

**GIFT OR POISON? WOMEN'S EXPERIENCE  
OF THE CHURCH WITH REFERENCE TO  
CERTAIN WOMEN IN THE EASTERN CAPE.**

by

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## DECLARATION

I declare that "Gift of Poison? Women's Experience of the Church with reference to certain women in the Eastern Cape" is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

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**SUMMARY**

This dissertation examines the experience that women have of the church. Work was done with groups of women in the Eastern Cape to hear their first hand experiences on this subject. A study was also made of the experiences of women as recorded in other parts of Africa and the world. South African women are situated within the broader context of society, thus also matters pertaining to this broader context were examined.

The situation facing South African women in society and within the church is complex and difficult. In the final chapter, rather than looking at how women could change external structures, the focus is on women paying attention to themselves. The great importance of women honouring themselves, and giving themselves priority, and that of developing a spiritual practice that is nurturing and relevant to their lives, were suggested as a prerequisite for effective change on a wider level. An emphasis was thus put on the inner world of the woman, where, it is argued, many South African women need to experience a revolution. That women need support in this journey was stressed, with the participation in women's groups seen as being transforming for women.

(ii)

### KEY TERMS

Women, Church, Eastern Cape, Theology, Spirituality, Methodology, Culture, Research, South Africa, Women's Groups, Women's Experience.

(iii)

I am grateful for financial assistance received from the Human Sciences Research Council. I take full responsibility for this dissertation.

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## INTRODUCTION

*Work is love made visible*  
(Ghibran)

Gift or poison? Women's experience of the church with reference to the Eastern Cape. Thus reads the title of this dissertation.

Why a focus on women? In turn, I would ask: "Why have so many studies been done in the past focusing, by default, on men?" Across the various disciplines research has been conducted as if the experiences of men were representative of all humanity. It is a very necessary corrective that there is self-conscious study into the experience of women, so that all may have a fuller picture of reality.

For decades South Africa has been involved in a low intensity war. Gender issues were not at the forefront. Now, with a democratic dispensation in place, women owe it to themselves, and to society, to examine their situation. Women in the country are awakening to the gender question, and the time is opportune for studies such as this one.

Why then the topic relating to women in the church? The institution of the church is a firm part of South African reality. Most women are affiliated to a church body. Some would argue that the influence of the church permeates society as a whole, so that what it sanctions becomes what is considered legitimate in the broader societal context. Thus, whether or not one is part of the church, its thinking and practice can be of consequence for one's own life. Women comprise by far the majority of South African church-goers. They are thus the major consumers of church life. And yet there is little information available as to how they feel about this institution.

This dissertation seeks to explore how women experience the church. Do women

experience the church as a gift or as poison? Another way of phrasing this question would be to ask whether women's experience of the church is life or death-giving. The word gift speaks of something which enhances and enriches life, which delights the recipient. Poison, of course, speaks of that which weakens, takes energy from and, ultimately, can kill. The contrast between the two words is intentionally stark, and each word has a strength of its own. Such words were chosen for the title of this dissertation as it is evident that the place church has in women's lives is foundational and influential, although of course it cannot be entirely separated from other aspects of a woman's life.

I was situated within the church at the time of writing, as an Anglican priest who is a woman. I was thus able to explore my own experience of the church and to have contact with other women, within the Anglican<sup>1</sup> church and other churches. As I was situated in the Eastern Cape, this is the area in which I wished to conduct this study. The field research component was conducted with Xhosa-speaking women in the region (I have a working knowledge of Xhosa). Xhosa-speaking women were chosen as the group with which to work as Xhosa is by far the predominant language spoken in the region, and it is Xhosa-speaking women that fill our churches.

The field research was conducted with groups of women. There was an attempt to conduct the research in a way that was congruent with my own beliefs, such as those of equality. Thus a research environment was established which was non-threatening and which encouraged, as far as possible, an equal relationship between myself and those with whom I was working. Hence also discussion in these groups was conducted in a fairly unstructured manner so that the women present could raise the issues that were important to them. The experience of meeting in groups to share

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<sup>1</sup> This is the term commonly used to refer to the Church of the Province of Southern Africa, and I use it as it is the one with which people are more familiar.

experiences of the church was a very moving and important one for each of the women. There was much sharing of emotion and pain, with a great depth of material being revealed. This dissertation argues in its concluding chapter that forums for such sharing are sustaining and nurturing of women's spirituality.

The field work component was not extensive, with the number of women reached for the study not exceeding seventeen. The duration of the research period was also not as lengthy as had initially been envisaged. This was at least in part due to practical constraints, such as time (my own and the women's) and issues of organisation (our meetings involved some not inconsiderable travel for all of us). I do not feel that either of these factors lessens the value of the study. It is rather all the more remarkable that such a depth of information can issue from a small research group. I think this validates the form of methodology used.

Qualitative research is the term given to the form of research that was undertaken in this study. The difference between this and (the more commonly used) quantitative form of research is implicit in the terms used to define them - qualitative and quantitative. There is greater depth to the material that is elicited through qualitative research. Hence, although the sample used in this study was small, the depth of information that was produced was more substantial than that which would have been realised by using a larger sample in a quantitative approach, which emphasizes the measurement of particular variables. The approach employed in this study allowed women to be themselves and to raise, within a broad framework, the issues that were of importance to them. This approach was preferred to the more traditional approach which attempts to elicit responses to set questions formulated by the researcher. I will argue in my opening chapters, where I describe the methodology I have used, that in fact this approach results in the researcher getting a fuller and truer picture of the reality that is being examined.

The field research also does not stand on its own. Against it I view the data of my own experience of the church as well as exploring how women in other parts of Africa and the world relate to the same subject. I am then in a position to judge whether or not the material gleaned from these various sources is supportive or contradictory.

The dissertation is structured as follows. The first chapter deals with theological methodology in general. I critique the way theology has generally been done in the past, and describe the approach that is used in this study. I find the more traditional way of developing knowledge, and also theological knowledge, as being very often unengaged with real life issues. The study is committed to an approach which regards as foundational to any theology the lived experience of women. Chapter 2 looks at the importance of women being enabled to verbalise their own experiences, to tell their own stories. The field component of the study was conducted largely with groups of women, and the reason for, and value of, this methodology is explained. Detail is also given regarding the research process itself and the relationship between the researcher and those sharing in the study. The following chapter, Chapter 3, describes the work that was undertaken with the women, explaining how it was begun and who the participants were. This chapter then proceeds to relate, often *verbatim*, what the women shared on the subject of their experience of the church. The following chapter examines how women elsewhere experience the church. In this way an assessment can be made as to whether or not the experience of the women in the study is shared by women in other parts of Africa and the world. Chapter 5 deals with the wider context of South African women, examining issues pertaining to the family, African culture, the contemporary concern with inculturation, and exploring the question of how issues of dissent are dealt with in South African society and the church. The sixth, and final, chapter attempts to plot a way forward for women in the face of all that confronts them in South African society today and within the church.

I am undertaking this study within the discipline of Systematic Theology. As the term

implies, this involves systematizing one's theological thinking. I will argue that category of experience - in this instance, the experience of women - ought to be the beginning point for one's understanding of matters of life and faith. This sub-discipline of theology has traditionally included systematizing ideas on matters pertaining to the Christian faith, such as an understanding of god,<sup>2</sup> of people, of the church, and so on. I will argue that in all of this, the experience of women needs to be where one begins (certainly as a woman). Thus I will not look at abstract concepts of god and the church, for example, but rather seek to understand the inner experiential reality of women. My premise is that life must be the starting point for any theological pursuit if it is to have any meaning. My particular contribution to the field of Systematic Theology will be in the areas of methodology, ecclesiology (the study of the church) and anthropology (understandings of the human person).

It is my hope that this small study will provide insight into how women experience the church and that this would inform the church at large and would, perhaps more importantly, reflect to other women the validity of their experiences and give them courage to own these. The most cherished end result would not be, as may be suspected, the transformation of the church, but rather that women would dare to look at, name and share their experiences and claim for themselves a way of being, in the church and in the world, that is life-giving and life-nurturing for themselves. As women, we tend to take responsibility for transforming things. I would argue that we need to concentrate on ourselves, and spend time with ourselves and with one another. Each woman will need to choose for herself what the church is for her - gift or poison - and decide whether or how to be part of the church. The words gift and poison perhaps suffer in that they suggest something that a person is given by

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<sup>2</sup> I deliberately use the lower case for god. (Another writer - Schüssler-Fiorenza - uses G\*d.) This is to indicate that this word for the divine is itself not without historical baggage and thus may be a word that "gets in the way", as it were, for some.

another. In many ways this is the case in the church at present. Religion is, as it were, dispensed by the leadership to the people. It is my hope that women would move from the passive role of being recipients to taking active responsibility for forming structures and groups that are nourishing because they take seriously the lived experience of women themselves.

I dedicate this work to all women who seek god - within and without the church. May we look within ourselves and to each other.

## CHAPTER 1

### METHODOLOGY FOR LIFE

*I ... knew so much about music  
that I had forgotten how to dance  
(Campbell)*

Alice - of Alice in Wonderland - asks the Cheshire Cat: "Which way should I take?" The Cat replies: "It depends where you want to get to." Certainly in this dissertation the "way" and the destination are intricately bound together. The subject under investigation is the experience of women in the church, and the "way" employed in the field research section of this work is to enable women themselves to speak themselves of this. This initial chapter will look at theological methodology in general and explain the approach that has been used in this study. Critical questions are raised as to the nature and function of the more traditional methodological approaches to the formulation of knowledge and theology. It will be argued that life is the only valid starting point for the theological pursuit.

My hope is that the research work, reading and the writing of this dissertation will be a life-giving experience for myself, for my readers, and for those with whom I dialogue in the research process. Academia is seldom a discipline that engages the whole of who one is - or at least a large part of one's make-up. Rather, in my experience, its appeal is often to the intellect only.<sup>3</sup> My hope is that the value of this dissertation would be more comprehensive. Thus I would dare to envisage that for all the actors involved there will be an intellectual engagement, but also an involvement of the

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<sup>3</sup> A theology professor at UCT cautioned me that it is difficult to be concerned and an academic!

emotions and the will.<sup>4</sup> If we seek a transformed world why should the world of academia be excluded from this?<sup>5</sup>

## KNOWLEDGE: BY WHOM, FOR WHOM, AND FOR WHAT PURPOSE?

Methodology is the explanation or rationale as to how a researcher has gone about her work. It is thus fitting that in this section we examine the concept of knowledge, this being the end product, as it were, of the process of examining and sifting material towards, in this instance, the completion of a dissertation. This section will thus examine who the "makers" of knowledge are, who its "consumers" are, and for what purpose knowledge is made available.

### **The Myth of Scientific Objectivity**

Knowledge has generally been associated with the intellect. There has been an emphasis in research upon investigating what is scientifically measurable, as if only such precision can result in what can be considered to be true knowledge. Happily the fallacy of this is becoming increasingly clear. It is being recognised that there is no such thing as impartial research.<sup>6</sup> The very choice of one's field of research reflects a certain inclination. Thus, from the very outset, there is a large element of subjectivity in the journey towards knowledge. The shortcoming of much previous

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<sup>4</sup> Main says that "the highest theology is the least academic" (1987:225)

<sup>5</sup> The authors I draw on in this section have been selected because they situate themselves in the broader struggle against oppression - against poverty, racism and gender discrimination.

<sup>6</sup> This has been long been debated in philosophy and philosophy of science, and my critique refers to what is known as the positivist tradition. (see Macquarrie, J. 1963/81. Twentieth-Century Religious Thought: The Frontiers of Philosophy and Theology, 1900-1980. London: SCM, pp 95ff)

work has been that certain researchers have acted as if such subjectivity does not exist. Aside from the subject choice, the sort of questions one might pose, one's interpretation of data and the way one chooses to present data are all reflections of the subjective choice of the researcher. It cannot be otherwise. Various women theologians and researchers are challenging the largely (still) sacrosanct emphasis on measurement and, supposedly, scientific precision. Nielsen is an example of this. In the excellent work that she edits, entitled Feminist Research Methods, Cook and Fonow say that:

Current emphasis on statistical methods means that variables are often conceptualized according to what is most easily quantifiable rather than what is most theoretically important .... Equation of quantification with objectivity has been critiqued by feminist scholars who point out that quantification has its own inherent biases and distortions (1990:77).

Another hazardous aspect about the formulation of knowledge is that it can result in people being separated into those who know and those who need to be told. This results in very unequal power relations. This is all the more dangerous when we face the obvious truth that knowledge-making is done by those who are already powerful in society - by those who are economically privileged and often from the ruling gender. That knowledge is emanating from this source further cements the inequality in power relations between the "knower" and the rest of society. Of course the very fact that knowledge comes from such sources means that, by and large, issues that are on the agenda of the poor and of women are not the object of study.

Knowledge is thus a political issue. The question of who formulates the study, what questions are asked, to whom these are being addressed, and to whom the material is finally made accessible are all political questions. Researchers "take sides" - consciously or unconsciously. They are not neutral. Increasingly women researchers and theologians are aware of this. So Aquino, writing from a Latin American perspective, states that "one of humanity's current discoveries, backed by the

sociology of knowledge, is how thinking and the historico-social reality of the thinker are related" (1993:81). She further adds that, referring here particularly to theology:

Theology claiming to be above history, or theology that is not conscious of its premises, ends up identifying with the dominant power in the church and society. This is to its own detriment and humanity's, because such a theology ignores the questions and deepest desires of the majority of human beings: the poor and oppressed of the earth (1993:82).

Indeed, to read much of the material that is written in various disciplines one could well believe that there is no problem of world hunger!

Sherif, in the work edited by Harding entitled Feminism and Methodology, similarly bewails the fact that science has often played handmaiden to the social values of the researcher (1987:40). In the same work, Ladner quotes Gouldren who says that:

In a sense, there is and can be no value-free sociology. The only choice is between an expression of one's values as open and honest as it can be ... and a vain ritual of moral neutrality (in Harding 1987:78).

Driver, really a feminist male writer, affirms that "a political factor is present in any body of truth: Whose interests does it serve?" (1981:73) That would seem to me to be the key question.

Aquino says that making its "interests" explicit is a feature of feminist theology (1993:81). She quotes Schüssler- Fiorenza who says that "theologians in the academy refuse to discuss publicly their political allegiance and preconceived bias and function" (in Aquino 1993:81). Aquino continues, "[this] means they manage to conceal even from themselves the ideologies and interests upon which their work is based" (1993:81).

In my experience of academia and theological education in South Africa this has most

often been the case, although this is changing, and those aligning themselves with the struggle for liberation would have been proud exceptions to this approach.

### **Knowledge as Knowing**

Knowledge that makes a difference - to the writer, the reader, or those involved in the research - will be that which seeks to respond, not only to the intellect, but also to the feelings and volition of people. Hence the question, "what is knowledge for?" The word "knowing" suggests a deep inner knowledge, not something confined to the intellect. It is said that in the Bible the word "knowing" speaks of the intimacy of sexual intercourse. This is what I would look for in knowledge - a knowing that resonates with all of who one is, that connects with the depths of one's own reality, informing and perhaps challenging that reality. It has to do with passion. (I value the advice given to me as I floundered initially to find a thesis topic and was advised by various women theologians - study what is your passion.) Thus, again, this work will not be disconnected from feelings. Our emotional life is very much part of our reality, and we cut it off at our peril. It is only when knowledge engages the whole of who we are that it will take root in our being and be life-giving and nourishing for us. It is presently mainly women who are bringing this understanding to bear on academic work (it need not, and hopefully will not, only be women who use this approach, otherwise we are suggesting that biology determines who we are). Nielsen puts it rather beautifully when she speaks of "the importance of the interaction between social knowledge and self-knowledge .... The personal becomes intellectual, and the intellectual, personal" (1990:30).

