001: 4; Droogers, 2001: 46; Kamsteeg, 1998: 10-11). However, it is argued that despite this issue, these terms are the most accurate in categorising and conceptualising PCCs.

gospel of PCCs. Today, PCCs represent the most significant African expressions of Christianity in South Africa, with at least ten million people identifying with some form of Pentecostal or “Spirit-oriented” Christianity (Anderson, 2005: 67).

Apart from the African-initiated PCCs in SA, the country has also seen an influx of PCCs from Australia, the USA, the Philippines and Korea after apartheid.<sup>2</sup> As part of this latter movement, Hillsong Church, now commonly known as just Hillsong, planted its first SA church in 2008. Originally named the Sydney Christian Life Centre was founded in Australia in 1978 by Brian and Roberta Lee (better known as Bobbie) Houston and became a global phenomenon over a short time (Martí, 2017: 378). The church developed out of the rapidly growing Protestant movement in Australia and was originally associated with the Assemblies of God (Connell, 2005: 315, 319). Australian Pentecostal megachurches such as Hillsong are usually significantly youthful, with most of the congregation in their late teens and early 20s, and often tailor their services and programmes to meet the needs of those who do not usually attend church, using lively worship music, informal interactive services, youth groups, and smaller prayer groups (Delany, 2005). The language used in the sermons at Hillsong is a “casual, populist vernacular” with a focus on inclusivity (using words such as “we” instead of “you”). More intellectual issues are usually downplayed, focussing on moral meaning and personal development instead (Connell, 2005: 323). In line with the wider Pentecostal prosperity theology, Hillsong embraces commercialism and materialism through the use of mass media marketing and merchandise, and believes that God intended for his people to have prosperous and healthy lives in order to help others more effectively (Ibid.: 325). As part of their mandate to reach out into the world and serve its communities (Connell, 2005: 327) and to evangelise through displaying the worldly benefits of the church to others (Wade & Hynes, 2013: 173), Hillsong has diverse outreach programmes in each of its locales.

I conducted my research at the Stellenbosch branch of Hillsong, situated about an hour outside of Cape Town in the Western Cape. Hillsong Stellenbosch (HS) reflects much of the culture of the original Sydney church. This South African branch of the church is only a few

---

<sup>2</sup> These “megachurches”, such as His People, Every Nation, Vineyard, Grace Family, and Hillsong, have more than 2000 worshippers each Sunday, some even reaching over 10 000 worshipers (named “gigachurches”) (Connell, 2005: 316). These churches are usually found as large complexes in middle-class suburban neighbourhoods, offer a number of programmes tailored to meet the needs of their vast congregations, and “frequently aim to achieve broader cultural importance” (Eagle, 2015: 591).

years old (Lottering, 2016) and has a racially diverse general congregation and leadership.<sup>3</sup> The congregation is an extension of the Somerset West branch, and was created so that students who attended Stellenbosch University did not have to travel all the way to Somerset West for the Sunday service. The Stellenbosch congregation is therefore very student-orientated. HS forms part of a network of churches, Hillsong Church South Africa,<sup>4</sup> that prides itself on outreach activities and activism that respond to specific local, as well as national, contexts. A study conducted in 2012 showed that 45% of women experienced some form of violence in South Africa, with sexual violence the most common in the Western Cape (CSV, 2016: 6). In relation to the rest of the country and the province, Stellenbosch sees high incidences of VAW. It is in this context that HS had a number of programmes run through the women's ministry, named *Sisterhood*, and its different *Sisterhood Causes*, which focus on the personal development of women as well as VAW (Hillsong Church South Africa, 2020a).

At the time of my research, one of the three main platforms that Hillsong used to spread its message on VAW-justice was their *Sisterhood* events, which women (both those affiliated with the church and those who were not) took part in. These events were women only services held a few times per year, usually on a weekday afternoon or evening. On Hillsong's website, *Sisterhood* is described as a "Modern-Day Movement" which falls under the global *Sisterhood* ministry named *Colour Sisterhood*, which is,

A growing movement of women who are responding to the simple invitation to BE THE CHANGE and make a positive difference in their local and global communities. We are living in remarkable and yet challenging days, and the need for peace, answers and solutions is greater than ever. If making the world a better place resonates with you, you belong within the *Sisterhood* story. (Hillsong Colour, 2020)

Bobbie Houston, officially titled Founder and Global Senior Pastor of Hillsong Church, started the *Sisterhood* in 1996 after a period when she said that she felt empowered by God to restructure women's ministry in order to focus more on their empowerment, as well as getting more women in leadership roles (Riches, 2017: 92). She explained her leadership strategy as an attempt to increase "awareness, prevention, education, rescue, and prosecution" (Houston,

---

<sup>3</sup> Hillsong's lead pastor, Brian Houston, made statements on the church's website regarding their opposition to racism and thus support of the broader Black Lives Matter movement that highlights the systemic racism towards African American people in the US (Houston, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> Hillsong Church South Africa (sometimes referred to as Hillsong Africa) includes branches in the wider Cape Town area (Gugulethu, Mitchells Plain, Somerset West, Stellenbosch, Southern Suburbs), Johannesburg, Centurion, and Pretoria.

2016: 220). It is because of this, that *Sisterhood* is actively involved in addressing global issues such as domestic violence, HIV, human trafficking, and government corruption (Riches, 2017: 93). For this research, I specifically focussed on Hillsong's VAW-related activism.

In addition to the *Sisterhood* events, HS offered a women's personal development course, *ShineWomen*,<sup>5</sup> which I will refer to as *Shine* from now on. The course was repeated once or twice a year in most Hillsong congregations. It was free, voluntary, and based on 90-minute workshop sessions once a week over eight weeks. The topics that the course covered included "worth", "strength", and "purpose", and course facilitators would use "experiential activities" to help course participants to navigate the overarching concept of "value" (Spry & Marchant, 2014: 37). The topic of "worth" was discussed in the first three sessions; variously named, "I am valuable", "I am one-of-a-kind", and "I am wonderfully made". The second foundational concept, "strength", was discussed in sessions four and five; named "I have the power of choice", and "My decisions determine my destination". The last concept, "purpose", was covered in sessions six, seven, and eight, called "My potential is limitless", "My life has purpose", and "I am *Shine*" (Shine, 2020). Three women who were active members of HS facilitated the course and gave each woman who signed up for it a course booklet. In each of the sessions that I attended, the facilitators would read the content of the course booklet and facilitate group discussions and exercises around this content, sometimes showing a video clip at the start of the session that was related to the topic of discussion.

The *Shine* programme was founded upon the premise that "every life counts and has intrinsic value, and fosters an awareness of this belief. As a result, women are equipped to become effective global citizens for the future" (Shine, 2020: 8). Nandila Spry, the global developer of *Shine* stated in an interview that the Cape Town pastors believed the *Shine* course was designed for African women because the message of value and hope "speaks louder with women who are oppressed" (Riches, 2017).

The *WAR* (War Against Rape) campaign was the third iteration of Hillsong's programmes and focussed specifically on rape and VAW. *WAR* fell under the *Sisterhood Causes*, but was developed in 2014 out of the Hillsong Africa Foundation, a non-profit organisation focussing on social upliftment which formed through Hillsong Church South

---

<sup>5</sup> Hillsong's *ShineWomen* is one of the two main *Shine* branches. It is aimed at women above 16 years of age. *ShineGirl* works with girls aged between 12 and 15 years of age, uses specific activities and topics targeted at this age group, and is usually held in school venues (Hillsong Shine and Strength, 2020).

Africa (Hillsong Africa Foundation, 2020). The Hillsong Africa webpage states that the campaign “seeks to raise awareness and assist with prevention of rape within South Africa” through school visits and engagements (Hillsong Africa, 2020). At the time of this research, the youth leaders at Hillsong congregations in South Africa ran the *WAR* campaign in communities surrounding their churches.

My interest in this research developed because I grew up in a charismatic Evangelical Anglican Christian setting, which emphasised helping those in need through Christian “activism”; using faith-based social justice centred on a belief in God’s authority (Castelli, 2007: 675). **When I moved to South Africa, I became aware of the exceedingly high levels of VAW in Stellenbosch and the Western Cape and noticed that churches started to react to this issue. One of the most noticeable churches in this regard was the Hillsong in Stellenbosch, which a number of fellow students attended. I therefore became interested in understanding how, in this social context, South African Hillsongers played their part in gender justice through a faith that is often described as patriarchal. What discourses do these Christians draw on to create their gendered, religious, and activist identities? What subjective complexities are developed through these identities? How do they conceptualise the effect of their women-centred justice programmes on the world that their work resides in?**

This kind of research is particularly important as it looks at the intersection between religion and gender, something that has gained renewed interest in academia due to the enormous shift in global Christianity to PCCs (Robbins, 2004). It also highlights the value of deconstructing secular feminist ideas and assumptions around religion against an understanding of what VAW activism looks like from the perspectives and social constructions of Christians (Avishai, 2008; 2016; Mahmood, 2019; Schultz, 1972).

### PC Christianity, Development Activism, and Gender

Pentecostalism’s roots can be traced to the eighteenth-century Protestant evangelical movement called the Great Awakening; an Anglo-American revival in which different denominations developed focussing on the necessity for spiritual conversion in order to achieve “salvation”. According to this theology, people were not born into the evangelical faith, but needed to choose it through the experience of powerful conversion experiences. Pentecostalism developed out of the evangelical Methodist tradition, and its origin is usually traced to the 1906 Asuza Street revival in Los Angeles, which formed the “first wave” of Pentecostalism in North

America (Robbins, 2004: 119-120). These Christians went out and sent missionaries across the country and into Africa, planting churches such as the Assemblies of God (Ibid.: 121). The movement emphasised the “gifts of the Holy Spirit”, namely divine healing, exorcism, prophecy, revelation, speaking in tongues, and adult baptism (Anderson & Pillay, 1997: 227). For these Christians, the Holy Spirit was present throughout their daily lived experiences, as well as in their worship and prayer lives (Ibid.: 3). They also believed that those “saved” through conversion and baptism through the Holy Spirit would have all their past sin removed and lead them into a new life of Christian sanctification (Robbins, 2004: 119-120). The second wave of Pentecostalism occurred in the 1950s and 60s in which mainstream churches experienced a Charismatic revival, causing subgroups within these churches to form. Since the 1970s, a third wave of new Charismatic or neo-Pentecostal churches have formed, named PCCs (Pentecostal-Charismatic churches), particularly in the global South. These churches believe that the gifts of the Holy Spirit are available to contemporary believers, and are often independent of larger denominations (Robbins, 2004: 121).

Although PCCs share certain common characteristics, the global PCC movement is extremely varied in theology and practice between individual churches (Miller & Yamamori, 2007: 1), and a large part of the literature on PCCs is on the enormous differences between them and how these differences stand central to the ways in which believers define their faith and act on the world. Some PCCs focus on the prosperity gospel, which emphasises prosperity with regards to health and wealth as a fruit of faith in God (Togarasei, 2011: 339). Others focus their theological practice on evangelism, healing, and worship (Miller & Yamamori, 2007: 2) while yet others focus their energies on spiritual warfare (van Wyk, 2014).

This form of Christianity spread rapidly after the Asuza Street revival and is the great “success story” of an era of cultural globalisation because it replicates itself in canonical form as it spreads and adapts to various cultures (Anderson & Pillay, 1997: 227; Corten & Marshall-Fratani, 2001; Robbins, 2004). In the global South (Africa, Latin America, Asia and Oceania), PCCs have been most successful (Meyer, 2004: 452; Robbins, 2004: 118). Nowadays, many PCCs around the world are known for presenting themselves as “the ultimate embodiments of modernity”, through the building of large churches that can accommodate thousands of believers (Meyer, 2004: 459). They also make use of mass-scale communication technologies for disseminating ideas and for converting others to the faith, promote internationalism through global megachurch networks, and ultimately create a global “Charismatic ‘meta-culture’” that

transcends adherence to local and denominational allegiances (Anderson, 2005: 68; see also van Dijk, 2000).

Corten and Marshall-Fratani (2001: 3) were some of the first scholars to register the global impact of Pentecostal-Charismatic (PC) Christians, and argued that in its emphasis on the experiential dimension of the spiritual realm, this transnational neo-Pentecostalism started allowing these Christians to experience a “radical transformation of the self and a new collective identity”. Martin (1998: 127) in addition showed how PC Christianity was expanding to create a space in which people could act in response to the dystopian features of global capitalism and postmodernity, of which poverty, ineffective institutional structures, and the disruption of the family as the central unit for economic and interpersonal support were most prominent (see also Haynes, 2015; Mate, 2002). Unlike Catholicism, neo-Pentecostalism was seen to have a future-orientated capacity for transforming individual and family lives in the here and now, and importantly offered hope and lived solutions to many people facing increasing socio-economic structural problems. New PC Christians were thus better able to adapt to the latest forms of capital and to the disruptions that followed in its wake (Martin, 1998: 128).

Apart from encouraging a positive attitude, overcoming fear, building a sense of personal destiny and hope in order to strive towards a better reality despite the circumstances, both Meyer (1998) and Mate (2002) showed in their work that PCCs routinely insist that converts make a “break with the past” and leave traditional ways of life behind, particularly ties with large extended families. Scholars such as Maxwell (2005) showed that this “break” allows PC converts to better navigate the vagaries and volatility of the capitalistic labour market. According to Power (2004), the Pentecostal belief in their increased moral “goodness” allows these Christians to view the roots of social problems as stemming from discrepancies in individual values, rather than from structures of society, politics, or economics. Thus Pentecostal believers seek their own salvation, and in turn convert others, whilst opting out of the broader social contract which reduces structural problems to the need for personal salvation (Power, 2004: 29). As a result, Oro and Semán (2000: 616) noted that there is a tension between PC political mobilisation and a Pentecostal message of indifference towards, rejection of, and transcendence over society in its current form in some contexts.

Miller and Yamamori (2007: 4) argued that although this new PC Christianity does not try to create an alternative social reality for believers it does something much more subversive;

it teaches Christians that they are made in the image of God, that all people are equal and have dignity. In the context of PC Christianity's impact on development in contemporary sub-Saharan Africa however, Zalanga (2010: 56) argued that its focus on being aware of God's presence and power in the world, rather than institutional change, in fact reproduces conditions for underdevelopment. Kakwata (2017) similarly voiced the concern that the success of Pentecostal development projects are often limited to the individual level, and that because structural problems responsible for certain social issues are not dealt with directly, this leaves gaps in the overall effectiveness of the development work. The focus on spiritual rather than structural solutions in PC Christianity led a number of scholars to argue that this form of Christianity is problematically apolitical (Robbins, 2004: 135).

Nevertheless, some scholars, including those that have criticised PCC development work, have pointed out that PCCs do extensive developmental work with a positive impact in contexts where the state has retreated or where it is incapable of dealing with issues of economic and social justice. Power (2004: 30) argued that in relieving members of collective responsibility in favour of individual empowerment, these Christians create an alternative and parallel society, which they see as sufficient for filling the void of the state. Kakwata (2017) acknowledged that while there are gaps in their overall effectiveness, the work of Pentecostal churches is often more successful than that of secular NGOs focussing on development, and that this is due to their spiritual and individual focus. This "intrusion" of PCCs into what was for a long time a secular space, has created a kind of Progressive Pentecostalism in which PCCs actively minister to the social and economic needs of their congregations and local communities (Kakwata, 2017; Myers, 2015). This Progressive Pentecostalism developed and flourished due to the promise of "salvation" and a focus on spiritual healing (Haynes, 2015; Miller & Yamamori, 2007: 2; Pfeiffer, 2004: 359). In this regard, PC Christians believe that the world had fallen into sin and destitution as a result of Adam and Eve's original sin (Milton, 2020), which allows the Devil and his demons to roam the Earth to cause illness, poverty and all manner of social and economic problems.

Kramer argued that PC Christians believe that they can right the world through fighting the Devil and his demons and through development activism, which they understand through their dominion and prosperity theologies (2005: 107). Through dominion theology, Christians elaborate their spiritual war against the Devil by searching for evidence of his work in the physical world and then spiritually fighting it to expand God's Kingdom on Earth. At the same

time, they believe that a person's spiritual health is coupled with their bodily, material, and social well-being, an idea that stands central to their prosperity theology (Haynes, 2020: 61). The ideal moral self in PCCs is one filled with the Holy Spirit (Meyer, 2004: 460). Through their political interventions and development work, PC Christians expect that individual subjective transformations would assist in converting others to Christianity and thus eventually heal and transform society itself (Haynes, 2015: 7) through radically reconstructing families and communities to support PC values and behaviours (Freeman, 2012: 4).

PC Christianity provides a language for discussing forces such as violence and moral corruption, embodying and breaking these forces down in ways that believers can grasp and confront, usually as demons (Maxwell, 2005: 26). PC Christians believe that God created the world by His words, and because humans were created in His image, their speech has similar generative capacities (Haynes, 2015: 20), compelling God to act in the spiritual war against the Devil (Corten & Marshall-Fratani, 2001: 10). The potential of language is vitally important for the successful materialisation of certain realities, and the overcoming of others (van Wyk, 2014: 141-170).

