

PENTECOSTAL
PREACHER WOMAN

The Faith and Feminism
of Bernice Gerard

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For Rob

CONTENTS

List of Illustrations / ix

Acknowledgments / xi

Introduction / 3

- 1 Life with the Gerards / 24
- 2 Delivered by Strong Women / 37
- 3 Fighting for Her Faith / 52
- 4 Finding Family / 67
- 5 The McColl-Gerard Trio and Professional Belonging / 82
- 6 Campus Life / 108
- 7 On the Radio / 134
- 8 Challenging Patriarchal Authorities / 159
- 9 Feminism, Footnotes, and Family / 177

10 Public Engagement / 201

Conclusion / 231

Notes / 242

Bibliography / 276

Index / 293

INTRODUCTION

WHEN BERNICE GERARD, Vancouver's flamboyant Pentecostal preacher, led a silent protest along a beach frequented by nudists in the summer of 1977, the political cartoonists had a heyday. "Barely anybody around for Gerard's march," one journalist quipped, as the media playfully and dismissively mocked this moral crusader.¹ Apparently, she had been born at the wrong time and place. "Forget the silly protest, Miss Gerard. The hole in the knee of your swimsuit is showing," chided a *Vancouver Sun* editorialist.² Meanwhile, Vancouver's church folks shook their heads too, wondering why she insisted on being so public and theatrical in her crusading. Wasn't she just making all evangelicals look crazy and intolerant, like ridiculous extremists who were outrageously outdated and out of touch? After all, it was the 1970s, not the 1870s, and the nude beach was in Canada's "hippest" West Coast city. But Gerard knew why she was there. And although she kept silent that day, as she had promised she would, she was persuaded it was the right thing to do no matter who disagreed. And she fully expected her actions would not be popular. But she marched anyway because in her mind, it was part of her calling.

In 2000, it was popular to make lists of significant individuals to mark the end of the new millennium and the beginning of a new century, and the *Vancouver Sun*'s religion editor published a list of his own. Consulting with scholars of religion and other authorities, Douglas Todd compiled a list of British Columbia's most influential spiritual leaders of the twentieth century. At the top of that list was none other than the Reverend Bernice Gerard.³ And yet, beyond her own life writing, no full-length biography of Gerard exists.



FIGURE I.1 In July 1977, Bernice Gerard and her supporters famously walked along a Vancouver beach to silently protest the spread of nudism on public beaches. | Vancouver Province, *July 11, 1977, 17*. Photographer: *Wayne Leidenfrost*.

Pentecostal Preacher Woman tells her story, with attention to broader themes about the ways conservative religious women navigate life stages with evolving views about faith, ideas, and public engagement. Taking a woman-centred approach, I explore the complexities of Bernice Gerard's life to illustrate the pitfalls of adopting binary judgments about women of faith. While some judge her as a hero of the faith and a successful model for women in ministry, others dismiss her as a rigid and outdated public figure who was easily caricatured. The truth about Gerard and women like her is far more complicated.

The Rev. Bernice Gerard seemed to cause a stir everywhere she went: to church folks, she was so unlike other proper church ladies; to liberal-minded residents of Vancouver, and for local political cartoonists, her actions and stances were so easy to mock – such a moralistic crusader! Yet, her radio phone-in show that went live every Sunday night in Vancouver and the northern part of Washington State had a very large and diverse audience because it was so entertaining, even compelling. Gerard invited her callers to phone in and ask her anything. Literally, anything. Her discussion topics covered the gamut of sex and drugs and rock 'n' roll. She talked to callers who were experimenting

with Eastern religions, including transcendental meditation, and to others who were experimenting with drugs. Callers tried to explain to the radio host why their behaviours were enjoyable or, in some cases, why they were less than fulfilling. Her answers were never dull, yet she was neither sarcastic nor rude to her callers. She listened intently, with respect and curiosity, before offering responses informed by her Pentecostal world view. Gerard patiently insisted that her callers were all seeking some spiritual experience, not simply a physical high, relief from depression, or enhanced sexual pleasures. Her recommendation to every listener was always the same: only Jesus could satisfy their deepest human desires, and only the Holy Spirit could give listeners the power to live with satisfaction and joy.

To Gerard, her listeners' appetites were spiritual in nature and she was very happy to share the good news about how to meet those needs.⁴ As her personal archives reveal, when listeners wrote to tell her their most intimate secrets, she wrote back and established ongoing correspondence in order to understand more about their stories. Meanwhile Vancouverites mocked the way Alderman Gerard leveraged her political office to add weight to her moral crusading, and her own denominational leaders wondered why she would not just stick to evangelism and learn to submit to the organization's lines of authority as other women did. But Bernice Gerard had a resilience born of her life experience and an intellectual curiosity that made her a force to be reckoned with. She was very sure about what she was called to do.

