Warrior Chicks: Youthful Aging in a Postfeminist Prosperity Discourse

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In a youth-oriented evangelical congregation where being perceived as “old” might marginalize member involvement and participation, a Hollywood, California congregation’s women’s ministry, God Chicks, presents aging women as possessing “godly wisdom,” endowing older women with spiritually charged energy, authority, and responsibility for training younger women to live “godly” lives. Ethnographic research and in depth media analysis of the God Chicks ministry reveals a particularly energizing evangelical postfeminist orientation that applies prosperity theology to contemporary challenges of changing women’s roles. Specifically, the God Chicks ministry provides “women over forty” with consumer and caretaking strategies for maintaining youthful selves and motivating younger women. A “God Chick” emerges as a compelling, youthful gendered religious identity that expects congregationally committed women to be strong, healthy, and active warriors who fight multiple relational and global humanitarian battles. Overall, this study demonstrates the construction of an innovative postfeminist evangelical identity through the tactical, opportunistic use of theological doctrine by ministry leaders within a particularistic geographic location.

Keywords: gender, aging, identity, prosperity gospel, Pentecostalism.

INTRODUCTION

Sociologists of religion give attention to complex gender ideology and negotiation among evangelical and conservative Christian communities, concentrating primarily on contradictions in belief and practice that impact marriage and institutional power relationships (e.g., Bartkowski 2001; Brasher 1998; Jenkins 2005). This article pushes such exploration further by considering age and aging as an intersecting point of analysis in the construction of legitimated religious roles for women and calling attention to the plural, adaptable, and particular nature of feminisms at work in evangelical congregations.

In approaching this analysis of gender and religion, we understand that youthful appearance, activity, and being productive are highly esteemed and gendered in American culture. Sociologists of aging have illustrated the ways that older people engage in “distancing” processes, rejecting the label of “old,” and seeking a “not old” identity (Hurd 1999). An important cultural strategy available for constructing a not old identity is to perform a healthy, active, and productive self that aggressively challenges “pessimistic stereotypes of decline and dependency” (Katz 2005:121; Wearing 1995). Women’s aging bodies, in particular, are susceptible to criticism (Cruikshank 2003), motivating expectations and entire industries for body “makeovers” and consumption strategies for maintaining a youthful femininity. Shaping aging bodies through exercise, diet, dress, and cosmetic pursuits are highly valued cultural strategies for successful aging (Slevin 2010), and as Marie Griffith (2004) has demonstrated, strategies such as dieting and body shaping have Protestant roots. Successful body management represents a gendered moral/religious

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achievement. This article demonstrates how one contemporary religious community provides discursive frames to address the challenge of gendered aging.

We isolate an intriguing case study, a distinctive evangelical Christian women’s ministry in Hollywood, California, called “God Chicks.” The ministry’s charismatic founder casts “older women” as energetic caretakers of younger women and creates a worship space where women of various ages are collectively envisioned as “young” and vigorous. While “women over forty” are designated as “older women” in this church, they are offered religious strategies for maintaining youthful selves based on gendered notions of caretaking and consumption. All God Chicks women are envisioned as youthful warriors possessing healthy, beautiful bodies who engage in numerous relational and global struggles as agents of God. God Chicks’ discourse of powerful and youthful Christian women and the practices it legitimates reflect the congregation’s socio-historical position, theology, postfeminist responsiveness, and globalized “individualization” processes.

The term postfeminism has been used by sociologists of religion and feminist thinkers in various ways to identify how women in Western culture construct selves amidst competing, incongruous roles and fractured institutional expectations. Nevertheless, a common understanding of postfeminist discourse is its ability to maintain contradictory standpoints. Gill (2007:149) calls attention to the “contradictory nature of postfeminist discourses and the entanglement of both feminist and antifeminist themes within them” and works to identify “stable features that comprise or constitute a postfeminist discourse.” Some of these features include a concern with femininity as a “bodily property,” a stressing of “self surveillance, monitoring, and discipline,” as well as “individualism,” “choice and empowerment,” and a reigniting “makeover paradigm.” Postfeminist discourses often envision women as sexual agents who “become the ‘entrepreneur’” of their own images, “buying into standardized femininities while also seeking to resignify their meanings” (Genz 2006:338). How might religious communities offer beliefs and practices for women seeking ways to reconstruct contemporary ideas of gender and femininity with highly intentional religious purpose?

Researchers have uncovered particular types of contradictory feminist positioning among conservative Christian women. Judith Stacey (1991:19), for example, argues that the term postfeminism describes “the gender consciousness and strategies of” those who “hold their distance from feminist identity or politics,” and yet have been “profoundly influenced by feminist ideology,” which is especially true for contemporary evangelicals who find their religion to be a “flexible resource for reconstituting gender and kinship” (1991:139). Subsequent studies call attention to the ways evangelical women negotiate ideas about female submission with their own strategic versions of Christian female power and religious mission (Griffith 1997; Jenkins 2005). As an extension of this scholarship, this research suggests that God Chicks’ prosperity-tinged discourse of independent, strong, attractive, and youthful Christian women is a formidable and appealing postfeminist amalgamation, most especially in its construction of a common religious identity that merges young with old and simultaneously embraces and rejects consumerism and Western beauty and body standards.

Broader societal shifts further impinge on gendered conflicts of the self. Sociologist Ulrich Beck (1992) analyzes the changing circumstances of women in contemporary Western society in terms of “individualization,” a distinct process of social structuring that constrains modern persons to be responsible for crafting their own biographies. Individuals are caught in what Beck describes as an oppressive system that demands reconsideration of the self in relation to market and governmental structures and places the burden of positioning the self to avoid risk and sustain personal well-being (see Marti 2012a, 2012b). For Beck, individualization processes are particularly evident among women as the accentuation of women’s interests in the past few decades comes with the increasing obligation of women to think in terms of status, income, and career (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002:60–67). There is greater pressure among women to assert themselves, to compete, and to demonstrate confidence. Due to the centrality of work,
this self-assertion dominates the greatest aspects of women’s lives, yet women fluctuate between family-oriented and work-oriented roles such that the “incomplete incorporation into the world of work thus entails contradictions in women’s lives” (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002:67). The challenge of constructing cohesive individualized career paths with uncertain professional and familial trajectories leaves women to define their own codes of conduct shaped profoundly by cultural expectations of health and wellness, self-reliance, and successful aging. Through contemporary processes of individualization, women, to a greater extent than men, experience pressure to personally actualize fashionable, urbanized body beauty standards through all stages of life. These standards combine pursuit of youth, self-help ideals, and consumption strategies that mesh with dual expectations in both the labor market and idealized romantic/family relationships (Gill 2007; McGee 2005).