A number of scholars have pointed out that one of the realities that PCCs struggle to overcome is the fact that these churches still largely support patriarchal forms of family and male power. According to Frahm-Arp (2015: 2), South African PCCs, like their counterparts in Nigeria (see Ojo, 1997), idealise the nuclear family, wifely submission, and being married as the highest calling for women. Although men and women are spiritually equal in these churches, husbands are framed as the head of the household while women are expected to work hard outside the home, care for their family, and sexually satisfy their husbands. In her work on two churches, one a PCC and the other a Zionist church, Frahm-Arp (2015) asked why so few women in these churches reported abuse despite their experiences of VAW. Using Foucault's understanding of surveillance, Frahm-Arp showed that women's responses, understandings and coping mechanisms were determined by technologies of power within the two churches; their patriarchal structures, their surveillance of women, the pastorate (through counselling sessions and prayer) and the silencing of potential women victims (Ibid.: 1). Women victims would often deny that violence happened in their homes, would normalise it, and blame themselves (Ibid.: 6) while patriarchal socio-religious systems promoted cultures of surveillance and silencing by policing what women talked about when it came to VAW (Ibid.: 1).

Despite these churches' Pauline notions of patriarchy, which highlight the necessity for the subordination of women to men and the legitimation of laws and structures securing male rule (Hauge, 1996: 56), more women than men are active members in PCCs (Robbins, 2004: 132). Scholars have long studied the reasons why more women than men attend Christian churches. Robbins (2004) argued that in spite of the support of male domination in these churches, PC Christianity often enhances women's autonomy and allows them public roles in wider patriarchal societies (see also Avishai, 2016: 266; Bialecki, 2008; Hauge, 1996; Smilde, 1997; Stacey & Gerard, 1990). In contexts where patriarchal structures are breaking down or are being eroded, scholars showed that female PC Christians often seek to "restructure and remoralise the patriarchal family against the destructive forces of machismo" (Riesebrodt & Chong, 1999:1). In her work on the role of women in Hillsong Church Australia, Miller (2016: 7) argued that while PC Christians often asserted narrow stereotypes regarding men and women, they increasingly embracing neoliberal ideals of individualism that did not situate gender roles in biology, leading to a "Pentecostal gender paradox". Women in these groups actively attempt to challenge and reshape the patriarchal family in a way that still allows for gender hierarchies to remain in place.

Early research on gender and religion was framed around the assumption that religion and feminism were inherently incompatible (Stacey & Gerard, 1990). Later studies found that women in religious settings would often embrace feminist practices and ideologies, but would distance themselves from the concept of "feminism" (for PC cases, see Fraser, 2003; Jenkins & Martí, 2012; Martin, 2003; Miller, 2016). According to Troeltsch (1992: 55, 75), Pauline traditions often give equal weight to revolutionary and conservative tendencies; a "dual ethic" that affirms patriarchal authority as divinely ordained while at the same time affirming (revolutionary) individualism and equality based on individual calls to fellowship with God and the eternal value of the individual soul. Inspired by Troeltsch, Smilde (1997: 345) studied sexual relations within Venezuelan evangelical households. Regardless of discrepancies in individual theologies, he found that the overall attitude amongst Venezuelan evangelicals were that men had authority over their wives in a loving and respectful way, and that women should obey men in a loving and respectful way. For women, there seemed to be a continual need for balancing competing commitments to two forms of authority; God, and those whom God had placed in a position of authority (Smilde, 1997: 345). Bialecki (2008) has further shown that ideas of "stewardship" and care in some American PCCs allow members to reframe older ideas on gender, economics and conservation in terms that are revolutionary. Avishai (2016: 273-4)

insisted that the tensions and contradictions within religiously-informed gender ideas powerfully produce, reproduce, challenge, and dislocate power structures.

It is within this broad framework of globalised PC Christianity, their creation of specific political subjectivities, their focus on development activism, and engagement with issues of gender, that I place my study on Hillsong's women-centred development and VAW-justice programmes.

### Methodology

In light of the overall aim of this research study, I used a qualitative paradigm in an inductive manner in order to learn about and understand the experiences, attitudes, and beliefs of my research subjects. I tried to immerse myself as much as possible in the specifics of the data that I collected in order to discover important patterns, themes, and inter-relationships. To this end, I attended a number of Sunday services at HS, attended a *Shine* course, two *Sisterhood* events, accompanied the church's youth leaders on two *WAR* campaigns at local schools, and spoke to one youth leader involved in the *WAR* campaign. I made extensive fieldnotes of the services, course sessions and campaigns that I attended, and collected leaflets, advertisements, and course paraphernalia that I thought might come in useful as data.

The *Shine* course took place in late February until mid-March 2020 at the HS pastors' house in Stellenbosch. Around 15 to 20 women between the ages of 18 to 50 and with a mix of racial backgrounds took part in each of the sessions that I attended. I gained access to the course through a contact from my time as an undergraduate student at Stellenbosch University. Through this contact, I received the phone number of one of the lead facilitators of *Shine*, Susan. She gave me written consent to take part in, observe, and voice record the course for research purposes (see Appendix A). The women in the course were aware that I was both taking part in the course, as well as conducting research for my Master's thesis. We were all added to an online Whatsapp group where we received information about the up-coming sessions. The women all gave verbal informed consent to be observed.

The *Sisterhood* events took place at HS and at the Hillsong Century City branch during 2019. The events were well-advertised and open to any and all women. Women in the church congregation were encouraged to invite their friends and family who did not usually attend church, and each event had a few hundred attendees. At both sessions and events, I used a voice-recording application on my iPhone, and made observation notes in my research diary. I

then transcribed the recordings and observations immediately after the events. I observed the ways in which participants in both these programmes responded to the content they were given by facilitators and pastors, their department, as well as the décor of the venues and programme advertisements.

I contacted Megan, one of the Stellenbosch youth leaders involved in the *WAR* campaign, through a personal contact I made at one of the HS Sunday services. Megan was a little apprehensive and slow to respond to my Whatsapp messages the first few times I made contact with her, but she finally invited me to come with her and her husband Zack, the other youth leader at HS, to a *WAR* campaign school visit. I actively tried to be friendly and engaging in asking them questions about their involvement in the church, and over time Megan and Zack warmed up to me. They became more open about discussing the campaign with me on subsequent school visits. I voice-recorded the sessions and made observation notes regarding my experiences and interactions with the youth leaders in my research diary. I transcribed these notes and recordings as soon as I arrived home.

I met the Mitchells Plain and Gugulethu youth leaders at Megan and Zack's first school visit, and spoke with Allie, the lead female youth leader of the Mitchells Plain branch. She had been involved with the *WAR* campaign before, and keenly participated in an hour-long open-ended conversation with me (see Appendix B). Her insight into the programme was invaluable as I gained an in-depth understanding of her experiences and beliefs around the campaign, as well as the mission and values that the campaign were built upon. This provided me with a good background when observing the school visits. I received written informed consent (see Appendix A) from her to voice-record and transcribe the meeting.

In both the *Shine* course and *WAR* campaign, I identified myself as a Christian and a researcher in my interactions with the participants in this study. I was aware of the fact that because I am a Christian and have grown up in a similar religious environment with comparable views to those at Hillsong, my "insider perspective" would not allow me to give a complete objective view of the field, as participants responded to me, as a Christian, in ways that I could not control (Scheper-Hughes, 1995). However, despite this potential drawback, a number of anthropologists have long argued that an insider perspective was beneficial in terms of gaining and a closer rapport with participants and access to the field (e.g. Cerroni-Long, 1995), in this case, the church's programmes, especially the *WAR* campaign. In addition, using a research diary throughout my data collection allowed me to be reflexive in my analysis regarding the

ways in which the participants interacted with me in a co-creative manner, and how I situated myself in each setting.

The unforeseen lockdown of the country due to the spread of the Covid-19 virus meant that I could not attend most of the *Shine* sessions, *Sisterhood* events, and Sunday church services at HS during 2020. Although it would have been ideal to have full access to these programmes, and although my findings may have been different if I had full access, I still had access to the content that would have been discussed in the *Shine* sessions through its detailed course booklet and to the church's website. My visits to the church and attendance at two main *Sisterhood* events also gave me sufficient insight into the ministry, what it stands for, and how the women viewed their role in acting against VAW. In addition, I had a number of discussions with friends who were members of the church.

Although the initial goal was to focus on HS specifically, I soon came to realise that HS' women's and youth ministries worked alongside the other church congregations in the country. My research on the *WAR* campaign involved the youth leaders from Stellenbosch, Mitchells Plain, and Gugulethu, and the *Sisterhood* event that focussed on VAW was a combined *Sisterhood* held in the Cape Town offices. However, the *Shine* course and the first *Sisterhood* event that I attended were held at HS.

With regards to analysis, I took a phenomenological approach (Schutz, 1972) in order to engage with the ways in which my research subjects produced and made sense of their realities and experiences through the different Hillsong programmes. I traced patterns in the ways that Hillsongers spoke about the church and VAW and unpacked the implicit meanings underlying what was said and how their material contexts influenced what people said; for instance, unlike in the in-church events, the *WAR* campaigners almost "un-Christianised" and "secularised" their talks in a school setting, but believed that in going out and speaking up about VAW was doing something very powerfully spiritual (see Chapter 4). I completed data collection and analysis simultaneously, allowing for a thorough understanding of the relationship between meaning, intentions and actions within these Hillsongers' subjective experiences, as well as a more accurate and reflexive analysis. A phenomenological approach helped me to map out the interactions between activism, and gendered and Christian identities without starting from a position in which their relationships were already fixed or assumed. After transcription, I identified key themes raised in the programmes and developed relevant codes and conceptual categories. I chose thematic analysis as it was useful for summarising

key features of large data sets, producing clear and organised data analysis (Nowell, Norris, White & Moules, 2017). It also provided a good setting for analysing intersecting identities of the participants in my study.

It is important to note that as I refer to HS' or Hillsong's women-centred or women-focussed teachings, not all of the programmes that I researched were fully woman-led and woman-focussed. The *WAR* campaign specifically focussed their work on raising awareness about VAW in mixed-sex schools, and the youth leaders were usually both men and women. The youth leaders also acknowledged that rape and violence could be perpetrated against men and boys, but focussed their work on the violence perpetrated against women and girls who formed the majority of the victims.

### Ethical Considerations

I adhered to the British Sociological Association (2017) and the Sociological Research Association's (2003) ethical guidelines when conducting my study. As such, I committed to not working with vulnerable populations (BSA, 2017: 6); my participants were over 18 years of age, and the conversations I had with them were unlikely to cause harm to the participants greater than what is ordinarily encountered in daily life. Because of the nature of the study site and participants (i.e. that the organisation was small and publicly active in their justice work and the leaders and facilitators were therefore more likely to be identified), I made sure that their identities were protected as much as possible through the use of pseudonyms. I also asked for permission for the use of a voice-recorder during my observations (BSA, 2017: 4).

With the exception of the pastors and other speakers at the *Sisterhood* events (which were open to the public), I gave as much information as possible to my participants in order for them to make an informed decision about their participation in my study. I made it clear that they were not required to participate, and that involvement was completely voluntary (SRA, 2003: 27-28). I asked the youth leader that I spoke to, as well as the lead facilitator of the *Shine* course to fill out an informed consent form. However, in a number of public settings, it was hard to negotiate informed consent from those that I observed. For instance, when introducing me at the schools, Megan and Zack referred to me as a *WAR* campaign volunteer, not a researcher. Although the teachers and students were not aware that I was doing research, the focus of my observations was the youth leaders. Ethically, I therefore believe that the teachers and students were not deceived or harmed by my research. In other contexts, such as my participation at large public events and in church services, I followed the ethical guidelines

on observing public events (Spicker, 2011), recording public speeches and the behaviour of public personas, but refraining from doing so in situations where participants had a reasonable expectation of privacy, as was the case when they engaged in private prayer.

I safely stored the signed consent forms on my personal computer, to which I were the only person to have access (BSA, 2017: 7). I made it clear that any questions concerning rights of participants could be answered by me or by Maléne Fouché (Stellenbosch University Departmental Officer working with Rights of Participants). At all times, I aimed to uphold the confidentiality of participant information when engaging with other people in the organisation. Thus, details of the participants or transcripts were not discussed with or accessible to anyone except myself, and I only brought up details of the study participants with my supervisor when necessary. I promised to make transcripts of our conversations available to participants who requested it and safely stored this on my personal computer in a password-protected folder. Voice recordings of the conversations were also stored in these files. Ethical approval for this study was sought from the Departmental Ethics Screening Committee and the Research Ethics Committee (project number 10265) at Stellenbosch University.

### This Thesis

Through this research, I hope to bring a greater understanding of the social worlds of PC Christians involved in women-centred programmes and VAW-justice work. In a country that has concerning levels of VAW, and in which Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity is increasingly popular, this study could promote an understanding of how people who identify with this faith can help combat this social issue and transform society for the better.

Chapter 2 of this thesis introduces the notion of Hillsong's activism in this context more broadly, Chapter 3 looks at how the church does this activism work on themselves specifically with regards to gender, and Chapter 4 analyses the ways in which these Christians understand their aforementioned activism on the world. Chapter 5 brings the study to a close, giving an overview of the findings and key insights discussed throughout the other chapters.

## Chapter 2: Activism as Transformation

Hillsong promotes the perspective that God wants people to live prosperous and healthy lives in order to more effectively “help” those who are not a part of the faith. This forms part of a general “prosperity theology”, which holds that faith, health, and wealth are inevitably intertwined and that their opposites, poverty and illness, have their origins in the work of the Devil. It is thus imperative for the Christian mission to go out into the world, heal those within it, and bring them to the faith (Connell, 2005: 324-5; see also Kramer, 2002, 2005: 101; Robbins, 2004). The prosperity gospel places emphasis on the here and now, on changing the world to mirror God’s will and therefore bring about God’s Kingdom. The goal of healing is where Hillsong Stellenbosch (HS) and its partner Hillsong branches’ women-focussed social justice work mostly resides.

This chapter looks at what women-focussed activism looks like at HS, and the other branches that work alongside HS. How do these Pentecostal-Charismatic (PC) Christians view the space that they aim to act upon and how do they in turn envisage their activism around violence against women (VAW) in this space? In particular, I will focus on the place of subjective transformation or “self-fashioning” in the church’s activist spaces. It is important to note that while these Christians may not actively label themselves as activists, their work on VAW is considered a form of Christian activism in the church.

### “End Times” and the Fallen World

In September 2019, the Hillsong Church South Africa held a combined *Sisterhood* event at its Head Offices situated in Century City, just off the N1 into Cape Town. This event brought together all *Sisterhoods* from Hillsong branches in Cape Town and the surrounding areas, including HS, Gugulethu, Mitchells Plain, Somerset West, and Southern Suburbs branches. There was also a live online streaming service so that other branches in South Africa, Century City, Centurion, Braamfontein, and Wonderboom, could tune in to the event. The event focussed on the increased visibility of VAW in Cape Town, and the actions that Hillsong’s women could take in response to this evil. The lead female pastor of Hillsong Church South Africa, Lucinda Dooley, introduced the session by referring to the rape and murder of University of Cape Town student Uyinene Mrwetyana in August of 2019 (Knight, 2019). Uyinene’s tragic death led to social uproar and numerous protests in the city and around the country.

Pastor Lucinda proclaimed, “I believe today is a significant *Sisterhood*... God knew that what was going to transpire in our nation in the last two weeks was going to happen. So this [*Sisterhood* event] is divine appointment. He will put his hand of blessing on us”. She then went on to talk about an online post in which she stated that “we are definitely a bunch of everyday girls but we are also a force to be reckoned with!”. The post was accompanied by a Bible verse that said, “She sets her heart upon a nation and takes it as her own, carrying it within her” from Proverbs 31:16 (Dooley, 2019). Pastor Lucinda continued, “I do believe it’s end times, the last days. God is going to have his way. I believe *Sisterhood* is very instrumental in what God is trying to accomplish on this Earth”. These “end times”, she said, was visible in the noticeable increase in VAW, evidence that the women at Hillsong Church South Africa were being called by God to play a role in helping “fight for our brothers and sisters” and “pray for and declare hope over our land”. The women in the congregation cheered and shouted “Amen!” in response.

A month after the *Sisterhood* event in Century City, I had a conversation at the same venue with one of the Mitchells Plain youth leaders, Allie, who had been involved with the church’s *WAR* (War Against Rape) campaign for a few years. I scheduled to meet her because I wanted to find out more about the reasoning behind the campaign.<sup>6</sup> Allie was very open and friendly, giving me the opportunity to ask questions about the role of *WAR* as a form of activism in the wider Cape Town area. I asked her what it means to be a Christian doing this kind of activism work. She replied,

[God] can turn [your life] around and use it for the good... Some people will say how did God allow this to happen, if he’s such a loving God? We live in a sinful and fallen world where things happen. People murder each other every day, there’s crime and, like, a whole bunch of things that we can’t explain because we live in a fallen world filled with sin and we’ll only ever understand [why] on the other side of eternity. So, we never really give attention to why God allows [rape and sexual harassment], but more explaining like that’s the world we live in. But it’s important how we receive it and how we handle and overcome it. So, we want our programme to be an overcoming programme, and for people just to carry a different sense where they feel that even though they live in a fallen world [they] wanna be different and be the light for the guys. Even though [their] friends are making jokes about girls and they’re looking at girls in a certain way, as a Christian guy [they’re] going to be different. [They’re] gonna perceive and honour them differently.

