

# Rock the Boat!

An exploration of non-transparency  
of positions on gender roles in C of E  
churches

A Report for Women and the Church

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# Acknowledgements

A huge thank you to all our participants who shared so openly, and we hope we have done justice to their stories.

Thank you to WATCH for the opportunity to undertake this project, which has revealed vital information about women's faith lives.

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## Executive Summary

This project was commissioned by Women and the Church (WATCH) in response to concerns around the transparency of churches and church leaders holding theological positions that exclude women from certain forms of ministry. WATCH has for some time called for scrutiny of the levels of transparency in church communications and argued that it is unethical for people not to be given full knowledge of the beliefs held by the leadership that impact on women's ministries in the churches where they worship. In this report, we focus on lay women's experience of churches where there is a lack of transparency. The project involved three stages: a comprehensive survey of websites and online presence of churches listed as being under alternative episcopal oversight; a questionnaire seeking examples of how a lack of transparency in churches is experienced; interviews with people who have told their stories in more detail.

Overall, our findings show that there is a significant issue around how churches make it known they hold theological views that limit women's lay ministry and oppose women's ordained ministry. We evidence this through our survey of websites. The impact of the lack of transparency is evidenced in the detailed stories shared with us. Additionally, we argue there are churches who are not visible in this discussion because they do not have resolutions (voted on by PCCs) but nevertheless have theological environments that limit women's ministry. Below are recommendations arising from the information collected across the three stages of the research project and are aimed at WATCH as a campaigning organisation, individual churches that seek to improve their messaging, and the national Church where there are policy implications. These recommendations should be taken as ways to ameliorate the impact on lay women and their supporters and not as a way of making the current arrangements (established by the Act of Synod in 1992 and developed in the Five Guiding Principles<sup>1</sup>) more palatable or more acceptable. WATCH is seeking 'a generous way to bring the Declaration and its arrangements to an end' and this report sits within the context of that aim. Indeed, that we evidence some of the damaging consequences of the current arrangements strengthens the argument that the Church should find a way of dissolving the structure that differentiate between men's and women's ministries.

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<sup>1</sup> The study resource on the Five Guiding Principles can be found here:  
<https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2018-02/5-guiding-principles.pdf>

## Website survey summary

We found that traditionalist Anglo-Catholic churches with resolutions voted on by the PCC to seek alternative episcopal oversight are more likely to include prominent information about theological positioning, but this is almost always couched in specialist language and signalled by association with Forward in Faith or The Society of St. Wilfrid and St. Hilda, without explanation about the implications of such association. Conservative evangelical churches listed as being under the oversight of the Bishop of Ebbsfleet are less likely to have this information on their website or online presence, but those that do often use the suggested wording from the Maidstone Commitments (a document responding to criticisms about culture in some churches). We found some examples of good practice from churches in both traditions but over half the websites surveyed gave no information about their position on women's ministry. Our overall conclusion is that significant work is required to ensure all churches communicate their approach to women's ministry with clarity on their websites or other online presence. The details of this survey are in Part One of this report.

## Questionnaire summary

Our questionnaire aimed to reach a cohort of people who, without full knowledge, had worshipped in a church with an active complementarian theology or with a resolution that allowed the avoidance of the ordained ministry of women. The numbers are modest, but nevertheless underline the issues around transparency; 74% of respondents either did not know of their church's position initially or were unsure and over half did not know whether their church had a resolution in place or not. The comments offered suggest for many people there is a gradual realisation that their church leadership have gendered views on lay and/or ordained ministry, by, for example, noticing the absence of women in leadership roles or through personal enquiry. 57% said they had left a church because of positions on women's lay and ordained ministry.

## The Interviews summary

To bring more detail into the discussion, we interviewed 15 people (mainly women) who offered their experiences in churches with theological views on gender and ministry. We have drawn out several themes: how the participants selected their church and how they learned about the theological position; the ways discussion was stymied; gendered praxis and language and how these limit women's ministries; and the ways individuals are harmed by these experiences. We also discuss the resistances and the positive relationship with the Church some participants have maintained, though

many describe being disillusioned and alienated from the Church. We suggest this part of the report is highly significant because it reveals how theological positions and praxis have significant ramifications for people's lives and faith and cannot be limited to abstract or intellectual discussions. This places transparency into a context of real experience and our overall argument is that non-transparency about views on gender and ministry is a matter of ethical practice and the avoidance of harm.

## Recommendations

Whilst we have made recommendations based on the research findings, we want to emphasise at the outset that these should be taken as measures to ameliorate the impact of an unsatisfactory structural and cultural situation in the Church of England. We have explored some of the scale and impact of non-transparency in matters of gender and ministry, but we do not wish this report or the recommendations to be read as an acceptance of the status quo or as a matter of adjusting practices to make the differentiation of women's and men's ministries more likely to remain a permanent practice. Here, we amplify the voices of our participants in this project who do not wish to contribute to a sense of permanency of the current structural and cultural context that result in women being diverted from their calling to particular ministries.

Notwithstanding the above caveat, throughout this report we discuss recommendations for WATCH in its campaigning, for senior decision-makers in the Church of England and for individual churches. We present them here in those categories for clarity.

### Recommendations for WATCH activities

- That WATCH highlight, particularly to the Bishop of Ebbsfleet, that parish messaging, even on websites with clarity about women's ordained ministry, often lacks detail about the status of **lay women's ministry** and that this should be included in statements.
- That WATCH publishes and publicises a list of phrases and words that should a) be avoided and b) be employed when parishes are signalling their position on literature and websites.
- That WATCH continues its work supporting a reinvigoration of the theological education of lay people with regard to gender and ministry to equip all lay people to make choices about their place of worship and to make informed decisions about resolutions and about women's roles in church.
- Given the partnership with Student Christian Movement, there is scope to discuss with university chaplains and campus groups such as Christian Unions how they identify and signpost churches responsibly and transparently.

## Recommendations for Church of England decision-makers

- That all bishops providing alternative episcopal oversight undertake a review of their parishes' communication strategies regarding positions on women's ministry.
- That the Bishop of Ebbsfleet revisits the wording of the Maidstone Commitments to include description of positions on both ordained and lay ministry of women.
- That the Church provides guidance on wording for parish websites and literature that avoids shorthand and coded language and explains the basis for, and meaning of, phrasing relating to alternative episcopal oversight.
- That the Church undertakes a regular audit of websites to identify poor communication regarding positions formally held on women's lay and ordained ministry and that parishes be held accountable for practices that obscure this information.
- That the Church collates information about parish churches and their resolution status on a national database that is publicly accessible.
- That the Church commissions further research to establish the extent to which gender differentiation in ministry is routinely applied at parish level *beyond* those parishes that seek alternative episcopal oversight. That the Church gives a strong lead by requiring disclosure of membership of organisations that promote theologies of ministries that are differentiated according to gender. This disclosure should apply to clergy and others seeking leadership such as Synodical candidates.
- That a website (such as *A Church Near You*) be designed and maintained by the national Church as a method of presenting individual parish positions on women's ministry (including those who welcome women in ordained and lay leadership positions) to ensure easy public access to such information.
- That further research is commissioned to determine the levels and frequency of consultation undertaken in relation to resolutions that seek alternative episcopal oversight and restrict ordained ministry to men.
- That further research is commissioned to understand the barriers to transparency, whether and why there is a deeper reluctance to openly discuss and advertise positions on gender and ministry amongst some church leaders.
- That work be done by the Church on guidance and process to ensure parishes seeking alternative episcopal oversight undertake wide and open consultation that allows all church



members to fully understand the nature of the proposed resolution and the theological reasons supporting it.

### Recommendations for individual churches

- That churches not seeking alternative episcopal oversight but teaching that ministry is differentiated according to gender clearly signal this position in their online and other public information, for example, information about whether a woman's ordained vocation would be supported by the church and whether preaching is limited to men.
- That churches pay attention to how they communicate beliefs about *both* ordained and lay ministry of women. Whilst messaging about resolutions and alternative episcopal oversight is employed to signal theological positions about women's ordained ministry, this can obscure the messaging about theological positions that impact on women's lay ministry and we recommend.
- That churches be consistent and transparent in teaching about theological positions to ensure congregations thoroughly understand the reasoning behind resolutions and differentiated ministries.

### Recommendations for umbrella organisations

- Given the large number of church websites using hyperlinks to the aims of the Society of St Wilfrid & St Hilda and Forward in Faith, these organisations should make their own information as clear and transparent as possible.

## Introduction

'WATCH has repeatedly called for transparency in churches that limit women's ministry'.<sup>2</sup> This report is intended to provide detailed information showing why transparency is an issue and how non-transparency causes deep harms when beliefs about gender are obfuscated. Based on our findings, we argue the impacts are particularly damaging for women seeking support and affirmation as leaders, teachers, and potential ordained ministers. This report sits within the context of wider concerns set out by WATCH: consultation regarding resolutions needs to be regular, wide, and inclusive to reflect whole parish views; parishes that are supportive of women's leadership and

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<sup>2</sup> See WATCH's statement: <https://womenandthechurch.org/news/watch-says-it-is-time-for-the-church-of-england-to-find-a-generous-way-to-bring-the-arrangements-set-out-in-the-2014-settlement-to-an-end-2/>

ordination should not be pressured into accepting clergy who do not share this position; issues around the reliance on third party organisations to provide forms of wording that are not transparent; the practice of limiting women's ministry through the application of complementarian positions that are not openly or officially pronounced. The latter issue has appeared in our research, and we also suggest further research should be undertaken that focuses on the experiences in churches where complementarian positions influence practices but are not signalled by a resolution to seek alternative episcopal oversight. The effect of this 'soft complementarianism' is to render invisible those churches who do not fully and without ambivalence support the ministry of women on the same basis as that of men.

Our main purpose here is to examine how transparent the messaging is in churches where there *is* a resolution, and to narrate the impact on (particularly) lay women who find themselves worshipping in churches that are unsupportive of women's lay and ordained ministry. We argue that the damage caused by the lack of clarity around gendered theological positions and the implications for women's roles in local churches is often hidden. We also stress that these stories should not be seen as individualised problems but rather as a way of revealing the systemic issues that the Church needs to address.

The Inclusive Church movement (see Cornwall, 2014) is successful in raising awareness of the need for 'safe' churches providing an unambiguous welcome for all and has been a useful focus for inclusion of LGBTQ+ people.<sup>3</sup> The Student Christian Movement, collaborating with WATCH, are campaigning, under the banner of 'Honest Church', for much more transparency around the welcome of LGBTQ+ people. Our inquiry into transparency around gendered ministries is connected to the 'Honest Church' campaign with a similar imperative; to seek transparency and clarity about how individual churches define the ministry of lay women and exclude ordained women. Whilst several scholars have published research on the experiences of ordained women working within a gendered, discriminatory structure (for example, Bagilhole, 2003; Jones, 2012; Page, 2012; Jagger, 2019), the impact on women's lay ministry is under-researched (Day, 2017). Kim Wasey (2016) makes this point in her work on lay women's experience of the Eucharist, women she sees as vital to the future flourishing of the Church. In recent years, the Church of England has made attempts to consider lay calling as valuable and theologically significant. The Church's reports *Setting God's People Free* (2017)<sup>4</sup>, *Calling All God's*

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<sup>3</sup> The Inclusive Church statement reads: 'We will continue to challenge the church where it continues to discriminate against people on grounds of disability, economic power, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, learning disability, mental health, neurodiversity, or sexuality'. See <https://www.inclusive-church.org/the-ic-statement/>

<sup>4</sup> Available at: <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2017-11/gs-2056-setting-gods-people-free.pdf>

*People* (2019)<sup>5</sup> and *Kingdom Calling* (2020)<sup>6</sup> have all contributed to this effort. However, other work (for example, Frigerio, 2023) critiques the way these initiatives are largely gender-blind and therefore miss the unique obstacles to lay women’s vocational flourishing in certain contexts.

This report adds to our understanding of how women with lay ministries experience the Church of England’s formal arrangements and the less formal positions of some clergy and local church leadership. WATCH has set out its concerns around the lack of transparency about both formalised positions (in the form of a resolution to seek alternative episcopal oversight, the recording of which only captures a partial picture) and the less visible positions taken by individual clergy<sup>7</sup>. Our research is designed to add detail and scaffolding for the expression of these concerns. We wish to establish the principle that the agency to choose an appropriate church in which to worship and develop vocations must not be hampered by use of specialist language, by lack of knowledge about the nuances of church traditions, and a lack of openness and straightforwardness on the part of some churches. Our findings therefore challenge assumptions that women can simply choose to avoid churches that do not support women’s leadership on the same basis as men’s leadership.

Based on our research detailed in this report, we argue that the issue of transparency cannot be seen as wholly individualised and exceptional. We argue that the issue of transparency harms the institutional church – indeed, in support of WATCH’s campaigning, we argue that the structural accommodation of theological stances that exclude women from ministry and/or forms of lay ministry is a long-standing and serious denigration of the Church’s reputation, harming its ability to speak into social justice debates. It might be tempting to see the stories we have collected as individualised misunderstandings and purely relational, requiring individualised solutions. We urge against this interpretation of the evidence we present below. Whilst we illuminate the damage done to individuals, at the same time we point to the systemic and cultural nature of the lack of transparency and call for church-wide policies based on the principles of consent, agency, and informed participation in church life. We argue for the highest ethical standards in communicating positions that affect women and those who see themselves as aligned to principles of gender equality. Our research shows clearly that many churches fall far short of these standards. Moreover, transparency about gendered convictions is a safeguarding issue. This is understood in the Maidstone Commitments document (we discuss this further) which links safety with transparency about complementarianism and the problematic culture that can develop from such theology. Multiple participants in our

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<sup>5</sup> Available at: <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/lay-discipleship-and-ministry-since-1945.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Available at: <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2020-10/kingdom-calling-web-version.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> See <https://womenandthechurch.org/news/watch-says-it-is-time-for-the-church-of-england-to-find-a-generous-way-to-bring-the-arrangements-set-out-in-the-2014-settlement-to-an-end-2/>

research also suggest the debate over women's roles and vocations is now being treated as a secondary issue. This not only contradicts the arguments made over the decades in resistance to women's ordination but is read by our participants as a way of stymying debate and ignoring the impact gendered theologies have on women within the Church. In short, our participants do not see the barriers to women's flourishing in leadership, teaching, and ordination as secondary.

We argue transparency about views on gender and ministry is an ethical and social justice issue. We define lay women's ministry as having access to the same leadership platforms, contexts, experience, and having the same access to authority, as men. We understand that some churches do not agree with this but teach an 'equal but different' understanding of gender roles or see ordained ministry as a male-only role. We do not intend to rehearse these debates, but we strongly argue that there must be transparency and clarity around these views and positions in all churches.

### Aims of the Project

This project explores the experiences of lay women who worship in Church of England churches that are formally and informally positioned as opposing women's ordination and/or differentiate lay leadership according to gender for theological reasons. We opened the project to men who see themselves as allies of women in leadership, although at the time of writing, no men have been interviewed.<sup>8</sup> We aimed to examine whether there are issues of transparency in parishes regarding positions on gender and ministry and to provide empirical evidence of the nature and extent of non-transparency. In the following sections, we present information from a questionnaire, a large-scale survey of websites, and detailed semi-structured interviews.

Our main research questions were:

What are the problems with transparency that result in some people finding themselves worshipping in churches without fully understanding that church's position on gender? And what is the impact of lack of transparency?

How do conservative evangelical and Anglo-Catholic churches state their position on women's ordination, women's lay leadership and on any formalised arrangements for alternative episcopal oversight?

What do women's experiences within such parishes tell us about the effect of gendered theology on their wellbeing, sense of belonging, and potential to take on leadership roles?

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<sup>8</sup> As we make clear in our concluding comments, this report may stir others to volunteer their experiences and we hope to continue the dialogue with those whose stories need still to be heard.

What are the wider implications for the Church of England in terms of pastoral care of lay women, the development of women's lay leadership and the support of women's exploration of vocation? The following discussion aims to provide some answers to these questions. We also indicate where there is scope for more research to develop better understanding.

## Background

Different traditions within the Church of England present different theological arguments about gender and ministry. Some conservative evangelical churches operate with the belief that men and women have different traits and capabilities – inherent and God-given – and therefore should occupy different roles in the Church, known as 'complementarian' positions. There are also theologies, associated with the Anglo-Catholic tradition, that place men and women in different categories according to divine appointment and purpose, meaning the ordained priesthood is reserved for men as a matter of ontology (God works through the ordination and sacramental role of men). These positions can be complex and nuanced. For lay women who may not be well versed in these theologies, and how they play out in local churches, it can come as a shock to find themselves being restricted in leadership and/or in their exploration of an ordained vocation. Whilst readers of this report may well be knowledgeable about the theological arguments used to maintain that leadership is a male role and that the priesthood is reserved for men, it is worth summarising these positions to give context to the discussion that follows.