The life of Bernice Gerard is a compelling story. What possessed her to walk on a nude beach and lead a silent protest that would make her the laughing-stock of her city, and in the eyes of her fellow believers, a problematic sister? What gave her the confidence to think that she had answers for every caller's need? I argue that Bernice Gerard's life provides a fascinating example of how conservative religious women use a process of self-narration to manage the dissonances that inevitably arise as they interact with institutional religion, encounter the wider secular society, and make sense of their own evolving journeys of faith. To the skeptical or irreligious onlooker, women like Bernice Gerard seem hopelessly stuck in their ways, but I maintain that in their interior worlds, they are negotiating complex realities in ways that make sense to them. Such women must come to terms with a variety of obstacles including insiders to their faith tradition, for example, when the patriarchy of church subcultures inevitably collides with a woman determined to live out her personal sense of calling. At the same time, for women like Gerard, finding allies outside one's own faith group is tricky because secular feminists and other liberal-minded people can be suspicious of religion when they presuppose that religion and

feminism are categorically incompatible. Moreover, during a lifetime of belief and practice, individuals like Gerard find their views inevitably evolve as their life experience grows and they face unexpected opposition, and sometimes acceptance, from both the like-minded and the critics.

I suspect that many readers (especially women) from evangelical traditions, including Pentecostals, will find Bernice Gerard intriguing because of how she navigated her life, shaped by her travels, her education, her work, and her own family history. Discontented evangelicals and former evangelicals sometimes turn to writers and bloggers like Sarah Bessey and the late Rachel Held Evans,⁵ who engage with disenchanted and formerly religious individuals (sometimes called “ex-vangelicals”) to help resolve the dissonance they encounter when conservative religious subcultures and evolving Canadian social mores collide. The process that has come to be called “deconstructing one’s faith” typically focuses on attempts to reconcile conservative religious experience with commitment to issues including truly egalitarian church cultures, genuine reconciliation with Indigenous peoples, and effective social justice activism on issues including racism, marriage equality, and affirmation of LGBTQ+ people, among others.⁶

Bernice Gerard was not a progressive Christian, and she would not have endorsed the openly radical positions of some twenty-first-century believers/former believers on these issues. But she would recognize the process of encountering changing social mores and having to reconcile her previous beliefs with her expanding experience. Gerard’s circle of acceptance of those outside her tradition broadened and evolved as she aged. Moreover, on many issues including support for refugees, affordable housing for the poor, and compassion and acceptance for those struggling with mental illness and addictions, she was ahead of her time. Susan Wells, a Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada (PAOC) insider, married to the denomination’s general superintendent, emphasized in our conversation about Gerard that on many of these issues, she had both “insight and foresight,” making her “a hero of the faith” for twenty-first-century Pentecostals.⁷

Other people find Bernice Gerard’s story fascinating for different reasons. In the early stages of this writing project, I spent part of one winter in the Vancouver archives. In a coffee shop conversation with someone I was meeting for the first time, he asked what brought me to Vancouver. When I told him that I was planning to write a book on a Vancouver personality, he asked me who it was. At the mention of her name, this British Columbian laughed heartily and said, “Oh my! Bernice was quite a character!” My conversation partner that day knew of Gerard from her time as a municipal politician (1977–81) and

had vivid memories of the way some of her most well-known exploits (including the Wreck Beach protest) had gripped the city's attention. That unforgettable personality had clearly made a deep impression on my new friend, who had been a student at the University of British Columbia at the time. For those who lived in Vancouver during the turbulent 1970s, and for others who only know Vancouver and the West Coast by its reputation for progressive values and practices, the fact that Bernice Gerard was a Vancouverite might seem a bit surprising. But the presence of conservative Christians in British Columbia is part of the province's character.⁸

In religion and also in politics, both progressive views and conservative ones have coexisted there for a long time, as the electoral history of New Democratic and Social Credit governments demonstrate.⁹ As well, there is a little Bible belt in the area around Abbotsford, BC, just a short drive from Vancouver, and it represents another characteristic of the most westerly Canadian province, namely the presence of a Christian right in this country.¹⁰ While people often associate the province, and especially the city of Vancouver, with its more liberal West Coast vibe, the province is actually a site where conservative and progressive politics and values often collide. It is also a prime site of the growing census category in Canada of those who identify their religious affiliation as none.¹¹ It is not a coincidence that British Columbia is home to important studies about irreligion in Canada.¹²

Other readers who may be intrigued by this biography include Canadian Pentecostals, charismatics, and evangelical leaders who knew Gerard personally or remember her through her media ministries. Indeed, some of the leading individuals among Canadian evangelicals, the Rev. Brian Stiller (formerly head of Evangelical Fellowship of Canada and currently the global ambassador of the World Evangelical Alliance) and the Rev. David Wells (general superintendent of the PAOC and president of the Pentecostal World Fellowship) both think of Bernice Gerard as an important influence and mentor in their lives.¹³ Gerard also cooperated with the late Rev. David Mainse, another of Canada's best-known Christian television personalities, who founded the Crossroads television network.¹⁴

I did not grow up in church, but I remember seeing Bernice Gerard on television in the late 1970s and early 1980s. My late father, who had a perfect attendance record at his Sunday school through the 1920s and 1930s, no longer attended church by the time I was a school-aged child in the mid-1960s. Like many others, our family had become casual adherents of the United Church but stopped attending church at the time of rural church closures, parish amalgamations, and incidentally, when the denomination introduced its new

curriculum.¹⁵ For entertainment, sometimes my dad would watch television evangelists and shake his head at their exploits. He referred to Bernice Gerard as “that preacher woman”; her broadcasts intrigued him for a variety of reasons, not the least of which was her deep, masculine voice. When Gerard sang, she sang baritone – a very unusual pitch for a woman.¹⁶