---

<sup>6</sup> I tried to talk to the Stellenbosch youth leaders, Megan and Zack, but they had only just entered into their roles as youth leaders, and thus did not have enough experience of *WAR* to be able to talk to me about it in depth.

Pastor Lucinda and Allie’s eschatological positions about the end of time and how Christians should behave in it, echo that of the Vineyard Church, which Jon Bialecki (2017) extensively researched. Bialecki (2017) writes that “Vineyarders” believe that being a Christian at this time was not about escaping life on Earth, but rather about living life in a more fulfilled, ethical, and effective manner. At Hillsong, Allie believed that even though the world had fallen into sin and suffering, Hillsongers needed to “overcome”, “be a light” and “carry a different sense” in this world. Allie did not elaborate what it means to “overcome”<sup>7</sup> the suffering caused by rape and sexual harassment, but she linked “overcoming” to the changes that the church could effect in young men. She explained that the church had a parallel, “brother” course to its *Shine* course for women (see Chapter 1), called *Strength*. The course focused on “overcoming addictions, anger, and hurt”.<sup>8</sup> Thus women’s “overcoming” was tied up with the active efforts of men to alter, or “overcome”, the negative perceptions that were rife within the “fallen world” and among their sex, leading the way towards healing.

Both Pastor Lucinda and Allie claimed that the future was not something to passively wait for on Earth, but that Christians should shape their present and future lives on Earth into lives of abundance and “overcoming” through faith, prayer, and purposeful actions. Both strongly believed that Hillsongers could assist in establishing God’s Kingdom and thus triumph over the fallen world. However, the final triumph over the Devil and his wicked ways was a reality that was, as Bialecki (2017: 37-38) explained, “already/not-yet”. In other words, the Kingdom of God was already present but had yet to arrive in its fulness. As such, God’s miracles were not always available to believers because the fallen world was in a state of war that had not come to an end yet (Bialecki, 2017: 41-42), a state of affairs that Pastor Lucinda acknowledged with her reference to the nearing of “end times”.

### Transformation of the Self

In this “already/not yet” context, HS and the partner branches’ women-centred programmes paid particular attention to individual change and the development of transformed individuals, as well as God’s ability to act on the world, as forms of spiritual healing and “warfare” against VAW. This was particularly clear at the *Sisterhood* event where Pastor Tes Jahnig, from Linc

---

<sup>7</sup> Van Wyk (2014: xx) gives a definition of the term in her work on the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God. In this context, the word refers to “an ontological state in which poverty, illness and unhappiness are actively held at bay”, usually through actions such as church attendance, exorcisms and spiritual warfare.

<sup>8</sup> Due to limited time and scope of this research, I did not look further into this men’s course.

Church in Ballito,<sup>9</sup> started her sermon by saying, “Jesus has positioned you here because He is calling you into Himself. Uniting in prayer, God is setting in motion a spiritual awakening”. She then discussed how Christian women should deal with VAW, and earnestly noted that “the Enemy<sup>10</sup> is not after us, but our hearts”. The sermon focussed on exercising the ability to “guard your heart”; building confidence and hope through a strong faith in God. To Pastor Tes, putting your faith in God to combat the problems of the world, whilst focussing on strengthening the Christian heart, which is the “most authentic part of who we are and shapes our existence”, were actions that “the nation and your future depends [sic] upon”. She told the women at the event that they needed to believe that “the Holy Spirit is enough, He will do it”. At *Sisterhood* then, “guarding your heart” and at the same time “trusting God and the Holy Spirit” to fight for you in a world in turmoil strengthened a believer’s relationship with God, leading to increased hope and positivity about the future, and ultimately, victory over the suffering caused by the Devil.

Both the *Shine* course and the *WAR* campaign’s work were also based around spiritual healing as a form of warfare. When I spoke to Susan, one of the course facilitators, at the beginning of *Shine*, she told me that the primary objective of the course was women’s empowerment, and to free women from the beliefs that they had little worth, strength, or purpose in life. Throughout the sessions that I attended, and in the rest of the course booklet, the importance of the course as a method for creating powerful Christian women that could rise above difficult circumstances was a defining feature of *Shine*. The course touched on topics such as choosing to not let comparison to others define your identity (session two), choosing to change your perspective in difficult situations (session four), cultivating hope and resilience as opportunities for growth (session five), and having the ability to recover readily from adversity (session six). These abilities added up to create “purpose”; the possibility and capability of being or becoming a powerful Christian woman (Shine, 2020: 50). The only limit to success and “becoming all that [you] can be”, was the one that individual women imposed on themselves by not being “resilient”:

Being able to bounce back and recover from adversity makes us stronger and contributes to our dreams becoming a reality. A resilient person is able to stand firm whilst facing significant difficulties and stress as they have a stronger sense of self-belief and faith in their

---

<sup>9</sup> It is necessary to note that both Pastor Lucinda and Pastor Tes do not work alone as the lead pastors of their churches, but work alongside their husbands, Phil Dooley and Dylan Jahnig, respectively.

<sup>10</sup> Hillsongers used this term to refer to the Devil.

capabilities...We can learn so much about ourselves when we go through challenges and problems...you can look back and see what you have learnt from the situation. Any mistakes we make are simply an opportunity to grow and learn. (Shine, 2020: 54)

The booklet lists things that help increase resilience, notably “healthy relationships, participation, communication (someone to talk to), overcoming problems, not giving up, standing up for what you believe, taking healthy risks, facing rejection or setbacks and trying again, not taking things personally, learning from your failures” (Shine, 2020: 55).

While *Shine* and *Sisterhood* events focused on transforming Hillsong women into powerful, agentive individuals, the church’s *WAR* campaign focussed on developing a sense of purpose and worth in youth that may have experienced rape or sexual harassment at schools in and around Stellenbosch. I attended a *WAR* campaign session on 16 September 2019 at Tembaletu Learners with Special Education Needs School in Gugulethu with Allie, a Mitchells Plain youth leader, and Megan and Zack, the Stellenbosch youth leaders.<sup>11</sup> Allie started the formal part of the session by introducing the *WAR* campaign and its origins with a shocking confession that a girl made to the lead youth pastor of Hillsong Church South Africa. The girl had been gang raped, but when she told her mother, she said that it was “just a part of growing up”. Allie explained that this incident inspired the lead youth pastor to start the campaign in order to teach young people that “it is not okay, it’s never okay, and you shouldn’t accept it ever”. She stated,

So if you are here today and this has happened to you, we want to say that we’re so sorry, we feel for you and we want to say that we support you and want to help you with taking the next step forward. You still have a purpose, there is still a plan for your life, you still matter, you’re still important, your voice still matters, and you can overcome this.

The youth leaders mainly focussed their message of hope and purpose towards the girls. When they spoke to the boys, the male youth leaders told the boys that they needed to protect women, and that “as men, our physical strength should not be used to overpower women but to protect them”. In a conversation with Allie, she stated that sensitising these young people to the issue of sexual violence could make them hopeful and resilient, helping them to “find freedom from that shame”, which would help them overcome and defeat the internal destruction that accompanied experiences of violence. She then went on to reflect on the

---

<sup>11</sup> This was both my first experience of the *WAR* campaign as well as Megan and Zack’s. They attended this session, which was run by the youth leaders of the Mitchells Plain and Gugulethu congregations, as a means of learning about how *WAR* is run in schools so that they could start implementing it as part of their new roles as youth leaders in Stellenbosch.

importance of being a Christian for this hope and resilience to manifest properly. Allie wondered how non-Christians dealt with difficult circumstances like rape and sexual harassment, because without God, people “feel hopeless”, have a “lack of purpose”, and thus have to “deal with a lot of shame and hurt”. According to Allie, as well as Pastor Tes, being a Christian allowed you to find freedom and rise above difficult situations in a way that permitted God to guide your faith and subsequent action in the world.

Since Hillsongers believed that the ultimate cause of social problems such as VAW was fundamentally spiritual, their individual and spiritual “war” against VAW, and the evil spirits or “the Enemy” that caused it, did not necessarily target unjust social structures. Instead, the *Sisterhood* events, the *Shine* course, and the *WAR* campaign focussed on instilling a kind of resilience that ultimately relied on the power of God and the Holy Spirit. In other words, this belief in the importance of spiritual, rather than structural, solutions to VAW, meant that women and young people were encouraged to make conscious decisions to move beyond their personal and individual suffering through the help from God and the Holy Spirit. The way that Allie spoke about her puzzlement over how non-Christians manage to navigate difficult circumstances reflected this understanding. As Pastor Lucinda declared, God fights for His people, and this fact could potentially enable women and young people to feel empowered enough to affect change.

The ways in which the pastors at *Sisterhood* events, the youth leaders in the *WAR* campaign, and *Shine* facilitators encouraged people to rise above their circumstances and allow God to fight for them, reflected a broader Hillsong message. In Martí’s (2017: 381) work on the global development of Hillsong, he argued that as a broader church movement, the church used a language of “positive psychology, adopting a ‘flourishing’ mentality and directing people toward an emotive call for humility and surrender, the growth and enablement of emotional and relational health”. Not allowing yourself to be bound by social context or emotion, as well as having an increased understanding of your life’s purpose, were important for creating a renewed spirit that could enforce divine will on trying situations and in turn rise above these circumstances in a way that, to Hillsongers, meant conquering and overcoming them.

Martí (2017) claimed that this “positive psychology” played an integral and very effective role in changing behaviours and social relations, as it assisted in altering social circumstances. A “flourishing” mentality directed PC Christians, like the Hillsongers in my

study, towards humility and surrender, increased emotional and relational health, thus fuelling energy towards activity in their local church and surrounding communities in a way that was immersive and instilled with intimacy and connection (Martí, 2017: 381). For example, *Shine*'s effort to radically change women's sense of self and their place in the world, as well as their beliefs, values, and morality, attempted to catalyse a fight against a sense of passive fatalism and fear of the suffering in the world. Women changed through this course could then realise that they had the power to make a difference. In finding inner strength, hope, and a sense of purpose, Hillsong's activism through these women-focussed teachings aimed to motivate and empower both Christians and non-Christians to improve their lives, leading to the development of new behaviours, and new types of social relations, that could help lead them "overcome" VAW. This "flourishing" mentality ultimately relied on Hillsong's belief in the power of God and the Holy Spirit to affect change in the world.

### Reaching Out

Transforming Christian subjects was the first part of church's "fight" against VAW. The second part focused on evangelism to influence and inspire, and eventually convert non-Christians to the faith. Towards this goal, the church's *Shine* course was not presented as a church- or even a Christian- course, but a free, self-improvement course for any woman. In the third session of the *Shine* course, Natasha, one of the course facilitators, explained this strategy by stating,

When we do *Shine* we don't bring the Christian aspect obviously. People will eventually see something is different in us. We want women all over to find their value and purpose. They may then start to question what the purpose is behind the course, and then we can pray that the Holy Spirit will bring revelation to these women and they will find Jesus.

Natasha believed that if non-Christian women came to *Shine* and saw something different in the way that Christian women dealt with difficult life circumstances, it would result in them wanting to know more and follow the same "life journey of healing". As she explained to the women in the room, "you are on this course because God trusts you with changing and building the nation. It is important to use *Shine* to also change the lives of non-Christian women". This sentiment was summed up well at the back of the *Shine* course booklet:

We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we

unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others. (Shine, 2020: 70)

While the church aimed to attract people outside it with its *Shine* course, this was not very successfully realised. The course I attended seemed to be overwhelmingly, if not completely, made up of Christian women who had some connection to the church. In his work on a Swedish PC church, Coleman (2003: 16) explained that although this church also aimed to convert non-Christians, their primary or initial goal was to recreate, and in essence, “reconvert” the Charismatic self which would then assist in persuading outsiders to enter the body of Christ. At HS this initial (PC) goal had not yet, in the view of my interlocutors, realised the second goal, which was to help the rest of the world to “shine”. In this regard, the Hillsongers, like many other PC Christians, viewed non-Christians as “poor and needy” because they had not received the prosperity gospel message yet (see also Burchardt, 2013: 634). Hillsongers believed that the situation of non-Christians, which is often viewed as dire, would change once they came into contact with Christian women who had been equipped with the techniques of “proper” self-making through various courses such as *Shine*.

Robbins (2012: 19) explained that this emphasis in PC Christian activism “posits a transcendent or ideal moral world that is quite different from the normal one” where their “ritual of spiritual warfare” could cause a “rupture” that allowed Pentecostals to invite the Holy Spirit to empower them. This empowerment radically transforms their social contexts, leading to a “wholly different and better life” (Ibid.: 13). The PC investment in the possibility of this “in-breaking of transcendent power” in the mundane world and the focus on individuality, argued Robbins (2012: 19), rested on the idea that it was within the human self that the transcendent most fully reveals itself in the world. In writing about the Vineyard church, Bialecki (2009) showed how this belief played out in the church’s political work. Politically left-leaning, Vineyarders spent large chunks of their time talking about social justice issues, but had trouble organising concrete political action because they believed that real social change resulted from the transcendental power of the Holy Spirit and His ability to break into the mundane world (Ibid.: 111). This belief, however, led to a conundrum that such “miracles” were depicted as both unanticipated (due to God’s “in-breaking”) and something that the transformed Christian could work for (Bialecki, 2017). While Martí (2017: 381) did not specifically identify this conundrum for Hillsongers, he recognised that Hillsong ministries seldom challenged the *status quo* in society, and engaged in no explicit politics or directed advocacy work.

While those working at Hillsong emphasised the importance and power of having a positive and victorious mindset when it came to fighting the suffering in the world, I came across a few instances where this ideal was not fully realised. Some of the people involved in VAW activism through the *WAR* campaign, both in HS and in other branches of the church in and around Cape Town, admitted that their activism was not as effective as it could have been.

Megan and Zack, both newly instated youth leaders at HS who had never facilitated or taken part in the *WAR* campaign, invited me to the session at Tembaletu LSEN School. Zack told me that initially, they were not planning on doing the *WAR* campaign in 2019 due to a lack of resources and staff.<sup>12</sup> However, due to a number of well-publicised VAW incidents, and a large public response to it, the team decided that they needed to do the campaign. Interestingly, the *WAR* campaign only went to township schools during the time I conducted my research. Zack commented on this on the way to Tembaletu, saying that they were planning on reaching the Model-C schools in central Stellenbosch as well, but that this plan never came to fruition because those schools were busy with tests and mock exams, and did not want HS to do the talks in their assemblies.<sup>13</sup>

Allie added that the *WAR* campaign was further hamstrung by the fact that it was run by different youth leaders at the various branches of the church who also had to focus on youth work. She said that “the ideal would be to get to a point where we had a specific thing where we just focus on *WAR* and not *Youth* and *WAR* specifically. Then we could equip a team to go to training”.<sup>14</sup> Brandon, another Mitchells Plain youth leader, said that they did not have the capacity to provide students with further assistance after the presentations and had to direct them to Rape Crisis<sup>15</sup> instead of getting involved with the specific cases of VAW. Allie said that getting involved was too risky; the youth leaders were not qualified to look after victims, while their work could have legal consequences. If a student started opening up to one of the

---

<sup>12</sup> Zack did not elaborate on what he meant by “resources”, but I assumed this included a budget for transport and paraphernalia needed for the running of the campaign.

<sup>13</sup> The fact that the only schools the *WAR* campaign visited were located in townships in Cape Town may point to a specific relationship of power between the church and the schools. The township schools were easier to access, and the middle-class, Model-C, mainly-white schools in central Stellenbosch were reluctant to buy into (or maybe even suspicious of) the church’s activism. Here, race and class maps onto particular patterns of adherence to *WAR* and its work. Those from lower-class black schools showed more adherence to the campaign than those from middle-class and white backgrounds.

<sup>14</sup> Allie was implying that if *WAR* were separate from the responsibilities of the youth leaders, and expanded beyond just schools, there could be a specific, dedicated team who could make sure that there were enough resources and trained staff available to effectively do, and expand, the work.

<sup>15</sup> An organisation qualified to deal with issues of sexual violence.

youth leaders, “legally whatever they tell us could get messy. Because if they tell us something, it needs to be reported and if how it is reported isn’t the way it should be, it gets messy”.

Apart from problems with funding and capacity, the *WAR* campaign sessions were also plagued by the practicalities involved in delivering their message to large assemblies of children in poorly resourced settings. At Ikaya Primary School in Kayamandi, Megan and Zack brought a Xhosa-speaking member of the Youth Group along to translate because they were concerned that the children would not understand English very well. The school had 1500 students, which they divided into two groups to make them more manageable – grades one to three on one side, and grades four to seven on the other. Megan and Zack told me that they were unprepared for such a large group of children. The fact that the assemblies were held outdoors, with the students standing in compact lines, also meant that it was probably difficult for students to both see and hear what Megan and Zack said. After Megan gave her speech to the group of older students, she mentioned to me that she hoped that the children in her assembly understood what she was saying, because some of the older girls who were at the front of the group just stood with their arms crossed and with expressionless looks on their faces. She said that it made her sad because it was quite possible that they had already experienced violence, or would in the future.