### **Knowledge for What Purpose?**

My thoughts on this were initiated some years ago by Chikane, the well-known South African pastor and theologian (and now also politician) who, when speaking at the

Rustenburg conference in 1991, stated that:

Authentic knowledge is ... concerned with the transformation of things ... [the] investigation of what can be .... Authentic knowledge sets itself up as social criticism; the transformation of the old order to the new (in Alberts and Chikane 1991:58).

Knowledge is thus not generated for its own sake but towards the goal of social change. So Cook and Fonow can say that "the most comprehensive type of knowledge results from attempts to change what one is investigating" (in Nielsen 1990:89). Driver says similarly that:

As long as it is authentic, truth is inseparable from its liberating function .... Every institution and every belief is to be judged by its liberating result (1981:94).

Millman and Kanter concur:

Social science should explore needed social transformations and encourage a more just, humane society (in Harding 1987:34).

So a growing body of people believe that knowledge is accountable and has as its purpose transformation. A group of black and white American women, who write under the title of The Mud Flower Collective perhaps put it most starkly - and I wholeheartedly agree with them:

The scholar who is indifferent to justice is not an excellent scholar .... No academic field ... falls outside the realm of accountability to the common good (1985:33).

However, this certainly has not always been the yardstick by which academic work is judged. But it is a call which should guide the excellent scholar.

## WHAT ABOUT THEOLOGY THEN? BY WHOM, FOR WHOM, FOR WHAT PURPOSE?

### **From Personal Experience**

I can of course be most sure of my own experience. I grew up in the Anglican church and was part of the Sunday School (as it was called then), being confirmed and attending services as a young adult. All this time there was nothing that I remember ever having engaged me as a person. It was as if there was a body of knowledge that had to be imparted to me, whether or not this had any organic link with my own reality. The information was already formulated and it did not change according to the person. I was in the church as a consumer of a product to which I was not invited to contribute. Indeed I did not question at the time that anything should be any different from what it was.

Having taken "leave of absence" for some years, I returned again to being part of a congregation. Again, now as an adult in my late twenties, there was nothing that engaged with my reality, although by this stage I did not even expect there to be. Neither the hymns (or choruses), the prayers nor the sermon were saying anything that connected with real life for me. Although I must admit that I myself was not yet identifying what the "real" issues were, the church certainly did not help me to do this.

I later began to study theology - first by correspondence and then at a seminary and university campus. In my studies through correspondence I began to be more explorative and authentic in my own approach to the material, and the institution through which I was studying encouraged this. However, at the seminary it was the usual church fare - teaching about theology in a way that was not related at all to the student's own context. What however was life-giving were the discussions more informally among students - most of whom were black. This was what excited me.

Now at last life and reality was being brought to bear on the material. And how different this was! Life was the first consideration. (I was still however never encouraged to explore my faith from a woman's perspective.) A further disappointing experience awaited me when I began my studies on a university campus at honours level. My (world-renowned) professor seemed baffled when I requested that I study church history in the social context of its time, so that I could explore how the church related to its context. No, it was as if the church existed beyond time, and thus could be studied as an entity on its own. Hence I conducted these post-graduate studies in a way that very seldom touched me or related to who I was.

I now serve as a parish priest in a church which makes use of a prayer book in which a large part of the service is set down. I explore ways to be creative but to be authentic to what would really be enlivening for me would be unacceptable to the congregation and the broader church. (This would involve doing away with pews, much more dialoguing and a move away from the focus on the service leader, the use of silence, the use of feminine imagery for god, and so on. As it is, I am introducing these gently, one at a time, so as not to overwhelm people.)

I fairly recently went on an 8 day retreat conducted by a well-known spiritual director. I found him very unhelpful. When he said to me that he found that black Africans had a very different approach to spirituality from "whites", I responded that women also have a different approach and responses from men. The director seemed baffled and said that none of the women that he "directs" had ever indicated that to him! What a difference I experienced when I became part of a small group of women who meet monthly to share their life journeys. Leadership is rotated, use is made of silence - lots of it - there is creative involvement through dance or drawing, group members can share - or be silent - concerning their inner journeying in the preceding month. This group organised an 8 day retreat which was led by a progressive Catholic nun. Here we engaged as women and I can truly say that that experience was one of the

highlights of my spiritual journeying. As a group we also compose our own rituals/services, where again leadership is shared, use is made of silence and the involvement of creativity. It has been said that after really worshipping one should feel both exhilarated and exhausted (Ruether 1985:107). This describes the feeling of the group after such gatherings.

I have described my own experience at some length in order to illustrate the different levels of alienation which I have felt within the church. This experience also alludes to a possible definition of theology which has been avoided so far in this discussion. Is the term "theology" in any way helpful, I wonder. The above exploration would suggest that theology has to do with the life of the church, but not, perhaps, with what the church teaches about god, because there we fall into the trap of thinking that someone can teach someone else about god. This idea kills our spiritual lives. Theology in the church is more about exploring together where god is in our lives and the world.<sup>7</sup> Is there then a place for theological studies? At this point I think I must say that I am unsure. At its best theology towards formation in church leadership would involve sharing from one's life-world, listening to others' stories, and learning to be an enabler of people's spiritual journeys. So it returns us to the question of whether church/theology/spirituality is life or death giving. Again, the plea is for engagement of the whole person.

This section serves to illustrate that where experience is not the starting point for a knowing of god, religion remains fairly peripheral to the person, becoming something the person "takes on" but is not informing the depth of who one is.

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<sup>7</sup> I much prefer the emphasis of liberation theologians on "doing theology" rather than "reading" or "writing" it.

### **Again, Theology by whom, for whom?**

Like knowledge, theology has tended to be "done" by specialist theologians - here again, they are most often from the affluent and powerful in society. Theology has, like other disciplines such as medicine and law, at least in some circles, begun to look at theology being done by "the people" themselves. Thus, the last few decades have seen a proliferation of writings from within the contextual and feminist theology sectors arguing that the first step in theologizing is to look at the real world - at life (which is of course another way of saying that we ought to start from experience). That needs to be affirmed, but how does this link up with life in the local congregation? Driver in Christ in a Changing World states that the base for theology is always an existing religious community, otherwise, he says, "theology starts to float in the clouds" (1981:2).<sup>8</sup>

I am presently serving as a priest in several small rural congregations. My experience here is that people expect - and desire - that one teaches according to the more traditional model (although I doubt it was Jesus' tradition) where people are "given the answers" about god without directly engaging their own reality or that of the world.

The best of theology - that of critical re-evaluation of doctrines, looking at the context, encouraging questioning - is far removed from where many people in the church are or want to be. The insights of feminist theology, that of re-evaluating all of tradition and scripture in terms of whether or not it is affirming of women, seems frankly heretical to the "faithful".

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<sup>8</sup> His definition of theology is: "I take theology to be the answer to a question, or at least the attempt to answer. That question is: What should the church teach about God?" (1981:1-2)

It seems to be of fundamental importance to link our theologizing with the situation in the local church. The danger is - as the reality reveals - that the local church and good theology will remain poles apart. It is my observation that many theologians are totally bored in the local church, if they have remained part of it at all. One also sees church leaders who present one "face" to the congregation, so as not to offend, when their own theological ideas are quite different from what they are expressing. I would regard this as quite a dangerous situation due to its lack of integrity. Or perhaps theology should not be rooted in the church but in the world, particularly among the poor. This is where Jesus' theologizing was rooted.

In an earlier draft of this dissertation I wrote that "it is useful doing theological study while serving in a parish. It reduces the temptation to separate these two worlds". I think that now I need to ask whether one can creatively "do" theology in a parish setting. Even in small group bible studies where I have attempted to encourage a freer, bolder approach to life and god, this has failed.

I am presently facing the struggle of trying to connect life-giving theologizing with parish life. Theology and spirituality and worship should go together, but they seldom do. (It has been said that theology should be done on our knees!) Our worship liturgies hammer out traditional theology, saying little about justice and freedom.<sup>9</sup> In my position as priest I try to honour the light of wisdom and truth that is within each person, encouraging each to embark on, or continue, the journey of exploring and questioning. But this isn't what people want or expect from a Christian leader: they expect guidance and "answers". And if one radically questions some considered-to-be "fundamental" doctrinal ideas such as what it means that Christ is our redeemer,

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<sup>9</sup> I refer here to my experience of liturgy in the Anglican church.

people are almost ready to lynch you!<sup>10</sup>

Having shared here some of the realities of the endeavour to be authentic in oneself and before god and be in leadership in a parish context, I now turn to look more intentionally at what the purpose of theology is.

### **Theology as grounded in and towards life**

Whilst this dissertation would affirm much of Driver's concern about theology being rooted in the faith community, it would like to widen this. Many of our most creative and critical thinkers find themselves leaving the church because of what they perceive as its bigoted narrowness. If our premise is that knowledge - and so too theological knowledge - is about transformation, then theology has an intimate relationship with its wider context, that of life, and particularly how it relates to situations of non-life or death. I bewail, with The Mud Flower Collective, that "theology becomes ... a way of avoiding taking human life seriously" (1985:195). Yes, I feel this has all too often been the case. Putting it more positively, they say that "we intend to take human life seriously" (1985:195).

Happily there are contemporary theologians, many of whom are women, who are echoing this commitment. Thus Aquino, writing in the South American context, says that "theology is about the meaning of our actions and our life and death" (1993:82). Heyward, writing in England, speaks of "the necessity of approaching all theological inquiry through an intense interest in humanity .... I think to do otherwise is wrong - both methodologically and ethically" (1982:6). Hull and Smith, African-American

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<sup>10</sup> I am mindful of the fact that I am working in a rural context, my examples here coming from a largely white middle-class rural congregation, and this no doubt colours my experience to some degree. I am not, however, convinced that the situation in a more urban setting would be very different.

women, assert movingly that "the bias of Black women's studies must consider as primary the knowledge that will save Black women's lives" (in Hull *et al* 1982:xxv).

Harding similarly:

Life and death issues are at stake in the way we perceive, analyse, and envision the world and therefore in what we say of God (1987:245).

McKenna too:

The poor, the masses of folk in the world and the church, do theology. They do it astutely, for life and death reasons .... The act of theologizing is an act of justice, of truth-telling, and of courage in a context of life and death (1994:172).

How seldom theology has been seen to be a matter of promoting life or death! The above-quoted writers put it so starkly, and surely it is so. If this is where god's concern is, it is surely where that of theology should be.

## HOW TO THEOLOGIZE - FROM LIFE AND TOWARDS LIFE

Having critiqued traditional understandings of knowledge and theology and having affirmed that the purpose of theology is transformation, particularly towards life for those for whom life is most vigorously denied, this dissertation will now proceed to detail a way of doing theology that honours the reality of the individual and which seeks to enhance their way of being in the world.

### **Beginning with Experience**

At a women's conference entitled Dancing with Creation held in Grahamstown in January 1995, the statement released from the gathering noted the following:

(We insist) that experience is the foundation for a South African Christian Feminist Theology.

The danger with fine-sounding statements is that they will remain just that. This dissertation will attempt to be faithful to the intention voiced at the Dancing with Creation Conference.<sup>11</sup>

Using experience as the basis for theology means that one needs to be taking oneself seriously. This in itself is something novel for women, whose experiences have been trivialised and marginalized. The simple act of owning our experiences as important and worthy of study and analysis is a vital step in our own liberation as people.

There is no single, standard "woman's" experience. Gender is only one of the factors that is fairly determinative of a woman's life-world. Other crucial factors are class, culture and race. As I have already indicated, if one is to have an engaged spirituality and theology, one must begin where one is. While the most progressive educational methods recognise the importance of beginning with the reality of the individual person, it would seem that this is a way of doing/being that is seldom welcomed within the church. I suggest that this is because the church could then no longer impose control on its members.

Throughout the literature written about doing theology as a woman there is this call to begin from experience. Thus the The Mud Flower Collective assert:

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<sup>11</sup> In fact, it will emerge later when I examine literature written by South African women that it is from experience that they write. Having lived for many years in political turmoil, South African women theologians have been highly aware of the importance of context. So Ackermann, a leading South African theologian, writes: "All theology stems from the depth of human experience" (in Hulley, L., Kretzschmar, L. and Pato, L. 1996. Archbishop Tutu: Prophetic Witness in South Africa. Cape Town: Human and Rousseau, p 153).

We do not begin our work on the basis of any formal creed, confession, rite, or sacrament .... We begin with a commitment to justice for all women and men. We begin with the study of our lives, taking seriously as theological data the truth and illusion, the small places and macrostructures, of who we are, where we have been, what we yearn for (1985:144).

I consider this shift to be fundamentally important, but, again, it would be anathema to the way that the church presently functions; it would be considered anarchic.

In this consideration of women's experience, we study the particulars of ordinary life. So Aquino says:

Women's religious experience is rooted in daily personal life and covers both the public and private spheres, the personal and the social .... Women's religious experience involves the whole of themselves. They speak with their hearts, bodies, and their whole being .... There is no split between understanding and feelings (1993:180).

When we speak of women's experience, we mean all of their experience.<sup>12</sup> Terrains of life that have been largely occupied by women and have thus not been thought to merit attention now have light beamed onto them. So Nielsen can say that:

What was previously invisible (sometimes not yet even named) has become visible .... To consciously adopt a woman's perspective means to see things

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<sup>12</sup> Contextual theologians - including black and liberation theologians - have stressed the importance of context. The focus on experience I regard as somewhat different from this, though the terms do overlap to some extent. "Context", broadly speaking, refers more to the socio-political reality, whereas a focus on experience includes the more subjective and feeling component. Arguably, though, it is difficult to separate social and personal contexts or experience, as is indicated in chapters 3 and 5.

one did not see before and also to see the familiar rather differently (1990:20).<sup>13</sup>

This is really a new discipline and commitment that needs to be practised by women, as the very act of owning and studying our experience is a struggle and a victory. In the book entitled Womanspirit Rising which Christ and Plaskow co-edit, they say:

It is a radical act to bring the experience of any woman to articulation .... This process takes time. The discovery and recovery of women's experiences will not be accomplished overnight. The alienation of ourselves from our own experience is deep; the resources that can aid our journey of self-discovery are slim (1979:231).

The journey thus begins with a woman loving herself enough to begin to consider her own experience as being of value and worthy of study.