But on the continuum between the national and global evangelical leaders and members of disaffiliated families like mine, there were many people who were drawn to Bernice Gerard for a variety of reasons. To those who reminisce about her place in North American Pentecostalism and hold her memory up as an exemplar of a bold and unapologetic women in ministry, this book might reinforce that view. However, as a denomination that claims to welcome women into leadership, the PAOC also admits that its practices and reality do not match its ideals, and women like Bernice Gerard were more the exception than the rule. By the 1990s, that denomination was failing to recruit as many women to positions as pastors, evangelists, and missionaries as they had in the past. In a 1991 article titled “Next Generation of Women in Ministry Please Stand Up!” published in the *Pentecostal Testimony*, the PAOC was asking itself what had happened to diminish the number of women who became full-time ministers of the gospel.¹⁷ It was also painting a glorified picture of the women who had risen to prominence in the past, erasing any trace of the conflicts such women had initiated, and making no mention of how challenging it was to manage characters like Gerard who seemed to have trouble submitting to regional and national leaders.

Well into the twenty-first century, very few women occupy senior ministry positions with the PAOC; according to the denomination’s published membership statistics, the number of women who occupy lead pastor roles stubbornly persists around 5–6 percent.¹⁸ The PAOC organization claims to be committed to improving that record, and gender equity is a laudable goal. However, welcoming cohorts of ordained women with the same indomitable spirit that Bernice Gerard possessed (if such women even existed!) would present a serious challenge to the patriarchal nature of the PAOC’s organizational culture. Those who remember Gerard with fondness, suggesting she is a model for other women, nostalgically minimize the controversies that so often surrounded her. Gerard’s story serves as a reminder that endorsing women in leadership roles within conservative Protestant denominations like the PAOC is tricky, especially when those women have strong personalities and unwavering convictions about their own authority.

Another group of readers who may be intrigued by Bernice Gerard are my academic peers, especially feminist historians, both religious and secular. This



FIGURE I.2 Bernice Gerard was a gifted public speaker whose preaching style incorporated humour, storytelling, and references to current events. | *Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada Archives.*

biography joins a growing body of literature about Pentecostalism in Canada in general, and of women in Canadian Pentecostalism specifically. Church historians who teach in confessional settings might assume that Gerard was a role model for women in ministry because her life could serve as an inspiration for younger women who sense a similar call. The way that women's history within Pentecostalism has been crafted is very inspirational indeed. Characters like Aimee Semple McPherson, who hailed from small-town rural Ontario and is perhaps the best-known Pentecostal in all of North America with her celebrity status at Angelus Temple in Los Angeles, is a case in point.¹⁹ Another is Alice Belle Garrigus, the American who established Pentecostalism in Newfoundland, where a future premier, Joey Smallwood, grew up in her St. John's church and led his province to boast a provincially funded Pentecostal school system.²⁰ Such Pentecostal women are widely known and celebrated. Even for those of less well-known reputation, there is a common element in the way their stories

are popularly told. For each woman, when sympathetic biographers tell their stories, there is emphasis on celebration, providential intervention, and general amazement at their levels of commitment and obedience to God. Their stories tend toward hagiography.

It is tempting to write with that tone about Bernice Gerard too, because her life was surely an extraordinary one. But a glowing rendition of her life might erase any trace of her unpopular alliances with Roman Catholic charismatics when many Protestants (including the PAOC) were still firmly opposed to that kind of ecumenism. And her fiery presence as a municipal politician and a national lobbyist when Pentecostals and evangelicals generally were divided about their entry into public life and politics makes it tricky for them to celebrate everything she did. Bernice Gerard never married, but she did have a lifelong partnership with another woman, and while their mutual affection is unmistakable, peering into their domestic arrangement raises uncomfortable questions. To tell Gerard's story while leaving these pieces out would be an overly sanitized version of events. Part of what makes Gerard so compelling as a historical figure is the degree of complexity that she embodied.

Scholarship on Canadian Pentecostalism continues to develop, but over the past fifteen years, the trend has been to consider this revivalist movement in its historical and cultural contexts, rather than leave the writing to insiders who are entirely sympathetic to the movement.²¹ Some of the most important recent work on Canadian Pentecostalism has been written by Michael Wilkinson, a sociologist at Trinity Western University, in Langley, BC, and his collaborators across Canada, the United States, and globally.²² Wilkinson and Ambrose's 2020 book, *After the Revival: Pentecostalism and the Making of a Canadian Church*, was the first volume to adopt a cultural lens that considered how one Pentecostal denomination, the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada, rose to centre stage among evangelicals.²³ Wilkinson and Ambrose trace Pentecostalism's rise from a marginal revivalist movement that was typically caricatured as a group of "holy rollers" to its prominence in the religious scene of Canada. For example, the PAOC now dominates evangelicalism in this country. If success is measured by both its participation rates and its material assets, these Pentecostals are outpacing the United Church of Canada on both scores.