In my conversation with Allie, she told me that the campaign’s impact on violence and gender relationships was “fifty-fifty”. She explained that it all depended “on how they receive [the talks] individually”; some children walked away from the sessions without “bothering” while others “received” the talks, pasted *WAR* campaign stickers on their mobile phones and recognised the Hillsong youth leaders when they came back to the schools. Allie used the word “receive” in the same way in which Christians spoke about receiving “the Word” of God in church, as something that had a visceral, spiritual impact on them. Allie’s measure of the spiritual impact of their message, how it was “received”, in terms of the students’ use of stickers, had some correlation to the literature on other PC churches. Kramer (2005) for instance showed that Brazilian Pentecostal churches used spectacle and visible displays to expand Christian dominion. They believed that these “aesthetics of power” (Kramer 2005: 110) displayed through mass media translated an invisible dimension of power into visible forms, and therefore to a concrete realisation of dominion and prosperity (Ibid.: 107). In a similar way, I would argue that the tangible and visible signals that Allie sought to measure the *WAR* campaign’s impact relied on a similar interest in the visible as a realisation of Christian

dominion and prosperity. However, like the Brazilian Pentecostals, Allie was concerned about the longevity and breadth of the *WAR* campaign's dominion. As she explained, due to staff and resource constraints, they had no follow-up *WAR* sessions at the schools. This was "sad", because sometimes there would be students "who have been impacted by [the talk] and they want to speak to Rape Crisis, but we don't really see the follow-through".

### A Pentecostal Paradox?

As seen throughout this chapter, transforming individual subjects was the first priority for the Hillsongers in my study in their activism in the world. Pastor Lucinda and Allie described this "fallen" world as nearing "end times" which was visible in the manifestation of VAW and other social ills. They insisted that Hillsongers needed to transform the ways in which they related to this world and "overcome" it. Interestingly however, this evangelism could only fully manifest itself through the unanticipated "in-breaking" of God and the Holy Spirit. Thus an interesting paradox appears; in order for the miracle of an end to VAW to occur, Hillsongers needed to work towards this through transforming themselves, whilst also believing in the unanticipated "in-breaking" of the transcendent (which manifests itself in and through the transformed individual) in the world (see Chapter 4 for an extension of this argument with regards to transcendent and human agency).

In this way, the activism that this church participated in was one in which political and social engagement did not necessarily mean challenging the structural *status quo*. Instead, it focussed on evangelism and an overarching "prosperity gospel" that encompassed PC religious life. For Pentecostals, like those at HS, the battle is not against flesh and blood, but against spiritual forces; creating a cosmological struggle between God and the Devil in which Christians could play a part (see Haynes, 2015). At Hillsong, this sentiment was reflected in the ways that women and youth leaders in the church "fought" against social ills such as VAW. From a secular, feminist point of view, this form of activism could be read as ineffective, but for these Christians, activism was about individual spiritual transformation. And although there were a few concerns with regards to the reach of their efforts, their religious engagement with the world had an overall goal of bringing God's Kingdom down on Earth through the conversion of non-Christians to the faith. Hillsongers relied on how others "received" their activism as an extension of the spiritual dominion of God's work. In this way, Hillsong joins other similar Pentecostal-Charismatic churches (PCCs) in viewing their role of acting on the world as one which need not engage with the structural problems of society, but rather focusses

on personal salvation and transcendence over the current social order; a method of activism that some scholars have viewed as being partially successful in achieving its aims (see Chapter 1).

In the next chapter, I will take a closer look at the gendered programmes that the church ran as a way of taking action towards this goal.

## Chapter 3: Activism and Gender

Hillsong Stellenbosch (HS), and its partner branches in and around Cape Town, held different courses and events promoting personal development for women throughout the year. At the time of my research, there were two active courses and events, *Sisterhood* and *Shine*. *Sisterhood* events typically consisted of a sermon led by a female pastor, praise and worship sessions, and structured socialising. The *Shine* course, which “places value on women from all walks of life and encourages them to know and understand their value, strength and purpose”, was one of the *Sisterhood Causes* at HS (Hillsong Church South Africa, 2020a). The church’s website stated that these two programmes encompassed their “mandate to place value upon womanhood” (Hillsong Church South Africa, 2020b).

Both the course and the events aimed to help women experience a revelation about their abilities to fulfil God’s calling and role for their lives in overcoming a sinful world. In these aims, the development of the Christian woman subject was central to Hillsong’s women-centred teachings, and reflected a wider Pentecostal-Charismatic (PC) sentiment that without interventions such as these, God’s Kingdom and his will for people cannot effectively manifest on Earth (see van Dijk, 2000; Mate, 2002; Maxwell, 2005; Meyer, 1998; Robbins, 2004). At Hillsong, this was certainly the case. At a time of so-called moral and institutional failure in the country, the women’s ministry focussed on spreading hope, resilience, strength, and a sense of Christian purpose through the promotion of the development of the individual woman’s self-worth, self-confidence, and self-control.

This chapter will discuss the ways in which Hillsong understood this call to the personal development of women and how it attempted to reenvision Pauline gender ideals in a way that still kept certain gender norms and hierarchies in place (see Chapter 1 for the Pentecostal gender paradox). In the church, narrow definitions of femininity and an embrace of consumerism to realise this end, seemed to restrict the ways that women expressed themselves, dressed and acted. Scholars have identified this kind of framing and moulding of women as postfeminist. However, as I will also show in this chapter, the Hillsong events were not solely focused on external markers of beauty or on consumption. The church also emphasised the importance of internal transformation to reclaim individual uniqueness for the Christian purpose of acting on the world. In this chapter, I argue that the church’s equal emphasis on external and internal transformations go beyond postfeminist understandings of women’s

ministry in Pentecostal-Charismatic churches (PCCs) and that these transformations shaped the development of the ideal Christian subject. I also look at how these Hillsongers understood the combined role of women and men in the fight against violence against women (VAW).

### Gender Work on the Body: Femininity, Consumerism, and Stewardship

In the literature on PCCs, a number of scholars have pointed out that these churches, in line with their Pauline understandings of gender (see Chapter 1), often hold gender-specific events, conferences, and courses to teach women about their place in the world, and how they should act within it (Miller, 2016: 53; Frahm-Arp, 2010). Frahm-Arp's (2010: 53) study on women managers in two South African PCCs, for instance, showed how church training workshops for women emphasised the need for cultural and social capital development based around very specific types of femininity. For their part, Christian women participants saw the workshops as important in order to gain a greater sense of meaning in life and a renewed sense of themselves as valued individuals.

Like other PCCs, Hillsong held a number of events, courses and conferences specifically for women. Susan, the lead facilitator of the *Shine* course that I attended, explained that these courses were necessary because women (regardless of whether they were Christian or not) were more vulnerable to suffering from low self-esteem, worth, and confidence. She noted that it was imperative that in order to fulfil God's calling for Christians and effectively do God's work, women should be "strengthened" through the kind of workshops and events that Hillsong regularly held for women members.

In Hillsong's *Sisterhood* events and *Shine* sessions, speakers regularly utilised women's bodies and external beauty as a site of discussion and motivation to reflect an ideal of femininity. This was most noticeable in the church's mass events for women. At the 7 September 2019 *Sisterhood* event on violence against women (VAW), Pastors Lucinda and Tes seemed to conform to very specific beauty standards in the way they dressed. Both women wore modern stylish outfits over their slim bodies, had shiny, immaculate hair, and Pastor Lucinda in particular wore bold, bright makeup and jewellery. At the other *Sisterhood* event that I attended, on 23 October 2019, the church projected images of well-dressed, smiling young women (usually in extravagant dresses, wearing bold makeup, jewellery, and with styled hair) juxtaposed with Bible verses about value and worth on to a screen. One example of these images was that of a young, pretty woman posing in a field of flowers wearing a floral, flowing dress with the verse "she is clothed in strength and dignity and she laughs without fear of the

future” (Proverbs 31:25) written above her head. Another image was of a young woman modelling in a glittering pink dress on a chaise-lounge embellished with gold edges with the word “*Sisterhood*” placed underneath her. The screen was visible to all the women who walked into the event venue. All *Sisterhood* events also had “affirming” activities that focused on the attendees’ looks. A very familiar one was where the pastor would ask attendees to turn to the woman next to them and to tell her “you look beautiful today”. The speakers at these events commonly addressed the women as “girls” or as “gorgeous”, phrases that were repeated on the signs that formed part of the venue décor.

At both the *Sisterhood* events and *Shine* courses, advertisements, general décor, and course materials also abounded with floral, and “feminine” images. For example, the *Shine* course booklet had a pink and purple floral cover while the colourful, boldly-designed advertisement pamphlets for the next *Sisterhood* event were handed out specifically to women at Sunday services. Beyond the circulation of these feminine images, the church also handed out gifts and prizes to the “girls” that attended their events. These gifts were highly gendered. For instance, before the official welcoming from the pastor, many *Sisterhood* events featured a dancing or sing-along competition on stage. After being picked out from the congregation, women who participated in these competitions won prizes of nail polish, earrings, and hairbands. Similarly, after each session, *Shine* participants received gifts of lip balm, pocket mirrors, and hand lotion, all decorated with *Shine* printed in pink on the object.

These “girly” objects were not simply gifts and prizes; they often formed an integral part in underscoring the Hillsong message to women that they had to constantly survey and monitor their bodily features; lotion to keep hands soft, lip balm to keep lips moist, and a pocket mirror to check for facial blemishes. For instance, in one *Shine* session called “I am valuable”, the facilitators used looking after your hands as a metaphor for looking after what is most important to Christian women. As Natasha said, as you put lotion on your hands and looked after them, you were also “putting lotion on” or caring for others around you (see Chapter 4 for the role of these gifts in Hillsong’s activism on the world). In the next session, “I am wonderfully made”, the course booklet emphasised that looking after your body as a woman showed that you valued it, as your body was made with “careful thought and consideration” (Shine, 2020: 29). In the “I am one-of-a-kind” session, Julie noted that exercise and diet, as well as makeup, could all be used to “make your face healthy or treat it well”. She went on to say that “as women, we need to look after ourselves. If someone isn’t going to look after us,

we need to do this”. As we saw above, the female pastors at the *Sisterhood* events embodied these ideals discussed in the *Shine* course; they were in good shape, wore immaculate clothes, expert make-up and had their hair done.

The gendered work on the body at *Sisterhood* and *Shine* events seemed to reflect and embrace postfeminist discourses in a way similar to the women’s ministry of the Hillsong church studied by Maddox (2013b). These Christians reflected ideals around femininity as constituted by the body, rather than by social, structural, or psychological properties. Such ideas accorded with a postfeminist sensibility in which the body as a sleek, toned, and controlled figure is seen to be normatively essential for portraying success, as posited by Gill (2007: 149). It also encapsulates the necessity of self-surveillance, monitoring, and self-discipline in order to conform to narrow perceptions of female attractiveness, whilst at the same time being presented as a woman’s source of power (Ibid.: 149-150). The Hillsong church in Maddox’s (2013b: 12) work “conform to a narrow, fashion-magazine definition of ‘beauty’” as a method to empower women. Maddox argues that this “empowerment” is actually regressive in nature because the emphasis on conventional beauty standards coupled with an emphasis on youth infantilizes women more than it empowers them; a phenomenon which Maddox calls the postfeminist “girl discourse” (Ibid.: 19-20).

Moreover, the examples of the gifts and prizes, the emphasis on make-up and dressing, and the values imbued in the glossy advertising and branding of *Sisterhood* events and *Shine* sessions all seem to encapsulate a “theology of consumption” in which commercial and product-driven standards of beauty reinforce views of women in popular culture. The term was coined by Maddox (2013a: 108) to describe patterns of consumption at Hillsong in Sydney. In relation to this theology of consumption, Maddox (2013b: 19) analysed a *Colour Conference*<sup>16</sup> at Hillsong Sydney where princess motifs of glitter, tiaras, and flowers abounded. She argued that this “princess theology” emphasized a particular capitalist version of feminine beauty that was coupled with youthfulness and postfeminist “girl” discourses. As Maddox (2013a: 111) argued, this gendered consumerism plays an important role in the church’s understanding of what it means to live as a Christian woman. Like the church in Sydney, the female leadership at HS and other South African branches of the church used hyperfeminine aesthetics of fashion

---

<sup>16</sup> The Colour Conference is Hillsong Church’s annual three-day global women’s conference that started 25 years ago in the Sydney congregation. It is usually hosted over a weekend in April by Bobbie Houston, and involves sermons given by a host of well-known pastors from around the world, as well as energetic worship sessions. The congregations that host this conference are based in Sydney, New York, Los Angeles, Cape Town, London, Kiev, and Moscow, and attract thousands of women every year (Maddox, 2013b: 12; Hillsong Church, 2020).

and makeup, as well as décor and paraphernalia designs to paint a very specific picture of what an empowered Christian woman looked like. *Sisterhood* events were all based around women “being the change” in the nation and building God’s Kingdom through these particular standards of beauty and consumption. On one pamphlet advertising its own *Colour Conference 2020* it stated, “but the people who know their God shall be strong, and carry out great exploits.” (Daniel 11:32). Female pastors and course convenors at the church seemed to suggest that not taking care of your body as a woman and not conforming to the church’s feminine ideals would hamper someone’s ability to fully fulfil this mission and carry out God’s “great exploits”.

### *Internal Transformation and Stewardship*

The fact that the women at Hillsong consistently reinforced the idea that beauty and attractiveness should be reclaimed for Christian purposes, however, went beyond conventional postfeminism and consumer theology. The courses and events also, and equally, emphasised that women needed to transform internally too in order to fulfil God’s mission. The *Shine* course booklet listed among its objectives that the course attempted to “build confidence, self-esteem and self-worth” (Shine, 2020: 8). This emotional upliftment, the booklet stated, played a vital role in the development of effective Christian women whose confidence was built up in order to live out a “purpose-filled life” (Ibid.: 9). Although the course facilitators spent time discussing the importance of looking after the body through the use of exercise, diet, and makeup, the goal was to show that a woman’s value and worth did *not* come from external markers of identity, but from the fact that each woman was unique, “one-of-a-kind” and “wonderfully made” (Shine, 2020). In the first few sessions of the *Shine* course, the facilitators highlighted that we had to embrace our individuality and to not compare ourselves to other women or a certain standard of being, because this would fulfil God’s “purpose” and calling for women’s lives.

In the session named “I am one-of-a-kind”, course facilitators taught us to “recognise the value of being one-of-a-kind”, as well as how to “distinguish the difference between uniqueness and comparison” (Shine, 2020: 20). We were given pieces of paper with different blank faces printed on them, as well as colouring pencils. Julie, the facilitator of this session, said that we could colour-in the faces however we liked, and with whichever colours we chose. After five minutes of colouring-in, Julie explained that the overall aim of this exercise was to demonstrate the uniqueness and individuality of women, as well as the importance of

embracing this individuality and not comparing oneself to other women. She then read out a section from the day's topic in the course booklet:

The first thing people notice is our face; faces gives [sic] expression to who we are; our heritage, our culture and our life...When something is one-of-a-kind, it is precious and valuable...a treasure...it has worth. Each of us is set apart as unique as there is no one else like us! We are created to be one-of-a-kind, custom-built and a masterpiece. (Shine, 2020: 22)

The booklet went on to state that because women were all so different and unique, their worth did not come from looks or other external values. Holding up the women's colourful face-pictures, Julie emphasised this point. In the following session, "I am wonderfully made", Natasha explained that in order to "value" ourselves and to understand our "worth", women needed to "look after" themselves. She started the group discussion by asking "do we truly value and appreciate our bodies?" Leah, who was wearing a t-shirt with "girl-power!" printed on the front, responded that we did not. Emily added that "we live in a sinful world and we are socialised into not being proud of ourselves and our achievements in case we look vain". Susan agreed with her and said that "we need to live our convictions. Imagine the impact you can have on the world if you are uniquely you?" The group seemed to agree that we had to value our bodies more and that this would have an impact on the world. Again turning to the group, Natasha asked us, "how should we look after our bodies?" Janine immediately answered, "exercise and diet". She then added that women should "speak positively into [other] people's lives" as well as their own, "because women are often struggling with issues of worth". Nothando responded that one of the benefits of looking after your body was that it "shows that we value our bodies. It lets them function effectively and makes us feel good". Susan and some of the other participants said that valuing and appreciating your body as a woman, and being proud of it through your levels of good health and fitness, meant that you could impact the world more effectively. The course booklet reiterated this point in stating that "we exercise to be strong in the core of our body so that we can be fit to carry on our amazing journey well" (Shine, 2020: 26).

After the discussion, Susan invited her friend Sandra, a professional nutritionist, to speak to us about the importance of a healthy diet. Sandra introduced herself and stated that she had previously participated in a *Shine* course and facilitated three others. She admitted that she used to struggle with issues around her weight, which negatively impacted the "value" that she placed upon herself, and gave her low self-esteem and low self-worth. During her

presentation, she asserted that she no longer felt these negative feelings and was prouder of her body. “God has given us a range of fruit and vegetables”, she said, that women should utilise in order to feed their bodies well, and in turn, to bring about a greater sense of value and self-worth. She emphasised that women needed to monitor the food they take into their bodies, and that they had to develop the “self-discipline” to have a balance diet. A page in the *Shine* course booklet for this session displayed a food pyramid, reinforcing the importance of a balanced diet (Shine, 2020: 29).

