

# Can We Talk about Change?

*Carmel Page*

As a child it was common for our Sunday morning prayers to include the queen. Looking back I find this odd because women were not allowed to speak or lead in services but we prayed for our female ruler. If God *removes kings and sets up kings*<sup>1</sup> – and presumably queens, too – why do we think God would not allow any female leadership or voice in our churches?<sup>2</sup>

I no longer accept this inconsistency. I'm aware of the verses which seem to silence women but I question why we hold those up above all the other evidence of women speaking and leading. If women could *pray and prophesy with their heads covered*,<sup>3</sup> why don't women do that now? Then I heard some UK Christadelphian churches allowed women to speak at services. I was curious to know how many, and I started a list for my own interest. That was five years ago and I have been encouraged to carry on counting.

I created a survey about gender roles and distributed it amongst UK Christadelphian friends. I requested they share it with members but only if they would be happy to answer it. I knew I was exploring a very emotive issue; my aim was to discern the truth without causing upset. The numbers keep changing, almost always increasing the active roles for women.

I have learnt a lot about gender roles in our UK community. Then an American sister asked me to include the USA so I opened up the survey worldwide. I now have responses from nearly 100 other places around the world, though I don't include the data from those in this report.

It is often presumed that people who promote women's roles have moved away from Bible study. I have not witnessed that. I've heard accusations of people becoming "worldly" and being

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel 2:21

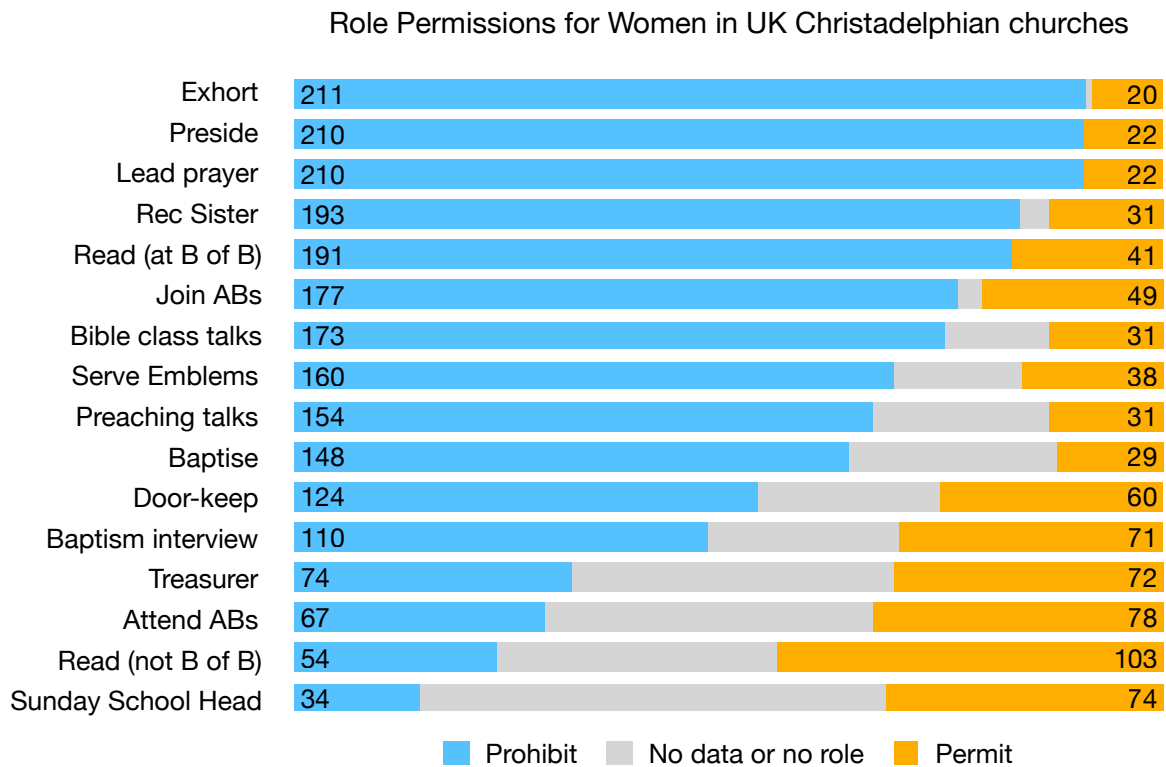
<sup>2</sup> I use the word "church" throughout rather than "ecclesia" – which is a whole other discussion

<sup>3</sup> 1Corinthians 11:5

influenced by modern ideas about equality and feminism. Obviously, these ideas have influenced us but I think that founding members were equally influenced by the social norms of their time.