## Theological positions on women's leadership and ordination

We provide a brief summary below of the positions that are offered as matters of theological conscience in relation to men's and women's ministry roles. We have divided these into complementarian views, largely found in some conservative evangelical churches and the more sacramental objections largely found in some Anglo-Catholic churches. We acknowledge that this separation is functional and that there is more nuance within positions. For example, some Anglo-Catholics who do not accept women's priesthood may also uphold a complementarian view of gender and some conservative evangelicals may also avoid accepting bread and wine at the communion table where a woman is presiding.

## Complementarianism

The belief that God created men and women to fulfil different roles in the Church and in (heterosexual) marriage is a central part of the positioning of some conservative evangelicals. Biblical

texts are used to support the notion of male authority and headship, extending to Christian marriages as well as applied to roles within churches.<sup>9</sup> The discourse of ‘equal but different’ is often used to describe the separation of roles according to gender. We argue this phrase is part of the culture of obfuscation, since roles have different values assigned to them, blurring the meaning of the term ‘equal’. Gender scholar Finn Mackay’s helpful discussion about how gender is constructed outlines how masculinity is aligned to leadership and associated traits and made to seem natural, whilst conversely femininity is aligned to nurturance and the pastoral (Mackay, 2021). Complementarian theologies are part of this process and are critiqued by an array of feminist scholars (for example, Woolwine et al 2014; Barr, 2021) as essentialist.<sup>10</sup> The idea that women cannot and should not have authority over men will be anathema to many people accustomed to secular equality legislation and socio-cultural changes that normalise women’s entry into leadership roles and into traditionally male occupations and leisure pursuits. However, the biblical instructions about men’s and women’s roles are pointed out by some evangelicals as a basis of complementarianism,<sup>11</sup> restricting women’s roles in the church setting. In 2017, the Church Times reported on a poll that suggested women in conservative evangelical churches were being dissuaded from ordained roles (including the diaconate) because they were told there would be no roles for them in their church (Davies, 2017).

Conservative evangelical churches who believe in biblical male headship may only be visible to our research because they seek alternative episcopal oversight to ensure their bishop is male. We also acknowledge that some Anglo-Catholic positions may also be underpinned by complementarian beliefs, though we make the distinction between the two traditions because of the Anglo-Catholic emphasis on the priesthood and sacraments. Those conservative evangelical churches who have not sought alternative episcopal oversight may still practice complementarianism in the allocation of lay roles. These churches are less visible and difficult to identify since they are not formally listed as being under alternative episcopal oversight (we discuss this further).

### Anglo-Catholic Objections to women’s ordination

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<sup>9</sup> For example, 1 Timothy 2:11-12; 1 Corinthians 11:3; Ephesians 5:22.24

<sup>10</sup> Essentialism is the idea that men and women are born with innate traits. Women are seen as innately nurturing and men are seen as innately rational, for example. Essentialism is debunked by many, especially by some schools of feminism, though not by all (see Mackay, 2022).

<sup>11</sup> Ironically, the essentialist ideas underpinning complementarianism were used to argue in favour of women priests; the notion that women provide traits that were missing from an all-male priesthood was used as leverage (see Lehman, 1993 [a US study across different denominations]; Furlong, 1998). Complementarianism, however, has done damage to both lay and ordained women because of how it reinforces the notion of feminine traits which are linked to types of ministry.

Anglo-Catholic churches seeking alternative episcopal oversight are concerned with preserving a male priesthood and emphasise the sacramental role. In other words, since God works only through the male priest, the sacraments are not valid when presided over by a woman. Some Anglo-Catholics believe the Church of England does not have the authority to make such a doctrinal change and needs to follow the lead of the Catholic Church; should the Catholic Church accept women's ordination, it could be accepted in the Church of England. These positions are more likely to impact women seeking support in their journey to ordination; lay women in such Anglo-Catholic churches may find they are less impacted since their ministries are not sacramental. However, our research suggests women in such churches find themselves limited in other spheres.

Some participants mentioned that they regretted not having the theological knowledge to counter some of the gendered discourses they came across, so for those who wish to understand these theological and doctrinal positions more deeply we signpost to *Fathers in God? A Resource for Reflection on Women in the Episcopate*, a collection of essays edited by Colin Podmore (2015), Geoffrey Kirk's *Without Precedence: Scripture, Tradition, and the Ordination of Women* (2015) and *Consecrated Women? Women Bishops - A Catholic and Evangelical Response* Jonathan Baker (2004). These authors have endeavoured to explain the theological and doctrinal arguments against women's ordination and entry into the episcopacy.

### The Church of England's structural arrangements

For those who are not familiar with the structural context allowing parish churches to opt out of receiving the ministry of ordained women, a summary of events may be helpful. After a long campaign, women were first permitted into the Church of England's priesthood by The Act of Synod, 1992. As Shaw (1998) comments, the Act combined two views of women: the notion of the female being an inferior version of the male, and the notion of complementarity, of being different but equal. In Shaw's argument, the Church built a structure that reinforces difference between men and women's priesthood, but without parity since the premise is that parishes would seek to avoid only women's ministry. The intentions of the Act and the subsequent arrangements focused on those who could not accept women's ministry, revealing the dominance of the male 'tribe' in the Church (Selby, 1998, p.78), laying the foundations for the disproportionate influence of those who continued to object to women's ordination. A dual structure was established that became known as the 'two integrities', allowing parishes to vote in favour of being under an alternative system of episcopal oversight, to avoid the bishops whose sacramental assurance was brought into question by the act of ordaining a female and allowing the parish to employ only male priests. For those new to this recent

history, Monica Furlong's edited book *Act of Synod, Act of Folly?* (1998) gives a thorough account of the impact on women in the Church.

The concessions to those opposing women's ordination were, at the time, accepted as a compromise by women's ordination supporters in the spirit of charity (Mayland, 1998; Francis and Robbins, 1999) and in the hope that flaws in the legislation could, over time, be dealt with (Selby, 1998). But many of the pro-women's ordination Synod members who had supported the arrangements came to regret it (Webster, 1994; Selby, 1998). The current debate about transparency of parish church positions on women's roles and their formal resolutions is directly related to the arrangements established by the 1992 Act of Synod.

When women became bishops in 2014, the discourse of 'the two integrities' was replaced by The Five Guiding Principles (see below), updating the arrangements to allow parishes to avoid the oversight of women bishops, though the essentials of the 'two integrities' remain; parishes can exclude women priests and seek alternative episcopal oversight from designated male bishops. These parishes are often referred to as 'resolution churches'.

### Resolution Churches

Throughout this report we refer to 'resolution churches'. For clarity, this refers to both Anglo-Catholic and conservative evangelical churches whose PCCs have voted on a resolution requesting alternative episcopal oversight. The recommended wording for the resolution<sup>12</sup> is: 'This PCC requests, on grounds of theological conviction, that arrangements be made for it in accordance with the House of Bishops' Declaration on the Ministry of Bishops and Priests.' Some of our study revolves around those parishes who have formally voted on such a resolution. However, we raise the issue in several places that this is not the full story and there are likely to be churches where the PCC has not voted for a resolution, but the incumbent or other significant leaders have complementarian or other gendered theological convictions that impact on women's lay ministry. The hidden, but impactful, nature of these positions is raised in our interviews, and we suggest this poses a serious problem for the Church if it intends to ensure transparency across all parishes.

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<sup>12</sup> See <https://www.churchofengland.org/about/general-synod/structure/house-bishops/house-bishops-declaration-ministry-bishops-and-priests>



## Five Guiding Principles<sup>13</sup>

There are several things within the Five Guiding Principles to note that are relevant to this study about transparency:

1. The *Five Guiding Principles: A Resource for Study* stipulates that there are no time limits set for the arrangements described above, which suggests a permanent context that lay and ordained women are required to negotiate. In 1992, there may have been some optimism that the arrangements set up by the Act of Synod would not be permanent, and that opposition to women's ordination would 'wither away,' though it became increasingly clear that this would not happen (Selby, 1998, p.84). WATCH members will be aware that significant campaigning will be required to persuade the Church to dismantle the current discriminatory structure. Moreover, the less visible culture of complementarianism means the principles of transparency need to be embedded by senior Church leaders, perhaps within the Five Guiding Principles.
2. Related to the statement that there is no time scale attached to the arrangements, there is a view (albeit likely to be a minority one) that 'reception' by the worldwide community of Christian churches of the Church of England's decision to ordain women has yet to be achieved and therefore women's ordination might be seen as a temporary arrangement. This view is expounded by Paul Avis in *Seeking the Truth of Change in the Church Reception, Communion, and the Ordination of Women* (2004) along with other authors, who imply the door is left open for the reversal of the legislation allowing the ordination of women. This seems unlikely; however, this view supports a *discourse* of doubt and precarity for women's ordination and feeds the flourishing of views that impact on women's ministries.
3. The Five Guiding Principles framework establishes the concept of 'mutual flourishing'. There is a growing seam of literature that challenges the viability of mutuality in a context that justifies the exclusion of women from leadership and ordination (for example, Thomas, 2019; Jagger, 2021; Schofield, 2023). Relevant to our discussion about transparency is that mutual flourishing attempts to prevent the marginalisation of positions that seek to limit women's ministries, however, in the spirit of mutuality, women should also be able to flourish in all types of ministries without fear of marginalisation or exclusion. This principle must be

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<sup>13</sup> Available at <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2018-02/5-guiding-principles.pdf>

delivered and enacted for women who by acts of omission or obfuscation find themselves worshipping in an environment where they are not supported, and in some cases actively prevented, in their ministry. We argue that the principle of mutual flourishing is the Church's own basis for ensuring the highest standards of transparency in parishes opposed to women's leadership and/or ordination.

### The Maidstone Commitments<sup>14</sup>

In our analysis of websites and other forms of communication in parishes, we refer to the Maidstone Commitments. This document is a response from the Bishop of Maidstone to a report from Thirtyone:Eight – an independent Christian safeguarding organisation<sup>15</sup> – published in 2021, raising concerns about the culture of some evangelical churches. The Maidstone Commitments are directed towards resolution complementarian parishes (conservative evangelical parishes) under the bishop's care. Since the Bishop of Maidstone retired in 2022, the Bishop of Ebbsfleet now oversees such resolution parishes. The Maidstone Commitments document specifies that parishes should clearly message their positions on women's ministry. In brief, the commitments made on behalf of conservative evangelical resolution churches that relate to this project about transparency are:

1. Act with impartiality and justice with regards to women's experience of complementarianism.
2. Ensure awareness of a PCC's conviction about men's and women's ministries – ensuring prominent and clear messaging on websites and posters and clarity about resolutions.
3. Review the PCC's church culture, which should be a wide ranging, open, transparent and accessible review.

Our survey of websites (detailed later) pinpoints how parishes are either failing, minimally complying, or exceeding the requirements of the second commitment. The interviews also shed light on church culture, the way women's concerns are marginalised and how the lack of open conversations about complementarian beliefs impacts on women's experiences of their churches. We hope that these findings will enable the Bishop of Ebbsfleet to request a review of accountability in parish communication strategies.

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<sup>14</sup> Available at <https://bishopofmaidstone.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/The-Maidstone-Commitments.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> See <https://thirtyoneeight.org/about-us/who-we-are/>

## Forward in Faith and Reform/Church Society

In this report we refer to societies and organisations that act as shorthand messaging about positions on women's lay and ordained ministry. For those who are unfamiliar with these organisations, a brief explanation may be helpful:

- Forward in Faith <sup>16</sup> is the membership society that supports the work of The Society of St. Wilfrid and St. Hilda.<sup>17</sup> This organisation upholds Catholic forms of Anglicanism and seeks unity with the 'rest of the Western Church'. Since the Catholic Church does not ordain women, Forward in Faith oppose the Church of England ordaining women, and this is explained reasonably clearly on Forward in Faith's website.
- The Church Society <sup>18</sup> is an organisation that acts as a hub for (conservative) evangelical churches and subsumed the organisation Reform, which acted as the evangelical voice opposing women's ordination. Their mission, as 'bible-believing Christians' is to help a 'confused Church' by providing resources. A programme for women is also featured prominently on the website. It is difficult to find clear messages about women's ministry, but there are oblique references to supporting a 'growing number' of parishes in their appointments of clergy. The statement of faith includes: 'The gifting and distinctive calling of women to minister in word and deed within the church' and 'the Scriptural and historic pattern of male spiritual leadership within the family and the church.' These statements are not easy to find and require levels of knowledge to recognise the praxis that these principles underpin.

These organisations represent the complexities of church tradition embedded in the structural arrangements of the Church, reiterated at local level with a wide variety of ways such beliefs are played out. This complexity contributes to the opacity of positions because it gives rise to two distinct sets of shorthand language and symbols that are not accessible to anyone not 'in the know'. We discuss this in detail later. However, membership of such organisations does provide a tool for messaging which might be useful for parishes where there is no formal resolution. The Church could signal a commitment to transparency by, for example, requiring disclosure of membership of organisations that promote theological and doctrinal positions.

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<sup>16</sup> <https://forwardinfaith.com>

<sup>17</sup> Churches can be a member of The Society without being a member of Forward in Faith

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.churchsociety.org/>

## Student Christian Movement and 'Honest Church' campaign

In 2023 WATCH partnered with the Student Christian Movement (SCM) to highlight issues of transparency of positions in local churches. SCM's 'Honest Church' campaign calls for churches to make their positions on LGBTQ+ people explicit and transparent.<sup>19</sup> There are serious concerns around how LGBTQ+ people can identify 'safe churches' in which to worship (see McIntosh and Jagger, 2021). The issue of transparency is common to all those who feel there are positions taken by leaders of churches that impact on a person's sense of self, and their ability to find belonging and personal growth and fulfilment in the church context. Honest Church's resources include recommendations for those currently attending a church, looking for a church, and for church leaders. Relevant to this report, in conjunction with WATCH, Honest Church also provides a set of questions and a descriptive 'Spectrum of Limits of Women's Roles.'<sup>20</sup> This spectrum is particularly helpful as it distinguishes between churches that hold a formal resolution and those where 'it is the case that men tend to be doing the leadership and teaching roles in a way which is not questioned and no effort is being made to increase diversity' and those where 'there may be a woman minister and women in other leadership roles. Teaching about women's roles may not be common and there may be some features of gendered thinking in terms of who is offered opportunities' (see the link in footnote 19). Our interview participants attended, or had in the past attended, churches at every point on the spectrum, although the majority discussed point 2 and 3 churches. This report echoes and supports the SCM/WATCH campaign which stresses that honesty is about being explicit, using clear language and creating a culture that encourages questions and discussion. The aim for honesty in these terms resonates with our research findings.

## Methods

This project uses a mixture of methods to provide evidence to support WATCH lobbying and campaigning activities around the issue of transparency of church positions on gender. We have undertaken a survey of people (mainly women) who have experienced lack of transparency which captures some of the main issues. We also provide a thorough analysis of online communication of all those churches who have formally signalled their position by requesting alternative episcopal

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<sup>19</sup> <https://www.movement.org.uk/get-involved/honest-church>

<sup>20</sup> [https://img1.wsimg.com/blobby/go/755a7a58-e46b-42fe-b696-477b9969a8cf/downloads/Women\\_s%20Roles%20Toolkit.pdf?ver=1696494897916](https://img1.wsimg.com/blobby/go/755a7a58-e46b-42fe-b696-477b9969a8cf/downloads/Women_s%20Roles%20Toolkit.pdf?ver=1696494897916)

oversight for theological reasons. Finally, we have interviewed 15 people who have shared their experiences, giving a sense of *impact* the lack of transparency has on (particularly) women's lives. Participants are anonymised and each has given consent to be included. The project was approved by the Humanities ethics committee at York St. John University.

### Listening to stories to find systemic issues and solutions

As researchers exploring aspects of the Church of England, we regularly hear that the Church hierarchy are not readily persuaded by people's stories, which can be seen in individualised ways requiring individualised solutions. We argue people's stories reveal systemic issues requiring systemic solutions (though the details are unique to individuals). Our task as researchers is to make clear the connections between people's stories that point towards structural and systemic issues. Additionally, we argue that one person's story can reveal a great deal about institutional-level dynamics – in other words, we do not necessarily need to show many similar experiences to understand how a system impacts upon individuals. For those interested in how researching women's stories can be transformational for individuals and for institutions and systems we recommend Nicola Slee's (2016) discussion on feminist research and Aune and Guest's (2019) study of Christian university students' attitudes to gender, which demonstrates that qualitative research is well suited to studying and raising awareness of the relationship between religion, gender, power, and identity. Our hope is to equip campaigners in WATCH with confident counterarguments for conversations where individual accounts are dismissed as anecdotal and non-evidential.