Throughout the course and in other *Sisterhood* events, women at Hillsong viewed the successful care of their bodies and management of their images not just as a gendered, but a moral/religious achievement, which aimed to build women’s self-esteem and emotionally uplift them, and in turn spiritually impact the world. Jenkins and Martí (2012) studied a very similar process among women in a Californian church’s women’s ministry. They argued that these Californian women used a discourse of “balancing Christian mission with Western middle- and upper-class cultural expectations of consumer health and beauty practices” (Ibid.: 246), reclaiming “beauty and attractiveness for Christian purpose” (Ibid.: 245). This reconstruction of a specific kind of femininity went beyond the conventional, secular understanding of postfeminism.

Indeed, in many respects, the *Shine* course’s emphasis on self-surveillance, monitoring, and self-discipline closely paralleled the economic practices of Vineyard Church followers in California, which Bialecki (2008) discussed in terms of the Christian practice of stewardship. Although Bialecki wrote on economic stewardship in PCCs, the importance of “stewarding”, or looking after and taking care of something in order to further God’s church, was reflected in the ways that female leaders at Hillsong urged followers to look after themselves. By monitoring their diet, and by being disciplined about regular exercise and bodily upkeep, women were properly stewarding God’s gift of a body “wonderfully made” with thought and consideration as “one-of-a-kind”. And like Bialecki’s (2008) Vineyarders who carefully and gratefully managed the money that God bequeathed in their care, the women church leaders urged women to manage the gift of their bodies so that they would “shine” and become visible to others as women with Godly purpose. To realise this purpose, and to do God’s work in the world, Hillsong programmes emphasised that women had to transform spiritually to create strong inner selves.

### Transformed Subjectivities

Like other PC Churches, HS and its partner branches focussed a lot of their work on the experiential dimension of their faith, and teachings were often based on the development of the inner Christian self (see also Mate, 2002: 549; Maxwell, 2005: 18; Robbins, 2004: 121, van Dijk, 2000). At Hillsong, the development of the inner Christian self started when someone accepted Jesus as their saviour and committed their lives to God. It was often a public commitment, and one on which the leaders in the church would end their services. At the end of each sermon, the pastors would ask if there were any people who were ready to change their lives and follow Jesus. Those who stood up would then be directed to a member of the church prayer ministry team so that they could “start their journey as a member of the Kingdom of God”. Once someone had made this commitment at Hillsong, much of the agency for their further future personal transformation lay in their own hands.

At the September *Sisterhood* event on VAW, Pastor Tes Jahnig spoke on the importance of a Christian’s heart to God. Pastor Tes animatedly explained how our hearts were the most authentic part of who we were, and that they shaped our existence. While “we often look[ed] at the outside, ... God looks at the heart”, she said. “In order for God to work in you and through you to build the Church and carry the nation”, Pastor Tes warned that we had to “guard” our hearts. Guarding the heart entailed, amongst other things, the ability to “align yourself with the truth” of the Bible, despite the “sickness” and “sin” in the world, as well as staying together in church as a Christian community in order to allow for “healing, wholeness, and growth”. Through holding tightly on to the church and the Bible, Christian women would be able to develop their inner selves in order to become beings that could effectively promote God’s Kingdom and assist in “carrying the nation” out of sin and suffering. Pastor Tes described this female responsibility as a “collective obedience that will change the nation”. To obey followed on from believing in God’s power to affect change. At Hillsong, women developed this ability through specific forms of self-discipline with regards to the choices they made, as well as through resilience and hope for a better future, in order to develop a strong inner self. Pastor Lucinda took Pastor Tes’ idea further at the same event in stating that through developing a strong, Christian self, women would be able to “fight” in the spiritual war against the Enemy and ultimately “take territory” for God.

*Self-Control – “I have the power of choice”*

At Hillsong one of the ways in which women were told that they could develop their inner selves was through better “self-control”. This was something that the *Shine* course at HS underlined, and which was elaborated on in the *Sisterhood* meetings. In the *Shine* course’s section called “Strength”, the booklet emphasised that women needed spiritual self-discipline. It stated that although “we have free will...our strength grows when we exercise our free will for good, for ourselves and for others”. Although the booklet was not clear on what it meant to use “self-control for good, for myself and for others”, it did hint at the need for women to self-regulate, and that when women used their self-control in this way or to this end, they would see their “strength come” (Shine 2020: 34, 71).<sup>17</sup>

While the *Shine* booklet insisted that being able to control feelings and make good decisions were key to the development of a strong self (Shine, 2020: 34), it also gave directions on how one could live a life that was not controlled by “emotions”. In session four, “I have the power of choice”, the *Shine* course offered an exercise called “Stop, Think, Choose”, which was supposed to help women do exactly that. The exercise was simple; it directed the reader to stop and ask what had caused them to feel a certain emotion, think about the choices they had made and the consequences of each choice, and then to choose the option that suited the best outcome they wanted (Shine, 2020: 37). This step-by-step individual exercise followed a discussion on understanding thoughts, beliefs, feelings, decisions, and responses, and how these things influenced behaviours and actions. The booklet stated that “when we begin to explore our feelings and the reasons behind them, we start to understand our past and our present and look forward to a different future” (Shine, 2020: 35). The exercise was meant to assist in the process of getting Christian women to believe in the power they had in overcoming situations through both free will and self-control. Expanding on these themes, session four of the *Shine* course booklet stated that although we could not always change the circumstances that arose in life, we could always take control over what we did about them, and this in turn built a woman’s strength and maturity (Shine, 2020: 34).

Valuing and respecting “boundaries”, and having control over who and what influenced you, was also discussed in the *Shine* course booklet as essential to cultivating a healthy sense of personal worth. It stated that if a woman continued to live a life that allowed the demands

---

<sup>17</sup> Due to Covid-19, I unfortunately could not find out what the facilitators would have said on this, and no-one asked about it on the online Whatsapp group.

and opinions of others to guide them, this might lead to “frustration, abuse, depression or resentment to take root” (Ibid.: 41). Instead, Christian women had to reduce their desire to react by exercising self-control, allowing them to maintain a controlling balance when it came to emotions. This control strengthening the self in order to take on the world for God and not be distracted or knocked down by anything along the way. Thus the key to the formation and maintenance of the ideal Christian woman lay in the transformative discipline of her interior life.

The *Shine* course also suggested that if women did not have strong inner selves, they could open themselves up to all manner of social and emotional ills. In many ways, the course’s prescriptions mimicked the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (UCKG)’s focus on using “intelligent faith” that van Wyk (2014: xx) studied. Here, the pastors encouraged their congregations to not act out of emotion, but through a faith which involved an individual’s “rational ability to appreciate that God is swayed not by emotions but by faithful actions” (Ibid.). In a similar way, HS’s *Shine* course seemed to be training these women to become rational Christians, who were strong and steadfast in the knowledge of God’s ability to assist them in rising above the difficult circumstances they may face.

*Hope and Resilience – “My decisions determine my destination”*

In exercising emotional self-control through the power of choice and a God-given free will, the *Shine* course at HS taught women to develop resilience and hope for a better future. In session five of the course, “My decisions determine my destination”,<sup>18</sup> women learnt how to “choose to see things that feel like, and seem to be, tragic as opportunities for growth” even when things occur over which they had little control (Shine, 2020: 41). As Susan said in one of the previous sessions, and as Pastor Tes echoed in her sermon, the “power that lies within” aids women to rise above adversities, and thus minimises the effect these adversities had on them. The *Shine* course booklet described it thus:

By using the strength within us, we are building and *growing* it as well as our character and personhood...Many of us carry around emotional things that can weigh us down like heavy bags. These weights are the baggage from our lives – the hurt, the pain, the unforgiveness and the regrets. We have the *choice* to receive healing from our issues and let go of our

---

<sup>18</sup> It is worth noting that “My decisions determine my destiny” was used in the contents page (Shine, 2020: 7), but “My decisions determine my destination” was used at the start of the actual session notes in the booklet. Either this was a mistake, or these Hillsongers saw the words “destiny” and “destination” as interchangeable.

baggage...By exercising choices that help us live “lightly” we build and develop our inner strength. (Shine, 2020: 42)

In the same session, an infographic on the “journey of a diamond” was used as an example of how in circumstances of intense pressure and an uncomfortable refining process, a mere rock could transform into a beautiful, unique diamond (Ibid.: 45). This metaphor was meant to bring an understanding of how the development of hope and resilience could be realised by Christian women, as through adversity they could still triumph and grow strong, beautiful, and brilliant, like diamonds.

In dedicating a substantial part of the *Shine* course to developing hope and resilience through choosing to rise above adversity, the facilitators hoped to radically change women’s sense of themselves and their place in the world – that they would start to see themselves as valued individuals who could play a role in God’s will for the world. This sentiment was reflected in the *Sisterhood* event in which Pastor Tes preached about the ways in which Christian women should act in times of VAW. She started her sermon with this statement:

I mourn with you in this city; what has risen to the surface after Uyinene. I am a woman and a mother and have too felt fearful and overwhelmed. It can feel confusing to be a woman in this nation. But I believe in this moment as we feel pain together, God is saying to us as women “rise heart”. We can build the Church even now. We can carry a nation and set our hearts on Africa because of Jesus...I believe we are being awakened to the power that lies within us at this moment in the nation. We are being awakened and enlightened again to the power that can change our families, our communities, our nation.

The female leaders at Hillsong taught women to move beyond a passive sense of fatalism and come to realise that they had agency and power within their lives. This power was not necessarily an inborn power, but came from Jesus, and could be activated once you accepted Him. This would then allow them to see themselves as victors over life circumstances, with inner strength, hope, and purpose. In his work, Robbins (2012: 12) showed that Pentecostal Christians often foster conscious efforts to utilise transcendence as a method for bringing about radical cultural change. These Christians highlight the importance for those who decide to follow Jesus to “make a complete break with” their pasts, be it on personal, social, or cultural levels (Meyer, 1998). To the Hillsongers in my study, this break was not with a traditional past, but between themselves and society and its troubles more generally. As a result, they needed to fashion themselves as new kinds of people, and transform their inner selves in

a way that marked a discontinuity in the way that they related to the world. They focussed on a transformation of the inner self which sought to alter beliefs and values about the ways in which women should orientate themselves in life circumstances. In moving away from a fatalistic acceptance of their situation, and in realising the importance of controlling their reactions to the world, these women at Hillsong hoped to emerge as conquerors, guided by the “power within”. As conquerors, they could disrupt the social order in which VAW and its accompanying fear and mourning were commonplace, to make space for the possibility of a Christian social order where VAW would not exist.

### Warrior Women and Men

Hillsong’s focus on both the bodily and spiritual transformation of Christian women played a vital role when it came to understanding how Christians are expected to act upon the world and ultimately create a new social order. Through *Sisterhood* and *Shine*’s attempts to facilitate the awareness of women’s intrinsic value, and build their inner strength to rise above their circumstances, these women would become fit and ready, both physically and mentally, to fulfil God’s calling; to go out into the world, “fight” for and heal the people within it, and bring them into God’s Kingdom. Hillsong’s framing of women as strong Christian fighters reflected a similar “distinct form of female muscular Christianity” found in Jenkins and Martí’s work (2012). In the Californian church they studied, women were encouraged to “pursue physical health and fitness as they uncover[ed] inner female strength and beauty” (Ibid.: 250). These qualities, they believed, helped women to become “warriors” against social ills, such as poverty and violence, and worked to advance women’s position globally. Importantly, Jenkins and Martí show how these warrior women pursued health and fitness because “health and physical challenges will inevitably rise that demand strong spiritual swords. They will also need surplus energy for evangelical outreach and, most important, battling personal issues that threaten productive evangelical warrior status and individual prosperity” (Ibid.: 252).

Riches shows (2017: 92) how Bobbie Houston’s focus on “princess theology” in Hillsong’s global *Sisterhood* is often combined with militaristic metaphors such as her famous phrase “daughter-princess-warrior”, which represents the progression of a woman’s self-understanding in terms of identity, status, and power in the world. Riches goes on to show how Pastor Houston sees “misogyny” as a spiritual war in which the Devil has caused women to live in contempt and hatred. Maddox (2013b: 21) equally concludes that language used in this ministry often reflected a kind of dominion theology in which “Christians have an obligation,

a mandate, a commission, a holy responsibility to reclaim the land for Jesus Christ". Hillsong then use militaristic images of impending conflict to portray the necessity for women to mobilise in order to fulfil end-time prophecies.

Hillsong's "war" against VAW was not just a woman's affair. At the *Sisterhood* event based on VAW, Pastor Lucinda asked the women at the event to pray for the "protection, salvation, [and] covering" of women and children in the country. She then also stated that the "men of South Africa need our prayers. It's never women standing up fighting alone. Healthy men and women [need to be] fighting together". Pastor Lucinda asked Luthando, a man from the Hillsong congregation who had come to the *Sisterhood* event especially for this moment, to come up on stage to pray for the "men of the land". As he came up, she continued, "we are going to annihilate the enemy, gangs, and crime. God needs our prayers, hearts, and commitment. He will stand in for the gap in our country. We are uniting in prayer as God is setting in motion a spiritual awakening".

Luthando started by reading verse 15 from 2 Chronicles 7 in the Bible, "if My people, who are called by My name, will humble themselves and pray and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land". Luthando went on to say that "men need to look at Godly men in the Bible" and that they needed to learn to "respect women". He then asked the women in the congregation to close their eyes whilst he prayed:

Set the men free. You see the men of our nation. I pray for every man in the country. You have called men to be Godly men. I pray they will lead the way You want them to lead. I pray against stereotypes of hard men who shouldn't cry and should be hard. Soften their hearts. They must see women with respect and dignity. Women have been created in Your image, so they need to be revered as Your Holy creation. I pray that South African men will be world changers and lead the way You want them to lead.

The ways in which the *WAR* (War Against Rape) campaign school visits related to the boys and girls followed a similar vein. Allie, in my conversation with her at the Hillsong offices in Century City, told me that the youth leaders wanted girls to be protected and to know their value, and that the male youth leaders in their talks with the boys told them that "as men our physical strength should not be used to overpower women but to protect them". The goal was to teach the boys that "it's about protecting [women] and being a real man that doesn't force himself upon a woman". At Ikaya Primary School in Kayamandi, I was able to sit in on most

of the assembly that Zack gave to the younger children on the other side of the school, while I could flit to the side where Megan spoke. In their separate assemblies, Megan and Zack said similar things, but at the end of his talk, Zack added a point about talking to the boys and said that “our job as men and boys is to look after and protect the ladies”.

To these Hillsong leaders, Christians needed to fight an evil and corrupting kind of masculinity, or “machismo” (see also Riesebrodt & Chong, 1999), that prevented God from healing the world, and which attacked His creation, namely women. They understood that certain masculine stereotypes played a concerning role in the way that women experienced violence. However, in fighting this evil, Hillsong reiterated gender binaries and roles in ways that reinforced the Pauline notions of gender in Christianity. For instance, Pastor Lucinda specifically asked Luthando, a man, to come and pray for the men in South Africa and to channel his (and other upright men’s) “strength” into looking after and protecting women, rather than hurting them. In this way, Zack, Allie, and Luthando believed that men would become “real”, Godly, and would use their God-ordained leadership and “world-changing” potential to work alongside women in the fight against VAW. In a sense, both men and women were expected to become more masculine in order to fight against VAW and take on the world for God.

Throughout this chapter I have shown how the Hillsong leaders in my study saw their women’s external and internal development as a way of strengthening themselves in order to allow God to help them change the world. They also believed in the necessity for both men and women to play very specific spiritual roles in this mission. As I will show in the next chapter, these complex ideas around the role of gender in activism were coupled with a focus on the importance of confessions and speaking forth this new world.

## Chapter 4: Activism and Confessions

For Pentecostal-Charismatic (PC) Christians, reality is not necessarily merely pre-given; it can also be spoken into being through faithful, sincere speech (van Wyk, 2014: 151). In Hillsong, using words as well as physical space as methods for creating “positive confessions” were important ways in which believers tried to make things more likely to pass. While any kind of religious utterance could be seen as a form of positive confession, the church’s women-centred teachings were particularly focused on the impact and importance of positive confessions on the world; these Hillsongers tried to bring about the in-breaking of God’s transcendental power in the world. Additionally, their confessions also aimed to change Christian listeners at Hillsong to become more hopeful<sup>19</sup> and resilient. As I showed in Chapters 2 and 3, these Hillsongers used hope and resilience as forms of activism.

In this chapter, I look at the ways in which these Christians envisaged creating a new world through these confessions, what this meant for their activism around violence against women (VAW), as well as the ways in which a community of women activists was created and reinforced through this particular focus on the power of words.

### Stirring God into Action and Saying the World Right

Throughout Hillsong’s *Sisterhood* events, positive confessions were used as a method to “stir women’s hearts” and to stir God into action to combat VAW, as well as heal women in the process. For instance, in the September 2019 *Sisterhood* event focussed on VAW, Pastor Lucinda opened the event by saying that even though atrocities such as the rape and murder of Uyinene Mrwetyana were happening in the world, the church was “making history, taking Africa, and God is going to change the nation”. She stated,

We are going to speak hope over the continent, we are going to continue to fight for our brothers and sisters, fight for the poor and needy, continue to have courage, have crazy faith, never let go of God’s confidence, and we are going to continue to pray for our nation and land. I believe God will continue to honour that.

---

<sup>19</sup> Scholars often consider hope as a Pauline Christian virtue (Robbins, 2009:111).