God Chicks’ ministry fuses competing images of gender and aging women into a functional religious identity and speaks to how, in congregations, as well as in broader society, “old structures persist alongside the new” (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002:66). Because of the need for individuals to obtain “prescriptions” of how to plan their individualized life trajectories, there is an increasing number of “construction kits of biographical combination possibilities” (Beck 1992:135) through which the self is reflexively made (Giddens 1991). Congregations are sites for actualizing such prescriptive life plans (Marti 2008, 2010). Researchers have demonstrated how evangelical Christian discourse has the ability to present a sense of cohesive life plan, even as it balances seemingly contradictory ideas through the operational life of congregational communities and religious subcultures (Bartkowski 2004; Smith et al. 1998). At the same time, individual evangelical Christians, like other religious people, are constantly at work constructing self from multiple secular and spiritual sources (Ammerman 2010). The religious resources of a congregation attempt to provide orientations that frame a cohesive gendered identity. Specifically, God Chicks’ discourse fueled by prosperity theology offers room for continual resistance and change through formal religious identities as they are translated and embraced by women in the face of broader societal pressures. This prosperity discourse is intended to not only emotionally uplift women but also motivate them to particular, religiously sanctioned actions framed by God Chicks ideals. In short, our research demonstrates how God Chicks provides a distinct postfeminist prosperity identity aimed at women in Hollywood, largely creative workers in the film and television industry, that addresses individualization and fragmentation by providing a religiously legitimated and congregationally supported identity that speaks to many of the gendered tensions faced in contemporary urban life.

CASE HISTORY AND METHODS

Oasis Christian Center is a large, broadly evangelical, Protestant nondenominational congregation co-founded in 1983 by a husband and wife team, Philip and Holly Wagner (Marti 2008; see also 2010, 2012a, 2012b). The church is located in the center of the entertainment industry, in the heart of old Hollywood, and attracts contingent workers living in the region (see Scott 2005). During fieldwork conducted from 2003 to 2004, Oasis maintained around 2,200 weekly attenders. While Pastors Philip and Holly Wagner are white, they lead a multiracial congregation. Membership files and systematic observation at services indicate the racial/ethnic composition as 45 percent African American, 40 percent white, and 15 percent other, including Hispanic, Asian, Middle Eastern, and nonnative blacks. The style of the congregation can be generally characterized as seeker oriented and neo-Pentecostal. Oasis’s prosperity “Word of Faith” theology is drawn from a lineage that originates with Kenneth Hagin and continues through Fred Price and Kenneth and Gloria Copeland. Pastor Holly Wagner shares near equal time with her husband in giving main sermons and is immersed in a variety of executive-level decisions for the operations of the church.
It is common for evangelical congregations to include a specialized women’s ministry, and Holly Wagner felt pressure to lead such a ministry. She thought “women’s ministries” were “boring” and describes experiencing a “revelation” while reading Proverbs 31 and hearing the call to create a ministry focused on younger women that would be fun, creative, and motivational. According to Wagner’s (2003) signature book, *God Chicks: Living Life as a 21st Century Woman*, women today receive mixed messages, and there is little in society to help them understand how to balance their gendered expectations. In response, she developed a targeted ministry program as a vehicle to convey a fresh multifaceted contemporary identity to fit women of all ages. The God Chicks ministry quickly became the congregation’s largest community outreach program with quarterly events featuring music, drama, symbolic gifts, dozens of active volunteers, and the central presence of the charismatic Pastor Holly Wagner. Her God Chicks books published with Thomas Nelson, a premier Christian publisher, have sold several thousand copies since 2003, and her influence is evident through her extensive speaking engagements and Christian media appearances on radio and television (including programs like *700 Club*).

To analyze the discourse and ministry of Pastor Holly Wagner and God Chicks, we draw from ethnographic field notes of Oasis—which included observations of God Chicks related events—as well as records of conversations and interviews with God Chicks ministry participants and their leaders. Formal, semistructured, face-to-face interviews were conducted with 25 women, which included leaders (paid staff and nonpaid volunteers), long-time members, occasional attendees, and first-time guests. The average age of these women was 41 years with a range of 20 years to over 60 years old. Forty-seven percent were white, 33 percent African American, and 20 percent other, which includes 4 percent who self-defined as some form of mixed/multiracial ancestry. One-third had attended Oasis two years or less, around 50 percent had attended between three and 1 years, and the remaining had over 10 years of membership. Nearly all had served in congregational ministry in some capacity.

Marti (2008) pays only limited attention to gender in his initial exploration of Oasis, so this research builds on his original data by rigorously sampling God Chicks books and audio files of God Chicks events produced from 2005 to 2009, in addition to reanalyzing interview and field notes with attention to gender and age as central categories of analysis. The God Chicks media analyzed include: Holly Wagner’s books *God Chicks: Living Life as a 21st Century Woman* (2003), *Daily Steps for God Chicks: The 90-Day Devotional for Real Women* (2006), *Warrior Chicks: Rising Strong, Beautiful & Confident* (2007); and an eight-CD set of sermons from 6/25/09 to 6/27/09 conference, *God Chicks: The Adventure*. Also, CD series with sermons and messages from events prior to 2009 were analyzed: *A United Battle Cry: One Voice Together* (two-CD set), *God Chicks Signature CD Series* (four-CD set), and *Extreme Life* (two-CD set). Primary source media also included ongoing analysis of the God Chicks website from 2008 to 2010. All unstructured data from God Chicks media were reviewed multiple times for common themes, which then informed conceptual coding categories. Axial coding in the later stages of analysis shaped theoretical relationships between dominant conceptual codes (Strauss and Corbin 1990:96–115). In our analysis, we highlight interconnected central discursive themes that support dominant conceptual codes of “Redefining Old” and “God Chicks as Strong and Resourceful Warriors.”