## Moving towards gender inclusivity

At the start of my study, in 2018, there were ten gender-equal churches in the UK. Since then, I have heard of thirty-six of our churches moving towards gender inclusivity. Some are just having discussions or making tiny steps, but thirteen have removed all of the rules that limited women. There are a further twenty-four places where women are allowed some roles, but I don't know when their rules changed. This is counter-balanced by four churches that have reduced women's roles, three of whom only withdrew one role. Here is a chart that summarizes the current data:<sup>4</sup>



The grey gap in the middle of the chart is for churches who either do not have the role, or for which I haven't managed to gather any data.

<sup>4</sup> 'B of B' refers to Breaking of Bread (memorial service); 'AB' refers to Arranging Board (elected committee of church elders); 'Attend AB' refers to attending Arranging Board meetings; 'Rec' refers to position of secretary

I have observed nine ways that change is happening: discussion, adaptation, death, closures, transfers, openings, baptisms, leaving, and informal groups. The most obvious way change is happening is by discussion. We will look at all nine ways in turn, starting with discussion.

## 1. Discussion

Many of our churches are discussing gender roles. Where all opinions are taken seriously – explored with open minds and open Bibles, over months or years – they bring about change. Where discussions are quickly closed down (often with one brother giving a dogmatic explanation and limited opportunity for discussion), no change happens.

Most of our churches are not having these discussions but that does not mean they are unwanted. Many members have told me change can't even be discussed. Please don't presume everyone in male-led churches is happy; many are not!

Throughout this article I will include relevant quotes from the survey in boxes.<sup>5</sup> Here is an initial selection:

*" Gender roles have been briefly discussed however there is an overall reluctance to discuss the matter further at this time.*

*" We don't feel able to push for any more reforms as the majority are elderly and stuck in their ways!*

*" I don't expect an accepting response, more a 'gentle rebuttal' or 'reminder' why brethren are required for the roles they ask to be filled.*

*" We have one leading brother who is pretty traditional – I suspect if it wasn't for him we would have far more open mindedness about the role of women. He is not aggressive – just stubborn!!!*

Where discussion has been taken seriously – where members have been willing to accept their strongly held beliefs *may be wrong* – change happens. And change often starts with the non-spoken roles, like door-keeping and serving.

As the first Christians met in homes, it seems likely that women would have opened the door. Women probably prepared the meal and passed around the bread and wine. I don't know

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<sup>5</sup> Additional quotes are included in the bonus material on the Press On website

why these roles became masculine-only duties. When these rules are challenged, some churches accept that there is little logic to them, but others become apprehensive about “the thin end of the wedge.”

There are at least 60 churches in the UK where women can door-keep. Interestingly, in ten of these churches women only door-keep unofficially. I’ve had this experience. I could not be on the door-keeping rota but whenever we lacked a door-keeper (quite often) the ABs would request I did it.

Women’s voices are becoming more common. Bible class or preaching talks tend to change next. The last roles to be taken by women are normally those where their voice is heard at the Breaking of Bread service. Reading is normally the first vocal job our sisters are allowed to do at the Breaking of Bread service. Presiding is often the last. Sometimes women exhorting starts as a team job done by a couple. Seven more churches in the UK accepted women exhorting in the last four years, bringing the total to twenty.

*” Hearing women speak mid-week made us question, why not also on a Sunday? So that was the next discussion.*

*” We went cautiously, checking with visiting speakers that they were OK with this. We subsequently introduced Alternative Sundays when sisters could actively be part of the B of B service by doing a joint presentation with a brother or by leading a different kind of service themselves.*

*” We had well attended BC talks (on gender issues) in 2017 & 2018 the meeting overwhelmingly supported sisters being eligible for all roles in 2019. Since becoming gender equal, our church has thrived and we are all feeling very positive. The sisters feel more valued and know they have a voice which will be heard.*

Churches that have gender equal rules don’t tend to have completely gender equal services often due to a lack of skills and confidence. However, a few places are working towards half of each spoken role being carried out by sisters.