After this, Pastor Tes came up on stage to preach her sermon. She reinforced Pastor Lucinda's point by highlighting that women needed to experience God's love in order to claim victory over VAW:

If you have grown weary in this season, disappointed and disillusioned, rend your hearts towards [God]. Tear yourself from everything you have latched onto before. God is calling girls to His heart. He's putting dreams and hope back into your heart...I believe in this moment as we feel pain together, God is saying to us as women to "rise heart". We can build the church even now. We can carry the nation and set our hearts on Africa because of Jesus.

Pastor Tes went on to explain that the Devil caused destruction in the spiritual realm and that this destruction infiltrated the Earth and its people, causing pain and suffering through violence, notably VAW. Because a heart is important to God, and because it is the "most authentic part of who we are and shapes our existence" (see Chapter 2), women needed to be "awakened to the power that lies within" which could help "change our families, our communities, our nation". Central to the awakening of this power, she said, was confessions.

Pastor Tes highlighted the necessity of "choosing your confession". She asked the women in the congregation to think about the words they used, specifically in conversation and on social media, because that language was "shaping our future". In order to stir God into action, speaking about the world in a particular way was imperative. Women needed to think about what they were *saying*, not just thinking, about their nation and families "when everything looks pretty dark" in times of VAW. It was important to cultivate hope and joy in your heart through language, because "when we praise Jesus, we feel peace". To reiterate this point, she recited a piece of scripture from the Bible which states,

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:4-7)

Pastor Tes spent a large proportion of her sermon discussing the need to talk about the VAW situation in the country positively, confidently, and hopefully. She believed that speaking, and singing, these affirmative words would assist God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit in increasing their

effort in changing the world of the mundane into a world of triumph and transcendence over evil. At the end of her sermon, Pastor Tes concluded with the statement,

Now is the time to “rise heart”. We are not waiting for things in the news to get better. A fearful world needs a fearless Church! God is putting confidence and hope within us. Raise a confession of hope, truth, Jesus. We need to cultivate praise into this place. Watch Him do something extraordinary in your heart right now. Praise shapes our hearts.

Pastor Tes called on the women in the room to worship Jesus, and to realise that when they praised Jesus, they would feel peace.<sup>20</sup> Speaking positively and hopefully about the situation, as well as praising Jesus, meant that women at these events could aim to become resilient through feeling peaceful and hopeful about God changing the violent circumstances they faced. Conversely, talking negatively about these circumstances could prolong them. It was therefore vital that Christians always spoke “hope” and “truth” over such situations in order to diminish this possibility. A powerful praise session followed, in which she called the church’s worship band to the stage and invited all the women to sing “Praise the Father, Praise the Son, Praise the Spirit, three in one”. The women joined with gusto, some praying out loud and thanking Jesus and the Holy Spirit with their hands stretched up in the air, whilst the band and a group of backing singers, lit up by stage lights, performed with vigour.

The Hillsongers in my study expected the irruption of God and the spiritual realm in a similar way that the Vineyarders in Bialecki’s (2017) research did. Bialecki (2017: 33) showed how these PC Christians did not just view worship as expressive or cathartic, but also as part of a project in which the believer was transformed into an ideal self that trusted in God’s power to affect change. Worship marked the growth of a relationship with Him and helped Christians become the people they desired to be in this world. Freeman’s (2015) work on the role of Pentecostalism on economic development in sub-Saharan Africa reflects on the importance of worship to PC Christians in a different context. She argues that the ecstatic worship characteristic of PC Christianity, usually made up of power ballads, plays an important role in the rupture of the current social order, because it creates visceral experiences of newness that presage the establishment of a new social order. Martí’s (2017) work on Hillsong shows a similar interpretation of the language of praise and worship to these two scholars. Hillsongers,

---

<sup>20</sup> Although a whole Christian gathering can be classed as “worship”, in this context I refer to how these Hillsongers used both the terms praise and worship as a way of describing a defining moment in the gathering where the whole congregation would worship God through song and music.

he said, aimed to deploy spiritual power through praise-oriented confessions in which testifiers surrendered themselves, opened up to God, and let go of fear and doubt. This in turn gave individuals a spiritual basis from which their individualised action on the world could take place.

The worship session that followed Pastor Tes' sermon was meant to forcefully banish the current situation of VAW and to establish a new social reality, made up of transformed people who followed Jesus and sought to overcome VAW through their hope and trust in Him. To my Hillsongers, praising Jesus in worship sessions with other Christians was a method of enlisting God in the spiritual battle against VAW. This was what "fighting" for the men and women of South Africa meant for Pastor Lucinda as well; her point was centrally about speaking, praying, and using language as a form of activism and "weaponry" in the war for social justice.

The power of language to create a different, alternative reality was also a key part of HS's *Shine* course. Here the creation of positive utterances, be it through encouragement, words of empowerment, prayer, or forgiveness, assisted women in knowing their worth, power, potential, and purpose. This would assist in healing these women and in turn help build the Kingdom of God. In one of the *Shine* sessions that I attended, Natasha stated to the group that the course was important "especially in a country with gender-based violence [in which] there is so much negativity. We need to rise up and be the light". Here "negativity" was contrasted with "light", a positive force that banished the "darkness" of evil. In the *WAR* (War Against Rape) campaign, Allie spoke in very similar terms about the need to speak up about rape and sexual harassment, "bringing it to light" (see Chapter 2). She also emphasised that youth leaders always attempted to be "hopeful" in their campaign trips to schools, and that they wanted to instil this hopefulness in the students who heard their messages so that they could learn to believe that they still had a purpose, and that they could and would overcome experiences of violence.

When I spoke to the youth leaders in church, they often used the notion of bringing something to light to explain their activism. Their use of the notion was, however, not secular; bringing something to light was to enter the spiritual realm and to fight darkness. But instead of explicitly acknowledging the spiritual power of positive confessions to change realities, these youth leaders consciously couched it in more "secular" language when they spoke to the

students at the schools which they visited. I chatted to Brandon at the Tembaletu LSEN School *WAR* campaign before the school assembly, and he told me,

when we speak about something, actually we are bringing it to light. When we speak about something it gives us the space to encourage one another. Even when it's a difficult topic, like rape, we can speak about it and encourage one another, and we know we're doing something right as well.

On the way back from Ikaya Primary School, Megan, the HS youth leader, told me that speaking up about and shedding light on VAW was a way of showing that the church was “taking a stand against it and saying no [to violence]”. To these Christians, the spiritual and the material were closely tied together, and positive confessions, in which people positively spoke against negative conditions were needed in order to fight against VAW. They saw power in the naming of an evil and interpreted taking a verbal stand against something as a method for rooting out that evil in each community.

The fact that the youth leaders consciously secularised their language when speaking to students at the schools they visited, did not seem to diminish the power that these words held for them. To bring up the issues and discuss them with the students was enough to bring them to “light” and for the spiritual realm to take action. When Megan spoke about “taking a stand” against VAW, she was not simply saying that the church was expressing its position on a social issue; Hillsongers took a physical and spiritual stand in their *WAR* campaign. The very name of this campaign highlighted the way in which its youth leaders imagined the work that their words or advocacy were doing; they were waging a spiritual war on VAW because its causes were located in the spiritual realm. This was different from the ways in which more secular advocacy groups “created awareness” about VAW and how they imagined the work that their speeches did at schools and other events. The youth leaders believed that by telling students in the assemblies that they were not in “a hopeless situation” and that they needed to “bring VAW to light”, they were making this reality more likely to come to pass than if they stayed silent. Speaking out against VAW had an inherent power that could shift the spiritual realm in favour of those that sought its eradication.

Fraser (2003: 154), who writes on Pentecostalism and marital abuse in Australia, argued that “Pentecostals cosmically [call] into existence things that do not exist” through a “name it and claim it” doctrine”. This doctrine assures believers that they should have faith that “God wants them to be wealthy [and healthy]” and that they merely need to “call it to

themselves” in order for God to bestow this prosperity upon them (Ibid.). The use of specific language and phrases as a method for allowing certain realities or potentialities to unfold in the *Shine* course, *WAR* campaign, and *Sisterhood* events, reflected Fraser’s statement to some extent. The women in the *Shine* course seemed to “call into existence” increased levels of self-worth and esteem, as well as successful control over the future and the choices that they would make in life (see Chapter 3). The course taught the women to envision certain things to come to pass in the future, such as the ability to use their desires and strengths as a method for fulfilling purpose, and to ultimately “have something to contribute” in the mission of “making a difference” in the world (Shine, 2020: 58). In a similar way, Allie and the other youth leaders believed that bringing the issue of rape “to light” would help young people to gain victory over experiences of violence. Pastor Lucinda explained that as long as Christian women positively confessed about God’s work and potential on the world, “God will continue to honour” their requests, and fight VAW for them. To her, positive confessions opened up a space in which God had the responsibility to act on the behalf of these women and lead them towards victory over the world.

#### Speaking Positively About the Potential of Hillsong’s “Girls”

In order for women at Hillsong to effectively act on the world, the leaders in the church dialogically created a body of powerful “girls” (see Chapter 3) who could conquer the world for God, together. Through their speech, the leaders in Hillsong’s two teaching platforms for women, *Sisterhood* and *Shine*, aimed to create a powerful community of Christian women who were resilient and who had heightened self-esteem and beliefs in self-efficacy. In the first *Sisterhood* event that I attended in October 2019, Pastor Lucinda’s sermon focussed on the meaning of *Sisterhood* as a movement of “girls” who knew their worth and value, and who aimed to make the world a better place. Pastor Lucinda defined “drawing out the potential in every girl” as the key aspect of the *Sisterhood* mission. She explained that “amongst women there’s a different healing and restoring. For too long women have been misunderstood and downtrodden. We must encourage, empower, pray for, and forgive each other”- and do so as a group. The advertisement webpage for the 2021 *Sisterhood Colour Conference* states that it “champions ‘the spirit of womanhood’” whilst focussing on “mobilising women to be the change and positive influence they desire” (Hillsong Church, 2020).

At the end of each session in the *Shine* course that I attended, the facilitators asked participants to stand in a circle, hold hands, and repeat the course mantra whilst looking into

the eyes of the other women in the group, “I am valuable, I am one of-a-kind, I am wonderfully made, I have the power of choice, my decisions determine my destiny, my potential is limitless, my life has purpose, I am *Shine*”. This mantra was a combination of all the session titles in the course, which as Natasha mentioned to the group, would give these women “truths” to hold onto about themselves when going out into the world, healing the broken, and bringing them to faith. In speaking this mantra out loud to themselves and the other women in the group, the participants were actively building each other up and creating a community of strong women. According to Natasha, the ultimate goal of the *Shine* course was “speaking positively into people’s lives, and your own...because women are often struggling with issues of worth”. In session seven of the course booklet, “My life has purpose”, it tells women where to find this positivity and to what end to employ it when it. It advises that when women “tap into the desires of [their] heart”, in other words their personal strengths, unique talents, abilities, and passions, they become aware of their purpose on Earth as Christians. As the booklet continues, “purpose enables us to make a difference in our world. Life does not have to be about just living for ourselves. Our life can be used to make a difference for others” (Shine, 2020: 58).

Miller (2016), who wrote on the changing roles of women in Hillsong in Australia, provided interesting insight into the church’s ambition to help women speak positively, and as a group. In doing so, she focused on Bobbie Houston’s book, *I’ll Have What She’s Having*, and argued that Houston presented the secular world as the real source of women’s limitations. Houston believed that God wanted women to be free and that they needed to allow Him to do so through “encouraging” themselves and others, and speaking His truths over their lives and circumstances (Miller 2016: 66). Miller argued that in doing this, Houston did not seriously challenge gender norms established by the majority of Christian churches. Rather, she understood the role of women in the church and society as one which involved collectively speaking positively into each other’s lives, eliminating the self-doubt that the secular world placed upon them, and in turn allowing God to “free” women from the sin and suffering of the world.

### Prayer as Activism

Prayer, as a form of positive confession, played an important role in the different women-centred courses and events that I attended at Hillsong. During our journey to one of the schools, Zack told me that they usually prayed to God before they visited a school to give their talk, asking Him to give the students freedom from shame and fear of sexual violence. To Zack,

praying beforehand meant that the youth leaders “trust[ed] that God’s going to minister” to the students. The *Sisterhood* mantra that Pastor Lucinda repeated at the VAW *Sisterhood* event I attended, of “taking territory and overcoming a sinful world”, was constantly paired with exhortations for women to pray. Pastor Lucinda argued that prayer would awaken the Holy Spirit to take on the task of bringing the Earth and its people into God’s Kingdom. She repeatedly highlighted this in saying that “the Holy Spirit is enough, He will do it”, and “the Holy Spirit is here, there is nothing to fear”. She often coupled these phrases with an emphasis on the belief that *Sisterhood* was a “powerful force of prayer”. In the wider organisation, Hillsong often portrayed its *Sisterhood* in similar ways. For instance, at a *Sisterhood* conference in Sydney, Pastor Bobbie Houston called it “an untapped prayer force” that would help women to rise up in prayer so that the Devil would “tremble” and “retreat” (Maddox 2013b: 21). Similarly, Julie, one of the *Shine* course facilitators, mentioned to me that in preparation for the sessions, all the facilitators would come together to pray a prayer that often included the phrase, “Holy Spirit, challenge us and let your light shine through every corner”. She told me that women’s “limitless potential”, could be achieved because of their participation in the limitless power of the Holy Spirit.

Burchardt (2013: 640), who writes on Pentecostal faith-based organisations and development in South Africa, argued that this “personal dialogue with God” was a reflection of the ideology of “speaking” something into existence, and the real ability of words, through the spiritual realm, to alter the physical one. To these believers at Hillsong, prayer, much like worship, was seen as a powerfully effectual process. It allowed them to acknowledge the spiritual composition of the world and the interventionist capabilities of praying and speaking against, or for, the alteration of certain circumstances. In a similar sense to Burchardt’s interlocutors, calling on God, the Holy Spirit and Jesus through prayer was vital for these Hillsongers if they were to achieve victory over worldly sin and suffering.<sup>21</sup> These Christians had confidence in God’s ability to act as they prayed.

PC Christians believe that they are inspired and led by the Holy Spirit in their efforts to address spiritual, physical, and social needs of people in their communities and that this ability is a “gift of the Holy Spirit” (Anderson & Pillay, 1997: 227; Miller & Yamamori, 2007: 2-3). This “Holy Spirit power” inspires PC Christians to seek holistic spiritual, physical, and social

---

<sup>21</sup> There was no consistent pattern regarding which member of the Holy Trinity was spoken to in prayer. My interlocutors seemed to jump between calling on the Holy Spirit, God, and Jesus in their specific contexts.

development. In this way, the Holy Spirit becomes the source of empowerment to do this work. To the Hillsongers in my study, prayer was used in this way as a kind of confession that showed God that they trusted in His and the Holy Spirit's abilities to work on their behalf to eradicate VAW, and thus *became* a mode of social intervention. Prayer as a form of both positive confession and activism had a lot to do with changing the inner self (see Chapter 2) and praying for things to change, as well as "being a light" for everyone else. This would extend the power of prayer into the world so that the world could become thoroughly Christian, and therefore sanctified and without sin and suffering.

### Positive Material Confessions

In addition to the ways in which the Hillsongers tried to remake the world through their words and prayers, they also paid some attention to the positive material ways in which they could change the world. Throughout the period in which I conducted my research, I came across many instances in which the women at Hillsong would go out of their way to make the atmosphere of events, courses, and other services celebratory in nature, in order to underscore the sentiment of victory over things that prevented women from finding healing, value, and potential. At *Sisterhood* events, the leaflets handed out, as well as the event décor, all displayed beautiful young women smiling and laughing, with uplifting quotes and bright, bold colours scattered around. Unlike the usual Sunday services, these events had a coffee and cake stand parked outside, and balloons tied to door handles and fence posts to guide the women towards the venue. Modern, upbeat Christian worship music was played as the women entered the venue, who likewise were also mainly dressed in fashionable, modern, and youthful outfits for the occasion.

Likewise, at the *Shine* course sessions, women were given pretty pin-up quotes and scriptures related to the course content, which were printed in black and white on bits of cut-out paper (see Appendix C). These quotes were used to assert one of the overall goals of the course, which the *Shine* booklet said was to "recognise the value of a positive environment for your potential to grow" (Shine, 2020: 50). Susan, a course facilitator, insisted that this externalisation of positive beliefs regarding victory and self-actualisation through different aesthetically pleasing visual, auditory, and tactile media were a means through which women at Hillsong could tap into their hidden potential. These women could then translate this potential into visible power that could be utilised to overcome and alter their realities.

For PC Christians, “the Word” of God has a performative force on the world that causes the summoning of divine power that would reprehend evil, realise individual prosperity, and in turn extend God’s spiritual dominion further (Kramer, 2002: 23, 31). Faith in the Word of God is an inner quality of the self that must be realised in the social space of the church, and presenting your faith in this manner assisted in the manifestation of God’s power extending into the world (Kramer, 2005: 101). In a similar manner, the use of different media at Hillsong’s women-centred teachings was an act of externalisation and extension of the spirit in a way that was both powerfully visible, yet also hidden. Creating an atmosphere that reflected a preconceived ideal of flourishing, positive women who emanated understandings of worth and purpose, Hillsongers believed that the Christian mission of dominion would be more effectively fulfilled and women would be transformed. As Pastor Lucinda said at the *Sisterhood* event on VAW, “we may just be everyday girls, but we’re a force to be reckoned with”. Indeed, women could “take territory” for Jesus and bring people into freedom (see Chapter 3). This freedom and self-transformation that the leaders in the church aimed for was a key ingredient in fighting against injustices, such as VAW, and bringing people to the faith.