Another important development in the scholarship on Canadian Pentecostalism was the creation of an interdisciplinary online journal, *Canadian Journal of Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity*, which ran for ten years, publishing dozens of peer-reviewed articles by established and emerging scholars.²⁴ The growing literature takes up a variety of topics including debates about the relationship of Canadian and American Pentecostalism, showing that in Canada the

movement was polygenetic, with concurrent sites of Pentecostal “firsts,” not monogenetic as some American versions of the history argue in their emphasis on tracing Pentecostalism to the Azusa Street Revival in Los Angeles. For Canadians, the story is more complicated, with influences from the United States, but also from Britain and other global sites.²⁵ Establishing Canada’s early history in this regard has been an important development arising from the scholarship. So, too, has the evolving theology of the PAOC²⁶ and Canadian Pentecostalism’s relationship to broader evangelicalism.²⁷

What first drew me to Pentecostal studies was a gender history question about the ambivalent position of women in the movement. And here, I knew my feminist colleagues in academia would be intrigued. While women are celebrated as early founders of various Christian traditions, from New France’s Roman Catholic sisters to nineteenth-century Wesleyan Methodism, they do not typically share equally in the leadership positions of the churches. This question of women’s history and church history is a global one, especially for Pentecostalism. Whether one focuses on North America, Europe, Australia, Asia, or Africa, global Pentecostalism shares the common thread of women in the origin stories of Pentecostalism.²⁸ Varying degrees of commitment to the principle of egalitarianism between the sexes are on display in these stories, with some emphasizing that it is an essential characteristic of Pentecostalism to see men and women as equally called to serve. Other versions of the past, especially in North American cases, emphasize the men who solidified the governance structures, policies, and material assets of the movements as the churches were established. In the latter stories, women’s contributions are seen as exceptional because women become more difficult to trace over time; after their marriages, their names are lost in the records when archival holdings, conforming to the social customs of the mid- and late-twentieth century, catalogue women by their husbands’ names, not their own family names. This renders their ministry careers prior to marriage invisible. Archival practices aside, the truth is that women’s involvement in Pentecostal churches in North America does ring true with the so-called institutionalization thesis, which argues that women and other historically marginalized groups become sidelined in new religious movements as the movement matures and carves out respectability for itself.²⁹ That development often comes at the cost of women and racialized groups being sidelined and silenced.³⁰

In the case of Bernice Gerard, who never married, the usual problem of losing her identity through a name change is not part of the story. Moreover, Gerard had the force of personality to continue to emphasize that she had an individual calling from God, and for her, that trumped the conformity to

denominational or church mores that would have seen her take a lesser role. Given the trajectory of Gerard's own conversion and ministry story, she found the question of whether women should lead a moot point. She did engage and spar with those who disagreed with her on the roles of women in the church, but for the most part she ignored the debates and pragmatically just carried on with what she knew she was called to do.³¹

This book also joins a broader and ongoing scholarly conversation about women, religion, and feminism. Gerard revealed in her 1988 autobiography that she had been shaped by feminist writers, both Christian and secular.³² When I discovered that she was reading Germaine Greer, for example, I knew that the ears of my feminist historian friends would perk up just as mine did! Gerard was convinced that Jesus was a feminist because of his regard for women as spiritual equals, and she also took inspiration from many strands of second-wave feminist thought about women's empowerment, especially when it came to questions about women in public ministry and church governance. At a Pentecostal women's conference where she spoke in the late 1960s, Gerard challenged her listeners not to build their personal security around their relationships with men because losing one's own personhood was a dangerous spiritual path. She warned that in the next life, women would stand before God as individuals, not as anyone's wife or mother.³³ That kind of talk seemed edgy for postwar churchwomen immersed in conservative subcultures. Given evangelicals' suspicions about feminism, and the perceived dangers they associated with it as a slippery slope toward humanism and secularism,³⁴ Gerard went too far for some when she kept insisting that women were equally as capable and qualified as men to lead churches.

At the same time, Gerard's antiabortion stance made it difficult for those outside the church to even consider the idea that Gerard was a feminist. While the PAOC denomination debated how to relate to women like the Rev. Bernice Gerard, the incorrigible woman pastor-turned-activist in their midst, Vancouver feminists feared the influence that this antiabortion crusader and alderman could wield. Gerard justified her actions and told herself that a prophet's life was sometimes a lonely one, and she remained true to her convictions, though they sometimes were contrary to both the church and other feminists. She saw no contradiction between her feminist principles, her Pentecostal faith, and her public service. But some of my academic friends will not be so sure; when I have presented conference papers about Gerard's feminism, skeptical colleagues remain unconvinced.

I am intrigued by religious women like Gerard who claim to be feminists yet continue to associate themselves with faith communities that minimize their

authority and prescribe gendered limitations on the roles they are permitted to occupy. I am especially intrigued by Gerard's claim to be a feminist even as she worked tirelessly to oppose abortion in Vancouver during the 1970s and 1980s, a city commonly associated with its liberal stance on social questions. My purpose in this biography is neither to defend nor endorse Gerard's views but rather to assert that her life provides a useful case with which to explore larger questions about the seemingly paradoxical relationship between conservative religious women and feminism, and how the two can be reconciled.³⁵ Focusing on that very question, sociologist Orit Avishai points to what she calls "the feminist dilemma of religion" where "assumptions about religion's inherent incompatibility with the interests of women and gender and sexual minorities ... results in ambivalence and hostility toward *studying* religion and *learning* from religious cases."³⁶ Indeed, scholarship in women's and gender studies "has historically viewed religion as an obstacle to feminism's goals," and as a result, "gender scholars across disciplines ... have approached religion with ambivalence, hostility, or indifference, thereby stifling interest in religion among gender scholars and narrowing the analytical frames available for understanding religion cases."³⁷ The ways that religion and feminism converged in Gerard's life are fascinating, and this biography takes up that paradox.