*” Having said that, it’s really only me willing to take these roles at the moment and I take my turn with them. Everyone seems happy that I do. Brothers typically encourage sisters in this and many sisters are happy to read and some will pray.*

*” Apart from myself, sisters don’t appear keen to take on presiding or exhorting. I don’t particularly enjoy it and am not great at it but feel it’s important not to lose what we have gained.*

*” Requests for sisters to fill appointments are met with deafening silence.*

## 2. Adaptation

It would be wrong to think that the main way change happens is through discussion. Far from it. The way we function as communities evolves over time, unless someone is determined to prevent that happening! Many of our churches are shrinking and so there are not always men to do the traditionally male roles. Women have taken on new responsibilities as a matter of necessity.

*” I offered to do it. There were not enough men to be ABs.*

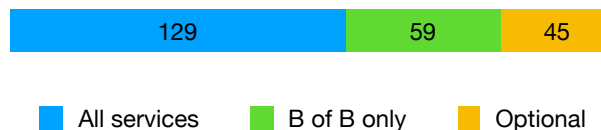
*” I was secretary as I could type. We had to use the sisters because of the need to keep the meeting afloat. Sisters began to offer prayers. We eventually had sisters giving exhortations.*

*” Reading at B of B out of necessity. No pre discussion.*

*” Sis give announcements, feedback with Sunday School during B of B, share lead for Family Services which include B of B. This has all evolved with no formal discussion.*

Many of our sisters have only been wearing head-covering to appease other members and went uncovered at home during lockdown. At least 45 of our churches have now made head-covering optional and a similar number only expect it at the Memorial service.

Head covering requirements



It has been common in many places for women to read at Bible Class but often only as part of a read-around. For some members, hearing women at Bible Class – or the thought of it – has caused them to move away. For other members, it has made them question why not also on a Sunday? In the last four years, eleven more places have allowed women to read on Sunday.

*” Lockdown had a big impact; meeting online felt very different. Women were asked to read. It was easier for people to virtually visit other meetings where members saw things done differently.*

### 3. Death

Our community is elderly. Although we still have 232 churches in the UK, we know many of them are small with mostly elderly members.

I go to a lot of funerals. This is sad in so many ways. I have observed that soon after members who have prevented development have died, rules change. These members have not affected the course of change, only the rate at which it happens.

*” We are dying...*

Both male-led and gender inclusive churches have funerals, but I think the male-led churches have a tendency to have more elderly members so, over time, the *proportion* of members in more inclusive churches is growing.

Sometimes places have so few men left that women join the ABs. ‘Arranging Brethren’ is becoming an out-dated phrase which has been replaced by Management Committee or Elders in at least 49 places where women are included.

There is also a notable rise in places where ‘Recording Brothers’ or ‘Secretaries’ are – or can be – female. They may not all be the equivalent to ‘Recording Brothers’ but an increasing number certainly are.

Other leadership roles such as Treasurer and Sunday School Superintendent are also becoming open to sisters. Although when the Sunday School Secretary role is listed in the ALS Diary as being held by a sister, it may not involve being the figurehead. What saddens me is the number of our churches without Sunday schools. It’s now over 40%.

### 4. Closures

As many of our churches shrink, some close. About every four months a Christadelphian church in the UK closes. This number has been consistent for decades. Churches that close are

more likely to be traditional (although gender equal churches have closed, too). So, the balance is moving, slowly, towards gender equality.

*” We’re approaching the lifespan of an ecclesia where most of the brethren ‘in-charge’ are mid to late life, and unless the young adult generation is ready/willing to ‘step up’ as they’ve begun to call for, then there is the possibility that the ecclesia ‘dies out’ with time.*

## 5. Transfers

Once a church closes, the remaining members transfer. Some members find that their alternative churches are more gender equal than they are used to, so their style of worship changes.

There are many other reasons why transfers happen. Discussion can bring about gender role change and not everybody likes it. Those people who have the option of moving somewhere with the style of worship they are used to, often do so. This causes polarisation.

Other reasons for transfer are because of life changes such as travelling to study or moving for employment. These changes can expose members to different worship styles.