### **To whom is theology accountable?**

This is felt to be an important question, and one that every scholar should face (though this has seldom been the case). Theology has often been accountable to academia, as it has frequently been written in that setting and has thus aspired towards the approval and rewards of that context. I would rather say that if there is accountability in this direction at all, it is only of a secondary nature. To whom then is one accountable? The answer to this question has been implied in the earlier-stated goal of theology as being towards life, particularly towards life for those who suffer most. I am also accountable to myself, and this then calls me to engage authentically with myself and with the people and material I work with in the course of this study. The work will engage me at the deepest level so that it will inform my

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<sup>13</sup> A rather delightful example of this studying of the "ordinary" is Fishman's study of the conversations between women and men which shows how women maintain these in a way that reinforces gender inequality (Cook and Fonow in Nielsen 1990:88).

very way of being in the world, as the latter also informs my theology. I do not regard accountability and commitment to women (and so also to myself) as being separate from my accountability to god. Theology is thus no longer a private, cerebral affair but part of one's engagement towards love and justice in the world.

### **Commitment to Creativity**

There is a lot of material that is fresh and new emanating from women theologians. There is a willingness to produce material that may not be considered favourably by some of its readers. There is a readiness to be highly critical.

So The Mud Flower Collective can boldly claim that:

We have learned that to consume passively theologies produced by others is not to do theology. Breaking dramatically with women's social role as economic, emotional, and religious consumers, we have been discovering theology as a creative act that incorporated our present experience and is resourced by our roots (1985:140).

Commitment to creativity - and not shying away from conflict - is of great importance to the theological task. Harrison expresses it thus:

The Christian story as I have come to understand it out of my experience, informed by feminist consciousness, is not the story told by the dominant tradition as I first learned it in seminary. The way I understand the Christian story is now quite different. My own theology is controversial, and by some standards it is heretical .... Yet coming to understand the Christian story this way ... is the reason that I am still in the Christian church (1985:216).

This echoes the way that I feel. Harrison says that dominant Christianity in fact uses its "theological giants" as a barrier against creative change (1985:221). This has certainly been my experience in theological education. Rather, theology should be understood as being always on the move. Is this not what is meant by the affirmation

that the Holy Spirit will lead us into all truth (John 16:13)?

The boldness of this kind of theologizing is rather terrifying! It is as if one is challenging the very foundations of what one was brought up to believe in the church. To be prepared to articulate such ideas within a congregational context is complex and lonely, as most people are not seeking such radical engagement with the things of god. At the same time this way of doing theology is utterly invigorating.

It has been suggested that the doing of theology should be regarded as a poetic pursuit, as the venture of the artist, rather than being seen, as it frequently is, as the construction of rather dogmatic and convoluted pronouncements (The Mud Flower Collective 1985:133). Chopp uses the image of play as a way of conceiving the doing of theology. The idea of play is one that I am finding increasingly helpful as an image of a way of being in the world - and of waging women's struggles - as it suggests a lightness about it all. So Chopp speaks of theologizing as a type of play, "a border between sensuous and rational experience" (1991:38).

There is a freshness and a liveliness and, certainly, great originality in that which is springing from women theologians. I do hope that it is contagious! It is a product of women owning who they are and working from that premise.

### **Passionate Engagement**

Women doing theology celebrate their passion! We own and work with our anger and our pain, and share it with our sisters. So The Mud Flower Collective asserts that:

Our mental faculties are not ... disembodied .... Here let us state emphatically our contention that the finest scholarship, the most powerful intellectual work, and the most creative thinking is done always by those whose hearts are in

their work (1985:23).

This is surely true. It is also part of the joy of working at a post-graduate level, in that one can identify the area of concern to which one is committed.

Daring to work from one's own experience and involving oneself at a deep level in one's work calls for great authenticity and courage, but is also surely the only really joyful way to work. One's thinking and writing is not something removed from oneself and one's concerns, but is part of the essence of who one is and the concerns that one holds dear. This personal commitment and energy is evident in almost all of the texts that I read for this study written by women theologians.

### **The Hermeneutical Privilege of the Poor**

This is a tortured way of saying that those who have least in society often have a far clearer vision of reality than those whose perspective is blurred by various forms of self-interest. Thus, if a study wishes to portray reality accurately, it should be listening to these generally marginalized voices.

I have certainly found it to be true in my experience that many people who are not literate and are living financially precarious lives have a deep wisdom and insight that seems to evade those who are more financially secure. Lest this sound like a romanticism of poverty, let it be acknowledged too that poverty also leads to many social ills and psychological dis-ease.

Nielsen is sympathetic to doing theology in a way which gives priority to the experience of the poor, but she does nuance her argument.

Standpoint epistemology begins with the idea that less powerful members of society have the potential for a more complete view of social reality than

others (1990:10).

However, she cautions that:

The less powerful group's ... conscious distinctiveness from the usually more widely shared dominant group's view cannot be taken for granted. Without conscious effort to reinterpret reality from one's own lived experience ... the disadvantaged are likely to accept their society's dominant worldview (1990:11).

One can see that this observation still holds true for many women.

While liberation theology's premise is that priority must be given to the insights of the poor, it is ironic, and deeply saddening, that male liberation theologians have not affirmed the prior centrality of women in this regard.<sup>14</sup> It would seem that the liberation they have envisaged is only that of oppressed men. This, then, would seem to undermine much of the value of their work. Does it not show them to be as blinkered as many of the more traditional theologians? South African pastor and theologian Jordaan critiques the failure of Black Theology to consider the need for the freedom of women from gender oppression.<sup>15</sup> She says:

Any form of liberation which does not address itself to the emancipation of the whole person should be seriously challenged for misrepresenting the concept of liberation (in Ackermann, Draper and Mashinini 1991:125).

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<sup>14</sup> Due to challenges from women, there is some shift in this, for example, in the work of Cone, an African-American.

<sup>15</sup> Mosala similarly challenges her male counterparts about the invisibility of black women in black theology in "Black theology and the struggle of the black woman in Southern Africa" in Mosala, I., and Tihagale, B. 1986. The Unquestionable Right to be Free. Johannesburg: Skotaville, pp 129-33.

The idea of knowledge as transformation is implicit in this discussion. As Harding points out:

The questions an oppressed group wants answered are rarely requests for so-called pure truth. Instead, they are queries about how to change its conditions (1987:8).

This section closes by listening to the voice of Aquino whose contribution in a sense holds together the different foci in this chapter on a new way of doing theology, including the importance of experience and one's accountability to oneself and to women in general:

The option for poor women assumes a woman's option for herself .... The necessary first step [is] toward themselves, the call to accept themselves and welcome themselves as women first and foremost. This is a journey into self (1993:113).

### **Concluding Remarks**

This chapter, entitled *Methodology for Life*, began by examining the concept of knowledge, advancing the idea that "knowing" might be a closer understanding of what true knowledge is - as something that engages the depths of a person and has the power to bring about change. That knowledge, and so also theology, has evolved from the powerful in society was critiqued, as was the myth that knowledge can be "uncontaminated" by those who develop it. There is no such thing as objectivity in knowledge or methodology, only an owning of one's own experience and one's place in society. A way of doing theology that has been proposed, and will be employed in this dissertation, is one that is grounded in life and aims to advance what is life-giving. The "doing" of this theology involves beginning with the experience of women themselves. This rooted way of theologizing takes seriously questions of accountability, and is not for the faint-hearted! Women are "making" theology with

daring, passion and poetic artistry.

Feminist theologians are bringing much that is fresh and new to the area of theological methodology. In fact, they challenge the very concept of content and method being separate: "to insist that how we do theology is as important as what kind of theology we do is to challenge the split between content and method" (The Mud Flower Collective 1985:142). Abraham puts this perhaps even more urgently when she says that "our method is our spirituality" (1994:197). Our way of doing theology as women is not just "by the way". It shows our commitments and our dreams.

The following chapter will proceed to examine the research process in more detail, looking particularly at the relationship between the researcher and the participants in the study, and describing the value of working with groups.

## CHAPTER 2

### HEARING WOMEN'S STORIES

This dissertation is calling for a way of women doing theology beginning from their life experience. One way of accessing that experience is by story-telling - sharing with one another who we are, where we have come from, our struggles and joys. This, perhaps, sounds quite mundane, but it has already been said that theologizing as women is about claiming the value of what has been considered to be insignificant. It involves, as referred to at the end of the last chapter, a journey into the self. The title of a recent publication of the World Council of Churches which deals with the stories of women of colour expresses this journey into self beautifully in the title: We are the Ones we are Waiting for (Sen 1995)! Indeed. We dare to claim our lives as having ultimate meaning.

Owning one's story is itself a struggle for women. The Mud Flower Collective, who in fact wrote their book as a group telling their stories to each other, say:

Such sharing, such revelation of both oneself and one's God, is not easy work .... First, we ourselves must know our own stories .... We must learn to remember our own lives, to tell ourselves about ourselves (1985:69).

This experience is a profound and in many ways a novel one for women, as "we tell each other stories which have never been told before" (Christ and Plaskow 1979:229). Necessarily these stories are about the facts of our experiences as well as about our feelings as women (Anderson and others in Nielsen 1990:101). To document feelings and values is more complex than the more simple documentation of facts (*ibid*:95). This is something that this dissertation will attempt to do - to hear what women feel, and to honour that as an important part of the truth about the world. I have found that, in my own experience in a group, I have had to learn to trust myself and the group so that I can, in fact, tell my own story.

A whole new world will emerge that previously has been hidden and denied. So Anderson and her co-authors can recount:

When women speak for themselves, they reveal hidden realities: new experiences and new perspectives emerge that challenge the "truths" of official accounts and cast doubt upon established theories. Interviews with women can explore private realms such as reproduction, child rearing, and sexuality (in Nielsen 1990:95).

Christ and Plaskow speak of the dialectic between story and experience:

Stories shape experience; experience shapes stories .... In a sense, without stories there is no experience (1979:229).

For The Mud Flower Collective, story-telling is theology at its best:

I have a very deep sense that there is nothing more beautiful than listening to people tell their stories about faith and God. They express, as nothing else can, who we really are, and what we really believe in, and the meaning in our lives .... If there's anything worth calling theology, it is listening to people's stories - listening to them and honouring and cherishing them (1985:133).

This chapter looks at the importance of women sharing their experiences, and shows how gathering in a group to engage thus is powerful and healing for women. The way in which this study was largely conducted was through women meeting in groups to share their experience of the church. This chapter examines the relationship between the researcher and the participants in the study, and looks at the attempt to equalise, as far as possible, this relationship. Women are encouraged to share what is important to them rather than being controlled by a narrow framework dictated by the researcher. The value, or otherwise, of working in this way is also explored. Essentially, the research study is seen as being integrated into the life of each of the participants.

## **My Story**

I am a woman with a story that continues to unfold. Much of my experience of church and theological education has been shared in an earlier part of this dissertation.

I have moved to a place of great freedom in myself and my understandings of god.

How utterly invigorating it has been for me, over the last decade or so, to trust myself to question what I believe, to be critical, to be free to dismiss or reformulate the teaching that I have received. I am still very grateful for this enormous shift, and the difference it has made to my entire life. I am unsure as to what facilitated this change in me. I think that living in the turmoil of South Africa, and beginning to become politically aware, has been part of the process. Perhaps it was as I became aware of injustice in the world and in societal structures, and the importance of working for truth and justice, that I was freed to question the religious thinking with which I had grown up and that did not seem to engage with this reality. My evolving political awareness was surely teaching me about analysing things critically. Faith became exciting and relevant for the first time. It was only subsequent to my beginning to reflect critically on things of faith that I was drawn to feminist literature and thinking. I am glad about this particular sequence, as anti-feminists would have one believe that one is just being influenced by radical feminist material. Rather I would see it as a movement of the spirit in my life. My thinking and my reading of what conscientized women have written, whether or not from a Christian faith perspective, has been very, very good news for me. I had not tasted this good news before!

### **My Sister's Stories**

A commitment of this study is to hear the voices of indigenous women in this region (I use the term indigenous here for want of a better one; the term "black" includes Coloured and Indian people, and the term "African" ideally, I believe, includes all who live in Africa and regard themselves as African). At first I thought this would be the only goal of this work, but I realised increasingly that it was important that I own my own story and struggles. There will certainly be points of connection, and difference, between my own story and that of my sisters. I do not expect the process of dialogue to be without conflict. The historical baggage we each carry in this country is immense. This affects our present realities, so that I as a white woman enjoy material security, whereas few of my indigenous sisters could say the same. At the two gatherings I attended in 1995 which were largely made up of conscientized women, there were

times of marked conflict between the black and white women present. At the conference entitled Promoting Women's History at Rhodes University in July 1995 a video was shown which had been made by a white woman in which she had filmed indigenous women who tore off their clothes in an attempt to halt state bulldozers from destroying their homes.<sup>16</sup> Many of the black women present, and indeed the black men, were furious that the women portrayed in the film had had their privacy denied them by having the incident captured on film. They questioned whether the film-maker really had the genuine consent of the women to have the film shown to the public. The woman film-maker insisted (in vain) that the women in the documentary had been part of the process at every stage. Weeks after the conference I met a black woman who had been present, and she was clearly still angry about the film having been made. (Although in discussion she conceded that perhaps the conflict was more a result of our different histories, and hence the mistrust between us. I find myself asking how differently the film would have been received if it had been made by a black woman.)

At Grahamstown's Dancing With Creation conference in January 1995, there was similar tension. However, the statement coming out of the gathering owned this by saying:

We grappled with our diversity as women from different economic circumstances, life-experiences, degrees of exposure to feminist theology, access or non-access to theological training, and our various forms of worship. We discovered that our different experiences as South African women prevent us from assuming an uncomplicated unity.

I hope, and believe, that there will be value for each woman who speaks in the process of this study coming to fruition. There is something very powerful - especially for

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<sup>16</sup> Meintjies' paper accompanying her video was entitled "Women's Consciousness and the Body Politic: Naked Protest, Dobsonville 1990".

subject people (which is how I would regard women who have not yet owned their own personal power, and there is a sense in which all women are subjected in terms of the dynamics of society) - in speaking one's story and being heard with empathy. We need to make space for this to happen. Small groups of women seem to be springing up in different parts of the country. This "women's-space" is proving astoundingly life-giving for its participants. It provides a safe space in which to speak, and where one will be taken seriously. From my interacting with two of these groups in the Eastern Cape, the importance they have for women is seemingly quite out of proportion to what they are simply trying to do, which is to give time for women with no other agenda than to share who they are. As I proceed to provide more details concerning the research process that was undertaken, I will comment further on the formation and value of such groupings.

## THE RESEARCH PROCESS

This section will look at the field research that was undertaken, examining the relationship between the researcher and those with whom she worked and looking at the issue of control in terms of who set the agenda for the discussion. This will lead naturally into the next major section which will explore the value of working with groups.

### **The Researcher: Who is She?**

Traditional study and research has had, as one of its cardinal rules, the emphasis on the objectivity of the researcher. I trust that it has already been shown in the preceding pages that knowledge is largely a social product, and that the "facts" that the researcher produces clearly have his/her image on them. Hence the emphasis in women's studies on the researcher owning who she/he is, and in fact making her/himself a part of what is being examined. As Harding says, the researcher is situated in the same critical plane as the subject matter (1987:8). Working in this way produces much more reliable material than the traditional way of working. Harding continues:

The researcher appears to us not as an invisible, anonymous voice of authority, but as a real, historical individual .... The beliefs and behaviors of the researcher are part of the empirical evidence for (or against) the claims advanced in the results of research (1987:9).

For this reason, I have already stated that my own experience will form part of the substance of this dissertation.