Whilst quantitative studies (those using statistical information) are valuable to assess the broad picture within the Church, qualitative data (such as people's experiences) is necessary to appreciate the impact of structures and strategies employed by the institution. Qualitative research captures the agency of lay worshippers who negotiate, resist, and accommodate the theological positions of their churches in skilful ways. In other words, lay church members are not passive audiences for the theological positions of their church leaders and this has been demonstrated throughout our interviews. At the same time, our research attests to the harm experienced by women who unknowingly find themselves in church with traditional and complementarian beliefs about gender roles. The impact can be profound for the individual and whilst not always quantifiable the harm is real, nonetheless. As our research shows, this harm is caused by the Church's structural arrangements and the way policies are developed and implemented. This means harms can be mitigated by systemic change. It is our hope that this report will 'bear witness' to these painful experiences of silencing and marginalisation that lay women experience, as well as their faith and resilience (Cross and O'Donnell).

The survey is also part of the exercise of listening to people's stories. We collected 79 responses (42 of which are included here for their relevance) and we give the detail of these in Part Two below. The survey was online and distributed via social media, personal contacts, and 'snowballing' (word of mouth). Given the nature of our target audience (i.e highly disparate) it was a difficult task to ensure we collected enough responses to provide a meaningful snapshot of the breadth of non-transparency issues and we do not claim to have enough data to provide surety on the *numbers* of people who are impacted across the Church. For clarity, though our survey of the online presence of churches supports the view that transparency is a significant issue, this research aims to tell the deeper story of how lack of transparency affects the faith and lives of women seeking to develop their ministries. Though the numbers are relatively modest, the comments shared are highly illuminating and give additional support to the information collected in the interviews.

We begin our discussion with the analysis of websites and online presence of churches.

## Part one: Websites and Online Presence

The most obvious way for an individual church to provide information about formal positions on women's roles is through its website or other online presence. We surveyed the online presence of 508 churches, both conservative evangelical and Anglo-Catholic traditionalist, known to hold a position limiting women's ministry. As we analysed online messaging, our premise was that clarity of language is a minimum requirement for genuine attempts at transparency. Our aim was to analyse the language and visibility of messaging about theological stances on gender and assess whether these messages are accessible to people without in-depth knowledge of the continuing resistance to women's ordained ministry and lay leadership. For this exercise, parishes were selected because they are either currently under the oversight of the Bishop of Ebbsfleet (supplied by the bishop's chaplain) or linked to The Society of St Wilfrid and St Hilda listed on the Society's website.

We note that there is no straightforward way to identify parish churches that have formal arrangements to avoid the ministry of women clergy and women bishops and such an investigation requires knowledge about church tradition and the Church of England's structural arrangements as well as a significant amount of labour. We argue it is unreasonable to expect individuals seeking information on their local church to know how to locate this information and we pick this up in our recommendations. We also note that some churches may not fall into either category, but their leadership may still have impactful positions on women's roles without making formal oversight arrangements. As has been noted, Honest Church's Toolkit for transparency on women's roles differentiates between these positions on a spectrum. We strongly agree with the Honest Church

campaign's aim that every church should be open and honest around women's roles and further research is needed to assess the levels of communication where there are informal positions held, but without arrangements for alternative episcopal oversight. We discuss this further.

## General Findings

Our headline findings from this exercise are:

- Only 47% of church websites surveyed made some attempt to signal their position on women's ministry, though many do so without clarity and straightforwardness. 53% of websites do not communicate at all about formal positions on women's roles in the Church or resolutions.
- There are notable differences between conservative evangelical and traditionalist Anglo-Catholic parishes in terms of transparency. Anglo-Catholic parishes are more likely to signal their position (51.5%), but less likely to use plain language and in cases where specialist knowledge is required, these might be considered highly obfuscating. This figure should not therefore be taken as an indication of how many churches are genuinely open about their positions on women's ministry. For instance, Anglo-Catholic church websites rarely use the word 'women' but often refer to 'alternative episcopal oversight'. We argue this is obfuscating, coded language and does not straightforwardly explain the implications. We do not believe this would present a meaningful message to anyone unacquainted with the context of such structural arrangements. Conservative evangelical churches are less likely to communicate their position (36% do so), but those that do tend to use clearer language, often using the word 'women'.
- Some evangelical churches communicate their position with wording directly requested by the Maidstone Commitments: 'the PCC of this parish has passed a resolution under the House of Bishop's Declaration on the Ministry of Bishops and Priests in order to reflect its convictions on the distinctive ministry of men and women'. We note that this wording does not sufficiently explain approaches to lay women's ministry.

## Detailed findings

We surveyed the online presence of 149 conservative evangelical churches under the oversight of the Bishop of Ebbsfleet and the websites of 364 Anglo-Catholic parishes affiliated to the Society of St

Wilfrid and St Hilda (abbreviated to Society but not to be confused with the Church Society which represents a cohort of conservative evangelical churches). The Society makes the list publicly available on their website, however the list of churches under the oversight of Bishop of Ebbsfleet was supplied on request by the bishop’s chaplain and at the time of research was not available publicly online. Of the 364 Society parishes, 4 were closed for public worship and 1 had recently had its resolution rescinded. In cases where a church did not have a website, their online presence on *A Church Near You*<sup>21</sup> and social media, usually Facebook, were surveyed as an alternative. We searched for content that signalled the position of these parishes on women’s roles in church, both lay and ordained, using criteria that was deliberately wide, such as whether a church stated it has a resolution, whether it is under alternative episcopal oversight, whether there are statements about theological positioning on women in the church, and statements about being a member of an organisation such as Forward in Faith or the Church Society. We recorded any content that could reasonably be understood as a message about the church’s position, along with visibility and placement on the website. We looked at the type of language used, noting whether the words ‘women’ or ‘resolution’ are used. Our analysis about transparency of position is based on whether the information is visible or hidden, and whether language used is obfuscating or coded and therefore not readily understood. For this latter category, we note, for example, the use of logos for organisations for the Church Society or Forward in Faith but without name or description given, text explaining the church’s theological position using misleading language, and placement of messages that require careful and deliberate searching.

The table below shows the number of churches that signal their position on the role of women in lay or ordained ministry in any way.

	Ebbsfleet Parishes	Society Parishes	Total
Parishes	149	359	508
Position Indicated	54 (36%)	185 (52%)	239 (47%)
Position NOT indicated	95 (64%)	174 (48%)	269 (53%)

<sup>21</sup> This is a website run by the Archbishops’ Council: <https://www.achurchnearyou.com/>



Common places to include information on a church's position were at the bottom of the front page or on the *About Us* or *Our Beliefs* pages. Some Anglo-Catholic churches attempted to make their affiliation highly visible using large font on their front page stating: 'A church affiliated to the Society of St Wilfrid and St Hilda'. In other cases, the position was indicated somewhere on the website but was not easily visible, such as being placed on a page about 'partner organisations' or 'useful links', or at the bottom of the front page in small font. Some websites did note they had a resolution but did so in small font placed in an obscure location on the website. One church mentioned their resolution on the front page but did so in small font underneath the safeguarding notice and charity number, making it seem like an additional administrative detail. Another website referred to their resolution at the very end of a church founding document navigated via a link which was itself underneath a list of the PCC members. Finding this communication involved an active and time-consuming search. We accept some churches may not wish to include information about a resolution on their front page, though this would be the most honest and transparent positioning. As a minimum, pages such as 'About Us' 'Our Beliefs' or even 'Staff Team' all provide a logical opportunity to explain that a church has a position on which roles and posts are only open to men.

### Society of St Wilfrid & St Hilda Parishes

Of the 359 Anglo-Catholic parishes surveyed, 185 indicated their position in some form, though this should not be taken as an indication of levels of transparency. The language commonly used is around affiliation to either The Society or Forward in Faith, or both. References to 'alternative episcopal oversight' were also extremely common. Many use the logos of The Society, Forward in Faith, or the Bishop of Richborough or the Bishop of Oswestry (who provide alternative oversight), but with little or no explanation of what these mean. Only 24 churches explicitly state they hold a resolution. The use of what we consider plain language is rare, with only 16 websites using the words 'woman' or 'women' in their description. If we take the latter as a basic level of transparency, it means around 4% of Anglo-Catholic churches we surveyed could be said to be open about the position taken about women and ministry. Given the large number of websites using hyperlinks to the aims of the Society of St Wilfrid & St Hilda and Forward in Faith, these organisations are able to make their own information as clear and transparent as possible.

We found some churches did not have their own website or other social media page but were listed in the *A Church Near You* website, with a proportion stating their position using this platform – these have been included in our analysis. As a centralised Church of England information point, *A Church Near You* is a promising starting point for churches to present with greater transparency and clarity their positions on women's ministry.

## Bishop of Ebbsfleet Parishes

Conservative evangelical churches were more likely than Society churches to have a website and these are often well-maintained with evidence of considerable thought put into their content and design. However, out of the 149 websites surveyed, only 54 communicate their position on the role of women in lay or ordained ministry. Of these, the most common wording used was that recommended in the Maidstone commitments.<sup>22</sup> Encouragingly, this means that nearly 78% of parishes under the oversight of the Bishop of Ebbsfleet that *did* signal their position used the word ‘women’ or ‘woman’, though it remains that 63% of Ebbsfleet churches make no mention of their position on their website at all.

An issue around transparency amongst conservative evangelical parishes is that they do not necessarily seek a formal resolution in favour of alternative episcopal oversight, leaving an unknown number of churches where complementarianism (for example) impacts on women’s ministry. In these cases, transparency on individual church websites is even more important. Those churches where positions on women’s ministry are influenced by individual incumbents or other leaders are difficult to research and are an unknown quantity. We revisit this issue in the section discussing the interviews, since we find that the most damaging impact on women arises in contexts where there is no formal position stated through a resolution, for example, and where congregants are left to discern attitudes to women’s leadership. Moreover, the non-formal positioning established by leaders in parish churches is less likely to be the focus of consultation (a required exercise for proposing a vote on a resolution) and more likely to affect lay women’s ministry and the exercising of women’s leadership. This is a gap in our research, and we suggest the Church formally commissions a larger project to find out the extent to which gender differentiation in ministry is routinely applied at the parish level.

## Transparency in language

The issue of transparency is not simply about whether there are references to theological positions in churches’ online presence; we need to examine the language used and whether statements are designed to be as open, honest, and accessible as possible. We argue that using plain language (that is, avoiding shorthand and church-specific terminology) is vital if a church’s intention is to communicate honestly about gendered beliefs (and we evidence this through the questionnaire). The interviews we conducted as part of this project (discussed later in this report) indicate that even

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<sup>22</sup> The wording within the Maidstone Commitments document reads: ‘The PCC of this parish has passed a resolution under the *House of Bishop’s Declaration on the Ministry of Bishops and Priests* in order to reflect its convictions on the distinctive ministry of men and women.’ See footnote 19.

longstanding members of a church may never come across terminology about the Church’s structural arrangements or debates about positions taken by different traditions regarding gender and ministry or leadership. Whilst a PCC may make assumptions about what is understood by, for example, affiliation to Forward in Faith on the front page of their website, we argue this is not fully transparent as it relies on detailed knowledge about church traditions and the Church’s structural arrangements. Similarly, stating that a church receives ‘alternative episcopal oversight’ is obfuscating shorthand, unlikely to be fully understood by anyone new to the Church or not fluent in its arrangements.

Considering the importance of language, the table below shows when the word ‘women’ (which we consider more transparent) and ‘resolution’ were used and, for evangelical parishes, the word ‘complementarian’ or ‘complementary’.

	Ebbsfleet Parishes	Society Parishes	Total
Parishes	149	359	508
Position Indicated	54 (36%)	185 (52%)	239 (47%)
Use word woman/women	42 (28%)	16 (4%)	58 (11%)
Use word Resolution	35 (23%)	24 (7%)	59 (12%)
Use word complementarian	16 (11%)	–	

Of those parishes formally under the oversight of the Bishop of Ebbsfleet, only 28% use clear wording including ‘woman’, 23% indicate there is a resolution in place and 11% use the term ‘complementarian’. In the Anglo-Catholic churches who are members of The Society, whilst over half do indicate their position in their online presence, only 4% use language to indicate women are affected and only 7% use the word ‘resolution’. Of the total number of parishes with formal positions on women’s ministry, only 11% indicate on their websites or other online presence that this is a position that is taken about women’s lay or ordained ministry.

There are differences in how positions are expressed between conservative evangelical and Anglo-Catholic churches: conservative evangelical parishes are likely to use wording recommended by the Bishop of Maidstone in the third of the Maidstone Commitments.<sup>23</sup> The Commitment document encourages churches ‘to ensure awareness of a PCC’s convictions over men’s and women’s ministry’ as well as offering suggested wording (see footnote 18). The frequency with which this wording is used on conservative evangelical parish websites suggests that some churches have heeded the bishop’s advice and altered their websites to align to the guidance, though this is at a low 28% at the time of the survey. Traditionalist Anglo-Catholic parishes from The Society list are more likely to state that they were under ‘alternative episcopal oversight’ or that they were affiliated to Forward in Faith or the Society of St Wilfrid and St Hilda.

We argue that neither type of statement adequately communicates the intention to differentiate ministry according to gender or that there is potential that women are excluded from certain levels of lay leadership or ordained ministry. Language used even by those churches intending to communicate positions on women’s church roles and ministries, in our view, relies on in-depth knowledge of the Church’s arrangements and/or theological debates. Many websites have clearly been designed with a potential visitor in mind, with care taken to explain elements of the service or Christian beliefs in accessible language, yet many fall short of transparency when explaining beliefs about gender. We consider employing specialist Church of England language and signalling to the minimum degree poor practice and not in the spirit of transparency. We provide below a more detailed analysis of communication we consider to be less than transparent before moving on to examples that we consider better practice.

Two common communication strategies used on websites and online presence were statements about the church’s affiliation to an organisation which holds either a complementarian or traditionalist position or noting a relationship with a Provincial Episcopal Visitor (PEV). These types of statements require detailed knowledge and are likely to be opaque to the casual observer.

### Provincial Episcopal Visitors

In most cases when a website states the church is under ‘alternative episcopal oversight’ or ‘under the oversight of the Bishop of Oswestry/Ebbsfleet’ etc this was left unexplained. Even less clear were websites which merely noted they were in the ‘See of Richborough’ or ‘See of Oswestry’ or where the

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<sup>23</sup> <https://bishopofmaidstone.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/The-Maidstone-Commitments.pdf>

The Bishop of Maidstone formerly provided alternative episcopal oversight before the Bishop of Ebbsfleet.

logo for the See of Richborough was used without any further explanation.<sup>24</sup> In several cases there are hyperlinks to the websites of the particular Episcopal Visitor, either on the front page or on the Links page. Most descriptions of alternative episcopal oversight are inadequate in their clarity. For example, one church stated they had ‘a special relationship with the Bishop of Fulham’, an unclear phrase, opaque to anyone without detailed knowledge of the Church’s structure that legitimises the avoidance of women’s ministry. Another described the Bishop of Oswestry as ‘an assistant to the Archbishop of Canterbury whose remit is to care for those parishes which seek to maintain the historic ministry of the Church of England.’ Again, whilst insiders may understand the connotations of this phrase, this is highly coded and inaccessible language. Similarly, on one church’s front page they state that the Church’s ‘staff team exists to serve the church family. It does so under the leadership and oversight of the Bishop of London, Sarah Mullally and her Assistant Bishop, Rob Munro.’ There is no mention made here that Bishop Rob Munro has a very particular role in assisting Bishop Sarah which reflects the gendered theological position of the church.

### Organisational Affiliation

Noting affiliation to a particular network or organisation was a common way to signal a position on gender roles in the church. This was a more frequently used strategy on traditionalist websites which often mention links to The Society of St Wilfrid and St Hilda or Forward in Faith. Some also mention links to Walsingham<sup>25</sup> and one website had on its front page simply that it was ‘served by priests of the Societas Sanctae Crucis (SSC)’. Most opaque messaging was found where churches are described merely as ‘a Society parish’, (a shorthand of a shorthand and difficult to interpret.) Similarly, some websites use the logos of these organisations without including their name. This would only be comprehensible to those very familiar with the organisation’s visual markers.