*” We were just of the point of making big changes. Then our nearest church made changes and we had an influx of new members from there who didn’t want any change. That made it hard to introduce changes that had been discussed and were just waiting to be voted through at the next meeting. Some of our members realised they were not going to get the changes they wanted so they transferred to the church that had already made changes.*

*” Four of ours have left without acrimony in the last year because it’s gone further than they could cope with.*

*” The main blockers have left after ‘seeing the direction of travel’.*

*” It was a long and cautious journey, but it was done by consensus and mostly without votes. We lost one family.*

## 6. Openings

A new Christadelphian church opens in the UK about once every 18 months. Of the last six to open, three established themselves as gender equal (or almost gender equal), one has

women reading at the Breaking of Bread, and one is male-led. Some people do not want to enter a dispute about gender roles and see the easiest way to worship in a gender equal church is to set one up with no history of male-led services.

*” We needed somewhere to escape to. We’ve been able to stand on the edge of the community and look at it from a safe place.*

## 7. Baptism

Growth comes through baptisms. For decades our numbers have declined because few of our own young people have stayed with us. However, baptismal rates seemed slightly higher in more gender equal churches.

Then everything changed. In the last six or seven years we have baptised about 3,000 Iranians. As there were only about 8,000 of us in the UK, this is staggering.

Iranians tell us they are drawn to the God of love. After a dogmatic religion of obedience they want to be Christians.

Many of the Iranians contact us soon after arriving here. Their lives are in chaos and Christadelphian religion is a lifebelt they take hold of. Many of them feared for their lives in Iran, had traumatic journeys, are alone, and respond well to a group of both British and Iranians. Once in the UK, they are accommodated by the authorities and receive a small allowance but must not work. They have no say over where they live.

Most of our members have been delighted to support people wanting to learn the gospel. Some Iranians have been placed near male-led churches and some nearest to gender equal churches.

Once granted permission to stay in the UK, the celebration you might expect can be subsumed by the need to find accommodation, register with a bank and other authorities, and find work. Quite often Iranians move once they are free to do so. There is a tendency for them to want to live in London, so our London churches have grown exponentially. Many of our London churches have women doing spoken roles. One of these churches has baptised over 200 Iranians.

One side-effect of the Iranian arrivals is churches re-thinking baptisms. Iranian women may never have had an unrelated man touch them and so there has been a move towards sisters



conducting baptisms. Also, during lockdown, baptisms were challenging and women became more involved. They can now interview in about thirty percent of our churches.

The arrival of people travelling to the UK to seek asylum (mostly from Iran) and also seeking knowledge about Christianity has had a significant impact on the need for preachers and teachers. Women are now involved in preaching at thirty percent of places with Iranians. Sometimes it is just for Iranians, not formal Sunday services.

## 8. Leaving

Many of our young people don't choose baptism. They have easy access to ideas different from our own and have been educated to question authority, not to blindly obey. They will not join a church without thoughtfully weighing up our values to see if they match their own.

Members are choosing to leave our community. Some resign formally, some stop attending but remain on the books for years. There seem to be a number of reasons for this. Our male-led community is perceived as misogynistic and homophobic. We also lack commitment to environmental issues and choose legalism over love.

Covid may have caused a lost generation. Those few years without youth weekends and camps meant that the strong bonds of friendship – which have held our community together in the past – were broken.

We have also lost Iranians, although how numbers compare to British who leave is too early to say. People arrive from Iran both traumatised and anxious for their futures. It is not an ideal time to be making important decisions about religion. What feels like the right thing to do, when you are establishing yourself in a country and alone, can be very different from how you feel once settled, working long hours, living in a different area, and reunited with your family. Iranians have come to the UK for freedom and my gut feeling is that they prefer churches with more freedoms and fewer rules.

In the UK we now have a large number of Iranian members who are mostly young and mostly male. While some may have their spouses and families join them, others are being divorced for becoming Christians. To support more staying, we are going to have to re-think our rules about marrying outside our community and about remarriage.

There are some male-led churches which appeal to young people and are thriving. Generally, our young people seem more inclined to stay in inclusive churches because treating women differently is unacceptable to them.

*” Several young people said that they could not attend a church that was misogynistic and homophobic.*

*” There is no point leaving a despotic regime to join a church where we are told all the time what to do.*

*” We do this (head-covering) because we do not want to upset but it is bad for us to have this thing because it makes us think.*

*” Of course we do not like this (rules about women) but they have been very kind to us.*

## 9. Informal groups

During lockdown online services became normal. Members realised they could worship with people anywhere in the country – or the world. People chose like-minded groups. Members dissatisfied with pre-lockdown services, or those who had their eyes opened during lockdown, did not all return to their halls. Some continue to meet with other Christadelphian churches online.