### **Women Set the Agenda**

Typically in research there has been a specific topic to be examined. The danger here is that the researcher will be expecting the members of the study to be responding to an agenda that she (the researcher) has set. While one needs some broad parameters or an area of investigation, I feel, along with other writers, that as far as possible the women themselves need to be able to "set the agenda" and raise the issues that are of importance to them. Harding, speaking of Gilligan's work, says:

She asks us not to prejudge them [i.e. those involved in the study] by forcing their responses to questions into categories which were never constructed to illuminate their experience, but to listen instead to how they think about their lives in the terms that they choose to use (1987:57).

Anderson and others similarly challenge traditional methodology:

Is it a woman's understanding of her own experience that is sought, or is the researcher structuring the interview so that the subject tells a story that conforms to the researcher's orientation? If the goal of the interview is to encourage the woman to tell her own story, to speak in her own terms, then how one asks questions, and with what words, becomes critical to the outcome of the interview (in Nielsen 1990:102).

The outcome of the encounter is thus not controlled but open and unpredictable (Westkott in Nielsen 1990:61). Indeed, the experience of researchers working in this way is that interviewees may focus on subjects very different from those the researcher had thought important (Cook and Fonow in Nielsen 1990:76). It works something like this:

The questions that the investigator asks of the object of knowledge grow out of her own concerns and experiences. The answers that she may discover emerge not only from the ways that the objects of knowledge confirm and expand these experiences, but also from the ways that they oppose or remain silent about them (Westkott in Nielsen 1990:62).

It would seem clear from the experience shared from the above writers that, in fact, this way of working yields much truer results as one is, at least to some degree, avoiding the danger of trying to get participants to conform to a focus which may not be their own.<sup>17</sup>

This study does not then seek to follow the more traditional quantitative approach of measuring responses to set questions. Rather, the design is much more open-ended. There is, in each interview or group discussion, an introduction to the broad area under investigation - that of the experience women have of the church. The researcher strives to be clear and direct regarding her own interests in conducting the research, at least one of these being that it is towards a post-graduate qualification in theology, and the women are encouraged to raise issues that are of concern to them. Thus one could say that the research process is attempting to be centred on the women themselves who are the subjects of the process rather than the researcher being in control.

### **The Researcher's Relationship with the Group**

That the relationship that the researcher has with those whom she is interviewing is very different from the traditional researcher/researchee relationship is implicit in what is said above. Indeed, one of the challenges for women doing research for and with women is that of creating new and different types of relationship between the researcher and the researched (Cook and Fonow in Nielsen 1990:90).

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<sup>17</sup> Despite this, the researcher has her/his own values and interests, but, as has already been said, there is an attempt to be conscious of these.

In feminist research, there may not be the clear separation between the researcher and those with whom she works, as has certainly been the case in more traditional research methods. Feminist researchers stress that an equal relationship between the parties is important if truth is to emerge (Nielsen 1990:30).

In any interaction an equal relationship facilitates truthful exchange. This would also create a climate where participants feel free to share and to explore their own thinking. I found this true in the study that I did.

Westkott critiques the idea that the researcher should be on guard not to let her feelings "infect" research (in Nielsen 1990:61). This "methodological norm of objectivity is", she says, "itself socially and historically constructed, rooted in an ideology that attempts to mystify the social relations of the knower and the known through procedures that appear anonymous and impersonal" (*ibid*).

Nielsen herself refers to work done by Oakley who

discovered ... that textbook advice about interviewing (for example, to maintain a certain distance between yourself and the interviewee, to "parry", or avoid, answering questions so as not to influence the answers of the interviewee, and so on) not only would not work but would also limit her ability to communicate with respondents in a way that would generate worthwhile and meaningful information (1990:5).

The researcher does not hold herself apart, but shares who she is and her own concerns with her partners in the research process. Barroso and Bruschini reflect this equality of status and responsibility:

We felt that they [i.e.those in the study] had a right to information about what our opinions were, and that attempting to disguise them would be neither very effective nor ethically justifiable, since it did not seem fair to expect them to be candid while we withheld our own candid expressions (in Mohanty *et al* 1991:167).

Cook and Fonow, again referring to the work of Oakley, found a similar approach:

In her framework, answering the questions of interviewees personalizes and humanizes the researcher and places the interaction on a more equal footing. The meaning of the interview to both the interviewer and the interviewee and the quality of interaction between the two participants are all salient issues when a feminist interviews women .... The sociologist (garners) knowledge not simply for the sake of knowledge itself but for the women who are providing information (in Nielsen 1990:76).

Such a participatory methodology can infuse the entire research process, determining the definition of the research problem, the collection of data, and the interpretation of results (Cook and Fonow in Nielsen 1990:76).

I myself came naturally to working in the way described above. Although I had been advised by some to make sure that my research was measurable, that I should not "pollute" the study by giving my own opinions, and so on, I found that, in fact, there was no other way in which I was able to work other than having an equal partnership in relationship which is described above. I find it exciting that women are working according to a different paradigm from what has been considered "respectable" academically. Previous paradigms in fact trivialise research participants, assuming that people don't really know what they think and that they will be influenced by the researcher's involvement. Women's approach humanizes the entire research process.

## WORKING WITH GROUPS

### **The value thereof**

I chose to do most of my research working with groups of women. I preferred this to conducting interviews with individuals, although I also used this method of necessity sometimes. The group process has a power of its own. This is evidenced, for example, by the fact that the group method is used in certain forms of psychotherapy. The value of groups has also been particularly recognised for those who are suffering from a common affliction, or have something in common (this gives rise to support groups for care-givers, and so on). It is reasonable to assume that women, who have gender in common and all that flows from this common factor, would experience support from

meeting in a group setting.<sup>18</sup> It is as if by hearing one another's stories, one's own are affirmed. Mies says that the group experience helps women to "overcome their structural isolation in their families and to understand that their individual sufferings have social causes" (in Cook and Fonow in Nielsen 1990:75). The power relations are also (perhaps) better taken care of, as there is not the potentially rather heavy polarisation between the researcher and the individual with whom she is interacting. Certainly women researchers have testified to the particular power of women dialoguing together in a group (for example, The Mud Flower Collective).

### **The Pitfalls**

The danger of working with a specific interest group, in this case a group of black women (more particularly the researcher not being black), is that the researcher will tend to collapse the group into having one identity rather than honouring the uniqueness of each person. The literature has a lot to say about this tendency on the part of "western" women working with women from a different background. Dill, and Johnson-Odim and Strobel caution:

Too often, social science researchers have sought to describe black women and their families as if they were a monolithic whole, without regard for differences in social class (in Harding 1987:103).

A particular pitfall for western feminist scholars is encountered when the concept of "representativeness" gets collapsed into a tendency to "represent" particular "Third World" women ... as a kind of universalized "other" .... A homogenization necessarily occurs in this process that creates an "object status" for Third World women. In this scenario, western feminists remain "true subjects" while Third World women never rise above their generality (Johnson-Odim and Strobel 1992:309).

This warning is also echoed by Mohanty in the work she edits (with others) entitled Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism:

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<sup>18</sup> Schechter has said in this regard the following: "It is wellknown to those who have done personal growth work in groups that the group setting is a powerful context in support of individual healing" (1995:126).

It is when "women of Africa" becomes a homogeneous sociological grouping characterized by common dependencies or powerlessness (or even strengths) that problems arise - we say too little and too much at the same time (1991:59).

Non-western women are also irritated by the way in which western women concentrate on the category of gender, thus omitting other important components of one's identity (such as class). Chow says:

Anger is often voiced by non-Western women about the singular priority that is given to "woman" by bourgeois liberal feminism (in Mohanty *et al* 1991:82).

Again, western women tend to want to "research" non-western women, believing "them" to be more particularly oppressed and thus making for more interesting research:

By portraying women in non-Western societies as identical and interchangeable, and more exploited than women in the dominant capitalist societies, liberal and socialist feminists alike encode a belief in their own cultural superiority (Chow in Mohanty *et al* 1991:93).

I have been challenged by the reading I have done and by comments such as those I have recorded above, and I hope that these warnings are ones which I have heeded, at least in some measure.

### **The Potential for Consciousness-Raising**

When we speak of consciousness-raising we speak of people coming to a greater awareness of who they are and how they interrelate with societal structures. One could also speak of transformation.

For women's studies to be creative and transforming there needs to be some level of political and gender consciousness on the part of the person initiating the research. The political and the gender aspect are both important, as there are many people who would share one of these concerns and not the other, and this would really prejudice their work. White feminists have been, I feel, often fairly criticized by black women for

their lack of concern for economic and political justice. This being the case, it will allow for the research to be done in a way that is conducive to growth in the self-knowledge of the participants. If the investigator is in touch with herself, she will be undergoing change just as much, if not more, than those with whom she is working. This would be particularly so in an instance where a person is working with people from a more disadvantaged situation than her own. The insights shared, also due to what we have spoken of as the hermeneutical privilege of the poor, have the potential to profoundly shape the researcher. The group the researcher is working with would also (hopefully) grow in consciousness as they own their experiences, tell their stories and recognise that their experiences form part of a broader social framework. I feel that this occurred, at least to some degree, in the research which I conducted.

Cook and Fonow point out astutely that there may be variance between women's consciousness and their behaviour, 'women simultaneously oppose and conform to conditions that deny their freedom' (in Nielsen 1990:74). Consciousness-raising is about exploring the subjective aspect of a person's life, the feeling component, as well as the contradictions between action and consciousness (*ibid*). If one only examines behaviour, this might suggest conformity, whereas consciousness can be a sphere of freedom for women (*ibid*). In other words, women may seem to be conforming, but they may in fact have very strong feelings against the very behaviour they are being coerced into enacting. This is a point that is of interest and pertinence to the subject of the experience of women in the church.

Women's sense of who they are has been deeply damaged by centuries of patriarchy.<sup>19</sup> The change that happens in the consciousness of women is arguably the most important thing that can occur. And this does not happen without a committed and protracted struggle within oneself. The Mud Flower Collective put it thus:

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<sup>19</sup> The newsletter Women in God's Image (No. 1) comments that all women are abused - at least emotionally, psychologically and spiritually - by virtue of having been subjected to 5000 years of patriarchy.

It is precisely our recognition of this tenacious hold of patriarchal images, functioning at pre-rational levels, that convince us of the long-term nature of the feminist struggle. Even women who profess to be feminist have internalized these theological images of female inferiority. The transformation required of all of us ... involves precisely the deepest levels of ourselves and our social order (1985:158).

It is because of the immensity of the shift we are called to make in the face of so much that would divert us, that women gathering in groups to share this struggle becomes important if not vital in our journeys. We dare not neglect our "inner struggle", which refers to our self-image, our belief in our own goodness and power, for the sake of the "outer" struggle, for human rights in society. And, as has been suggested, the former terrain can be the most challenging and resistant to change. So Nompikazi, speaking at the Conference on Women and Gender in Southern Africa in January 1991 could say:

As a black woman ... I've had my fair share of suffering and fighting. One of the most difficult and serious of these fights has always been with myself. Centuries of women's oppression, African traditions and prejudices against women too, had left their indelible mark on me, resulting in an inferiority complex that needed a bulldozer to move (Conference Report 1991).

## THE CONNECTION BETWEEN RESEARCH AND ACTION

I trust that it is evident that there is a great liveliness in the way women are doing theology, with the split between action and research becoming a rather false divide. Feminist theologians suggest that there is a flowing dance between theory and practice, each nourishing the other. The very way in which research is conducted is such that action and change occur throughout.

Women theologians argue that one cannot undertake meaningful study unless one is engaged in the struggle for wholeness - within oneself and within society. Smith, an African-American, says:

I believe that the most accurate and developed theory ... comes from practice,

from the experience of activism .... I do not believe it is possible to arrive at fully developed and useful Black feminist criticism by merely reading about feminism .... I was very aware that my lack of involvement affected my thinking and writing overall (in Mohanty *et al* 1991:105).

This is interesting as it revolutionises, and humanises, the entire terrain of academia in that one's work is rooted in and flows from one's concerns in society. It is what I was calling for when I defined the purpose of theology as transformation.

Harding stresses the importance of struggle for change in arriving at knowledge thus:

Knowledge emerges for the oppressed only through the struggles they wage against their oppressors (1987:185).

On a fundamental level I agree with the writers quoted above. I only want to be sure that we do not lose the importance of the "internal" struggle that I referred to in the previous section. I see around me the danger of being able to tackle gender issues "out there" but the difficulty, on a more interior level, of claiming freedom in one's more personal spaces and within one's own psyche. Thus I would, as it were, add a rider to what the above writers have said by saying that working on small changes in one's life is a valid form of the activism of which they speak.

## CLOSING REMARKS

This chapter has advocated the sharing of our lives as women as being a vital starting point for the theological pursuit. Emphasis was placed on the value of undertaking a study of this nature by working with women in groups. The importance of the nature of the relationship between the researcher and the people with whom she works being an equal one was stressed, and is a new feature that women bring to the research process. Finally, the point was made that there can be no real separation between research and action. The following chapter, which deals with the particulars of the study I conducted in the Eastern Cape, provides more detail of the group encounters, my own participation, and the substance of what was shared.

## CHAPTER 3

### HOW SOME WOMEN IN THE EASTERN CAPE EXPERIENCE THE CHURCH

*If they have lied about Me, they have lied about everything*

*(Walker)*

Having looked at the way in which feminist thinkers are approaching research methodology, this chapter will describe the particulars of the research process used in this study and will share, under four headings, the substance of what it is that the women shared. I will also continue to draw on my own experience of the church to illustrate and inform this discussion.

As I have explained, I met with most of the women within a group context, though there were some individual interviews. (I employed the group method for the reasons outlined in the previous chapter.) I approached these groups in an open way, only presenting very broad questions, so that the women themselves were able to raise the issues that were of importance to them. I tried to engage as an equal member of the group as much as possible, thus at times also sharing my responses to the different questions. My interaction was with Xhosa-speaking women. I have explained that Xhosa is the predominant language in the Eastern Cape, and that the Anglican church in this area comprises mostly Xhosa-speaking people. Xhosa-speaking women in this region are also the group that have been most oppressed in terms of race and class. While I began the study by meeting with an ecumenical group of women, much of the later work was with members of the Anglican church, as I began to feel it may be useful to be able to speak into a specific context, which is also my own.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> By church here I am referring to the institutional church, with its regular services, organisational meetings, structures, and so on.

As is explained in the introduction to this dissertation, my research base is relatively limited. The study nevertheless serves as one illustration of the doing of theology in the way that has been described in the previous chapters. Despite the small size of the sample, the results of the study are indicative of the value of conducting research in accordance with the qualitative framework that has already been outlined.

## THE GROUP PROCESS

### **The Beginning**

Where did this study begin? I knew my "passion" was with matters that concerned women, and my immediate context was the church. For about 18 months I drafted several different possible proposals for this dissertation. Then in July 1995 I attended a day's conference on Promoting Women's History at Rhodes University. Here papers were presented on the value of oral history, and on the importance of storytelling. Even more important for me, during the lunch break, I happened to join a group of (Xhosa-speaking) women who were lamenting with great fervour what they saw as injustices in the church. Issues being raised were the following: outrage at the treatment of young women in the church who were pregnant; anger at the way the bible was used; and one woman stated that "our women's organisations cripple us", continuing to talk about how she felt oppressed by the power that the wearing of the official woman's church uniform gave her (what an interesting way of turning oppression on its head - I am oppressed by being given power unjustly!) It was very exciting for me to hear first hand the strong feelings women were expressing around the subject of church. This was material that was "alive" and mattered - very much - to the women. Hence the idea began to take shape for me of listening to women's stories as a way of doing theology. Soon thereafter I contacted one of these women who organised the first meeting that I had with a group of women.