For parishes under the oversight of the Bishop of Ebbsfleet, some highlighted links to The Church Society. For example, one website has on its front page: ‘We are a Church Society Partner Church’ – the only reference to a formal position on gender and gender roles. A substantial number of evangelical websites we surveyed linked to either the Basis of Faith of the Church of England Evangelical Council<sup>26</sup> or Gafcon’s Jerusalem Statement.<sup>27</sup> Neither of these explicitly mention a

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<sup>24</sup> There is a particular issue with transparency for parishes whose geographical location means that naming their Bishop would not alert anyone to any alternative arrangement. For example, a church which states it is ‘cared for by the Bishop in Fulham’ but it located less than 10 miles from Fulham.

<sup>25</sup> Walsingham is a site of worship and pilgrimage that does not allow ordained women to officiate and is a popular worship destination for Anglo-Catholics.

<sup>26</sup> <https://ceec.info/>

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.gafcon.org/about/jerusalem-statement>

complementarian position, however, those familiar with conservative evangelicalism may infer gendered beliefs from these affiliations, another example of communication through coded and shorthand language that is not meaningful to those without existing detailed knowledge.

### Other examples of non-transparent language

Of the websites attempting to communicate a position on gender and gender roles, there are 47 we identified as being particularly deficient in clarity and transparency where language is misleading or confusing. For example, one website states; 'All men and women, being created in the image of God, have inherent and equal dignity and worth, which is not annulled by gender role distinction or headship in marriage.' This attempt at describing the doctrine of male headship was not accompanied by any statement about what this might mean in practice. Indeed, an observer may be drawn to the word 'equal' and without significant knowledge of theological arguments may well misread this as a statement that supports women's leadership and authority. Similarly, another church website states: 'We believe in, and are committed to, the equality of men and women and their distinctive ministries in church life.' The word 'distinctive' is loaded with complementarian meaning but does not plainly explain this meaning. Indeed, 'distinctive' is used repeatedly alongside 'equality' by those conservative evangelical websites that did attempt to signal their position, which we argue is highly misleading.

### Examples of Good Practice

We have identified some websites that we consider to be employing good practice in terms of language used and the visibility of messages. The examples below are a selection of Anglo-Catholic and conservative evangelical churches that illustrate how different theological positions can be more clearly communicated. Adding a cautionary note, however, we argue that there is room for more explanatory phrases about the implications of theological positions on the status of lay women's ministry, which is often obscured by the resolutions that seek to avoid the ordained ministry of women.

#### **St Lawrence, Exeter**

The front page of the website states: 'Our parishes are affiliated with the Society of St Wilfrid and St Hilda – set up to offer pastoral and sacramental care to those unable to receive the ministry of women as priests and bishops – and under the care of the Bishop of Oswestry.' We note the clarity here that women's ordained ministry is not accepted. Whilst there needs to be an additional statement about women's lay ministry, whether it is supported or not, to be considered fully transparent, the inclusion of an explanatory statement about women's ordained ministry is clear.

### **Trinity Church, Buxton**

On the *What we believe* page there is an explanation of its resolution. It states: 'We are under the episcopal oversight of Rob Munro, the Bishop of Ebbsfleet, who pastors and cares for those Anglican Evangelical churches who do not wish to be under the oversight of a female Bishop.' The use of the phrase 'do not wish' is clearer, in contrast to those who state they are 'unable' to be under the oversight of a woman bishop. Whilst the statement here is clear about the position on women as bishops, there is scope to explain whether lay ministry of women is restricted or whether they welcome women as preachers and leaders.

### **St Stephen's, Gloucester Road**

The *What We Believe* section has a clearly titled page about the Society of St Wilfrid and St Hilda which attempts to explain in plain language what the Society is and its purpose. This explanation is clearer than that used by many parishes who generally copy from the Society's own website which is an explanation lacking clarity.

### **All Saints, Cheltenham**

This parish offers one of the most comprehensive explanations about its position on ordained women in both language and visibility. The front page indicates, 'we are under the pastoral and sacramental care of the Bishop of Oswestry, The Rt. Revd Paul Thomas SSC'. On the *About Us* page of the website a section titled 'Theological Declaration' gives a detailed explanation of the church's resolution on women in ministry, making the process transparent. It gives past context to the current position:

*So All Saints stated that it would not accept a women priest at the altar or as the incumbent of the parish; but it did not petition for alternative episcopal oversight, from a so called 'flying bishop', but remained under the pastoral care of the Bishop of Gloucester. This partly reflected the wide diversity of views about the ordination of women to the priesthood held by the parish family. When the Church of England decided to ordain women as Bishops, new more flexible provision was made for those members of the church who wished to remain loyal to traditional Anglican and catholic teaching about orders. The PCC of All Saints therefore after lengthy discussion agreed to pass a declaration of theological conviction, namely that the parish did not accept the innovation introduced by the Church of England in admitting women to the Priesthood and Episcopate, and wished to remain loyal to traditional Anglican and catholic teaching on this matter. One advantage of this new provision was that it enabled the other parishes in the North Cheltenham Team to appoint a woman Team Vicar, which the previous resolutions blocked.*

It then goes on to explain their theological rationale fully as a Tractarian church, concluding; ‘should the whole church, Roman Catholic and Orthodox included choose to admit women as Priests and Bishops then the basis of our theological conviction would no longer exist.’

### **Holy Trinity, Hinckley**

On the *Our Theology* page under the heading ‘Our leadership is Complementarian’ there is a clear description of what this means, attempting to communicate to audiences with different levels of knowledge about the position and process, crucially using accessible language. This website usefully explains the difference between egalitarian and complementarian positions which puts the use of the word ‘equal’ into context and is an example of clarity around views on lay women’s ministry as well as ordained ministry:

*The understanding that men and women are equal in creation and salvation, and that God has made men and women with complementary gifts so that different roles are appropriate in the church and marriage. Members of our church family hold both complementarian (equal value with different roles) and egalitarian (equal value with no difference in role) positions, whilst we are agreed on our leadership being complementarian. For those familiar with the Church of England’s procedures in this, here is some further explanation: In 2018 we passed a Resolution under the House of Bishops’ Declaration on the Ministry of Bishops and Priests. As such, we consider that the leadership of the church, preaching in our primary service and the oversight of a bishop should be by a suitably qualified man. Under this leadership, we want to encourage the ministry of men and women to flourish.*

### **Observations about language**

During our survey of websites and online presence of parishes with a formal position on women’s ministry, we noted several areas where language operates as a confusion and a barrier to clarity, and therefore transparency. We found this to be the case even where parishes were attempting to explain their position and the rationale behind a PCC resolution.

### **Conservative evangelical language**

The conservative evangelical use of ‘equal but different’ style of phrasing is problematic because it gives the impression there is an egalitarian attitude to women’s ministry. For those without a solid



knowledge about the praxis of complementarianism this may give the impression that there is parity in women's and men's leadership.

This is an example from Holy Trinity, Eastbourne:

*We believe in the complementary ministries of men and women of whatever race or colour, in our absolute equality of value in personhood and ministry before God.*

Whilst there is an attempt at signalling a specific gendered position, the wording is obfuscating the gendered position, especially alongside the reference to race. 'Equality of personhood' gives the impression to anyone unfamiliar with the intricacies of complementarianism that there are no restrictions on women's ministry. We acknowledge that complementarianism may be nuanced, but we also suggest that if there is limited explanation about authority, leadership, and headship, then transparency is highly compromised.

This example from St Mary's, Chaddesden explains they are under alternative episcopal oversight (that is, to avoid the ordained ministry of women), but goes on to reassure the reader that the complementarian position does not impinge on women's fulfilment of leadership ministry:

*St. Mary's is an Evangelical Church which comes under the Bishop of Maidstone, for churches that believe the Bible says women and men are equal but different- they are complementary and have different roles in the church. You can find out more here: <https://bishopofmaidstone.org>. But please don't be surprised if you find the services, readings, prayers or Bible study groups led by women- we believe that everyone in the church has a vital, equal and important role to play.*

We argue this is an example of non-transparency wrapped up in explanatory text. Whilst it points out that women can have an active role, it fails to highlight that women wishing to explore preaching, leadership that requires authority over men, or an ordained vocation will not find adequate support here.

St James, Audley offers an example of how the issue of men's and women's roles is given a secondary status, that is, its significance and potential for impact is downplayed:

*It's not a central part of who we are as Christians, but it might be helpful to know that the churches' leadership teams have a range of views on what the Bible says about women leading churches. We all agree that women are called to serve God in a variety of hugely significant ways, and out of love, we want to protect anyone from being in a position where they're asked to go against their conscience. To*

*help with that, St James receives episcopal oversight from Rob Munro, the Bishop of Ebbsfleet.*

One of our interviewees felt very strongly about the way discourse has changed over time, from claiming women's ordination is a schismatic issue that has forced some to leave the Church to claims that it is an issue that is not central to a Christian life and is a matter of individual conscience. Given the impact such theological positions have on women's vocations, ministries, and sense of belonging, shifting the issue to a secondary status is to dismiss the voices of many women in the Church.

These are examples that illustrate how some conservative evangelical churches are attempting to convey conflicting messages: one of inclusion and support of women's (lay) ministry and one that signals that women's ministry is differentiated from men's ministry in significant ways. Use of the word 'equal' in this context is highly misleading because at the core of complementarianism is the principle of male headship, which we read in terms of access to, and exercise of, power over women.

### Traditionalist Language

Like the conservative evangelical phrasing, we challenge the type of language used by traditionalist churches that softens the impact of theological positions that exclude women from certain types of ministries. There is also a tendency to frame traditionalist churches as the maintainers of orthodoxy, being theologically and ecclesiologically faithful and loyal. Sharon Jagger's (2019) research found this way of describing the part of the Church that maintains a male-only priesthood is immensely challenging and hurtful especially for Anglo-Catholic women priests. Other types of phrasing around assurance and confidence are also interesting to note, since this language is aimed exclusively at those who wish to avoid the ordained ministry of women. The transparency issue has a different tenor, but still relies on significant understanding of theology and ecclesiology. We provide some examples of websites using this type of discourse.

**The Society of St Wilfrid and St Hilda:** 'The purposes of the Society are: To promote and maintain catholic teaching and practice within the Church of England, to provide episcopal oversight to which churches, institutions and individuals will freely submit themselves, to guarantee a ministry in the historic apostolic succession in which they can have **confidence**.'

**All Hallows Easton:** 'The **unchanging tradition** of the Catholic and Orthodox Churches is that neither marriage nor priesthood are "gender-neutral". Marriage must be heterosexual; priesthood must be male, by the institution of Christ himself.'

**Great Ilford, St Alban:** 'Faithful traditional Anglo-catholics...we adhere to the traditions of the western church.'

**St Columba, Inkersall:** 'We receive our sacramental care from the Bishop of Oswestry, confessing in union with other such parishes the ancient faith of the Church, and maintaining the traditional Catholic practices of the Church of England.'

**St Nichola, Skirbeck:** 'For these reasons, Forward in Faith supports and upholds the sacraments as they have been inherited and are now practiced in the Church of England in the Society, especially the traditional teaching of the Priesthood. In light of this it is unable in good conscience to accept changes to teaching of the priesthood through the ordination of women as priests and bishops.'

**St Pancras, Old church:** 'Most Anglo-Catholics wish to remain loyal to the wider Church across the ages, so they find it hard to accept that the Church of England has the authority to make changes to the essentials, when they are not agreed to by the Universal Church, such as the ordination of women.'

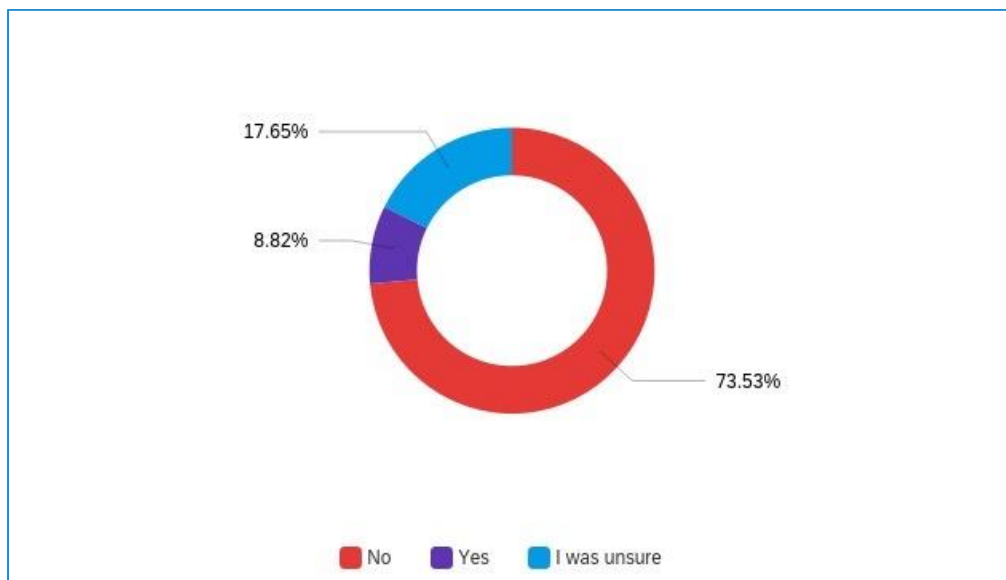
## Part two: The Questionnaire

The second part of the project was an anonymous online questionnaire to gather general information about transparency from the point of view of lay worshippers. The questionnaire asked whether respondents currently or in the past had attended a CofE church which in any way limited the role of women, how they became aware of the church's position, whether they knew if the church had a resolution in place and how worshipping in that church had impacted them. There was also space for those who wished to add some more detail about their experiences in that church. We invited respondents to volunteer to be interviewed to share their story in more detail and several of our interview participants were contacted this way.

The survey was distributed via social media and had 79 respondents. Due to the nature of the online survey platform used, we had several respondents whose survey entries were not suitable for analysis as part of our research cohort. We deleted 17 entries which were entirely blank. We also excluded a further 20 from our cohort on the basis that they had not attended a church which had any position limiting women's ministry in a lay capacity. It should be noted that we retained entries from 4 participants who stated they attended either a conservative evangelical or Anglo-Catholic traditionalist church but answered 'No' to whether they attended a church which 'limits the role of women in some way'. (It is assumed that these answers reflect a disagreement with the conceptual understanding underneath our choice of the word 'limit' and these entries were included to respect this difference of

understanding). We were left with 42 respondents who had at some point been a lay member of a CofE church which in some way limited the role of women. 16 labelled their church's tradition Anglo-Catholic traditionalist and 18 conservative evangelical, the remaining 8 described their tradition as 'other' or declined to answer. Respondents ranged from aged 25 to over 65 and were predominantly white women, with 2 male respondents.

The survey results support our argument based on the website survey that there is a significant issue with transparency around the role of women in the Church of England. 60% of the respondents did not know the position of their church before joining and 14% stated they were unsure. Only 7% of respondents said they knew the church's position before joining. Some respondents stated they were not entirely sure of the official position of the church until they had left. The remaining 19% reflects non-answers for this question. The pie chart below visualizes the responses to this question:



Out of the 42 respondents there were only two examples offered of relatively direct communication in church about views held on women's ministry. In what might be the closest example to good practice evidenced in the survey, one respondent stated that there was a Forward in Faith noticeboard which communicated the church's position. This respondent was therefore aware of the church's views before beginning to attend. To supplement our research, we conducted a small-scale physical survey of some churches which had clearly displayed leaflets and posters for Forward in Faith and The Society of St Wilfrid and St Hilda. In a similar vein to the website discussion above, these leaflets and posters rely to some extent on an awareness of what theological and organisational significance these societies have in the Church of England, and we suggest such material could be improved to be made clearer to a wider audience. Another respondent from a conservative evangelical church said she

discovered the church's theological position on the role of women through sermons, however she was unsure of the church's position before joining. Regular teaching on a church's officially held theological position on women is an element of transparency and is particularly important for churches undertaking consultation on whether to seek alternative episcopal oversight. However, as is evident from this survey response, it may take some time before a newcomer to the church becomes fully aware of the teaching on gender and gender roles.