Gerard's life story invites us to think about the possibility of secular and religious feminisms coexisting.³⁸ To accept that religion and feminism are not completely incompatible³⁹ requires gender scholars to "suspend their normative critiques of and assumptions regarding religious affiliation as a paradox to explain or a puzzle to solve and instead interrogate religion cases on their own terms – taking seriously religious subjects' desire to affiliate, focusing on their lived experiences."⁴⁰ Critics of Western feminist scholarship insist that it is time to reconsider implicit biases and assumptions that privilege progressive women to the exclusion of others. Multidisciplinary scholarship on religious women, feminism, and gender is posing new questions to redress that imbalance and this biography of Gerard joins that rich conversation.⁴¹

According to one theorist, "what makes conservative religions' gender regimes particularly interesting to gender scholars (beyond their empirical significance) is that they are rife with conceptual tensions."⁴² Certainly, Bernice Gerard's life is rife with "conceptual tensions," and when conflicting aspects of her life collided, Gerard continually engaged in what psychology educator Elizabeth Weiss Ozorak calls "cognitive restructuring," where she reframed her experiences to explain to herself and others that what was happening to her was neither surprising nor too much to bear.⁴³ Gerard remained with the

same Pentecostal denomination throughout her career, although she disagreed with denominational authorities on several issues. She framed that decision by saying she simply wanted to get on with the work God was calling her to do despite the naysayers. Sociologists of religion help us understand women like Gerard by interrogating “a paradox that ponders women’s complicity” as they “remain in patriarchal faith systems,” inviting us to think about women who “do religion” as “a mode of conduct and being, a performance of identity – not only a purposeful or strategic action.”⁴⁴ In other words, women who are religious have religious reasons for doing things, and scholars must come to terms with the idea that “religion may be done in the pursuit of religious goals – in this case, the goal of becoming an authentic religious subject against an image of a secular Other.”⁴⁵ Studying a Pentecostal woman like Gerard by listening to how she narrated her own life experiences means setting aside pre-conceived notions about religion and feminism and looking “beyond professed attitudes to how people actually lived their lives and allow for messiness.”⁴⁶ As an antiabortion feminist and a Pentecostal politician, Gerard’s life teemed with messy contradictions. Yet it is those very paradoxes that make Gerard so intriguing.

As I study Pentecostal women, I start from the premise that women’s religiosity should be respected, and when they claim religious motives for their church and public involvement, I must listen closely to their own self-narratives, contradictions and all. This is in step with cultural theorists, anthropologists, and feminist sociologists of religion who start from the premise that religious women should be heard in their own voices when they speak about their religiosity. This woman-centred approach is a promising way to understand conservative religious women like Gerard. The idea of “self-authoring” insists we recognize that religious women do not tell their stories from a “discursive vacuum.”⁴⁷ As Avishai explains, women’s religious experiences and how meaning is made of them is shaped by both structural and institutional contexts. In this book I demonstrate that Gerard practised self-authoring on many topics, to make meaning from the complexities she embodied.

When Gerard invoked her own life experiences to account for her convictions, when she explained that her public activism was dictated by her calling, and when she revealed that debates about women’s ordination were something she did not care to engage, she was using her own story to explain her convictions. At other times, I am convinced that her silence on some topics is significant, and even when she did not make direct links to her early experiences as deeply formative for her later protest work, I see a connection. For example, I have a hunch that the extremely conservative views she held on



FIGURE I.3 Bernice Gerard, “Into a Mirror.” Gerard took this 1951 “selfie” in Mexico when she was travelling as part of the McColl-Gerard Trio. Her photography provided a record and reflection of her life experiences, and her autobiographical writing served a similar purpose. | *Summit Pacific College, Hudson Memorial Library, BX87G2 Z8 M121 1951.*

moral issues, and for which she was often mocked, were tied to the sexual violence she experienced as a child, even though she remained largely silent about her own abuse for most of her public life.

What we do know about Gerard’s early years, we know because she wrote two versions of her autobiography. The first one, published in 1956, *Converted in the Country: The Life Story of Bernice Gerard*, was a text written with church audiences in mind, clearly illustrating how religious identity framed the author’s narrative about herself as she embraced Pentecostalism. Gerard was forthright about her purpose in that life writing. Anticipating her reader’s curiosity, she closed the book asking directly, “Why do I write my story?” Her answer puts religion at the centre of her rationale: she wrote it “to influence others to give

their lives to the Lord Jesus Christ.”⁴⁸ Clearly religiosity was central to her identity, and because she frames her identity in terms of her beliefs, Gerard is a prime example of what scholars of life writing call “self-narration.”⁴⁹ She tells her life story with rich detail about how her life and beliefs unfolded. Gerard’s religious views evolved throughout her life, and her life writing is framed by the rationale she offered to herself and others for why she did what she did and how her actions were informed by her beliefs. In addition to what we know about Gerard from her own thoughts, there is a great deal of contextual evidence to situate her reflections. Taken together, her self-narration and her life experiences confirm Gerard as a fascinating case study of the ways in which conservative religious women interact with institutional religion and the broader society to make sense of the conflicting cultural mores and ideas they encounter. In short: it’s complicated!