**Strategies for Redefining Old**

In a congregation that strives, ironically, to both underscore and eliminate age difference, Oasis’ formal discourse marks the age of 40 as a symbolic age dividing “old” and “young.” This age demarcation is significant given that most of those attending Oasis events are creative contingent workers in Hollywood who struggle to initiate, and then sustain, a cohesive career (Marti 2010; see Scott 2005); in particular, Holly Wagner makes clear that her target population is young women in Hollywood, many of whom have attempted careers in the entertainment industry,
a business where beauty, age, and wellness ideals exert high pressures. It is not surprising then that God Chicks language and practices, in distinct and contradictory ways, work to construct women of all ages as beautiful royal princesses charged with similar religious purpose, adorning bodies with markers of youth and beauty.

**Princess Wardrobe**

Women at God Chicks events are constantly referred to as “chicks” and “princesses,” gendered terms that hold derogatory meanings, but when used by Wagner and other speakers, they convey a contemporary popular postfeminist “girl power” conviction. Wagner acknowledges that the word “chick” is associated with negative images of women, arguing in a third-wave feminist contradictory yet strategic voice that her use of the word is meant to reclaim beauty and attractiveness for Christian purpose. “The reason I am using the term *chick* is not to be disrespectful, but to have a little fun! So c’mon, you amazing God chick. Open your heart to a picture of the woman you were created to be” (Wagner 2003:x). She similarly defends the label “princess,” arguing that women are loved daughters of the King [God as royal father] who are always beautiful in God’s eyes. Unlike negative images of princesses as selfish consumers, God Chicks are presented in discourse as princesses who are meant to use their positions of privilege to serve others and fulfill God’s purpose.

Practices at God Chicks events work to dress all bodies as young not only through language but also through accessorizing women with youthful markers complete with church-provided costume props. Aggressive God Chicks marketing features glossy photographs of young women playing on fairytale myths (like Cinderella) juxtaposed with Bible verses (like one from Proverbs 31 that reads; “Her value is far above rubies and pearls”). At events, Wagner and her large team of women volunteers make earnest attempts to have every woman participant feel “special” and to take on ambitious roles in the world as “Princess chicks” who are hip, lovable, and empowered. Being a special, attractive, and individualized God Chick is constantly reinforced. During one conference, a featured speaker told women to “turn to the chick beside you and tell her how cute she is.” In an interview, Wagner noted that she likes “pictures,” by which she means giving women iconic visual images, and incorporates strategic elements to promote images in church events.

A distinctive element of several events was that every woman who walked through the door received her own personal tiara. Video from a God Chicks event projected at a weekend church service featured mature women wearing their tiaras, standing together and gleefully laughing, in what appeared to be a church-sponsored “girls night out.” At other events, volunteers dressed up all participants with “beauty queen” sashes. In another dramatic gesture to visualize godly royalty, every woman at one event was ushered to a horse, carriage, and throne in the parking lot where they could take a picture with their beauty sashes and faux diamond studded tiara. Women interviewed fondly remembered these props and picture opportunities. Some showed pictures taken of friends and themselves at events and said their tiaras are proudly displayed on desks at work or shelves at home. While such props and pageantry have some affinity to Hollywood’s iconic red carpet, the God Chicks ministry alludes to young girls and fairy tale narratives. For example, in sermons and in God Chicks events, Wagner pushes women to imagine the pride that comes with being crowned. She writes in *God Chicks*: “For a moment, I want you to be that little girl again... the one who freely plays dress up... I want you to see yourself as a princess, complete with the crown and the robe. Go ahead and buy yourself a tiara and look in the mirror with it on your head. . . . You need to see yourself with a crown on your head. Why? Because that

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1 Valerie Renegar and Stacey Sowards offer a discussion of literature on third-wave feminism with attention to exploration of contradictions as strategic method (2009).
is how God sees you” (Wagner 2003:26–27). She acknowledges that crowns and beauty pageants are appalling to some women: “I won a beauty pageant one time. (Don’t hold it against me!!)” (Wagner 2003:22). Still, she pushes the third-wave contradiction, encouraging women to imagine the pride that comes with being crowned.

Oasis’ image of youthful Princess Chicks bundled together in a hip, young, media-rich congregation meeting in a refurbished movie theater in the heart of Hollywood provides a powerful setting for women to perform gendered ideals of youth and beauty. God Chicks members, like Monica, aged 30, consistently associate Oasis with younger age: “The first thing I noticed [at Oasis]. I looked around and these people are almost the same age or younger. So I really enjoyed the youthfulness.” Monica described Oasis as “more vivacious, more energy, more freedom. Not as regimented . . . new, fresher.” Members of the congregation regularly link vitality and youth. Amy, age 40, was among several who said it was because she felt so much “younger” than her age that she “fit in this congregation.” She didn’t know what she would do in “an older congregation” because they would think she was a “freak.” The God Chick ministry opens a gendered space that allows “older” women like Monica and Amy to participate legitimately as an energetic, hip, “younger” self.

God Chicks’ strong princess is intricately tied to Western ideals of healthy, strong, youthful, and lean bodies as beautiful bodies; however, a princess should use her body-altering practices and fashion enhancement to Christian advantage. God Chicks must stay focused on looking fashionable in a healthy body as this is what allows them to prosper in the world in personal relationships and evangelical, missionary outreach. Photographs of God Chicks women in print and on the website are well dressed, neat, smiling, and appear from thin to medical weight charts’ “normal” range. During events and in books Wagner talks about how good it feels to wear a new outfit or look good in nice clothes, yet the emphasis on attractive appearance is refocused through the congregation’s prosperity theology to accentuate a woman’s missional role as an agent of God’s cosmic plan to spiritually impact the world.