The most common scenario described by respondents is understanding the church's position only after some time; comments include 'gradual realisation', 'learned over time', 'only gradually became aware' or discovered the position 'over a long period of time'. For example, one woman, who had attended an Anglo-Catholic traditionalist church said: 'It became apparent over time that whilst women did hold some "leadership" roles not all positions were open for women to hold.' In these situations, the work of discerning the church's position was done by the lay worshippers rather than the leadership taking responsibility to ensure their position was clearly communicated and understood. Such discernment relies on lay worshippers piecing together clues over time, many of which involve interpretative judgement or awareness of specialised language and symbols. In the case of the Forward in Faith poster, the respondent had to be sufficiently familiar with the Anglo-Catholic church tradition to be aware that membership of Forward in Faith communicates a specific position on women's priesthood in that parish. Another respondent said that in her parish church the primary visual symbol of the church's position is a candle burning in the Lady Chapel for Forward in Faith, a highly coded visual marker. Alongside these physical clues, other respondents noted they had inferred that the church had a particular position on the role of women due to an absence of women in 'upfront' roles such as leading, preaching and serving at the altar. One woman described the church she grew up in where 'girls [were] excluded from serving at the altar.' Another respondent described her family's church; 'I grew up, and only gradually became aware that no women ever preached.' The gradual realisation that women are absent from some roles, without an explicit explanation, often leaves lay women unsure which roles are open to them and the basis on which such judgements are made – this sense of confusion about what roles were deemed appropriate for women was echoed in some of the interviews.

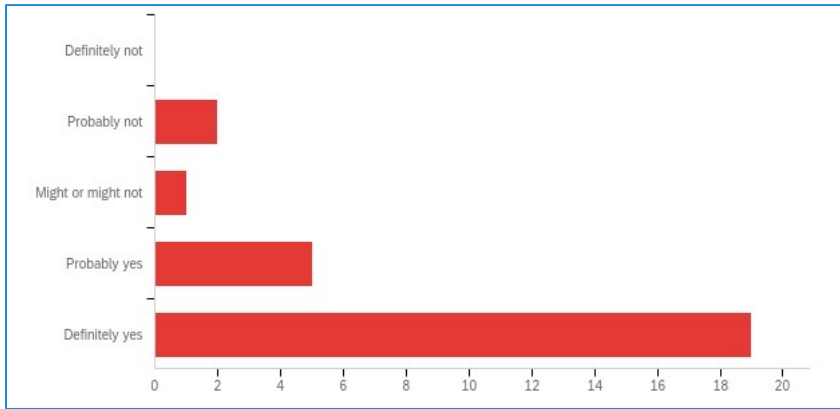
Limitations placed on women's roles was a common theme raised by respondents who learned of their church's position only when they were faced with barriers to their ministries. One woman stated, 'I was exploring vocation to ordained ministry. The incumbent kept contradicting himself, I pushed, and he came clean.' In this example the lay worshipper needed to extract the information from her incumbent, who seemed reluctant to be open and straightforward about his views. Another woman described her experiences of lay leadership; 'I asked about leadership... had led services and preached

at other churches... I was pushed away at all turns unless I wanted to do children's work.' Some of the interviews shed some additional light on this type of scenario; some participants speculate that leaders who are not upfront about their gendered theologies may be motivated by a desire to be sensitive, to protect the congregation from difficult debate and to promote harmony. In our examples, even direct questions about women's ministry were met with obfuscation and a lack of clarity. Our research underlines, however, that not being explicit about the limitations set on women's ministries is harmful because it denies women agency, makes it difficult for women to flourish in their chosen church and stymies their sense of calling (lay and ordained).

The lack of transparency about views held on gendered roles makes church life difficult for women negotiating their place. Respondents describe contexts in which the church's position was 'never discussed' or 'just assumed'. One woman described the impact of being in such an unclear context; 'they were very kind leaders and I liked them... it was more like the lines were just hidden away, so I still kept tripping over them.' This response is a reminder that theologies that differentiate according to gender involve boundaries, limits, and lines which women must negotiate – in other words, the impact is on women. Positions may be 'just hidden away', as the respondent describes it, either through softened language or by not being made explicit, but the effects felt are real and explicit. Negotiation of unseen and unspoken boundaries is ultimately about placing the labour on to individual women.

The survey results also provide evidence that there is confusion over resolutions. Some respondents simply did not know whether their church held a resolution or not, even having worshipped there for some time. 21% of respondents said their church held a resolution, whilst 26% answered that their church did not. A further 26% said they did not know, with the rest of respondents choosing not to answer the question, which may suggest a lack of knowledge. In other words, around half of respondents were unable to say whether their church had a resolution or not. These figures, though modest in volume, suggest there is a need for churches to raise awareness about resolutions and to do so regularly. Further research is required to determine the extent to which congregations are aware of their church's resolutions, what levels of consultation are undertaken before a resolution is passed by the PCC, and how often this is revisited.

From the responses detailed above it is clear that the matter of transparency should not be considered in isolation from its impact on lay women. The graph below shows the distribution of answers to the question, 'do you think attending a church which held this position affected you?'



One of the most concrete ways our respondents described the effect of ‘attending a church which held this position’ was the frustration of their own sense of vocation, both in lay and ordained ministry, and that of other women. One respondent said, ‘I became uncomfortable with the clear limits being placed on women within the leadership structure of the church.’ Another described the impact; ‘It was taken for granted that these exclusions existed and affected my whole view of priestly ministry.’ Respondents mentioned feeling either unsupported or actively blocked from taking on more leadership within the church; ‘I felt overlooked and patronised almost constantly. I have worked with young people and children all my working life but this church were not interested in using me.’ We have focused on the impact on individual women, however, this last comment should raise the alarm about the impact on the whole Church in terms of wastage of talent and gifts.

One respondent who still attends a resolution church described a difficult situation in terms of discomfort:

*Warm welcome from congregation 18 years ago. Since then I'm training to be a LLM [licensed lay minister] same love and warmth but not from all. Very sad and there is hurt on both sides as hopefully I will now also be ordained, my calling changed last year. Not all welcome this and I'm not comfortable in this parish at the minute.*

Another respondent had an even more stark experience, stating that she learned of the position in her former church because ‘I was not allowed to pursue my calling to ordination.’ (This type of situation has also been raised in Sharon Jagger’s 2019 research). When asked to describe her experiences in that church, the respondent stated:

*Put upon for service roles. Boys treated differently to girls in Sunday school and youth groups. Worship leaders were men even though not the best musicians. Men put forward for ordination not women. No women speakers or priests came to*

*minister but plenty of men. As a woman I could not have a vocation to ministry.*

*God only chooses men.*

In addition to describing limitations put on women's ministry because of gendered theological positions ('God only chooses men'), this response raises a theme present in both our survey and interview data – that of power exercised over women in the church context. Clergy have a gate-keeping role in the discernment process which affords them significant power over lay women in their congregations wishing to explore their vocation. The respondent quoted above states she was 'not *allowed*' to pursue ordination, a perception of the power over her held by her church leadership. We acknowledge, of course, that women seeking support for ordination are not barred from doing so in most parishes, but this strengthens the argument that transparency is a vital matter of agency and of responsibility and ethics in the gate-keeping process. In other words, women should have access to knowledge about whether their incumbent would support a woman's exploration of ordained calling. It is, in our view, unethical to wield gate-keeping power (whether perceived or actual) without the fully informed consent of those who place themselves under clergy leadership.

Another aspect of the exercise of power is revealed in other respondents describing how they were strongly influenced and encouraged towards specific forms of ministry, such as children's ministry or practical service such as catering. One respondent noted that even in this she was not a free agent, as doing the children's work was 'deemed OK but they told me what to teach.' In other responses power is more diffuse; the power to shape opinion and to create a culture. One respondent described her experience thus:

*It just felt that female experience was never acknowledged or celebrated and that not hearing a woman's voice became increasingly difficult. I was concerned about the lack of female role models for the children that attended and although women read and prayed publicly, they also did most / all of the catering*

These responses are a reminder that women's lay ministry includes leadership, responsibility, and authority, which is curtailed significantly in some churches; these stories can be eclipsed by the more visible process of avoiding women's ordained ministry. Some respondents highlighted how differentiating between male and female lay roles means that women do not have the same access to leadership and authority. One woman stated that she had 'hated seeing women in subservient roles' in her church. Many respondents indicated women's roles were restricted to children's work, cleaning and providing refreshments, mirroring the gendered separation of the domestic and the public realms. We want to recognise and value this important service undertaken faithfully by lay women in the Church of England week in, week out. However, our respondents recognise that framing these



ministries as the only ones suitable for women relies on essentialist and stereotypical notions of gender. The survey of websites discussed earlier highlights the discourse that men's and women's differentiated roles have equal value. Some of our respondents challenge that discourse, suggesting there is a hierarchy of roles, with power and authority being invested in roles to which women have no access. We argue this challenge is important because it dovetails with our discussion about how the word 'equal' is used alongside explanations of differentiated roles.

The survey data affords glimpses of lay women's experiences in churches where ministry is differentiated according to gender. Many respondents communicated strong feelings on the issues. One woman reflected; 'I am not bitter, just sad, greatly concerned and dismayed.' When asked if they had been part of a Church of England church which limits the role of women in some way, 57% of respondents stated that whilst they had, they no longer attended such a church. It was clear from their longer answers that many of these responses reflected feelings that they could no longer stay in a church environment where they were restricted. As we discuss in more detail later, the choice to leave a church can come at profound personal cost and some have spoken to us about abandoning churchgoing altogether (though not necessarily abandoning their faith). Moreover, it is a loss to the Church when lay women feel they cannot remain and contribute fully to their churches, and this should be of concern to all church leaders. To understand in more detail the impact of masking, downplaying, and obfuscating of gendered theologies – in other words, the lack of transparency in many churches – we interviewed a group of people who have experienced being in such church contexts.

## Part 3: Stories and the Impact of 'Not Knowing'

### Introduction

We conducted 15 interviews of between forty-five minutes and an hour and forty-five minutes. Participants largely identified as female – with one non-binary participant – and ranged from their 20s to 80s. All had spent at least a year in a CofE church which they felt in some way limited the role of lay and ordained women. Some of these churches have voted on resolutions and are members of an organisation such as Forward in Faith or The Church Society. Others hold their positions more informally but still felt by our participants to limit women's ministry because of theological beliefs.

This part of our research raises questions about why transparency about gendered theological beliefs is an issue and why some people report difficulty in discussing the issue openly and honestly. Some of our participants suggest there can be a tendency on the part of church leaders to play down gendered

positions and speculate this may be from a desire to maintain harmonious relationships or a paternalistic view that the congregation needs protecting from difficult debate. Moreover, some participants feel that some in church leadership are unwilling to put themselves in positions where their views might be challenged. Sharon Jagger's (2019) previous research suggests decades of debate have left a legacy of discomfort, fear, and entrenchment around beliefs about gender and ministry. We acknowledge also, that there is anxiety about church decline and connections to reputational damage when theological positions are at odds with wider societal equality and inclusion aspirations. We might also ask whether some church leaders are unaware that transparency is fundamentally about preventing harm. These are suggestions about the reasons transparency in matters of gender and lay and ordained ministry has developed into a significant issue. For clarity, and to be faithful to the participants who have shared their stories with us, we maintain that none of the barriers to transparency suggested above would justify non-transparency that robs people of agency in their choice of church. We do suggest, though, understanding these barriers would be helpful, and recommend further research with church leaders.

The themes we highlight below include implications for both the local and national church in relation to the lack of transparency about gendered theological positions and other themes explore the personal impact of learning about these positions on our participants. Some participants explored their decision to remain in the local church whilst others described making the significant and difficult decision to leave the Church entirely. The participants' stories shed light on the ways messaging about gendered positions were either communicated or hidden. Issues raised range from absence of any messaging or discussion to strategies of individualising and minimising challenges and questions.

### Choosing a church and lack of information

Participants we interviewed had chosen churches to attend for various reasons. Some were brought up in that church, others went to their local parish church when they moved into the area or wanted to explore the Christian faith further. Two of our participants primarily chose their church because it was well-regarded for its children and youthwork program. Two participants were at university when they went along to the local church most popular with students, without fully understanding there may be distinctions amongst CofE churches in positions on women's roles. One participant, Tabitha<sup>28</sup>, said: 'nothing occurred to me that they would have a different perspective of women's leadership or gifting than the church I had grown up with because it didn't look very different to me.' Tabitha was not aware of any discernible clues to the church's position in either practice, tradition, or explicit

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<sup>28</sup> All participants have pseudonyms

communication. She was a lifelong churchgoer but had mainly attended Baptist churches and was unfamiliar with differences between CofE churches.

Whilst several of our participants were aware that the CofE held together contrasting gendered theologies, attempts to avoid a church 'with extreme views' were thwarted by a lack of messaging of the church's position. Other participants were entirely unaware that there were differences between parish churches and that some were not supportive of women's ordination or differentiated ministry according to gender. Natalie decided to begin regularly attending church as an adult stating:

*I went back to the kind of the church that was closest to me, which I've been to as a kid in Brownies, I was confirmed in that church through Brownies. I had no idea at that time that there were resolutions in place and even if I had, I wouldn't have known what that meant, you know?*

This example underlines the need to avoid assumptions about levels of understanding and knowledge about theological differences and about specialised language. Equally, Natalie's example shows that theological positions on gender (amongst other things) matter to people looking for a church in which to belong. In other words, lack of knowledge about the Church of England landscape should not be interpreted as lack of interest in how theology shapes gendered experiences. On the contrary, the strong message from our research is that once participants fully understood the implications of certain theological positions, they cared deeply. Moreover, the way participants come to learn about their church's position can compound the sense of disappointment, anger, and shock.

One participant described her process of discovering the views that her church's leadership held on women's roles:

*Then we realised, you know, started reading about things, never heard of complementarianism, never heard of the Five Guiding Principles, although, you know, I'm not saying that we weren't totally ignorant about things, but basically, you just get on with your life and you're doing other things, you know.*

For lay people, church attendance is one aspect of often busy lives, but the underlying principle we draw from this, and other stories, is that the onus on becoming aware and asking the right questions should not lay with congregation members. Rather, it is the responsibility of church leaders to ensure theological positions are made obvious and accessible. We discuss the issue of the emotional labour expected of lay worshippers in more detail.

Some participants told us of how their church changed around them, as new incumbents arrived with conservative views on gender roles. For example, Yvonne, a lay woman with a track record of

significant work in outreach and social justice, found that the church she had attended and worked in for many years began to change its character when a new incumbent arrived who had a complementarian theology. She felt this had a profound impact on the ministry of the church, that unfolded over time; 'by discriminating against women, the church had become an island in the parish' she told us. Such was the change in focus, she felt she could no longer attend. Yvonne no longer attends any church and although she has held on to her faith, she is deeply disillusioned with the Church's acceptance of theological stances that exclude women from leadership or ordination.

Throughout our interviews we saw repeated evidence of a lack of transparency, with lay worshippers having no way to easily discern their church's position before, or even once they had begun, attending. Participants told us that they often had to discern from clues: the absence of women in leadership roles, intercessions for a bishop who was not the diocesan bishop, the provision of gender segregated bible studies and such like. Some participants had noticed they were subtly discouraged from pursuing opportunities. For example, one participant talked about how she had shown an interest in learning to preach, her husband was asked to take part in training instead, confusing and damaging to self-esteem since she did not know that the incumbent held strong complementarian views, something she only learned after several years in the church. Bridget, having attended a conservative evangelical church, reflected 'I had no idea that this particular church was so anti it. There was no sense of that from any of their online stuff or literature or any of that.' Natalie said similarly, 'it wasn't explicit anywhere' that her church was traditionalist. For another participant, Rowan, it was months of attending before they began noticing clues about their church's position, but it was only when they were fully 'brought into the fold' a year and a half later that the significance of being in a Forward in Faith church was explained to them. In Georgie's interview she discussed a church that she is currently attending, where she likes the vicar personally but is concerned about the lack of transparency around his views: 'I wouldn't say he shies away from difficult topics. It's just that he shies away from *certain* difficult topics' which she understood to be gender and sexuality. These are examples of a lack of easily available information, coupled with the reluctance of some church leaders to discuss specific topics. In Rowan's case, there is a perception that only once a person has been drawn into the church does the positioning on gender become clear. What these examples also show is that there are different ways in which there is a culture of silence – the absence of public statements or unclear statements (as we discussed in the first section of the report) is something that can be simply addressed. However, some of the stories shared with us point to a culture where theological positions on gender (and sexuality) are taboo.