While we have the chance to “hear” Gerard’s versions of her own story through the published autobiographies, we also have a rich collection of her other life writing sources. Historian Barbara Caine, in her book *Biography and History*, points out that the scope of “life writing” has broadened to include “many different kinds of life story and many different forms of writing – including sermons and eulogies, privately written sketches produced for members of a family, and fragmentary sketches of lives.”⁵⁰ To piece together Gerard’s story told in her own words, there is a rich archival record, including her sermons, scrapbooks, and other personal records now housed in the archives at Summit Pacific College, in Abbotsford, BC; university archives that encompass her work as a chaplain at the University of British Columbia and Simon Fraser University; municipal records held by the Vancouver City Archives that include Gerard’s time as a city alderman; and numerous religious and secular print media sources including newspapers and magazines.

Gerard wrote her first autobiography when she was thirty-three years of age to tell the story of her early family life in her adoptive father’s irreligious household and her conversion to Christianity.⁵¹ That book was intended to establish not only how young Bernice (then known as “Peggy”) became a believer, but how she changed her initial theological understanding from what those first itinerant preachers taught her about their exclusive view of who qualified as a “real” Christian, to embrace a broader definition of true believers. The central message of that book was the transformation she experienced after that conversion when she accepted the work of the Holy Spirit in her life and became a Pentecostal.⁵² This was a crucial pivot point in her identity formation.

It is important to recognize that Gerard’s first autobiography was serving

a bigger purpose than merely telling her story. Throughout her childhood, Gerard was exposed to a variety of religious experiences, and when she looked back and chronicled those formative years, she emphasized her evolving spirituality and changing affiliations.⁵³ Later in her life Gerard garnered a reputation for being conservative and rigid in her views. While it is true that she had firm convictions on a range of social issues, her interior life of faith was actually an evolving journey. Her early life writing is a clear example of religious studies scholar Susan E. Henking's assertion that "the personal is the theological."⁵⁴ As Henking claimed, it is obvious to me that Gerard was using her personal experiences to formulate and revise her theology and I make this case throughout the book.

Gerard published her second autobiography, *Bernice Gerard: Today and for Life*, in 1988, when she was sixty-five years old.⁵⁵ While this second version of her life covered some of the same ground as the earlier book, there was obviously a lot more life experience to include in the later work. As Gerard reflected back on her own life story, she wanted to make it explicit why she had done some of the things she did and explain how her actions and her interior life aligned. In other words, her life writing helped her to make meaning from her experiences. Gerard's life writing parallels what scholars find in other religious women's autobiographies, namely that "the dialogue between selves presented therein provides us with a clear notion of self as process, both selves and intellectual products as historically and culturally located concoctions."⁵⁶ The life story that Bernice Gerard "concocted" helped her to resolve cognitive dissonances including how she came to embrace her public ministry roles in a spiritual tradition that professed equality between men and women but frequently stumbled over how to implement that conviction. Gerard proceeded with her ministry and public roles because she was convinced that God had called her to them, and when her own denomination hesitated in the 1980s over what position they would take on "the woman question," Gerard was engaged but not distracted by the renewed debate. She quipped that she was not being "belligerent" but was simply "bored" by a so-called dilemma that she had resolved in her own mind decades before.⁵⁷

What is noteworthy about this second autobiography is how Gerard reflected on those who held different points of view on issues including abortion, morality, and the role of women in the church. A close reading of the sources suggests she actually took a more moderate stance on many issues than her critics recognized or gave her credit for. Moreover, when it came to issues of her own faith, she became much more ecumenical as time passed because experience broadened her views of other faith traditions and of human nature

itself. In the second book, Gerard displayed a maturity that allowed her to delve into issues of a very personal nature including her adoption story and the conflicts she had encountered as a woman in church leadership, as a media personality, and as a politician. She had obviously reflected a lot on the joys and hardships of her life, and she also disclosed more about her affections, including the joys of finding her birth family and of sharing her life with Velma McColl Chapman. At the same time, one is struck by the fact that while her conversion was an experience locked in time that she used as a reference point to define her identity and to ground her faith, it did not dictate that her interior life was stagnant or that her mind was made up on every question. Her intellectual curiosity, rich networks of global relationships, and ecumenical efforts born of the charismatic movement had definitely broadened her mind. In step with what scholars of women's life writing observe, the way Gerard told her story continued to evolve even as she aged.⁵⁸

Gender theory and the sociology of religion provide useful ways to think about how Gerard narrated her life story and explained the decisions she made. As a Pentecostal minister and social activist within the contexts of the church structures of her denomination and of Vancouver politics in the 1970s and 1980s, Bernice Gerard was "doing religion." The story she told herself and others about what motivated her ministry and her municipal involvement follows the line of testimony that is common among many Christian traditions. Testimony and "narratives of calling" are particularly significant for Pentecostals, and exploring them by using narrative discourse theory and literary theorists' work on women's conversion and call narratives is helpful for rethinking the life writing of conservative religious women like Gerard.⁵⁹

