



Unhappy clappy

At 14, Christina Patterson joined an evangelical church to meet boys.

A decade on she found herself suffering health problems, speaking in tongues — and she was still a virgin. Here she recounts her escape

Photography by *Julia Fullerton-Batten*





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he first time I spoke in tongues was on a green velvet pouffe. My friend Louise and I had been baptised in the Holy Spirit a few days before. We had both started shaking when Terry and Chad laid hands on us and begged the Lord to fill us with his spirit and his power. Chad had given me a word from the Lord. God, he said, “had seen the fear and sadness” in my heart. I wanted to cry, but when the singing started I joined in. “As the deer pants for the water,” we sang, “so my soul longs after you.” And then I shut my eyes and thought about Jesus. “You alone,” I sang, and it made me want to cry even more, “are my heart’s desire.”

I don’t know how long it takes Muslim teenagers to sign up to a fundamentalist ideology, but for me it took a few weeks. It started, as things often do for teenage girls, with boys. My girls’ grammar school had just turned comprehensive, and our local source of boys had dried up. The boys’ grammar had turned independent, and was now sharing discos, dances and delicious first kisses with the fee-paying girls down the road. My friend Louise and I spent our school lunch hours swapping stories of handsome boys who took you to the Berni Inn, gazed into your eyes and whispered that you were beautiful. The trouble was that the only handsome boys we knew were in our heads.

So when my brother said his friend Steve had invited him to a youth club, and that Louise and I could come, we leapt at the chance. It was hard to know what to wear, but I settled for jeans and the cream drawstring top my mother said looked like a teabag. My father dropped us off at the modern brick building called the Millmead Centre. As we passed a line of motorbikes, and a group of boys in leather jackets, I felt like begging him to take us straight back.

As soon as we walked through the glass double-door, a woman called Jane rushed up. A man called Terry came and shook our hands. Jane and Terry were, they said, youth leaders. So, it turned out, was a man called Chad. Chad asked us if we wanted to play volleyball. I didn’t know the rules and just stood and giggled as the ball flew around. When the game finished, Terry, Jane and Chad asked lots of questions. Did we like school? What were we planning to do for O-levels? Did we like the youth club and were we planning to come back? I looked at the boys in leather jackets, particularly the one with spiky hair and soft brown eyes, and tried not to sound too eager when I said “yes”.

I didn’t realise, that first Friday night, that Millmead was a church. I had always hated church. Church was what you had to do in our family to get your Sunday roast chicken and, if you were lucky, your ice cream with chocolate sauce. I had a brief phase, after watching *The Nun’s Story*, of singing the hymns very loudly and hoping that people would notice my piety and gasp. That was the year I cut off the hair of my Sindy doll and made my mother make her a black habit and veil. But I soon got bored with religion, and when I watched the news, and saw children clutching swollen bellies, or people crying about homes wiped out by hurricanes, I didn’t see how there could be a God. I wasn’t, I told my nice, kind, C of E parents, going to be a hypocrite. I stopped saying the prayers or singing the hymns. Louise, I told them, didn’t have to go to church, and I didn’t see why I did. And so, when I was 13, they said I could stop.

I thought I might become an existentialist. I was nearly 15, and Mrs Hudson, our French teacher, had told us about Camus and Sartre. The important thing, she said, was to be

“authentic” and to create your own moral path. I liked the idea of making my own moral path. I also liked the idea of arguing about alienation over Gauloises and café au lait in Les Deux Magots. But when someone told us that the boys in leather jackets all went to something called “Folkus”, which took place after church on a Sunday night, Louise and I decided that we were going, too.

At Christ Church, an organ played some old-fashioned music, then you sang a few hymns, heard a short sermon, knelt for the prayers and went home. Guildford Baptist Church, which was in the same modern building as the youth club at the Millmead Centre, was more like a theatre. Instead of pews, there were padded vinyl benches. A man in a check shirt played a guitar and a woman in a flowery dress shook a tambourine. When the music stopped, there was a silence that felt like the moment before the Boomtown Rats came on stage. A man with a grey suit and a grey beard walked up to a microphone, his eyes so bright I couldn’t look away. “Welcome,” he said, “to the Lord’s house. The Lord Jesus is here with us tonight.”