## Silence and Silencing

We feel that some of the stories shared with us reveal how the beliefs around gender and ministry have become taboo in some quarters. The main theme arising from the stories we collected was how conversations in church were rarely conducted openly and clearly. Some participants recalled guesses and rumours passed on to them quietly by other church members; the vicar may be a member of Reform, or the church was considering voting on a 'flying Bishop', for example. For Effie the only clue on joining a new church that her vicar held complementarian views was an awkward silence as she described how much she had enjoyed having a woman curate at her previous church. She described how she was aware she had said something wrong, but no explanation was given about why this was a difficult subject. By the time she pieced together her vicar's position she felt it was too late to leave and miss out on the relational networks and sense of belonging she had found. Another participant described how confusing conversations were, even when she had talked about ordained vocation with the student liaison person in church:

*I had one of the most confusing conversations of my life. Literally went out of the room thinking I'm not sure I know which way is up right now because we had a discussion for about 45 minutes to an hour during which at no point did she say we don't believe women should be in ordained ministry, but during which she just sort of assumed that I already knew that, and that when I said I wanted to be a Minister, what I really meant was something like, I want to work with children...I remember being so confused as I left and that I still hadn't put two and two together. And just thinking, I don't know why she thought I wanted to work with kids. I don't know why she thought I was particularly interested in teaching women. Well, I'm not sure that we quite saw eye to eye on that one. but I didn't work out why.*

This comment illustrates the lack of clarity and forthrightness in conversations about gender and ministry and raises questions around assumptions of knowledge and the subtle channelling of women into particular roles. We discuss these in more detail later.

Not only are there church cultures where leaders are reticent to explain their theological views, but some participants described how they felt unable to ask questions or speak openly, sensing the subject was taboo. For some participants, questions they asked were met with vague and brief responses. Rowan, for example, asked why the church did not pray for the bishop of their area and was told 'Oh, we have slightly different beliefs than the rest of the Church of England churches in the area and therefore we have a different bishop.' This inadequate explanation acts as a form of dismissal, closing down conversations and avoiding further discussion. Natalie, who wanted to discuss

her call to ordination, recalled the meeting she had with her priest. She describes her feelings of relief at the time that he was kind and polite, but looking back she regrets that deeper issues were left unexplored and were 'glossed over'. She stated: 'I was very like, "I know that we differ theologically", I think and that was it. You know looking back I can't believe that we didn't talk about that more'. This experience brings our discussion back to the gate-keeping role of incumbents.

There may be multiple reasons why theology and practice around women's roles are not openly discussed and some of our participants reflected on these thoughtfully in their interviews. In Natalie's experience there was a sense that her priest avoided the issue at least partly to spare her feelings. However, she felt this was misplaced politeness and would have preferred to understand his views more fully and have the opportunity to discuss openly with him. The silence left her with doubts and feelings of insecurity. Participants reflected and offered thoughts on the reasons why church leaders were not more open on their views on gender: a desire not to cause offence; a lack of self-awareness around biases; to make the church more palatable to newcomers; as a way to retain control and to avoid scrutiny. Whilst some of these suggestions are perceptions, our research did reveal stories where participants strongly felt clergy deliberately hid their views from the congregation and PCC. For example, Avril was shocked to discover her vicar's views on women after having attended her church for eight years. She was a member of the PCC and was informed by another PCC member that their clergy had signed a letter to the House of Bishops threatening to withhold their parish share over the issue of women bishops. This letter was sent without consulting or even informing the PCC and Avril's fellow PCC member discovered it online.

Several interviews raised concerns about the opaque nature of a resolution in place and suggested there needed to be more open discussion and justification for church leaders (PCC and incumbent) seeking alternative episcopal oversight on the parish's behalf. Some participants talked about how they doubted that the congregation were fully informed about the significance of resolutions passed and possibly did not fully understand the different stances co-existing in their diocese. One participant stated that when she challenged her incumbent about consulting the parish 'he said we are not a congregational church. We don't do things like that. The PCC make the decision.' However, as articulated by this participant, wider consultation on a resolution vote is an opportunity to ensure full transparency and openness – a process that also allows the PCC to represent the views of the congregation more faithfully. Natalie reflected in her interview on the experience of being on the PCC during a vote to retain the parish's resolution. In her experience, there was no theological discussion and a large proportion of the PCC abstained as there was an unspoken understanding that without the

resolutions their priest would leave. More generally, the wider congregation were even less aware or engaged:

*I would say that maybe two-thirds of the community didn't necessarily agree or even know why they would have done that. I think there was maybe a small core that would have been like, 'yes, we assert this' and so that, you know, as is often the case, the ones who kind of, I guess, have the most to say speak the loudest, whereas everyone else just trundles along not really bothering what's going on.*

Natalie's experience illustrates how limited communication from the priest on his own position – relying on it being 'just known' – together with few opportunities created for discussion leads to an environment that works against transparency. We argue that transparency requires commitment to an open and honest culture, going beyond public statements by ensuring there is an environment in church where gender and theological positions can be discussed and debated widely. Several participants felt there was a lack of 'safe space' to discuss the issue of women in the Church. In fact, many of our participants specifically mentioned that they valued taking part in this research because it gave them a safe space and the opportunity to relate their experiences, share their opinions, and express strong feelings without having to self-censor.

Some participants described how they gradually became aware that their own views on gender and lay and ordained ministry differed from those of the clergy in their church. For example, Avril recalled how difficult it was being a member of the PCC and believing women should be in leadership roles when her vicar did not; 'I tried to raise, you know, to have healthy open discussions at PCC meetings. But it was always very, very awkward, you know, awkward silences, as you can imagine.' Another participant similarly felt compelled to raise the issue of women priests before her time on the PCC came to an end and was met with silence; 'nobody on the PCC said anything, they never do, apart from the vicar. I just said, you know, "that's how I feel. And I want that to be recorded." It never was recorded.' Rather than an open public discussion, the vicar visited her privately to explain and justify his position. Towards the end of her interview Georgie reflected, 'to be able to just sit there and go "this is really weird and potentially uncomfortable", it's not something the church really has created space for. If I want those spaces – I need them – I have to go to places that I've created quite externally to the church really.' The desire to belong is a powerful factor felt by some of our participants. One recalled her experience on a PCC where the vicar created a compelling narrative that their church was 'not like other churches' because it was so united. She felt this created an environment which strongly discouraged anyone from voicing dissent as they would not want to disrupt the harmony and the sense of togetherness this created. Another participant felt that

members of her church who disagreed with the vicar's complementarian position valued that sense of belonging and relationships in church above the desire to raise difficult issues. These examples suggest that it cannot be assumed that PCCs are forums for open discussion or where dissenting voices can be expressed and heard. We argue this has implications for wellbeing of lay women who are required to process the theological and personal issues in isolation or to seek out alternative spaces for discussion.

In some stories, we heard about the ways challenges and questions about the church's position were derailed by postponing or promising discussion that did not occur. Sara Ahmed (2021) is a scholar who discusses how complaints and critical discussions are sidelined and derailed by institutions by promising to respond but failing to do so, by generating activity and conversations that do not directly address the issue, or by framing the complainer as the person in the wrong. Some of the stories we heard resonate with Ahmed's work suggesting similar institutional and cultural forces are at work; anxiety about reputation, protection of the status quo, lack of awareness of harms, and the notion that conflict is to be avoided are some reasons why institutions fail to address complaints or challenges. One example from our research is Dahlia who was an involved member of her traditionalist parish church around the time that women were first being appointed as priests, and later as bishops in the Church of England. As she began to understand the implications of her church's stance against women priests, she tried to raise the issue with the leaders of the church. She states that she was 'berated' for being divisive and encouraged to wait to discuss it in an 'open forum' 'where all may participate, express their views.' Dahlia grieved that such a forum 'has never happened, was always promised, but it was always put off and postponed, postponed. They never did have an open discussion in the church, never about women priests ever.' Similarly, Bridget's experience was about perpetually delayed conversations. She described her vicar as 'polite' 'charming' and 'winsome' and yet she repeatedly experienced being overlooked and diminished during her time at the church. She describes the indirect communication she received:

*it was never like, 'no, we don't want this' it was like, move on the conversation, deflect ... you're not getting anything back. They say, 'Ohh. Thank you so much, Bridget.' But then you don't hear*

Participants noted another strategy to deflect and diminish requests for discussion is the concept of women's roles being a 'secondary issue' and therefore not worth creating division over. Yvonne, when she spoke to a woman bishop about her difficulties being in a church with a complementarian incumbent, was told it was now considered a secondary issue; 'it makes me feel separate from the Church' she told us. Moreover, her incumbent, who holds complementarian beliefs, uses the



argument that it is more important 'to win people to Christ' than 'rock the boat' by discussing the secondary issue of gender and ministry roles. Yvonne stated she was left feeling judged; 'you're always being told...that what we are doing is a secondary issue...making you feel that you're decriing what [the church leadership] are doing in the ministry.' These are loaded terms that sets up an either/or discourse, using one social justice imperative to silence discussion on another. Not only is the issue of women in leadership and the priesthood being framed as secondary for some participants, but Yvonne told us that when a friend had talked about a change of mind and began accepting egalitarian theology, he was told by the church leader that he had 'gone to the dark side'. These othering discourses are powerful enough in some contexts to close down open discussion. One participant, Effie, described how the framing of gender and ministry as a secondary issue had encouraged her to tolerate the discomfort she felt and enabled her to ignore the impact of being in such a restrictive environment. Another participant, who was also told the issue was secondary, described how she was unconvinced when her vicar insisted, 'you mustn't quarrel about things like that because it's a secondary issue.' She responded, "'It's not a secondary position to us and it certainly hasn't been a secondary position to you". You know, I know full well he talked about leaving.' These participants highlighted to us that claims that issues around women's ministries is a secondary issue contradicts previous discourses and fears of schism, clergy leaving the Church and arguments that the Church of England does not have the authority to make such a doctrinal change. Certainly, our participants agree women in ministry is not a secondary issue and there is a sense that at times it is framed as such to avoid discussion and potential conflict.

Linked to the 'good disagreement' discourse promoted within the Church with the aim of limiting conflict and division over the issue of gender and ministry roles, some participants felt that the leveraging of spiritual and theological principles is a way of closing down conversations and a few participants stated this can be abusive. Both traditions employ powerful discourses around being faithful to tradition and loyal to biblical principles and the 'clear teaching of Jesus' in evangelical contexts. Several participants talked about how the notion of 'unity' was mentioned when they tried to raise concerns about their church's position on women's lay and ordained ministry. For example, Dahlia attended her local parish church during the campaign for women's ordination. She recalled how forcefully the concept of unity was employed around what was called 'a contentious issue' that could split the church. Avril has similarly experienced the pressure to consider her obligations in spiritual terms:

*I was told that if I make a fuss about it, that I'm divisive, distracting people from the gospel work. One of these clergy said to me, 'oh, you should pour water on the*

*fires of disagreement, not oil.' So, characterizing any questioning of it as basically being a bad Christian and disobedient.*

This appeal to unity is a form of silencing coded in spiritual language. Georgie described her voice being taken away because she did not want to be difficult or disruptive: 'just by virtue of not wanting to rock the boat or disrupt that kind of tacit silence around ethical issues. You just say nothing and then you end up saying nothing.' The spiritual weight attached to the concept of unity adds a sense of shame that many of our participants had internalized through spending significant time in environments that discouraged dissent. Mel reflected:

*You lose your sense of boundaries, don't you? Because you're absolutely not taught to – and this is massively gendered in the church – you must not stand up and question and push back and rebel. All those things are absolutely anathema in those church environments.*

Some participants felt ill-equipped to counter the ways discussion was framed in terms of faithfulness to Christian principles. For some, there was an assumption made about levels of theological knowledge. This was Tabitha's experience in a large conservative evangelical church where complementarian theology was never discussed directly but merely treated as a given. This meant for a long time she remained unaware of the leadership's position and confused by conversations whose premise was hidden from her. However, once she learned of the officially held views, she felt isolated. She recalled:

*I definitely did feel I was the only one...Suddenly having this feeling that everyone else in the room was nodding and everyone agreed. And so obviously this was this big secret to me, but like an agreed position that somehow I'd been out of the loop on.*

This environment of assumed knowledge led to Tabitha internalising a belief that she was 'the only one' who disagreed. She therefore lacked the confidence to express her differing theological position and left the church without raising the issue. Other participants had a sense of isolation which they felt was deliberately generated. For example, when Avril tried to raise her concerns around lack of transparency with her bishop she was told, 'you're the only person that's mentioned this to me,' something she now recognises as a silencing tactic.

The ability to critique gendered theologies held by church leaders can also be undermined by a lack of confidence in levels of knowledge of the theological issues, evident in the stories from participants belonging to both traditions of the Church. Tabitha, for example, states:

*I didn't have the resources then because I hadn't been in any debates about it on one side or the other. I hadn't discussed, I don't know anything of what conservatives would have believed on that. I didn't know any of the kind of defences or discussions around it. So yeah, absolutely. Just didn't have any kind of language or framework to know how to consider the question.*

Natalie remembered how nervous she was to raise the issue with her priest:

*I just didn't feel equipped enough.... I guess scared really, and not that I thought that he would like kind of put me down or anything like that, but I just thought he would he would shut down the argument in a in in a theological way that I wouldn't be able to counter*

We argue that limited knowledge around gender and theology is part of the dynamic that reduces the notion of 'good disagreement' to mean *avoiding* disagreement.<sup>29</sup> If discussion is stymied to the extent that lay people are not given the resources to learn about theological differences around gender and ministry, then good disagreement is a hollow concept. (Throughout our interviews, participants described having to do their own research and educate themselves around these issues.) Both Georgie and Carys expressed concern that avoiding contentious theological issues infantilises congregations and does nothing to help further productive discussions. Carys asserted 'there is something to be said for fighting fire with fire and saying, actually this is our rounded theology ... We need to do grounded good theology to counter it.' Another participant suggested; 'it's really important that congregations get the two sides, not just the not just the, you know, the view of the incumbents and the power church.' Yvonne, someone with a long history of church attendance, but who now no longer attends because of experiences in churches related to gender roles and gendered beliefs, told us that she had sought out her own theological education to further understand the different views on gender. She stated that this helped her overcome the complementarian teaching she had received in several different churches. Not only are some lay people feeling ill-equipped theologically, Sharon Jagger's (2019) research also found that amongst women clergy feminist theology (a way of challenging gendered theologies) is marginalised and that often women clergy do not feel they are well-placed to directly challenge, on a theological basis, those who oppose women's ordination and lay women's leadership. We suggest, as does Carys, there is a role for lay people to engage with the theological arguments. One of our recommendations reflects the need to reinvigorate the theological

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<sup>29</sup> A related question is how gender and theology is taught at training stages for clergy (Sharon Jagger's previous research suggests feminist theologies are seen as marginal and specialist subjects) and whether there is scrutiny of and discussion around gendered theologies is routinely part of curricula.

debate so lay people understand the basis of decision-making by church leaders in relation to women's lay and ordained ministry.

Yvonne's story is worth expanding a little further since she talks about some important wider issues. Her attempts to raise the issue of gender differentiation in ministry with her PCC and incumbent were responded to by her vicar, but not the PCC and so open discussion was avoided. Additionally, the difficulty in obtaining time with people in power in the diocese felt like a barrier to Yvonne, a way of ending the conversation (and complaint) by being made to wait for many months or by not receiving timely correspondence. She says, 'you start to think, is there another agenda here, is something going on?' Once she had secured some time with the bishop, who was a woman, the encounter left Yvonne and her friend feeling she had to resist a sense of shame; 'I felt we were an embarrassment to her...you just felt we were a nuisance.' The framing of a complaint as an embarrassment is a signal that the conversation is institutionally unwelcome. If a person trying to raise the issue of gender and ministry senses she is seen as silly, a nuisance, it takes some courage and resilience to continue to push for a discussion. Moreover, as our interview continued, Yvonne discussed how it seemed to her that the experiences of lay women were being set aside, seen as less important, because there has been a level of 'progress' in that women are now bishops. Yvonne wondered whether the progression of ordained women is being somehow protected at the expense of lay women's concerns. Yvonne also felt that once she had raised the issue at diocesan level she was subtly portrayed as the person creating discomfort for the incumbent, thus making him the victim. Making the person who wants to object to being discriminated against feel like the perpetrator, and framing the discriminating person as the victim, is a storyline that appears in Sharon Jagger's (2019) research. We recommend Sara Ahmed's (2021) book 'Complaint' which is an excellent discussion of how this happens in institutions that are attempting to manage complaints according to the needs of the institution. Whilst Ahmed's research is in academic institutions, the discussion is highly relevant to the institutional Church.

### Language, practice, and the limiting of women

As well as leveraging spiritual discourses, some participants felt that language around equality is misused in ways that make dissent and challenge difficult. For Effie, her reluctance to challenge the church leadership about complementarian positions was because the arguments were framed so strongly in language suggesting women's value and equality that she felt unable to counter and resist: 'it's always like overlaid with such an aggressive assertion that they obviously a hundred percent believe that women and men are equal.' Tabitha named this tactic 'double talk'. This use of language was mentioned by participants whose churches held formal resolutions and those whose church was

felt to limit women in a less formalised way. Yvonne told us she had tried to address the issue of transparency and had complained that her church's website used unclear language and obfuscated the complementarian beliefs with statements about believing in the Bible. We noted in the section discussing church websites that the use of equality language in complementarian contexts can create confusion about approaches to gender hierarchy and participants express how challenging it can be to wrestle with the notion of 'equal but different', when the practice is hierarchical. As we argue in the previous section about encouraging theological knowledge, there is scope to support a conversation about terms being used and the meaning-making behind them.