How was I to "be" in the group? I didn't know. Some people that I spoke to stressed that I must be detached and not say anything that could influence the group, the idea being that the more "objective" I was the "purer" the results would be. Feminist literature on methodology, as I have already noted, takes a different approach to this. Here the stress is on being equal with the members of the group, and of disclosing who one is, thus dispensing with the idea of the "passive observer". This "new way" was a relief to me and felt much more authentic. I grew into this way of being in the groups, although initially I started out thinking that to do this study "properly" I should be more distant - but in fact I found I could not really be that. Clearly this lack of separation from the people with whom I worked encouraged a climate within the group, and within the context of the individual interview, that was far more conducive to sharing material than would have been the case in the more traditional approach. That my gender was the same as those with whom I worked was also, I would say, almost a prerequisite for the success of the study.

### **Who Were the Women?**

I wasn't quite sure initially! I felt that as the struggle for political freedom in South Africa had been so ecumenical, so, too, would the struggle for women's freedom involve brave women (and hopefully men) from all the different denominations (and of course those who are not part of the churches at all). Thus, initially, I did not limit the groups I met with denominationally. Later, because the contacts I had were largely Anglican, those attending the groups came to be Anglican, almost by chance. (In one instance other women who were invited were not able to attend). I also began to think that since I was working largely within the Anglican context, it would be useful to be able to address this context directly through being able to draw on what women from this particular sector are saying.

My initial meeting was with about 8 women from various denominations, all of whom

were attached to the church to some degree and all of whom were also politically involved. (This was the group brought together by one of the women I met at the conference I have referred to in Grahamstown.) Thereafter I spoke to a woman who I had met at one of our Anglican diocesan meetings, and she referred me to other women who she thought would enjoy meeting with me, women, she felt, who were not afraid to speak out. This became a group of 3 women who met twice.

I asked a woman I know who is involved in the Anglican youth to try and draw together a group of people from her area. In the end only herself and another young woman participated in this discussion. We only met once. I don't think that either of them was particularly politically active, nor were the members of the group mentioned above.

I met twice with the group based in Grahamstown - although the second time the group composition had changed somewhat. Apart from the group involvements, I had a couple of interviews with women, not all of whom were Anglican. These were very successful and both women expressed an interest in gathering a group of women for future discussions. This has not taken place.

Were the women particularly strong and vocal and hence perhaps a tiny minority of women in the churches? I feel not. Certainly the small group of young persons was "very average", if anyone can be said to be that! The woman who identified other women to be part of the other small Anglican group said she was inviting those who were prepared to speak! And the interdenominational group were politically involved. However, I think one could regard most of these women as fairly "average" and "ordinary". I was certainly not targeting a particular "type" of woman in the church. It may have been interesting to have a group comprising women who were very involved in the church's women's organisations, and see whether their views differed substantially from those in the sample. This, however, was not part of the present

study.

I had envisaged that I would meet with these groups over a fairly lengthy period, but as I have said I only met with two of the groups twice, and only once with the other, meeting only once with each of those I interviewed alone. Our meetings involved a considerable amount of organisation as I was not living in the immediate vicinity of the women with whom I was meeting. For all of us, meeting together involved travel, organisation and time. Although we did not have many gatherings, we agreed that any of us could call the groups together should we wish to do so. I was meeting with the individuals and groups over a period of about eight months. On a more informal level, I was frequently engaging with the question of women's experience of the church, as it was one of immediate interest to me. None of these more informal conversations offered any material that did not support what had emerged from the more intentional conversations I had. However, again I cannot claim to have spoken to a large number of women. It would seem significant, though, that there was no substantial difference among all those with whom I interacted.

I did not meet with Anglican women who lived close to me, although part of another parish, as I felt it may compromise us to talk about a situation in which we all knew the role-players. Thus, the contact I had was with women in congregations with whose priests and lay leadership I was not well acquainted. This seemed to be a fairly important ethical consideration for me and the women with whom I worked, and, I think, allowed us to proceed with a greater degree of freedom.

I also felt disinclined to meet with women that I myself had worked with, as I envisaged that they would have had a quite different experience of the church. This could, of course, have proved interesting in comparison, but this was not part of the present study. There are also so few Xhosa-speaking women who are in a congregation that is led by a woman that this would not have changed the general

thrust of the observations made in this study.

I have noted that, despite good intentions, further meetings which were hoped for often did not materialise. I certainly do not see this as a reflection of a lack of interest, but rather symptomatic of the lack of time women have for themselves, and perhaps, too, of the lack of priority that we as women put on meeting together in this way.

### **The Process**

Almost all of the women with whom I met were women I had not known previously, and I began the first meeting with each group (or individual) by introducing who I was in some detail, as is customary in Xhosa culture even in the case of a casual meeting. I explained that I was conducting research towards the completion of a Master's degree in theology. I said that I hoped that the experience of sharing together would be enriching for us all as part of our faith and life journeys. This was my hope, that the exercise would not be a simple sharing of facts about ourselves but rather that, through sharing, we would each come to a deeper knowledge of who we were and who our sisters were, and that this knowledge would nourish our further journeying separately or together. Of course, I was journeying as much as anyone else. We would begin with a time of quietness. At one meeting, we began with a time of silence, which, on reflection, I think was a very new, and thus strange, experience for the group. Had I used that again, I would have done it rather differently. On another occasion we sang together a simple meditative prayer: "Today I hold myself in readiness for You." I would light a candle and sometimes have an arrangement of flowers in an attempt to try and create a beautiful space for us in which to gather (I feel that such details are very important).

Influenced somewhat by material I was reading, a fairly nondirective approach was

adopted in the questions I put to the women. The questions that I posed for women in the one group were "what do I like about being a woman in the church", and "what don't I like about being a woman in the church?" This I think worked better than my approach in another group where I had simply asked women to share anything they might like to about their lives as women in the church. The broadness of the latter approach seemed to give rise to some confusion. One woman had asked: "What can we raise? Must it be about the church? I can't separate my life as a person in the church from the rest of my life".

To return to the group to whom I asked the rather more direct questions, the second time we met I followed up these questions with the following: "If I were free in the church, how would I be/what would I do?" and thereafter, "If I were to behave freely, that is, contributing in the way that I have shared, what would happen?" This question was again followed up with "If I remain 'unfree', 'controlled' in the church" (as women had said they did feel) "what does this do to me?" The final question for this group was "Arising from today's discussion, what do you think is the way ahead for you (as an individual or as part of this group)?" I tried to consciously have a loose structure to our gatherings, and be open to sensing when I should change direction, or disregard what I had planned. Using intuitive knowledge in this way was an important part of the process (in Christian terminology, I was striving to be open to being Spirit-led).

An interesting dynamic developed in the group that was more politically involved and had more experience of activism. (Some of the group were part of the ANC Women's League and one was standing as a candidate in the local government elections.) The women felt they wanted to do something about the situation, this after only having met together once. This had not been my plan at all. I had envisaged the group as a space to share and reflect. I realised that it was up to the group to decide where it wanted to go, and a plan of action was drawn up. (I remained hesitant about this as

it all felt too hasty for me, but the women felt the situation was extremely urgent.) They planned to approach Zwelonke, an organisation made up of the executives of all the church women organisations in their area. They also planned to get themselves invited to the different churches to speak on women's issues. The group was keen that I be involved in their action. I was unable to agree to this as I lived more than 2 hours drive away from them and was not free to do extensive travelling. It was also important that it was their action. I expressed this to the group. The group agreed to meet together again to reflect on the action they had taken. (In fact, it was around the time of the local government elections in 1995 and, as far as I know, the planned action did not materialise.)

After each of the meetings, by agreement, I would write notes on what we had talked about and send them either to one of the group, or in some cases, to all the members of the group to see if they felt that these reflected what we had shared together. The members were always happy that the notes did reflect accurately our time together. This was an attempt on my part to build in some accountability to the women, and to engage them more comprehensively in the research process. I also envisaged that seeing what they had shared reflected, usually *verbatim*, in writing, would affirm the importance of their own contributions. It served, too, as a checking mechanism for myself. I had hoped that the women would be part of the process until the final writing up of this dissertation, but this did not happen due to the fact that the groups were not ongoing.

I met with 17 women. Some were from medium sized towns, others from fairly rural townships. Their ages ranged from about 17 - 65 years. Their educational backgrounds were various, as were their degrees of political involvement. None, to my knowledge, had received any theological education, although one woman was employed by a Christian organisation. This was, I think, significant, as this study was an attempt to hear the voice of the "ordinary" church-goer. Small though the sample

was, it serves to illustrate that research done in accordance with the commitments that have been stated in earlier chapters can yield a lot of information which is of depth and importance. In fact, what will emerge later in this study is that there is little variance between what women in the study were articulating from those who are theologically educated and are writing or speaking on this topic.

### **What the Women Shared**

On a certain level, what the women shared was fairly unremarkable. More than the content, it was the emotions that were clearly visible, and expressed, that made the time spent with the women the powerful experience that each encounter was. This section will, however, look at the content of what was shared.

#### Worship

The absence of women in the leadership of services was spoken of with anger. As one group of Anglican women said:

Women are used to doing lots of things, but when it comes to sharing power, it ends there. There are no women visible in terms of leading of services. At some local churches women do not even do the readings.

Women deeply miss their image being reflected in those who lead the worship services week by week.

A concern repeated with passion was that they were not able to be "real" in the church service, to be who they were. A woman from the Order of Ethiopia (which is loosely attached to the Anglican church) said: "When we - when I - go to church, our bearing changes; we become bowed down, submissive, we tiptoe. We are not real in our churches". Another Anglican woman put it thus:

As a woman, I cannot express what I want to in church. The church is full of women; there may be 2 or 3 men, but they dominate, it is their voices who are heard, not the women's. There are many restrictions that hem you in - lots of "don'ts" - this inhibits your freedom. You are not free to dress as you wish, nor to participate as you wish.

What a sad indictment that the very community which is to celebrate freedom and equality fails dismally in this.

Several women also mentioned, with anger, the discriminating practice of "disciplining" young women who are pregnant. They are ex-communicated, at least for a time, while the partner of the woman has no similar steps taken against him. A woman put it thus:

If a single woman/youth is pregnant she has to declare herself a sinner before the elders and the congregation - this is humiliating. No mention is made of her partner.

Another woman commented on the fact that there are rules about headgear, but that in this "we have no say as women; it is the steward (a male) who has the power". Women feel themselves to be controlled by a system that is not of their own making.

Women are appealing for worship to be real, to touch on life as they know it. One woman expressed it like this:

The church should not just be a place for "the word". There should be more whole ministry .... Let us look at real life issues, not just go on about heaven and hell.

Another, similarly, said that "we need to focus on broader life issues, not just on the bible".

The issue of the length of services was also raised - with anger. One woman asked:

"Who knows what it is like to be a working woman!" The feeling expressed was that women have so many demands on their time, and that this is not considered in the church. There was also a fear, which was based on clear threats that are sometimes made, that if you miss a few services you will forfeit rights to a church burial.

I have other concerns regarding worship that were not raised directly by the women in the study. For myself, the physical layout of the church, with the separation of clergy and leaders from the laity, affects everything that happens within the service. There is little real participation, and even little real connecting takes place between people within the congregation, who sit looking at the back of the head in front of them. There is none of the familiar feeling that one would get in entering, for example, a hut, with people seated around on reed mats. We are beings who are affected by our physical space, and the rigid layout of our churches hinders a sense of community. Regarding the words of the liturgy, the bible, and the hymns sung, I need to continually do linguistic gymnastics to try and re-appropriate what is being said in a creative way.

I remember about 15 years ago hearing a woman share in a church service about how sexist language in worship was offensive to her. Somehow I could not hear her at the time. It was as if I more or less accepted the church service as I found it, as a given, without considering the possibility that it could be different, that it could speak to who I was and for what I longed. It is only as I have grown to greater consciousness that I have increasingly become sensitive to the question of justice in the liturgy, which would include language use, whether a relationship of equality is expressed in the service, whether people's gifts are shared. I regarded as helpful the two questions that were posed at a recent Anglican conference when we were looking at the area of spirituality. Firstly, does our relationship with god make us whole, real, healthy, human people? Secondly, is our life in society/the world informed by our spirituality? One could slightly alter these questions, and ask rather

whether our experience of worship humanizes us and helps us engage more creatively with the world. I cannot say this of the Anglican liturgy.

It is clear that there are commonalities and differences in our various experiences as women. None of the women with whom I met shared a concern about god-language being male (although this is more nuanced in Xhosa), nor about the physical layout of the church. However, issues of freedom and equality, the ability to be oneself and be nourished in the church, was a concern we all share, albeit formulated in differing ways.

### Church Structures: The Exercise of Authority

The women I spoke to all felt that, as they put it in their own words:

Men are not prepared to share real responsibility in the church with women - they hold onto the leadership positions .... "Officially" women and men are said to be equal in the church, but the reality is different .... There is male domination .... There is talk of democracy but it is not in the church.

Although there are some women churchwardens, this is unusual. And again, an unmarried woman is not allowed to be a churchwarden, while an unmarried man is (according to one of the women I met with in a group).

Many women spoke of the present (male) leadership as being dictatorial. One said:

The male leadership tends to forget people at the grassroots level. Delegations are always male-dominated. The men do not give adequate report-backs. They behave like dictators. There is no transparency.

Women speak about the lack of equality given to people's contributions. One said: "Certain people are heard, and others ignored. People are very status conscious".

The suggestion was made that:

We should share our experiences with each other - not just the "professionals", but also the factory workers; such sharing would be a good equalizer. Too much attention is given to degrees and certificates; "ordinary" people have much to share from their experience of life.

I found the repeated calls for equality among all in the faith community very moving.

Women frequently feel that they are not heard or are even silenced. One woman who raised a very real concern in a church meeting was reprimanded very aggressively by several people thereafter who told her that she shouldn't raise such a thing in public. Women often feel that they are not free to express themselves. One woman put it very poignantly thus:

I've got no say. I'm taken for granted, like a vase.

This is a poignant way of picturing a situation of perceived powerlessness.

There is a feeling that one is being controlled by the "powers" in the church (as the women put it). The Diocese, too, is experienced as imposing its will on women:

We don't look at the problems our own community faces. Rather we are ordered by the Diocese to start projects that THEY want in other areas - this so that the church can be recognized internationally.

Many women speak of the fact that their contributions at meetings are trivialized. A young Anglican woman said the following:

One does not feel valued as a human being. I have been told in meetings: "I wasn't listening to you. I was looking at you." One is viewed as an object. Men interrupt you. In the youth gatherings too women are marginalised.

This really depicts quite a terrifying situation.

Women in the study cited times when they were sexually harassed by male clergy. As one of the young women said, "it is difficult to confront this as the person may be much older than you."

Such sexual harassment happens too within congregations. I was told of a situation (outside the formal context of this study) where a member of the men's preaching guild was abusing a member of the youth. His wife, a member of the women's group, was aware of this, but would not confront him for fear of being beaten.