I still can’t pin down the exact moment when disbelief changed to something else. I only know that the Rev David Pawson’s sermon did some trick with time. By the end of the service, I felt as if the things I knew about the world had just been put on a bonfire and set alight. At Folkus, which took place at the home of a couple called Paul and Jan, I listened as people talked about their faith. I watched the faces of the boys with leather jackets as they sang the choruses, and the way they sometimes shut their eyes. “Jesus, take me as I am,” they sang, “for I can come no other way. Take me deeper into you. Make the flesh life melt away.”

Three weeks later, when the Rev Pawson put out a call for anyone who didn’t know the Lord to accept him as their Lord and saviour, I shut my eyes and made a vow and told Jesus that my life was now his.

It was quite tiring being a Christian. For a start, you were meant to start every day with a “quiet time”. You were meant to set your alarm early so you could read the Bible and pray before you went to school. I was no better at getting up early as a born-again Christian than I was before, or am now. Every day started with a feeling of failure.

You were also meant to pray for everyone you knew who didn’t know the Lord. This included your parents, because going to a nice C of E church every week didn’t count as “knowing the Lord”. You only knew the Lord if you had accepted him as your Lord and saviour. This meant that only people who went to your church, or similar churches, did. This was quite a worry. It meant that not only were the people you knew missing out on all the joy of knowing that the Lord was in control of their lives, and all the spiritual nourishment you were getting by going to church, and youth club, which was called Network, and the after-church meeting, which was called Folkus, and the Monday night meeting, which was called Extra Time. It also meant that these people were, unfortunately, going to hell.

It wasn’t always clear who was going to hell. I asked Clive at Network about the pygmies in the jungle. Were they going to hell, even though they hadn’t heard the word of God? Clive said they were. He said the point of the pygmies, and the starving babies in Africa, was to make us grateful for what we had. But Terry said it wasn’t straightforward ➤➤➤

BAPTISM

Left: Patterson went from mild atheism to fundamentalist Christianity in a matter of weeks

with the pygmies. It was possible that they would be judged on the truth they had received, which might not be all that much. I was relieved to hear that, but no one could really argue that my friends and family were pygmies.

What was clear was that it was your responsibility as a Christian to be a good “Christian witness”, which meant that you were a kind of ambassador for Christ and had to be on your best behaviour all the time. You shouldn’t ever swear. You shouldn’t be greedy. You couldn’t be rude, or angry, or sulky, or unkind. And when your French teacher talked about the Christian “myth”, it was your job to tell her, in front of the whole class, that she shouldn’t call the truth a “myth”. Even though doing it made your cheeks burn.

And as for the boys? You may well ask about the boys. “Sex”, Terry told us at Extra Time one night, “is a wonderful gift from God.” It was a gift God had given a man and a wife to celebrate their love for each other. It was not something you could ever do outside a marriage. But even if you fancied someone, you couldn’t just go out with them. You had to ask God whether it was the right thing to do, and you should only do it if you thought it would lead to marriage. And you couldn’t even think about going out with a “non-Christian”. The Bible said you couldn’t be “yoked with an unbeliever”. But you also shouldn’t assume that you would get married. “To some,” said Terry, “God grants the special gift of being single.” When I heard this, I suddenly felt cold.

At night, I dreamt about Andy, the boy with soft brown eyes. He liked Genesis, so I used the wages from my Saturday job to buy every record by them — and wept as I sang along to Mad Man Moon. “Was it summer when the river ran dry,” I sang, with Phil Collins, “or was it just another dam?” I cried because I didn’t know how to talk to Andy, and I didn’t think he liked me, and I wasn’t meant to think about him. I cried because my friends didn’t understand about my faith, and my family didn’t understand about my faith, and because I felt I was always failing God.