Becoming aware of masculinised language and accepted practices is part of the process of understanding more deeply how a church positions itself in matters of gender and ministry. Stella described the 'drip feed' of leadership using predominantly masculine language and of noticing women appearing as a token or novelty in upfront roles, or as the wife of her church leader:

*We're gonna say that it's all OK and that yes, of course women, women have a lot to bring. They do. They have a lot to bring. They can play with the children, bring a gentler, softer side. They can, they can balance out the actual leader. And in it it's all that kind of unsaid. But if you look at the practice, you think, no, actually we're not, we're not really doing this.*

As awareness is raised, this participant notices the disconnect between discourse of equality and the actual practice. In environments where women are repeatedly described as equal and valued members of the community, particularly when there is no formal arrangement to limit them, lay people may find it difficult to know how to critique practice. In contexts where any form of dissent is framed as divisive, difficult and 'un-Christian' it can seem almost impossible. This underlines the challenge of ensuring transparency in churches that have not voted on a resolution and make much of the value of women's distinct ministry, but where limitations and constraints are still felt by lay women.

In our research we saw that the limitations placed on lay women's ministry in the CofE means that many of the participants felt that their gifts went unexplored, underused, and undervalued – in other words, there is a barrier to flourishing. Bridget, for example, put this starkly:

*I've known for a long time really, that leadership is one of my giftings. And it infuriates me that the church want to squash it down and want to just blatantly ignore anything that I – that's what they did, they blatantly ignored everything that I had to offer.*

Other participants echo Bridget's comments. For some, the opportunity to explore a potential call to ordained ministry has been stymied. In her role as a lay church worker, Mel feels she was dismissed whenever her vicar felt she was overstepping a line. He refused her request to try preaching and she felt there was no encouragement to pursue church leadership further: 'I wasn't allowed to explore any of that... absolutely not! In fact, it was positively squashed out'. Whilst Natalie's relationship with her priest was more positive, it was still difficult for her to explore leadership and teaching gifts in her parish church as preaching and leading were definitely 'off limits' to her. Dahlia told us she offered herself as a lay Reader when she joined her parish church, something that her previous parish experience and theological education meant she was well suited for. She was told by her Rector, 'Well, if you did so, you'd have to promise to obey me.' She was unable to make this promise and was therefore not allowed to exercise her teaching and theological skills in her church. She subsequently felt over-scrutinised and discouraged by the church leader after being told her intercessions included too much theological content. This left her frustrated and deeply hurt. Effie also told us about the limits placed on her ministry. She had been seen as a promising preacher and potential leader in her university church but when she moved home and went to her local parish church, she was given no opportunities to develop this skill. She was very involved in the church, but was mainly asked to help with children's and youthwork. Effie feels her exposure to experience and opportunities have been significantly shaped according to her gender. She notes that her male peers were encouraged to lead bible studies and go on preaching courses, for example. She admits this was something she did not challenge at the time and was only able to see the situation clearly with hindsight: 'If I'd have been a man, they would have been talking to me about ordination and 100% it would have been. But you can't see what's not happening, can you? Until afterwards.' When Tabitha attempted to discuss a vocation to leadership and ministry with a student minister at her church it was simply assumed that she must mean leading either children or women, as no other options were open to her in that context. Georgie discussed how odd these limitations seem to her:

*what was always interesting was that there was absolutely no problem with me using my kind of theological skill, my gifts of public speaking, if I wanted to work with children.... No one objected to me, you know, having a formational role over these young people's spiritual lives ... it still shocks me that there's this arbitrary line drawn between children and adult ministry in that way... just because these people were under the arbitrary legal age of 18, it was quite alright for me to take on these roles that I felt, you know, as I say, were vocational for me. They're not the sum total of what I wanted to do, but I am quite good at doing them.*

As a lay person, Georgie feels called to develop her ministry within the church but feels severely limited because of the gendered distinctions in her place of worship: 'I fundamentally believe that I have gift to offer the church that are exclusively given to men in some contexts, and therefore I'm probably not alone in that, even if I don't want to be a priest.' Moreover, Georgie felt called to pursue academic theology and yet was unsupported and even criticised when she shared this aspiration with her church leadership. They questioned, 'Why would you want to do that? Well, you don't want to be a priest, do you?' Elaborating further, Georgie talked about a vocation as an aspect of one's sense of self. The impact of being limited is therefore significant and we discuss this in more detail later.

As well as not being able to exercise their gifts in the fullest sense (not differentiated according to gender), some participants told us how their professional knowledge was often overlooked and ignored even though such expertise could be valuable to the church. For example, one participant had significant career expertise around safeguarding and yet felt this was invisible in her church:

*[the Vicar] went to a diocesan training day and came back with this sheet that he'd done with all this guidance and gave it out to everybody to say, this is how you should handle sexual abuse. I thought I'm sitting here. You've never asked my opinion. You've never asked me to talk to the PCC, I just thought at the time, well, what a put down. That is, if I was a man, you'd have been asking me to do you know, to put something together and talk to people.*

This participant felt belittled and frustrated by her vicar's actions. Furthermore, the church missed the opportunity to gain valuable insight into a complex issue. Similarly, another participant, Bridget, had years of youth and children's experience and yet was overlooked and not given credit for this expertise, eroding her confidence:

*it was like a blank wall not recognising that I have that I had any kind of leadership ability not recognising that I had um the experience to bring to the table in terms of youth work, or children's work... I was just met by a complete like, we're not interested, don't want you*

Such stories illustrate the contrast to the lives of women outside the church – their expertise, their leadership skills, and their authority. Participants also said they felt pressured into roles which were considered appropriate for their gender but to which they did not feel particularly suited. When taken together our participants' stories evoke a pervasive ideology around stereotyped gendered roles. Carys reflected that when she was growing up in the church, she was influenced by the roles she saw women inhabiting:

*The only women in the church did the flowers or did the cleaning um, you know, were very subservient in their role. And I mean, that's still the case now. I mean, if you, if you look at who's doing the teas and the coffee on a Sunday, it's very rarely the blokes doing it.*

Rowan's experience as a young child echoed this as they experienced a church where there was 'no deviation from traditional gender boundaries', with their mother being 'pushed into these very segregated roles.' The participant whose safeguarding expertise was ignored by her vicar, reflected with frustration on what was perceived as valuable in her church:

*I've been cooking for the luncheon club for about 20 years, but at the same time I was working and being, you know, running a team [at work] and doing all sorts of things. And but it's like, you know, 'she does lovely dinners ... You know, she looks after us.*

The stories above show that the limitations placed on women's lay ministries is a potent theme that impacts individual women and the local and national Church. Our participants have revealed the additional challenges and hurdles faced by women in contexts where they do not receive the same encouragement as their male counterparts; they are unable to flourish in their ministries. Rather than having their gifts drawn out and being offered increasing opportunities in a familiar setting they must negotiate complex arrangements to go elsewhere, or as in Mel's and Effie's case, give up. We have discussed this loss to the Church in terms of ordained ministry; the loss of lay women's ministry may be less visible but is harmful to the institution's capacity to draw on well-trained, gifted women into leadership positions, both lay and ordained.

## Gender roles

We have discussed how gendered theologies limit women's lay ministry, as experienced by our participants. Some stories shared with us reveal that such limitations and prescriptions are not limited to formal forms of ministry, but gendered ideologies seep into many spheres of life. Some participants feel they have been in a wider environment that reproduces gender stereotypes and profoundly limiting and limited understandings of gender, but also others emphasised that such gender differentiation is not part of the normal experience of life. One participant stated that she noticed after some time that things were 'weird'. Georgie joked that stereotypes around gender were epitomised by the kinds of events that churches put on for women: 'Why don't women's breakfast get bacon? We like bacon actually... You can have croissants. I don't want croissants, I want bacon!' Two areas were particularly mentioned by participants as being affected by gender stereotyping in the



church – employment and family relationships. As has been noted above, our participants experienced their skills and knowledge gained through employment being undervalued in the church. More pervasive than this was the sense for many participants that traditional gendered norms were still operating in their churches meaning their work was entirely disregarded, or even discouraged. Leah and Bridget noted that the only ‘women’s groups’ in their churches met mid-morning during the working week, which spoke volumes to our participants about expectations that women in the church would not be doing full time paid work. Whilst Bridget enjoyed the women’s group at her church personally, she struggled with the ‘antiquated’ rationale she felt underpinned church activities: ‘Let’s just get the women together because you know they’re too busy having babies... and homemaking to kind of need to go to work. You don’t want to go to work...They’re free in the week.’ Leah similarly reflected that there was a broader lack of respect for women’s employment and careers:

*The culture in that church was that if you worked that that wasn't really the best way of life, like actually you should really be at home, especially if your kids were little and there's an expectation that even then if you worked, you were part-time and you were doing some kind of nice job and there wasn't a respect.*

For Leah, the lack of respect the church had for women’s employment was conveyed subtly, through microaggressions, such as her husband being asked about his work and no interest shown in her work. She grieved that when she had wanted to borrow some items from the church hall for an event she was organising ‘there’s no way I could have gone to the main leadership team because it wasn’t, there wasn’t the respect for the work that I was doing.’ As the CofE looks to support and empower its lay members in their diverse vocations throughout the week, it must be acknowledged that work is gendered and gendered theologies impact the way work is perceived in the church (see Frigerio, 2023). In church contexts where lay women feel unsupported or even uneasy talking about their paid work, their ability to integrate faith and daily life is significantly hampered. This can be an issue for all lay church members, but our research suggests there is an important gendered dimension in some churches.

The discourse about women’s roles as wives and mothers being more valued and given more approval than other roles was discussed by several participants. Mel, for example, found this type of messaging particularly damaging and difficult coming from her vicar in oblique ways: ‘there were never open conversations about it... He just absolutely thought women should be wives and mothers.’ Another participant, a child-free woman, also raised this as an unspoken, yet profoundly impactful, belief in her church, where the traditional family unit was constantly reinforced as the gendered, heteronormative template. Another participant, Effie, stated that even being a feminist and her own mother having a

successful career, she found it difficult to counter the pervasive gender ideology in church as it was presented so subtly:

*But it was subtle, and the pressure was subtle. And I think it was like, you know... they would maybe preach in a sermon about families and like the sense of it wasn't good for children to have both parents out of the house. But it was very clear, you know that they meant the woman. So I suppose that stuff like that was subtle. I'm like, you couldn't quite say Ohh ohh, hang on a sec. You know it just like it's just drip, drip, drip, drip, drip*

Effie had just completed university when she attended her complementarian church and felt that this was an 'impressionable' time to be in a context that modelled women's roles primarily as wives and mothers. She regrets that she did not receive more encouragement to consider her career path or vocation. She also reflected that the context she was in 'where women's careers and women's vocations were so secondary to men's' had influenced her marriage in the subsequent years. Her husband had pursued a career choice which had significantly impacted on her and yet she had felt unable to assert herself and instead 'went along with something that I was really unhappy with.' She found the spiritualised element most powerful: 'surely [the vicar] planted that seed of narrative of like, well, that's disrespectful to God, that's disobedient to God for you to stand against His will for your husband's life.' Effie felt that not only her perceptions of work, but also her closest relationships were significantly constrained by her church's views on gender. We revisit the impact such gendered theologies and ideologies have on lives and relationships in the next section.

## Personal Impact

So far in this report we have outlined the ways some churches fail to be transparent about theological positions, and the how these positions are worked out to restrict and alter women's ministries. We have left until last a discussion that is perhaps the most important; the effect and impact non-transparency and the workings of gendered theologies have on individual women and their relationships (without diminishing men's experience). The focus of this research is how the lack of openness about theological positions that define church roles and ministries in terms of gender compounds the harms described to us by the people we interviewed and who responded to our questionnaire. When women do not know they worship in churches where the leadership does not support women's lay or ordained ministry on equal terms to men's, we are told there is a significant impact on self-esteem, confidence, and faith once such positions come to light. There is often shock

and disillusionment. One participant told us; 'it just felt like being punched in the gut, because I had no idea.' Here we highlight the participants' descriptions of the negative impacts of the lack of transparency on life, their vocations, and their sense of self.

Several participants expressed feelings of missing out on exploring ordination because they were diverted away from it by church leaders. The issue identified clearly by some participants is the gate-keeping powers clergy have over those exploring an ordained vocation. Natalie, who explored her own calling to ordained ministry, shared her thoughts on this:

*You have to have the support of your parish priest in order to go forward. So what I thought was I would be able to kind of sidestep it was like, oh, he doesn't support the ordination of women. I thought OK. So that isn't the case and what I realised I had to do was I just had to go and have a conversation with him.*

Lay women are at a significant disadvantage in discerning their calling to both lay and ordained leadership if they find themselves in a church where this type of ministry is not supported. Tabitha talked about how she realised non-transparency deeply affected her ability to explore a calling:

*Transparency is obviously the thing that I think would have changed my experience the most because I was there so long while discerning a call for ministry for myself without realising that that wasn't a supportive environment to do it in. And if I'd just known I could have just gone, OK I'll go have these conversations somewhere else where people are more open to it...Rather than kind of feeling like I was hitting this brick wall of there is an assumption here and I don't understand it.*

As this comment shows, transparency is a fundamental part of ensuring women have agency about where they put their energies and the church they wish to commit to whilst they are exploring their own calling. A participant in Sharon Jagger's (2019) previous research shared a similar story that is worth sharing here to emphasise these are not isolated and unique experiences and that women can be sabotaged by clergy who have not been fully open about their unwillingness to support them in their ordination journey. A woman who is now ordained shared how she had no understanding of her incumbent's position on gender and ministry until she reached the stage in her discernment journey when a reference from her church was required. The reference given by her vicar was extremely negative and he refused to support her call. She described the shock of this:

*The DDO<sup>30</sup> asked 'did no-one ever tell you [your vicar] was Forward in Faith?' and I said, 'No, they didn't ...I certainly felt unworthy to be called as a human being, but I didn't feel unworthy to be called because I was a woman, if that distinction makes sense. And all of the experiences after that of effectively men via the institution questioning that...*

This story again brings to the fore the damage that silence causes when women are seeking to fulfil their vocations, lay and ordained, but are not given information about the appropriateness of the church in which they worship. The participant telling the above story had to move churches and begin the discernment process again.

Another participant in our study has reflected on the gate-keeping role of clergy having discovered her vicar, who does not theologically support women's ordained ministry, is on a selection panel:

*They've got such power overall ordinands and women who want this, who feel they're being called by God to do this job and then they put men who don't approve of women in the priesthood anyway in a position where they can select them or reject them. The Church of England's got to address that. That's not right. It's just absolutely appalling.*

Our participants also emphasise that the gate-keeping power of clergy applies as much to lay women's ministry as to the calling to ordained ministry. Stella describes it thus:

*I think so much is going to depend on the vicar of that church... If the pervading culture is that it's the men that do the bits up the front, I don't know what to tell that woman, who wants to stretch, particularly if her vicar isn't going to encourage her...Many things, particularly involving church leadership, so things like licensed lay minister roles or Readership, or you know if it's that kind of leadership that they're looking for, that needs the vicar's sponsorship...they could go to the diocese and ask about it and ask for details. But I don't think they're gonna get very far if they haven't got the um the sponsorship of the vicar behind them.*

The role of clergy as gatekeepers for both lay and ordained ministry raises significant questions in the context of non-transparency around theological positions on gender roles. Coupled with the cultural silence our participants describe, we argue this presents a significant problem that the Church should

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<sup>30</sup> DDO refers to the Diocesan Director of Ordinands – the person who manages the process of people going through the selection.

address. Our participants talked in personal terms about the impact on their lives, their confidence and their faith journeys and such personal costs should be persuasive enough to engender changes in approaches to transparency. But we highlight here the loss of women leaders to the institutional Church, a finding that should stimulate systemic solutions, such as providing and advertising alternative ways for women to explore ordained vocations.