In short, Pastor Holly Wagner reconciles an apparent focus on superficial looks by tying this into a deeper sense of Christian purpose. Women are to set themselves apart for God’s purposes, living actively in the world with virtues and ambitions suitable to an empowered, Spirit-filled Christian. She notes her insider knowledge of television, film, and modeling, criticizing competition among women and the use of makeup tricks and products that make women look “perfect.” She writes: “Most of us look at fashion magazines and feel depressed shortly afterward. Why? Because we feel as if we can never measure up. When we look in the mirror, our imperfections shout loudly at us: ‘Big pimple in the middle of forehead!’, ‘Serious baggage under eyes!’’, ‘Very large nose!’, ‘Lots of crow’s feet!’, ‘Disappearing lips!’” (Wagner 2007:15). Implicit to women’s success in the broader world is maintaining standards of youthful beauty set by the Hollywood screen; however, believing that you are beautiful at any age is a major part of being a successful warrior chick: “If we are to become effective warriors, the first war we must win is the war to believe that we are beautiful. And these battles are fought on the inside. We can certainly change our outer appearance and use weapons to wage a war against aging, but unless we conquer the battle to see ourselves as beautiful, external changes won’t help” (Wagner 2007:16).

To be a successful woman warrior, then, is to carefully embrace and reject dominant age and beauty consumer practices and put Christian purpose and spiritual attractiveness first. The model is far from ascetic: “Sometimes I laugh with my friends as I am getting a massage or a manicure or I am eating in a very exclusive restaurant saying, ‘I can So-o-o-o do the princess thing!!’ . . . I like the finer things in life. Come on . . . who doesn’t? And honestly, I don’t see why I shouldn’t have them. I am my Father’s daughter, after all! And while I play with my friends about doing the ‘princess thing’, I am not confused about the reason I am a princess on the earth. I am here to serve humanity, not to be served. So are you” (Wagner 2003:29). In this passage we hear a frequent God Chicks discursive strategy: balancing Christian mission with Western middle - and upper-class cultural expectations of consumer health and beauty practices.
Successful entrepreneurial God Chick warriors are those who engage in age/beauty consumer practices but do not become absorbed by them and, even more, learn to use them strategically to share their faith with others and work in ministry for those in need.

**Special Knowledge**

God Chicks discourse and practice sustains another curious contradiction that shapes images of youthful aging. While the ministry brands older members as “wiser” and therefore able to provide distinct mentoring to younger members, it simultaneously negotiates the subjective meaning of age by calling all women “old” women who have knowledge to share. Wagner stresses that every woman has responsibility to care for women younger than herself, offering women of all ages a gendered care-taking role. She described her inspiration for this formulation in an interview, saying: “There’s a scripture in Titus 2:4 that challenges the older women. You are to teach, train, and inspire the younger women . . . I felt God say to me, ‘Is there any woman on the earth younger than you?’ When that hit me, it shifted my entire focus of the women’s ministry. It became entirely focused on the younger.” Wagner was emphatic: “Everything I do is for a younger woman. Because that’s the mandate I have from the Bible.” More than merely a personal conviction, Wagner teaches that every woman is responsible for the younger generation.

Formal events and regular small groups provide opportunities for “old” and “young” to interact, and women interviewed talked about their conviction to use those opportunities to work with, or “invest in,” younger women. One woman said: “We are taught that the older people of the church have a responsibility to the younger people of the church. We are big on that. Especially with the women, especially with God Chicks.” Wagner hits this point hard during events and in her books. In *Warrior Chicks* (Wagner 2007:68–70) she writes: “There was a moment a few years ago when a chapter [in the Bible] jumped out at me. Basically it is challenging the older women to assume responsibility for the younger women. I thought, ‘Great, when I get to be 103, then I will be the older woman, and I will train up all those younguns!’” She continues:

You are an old woman. Why?
Because right now, in the world, there is a woman younger than you are.
If you are 16, you are an old woman. Why?
Because there are 10-year olds who need to learn from you.
If you are 25, you are an old woman. Why?
Because that 16-year old needs to know what you know.
If you are 43, you are an old woman. Why?
Because there is a 20-something who desperately needs to learn from you.
If you are 99, you got all of us!
As long as there is someone younger than you on the planet, you are an older woman.
And as the older woman, we do have a responsibility. We are to equip, motivate, inspire and train younger women.

Wagner urges women under 40 to turn to older women for advice, but she also emboldens them to “keep in mind that you have a job! There are younger girls . . . those who are now in elementary school . . . who will one day be looking up to you to help them. So keep your heart open . . . because there are girls who need you to” (2003:174). Younger women take this commission to heart. Jessica, 20 years old, said, “I see girls struggling with issues at 18 or 19, or my age, 20, that I was able to deal with when I was 12.” She uses her “wisdom from experience” to invest in these women. “You are just as young as you want to be, and God is not done with you at a certain age, but you are there to help the next generation below you . . . That means I’m responsible for the High Schoolers and the Junior Highers, and Holly’s responsible for another generation.”

Women “over forty” are urged to be spiritual mentors to young adults, which includes praying with and “instructing” them in godly ways. The older you are, the more responsibility you have
to teach younger women about issues of self-esteem and self-presentation, including sexuality, personal relationships, dress, and living through emotionally difficult situations. In *God Chicks*, Wagner offers her mother as an example, telling how she “decided to open her heart” and help a young single mother who had been abandoned by her family when she became pregnant. She tells another story of a woman who started a program for troubled youth. Wagner gives women over 40 a special charge: “All of you over-forty-year-olds who are reading this book. (Thanks, by the way!) Millions of young girls around the world have no idea what it means to have a mother’s love and support. . . . I’m asking you to extend yourself to a generation that so desperately needs you” (2003:173–74).