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ut at church, and at Folkus and Extra Time, and on the youth weekend when I was baptised in the Holy Spirit, I sang my praise to the Lord. Chad had told us about the baptism of the Holy Spirit. It was, he explained, when the Holy Spirit came upon you, and unleashed “signs, wonders and miracles”. Afterwards, you might have a special prayer language, which was called “speaking in tongues”. You might have “words of knowledge” for other people, which were direct messages from God that he wanted you to pass on. You might have the gift of interpreting tongues. Sometimes the tongues were real languages, like Arabic or Mandarin, and you would be given the ability to translate them even though you didn’t know them before. Or you might be granted the gift of healing. Jesus loved to heal, he said, and whatever you asked in his name, he would do.

I don’t know if I ever heard Mandarin or Arabic, or instant translations. I do know that I heard a lot of people speaking in tongues, and that I had no way of knowing whether any of the languages were real. I know that, on that green pouffe, in Louise’s parents’ bungalow, I started speaking what I thought was gobbledygook. We were holding each other’s hands as we prayed, and when the first words came out she said she felt something electric shoot up her arms. I know I heard “words of knowledge” in prayer meetings that seemed to reduce the people they were meant for to tears. I know I heard “words of knowledge” meant for



TEEN ROMANCE
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me that made me gasp. I saw people shake, and weep, and “laugh in the Holy Spirit”. I saw people who had been ill who said they had been healed. I wasn’t sure what to make of any of it. I didn’t understand God. I didn’t see how he could make Jane’s car pass its MOT but not stop the floods in Bangladesh. I didn’t see how he could send well-meaning people who didn’t happen to believe in him to hell. But one thing I did know. Whether I liked it or not — and quite a lot of the time I didn’t — I couldn’t doubt that God was real.

My first evangelistic crusade was called “Star Rock”. God had given Terry the name. The “star” was the light that was Jesus, and the “rock” was the church. God wanted us, Terry told us, to reach out to young people across Guildford. The Star Rock logo was printed on posters, sweatshirts and badges. I wore the sweatshirt as I handed out leaflets on Guildford High Street. In a week, 57 people gave their lives to the Lord. Terry asked me to write about it for the church newsletter. It was the first thing I ever had published.

At Durham, where I read English, I went to a house church in a carpet factory on an industrial estate. Many women in the congregation, including students, wore headscarves. The Bible, they told me, said that “any woman who prays or proclaims God’s message in public worship with nothing on her head disgraces her husband”. Music for boomed out of giant speakers, and people clapped and danced around the room as they sang.

I also joined the Durham Inter-Collegiate Christian Union. In my second year, I went with a group from DICCU to Perugia in Italy. Our mission was to convert international students, and particularly Muslims. James, our co-leader, gave a talk on Islam and Christian witness before we went. Muslims, he told us, weren’t encouraged to think for ➤➤➤

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themselves. Sue, his co-leader, gave a talk on Catholicism and Christian witness. She said that Catholics bowed down to statues and candles, which was idolatry. She said that she had been given a vision about Perugia being bathed in light.

We should, James told us, be able to give our personal testimony in three minutes. We should be warm, and friendly, and natural. What it came down to, he said, was ABCD: Admit, Believe, Consider, Do. During the day, we roamed the streets in pairs. On the steps of the Università per Stranieri, we met Maria from Somalia, and Abdul from Lebanon, and Ali from Algeria, and Hafez from Iran. We asked them about their faith and talked to them about Jesus. We invited them back for supper, and took it in turns to cook. One night, an Italian boy called Luigi announced he had something to tell us. After spaghetti with ratatouille, he told us he had asked Jesus into his life. Sue cried, and James said “hallelujah”. We sang choruses late into the night.