With such a rich and varied collection of Gerard's life writing, we are offered rare and sustained insights into her interior world and the evolution of her thought over a lifetime of ministry work. At the same time, it must be recognized that placing Gerard's first-person accounts at the centre of this study introduces certain limitations. When she is silent on specific issues that were central to the context of her time, such as labour relations and union activity, the Canadian government's dispossession and internment of Japanese Canadians, or race relations issues more broadly, the biographer cannot presume to know what (or if) she thought about these things. The silences in the autobiographical writing also belie the religious context of Gerard's world. For example, like many evangelicals of her time, Gerard subscribed to premillennial views about eschatology and theories about the end times that were tangled up with world affairs, making her quite sympathetic to the State of Israel. She visited Israel multiple times, first as a religious tourist and later as

a tour guide (with her ministry partner) for others.⁶⁰ However, it would be an oversimplification to assume that Gerard's fascination with the place was politically motivated because she did not voice uncritical support for American foreign policy or push for Canada to form closer ties with Israel. Rather, Gerard retained a sense of childlike wonder; her visits to the Holy Land meant she was walking where Jesus had walked, and the imminent second coming of Christ would involve apocalyptic battles being waged there. When she recounted her travels, Gerard seemed entranced with the way she could be transported to enjoy the geography and landscape of places she felt she already knew quite well from her lifelong study of the Bible.

Gerard wrote her autobiographies as a form of testimony, but she was also explaining to herself and her readers how she resolved the conflicting views that she encountered. She introduces her readers to the individuals and experiences that shaped her actions and beliefs, and she provides insights into the ways her faith and religiosity evolved over time. While she maintained her identity within global Pentecostal circles, she changed her views on many things over her lifetime. Her evolving self-narration provides a rich example of listening to women's own voices as they describe their spirituality, rather than trying to typecast people. How Bernice Gerard arrived at and reconciled those changing views is the focus of this book. And it's complicated!

THIS BOOK IS ORGANIZED into ten chapters. The first three chapters deal with Gerard's complicated early years. [Chapter 1](#) reveals the instability of her life as a young child who was adopted at birth, only to be subjected to abuse and violence. Her earliest exposure to religion was not a positive one, but this gave way to a dramatic conversion experience that not only provided a way of escape but would also become the core of her individual identity. [Chapter 2](#) begins after Gerard was delivered from the home of her adoptive father with her encounters with child welfare professionals and the foster families who were central figures during her adolescence, introducing her to a wider variety of life experiences that ran parallel with her evolving religious awareness. A bright student, Gerard's tremendous potential was identified early on by her caseworkers, and the leading provincial child welfare authority took a personal interest in her, convinced that this child could thrive if only she would embrace the opportunities her middle-class foster family in Vancouver could offer her. [Chapter 3](#) traces Gerard's experience during secondary school, the tension between middle-class values, upward social mobility, and her attraction to Pentecostalism, a movement on the fringe of respectability at the time. With her caregivers' encouragement she trained to become a teacher but continued

to resist their suggestions that she needed to tone down her teenaged religious excesses and embrace the social mores of mainstream society. Despite their best efforts, by the time she was a young adult, Bernice Gerard had firmly established her identity as a Pentecostal, complete with the persecution mentality she embraced while taking such a firm stance on her convictions.

Chapters 4 and 5 trace Gerard's first tastes of independent adult life as a professional. Out from under the constraints of the provincial child welfare system, Gerard deepened her sense of self and worked to establish her sense of belonging, both personally and professionally. When Bernice met Jean and Velma McColl, Pentecostal women who invited her into their private lives and their ministry work, she found a warm welcome as part of the McColls' extended family, took the opportunity to search for her own birth family, and as she addressed some nagging childhood issues, she developed an even deeper empathy for those who suffer on the margins of society. Her career as a teacher was short-lived, and as Chapter 5 shows, she quickly threw off one profession for another to become an international travelling evangelist. Those geographic adventures were key to Gerard's expanding life experiences, but they also solidified her identity as a Pentecostal. Through her religious networks, Gerard encountered Pentecostals around the world and joined a truly global phenomenon with its complex cultural and theological diversity. She published the story of her conversion in a book documenting her spiritual journey from irreligion to Pentecostalism. Gerard's confidence grew as she told and retold that story, settling into who she was in relation to her own family history, her new ministry partners, and the wide and expanding world of Pentecostalism. Giving one's testimony is an important ritual for Pentecostals and other evangelicals, and Gerard embraced her life writing as part of her continuous process of personal meaning making.

The next two chapters follow Gerard's return to Vancouver after the McColl-Gerard Trio disbanded. Chapter 6 opens as Gerard was left to figure out how to remake herself in a life without the travel or companionship she had so enjoyed. But Bernice was not entirely alone in this period because her close ties with Velma McColl and Velma's new husband, Dick Chapman, included sharing their Vancouver home, a place that served her well as a refuge and a ministry base. Facing a new phase of life, Gerard's intellectual curiosity and academic ability combined to compel her to enter university as a mature student. While she was studying at the University of British Columbia (UBC), both as an undergraduate and during her graduate work, Gerard regarded the campus as her mission field and after she was appointed as a university chaplain, she thought deeply about the best strategies for reaching the uni-

versity community. Once again, her autobiographical work and her other life writing provide important clues for understanding Gerard's complex intellectual world. [Chapter 7](#) focuses on Gerard as a radio host, and how she became a widely recognized media personality with her own open-line radio show. A woman radio host was not unheard of, but Gerard's ability to forge intimate ties with her listeners was remarkable, something that many people attributed to her intellect and her gender.