Members over 40 accede this discursive theme of older women mentoring the young. While women over 40 are a minority in the congregation, they are seen as highly valuable members who have more life knowledge and are therefore a great asset to a congregation whose primary mission is to evangelize young adults in Hollywood. One woman recounted a discussion where pastors said: “We need you. We’ve got this amazing group of young people, and the youth is great. But we need the older people too. Because you have wisdom, and you have what it takes to help the youth.” Yet another long-time member said she initially struggled with being an older woman in the congregation, asking herself: “‘Am I being fed here? Everybody is young. I want to get married. I’m 51. I’m not going to meet that man here.’ And then the Lord just showed me, ‘It’s mentoring. It’s what your gift is. So you’re here to mentor the younger people.’ And it has been such a blessing.” Older women are expected to proactively engage younger women. One woman, age 62, declared, “I am to be a blessing to younger women,” and described “investing in the next generation” as transforming her former “mistakes” into points of advice: “God has given me some wisdom because I’ve made so many mistakes, and I’ve done it so wrong, that I can turn it around, and when I see somebody moving in a direction . . . I just need to share some thoughts with them.” One woman, 46, began working with teenage girls soon after her conversion and said, “I just look at kids and think, ‘If I had one person telling me I was important at that point in my life, I don’t think my life would have taken the turns that it did.’” Another long-time member, age 57, said: “Sometimes in the ladies room, I say, ‘That’s a really pretty top. But, you may want to think about wearing it.’” Members talk about making these pointed comments “in love” to women already active in the congregation. This particular woman continued: “After seeing someone here faithfully for two months, there’s an understanding this person is now committed to this ministry and hopefully to Christ. . . . I have taken ladies out to lunch and just talked about life and living and offered some guidance.” Such a conversive style of spiritual mentoring allows even less physically active older women to constructively participate in the God Chicks initiatives.

While older women possess “wisdom” to share with younger women, the women under 40 also have critical expertise, possessing valuable knowledge for older women about fashion trends, and serving as examples of dressing and acting young. Aging God Chicks are to avoid being prudish or frumpy. A long-time member admitted that the large proportion of young adults in the congregation sometimes intimidates older members, but Wagner points out the benefits of being around so many younger women:

Find a younger woman . . . someone who is perhaps struggling with a giant you have already killed. She needs you, and there are things you can learn from her . . . maybe some new, fun way to dress or wear your hair! My friend Anjanette is fourteen years younger than I am. She keeps me in touch with new thoughts, styles, and ideas. And because I believe one of my most important jobs on the planet is to encourage, inspire, train, and teach the generation of girls right behind me, she keeps me on my toes. (2003:103)

In this way, the God Chicks ministry offers opportunities for interaction between “the generations” that evokes a type of spiritual reciprocity: Older women engage in purposeful interactions dispensing wisdom and experience to younger members, and younger women assist women over 40 in performing a not old identity and youthful body. Helping older members look
young and attractive fulfills the religious goals of the congregation to have women poised in the presentation of their selves for success in a region that stigmatizes being “old.”

Staying Active

God Chicks are encouraged to enjoy life and remain active at every stage and through each difficult life circumstance. Active leisure pursuits and body-altering consumption are encouraged alongside purposefully living Christian grace and hospitality. In speeches and books Wagner offers examples of doing good deeds for others, but makes it clear that in order to “love the life you have been given” you need to do some “fun things” and not be too serious:

It really is a drag to be around someone who takes herself too seriously . . . Do some relaxing things. Get a manicure . . . or a massage . . . or a tan . . . or a coffee. Go for a run . . . or a walk. Watch the sunrise . . . or the sunset. Try a new restaurant on your girls’ night out! Have the occasional girls’ night out! Have a slumber party . . . you are never too old for slumber parties! Go shopping and try on the craziest clothes . . . Party chicks are full of life! They live each moment as if it mattered. They celebrate the victories . . . large and small! (2003:164)

Staying active through leisure and consumption are key symbols of performing a not old identity (Gingold 1992; Katz 2005; Wearing 1995). Proximity to the Hollywood industry further accentuates the goal of women being both appealing and energetic.

Active religious involvement is central to good aging. Wagner writes: “most of my spiritual strength comes because I am connected to the house of God. The psalmist told me that if I want to be flourishing in my old age (not that I am anywhere close to old age!!), if I want to be living a happy life . . . then I must be planted in a church” (2003:64). She also writes that the “house of God should be the most dynamic, fun- and life-filled, and life-giving organization on the planet” (2003:65). A key means to staying religiously active is volunteering in church ministry. Many women members at Oasis spend hours working, planning, actualizing, and following up on God Chicks meetings and events all year around. Each of the women interviewed had direct experience with God Chicks events, most had invited friends and family to come, and the majority had served in some capacity in planning or working events. Several described themselves as part of Pastor Holly Wagner’s “core team” for the ministry, including women who found and joined the congregation through a God Chicks event and felt great loyalty and appreciation to the ministry. By working in ministry subgroups (graphic arts, media, stage and sound, administration, ushering and welcoming, clean-up, after service counseling, etc.), women find affinity with other women. These subgroups are active sites for ministry leaders to “invest” in other women by providing intercessory prayer, personal advice, ongoing conversation, and extended friendship (see Marti 2008:164–67). One woman involved in God Chicks said what’s “great about the Oasis” is “the team effort” and “the ability to see potential in people, to see people’s strengths and develop them.” Then she personalized this, saying, “I am a product of that.”

Members also reinforce an image of God Chicks as vigorous and enjoying life by framing worship at Oasis as exciting, active, and fun. Francis, who recently turned 40, said that on a Sunday she used to go to a movie or play volleyball, but that she now just wants to be at Oasis. She had options for leisure and consumption yet describes the energy during worship as more enlivening: “You just come in, and you’re just so happy to be here, and it’s fun. It’s so much fun.” Small group involvements and frequent occasions with Oasis friends and acquaintances also give women—whether single or married—opportunities to maintain a full calendar of social involvements.

Overall, God Chicks’ discourse provides an evangelical Christian frame for an active, culturally relevant, and appealing performance: “My job on the earth is to display the nature and character of Jesus, to the best of my ability. It will definitely involve celebrating. I should live my life in such a way that people are drawn to me, not repelled. So smile, Party Chick, and live your
life out loud in a way that you lead people to their Father! The party chick is within you... let her out!!” (Wagner 2003:166). Wagner’s postfeminist girl language reinforces a dynamic and on-the-go lifestyle. By being active and engaged, “old” becomes young, and women’s bodies are understood as youthful at every stage of life, even as God Chicks promotes 40 as an underlying boundary that distinguishes aging female bodies.