### *Gifting Activism*

At the *Sisterhood* event on VAW, a young, dynamic woman came up on stage and asked the congregation to give monetary “gifts” to *Sisterhood Causes* in service of social justice. A slide flashed up behind her on the screen which had “generous *Sisterhood*” written on it. She proceeded to ask the congregation to read John 4:4-6 with her, a section of Biblical scripture which details a story about a Samaritan woman who Jesus visited whilst she was at a well. The woman then read Luke 11:42, which states “Woe to you Pharisees, because you give God a tenth of your mint, rue and all other kinds of garden herbs, but you neglect justice and the love of God. You should have practiced the latter without leaving the former undone”. She explained that Christians often gave to “the House of God” but neglected to “activate the love of God and people and bring social justice”, which she said, “is wrong”. The story of the Samaritan woman at the well, she said, illustrated the verse in Luke because Jesus restored justice between the Jews and the Samaritans when he visited the woman, which led to the love of God being “activated” in the woman, and then in the whole city in Samaria. The young preacher on stage concluded by stating that giving money to the church was about more than just funding the church’s activities, as it assisted God in “repulsing” the Devil through believers’ faith in His ability to do good with the monetary gift. She ended off with, “we are

activating a well of *Sisterhood* in our country where women can find social justice, healing, and refreshment. A movement of women is being activated from this well”.

As a “well” and a source of powerful prayer, Hillsong’s women-centred programmes and events not only accepted “gifts” to further their work, but also gave gifts to the women that attended the events. In Chapter 3, I described the “girliness” of the gifts that the church gave to women after each session and how these gifts served as mnemonic devices to underscore the lessons that were taught in each session. For example, in the first session, which looked at hands as a significant part of our bodies, we were given hand cream as a parting gift. The second session focussed on the uniqueness of faces, thus the facilitators gave out pocket mirrors, and the third session briefly looked at the uniqueness in the way we communicate with others, after which the participants received a lip balm. All of these gifts had the word *Shine* printed in pink on them. Similarly, at the *Sisterhood* events that I attended, the evening hosts, which were members of the student community at the church, gave women gifts such as nail polish or hair accessories, while everyone also received artistically-created booklets advertising the annual *Colour Conference* that Hillsong hosted in central Cape Town.

In his work on the “Charismatic gift”, Coleman (2004) provides some insight which can be used to understand the gift-giving practices at Hillsong. The Swedish Christians he studied used “gifting” as a method of externalising a part of themselves, which, Coleman (2004: 421) argued, helped them to extend their agency in the world beyond cultural and physical boundaries to covert others. Coleman argued that this form of Charismatic gifting involved “reaching out” into the world, allowing for connections between people and sacralised objects to take place, which in turn helped to create and maintain specific spiritual ideals and a certain sense of agency in this process. In addition to this, gifting was central to the formation of identity and commitment in the Swedish congregation, as it allowed for the missionizing of the unsaved as well as benefitting the saved (Ibid.: 434). Ekman, the founder of the church, claimed that “just as you enjoy giving gifts to others, so God enjoys giving to you. God is a cheerful giver” (Coleman 2004: 434). Coleman (2004: 435) described this joyfulness in giving as “manifestations of the donor’s optimism and are thus a form of embodied ‘positive confession’ which is mimetic of God’s own assumed state”. He then argued that giving gifts, be it money or sacralised words (such as taped sermons, web pages, and magazine articles) in the Swedish church, “are believed to contain the divine, generic power that has been stored in the spirit, encouraging the person to think of the most sacred part of themselves as becoming

abstracted, removed from any confining social content and inserted into a world of limitless possibility” (Coleman, 2004: 436).

The Swedish church’s understanding of gift giving as a method of converting others is partially reflected in the ways that the Hillsongers in my study gave and received gifts. The way that the *Shine* facilitators and the hosts at *Sisterhood* events gave gifts as a means of congratulating the participating women echoes the joyful and optimistic giving that Coleman’s Swedish Charismatics (2004) tried to enact. The women who received the gifts also acted in a joyful manner, be it in thanking the *Shine* facilitators, or in voluntarily partaking in the singing or dancing competitions at the *Sisterhood* events. Moreover, the speech that the young woman gave in the *Sisterhood* event about the need for giving money to the ministry’s social justice causes highlighted the divine power and limitless possibility that financial giving could create. This young woman was calling on the women in the congregation to use their agency to “activate a well” of God’s love in multiple, probably unknown, others, like in the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman, through gifts of money to the church. The *Sisterhood* motto of “taking territory” was reflected in this moment at the event, as the woman saw the giving of money as an act of positive confession that breaks barriers of fear and doubt, and supposedly would help in the activation of a movement in which “women can find social justice, healing, and refreshment”. Giving money to the church, in this specific sense, would open up possibilities for God and His spiritual realm to change the social order and fight against VAW. Giving away a “sacred part” of oneself, such as money, was an externalisation of the inner, spiritual self, as well as an active proclamation of the power of God over the Earth and its people and His “limitless possibility” to bring about justice.

### Confessions and Spiritual Agency

Engaging with the world in the ways described in this chapter were key to how these Hillsongers envisaged their activism. These Christians used their words and physical space to engage with the transcendental power of God and His ability to transform the nation as well as the women within it. Speaking, singing, and praying with certainty and vigour were necessary in order to mobilise this group of women to believe in their collective ability to affect change. Actualising these positive confessions in the spaces where they met worked as both inspiration for the women, but also positive action.

The ways in which these Hillsongers understood both their and God’s role in this process of world-changing, gave me interesting insight into the role of spiritual agency in the

church's social activism. Indeed, the relationship between activism and agency in this context was very different from that found in secular activist circles where activists engaged through wilful, individualised actions with the institutional and political structures in the world in an effort to change it. At Hillsong, activism against VAW consisted almost entirely of talk which was directed at women to change internally and externally (see Chapter 3), at the world to transform its "negativity" and at God to break in on the material world and radically alter it (see Chapter 2). In many contexts where the church wilfully engaged with VAW, as in its *Sisterhood* events and the *WAR* campaigns at schools, it seemed to relinquish its agency and the agency of its activists to God in an "already/not yet" world (see Chapter 2). For instance, when Zack spoke about the efficacy of their *WAR* campaign, he did not speak about social welfare interventions or repeated follow-up visits, but hoped that God would minister to the students through the youth leaders. Zack seemed to imply a kind of diminished free will in moments of activism; a relinquishing of control to God through belief and trust in Him and His power to affect change. Zack's views mirrored those of the female pastors at *Sisterhood*, Julie from *Shine*, and the other *WAR* campaigners, who all hoped that their words would stir God into action.

In comparing the relationship between belief, causation, and personal agency in two religious communities in Thailand, one Buddhist and one Christian, Cassaniti (2012: 304) defined agency in terms of "the source of causation". In the Christian community, "belief serve[d] to mediate the agency of the self with the agency of what [wa]s conceived of as an acting, cosmologically external Other". In this community, "God's will", which could be swayed through prayer, was the central mechanism which mediated moments of cause and effect (Cassanti, 2012: 308-309). As such, individual agency was enacted *through* the engagement with this external Other, and belief acted as the mediational component in this process (Ibid.: 309). Interestingly, although this agency was described as emanating from God, the believer, through their own personal agency, harnessed this power, and appropriated it "by becoming involved in a relationship with it based on, or mediated through, belief"; thus the believer's agency was predicated on the interaction with and belief in a more powerful, external agent (Ibid.: 311).

Cassaniti's work provides an interesting lens through which Zack's comment about the *WAR* campaign, as well as the VAW activism at Hillsong could be viewed. The way in which almost all of the Hillsongers spoke about their activism tied in with the above implicit

understanding of the interrelation between God's agency and the believer's personal agency. As highlighted by the Hillsongers mentioned in this chapter, the belief in God's abilities was quintessential to the ways in which Hillsongers envisioned their activism on the world. In their view, because belief had the performative power to invoke the spiritual realm and, therefore, increase the effectiveness of their activism, any fight against VAW should centrally be about strengthening one's faith and "stirring" God into action. The Hillsongers in my study defined their activism, their agency, as tied up with God's own agency; a kind of activism that is very different to that often found in more secular contexts.

## Chapter 5: Concluding Remarks

This study sought to gain insight into how, at a South African iteration of the international Hillsong Church, women-centred development and violence against women (VAW)-justice programmes, as well as those Christians involved in them, understood gender-focussed activism. In a country with both high levels of VAW and Christian religious affiliation, I was interested in understanding how these Christians navigated their identities and roles as “world changers” through their faith. Throughout my study, I found that the activism that the Hillsongers took part in had an overtly spiritual foundation which directed their perceptions of what women’s empowerment and VAW activism meant. Their activism relied on God to affect change, but they also believed that they had a role to play in the way that they conducted themselves and related both to the world and the spiritual realm.

In the first instance, the Hillsongers in my study traced the origins of VAW to a “fallen” world where evil spiritual forces caused suffering. The fact that people experienced social and emotional battles in the world was a sign to the lead female pastor of Hillsong Church South Africa that the “end times” were near. As such, she and other leaders at the church asserted that Hillsong had an important part to play in the process of healing this broken world, and ultimately to bring God’s Kingdom down to Earth. Establishing God’s Kingdom meant that the Devil would be overcome, and all suffering, poverty, and VAW would come to an end. The church hoped to bring this about through its women-centred activism in its *Sisterhood* events, through its *Shine* courses and through its *WAR* (War Against Rape) campaigns. One of the key ingredients in this activism was the envisaged was the internal and external transformation of the women that participated in these events and courses (see Chapter 3). This transformation was important in shaping Hillsongers to partake in the spiritual “warfare” against evil forces. Of particular importance in this regard was the need for women to strengthen their Christian hearts through confidence, hope, as well as a strong faith in God’s ability to combat the problems of the world (see Chapters 2 and 3). This strengthening would lead to spiritual healing and ultimately shift the spiritual realm in God’s favour.

The *Shine* facilitators, as well as the *WAR* campaigners, focussed on resilience, a sense of power, worth, and purpose in times of trouble, as further important Christian traits. Women and young people had to make conscious internal decisions to move beyond personal suffering, in a way that relied on God to affect change. In this way, they could reach out into the world,

influence and inspire others to convert to their faith, and become healed in the process. These transformed Hillsongers relied on their evangelism and how others “received” their activism efforts as a sign that God’s spiritual dominion, and thus prosperity, were taking place. However, this ideal of the “in-breaking” of the spiritual realm into the mundane world was sometimes not fully realised (see Chapter 2).

The ways in which Hillsong envisaged their activism against VAW more broadly translated into very particular understandings of gendered roles for men and women. *Sisterhood* events and *Shine* sessions based their teachings around uplifting and encouraging women; building self-esteem, self-efficacy, and self-worth. In order to achieve these aims, the church leaders utilised narrow definitions of femininity based on ideals of external beauty and consumerism that, on the surface, reflected postfeminist discourses. The leaders used a kind of “princess theology”, a capitalist version of feminine beauty, as an externalised and tangible method for empowering women. However, they also coupled this fixation on external markers of beauty with an emphasis on internal spiritual transformation. Hillsong’s women-centred development programmes focussed on the development of the Christian woman subject through leading women towards a revelation about their abilities to fulfil God’s calling and role for their lives in overcoming the sinful world. In Hillsong’s development programmes, women thus learnt to orient themselves to become resilient, hopeful, and to have self-control in order to alter the ways in which they related to a world which has often been unkind and violent towards them. The goal of these programmes was to build women who were internally strong and could “fight” the spiritual causes of violence and destruction. This focus went beyond conventional understandings of postfeminism. In this framing, women who focussed on the need for healthy and beautiful bodies were able to reclaim “womanhood” and individual uniqueness for Christian purposes, specifically for changing the world to become more Christian. Towards this end, the Hillsong leaders highlighted the importance of self-surveillance, monitoring, and self-discipline as a method for stewarding God’s gift of the body in order to fulfil their specific, Godly purpose (see Chapter 3).

In Hillsong, a proper steward was a muscular woman fighter who represented a kind of militaristic spiritual warrior. This was also reflected in the way that the church viewed the role of men in activism against VAW. In both the *Sisterhood* events and the *WAR* campaign, Hillsong leaders were aware of the destructive forces of a certain kind of tough machismo, but continued to support gender binaries in which men had to protect women. The role that both

men and women played in the church's VAW activism involved a combination of developing masculine ideals of strength and power in both sexes, while at the same time developing strict Pauline notions of gender that saw differing roles for men and women (see Chapter 3). Pastors Lucinda and Tes, specifically, aimed to channel gender ideals in order to "fight", "take territory", and "change the nation" with regards to VAW. These pastors perceived the role of both women and men in the eradication of VAW as one of assisting God in achieving dominion over the Earth, most notably through fostering a close relationship with God and an unwavering belief in His spiritual power.

Underlying all of Hillsong's work on the world was a deep-seated belief in the tangible impact of positive confessions on the world. The leaders in all three of the women-centred programmes and teachings consistently honed in on the need for hope and positivity to be reflected in the words that they spoke, sang, and prayed, as well as in the physical space that they occupied. Through using their words in a very specific manner, the leaders believed that people's hearts and God's actions would be transformed. "Saying the world right" was one of the most important ways in which these Christians understood the effect of their activism around VAW, as they strongly believed that this action would assist in the in-breaking of God's transcendental power to affect change in the world. To these Hillsongers, both worshipping and praying to God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit were powerful manifestations of this belief. Confessing in these ways thus assisted in causing a rupture of the current social order through an awakening of the Holy Spirit to help them to take on the task of bringing God's Kingdom down to Earth. As my interlocutors believed, God had a powerful ability to act as they prayed and worshipped. To Hillsongers, trusting that God would act played an important role in their mission of healing the world, and the women within it, for God (see Chapter 4).

Hillsong leaders believed that naming an evil and taking a verbal stand against it would spiritually assist God in rooting out this evil. Thus, going out into the world and voicing their beliefs and opinions about VAW in the *WAR* campaigns encompassed a much deeper spiritualised goal than just creating awareness did in a secular context. In the same way, the youth leaders "called" prosperity onto the students' life circumstances by highlighting their worth and purpose. In this way, Hillsongers believed that they could, along with God, gain full victory over the sin and suffering that the Devil has caused on Earth, and specifically VAW (see Chapter 4).

Speaking positively about the potential of the community of “girls” at Hillsong was also a necessary facet of using positive confessions as a form of activism against VAW. The female leaders at Hillsong employed a materialisation and revelation of their collective potential to conquer the world through words. The idea of “honouring every girl”, building each other’s self-esteem through speaking positively about other women and their lives, being inspired by women rather than comparing oneself to others, amongst other things, were all methods for achieving social connection and therefore increased collective mobilisation towards a healed and Christian world. In this way, the women at Hillsong could have a thriving and active stance on the world, rather than a passive one.

Hillsongers displayed a similar atmosphere of victory over the evil that manifests in the world through their physical space. Creating a “positive environment” through venue décor and programme paraphernalia meant to the leaders that women could more easily tap into their hidden potential. Women could then translate this potential into visible spiritual power, and in turn use it to overcome and alter their realities. Summoning divine power through creating a celebratory physical space meant that these women would be able to realise their individual prosperity, and in turn extend God’s dominion further into the world. In addition, these Hillsongers used the exchange of material gifts in a similar manner in order to “activate social justice” within the church and out in the world. I used Coleman’s work (2004) on the Charismatic gift to interpret this form of “gifting”, and argued that these women believed they were reaching out and connecting through sacralised objects that acted both as inspiration and positive action for women. These Christians believed that they were remaking the world through externalising and extending their agency as transformed beings into the spiritual realm, with the goal of converting others (see Chapter 4).

An interesting and noteworthy paradox emerged throughout this study with regards to the complex relationship between the agency of the individual and the agency of the transcendent. On the one hand, Hillsongers believed in a responsibility to transform the individual self as a method of activism on the world, and on the other hand they believed in the necessity for leaving ultimate change up to the in-breaking of God and His spiritual realm into the world of the mundane. This in-breaking was thus both unanticipated and something that these Christians could work towards. The agency and activism of Hillsongers interacted with God’s agency in a way that was very specifically religious; belief in, and a relationship with, God and his power, as well as a receptivity to the prompting of the Holy Spirit, gave existence

to Christian personal agency and activism. This cycle between belief, causation, and personal agency allowed believers to harness God's power in order to act on and conquer the world in a way that was very different to secular activism. In this way, the focus of Hillsong's work did not focus on being politically active in changing the *status quo*, as they relinquished ultimate control over the world to a higher transcendent power.