Central to the last three chapters of this book is gender; Gerard pushed the boundaries that usually framed the lives of Canadian Pentecostal women in ministry. While churches in this tradition were familiar with women evangelists and preachers, it was far less common for women to become full-time pastors in a denomination that claimed commitment to egalitarian principles but structured itself in patriarchal ways. Gerard stood outside the expected Pentecostal norms in a variety of ways. [Chapter 8](#) includes two issues where Gerard was more progressive than the majority of her PAOC colleagues. First, she was an early adopter of the charismatic movement in the 1960s, joining an ecumenical cast of fellow chaplains who influenced her to expand her intellectual horizons with a growing appreciation of other faith traditions. Gerard's curiosity about what the Spirit was doing led her to openly embrace Roman Catholic charismatics, putting her at odds with many in PAOC circles. Gerard's ecumenism evolved as she responded to the religious context around her. She stood apart from many others in conservative churches on another cultural development of the 1960s and '70s: increasing equality between the sexes called for by the second-wave women's movement. Given her career as a professional Pentecostal, Gerard found it tiresome when debates (re)emerged in the 1980s about whether women should be in ministry, in part because she had already enjoyed a long and successful ministry which gave her the firm conviction that strong women were used of God. She was impatient with the rhetoric of men in the PAOC who sought to limit women's roles while claiming that when they rejected feminism in their ranks, they were resisting "worldly" cultural encroachment. Gerard disagreed.

Bernice Gerard lived a woman-centric life and [Chapter 9](#) gives attention to some of the enigmatic aspects of Gerard's interior world and her private life. When she resisted the patriarchy within her own denomination, she reflected deeply on why she could not agree with those who put limitations on women's potential. Her feminism, she argued, was not worldly at all, but completely in step with Jesus, whom she claimed was feminist also. Gerard wrote at length about this, inviting her readers to follow her footnotes to understand how she arrived at her complicated convictions about this. The second part of Chap-

ter 9 considers something Gerard did not write much about: her domestic arrangements and her private life with Velma. Bernice and Velma lived together for decades, including their years on the road, the decades when they co-pastored a church, and during their retirement years. Gerard shared a Vancouver home with the Chapmans throughout Velma's marriage, and the two women continued to live together after Velma's husband passed away. Thus, Bernice and Velma remained a ministry "couple" until they were separated by death. The nature of that relationship between two women with lifelong ties is intriguing and the chapter concludes with a consideration of their shared love.

Although her private life remains an enigma, Gerard's public life regularly made headlines. [Chapter 10](#) circles back to focus on Gerard as a municipal politician and her public lobbying efforts, including the episode of the famous beach walk that opens this book. Gerard was particularly outspoken about three issues: abortion, public nudity, and standards of morality in theatre and the arts. It is this work that most Vancouverites remember her for, and for which she is caricatured as a throwback to earlier moralistic times. Yet, in the midst of all that opposition, Gerard truly felt she was doing important work to fulfill her calling as a prophet, a role she reluctantly embraced only after she was convinced that God was calling her to do it. How she arrived at that conclusion is tied to her identity as a Pentecostal, but I argue that her motivation also sprang from the lasting impact of her early childhood.

When I first began to do research on Pentecostal women in Canada, my mentor and friend Dr. Margaret Kechnie, who grew up in a Pentecostal church in southwestern Ontario, gifted me a copy of Gerard's autobiography and told me that Bernice Gerard was someone I should write about. When Margaret was a small child in the 1940s, the McColl-Gerard Trio visited her church in Windsor, Ontario, and Margaret still had a postcard/photograph as a souvenir of the occasion. I had the luxury of a sabbatical in 2015 and by that time, I had already begun to present scholarly papers about Pentecostal women and the puzzle of how gender was at work in that movement. Some academic feminists were baffled by the connection I was making between Gerard and feminism, and they were not the only ones. In January 2015 I went to Vancouver for archival research about Gerard, and I met some friends. My dinner companions confirmed that Gerard's story, with all its flair and contradictions, needed to be told. Catherine, a freelance editor, knew some Catholics in Northern Ontario who had joined the charismatic movement in the 1970s, and she wondered if Gerard's story might shed some light on a phenomenon that intrigued her. And Scott, a Vancouver-based artist who had been a UBC student when Gerard was a chaplain there, was still amused by the media's caricatures of

Gerard from her time at Vancouver City Hall.

Perhaps the reader identifies with churchgoers like little Margaret, who squirmed in her pew enduring those long but lively Pentecostal meetings, or with Catherine, who grew up Catholic but was left wondering what was unfolding as she watched some of her family members embrace the charismatic movement that was central to Gerard's religiosity in the 1960s and 1970s. Like my fellow academics, some readers will squirm at the suggestion that an anti-abortionist like Gerard could ever be considered a feminist. Still others, like Scott the Vancouverite, will be amused by the antics of a prudish preacher's protest on a nude beach. Whether readers knew Bernice Gerard personally, indirectly, or not at all, I predict they will be surprised by the complexity of her biography, a story tracing her path from child welfare case to travelling evangelist, from campus chaplain to moral crusader, and from unlikely feminist to lifelong partner of another woman. This book offers insight into the case of a conservative religious woman and the factors that shaped her identity and public life. At first Bernice Gerard appears to be a reductionist thinker holding to simplistic notions of right and wrong, but I argue that she was a complicated character whose rich inner life informed her evolving faith.

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