GOD CHICKS AS STRONG AND RESOURCEFUL WARRIORS

Wagner works to change images of godly women from dull and unattractive to vital, dynamic, exciting, resourceful, sexy, selfless, and generous. And while 40 serves as a marker of older bodies in talks, books, and through a small group ministry named “Over 40 and Fabulous,” Wagner is careful to clarify that women of all ages have a similar goal of holding strong under pressure, of managing multiple roles, and giving time and effort to others in Christian purpose. Wagner writes:

The whatever-it-takes chick is pretty amazing... She continues to increase her capacity, thus expanding her sphere of influence. She doesn’t buckle under pressure. She lets the pressure propel her to the next level. She does whatever is needed, without ego involved, to accomplish the task in front of her. She generously opens her filled hands and gives of what she has... be it love, time, kindness, or a financial resource. (2003:204)

The whatever-it-takes chick has high aspirations for building rich relationships while conquering increasing goals and demands. God Chicks discourse emerges as an attempt to address the fractured and competing forces at work in women’s lives, and more specifically for the members of Oasis, creative female workers’ lives in Hollywood whose careers demand an active and attractive persona characterized by both persistence and self-promotion.

Wagner’s whatever-it-takes chick reflects a distinct form of female muscular Christianity: women of all ages as warriors against social ills who pursue physical health and fitness as they uncover inner female strength and beauty. Muscular Christianity emerged at the turn of the 20th century in the United States as a response to Protestant men’s fears of women’s rising and passionate religious participation. They sought to rescue young white Protestant men from an industrializing society that threatened to produce a culture of effeminate men (Putney 2001; Rotundo 1993). The Young Men’s Christian Association and similar types of organizations answered threats with an aggressive Christianity where building strong men’s bodies for Christian mission took place through the promotion of sports and athletics. During the same period a female muscular Christianity took shape in the Young Women’s Christian Association, the Camp Fire Girls, and the Girl Scouts, all of whom embraced an active strenuous life. Putney (2001) calls these historical groups “muscular women.” Jenkins (2005) finds a contemporary version of female muscular Christianity at work in the International Churches of Christ. Wagner’s muscular Christian women are highly active, building strong bodies, and emotional reserve for battle on various fronts.

Wagner (2007) draws on biblical images of strong women to shape a God Chicks warrior identity: “Deborah... rose like a mother in Israel. God used her to lead the Israelites to freedom. She was just a girl, like you and me... She accepted the challenge and encouraged military leaders to victory” (2007:27). Queen Esther serves as another biblical warrior: “Esther risked her life to approach her husband, the king. She told him about the danger... and he helped... Because of her courage, a nation of people was saved” (2007:27). God Chicks are urban warriors ameliorating poverty, violence, and advancing women’s position globally, although the dominant discursive theme is that women are in a battle against personal life circumstances. For example, Wagner presents readers with the following list:
Are you facing a disintegrating marriage? Are you worried about the decisions your teenager is making? Are you losing the battle of faith? Does the plight of the orphaned children in Africa touch you? Are you wondering if you will ever get married? Are you angered over the plight of young girls who are kidnapped into the sex trade? Are you certain about your career direction? Does the unwed, pregnant teenager move you with compassion? Is your health in crisis? Has your heart been broken? Hello, soldier. Welcome to life as a warrior. (2007:9–10)

Note that only three out of the 10 questions address ambitious, global, and humanitarian concerns. As in Wagner’s 2006 book, Daily Steps for God Chicks, personal issues, including individual health, job, family, faith, and interpersonal relationships, are positioned as central battle zones.

Entrepreneurial warrior chicks are multitasking masters who maintain multiple fronts where they fight to take care of self and others. Wagner (2003:192–93) describes her own success as a “Whatever-It-Takes Chick,” emphasizing an active conquering of relationships and emotions:

Sometimes girls will look at me and say, “I want what you have.” And I know they are talking about lifestyle… which involves a healthy marriage and family, a calling on the earth that is rewarding, and friends around the planet… they are looking at a twenty-year result and wanting it instantly. So I say, “Well, study hard… read a book a week… stay married when you feel like leaving… write a letter to a friend when you’d rather shop… play with your children when you want some time alone… write when you feel like sleeping… work out when you feel like playing… control emotions when you feel like screaming… forgive when you feel like hating… overcome limitations when you want to quit. Do those things and you will have what I have… I have just been a good steward over what has been given to me, and so my capacity has increased. Yours will too.”

Chapter 3 of Wagner’s Warrior Chicks book (2007:37–53) is entitled, “Stay at Your Post!” She begins with a revolutionary war colonial soldier who was killed and his wife, “Margaret Corbin,” who “took over the manning of the cannon until she herself was wounded.” Wagner thanks her for “staying” at her post and reassures readers that they will likely not be required to die at their posts, but that “as warriors” they will need to “stay” firmly fastened. She describes her own warrior posts as wife, mother, teacher, and friend, and her main post as “believer,” offering examples of stalwart warriors who faced serious challenges: a woman with Lou Gehrig’s disease, Harriet Tubman, Anne Sullivan, and the passengers on Flight 93 on September 11. In God Chicks, Wagner (2003:189) brings Christian purpose to contemporary women’s lives as busy and pressure filled: “God needs us to be great at handling more and more. He needs each of us to be the whatever-it-takes chick. We can’t be wilting under pressure. We can’t be the ones decreasing in passion or ability.” In short, warrior whatever-it-takes chicks are highly active, able to balance multiple roles and responsibilities, and are filled with resilient, youthful energy.

These active images are promoted in a high-energy, motivational setting. In Oasis’s converted movie theater, video and music through lighting, projection, and other new technology appears seamlessly natural and a fitting backdrop for Wagner and other energetic charismatic God Chicks speakers and volunteers. Wagner gathers her troops during God Chicks events, rallying an army of young and old together: “In the troop right here we have people in different seasons of life. We have young people who are still in school… then you have single career people and you have new moms, and then you’ve got career moms and you’ve got the stay-at-home moms, and you’ve got working people and grandparents – different seasons.” Regardless of age or life circumstance, women of all ages and life positions have an obligation before God. As a congregation Oasis provides the relational space to sustain an identity to enact that purpose: “If you are a new mom, put that baby on your hip and greet people at the door, be a part of building the house of God, don’t just say, ‘oh, it’s overwhelming.’…” If you are a grandmom it is not the time to stay at home, it is the time to help, be a part and bring your wisdom into a generation of young people that need it… we need everybody at different ages and in different seasons on the journey.” She presses the older women to embrace the worship style of a younger generation: “Maybe you… come in and perhaps the music is loud and you are thinking ‘arrgh..arrgh,’ or whatever, ‘what’s wrong

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with these people.’ No, just appreciate the enthusiasm and the energy and just the vibrancy they bring.” To the younger women she teaches: “Maybe you are in here and you . . . are a young whipper snapper. I need you to value the wisdom that comes from the woman next to you.”