Another woman remarked on the same problem and the church's failure to address this, and other issues, when she said:

Ministers and prominent church people are part of the abuse and corruption. The church is silent on all the issues of importance. Silent about violence, silent about abuse of women and children. There is no connection between what happens in church and our daily lives.

It is quite clear to me from my experience in a Xhosa-speaking congregation that the women are the people who give enormously and sacrificially - here I refer to financial giving. Yet, as one of the women I spoke to said, "the women raise the money but are not involved in decisions about how it is spent." This same woman was expelled from her church for objecting to the fact that money that had been given for a pre-school was being used for general church expenses.

Some evidence of the tight hold which male authority figures have in the church, is illustrated by one of the groups with whom I was meeting. After my first meeting with them, as we spoke about whether or not we would meet again, the discussion went

thus:

Won't Su be in trouble for meeting with us? Perhaps we should become a sister parish with one of her parishes so that our meetings are "legitimate". This process could cause conflict among the priests .... We can be accused of planning a coup .... The wardens and priest should approve of our meeting. We can be accused of trying to destroy the church. We are limited - by the control of the church (leaders); this makes us unsure if we can continue this process.

A member of this same group related how the constitution of the church is used to silence her. She said: "I need to see the canons. I am always told: 'the canons don't allow that', but no one shows me the canons".

Another woman spoke of an experience that is common for women, when men use their ideas and claim credit for them. She said: "Women start something, and when it is going well, men want to take it over".

The level of control that is being exercised is frightening. The women who, as I have related, were debating whether they could "dare" to meet with me again were articulate, educated women, but they were reduced to feeling subversive about taking part in what should have been seen as a very ordinary activity.

In a letter to one of the "authorities" in the Anglican church in 1996, which I said he could share with others in leadership if he saw fit to do so, I briefly expressed how it felt for me in the church at that time:

As you may well imagine, its jolly lonely being a church leader who is a woman. I do want you to know how it feels. I generally leave diocesan and archdeaconry events feeling horrible. The church leadership is massively male and very hierarchical. While in the local congregation women predominate - at least in the pews - everywhere else in the church we are a minority. Its painful for me to be in the church at this time. I feel it is an unjust

institution. The church undermines women even more than society does in general, I think. It hurts. I need you to know how hard it is. Women do - and I fear will - leave because its all too death - dealing for them.

It cost quite a lot for me to write this as I was making myself vulnerable. I never received a satisfactory response.

Although women have been ordained as priests in the Anglican church in South Africa since 1992, male clergy are by and large not encouraging women to offer themselves as candidates for ordination. For me, being ordained as a priest was at best an ambivalent experience. I felt I was being "let into" a male world, without the church having repented for the injustice it had been practising for centuries. I was anxious about whether the role of priest, in that it is a hierarchical one, could be empowering.<sup>21</sup> Some of those who struggled for women to be ordained now seem to think that there are no gender imbalances in the church, which I find very curious.<sup>22</sup>

### Women's Complicity in Their Subjugation

Women certainly also make reference to the ways in which they as women serve to

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<sup>21</sup> Starhawk makes a comment that may be pertinent here. She says: "A change in symbols ... is not enough. If female images are merely plugged into old structures, they too will function as agents of oppression, and this prospect is doubly frightening because they would then be robbed of the liberating power with which they are imbued today" (1989:200).

<sup>22</sup> At a meeting and in correspondence with the Anglican leadership I have suggested that a quota system might be used to ensure the adequate representation of women in all church structures. There has been no support for this from the church leadership nor by the few women at the meeting at which it was raised. Similarly, trying to lobby influential church leaders so that issues such as violence and abuse towards women could be challenged by the church has largely been met with silence.

maintain the present *status quo*. One woman stated that "women are so used to having limits put on them that when they are given a chance to participate they withdraw." Another woman commented that women nominate and elect men to posts in the congregation.

It is felt strongly that women do not support each other. One woman said: "the church wants you to be passive. When you speak out, you are marginalized as being 'political'."

Several of the members of the ecumenical group with whom I met, women involved in the church and active politically, made similar comments:

I am not prepared to speak out myself in our congregation. I am the only woman in the leadership. I will get no support.

This links with a comment made in the previous chapter that there may be some dissonance between a woman's attitude and the way she behaves, as is clearly the case here.

Another woman explained:

If I speak out on women's issues, I am considered a radical, and become isolated. I am even thought to be doing the work of the devil.

Another said with passion that "it is women who are the problem in our churches. If you call a meeting to discuss women's issues, no one comes. But on Thursdays everyone flocks to pray."

Why does this situation prevail? It is surely fear that is causing women to denounce those that dare to tackle this important subject. Why the fear? If not even the strongest of women dares to speak for fear of standing alone, what hope is there for

women in the churches?

On the question of sexual abuse, another woman bewailed the complicity of women:

There is a culture of silence. We protect our husbands and our sons. We don't ask the girl who she slept with. We accuse our daughters of lying when they say they were raped by their dads. We are losing our humanity. We no longer know who we are.

Perhaps we have, in fact, come to hate ourselves, thus internalising the attitude society seems to have towards us.

At a recent conference of the South African Council of Churches on Women in Ministry, I was part of a commission which was looking at "The Transformation of our Women's Structures", where, while looking ostensibly at women's organisations within the church, issues that resonate with the above discussion were aired, such as the need for women to work to empower and love themselves. The following concerns were raised:

- \* as women, we need our minds first to be transformed, i.e. we need to work on our own individual growth and awareness.
- \* some women feel marginalised by the manyanos [church women's organisations]: there can be class divisions.
- \* as women we are not united; we don't support each other.
- \* do we really want transformation as women? In the end we seem to want to please men.
- \* we need to share our stories and so discover ourselves and other women.
- \* we need to be real and stop pretending everything is alright in our homes and marriages.
- \* uniforms [worn by members of the church women's organisations] were meant

initially to equalise women, but now have become a sign of superiority.

- \* we are the people who serve the men.
- \* we submit to men.
- \* we should use our structures as forums for sharing (also about abuse, etc).
- \* we need to integrate all women, and break the divisions between us.

My research did not elicit much data regarding the role of women's organisations in the church, but one of the participants expressed a concern similar to that voiced above:

We feel that dressing smartly or in a uniform makes us holy; we feel ourselves better than the poor, the badly dressed, the "sinners".

And another woman I quoted earlier said similarly: "my uniform oppresses me ... it gives me power [over other women]".

This section surely touches on the most important issue of all as it relates to women's relationship to themselves and to one another. Where these relationships are not strong and healthy, no move towards struggling for justice can take root. The feelings that the women expressed, in different ways, were that women are, in some respects, lost, and need to find and befriend themselves. A holistic and loving practice of spirituality would be a wonderful tool to enable this to happen, but this is not provided by the churches. Rather the institution that should be providing nourishment and strength is contributing to women's alienation from themselves and one another.

### What Do Women Want the Church to Be?

Sadly, in our discussions, not one woman mentioned anything positive about her experience of the church (although some of the questions that were posed

encouraged this). However, the women pointed to the sort of church that they would like to see.

The women I spoke to were longing for a more human church, a church that was gentler, more people-centred, a church where there was more sharing and equality. They want to be able to share their views and suggestions and be heard. As one of the Anglican woman put it:

I would [like to] speak out about changing the way our umjikelo<sup>23</sup> is organised .... I would suggest more group participation in things like bible study; it was good for me to be in such groups at Synod and realise that our priest doesn't have all the answers. Group work encourages people to participate, and one can raise questions; in contrast to this, our sermons often just hammer on one text. I would suggest people with certain gifts share these with the congregation .... We have skilled people, but there is no opportunity for sharing.

Women were adamant that there needed to be more space in the services for participation through, for example, people sharing their prayers or coming forward for ministry. The call was also for leadership that was participatory. As one woman said, "we need to train our leadership in participatory styles of leadership: but will they be open to change?"

Women want to be included in all aspects of life in the church:

There is now to be a workshop - at the church - on circumcision, but only men are to attend. Why? We get no information about our sons, and only know when they are dead (when they are "in the bush"). We hear: "This is our culture ...."

Several of the women I met spoke of how they had offered their expertise in various areas to the leadership in their congregation, but that their services had not been

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<sup>23</sup> A form of celebratory worship which also has a fundraising function.

utilised. This leaves them feeling isolated. Another woman spoke of her envisaged involvement in the congregation:

I have told the priest I can organise a workshop for new council members - on how to communicate with people, etc. I will also try and organise a presentation on career guidance; thirdly, I will try to make sure people are informed about the importance of counselling. I am very concerned about the youth.

Many of the women mentioned their concern for the youth - though they were often fairly senior in age themselves. Another said that "our youth are frustrated. We need systematic counselling of abused youth, there are many of them, and we only reach very few". They had a vision of a far wider ministry in and through the church. As one said:

It's no good just praying and then leaving church .... The church should be seen as a resource place - not just a place for "the word".

It is clear that on a massive level the gifts of people in the church are not being recognised and used for the strengthening of the church and the community. This is tragic for each individual whose gifts are thus denied and for those who cannot thus benefit from their ministry.<sup>24</sup>

What if women do not find in the church what they long for? As I put to one group, "if you remain 'unfree', 'controlled'" (as they had said that they are made to feel), "what does this do to you?" Some of the responses were as follows:

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<sup>24</sup> There is an interesting discussion on spiritual gifts in a booklet entitled The Other Disciples of Jesus, written by the Umtata Women's Theology Group (pp41-42). The prevailing situation in the churches clearly makes a mockery of the biblical teaching on the sharing of spiritual gifts for the building up of the body.

- \* I'll lose interest, withdraw, become passive. I will just go to church but not be involved - though I will feel guilty about this.
- \* This is not about the future. This is how I feel now. I have withdrawn, become passive for the sake of peace. I don't want to cause trouble and be isolated.

These comments come from women with a deep concern and commitment to the church but who are on the edge of despair as they feel they are unable to affect any change.

### **The Value of the Groups**

The women without exception welcomed the chance to be together and to share simply about their experiences as women, not having anything else on the agenda. Even a woman who was extensively politically involved, and worked with and organised other women, in response to the suggestion to meet, said:

It will be good to meet together. We don't have a chance to speak specifically on gender issues.

One woman said at the end of one of the gatherings:

It has been so good to set aside a time to share together as women - this experience is quite new to us. It has been truly worthwhile. Perhaps we are the pioneers of something new.

One of the young women said after meeting:

Sharing was easy. It is important to be sharing like this. Let us invite other women and meet again.

A woman I spoke to individually said that she would like to organise a group of women to talk about the issues we had been discussing. This may be "the beginning of the answer", as she put it.

One could put these comments down to people being politely affirming. However, I believe there was a depth and sincerity in these affirmations of how important and meaningful it was for us to share together as women. We were aware that as we talked together we were affirming our own personhood. It was so important and healing for us to be heard by one another.

We really enjoyed our time together. There was a remarkable degree of openness and trust, notable particularly as I did not know any of the women well, in fact, I was meeting with the majority of them for the first time. The women dared to trust me. (In conversation with a Rhodes academic in the early stages of my work, she - herself a black woman - said: "Yes, the women will trust you. We are so extra-ordinary!" She proved to be right.)

Perhaps even more important than the content of what the women shared were the feelings that were expressed. As women expressed themselves in pain and anger, and others listened, there was much weeping. I recorded this after one of my personal interviews.

She began to share her experiences of sexism in the church and in society. She was clearly moved and hurt. It seemed so clear to me that women are so full of feeling and pain at their exclusion from leadership in church and society.

After my initial group meeting I recorded this:

What stands out most for me is the strong, strong feelings about the church. The anger, disappointment .... What was important is that we as women feel

so much and have so much that pours out of us when talking about our lives and the church.

Of the same meeting I wrote:

The women understand what the church should be. They are greatly pained at its failure to address the crying issues of the day - which involve the very life and death of individuals and their communities. There is great anger at the passivity - and even complicity - of church leaders in the face of burning social issues.

No woman needed any persuasion to meet and discuss their experience of the church. This was something close to the heart of each of the women I met. And it is a subject that has caused them a great deal of pain.

Although women meet one another frequently in the course of life and work, there is usually a sense of "business" in these interactions. The slowness, the space, the beauty of our gatherings allowed each of us, as it were, to unfold and tell ourselves and each other things that we had not articulated before. Such opportunities are a lifeline for women, that is, they serve to sustain us in wholeness in the face of a world that would often negate our goodness, worth and power.<sup>25</sup>

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

As is evident from the above, the content of the women's sharing was certainly not that of feminist rhetoric. Women were simply voicing the truth that they knew from

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<sup>25</sup> If one was to envisage these groups continuing, each may take on a different character. I am thinking of the one group that felt compelled to immediately plan a course of action. Whether groups such as these can, or should, also function as action groups is something I have not explored. I would envisage that care would need to be taken not to lose the emphasis on personal sharing and listening in favour of planning and activism.

first-hand experience. While there was a strong critique made of the way male power is exercised in the church, I don't think the women were saying that women do not sometimes exercise power in just as oppressive a way. There was honest self-criticism in that women recognised that as women we do not support one another.

My hopes for the research process were more than realised. My hope had been that each conversation or gathering would in a real way contribute to each of our coming to know ourselves more fully, and so affirm our own and each other's journeys.

The anger and the passion of the women taught me a lot about how they view issues of the church and gender. It was this sharing of feelings that made the process very precious. An overwhelming feeling women had in the church was that of being controlled, of not being free to be who they were and to raise issues that were of importance to them. <sup>26</sup> I was interested to discover that women are not splitting their lives into "church" and "other". They know that "church" and the rest of their lives are part of the whole and need to inform each another. Hence also the women's frustration at the church not wanting to look at the real life issues that were affecting their communities. The experience of spirituality in the church was not serving to empower women in their own life journeys. Rather, the practice of the church was seen as being abstract and not rooted in experience as women know it.

I have said that I felt that the women with whom I engaged were fairly "ordinary" and "average". And yet several expressed that if they spoke out in the church, they

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<sup>26</sup> How much does this mirror the feeling that women generally have in society? Sebidi, a South African artist, says poignantly: "it's quite heavy for a black woman. When she has to talk she is not allowed to. There is something blocking her. 'It's on my shoulder, how can I move this load from my shoulder?' She is not free. When you are in the backyard you can't get out" (in Williamson's Resistance Art in South Africa 1989:37).

would stand alone and be severely undermined. Does this mean that other women do not experience what these women do? Or does it mean that whilst women may be in touch with their deep anger at the church, this does not translate into speaking out about this in general church forums? This is a question I will return to later in this study.

Most of the women in the study would not have had a feminist framework within which to make sense of their experiences. Walker speaks of the sense of rebirth she experienced on first encountering the civil rights movement in the 1960's in America (1983:126). At last her life experience made sense. Sharing of experience together as women is fundamental to our healing, and the exposure to paradigms through which to understand one's situation can also be very empowering for women (in this instance, a feminist or womanist<sup>27</sup> paradigm). However, there is a real sense in that as women meet together they will arrive at their own truths, which would then only be confirmed or enlarged by material that they might read.

There were hints from several of the women that, perhaps, this form of sharing together is the beginning of healing for ourselves and transformation for the church. This seems to be the hope expressed in these rather whimsical statements:

Perhaps we are the pioneers of something new.

and

This may be the beginning of the answer.