Something new has also happened. People are choosing to meet in informal online groups. At least 1% of UK members now do this. It may even be 5%. Often it is because people want more gender equal services than their local church provides. There may also be those who choose online male-led groups. Some of these groups are quite big but they are not choosing to become formal ecclesias. They exist on the edge of our community.

These informal groups were not included in my study, but if they had been, the proportion of UK Christadelphians experiencing equally-led services would be a few percent larger.

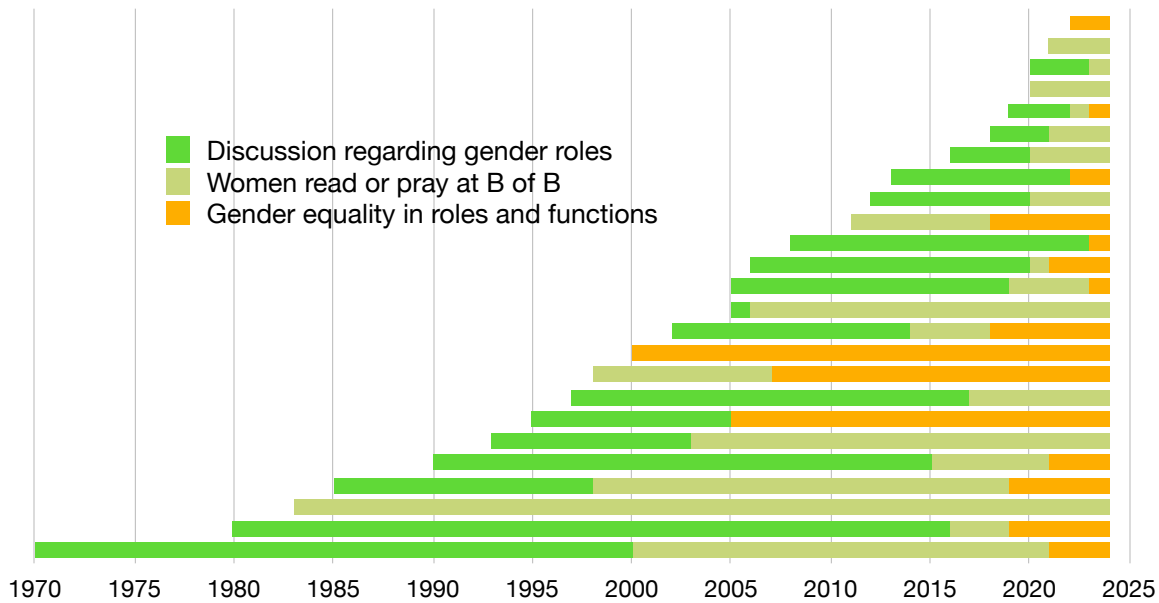
## A changing community

I want members to know what it really means to be a Christadelphian. We are a dynamic community, constantly changing, re-reading, rethinking, and adapting. The way the Christadelphian community is *defined* is different from *actual* Christadelphian practice, which now includes a diverse range of worship styles. It was my prayer that this study leads to more tolerance. I make no secret of the fact that I am a sister who chooses to do speaking roles, but I

have not been trying to make other people change. I am only to show that change is happening and change is possible.

The rate of change with regard to women in our community is increasing; in fact the transition to gender-equal rules seems to be happening exponentially. Change will continue to happen for all of us. Here’s a chart that shows the timeline of change in 25 separate churches:

Pattern of processes in various churches for exploring gender roles



My study continues because many people encourage me to continue it. If you would like to contribute data, the link is <https://forms.gle/sBn6UrBbviWfsrM38>.

As a community that has often prayed for the late queen, we should take her seriously. At the beginning of lockdown she said:

*I hope in the years to come everyone will be able to take pride in how they responded to this challenge. And those who come after us will say the Britons of this generation were as strong as any. That the attributes of self-discipline, of quiet good-humoured resolve and of fellow-feeling still characterise this country. The pride in who we are is not a part of our past, it defines our present and our future.<sup>6</sup>*

Our community faces many challenges and we all have to decide how we are going to respond. I leave you with these questions: What behaviour will characterise *our* community? How will we define our *present* and our *future*?

<sup>6</sup> Queen Elizabeth, Queen’s speech, 2020