Wagner, other God Chicks speakers, and dedicated lay leaders serve as examples of muscular risky warrior women over 40 and frequently perform contradictory positions: Wagner talks about her acting and modeling career, joking about having small breasts while preaching embracing the beauty of one’s body as God made it. Speakers joke about not living up to ideals of physical fitness and beauty, but then espouse commitment to health and wellness discourse. For young and old, individual health is paramount if women are to engage in battles of moral character and maintain strong bodies to fight disease. Risky warrior women of all ages keep their bodies active and strong because health battles and physical challenges will inevitably rise that demand strong spiritual swords. They will also need surplus energy for evangelical outreach and, most important, battling personal issues that threaten productive evangelical warrior status and individual prosperity.

In God Chicks Wagner writes: “Come on, Champion Chick. Take care of your body . . . I don’t care if you are eighteen or seventy-eight, you can start now doing something to build strength . . . we have people to love and a world to touch. We can’t be getting weak in the middle of the journey!” (2003:72). One of the proudest and most loyal of Wagner’s God Chicks volunteers told of leaving her modeling career to star in and promote fitness exercise videos. She promoted her youthful look and attractive figure as evidence of faithful discipline to God’s purposes. In more recent books, Wagner uses her battle with breast cancer to emphasize the body as battleground and the importance of maintaining health. “Warriors are committed to being fit . . . For years I abused my body, thinking that it would just bounce back. And for years it did. I would hear about healthy eating from time to time, but never really applied what I learned . . . Getting cancer was harder . . . So now, I was willing to learn what it takes to get and stay healthy” (Wagner 2007:142). She stresses eating well and exercising as fighting disease. “I learned that fewer Americans are dying of contagious diseases and more are dying from degenerative ones” (Wagner 2007:143). Readers are told several times in Wagner’s texts that warriors don’t “whine,” meaning that they do not blame others for their shortcomings and instead do the work of preparing mind and body for battling age-related conditions, illness, and other life challenges.

God Chicks’ emphasis on eating right and exercising to be healthy and productive active evangelical “warriors” reflects a deep history in Protestantism of disciplining and shaping bodies for God’s purpose through diet and exercise (Griffith 2004). Wagner “begs” readers of Warrior Chicks to “commit to getting fit” and gives biblical legitimation, saying, “I felt challenged enough to change when I heard Paul confront the Corinthians: ‘But, [like a boxer] I buffet my body [handle it roughly, discipline it by hardships] and subdue it, for fear that after proclaiming to others the Gospel and things pertaining to it, I myself should become unfit [not stand the test, be unapproved and rejected as a counterfeit]’” (Wagner 2007:144). She writes: “True health is not based on the sculpture of your physique nor your ability to compete in a triathlon . . . It is the empowering of our bodies to perform at their optimum level” (Wagner 2007:143). If faced with a “battle” against illness we are well-armed if we are whole in body and mind. “Optimal health means having reserves to deal with the unexpected stresses encountered in everyday life. It includes having a clear, strong mind and a good memory . . . That is the most effective way to avoid degenerative disease and thus to achieve the maximum number of years of active, enjoyable living” (Wagner 2007:143). Such performances are front and center in God Chicks’ discourse, providing religious strategies and identity markers that resist stereotypical ideas of aging bodies and embrace a discourse of “fighting” cancer and disease before and when it strikes.

Wagner argues that all people, regardless of age or gender, possess warrior bodies, a position bolstered using genetics as cultural icon: “You and I may or may not face actual invaders into our homeland, but we will all face battles. Whether we ever wear camouflage or not, being warriors is in our DNA. And the better we are at being warriors, the more equipped we will be at winning the battles we have been destined to win from all eternity” (Wagner 2007:8). She proclaims at a
God Chicks event: “I’m not talking about punching out the girls next to you . . . passive people just get overtaken by life . . . situations . . . circumstances . . . but you and I need to be those people who fight, we don’t need to be the passive people . . . You are gathered tonight as a troop and so what I hope to do tonight is to inspire a bit of that fight, to navigate that fight that God has entrusted us with.” God Chicks are women of all ages who can manage numerous relational, occupational, and missionary battle zones as well as embrace risk.

The power of the God Chicks ministry community for framing a religiously gendered identity is made accessible through weekly church services and regularly scheduled events. Volunteers can find immediate ways to actualize God Chicks warrior ideals by saturating themselves in the purpose of the ministry itself. For example, one weekend all Oasis church services featured pictures and video of a God Chicks road trip. People clapped and cheered as they watched how women from all ages had joined Wagner to take God Chicks on the road, going on a long-distance bus trip to serve as volunteer staff for God Chicks events held in other states. Women in the congregation, like those from this bus trip, make God Chicks events happen by reprioritizing their time, taking days off of work, stepping back from pursuing dating or leisure opportunities, and seeking release from the burden of childcare or housework. Volunteers commit to the ministry because they want to see (as a many members stated it) “women’s lives changed.” Their role as “godly women” is not simply reinforced but actively buttressed through sanctified, purpose-driven social interactions with Pastor Holly Wagner and other dedicated volunteers. Volunteers also feel free to “encourage” (which can mean actively scold and discipline) each other, and Pastor Holly Wagner holds volunteers to “higher standards” of morality and faithful religious observance (see Marti 2008:165–67).