The enormous shift in global Christianity to Pentecostal-Charismatic churches (PCCs) has sparked renewed interest in academia (Anderson & Pillay, 1997; Corten & Marshall-Fratani, 2001; Robbins, 2004), especially with regards to the ways in which this faith teaches its adherents to remake themselves as new kinds of individuals in the world (Meyer, 1998; Mate, 2002). In a country where VAW is at high levels, some South African Hillsongers have utilised their faith to join the global discourses and movements against the suppression of and violence against women. The Hillsongers in my study focussed their women-centred development and VAW-justice programmes on harnessing, what was to them, a very real and effective spiritual power in ways that allowed them to act on the world in specifically Christian manner (see Haynes, 2015). Although Pentecostal-Charismatic (PC) Christianity is often viewed as restrictive in terms of patriarchal power (Hauge, 1996; Robbins, 2004), this South African church created powerful, complex and interrelated gendered, religious, and activist identities. This study highlights the value of a phenomenological approach to the understandings of gender-related activism in a Christian context. In trying to understanding the meaning of activism in a Christian setting that has often been critiqued as being patriarchal or in support of patriarchal structures, I hope to expand the conversation about VAW activism between both religious and non-religious groups so that both forms of activism can exist as different ways in which differently-situated women react to VAW.

## Reference List

- Anderson, A. 2005. New African initiated pentecostalism and charismatics in South Africa. *Journal of Religion in Africa*. 35(1):66–92.
- Anderson, A. & Pillay, G.J. 1997. The Segregated Spirit: The Pentecostals. In R. Elphick & R. Davenport (eds.). Cape Town: David Phillip *Christianity in South Africa: A political, cultural, and social history*.
- Avishai, O. 2008. “Doing Religion” In a Secular World. *Gender & Society*. 22(4):409–433.
- . 2016. Theorizing Gender from Religion Cases: Agency, Feminist Activism, and Masculinity. *Sociology of Religion: A Quarterly Review*. 77(3):261–279.
- Bialecki, J. 2009. Disjuncture, Continental philosophy’s new “political Paul”, and the question of progressive Christianity in a Southern California Third Wave church. *American Ethnologist*. 36(1):110–1123.
- Bialecki, J., Haynes, N. & Robbins, J. 2008. The Anthropology of Christianity. *Religion Compass*. 2(6):1139–1158.
- Burchardt, M. 2013. “We are saving the township”: Pentecostalism, faith-based organisations, and development in South Africa. *Journal of Modern African Studies*. 51(4):627–651.
- Cassaniti, J. 2012. Agency and the Other: The Role of Agency for the Importance of Belief in Buddhist and Christian Traditions. *Ethos*. 40(3):297–316.
- Castelli, E. 2007. Theologizing Human Rights: Christian Activism and the Limits of Religious Freedom. In *Non-governmental politics*. 673–688.
- Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation. 2016. Gender-Based Violence (GBV) in South Africa: A Brief Review. (April). [Online], Available: [http://www.csvr.org.za/pdf/Evidence based strategies for the prevention of gender-based violence in South Africa A case study of CSVr.pdf](http://www.csvr.org.za/pdf/Evidence%20based%20strategies%20for%20the%20prevention%20of%20gender-based%20violence%20in%20South%20Africa%20A%20case%20study%20of%20CSVr.pdf).
- Coleman, S. 2003. Continuous Conversion? The Rhetoric, Practice, and Rhetoric Practice of Charismatic Protestant Conversion. In A. Buckser & S. Glazier (eds.). Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers *The Anthropology of Religious Conversion*. 15-28.

- , 2004. The Charismatic Gift. *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*. 10(2):421–442.
- Connell, J. 2005. Hillsong: A Megachurch in the Sydney Suburbs. *Australian Geographer*. 36(3):315–332.
- Corten, A. & Marshall-Fratani, R. 2001. *Between Babel and Pentecost: Transnational Pentecostalism in Africa and Latin America*. A. Corten & R. Marshall-Fratani (eds.). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Delany, B. 2005. With song in their hearts. *Sydney Morning Herald*. 13.
- van Dijk, R.A. 2000. *Christian Fundamentalism in Sub-Saharan Africa*. Copenhagen: University of Copenhagen, Centre of African Studies.
- Elbourne, E. & Ross, R. 1997. Combating Spiritual and Social Bondage: Early Missions in the Cape Colony. In R. Elphick & R. Davenport (eds.). Berkeley: University of California Press *Christianity in South Africa: A Political, Social, and Cultural History*. 33.
- Frahm-Arp, M. 2010. Pentecostal Charismatic Christianity and the Making of Female Managers. 47–53.
- , 2015. Surveillance and Violence against Women in Grace Bible Church and the Zionist Christian Church. *Journal of Religion and Gender*. 21(1):1–13.
- Fraser, M. 2003. A Feminist Theoethical Analysis of White Pentecostal Australian Women and Marital Abuse. *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*. 19(2):145–167.
- Freeman, D. 2012. The Pentecostal Ethic and the Spirit of Development. In D. Freeman (ed.). London: Palgrave Macmillan *Pentecostalism and Development: Churches, NGOs and Social Change in Africa*. 1–38.
- Gill, R. 2007. Postfeminist media culture: Elements of a sensibility. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*. 10(2):147–166.
- Hauge, A. 1996. Feminist Theology as Critique and Renewal of Theology. In A. Thatcher & E. Stuart (eds.). Gracewing *Christian Perspectives on Sexuality and Gender*. 56–67.
- Haynes, N. 2015. “Zambia Shall be Saved!”: Prosperity Gospel Politics in a Self-Proclaimed

- Christian Nation. *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*. 19(1):5–24.
- , 2020. The Expansive Present: A New Model of Christian Time. *Current Anthropology*. 61(1):57–76.
- Hillsong Africa. 2020. WAR. [Online], Available: <https://hillsongafrica.co.za/WAR-2/> [2020, August 30].
- Hillsong Africa Foundation. 2020. *HAF: About Us*. [Online], Available: <https://hillsongafrica.co.za/about-us/> [2020, August 30].
- Hillsong Church. 2020. *Hillsong Colour Conference 2021*. [Online], Available: <https://hillsong.com/colour/> [2020, August 17].
- Hillsong Church South Africa. 2020a. *Sisterhood Causes*. [Online], Available: <https://hillsong.com/southafrica/Sisterhood/causes/> [2020, June 19].
- , 2020b. *Sisterhood South Africa*. [Online], Available: <https://hillsong.com/southafrica/Sisterhood/> [2020, August 14].
- Hillsong Colour. 2020. *We are Sisterhood*. [Online], Available: <https://hillsong.com/colour/Sisterhood/> [2020, October 08].
- Hillsong Shine and Strength. 2020 *What's the difference between the Shine Girl and Shine Women programs?*. [Online], Available: <https://hillsong.zendesk.com/hc/en-us/articles/203738200-What-s-the-difference-between-the-Shine-Girl-and-Shine-Women-programs-> [2020, November 1].
- Houston, B. 2020. *An OPEN Letter to Hillsong Church*. [Online], Available: <https://hillsong.com/collected/blog/2020/06/an-open-letter-to-hillsong-church/#.X38P61LitPY> [2020, October 08].
- Houston, R.L. 2016. *The Sisterhood: How the Power of the Feminine Heart Can Become a Catalyst for Change and Make the World a Better Place*. Sydney: HarperCollins.
- Jenkins, K.E. & Martí, G. 2012. Warrior Chicks: Youthful Aging in a Postfeminist Prosperity Discourse. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*. 51(2):241–256.

- Kakwata, F. 2017. The progressive Pentecostal conception of development within an African context of poverty. *Stellenbosch Theological Journal*. 3(1):159–183.
- Kramer, E.W. 2002. Making global faith universal: Media and a Brazilian prosperity movement. *Culture and Religion*. 3(1):21–47.
- , 2005. Spectacle and the staging of power in Brazilian neo-pentecostalism. *Latin American Perspectives*. 32(1):95–120.
- Lottering, L. 2016. *Hillsong Church now in S'bosch*. [Online], Available: <https://www.netwerk24.com/ZA/Eikestadnuus/Nuus/hillsong-church-now-in-sbosch-20160518-2>.
- Maddox, M. 2013a. Prosper, consume and be saved. *Critical Research on Religion*. 1(1):108–115.
- , 2013b. “Rise up Warrior Princess Daughters”: Is Evangelical Women’s Submission a Mere Fairy Tale? *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*. 29(1):9–26.
- Mahmood, S. 2019. *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton University Press.
- Martí, G. 2017. The Global Phenomenon of Hillsong Church: An Initial Assessment. *Sociology of Religion: A Quarterly Review*. 78(4):377–386.
- Martin, B. 1998. From Pre- to Postmodernity in Latin America: The Case of Pentecostalism. In P. Heelas, D. Martin, & P. Morris (eds.). Oxford: Blackwell Publishing *Religion, Modernity and Postmodernity*. 102–146.
- , 2003. The Pentecostal Gender Paradox: A Cautionary Tale for the Sociology of Religion. In R. Fenn, K. (ed.). Blackwell Publishing *The Blackwell Companion to Sociology of Religion*. 52–66. [Online], Available: [http://www.ghbook.ir/index.php?name=فرهنگ و رسانه‌های نوین&option=com\\_dbook&task=readonline&book\\_id=13650&page=73&chkhask=ED9C9491B4&Itemid=218&lang=fa&tmpl=component](http://www.ghbook.ir/index.php?name=فرهنگ و رسانه‌های نوین&option=com_dbook&task=readonline&book_id=13650&page=73&chkhask=ED9C9491B4&Itemid=218&lang=fa&tmpl=component).
- Mate, R. 2002. Wombs as God’s Laboratories : Pentecostal Discourses of Femininity in Zimbabwe. *Africa*. 72(4):549–568.

- Maxwell, D. 2005. The Durawall of Faith : Pentecostal Spirituality in Neo-Liberal Zimbabwe. *Journal of Religion and Society*. 35:4–32.
- Meyer, B. 1998. “Make a Complete Break with the Past.” Memory and Post-Colonial Modernity in Ghanaian Pentecostalist Discourse. *Journal of Religion in Africa*. 28(3):316–349.
- , 2004. Christianity in Africa: From African Independent to Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches. *Annual Review of Anthropology*. 33(1):447–474.
- Miller, E. 2016. Women in Australian Pentecostalism: Leadership, Submission, and Feminism in Hillsong Church. *Journal for the Academic Study of Religion*. 29(1):52–76.
- Miller, D.E. & Yamamori, T. 2007. *Global Pentecostalism: the New Face of Christian Social Engagement*. 1–14.
- Milton, G. 2020. Salvation: Participating in the story where earth and heaven meet. In W. Vondey (ed.). *Routledge The Routledge Handbook of Pentecostal Theology*.
- Myers, B.L. 2015. Progressive Pentecostalism, Development, and Christian Development NGOs: A Challenge and an Opportunity. *International Bulletin of Mission Research*. 39(3):115–120.
- Nowell, L.S., Norris, J.M., White, D.E. & Moules, N.J. 2017. Thematic Analysis : Striving to Meet the Trustworthiness Criteria. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*. 16:1–13.
- Ojo, M.A. 1997. Sexuality, Marriage and Piety among Charismatics in Nigeria. *Religion*. 27(1):65–79.
- Oro, A.P. & Semán, P. 2000. Pentecostalism in the Southern Cone Countries. *International Sociology*. 15(4):605–627.
- Pfeiffer, J. 2004. Civil Society, NGOs, and the Holy Spirit in Mozambique. *Human Organization*. 63(3):359–372.
- Power, R. 2004. The Rise and Rise of the Pentecostals. *Arena Magazine*. 27–30.
- Riches, T. 2017. The Sisterhood: Hillsong in a Feminine Key. In T. Riches & T. Wagner (eds.).

- Camperdown, Australia: Palgrave Macmillan, Cham *The Hillsong Movement Examined. Christianity and Renewal - Interdisciplinary Studies*. 85–105.
- Riesebrodt, M. & Chong, K.H. 1999. Fundamentalisms and Patriarchal Gender Politics. *Journal of Women's History*. 10(4).
- Robbins, J. 2004. The Globalization of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity. *Annual Review of Anthropology*. 33(1):117–143.
- , 2012. Transcendence and the Anthropology of Christianity: Language, Change, and Individualism. *The Finnish Anthropological Society*. 37(2):5–23. [Online], Available: <http://scholar.google.com/scholar?hl=en&btnG=Search&q=intitle:Transcendence+and+the+anthropology+of+christianity#0>.
- Scheper-Hughes, N. 1995. The Primacy of the Ethical: Propositions for a Militant Anthropology. *Current Anthropology*. 36(3):409–440.
- Schutz, A. 1972. *The Phenomenology of the Social World*. Illinois: Northwestern University Press.
- Shine, 2020. *ShineWomen*. Cape Town: Hillsong Africa Foundation.
- Smilde, D.A. 1997. The fundamental unity of the conservative and revolutionary tendencies in Venezuelan evangelicalism: The case of conjugal relations. *Religion*. 27(4):343–359.
- Spry, N. & Marchant, T. 2014. How a personal development program enhances social connection and mobilises women in the community. *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*. 54(2):32–53.
- Stacey, J. & Gerard, S.E. 1990. “We Are Not Doormats”: The Influence of Feminism on Contemporary Evangelicals in the United States. In F. Ginsburg & A. Lowenhaupt Tsing (eds.). Boston: Beacon Press *Uncertain Terms: Negotiating Gender in American Culture*. 98–117.
- Togarasei, L. 2011. The Pentecostal Gospel of Prosperity in African Contexts of Poverty: An Appraisal. *Exchange*. 40:336–350.
- Wade, M. & Hynes, M. 2013. Worshipping Bodies: Affective Labour in the Hillsong Church.

*Geographical Research*. 51(2):173–179.

van Wyk, I. 2014. *The Universal Church of the Kingdom of God in South Africa: A Church of Strangers*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Zalanga, S. 2010. Religion, Economic Development and Cultural Change: the Contradictory Role of Pentecostal Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa. *Journal of Third World Studies*. 27(1):43–62.

# Appendix A: Consent Form



UNIVERSITEIT • STELLENBOSCH • UNIVERSITY  
jou kennisvenoot • your knowledge partner

## STELLENBOSCH UNIVERSITY

### CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

---

My name is Danya Marx and I am a Sociology Masters student at Stellenbosch University, and I would like to invite you to participate in a research project entitled *Violence Against Women and Gender-Based Activism in a Pentecostal-Charismatic Church in Stellenbosch*.

Please take some time to read the information presented here, which will explain the details of this project and contact me if you require further explanation or clarification of any aspect of the study. Also, your participation is **entirely voluntary** and should you choose to participate in the study, you may choose not to answer certain questions and still remain in the study. You are free to withdraw from the study at any point. However, should you decide to withdraw, I will ask you whether I can continue using the data from your conversation, but completely anonymised.

As indicated in the project title, I am interested in learning about your women's development programmes and how and why you work in the area of violence against women justice. I am particularly interested in the ways that you define your role in gender justice, particularly VAW justice, through your faith.

I am looking to do participant observation and interaction with people involved in the women's and youth ministry programmes associated with *Hillsong Stellenbosch*. In the conversations I will ask you questions about your attitudes, beliefs, and experiences in terms of your involvement in relevant programmes.

I would like to use a voice recorder in the conversations, group discussions, and observations in order to help with the accurate writing-up of the data. If you prefer to communicate in Afrikaans, you are welcome to communicate in Afrikaans as I can speak and understand it fully.

Your information as a participant will remain completely confidential, and I will use pseudonyms throughout to ensure privacy. I will also make sure that your details and the transcripts of observations and conversations will not be accessible to anyone except myself and my supervisor. The transcripts and any additional data, including these consent forms, will be stored on my laptop in a password protected folder. You are also welcome to ask for copies of the transcripts. Although it is not planned, the results from this study and the overall Master's thesis could be used in future publications.

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact.....

Me (Danya Marx), on +27 16 135 196, or [19136331@sun.ac.za](mailto:19136331@sun.ac.za)

My supervisor (Dr. Ilana van Wyk), on +27 21 808 2098, or [ilanavw@sun.ac.za](mailto:ilanavw@sun.ac.za)

**RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS:** You may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this research study. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, contact Ms Maléne Fouché [[mfouche@sun.ac.za](mailto:mfouche@sun.ac.za); 021 808 4622] at the Division for Research Development.

You have right to receive a copy of the Information and Consent form.

**If you are willing to participate in this study please sign the attached Declaration of Consent and hand it back to me, the investigator, at our next meeting.**

### DECLARATION BY PARTICIPANT

By signing below, I ..... agree to take part in a research study entitled: *Violence Against Women and Gender-Based Activism in a Pentecostal-Charismatic Church in Stellenbosch* conducted by Danya Marx

I declare that:

- I have read the attached information leaflet and it is written in a language with which I am fluent and comfortable.
- I have had a chance to ask questions and all my questions have been adequately answered.
- I understand that taking part in this study is **voluntary** and I have not been pressurised to take part.
- I may choose to leave the study at any time.
- All issues related to privacy and the confidentiality and use of the information I provide have been explained to my satisfaction.

Signed on .....

.....

**Signature of participant**

**SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR**

I declare that I explained the information given in this document to \_\_\_\_\_  
[*name of the participant*]. She was encouraged and given ample time to ask me any questions. This conversation was conducted in [*Afrikaans/English*].

\_\_\_\_\_ (Signature) \_\_\_\_\_ (Date)

## Appendix B: *WAR* Campaign Conversation Guide

- When and why did you join Hillsong Church?
- When and why did you join this as a Youth leader and also this *WAR* campaign?
- What kind of work do you do around activism against VAW?
- What impact has the work, and experiences of, this programme had on violence and gender relationships?
- What impact has the work of this programme had on your life?

## Appendix C: HS *Shine* Quotes