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<sup>27</sup>

Womanist is the term often preferred by black women.

## CHAPTER 4

### HOW DO WOMEN ELSEWHERE EXPERIENCE THE CHURCH?

While the previous chapter outlined the material generated in the field research conducted for this study, I will now proceed to examine whether or not the experience of the church described by women in this study is at variance with the experience recorded in the writings of other women on the same subject.

I look first at the documented experiences of other South African women<sup>28</sup>, thereafter I turn to women in Africa, in Asia, and finally to women in the West. The closing section will attempt to relate what these women say to the material in the previous chapter.

#### THE EXPERIENCE OF OTHER SOUTH AFRICAN WOMEN

In this section I draw extensively on a collection of writings published in South Africa in 1991 which is one of the most exciting publications to emerge from South African women, Women Hold Up Half the Sky: Women in the Church in Southern Africa.<sup>29</sup> (A few of the more than thirty contributors are, in fact, men.) Many of the contributors to this work are not theologians in an academic sense, and many are Anglican,

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<sup>28</sup> A wonderful addition to women's theological landscape in South Africa is the recent compilation of "An Annotated Bibliography of Gender and Theology" published in bulletin for contextual theology in Southern Africa and Africa 4:2. South African Council of Churches' Women's Desk and the Pietermaritzburg Agency for Christian Social Awareness (PACSA) Human Rights Gender Programme, July 1997.

<sup>29</sup> Most of the contributors are South African, but I will also be referring to a Namibian writer and a European woman who write of the Southern African context.

seemingly due to the fact that the publication was stimulated by the debate within the Anglican church at the time regarding Anglican women's ordination to the priesthood. The text is lively and often relates to the first hand experience of women, and in this sense continues the process already begun of listening to the stories of women, and, in this instance, of concerned men.

Several writers in this collection speak of the servant role assigned to women in the church. Kretzschmar quotes Pato's observations written as long ago as 1985, and which sadly can be re-echoed today. He says:

They [the women] continue to play supportive roles of providing teas, raising funds and leading women's organizations, notwithstanding the fact that they constitute the majority of active members in the church, and therefore are the backbone of the church .... The ministry allowed to women in the church does little more than reinforce images and structures of inferiority and servitude (Kretzschmar in Ackermann *et al* 1991:116).

Similarly Mandew quotes Namibian woman theologian Ramodibe as saying:

This church ... wants women but does not need them. Women are wanted because they are workers (cleaning the church, making cakes, fund-raising, etc) for the comfort of men. Men are like Pharaoh, who wanted the children of Israel as slaves but did not need them as people (Mandew in Ackermann *et al* 1991:136).

A group of women meeting in the Eastern Cape town of Umtata, The Umtata Women's Theology Group, in a booklet entitled Women, the Bible and the Contemporary Church, list the activities with which women are typically engaged in the church, and those from which they are excluded. The former include cooking and the washing of linen, with leadership roles being limited to leading women and children. Women, they note, are excluded from decision-making in the church, and from any teaching, liturgical function or other form of leadership where men are part

of the composition of the group (p 3).

Ackermann boldly asserts that the church that discriminates and negates the gifts of its members is not in fact authentically and rightfully the church (1984:76). Those who practise discrimination and those who collaborate with this by not acting and speaking against it are, she says, sinning (1992:15).

Govinden describes the church as "male in structure, in all visible activities" (in Ackermann *et al* 1991:284). She continues:

In its deliberations on the life of the church, and in its decision-making - at regional councils, diocesan, episcopal and provincial synods - there are more male representatives and delegates than women. This is a reflection of the fact that lay leadership, as well as the three levels of ordained ministry are dominated by men (*ibid*).

Mncube goes further than this and questions the structures themselves, arguing that to preach about justice to hierarchical structures is a waste of time (in Ackermann *et al* 1991:361). This is a point that did not emerge in my field research, but is an important consideration.<sup>30</sup> Duncan makes a similar observation when she raises the question: does the ordination of women to the priesthood, in fact, advance women's struggles at all? More broadly, she asks:

Is participation in male-dominated structures the right strategy? If ours is merely a struggle for admission into existing church structures as selected persons who make it in the eyes of the men who choose us, will we do anything towards bringing about the transformation we long for (Duncan in Ackermann *et al* 1991:388)?

She notes how black men made their way into the church's hierarchical structures of

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<sup>30</sup> The issue raised by the women I met concerned women's representation rather than questioning the very structures themselves.

authority and came to dominate, conforming to the situation as they found it rather than changing it (*ibid*:389).

Regarding women's ordination, she asks whether the very idea of setting people apart for a "superior" function is not divisive and unegalitarian (*ibid*:388). She posits that no talk of the recognition of lay ministries will ever be effective while there is this divide between lay and ordained ministry (*ibid*:388). I would agree with her, but this was not an issue that was raised by the women with whom I met. Rather, these women wanted to be able to see their own image reflected in those who were leading the congregation.

A Namibian, Kathindi, notes that while the church championed the cause of national liberation, within this same church women struggle against sexism and economic oppression by men (in Ackermann *et al* 1991:254). Mpumlwana, herself living in the Eastern Cape, has a section in her contribution headed "The Attitudes of Male Clerics" (she refers here, she says, to African (black) clerics). Among those she categorizes as the more progressive are those who accept the principle of women's equality but practise the opposite, and are not prepared to defend women's equality in the face of opposition (in Ackermann *et al* 1991:376). She tentatively suggests the quota system as a way of ensuring that women's voices are heard within church structures. Mpumlwana, too, speaks of how women have internalized their oppression, with some going so far as joining forces with men and isolating women who stand up for justice in terms of gender (*ibid*:381).

Garman argues that the Christian symbolic universe does not fit female experience and thus should undergo considerable revision (1996. Thesis MA. What is really real?: A feminist critique of the Christian symbolic universe. University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg). Holness similarly suggests that the classical Western faith model is inadequate for the contextual needs of South Africa, arguing that faith needs to be

re-interpreted from a women's perspective (1991. Thesis MA. Contextualising faith from the perspective of a South African woman. University of Cape Town). Lebaka-Ketshabile argues for the reconstruction of theology in order for the human and spiritual needs of all people to be taken into consideration, outlining the limitations of traditional theology and exposing its arrogant stance in the name of excellence (1995. Reconstructing theology: A woman's perspective. In *Journal of Black Theology in South Africa* 9:2). Keane speaks of the contribution feminist theology can make to the renewal of the church (1993. The role of theology in the renewal of the church and the contribution feminist theology makes to the renewal process. *Theologia Evangelica* 26(2):8-16).

Several of the contributors to Women Hold Up Half the Sky examine the question of how women respond to the situation in the church, with there being consensus that trying to change the situation generates a great deal of conflict and unpopularity (Kathindi in Ackermann *et al* 1991:256). The Umtata Women's Group booklet to which I have already referred, suggests that women find themselves in one of three positions: some are content with traditional roles, regarding attempts to change these as un-Christian; there are those who are dissatisfied but are unsure of the way forward; and others who, due to frustration, have left the church (Women, the Bible and the Contemporary Church, p 4).

Swart-Russell, in seeking to understand the complicity of women in their own oppression, suggests, as do many of the other writers in the volume, that women do not experience freedom within themselves, and thus their attitudes and actions perpetuate the situation within the church. So Swart-Russell says:

They derive security from the stereotypes projected upon them, and willingly conform to these stereotypes. The self-denigration created in them by sexism causes them to admire and even adore the male leaders of their church .... Liberation ... offers little short-term security (in Ackermann *et al* 1991:299).

Duncan, in further exploring the responses available to women, speaks interestingly of what she calls the security of maintaining victim-status. Reflecting on the experience of women delegates to the Rustenburg conference in 1990 she says:

Being a victim can be quite a comfortable state of affairs. It is nice to be warmly hugged and apologized to (Duncan in Ackermann *et al* 1991:389).

The description of women themselves complying with the situation that exists, and undermining those who work for change, is a theme that was repeated, with pain, in the study that I conducted. Likewise other themes, such as that of the under-representation of women in church leadership, emerged in my study as well as in the writings I have looked at arising out of the South African context. Women in my field research spoke more of the situation at the local parish (or congregational) level, rather than looking at broader church structures. This is understandable as this is where they are situated.

That there is no substantial difference between what the writers in Women Hold Up Half the Sky are saying from what the women in my study expressed is, on one level, unremarkable, due to the fact that those engaged in the study and those contributing to the written text are all women with experience of the church in this country. However, the women who have written their stories would have had considerable exposure to debate and other writings on the subject of women and the church, whereas this was by and large not the case with the women with whom I worked. I thus feel that the correlation between what these two groups of women articulate does suggest that the women with whom I worked are not "out of step" with the experiences of most women in the church. The observation remains, though, that women are not effectively organising for change in the church, and that many women within the church have internalised their own oppression. Change certainly cannot be considered to be imminent. Nor even, sadly, the struggle for change. Women are nowhere near heeding the call made in the epilogue to Women Hold Up Half the Sky

by Kadalie that they withdraw their services from the church as a strategy to affect significant change (in Ackermann *et al* 1991:391).

## WOMEN IN OTHER AFRICAN COUNTRIES

Women in Africa have written powerful indictments on the life of the church. They write with power and passion. Oduyoye and Kanyoro in The Will To Arise suggest that the fundamental question women must ask is "How does religion serve or obstruct women's development" (1992:10)? They pronounce bitinglly that:

Like Jairus' daughter, we daughters of Africa have been dead, spiritually, of malnutrition caused by the injustice of the church (1992:203).

They quote a woman from Malawi asking poignantly: "How can I arise and walk when our men continue to break my knee joints" (1992:204)?

In the work edited by Fabella and Oduyoye, entitled With Passion and Compassion, in which there is a section on African women, Ramodibe asserts that "there can be no argument that the church is one of the most oppressive structures in society today, especially in regard to the oppression of women" (in Fabella and Oduyoye 1989:16).

Tampa from the Cameroon, writing in the same volume, remarks on the doctrinal approach of the churches, which feeds one abstractions which do not engage with the concrete reality in which women find themselves:

This is why even to the present it has been possible to interpret the doctrines of the incarnation (liberation) and of expiation (reconciliation) in terms that leave intact the social structures and models of our communities, including the church (in Fabella and Oduyoye 1989:31).

What is the suggested response by African women to the situation which confronts women in the church? Fabella and Oduyoye warn that women are considered dangerous when they question the powerful and masculine structures of the church and that such action becomes a source of tension (1989:xiii). African women call for engagement while at other times suggesting non-cooperation with the church as it is presently structured. Regarding engagement, Fabella and Oduyoye argue that Christians have the responsibility to make the church community accord with the truth of the Gospel (*ibid*:vii). In Oduyoye's own earlier work she touches, as surprisingly few of the writers do, on the question of women's organisations within the church, asking whether these should continue to support the male clergy, thereby supporting the ecclesiastical *status quo* (1986:126).

Ramodibe is determined in her call for non-cooperation:

There can be no cooperation between women and men as long as the oppressive and exploitative structures of the church remain intact. There can be no cooperation as long as men retain their dominant position in the church (in Fabella and Oduyoye 1989:14).

She urges a radical correction of the church's way of being:

Which church are we building - the historical church of the dominant classes or the church of Jesus Christ?... Are we invited to participate at the will of the dominant group ... just to be accommodated, to be co-opted into the system, to collaborate in our oppression? Are we asked to soothe the consciences of men by being seen to be working side by side with men when we have no powers at all (*ibid*:15)?

She says that the church cannot be "improved" but needs to be "born again". In its present form it is not, she says, the body of Christ (*ibid*:17). Part of this thorough revision would include the examination of all the symbols of Christianity to analyse whether they perpetuate male domination. The Bible, theology, church history and

tradition must be subjected to the same rigorous analysis (*ibid*:19).

Women also refer more broadly to ecumenical associations within the church, generally known for their commitment to justice and freedom. Alas, not regarding women! In the World Council of Churches, despite laudable resolutions regarding representation, women barely secure 12.5% of seats in the Assembly (Oduyoye 1986:124). Similarly Fabella and Oduyoye speak of the demon of sexism existing within the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) where women are under-represented and the issues they raise are not taken seriously.

The women I have cited above seem to have a stronger, more developed voice than many women in South Africa. This may be because the women I have quoted are theologians and have written, some of them extensively, on the subject. There is a great power in their writing, as if they are not holding back their anger, which suggests to me that they have a consciousness of their own personal power. The call of some of these women for non-cooperation with the church, while it is male dominated, is a bold call, and one that has hardly been heard in South Africa. Women in Africa speak of receiving death, not life, from the church. Again, in South Africa, I have not heard many women speak in such bold terms. African women pose the question as to whether or not religion really serves women - the question in fact posed in the title to this dissertation. There also seems more willingness to examine the role played by women's organisations within the church. They also, in contrast to the women I spoke to, call for an examination of church doctrine to see whether or not doctrinal beliefs strengthen women. Similarly all traditional teaching and practice of the church - including church history, the Bible, church traditions - must undergo radical examination in relation to how they affect women <sup>31</sup> (Again, this is something

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<sup>31</sup> These demands would be influenced by the fact that the African women I referred to are theologically trained.

that did not emerge from the women with whom I interacted in this study, although it is articulated by some of the South African women theologians to whom I have referred). It seems to me we can learn a lot from our African colleagues.<sup>32</sup>

## A VOICE FROM ASIA

I will be drawing in this section on the exciting work by Chung, Struggle to be the Sun Again, published in 1990. (Chung visited South Africa to address various theological and women's gatherings in January 1996.) It is a rigorous work in which the author looks systematically and thoroughly at the role religion plays in Asian women's lives and creatively describes a new way of spirituality for women. As this dissertation is not directly concerned with Asian women's experience, I simply refer to this source as a means of comparison with what women in the Eastern Cape are saying.

For Chung the criterion we must apply to our religion and spirituality is this: does it give us life? Thus she says:

Our concrete, historical, everyday, lived experiences must serve as the final test of our theology. If a religious teaching or practice provides a life-giving power to Asian women so that we can sustain and liberate our lives, that teaching and practice becomes "good news" - gospel - for us. If it makes Asian women die both inside and outside, it becomes "bad news" (1990:6).

As her above assertion clearly shows, spirituality and faith, for Chung, are rooted in life, not in abstract understandings and doctrines. So she continues:

Asian women's theology may not have an adequate systematic structure or the proper academic terminology in the traditional sense, but it arises out of

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<sup>32</sup> However, again, one could ask how much the insights of these African women reflect the thinking of the "average" church-going woman in Africa.

women's experience of encountering God in their gut, feeling God in their heart, and communicating with God in their soul .... Asian women's theology is live-ing theology. For Asian women theology is not just talking or thinking about God; it is living the liberation and wholeness here and now (1990:99-100).<sup>33</sup>

This deep engagement of one's whole being is very much in accord with the way of doing theology that was called for in the methodological section of this dissertation. Our spirituality should be that which fosters radical change within ourselves and the world (1990:113). Chung claims a great boldness for Asian women as she says: "Asian women do not follow the church's teaching blindly. They discard the church's teaching if it keeps their lives under bondage" (1990:92).

Some Christian Asian women link up with women of other faiths in their exploration of spirituality (1990:94). These women have created spaces to gather beyond the restrictions of the institutional church where they can explore rituals and ways of being that are liberating (1990:111). Christian women gather also with women who are sustained by popular traditional beliefs (1990:111).