The idea that God Chicks warriors are highly active in ministry and live dangerous lives promotes aging women as strong, assertive, full of energy, and, most importantly, as not old. The ministry draws from wider evangelical ideas about Christian life as precarious and dangerous pursuit. For example, one featured God Chicks conference speaker began by referencing Oasis’s symbolic age line, telling the audience that she is over 40 and then challenging them: “Do I look it?!?” She followed with examples of her missionary experiences, telling a story about how she recently spoke in a building that was soon after bombed by a terrorist. She found out firsthand that “being an Evangelical in the 21st century is pretty risky.” God Chicks make risky but wise choices. They are not “boring” Christians; they are part of a “radical revolution group of disciples that would change the world.” Turning back to first-wave feminist accomplishments, Susan B. Anthony emerges in Wagner’s book as a symbol of a warrior in a dangerous position: “Susan B. Anthony was ridiculed and persecuted . . . She encountered threats of physical violence and cruel crowds. Still, in 1863, Susan helped to organize a Woman’s National Loyal League to support and petition for the Thirteenth Amendment . . . She then began to campaign for full citizenship for both African Americans and women . . . she did not give up” (2007:48). Using Anthony, born in 1820, as a symbol of feminist feats post-40 is a safe discursive strategy given that she is a broadly legitimated cultural figure, more likely to be accommodated by postfeminists in general than second-wave feminist icons.

The aggressively forceful image entrained by the Warrior Chicks persona implies an upper boundary of age regarding what kind of woman can successfully fulfill God Chicks expectations of role performance. Yet, an upper age limit is difficult to specify given the profile of Oasis attendees. No older women with visible feebleness or disabilities regularly attended, and any time a woman was presented or introduced as an “older woman,” it was always with a remark of how youthful, vigorous, and engaged they were. One older person even refused to state her exact age, and ministry leaders declined to reveal it, only saying: “You wouldn’t believe how old she is.” Rather than emphasizing age, these God Chicks women emphasize vitality. Even more, the

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For example, McManus (2002) and Batterson (2006).
image of a Warrior Chick suggests that women always have the capacity to make choices to use their time and energy for ministry. A woman in her 60s said: “Anybody who is older and comes here and they feel like they don’t have anything to do, it’s not like there isn’t anything for them to do. It’s because they haven’t chosen to do it.”

**Discussion and Implications**

Oasis Christian Center is a contemporary evangelical congregation located in an economic region that promotes a heightened entrepreneurial spirit regarding bodies and creative labor (Marti 2008). Like corporations’ use of “the language of ‘Girl Power’” to give “their products a sense of dynamism, modernity, and innovation,” Pastor Holly Wagner crafts an energizing religious identity for contemporary Christian women (McRobbie 2008:533). This identity is framed using a mix of biblical and secular images, promoted through books and sermons, and sustained by immersive involvement in church-sponsored activities. God Chicks’ multiple images of female empowerment and purpose buttress a Western culture where ideas about age and gender merge with “consumerist, middle-class values and aspirations” (Genz 2006:338), and where evidence of individual initiative determines the moral evaluations of aging women.

More than being an isolated church ministry, God Chicks reflects both a local culture that grants status to fashionable and invigorated women and a historical period that permits a narrow range of religiously sanctioned roles for urban Protestant women. Ministry leaders fuse competing images of gender and aging women into a multifaceted and functional religious identity drawn out of a prosperity theology framework that energizes individual engagement, choice, and hard work at church, home, and in the marketplace. In particular, the congregation’s prosperity theology bolsters an individual sense of purpose in being especially connected to God and his intentions as a “daughter of the King” while stimulating active and sustained involvement in worldly activity. In short, God Chicks’ postfeminist prosperity spirit supports and motivates disciplined and monitored bodies for Christian purpose, providing discursive strategies for alternatively rejecting and embracing ageist beliefs and Western beauty standards.

The promise of prosperity through God Chicks is best envisioned as an adaptation—a profound and practical postfeminist adaptation—of religious experience to demands of new forms of life. Representing the complex nature of postfeminisms, such strategies contribute to ageist approaches in a culture that understands older bodies and the physical effects of aging (especially for women) as failure, encouraging instead “successful aging” processes whereby people “transcend” age in body and in spirit as they grow older and maintain “youthful” social performances (Andrews 1999; Slevin 2010). Essentially, Wagner and her cadre of volunteers encourage warrior princess God Chicks to pursue multiple roles and caretaking responsibilities, reinforcing a somewhat manic gendered lifestyle and identity for all women, including those in their 60s, 70s, and beyond. Furthermore, in her call for “older women” to “equip, motivate, inspire and train younger women” we hear the legitimation of a wider cultural discourse that understands aging women as increasingly responsible for emotional labor in work, family, and here, religious roles. God Chicks perpetuates the idea that older women are responsible for how they age and, above all, are caretakers of multiple others.

Researchers have well-demonstrated how religious ideology in evangelical groups works to balance multiple gendered beliefs and practices (Bartkowski 2004; Brasher 1998; Griffith 1997). Jenkins (2005), for example, notes the “third shift” nature of women’s position in the International Churches of Christ. Our analysis here underscores the importance of place, group theology, and

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congregational demographics within shifting societal structures. Many of these previous studies highlight the contradictory nature of evangelical discourses with regard to marriage relationships. God Chicks discourse incorporates feminist beliefs and Christian purpose in marriages in similar ways (Wagner and Wagner 2010), but geographic location and the targeting of young creative workers in Hollywood brings a distinct religious identity that is chiefly about fusing beauty, age, and religious purpose relevant to all women whether married or not. Evangelical Christian identity is fluid and shaped by distinct communities (Marti 2012a). The type of feminism surfacing in such groups is plural and adaptable, changing to fit evangelical conversion, theological, and outreach goals in particular locations. Future studies exploring evangelicals and gender ideology should pay more attention to this plurality and adaptability.

The God Chicks image fits well into the overall identity reorientation evident among believers at Oasis as empowered achievers and creative workers for God, merging multiple ideas about gender and age with life position, Christian purpose, and prosperity gospel (see Marti 2008:121–28, 154–60; also Marti 2010, 2012b). Still, neither Marti’s original data nor the media analysis accomplished for this research can truly speak to how individual women confronted and understood this discourse. How might some women reject a God Chick identity or be excluded access? At what point might illness or disease impact an “older” woman’s ability to maintain an empowered Warrior Chick front and perhaps become primarily an object of care? Future studies of evangelicals and gender should explore how various manifestations of postfeminist discursive contradictions, such as those we uncover here, are embraced, rejected, and altered through individuals’ lived religious experience in other particularistic sites. Given the lack of attention to age and gender as central categories of analysis in existing research, sociologists of religion should ultimately extend these questions about identity and practice to other religious traditions.

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