It was after I had left Durham, and started work as a publicity assistant for a publisher in Bloomsbury, that I started evangelising in gay pubs. I was going to a church called Holy Trinity Brompton, now famous for its Alpha courses. A girl called Sue (there were a lot of Sues) told me about “the Earls Court project”, to reach out to people in the area who didn’t know the Lord. Some nights, I went to the drop-in centre to serve tea and warm food to tramps. Some nights, I went to the Coleherne, a leather bar in the Old Brompton Road. I took a deep breath and told men in studded leather about the Lord. I knew they didn’t want to talk to me. I didn’t want to talk to them. But God, Sue said, had called us to do this work. Like every Christian I met, she seemed to be a lot better at hearing God’s voice than me.

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n the end, it was my body that cracked up. First it was my skin. I’d always had a few spots, but when I was 23 what happened on my face was more like a war, with red throbbing lumps. My mother sent me to see a dermatologist, but the drugs I was prescribed only seemed to make it worse. At night, I prayed for the skin to heal. In the morning, when I looked in the mirror, I felt sick. Every time I caught a glimpse of my face in a shop window or a saucepan lid, I hoped that it wasn’t as bad as I thought it was, but it was.

When the skin cleared up, after a vicious ultra-violet treatment at a hospital for skin diseases, the physical pain kicked in. It started in my ankles and spread up to my knees. Soon, I couldn’t walk more than a few yards. I went from doctor to doctor, but nobody seemed to know what was wrong. I was just about to set off for a “discipleship training course”, run by an organisation called Youth With a Mission, when I got a call to say that the blood tests I’d had a year before had been found. A secretary told me that I had an incurable autoimmune disease called lupus.

I was 25. I was unemployed. I’d had one boyfriend, for just a few weeks. And I had never had sex. In the decade I had spent trying to serve God, no one had ever even touched my breasts.

I did the course. I wanted to give God one last chance. My knees were so painful, in spite of the steroid injections and drugs I’d been prescribed, that I felt, when I staggered from a car to a building, like the little mermaid, walking on knives. During the day, I went to schools and youth clubs, talking about the God who mended broken hearts. At night, on my bunk bed, I cried. People kept telling me that the



DEVIL’S DAUGHTER
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Lord wanted to heal me. They kept praying for me and telling me that he had told them he would. And I was in so much pain that sometimes I just wanted to die.

It was when the pain spread to my arms that I gave up. I couldn’t serve a God I had come to hate. My fingers hurt so much that it was hard to write. But in my diary, I wrote this: “Fuck off, God. Take your filthy hands off my life. Let those who believe you are good continue to enjoy your gifts. I expect nothing from you except pain and disaster.”

The next day, in my diary, I wrote this: “Satan, if you’re trying to attack me, because you think I might be a threat to you, I wouldn’t worry about it. I don’t care about God. You’ve won. Let me have my life back.”

And that was that. Technically, I am a daughter of the Devil, since I still believed in him when I handed over my life. But what followed wasn’t nearly as much fun as that might imply. I had to rebuild a life without the central plank. I was still unemployed and immobilised by pain, and it took a long time, and an awful lot of therapy, to get that pain to go. When I should have been learning how to date, I was singing love songs to a man who died 2,000 years earlier. In anything to do with relationships, I was crippling shy. All these years later, I’m still quite shy. Some habits are hard to break.

I still don’t know quite why I got sucked in, or why it took so long to get out. But one clue may be this. My sister, Caroline, who was five years older than me, had her first breakdown when she was 14. She was sent to the adolescent unit of a mental hospital and later diagnosed with schizophrenia. When she died, of heart failure, in 2000, my mother found a poem she had written. In it, she talks about the “illness from generations” she had “the bad luck to inherit”. The illness, she says, “is too much to bear”. But she had to bear it anyway.

Caroline didn’t have a normal youth. Caroline couldn’t have a normal youth. When I was 14, I found a path that also wrecked my youth. You can call that a kind of madness. You could even call it a kind of love ■

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