Some participants have spent many years in their chosen churches, often growing up in and being formed by their church community. Several told us that finding out they were in a church context where the leadership framed women in complementarian ways that restricted their faith-based activities led them to realise the fundamental ways this had shaped their sense of self and therefore their whole life trajectories. Avril, someone who had attended her local church believing there were no 'extreme views' told us that coming to understand the gendered attitudes and beliefs of her church leadership over the years led her to see how fundamentally she had been altered by being in such a context. She states, 'I would be a different person I think if I'd if I'd grown up without having all this stuff put on me.' Mel shared the pain of piecing together the life-altering impact of unwittingly being formed by conservative evangelical views; 'I can kind of see the erosion of this very confident young girl who should have maintained that level of confidence right through. But I just was absolutely scythed down. That's how I kind of interpret it now, and at 54 I'm only just back to where I should have been (and I'm not really). I'm bruised and battered.' Tabitha was a student when she began to realise her chosen church put limits on her leadership potential because of her gender. She attended a church that had been signposted by her university's Christian Union – it was known as a student church. Whilst exploring her own calling to leadership she became aware in a meeting that the church defined women's ministry in limiting ways:

*I didn't even realise this was a question. Should I be asking myself: am I allowed to be a minister as a woman? You know I'm being really conflicted about it, oh, he's [the vicar] just listed all of these roles, like children's worker and leading Bible studies for women and serving as a Deacon, and all of these kind of roles they felt were appropriate. And suddenly I'm going, am I supposed to be doing that? Is there actually a ceiling on this that I can't be the minister?*

Self-doubt was Tabitha's initial reaction to suddenly realising ministry roles were considered gendered and that as a woman she 'ought' to think of herself as a children's worker or a teacher of women. This questioning unsettled Tabitha's sense of vocation, despite growing up in a different church which was fully egalitarian.

As an important aside, Tabitha's story also raises questions about the influence wielded by organisations such as student Christian Unions in signposting local churches. Research undertaken by McIntosh and Jagger (2021), shows how signposting to local churches for LGBTQ+ students is given careful consideration by university chaplains to ensure 'safe' inclusive churches are identified. There is scope to extend this awareness to those churches with traditionalist and complementarian views, including churches formally under alternative episcopal oversight, so students are aware of the positions about gender as well as sexuality of the churches they might attend whilst at university. This might be usefully discussed with the Student Christian Movement.

For those participants who had been raised with male-only images of priesthood and leadership, the self-doubt and self-questioning were more foundational. Some participants struggled to imagine themselves as leaders or consider the idea of priestly vocation for themselves. For example, Effie had at one time considered ordination but had felt her theological imagination had been shaped so powerfully by complementarianism that she did not put herself forward. Leah also described the significant way her personal growth had been affected: 'I never felt like I could be fully me at that church...So, I think you know I kind of closed off a part of me that felt like it had to, you know, stay quiet I guess.' And Bridget states;

*The impact on me has actually been far more significant than I gave it credit for at the time... I found myself really losing a lot of confidence...I think that it, yeah, it really knocked my confidence. It kind of made me feel like I was back in the box, back in a kind of restricted place, really, in terms of faith...It made me and it felt so weird because I've done so much of the work to kind of climb out of that box already.*

And for Avril, the affect was nothing short of life-altering:

*People have described me as a mouselike individual or, you know, downtrodden and things like that.... I've always been very, very happy to take a back seat because I thought if I wanted to take a, you know, if I was pushy then a) I would be repulsive and b) I would be bad, you know, because it wasn't the main thing. And as a result, I'm still cripplingly bad at public speaking and being confident in the workplace. I went to a seminar on Saturday and at the beginning when you have to introduce yourself, I couldn't look anyone in the eye. I was just looking at the floor... It has taken me a couple of years to recover, to try to make sense of what*

*happened and share it with you for you to do with it as you please. Up to now I felt intimidated by the clergy at [church] and this kept me quiet. I'm still afraid of them*

There is anger expressed along with the regret and pain of missed vocations and all that entails. Effie highlights that often the effects of being in a gendered environment without fully understanding the implications can take years to be recognised;

*You could have interviewed me while I was in it, and I would have been like, it's great. It doesn't affect me at all. And yet ten years down the line, I'm like, that fucking messed with my head. Like a mess in my head. To the extent that it will, I might never recover.*

Understanding the extent of the harms described by the participants is crucial if we are to do justice to their candour and courage in telling their stories. Mel helps us to understand that sometimes the internalising of gendered beliefs leads to self-blame, shame, and a sense of alienation and this plays a role in building barriers to open discussion; 'I had no language or understanding. It's all on me. All on my shoulders. I'm a weirdo, I must be a weirdo because all this stuff is happening around me...You think that's me just being sensitive or I haven't understood.' This comment underlines why our research is vital and should remain open to others wanting to share stories. The tragedy for many women (and men who also feel isolated in their egalitarian views) is that there are churches that support women on the same terms as men to exercise their ministry without reference to their gender. Feelings of being alone and alienated are a direct result of being in an environment that is not transparent. We do not believe these are isolated stories and the more we can collect, the more the systemic and cultural issues are revealed.

### Impact on family and relationships

Whilst it was not our initial intention to explore these relational impacts, most participants brought this area of their lives into the discussion on the impact of church belief and practice on their closest relationships. Leah, for example, felt that it was somewhat inevitable that her closest relationships would be impacted, given the lack of authority women were given within her church:

*I think it also affected [my husband] probably in a negative sense because again, you know, you lose, I think it contributes to him like losing respect from me, but he's not gonna listen to me in the same way if you're not listening, you know, you've got no other women figure that's speaking and you're hearing from and*

*kind of you know only the man's voice is listened to and respected...I think it's that hard for [my husband] to then listen to my voice in that sense.*

Another participant also felt her voice has been impacted by 'internalized views of how men and women operated in marriage.' Reaching the point where she had deconstructed some of those views had taken time; 'I look back on my early marriage and think it took me a while to start saying, hang on a minute. You know, I've got opinions too.' Georgie was more positive about how her and her husband had over time been able to negotiate the gendered teaching they were presented in their church and establish an egalitarian marriage which suited them. However, overcoming the deeply engrained sense of what they ought to be doing in their marriage was part of the process, and ultimately, she is able to say; 'I have absolutely no ill conscience anymore and about living in a marriage where there is no kind of complementarian headship.' Such conversations, though, can be a source of personal distress and relational friction, and one participant noted that whilst many of her church friends agree with her about women's equality:

*[They] just won't discuss it because their husbands don't, yeah, because the husbands don't believe it. No, they just say 'well, we can't enter into any of that we you know, it's just going to cause disharmony, you know', and it's sad.*

Mel told us she had experienced a profoundly dysfunctional marriage and felt her church's teaching and practice around gender had created a dangerous context for this kind of domestic abuse:

*The church stripped me of my feminist personal power to resist and to stand up for myself and just say, you know really this is not my idea of what a good marriage looks like... it is really difficult to kind of evidence this, but I do think it allowed that kind of thing...absolutely everything was controlled by him. So, it kind of mirrored then what I felt was going on in the church.*

Discussing the connections between domestic abuse and gendered theologies is beyond the scope of this report, however, there is a body of academic literature that tackle this important subject (see for example, Wendt, 2008; Nason-Clark, 2013).

Alongside their experiences in marriage, some of the most personal stories shared during the interviews related to relationships with children. Avril discussed how angry she had been to learn her daughters had been taught the doctrine of male headship at a young age:

*Without our knowledge or consent, both our daughters were taught the doctrine of male headship through the youth group. So, our 13-year-old daughter in her*



*experience, on one occasion in the youth group was that the youth group leader asked them who would like to say the prayers and my daughter put her hand up and then the youth group leader said 'no, it's got to be one of the guys.' So that's very distressing, you know, to think that your daughters are being modelled and taught to submit without your knowledge or consent.*

Rowan similarly felt there was a lack of transparency around what they were taught as a child in their parish church. This lack of transparency eventually left their mother in a very challenging position:

*I think there was definitely a point at which my mum became aware of what these things were, kind of by that point it was too late .... I think she had a few conversations with our priest where she asked him to stop talking to me about the need to protect the male-only priesthood... She didn't stop me going to those spaces, even when she knew. Because I think in her eyes, the way she saw I was happy, and I had kind of a sense of purpose and a sense of belonging to something. So, she didn't wanna come to disrupt that, even though it was, it probably would have been a lot better if she had.*

Rowan went on to reflect that the gendered spheres within their church put distance in their relationship with their mother. Rowan perceived that, 'The church kind of took a lot of her authority as a mother away'. This was, Rowan felt, inflected by the fact that she was a single mother something out of odds with the church's traditional theology:

*There were definite moments of kind of our priest to some degree, did not trust her authority as a mother and as a woman, and therefore it translated into the way she was generally treated and therefore people would, without realising I think, quite often undermine her authority as a mother.*

These impacts on our participants' closest relationships are deeply personal and entangled with issues of power and transparency. Each story deserves to be heard though our aim is also to present a picture of how the systemic issue of transparency in culture as well as in public messaging has a lasting negative impact on people's lives. Culture is difficult to change through policy alone, and sustained and genuine efforts to be fully transparent about gendered theological views is paramount.

### Impact on faith

Not only did our participants talk about impact on their sense of themselves and their relationships, but also in specific terms about their relationship to religion and spirituality; disillusionment and

struggles to reconcile their difficult experiences with their faith and religious identity. Some continue to worship and have a ministry in the CofE in either lay and ordained capacities. Others have chosen to leave the Church entirely, which some saw as a positive act, though not without pain and loss. For most of our interview participants, their relationship with the Church is unresolved and continues to be a source of pain and frustration. Leah, for example, does not currently attend church with her family and whilst she feels a sense of freedom, she grieves for the things she has lost; 'I think that [church] damaged my view of how, you know, church communities should be, and I feel sad for that, because I've missed you know, there's not many places where you get that sort of type of community.' Rowan similarly experiences a sense of loss, not just for the community but for a stable religious identity and expression:

*I've not had a solid church life for a very long time... I just kind of float around the place. I do religion according to my own whims and my own desires. I have no community with whom to kind of confer and belong, and I think ultimately, and I think to some degree is a butterfly effect, but it does all ultimately boil down to us going to that church.*

Both Leah and Rowan's reflections convey how disorientating a loss of belonging can be. Pain accompanies this loss. Dahlia, for example, was visibly moved in her interview when she related that she no longer attended her parish church. She has attempted to return but finds it too painful:

*I just can't bring myself to do it. Not after the way I was treated at the altar. Not after years, years of – you know it just hurts ... I do not belong here. No. Yes, it does upset me... because I tried lots of times and I've always, there was something happened that I could, I would come home feeling worse than I went.*

Another participant likens leaving her church to a painful divorce; 'I just feel as if I've been in a relationship with somebody for a long, long time and it's been going. It's been failing. It's been falling apart and now I realise it's gone.' Avril, another participant who showed her emotion as she spoke, told us her experiences had taken a huge toll on her mental health. She described how costly the decision to disentangle her life from a religious community was:

*It gave me a kind of nervous breakdown because my kids were in in youth groups and taking them away from the church and leaving the church, which we had loved so much and leaving all our friends – in fact, is making me well up now, all these years on – was horrendous, and finding out that my vicar had, was not the person I*

*thought he was and finding out how he truly regarded me as a woman was just very shocking.*

These participants could not stay in environments where they had experienced the hurt and upset involved in discovering how they were restricted and viewed because of their gender. Yet leaving these churches had also brought pain. The thick networks created in church mean choosing to leave can be a source of continued distress. Given that the Church of England is embedded in geographical communities and plays a key role in many people's life events, we need to take seriously how the systemic and cultural failure to be unambiguously committed to the flourishing of women in all types of ministries leaves some lay women feeling they have no option but to leave their church communities. Dahlia noted that others who felt unable to remain under her traditionalist rector now attend a church in another village and so acknowledges that there are other churches available that provide an egalitarian environment. However, she finds it deeply painful not to be able to attend the church in her own village community, not to be able to be part of her own parish. Another participant felt the loss of her church keenly as it was the place where her children had been christened and her husband's funeral had taken place. Georgie similarly described the relational cost for her of moving on from her 'home church':

*it took me a long time to actually get to the point where I felt as though I could part with it, because there are people at that church, who have known me since I was five years old. They were at my wedding, they were at my confirmation, they, you know, I've grieved with them. I've you know, they're important parts of my youth and growing up and to say I can't have anything to do with this anymore was tough.*

Whilst our participants overall had come to a place where they exercised agency, we emphasise that such a decision to leave is not without significant loss and in most cases did not resolve or undo the sense of harm.

For some of our participants, the sense of disillusionment went beyond the relationship with the institutional Church. For some, these experiences have fundamentally altered how they see their faith. For example, Avril's disappointment in what she saw as sexism in the Church and the apathy amongst its hierarchy has been 'really damaging to my faith.' Effie felt her understanding of God had been shaped so profoundly by the context she had experienced that it was difficult to disentangle:

*I think it just affects the way you see God really, like it's very hard to see God in a different way when, like they're so sure, right? Like they're so sure about who God*

*is, who He is and what He's like and what He approves of and what He doesn't. It takes years. Well, I don't know. I don't think I'll ever unpick that kind of damage.... certainly, I'm not sure my faith will ever recover.*

Another participant was more hopeful that despite the challenges she had experienced she could positively rebuild her spirituality; 'it's rocked our faith we've had to basically deconstruct our faith and we're now trying to reconstruct it. If you, if that's possible, you know, I think, but I hope it is.' These stories bring into focus how theological beliefs about gender (and other aspects of a person's sense of self) are not abstract or academic, but have a direct impact on people, their subjectivity, and their faith journey. Taken in the context of the discourses of 'mutual flourishing' and 'good disagreement' we argue that this project reveals how the praxis that comes out of one side of the debate about gendered theologies, especially when positions are not completely transparent, robs individual people of agency and of subjectivity.

## Remaining and Resistance: Concluding comments

We are aware that this research is likely to open up discussion about other forms of transparency in other areas that have not been the focus of this report. For example, many of the principles discussed here can be applied to Church of England schools that are served by parishes that do not accept women's leadership and/or ordained ministry. We are also aware some churches have patrons who may need to be involved in the conversation about transparency. These areas require further research.

We have related how for many of our participants their stories ended in leaving their churches, however our research shows that leaving is not straightforward and there are sometimes compelling reasons to stay within churches after becoming aware of positions regarding gender and ministry. Natalie and Effie, for example, discussed their personal friendships with their vicars. Both expressed ambivalence during the research, wanting to stress how there had been positive experiences which had encouraged them to stay for so long in their churches. Tabitha, Leah, and Bridget noted that there can also be a stigma around leaving churches, a sense of being disloyal or a desire to avoid the pejorative label of 'church-hopping'. So, we want to underline that it is not always a straightforward decision to leave a church once there is a fuller understanding of the gendered theological environment.

In this final section, we want to air some of the positive experiences shared with us and to emphasise that there are resistances at work. Although we have emphasised the problems and the damage caused by non-transparency, we do not wish to construct our participants as victims without agency or the ability to resist. For some, there remains a strong investment in the Church. For example, Avril

discussed her sense of loyalty and deep affection for the CofE, which was a part of her family's identity but also important to her as an individual; 'I love the Church of England in my own right. It's not, you know, I think it's great that we have a parish system. It's great that we have Episcopal oversight.' Georgie currently attends a CofE church where she is unsure of the vicar's views on the role of women. When discussing if she would feel compelled to leave the church should she discover they disagreed she was unsure; 'I think, desperately want to think, that there's more to a church than a vicar.' Georgie's hope conveys a paradox at the heart of many of our participants' experiences – church leaders can wield significant power over the positioning of a church and as we discuss above can determine the trajectories of lay leaders. However, as Sharon Jagger's (2019) research begins to uncover, many clergy holding views about gender and ministry are highly regarded and have positive relationships with their congregations. So, we need to think in terms of symbolic violence<sup>31</sup> that occurs within cordial relations, a deeper layer of non-transparency. Far from creating a positive, nurturing environment, the levels of obfuscation within such relationships cause harm that goes unrecognised.<sup>32</sup>

The final message from some participants goes beyond transparency. Some participants expressed frustration that the Church still provides a mechanism that separates out those who remain opposed to women's ordination and women being in positions of authority. This arrangement is possible because the Church claims its exemption from equality legislation. We leave the last word to one of our participants: 'I now think the Church of England needs to give up its exemption from the discrimination legislation.'

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<sup>31</sup> The term 'symbolic violence' is suggested by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu to explain and reveal how oppression is perpetrated in hidden ways through polite and friendly interpersonal exchanges.

<sup>32</sup> We argue that the use of the notion of 'good disagreement' – a powerful discourse within the Church – is an example of symbolic violence because it hides the damage being done to women's subjectivity and insists that women clergy themselves work to maintain this damage.

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