What matters for them is not doctrinal orthodoxy. Male leaders of the institutional church always seem preoccupied with the doctrinal purity of their religions. What matters to Asian women is survival and the liberation of themselves and their communities (Chung 1990:113).

I find Chung refreshing as she is so pro-active. She does not spend a lot of time bemoaning how the church is, but shares her vision about how women are, in fact, remaking the church.

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<sup>33</sup> That the church in Asia is very oppressive is clear from the comments of an Indian writer, Gnanadason, who says that just as the "church fathers" spoke unspeakable utterances about women, contemporary church men evidence the same fear and misogyny (in Fabella and Oduyoye 1989:71).

These reflections from an Asian context resonate to some degree with the issues that the women I worked with in the Eastern Cape were raising, though dissimilarities, too, exist. The rooting of faith in lived experience which Chung emphasizes is in accordance with the methodology advocated in this dissertation. The section on methodology affirmed, as she does, that our practice of faith needs to be towards life. There is some divergence between the Asian experience and our own in the bold inter-faith sharing that is taking place, at least to some degree, among Asian women. In South Africa there is much ecumenical sharing, but little inter-faith co-operation (although our context is different in that Christianity is the religion practised by most people). However, perhaps South African women are similar to their Asian sisters in that Christianity is practised along-side traditional African practices by many women in the country.

Chung claims a freedom for Asian women to define the church in a way that is life-giving for them. I believe we need to do this as women. What remains unclear to me is how Asian women relate to the institutional church as it is presently structured.

## WOMEN FROM A WESTERN CONTEXT

In this section I will draw substantially on Ruether's work, Women-Church, which deals directly with the experience women have of the church, as well as drawing on various other sources. It is evident that women in the West have been writing for longer on the subject, hence there is quite a wide variety of material emanating from these women.<sup>34</sup>

A major concern for Ruether is the use of the liturgy (she writes from the perspective

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<sup>34</sup> Western women often have more access to financial and other resources which facilitates their being able to write and makes it possible for their work to be published.

of a Catholic). She is fierce and scathing in her treatment of how women experience this. She argues thus:

Women in contemporary churches are suffering from linguistic deprivation and eucharistic famine. They can no longer nurture their souls in alienating words that ignore or systematically deny their existence. They are starved for the words of life, for symbolic forms that fully and wholeheartedly affirm their personhood ....They desperately need primary communities that nurture their journey into wholeness, rather than constantly negating and thwarting it (1985:4-5).

She continues to talk about the negative power of the institutional churches, saying that "attendance at their fonts poisons our souls. They have become all too often occasions of sin rather than redemption, places where we leave angry and frustrated rather than enlightened and healed" (1985:5).

Ruether recognises women's need for, as she puts it, communities that nurture one and that include a ritual and symbolic aspect that is life-affirming for women (1985:3). She argues that women need to have ways that they can gather and have these needs met, recognising that the institutional church is not providing this. Ruether thus calls for women to meet in groups where they can learn to find themselves and build up their own identity (1985:59). Ruether does not stipulate how these women's groups should relate to the institutional church, but her hope is clearly that they will serve to influence the church in some way. Ruether (cautiously) advocates women not leaving the institutional church, although, in defining the church as "the community of liberation from patriarchy", I feel she removes from the institutional church the right to claim to be church at all. Ruether does concede, however, that for many the process of conversion becomes also the process of leaving the church (1985:88).

Ruether discusses clericalism fairly extensively. She does not feel that women being

ordained brings about any fundamental change. She says:

For the most part, women pastors ... find themselves confined to traditional institutional maintenance or, at best, able to take tiny steps toward new symbols and rituals against the determined opposition of most church members (1985:4).

This is certainly my experience.

Ruether asserts that there is an "utter incompatibility of clericalism with a liberation understanding of ministry" (1985:75). I would agree with this. She defines clericalism as when ministry is no longer exercised by the community but rather there is a hierarchical ordering of functions (1985:75). This results, she says, in the laity becoming passive recipients of the ministry of the priest (1985:75). The relationship between clergy and laity is that of the parent and child; indeed, this is evident clearly from the terms used to address priests, "Father" being very common in the Catholic tradition.

Ruether is particularly scathing of what she calls the "magic tools" of which the priest has sole use - she refers here to the priests' role in the Eucharistic celebration. She remarks how this function is utterly straightforward and would take very little explanation for anyone to be able to carry out. Making this the exclusive preserve of the priest is a way of giving priests control and power in the sphere of the divine (1985:77). Indeed this is so, and it is a power that priests will not easily give away.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, with the authority to forgive sins, Ruether reminds us that in the Second

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<sup>35</sup> This criticism is more valid in the Anglican and Catholic traditions than in the non-conformist traditions such as the Congregational, Presbyterian and Baptist churches where this gap is less wide.

Testament<sup>36</sup> this was a power appropriated by Jesus (thus enraging the priests of the time) and given to people in community to minister to one another (Mk 2:10; Jn. 20:23)(1985:79).

Regarding theology, here too the laity are made to feel that they need to depend on the clergy for help in understanding the Scripture and church doctrines. Knowing god becomes mystified to preserve the power advantages of the clergy. God must be mediated to people through the expertise of the priest (1985:81).

Even where laity are part of church structures, the tendency is, says Ruether, to delegate power to a few individuals in a way that disempowers the lay community as a whole (1985:85). The average church member has long learnt to abdicate responsibility.

Many laity think of ministry as services that they pay professionals to provide .... Thus many prefer to cede decision-making power to the clergy and to the few laity who come forth to take church office, rather than claiming collective responsibility (Ruether 1985:85).

The church should be a faith community that is concerned with building justice - within the faith community and the community at large. This concern with justice is often lacking in the institutional church. Ruether explains:

A community must have some idea of its own identity as a witnessing community with some social praxis before it can begin to symbolize its collective life authentically. Most church liturgies are dead precisely because they have no real reference point in a community ... [they lack] an authentic praxis as a reference point for liturgical expression (1985:92).

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<sup>36</sup> Ruether refers here to what Christians commonly call the New Testament to avoid an anti-Semitic nuance. I find her term appropriate.

Driver, also writing in a North American context, comments similarly on the privatised nature of religion for many in the West. He says:

People may be taught not to expect that the ritual will have any effect except perhaps on one's emotions or one's "private" life .... The ritual then becomes intellectually or aesthetically or emotionally satisfying, perhaps even cathartic, but without any expected impact on the social world (1981:163).

I would agree that the church has lost sight of the fact that it exists, at least in part, for the sake of the world (and I refer here to my experience in both black and white congregations).

Can women maintain their wholeness and wellbeing while remaining part of the traditional church? This is a question that has occupied many women in the West, and they come to various conclusions. Many writers speak of the ambivalence that women feel towards the traditional practice of Christianity. On the one hand, they may experience liberating elements, on the other hand, their very selves are undermined (it must be said that one often has to struggle to claim the liberating aspect of the faith as it is so often well disguised). In the study I conducted no woman expressed anything positive about her experience of the church, nor am I aware of women who are writing with enthusiasm about their life within the institutional church. How sad that this is not so.

In Eck and Jain's work entitled Speaking of Faith: Cross-Cultural perspectives on Women, Religion and Social Change, I found a submission by Hampson of Britain very moving. She writes as someone who had for years, if not decades, sought the right to be ordained in the Church of England. Daphne finally leaves the church, and this she describes as an act of healing for her.

Since I left the church ... I have come to feel good again about my body, and about having been born a woman. I have healed both spiritually and

physically .... One finally gets up and leaves - to preserve one's human dignity (1986:131-132).

Schüssler-Fiorenza, based in the United States, speaks strongly of women's responsibility for determining what their vision is for the church, naming and defining it according to their own experience. She appeals to women to own their power in the church (1983a:3). She says: "We can never surrender our claim to spiritual authority. Thus Christian feminists may not give up their religious authority to define biblical religion and the Christian church" (*ibid*). She seeks to reclaim the power that has been taken from women. In tracing the journey of women in the church, she argues that, through the ages, the institutional authorities battled to suppress the freedom and power of women. As Ruether similarly notes, women who did not comply were labelled "heretics" and pushed out of mainstream Christianity (*ibid*:86). In her later work on Jesus, Schüssler-Fiorenza persuasively argues that it is for the sake of life in the global village that women must not relinquish their power of naming in the spiritual domain (1994:11).

As strong as Schüssler-Fiorenza's commitment is to the institutional church, she does return to the question in her 1993 work entitled Discipleship of Equals, asking whether women can belong to a sexist church which is destructive of their identity (1993:138). She quotes very movingly the words of various women. For example:

I no longer can participate in a male-centred mass if I do not want to relinquish my faith in God and in the Christian gospel .... The Eucharist has been perverted and become destructive of my Christian faith (1993:138).

The deep anguish and alienation experienced by women is also expressed:

Prayer today is a battleground. Public prayer, especially the Eucharist, becomes a locus of almost unbearable pain .... The insensitivity to language which excludes women from the saving act of redemption makes it almost impossible for me to be at peace enough to receive the Eucharist .... In every

prayer there is a struggle (in Schüssler-Fiorenza1993:138).

A woman activist friend of mine (and a very long-time Anglican) recently told me that she had left the church. She said that having fought apartheid, it had become untenable for her to continue being part of an institution, the church, which she felt was riddled with injustice. However, she is now struggling with the fact that she is no longer part of a worshipping community.

Other women determinedly stay where they are. The Feminine Face of God quotes two women, one a Christian and one a Jew.

"If I were pushed against the wall, I wouldn't let anybody throw me out. I am the Church in a new place".

"Why should I let them define what Judaism is and place myself outside of it" (Anderson and Hopkins1991:222).

Ultimately, of course, the decision of whether to remain within the institutional church or not is a personal one for each woman - and each man. People do seem to need a faith community to help support and sustain their faith, and women in many areas, at least in South Africa, would find that if they left the church there may not be a group with which to worship regularly. This then remains an unsatisfactory situation, as many such women would long to be part of a worshipping community to which they could contribute and together with whom they could grow. One is lucky if one can find a group of people in the area where one lives with whom one can worship thus.

While a superficial reading would suggest that this section on women's experience of the church outside of Africa and Asia raises different issues from those raised by women in Africa and Asia, a closer examination reveals, in fact, that there are many commonalities, although the way of expressing the issues are different. Western women theologians are concerned with liturgy, which is an issue that is not raised in

the same terms by the other women to which this dissertation refers. However, the fact that women in the Eastern Cape repeatedly appeal for worship to be related to issues affecting their lives can be interpreted as a similar plea for the relevance of worship. While writers in the Western context see the necessity of the church being consciously situated in and affecting its social context, this is expressed with far more passion in the African and Asian contexts, as is to be expected. The question of whether or not to remain within the church is one that has vexed Western women more than it has women in other contexts (although I know of South African women who just vote with their feet and leave, without making a fuss about it). The issue of clericalism and the power of the clergy is discussed more thoroughly by Western women than was evident in other women's writings that I examined. However, it is a theme that appears strongly in my field research with women from the Eastern Cape which they articulated as the abuse of authority by the clergy, and by men in general in the churches. Women in the Eastern Cape, along with many women in Africa and Asia, are determined in their demand for real involvement in the church. The idea of women meeting together almost as a parallel church is also explored at some length in the above section. This is different from women who meet together in African women's groupings, as these are generally very much part of the church in a way that Ruether's "Women-Church" is not. Ruether's strong call for women to meet together in groups echoes the emphasis put on this need in the earlier chapters of this dissertation, and is the way in which the research component of this study was conducted. Meeting in groups as women and sharing in ways that are meaningful will be proposed, in the final chapter of this dissertation, as one of the ways in which women can grow in wholeness, strength and power.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Many of the issues raised by the women with whom I worked in the Eastern Cape are also addressed by women situated in other parts of the world. The deepest

commonality is, I feel, on the emotional rather than a factual level - although, as is said, "feelings are facts!" Women writers in their various contexts echo the feelings of pain and deep dissatisfaction expressed by women in the Eastern Cape. Women in the African and the Western contexts put this powerfully when they speak of suffering from malnutrition in the church, of being poisoned, or of having their knee joints broken. Clearly, women feel they are often receiving death rather than life. So, too, the women whom I interviewed. In a variety of ways, and through anger and tears, they expressed these same feelings of hurt and frustration. After our group meetings it was often the emotions expressed as much as the facts shared that stayed with me.

Eastern Cape women, along with other women in Africa, critique the role of helper/servant that women have within the church. However, it is only the occasional voice, in the writings I consulted and in the group study that I did, that analyses the role of women's organisations in the church (who often fulfill this servant role). I question why there is relative silence on this important subject. Is it too thorny for women to tackle? It surely demands investigation.

A recurring cry from women in South Africa, and in other African countries, is the lamenting of the lack of women's representation in all the decision-making bodies of the church. This again is something raised by women in the Eastern Cape, although less so. Their main concern is how the local parish church operates, as that is what they experience in an ongoing way. A minority of African writers, including South African writers, question the validity of the present church structures. These minority voices question whether women can creatively participate in structures that have been developed by men, and suggest that more radical change is needed than simply involving more women in these male creations.

Regarding the division into clergy and laity, it is largely the Western writers that I

reviewed that spoke strongly against this. In the field component of my research the question of having a clerical caste was not questioned, although certainly the way this group conduct themselves was. This leads me to ask whether the fact of having ordained ministers is regarded as a given in Africa. It would seem so at present.

Women in South Africa, in the literature reviewed, and in the conversations I had, speak of the isolation of women who stand against gender oppression in the church. Such women generally feel unsupported. Women from other African countries recount similar experiences.

Women in the Eastern Cape often referred to the fact that the church is not confronting the real life issues that affect the community; it is as if one is in a place of abstractions which is disconnected from the rest of society. The more politicized group of women that I met with, spoke passionately about the church's neglect of issues such as the sexual abuse of young girls.

African women similarly critique the abstract doctrinal understandings that are taught in the church which do nothing to seriously challenge the real situations of people. The plea is for a faith that looks long and hard at the real life issues confronting people. Similarly Chung, sharing from the Asian experience, insists on faith being life-centred. She appears bolder than African women in asserting that Asian women will dismiss the "bad news" meted out to them in the churches, and embrace only that which constitutes "good news" for their lives.

Indeed, what makes the church the church? This question is addressed, perhaps more obliquely, in the African, Western and Asian contexts. Is the church, as it is presently constituted, really the body of Christ, or just another patriarchal institution? Does the fact that its functioning is so much at variance with the "Discipleship of

Equals<sup>37</sup> that constituted the community of early believers not disqualify it from being regarded as a true expression of the church? The boldest answer is given by Chung, who calls on women to re-define Christianity.

Traditional Western theologians seem to say to us that they have the copyright on Christianity .... We Asian women theologians must move away from our imposed fear of losing Christian identity, in the opinion of the mainline theological circles .... Who owns Christianity? Is Christianity unchangeable? What makes Christianity Christian (1990:113)?

Women in my study and the women whose work I have discussed show clearly that it is not all women who express the same sentiments as they do. Generally the literature is silent regarding this, that is, women who are satisfied with the church are not writing about it. The closest one gets to this is writers in the Western context who try to explain why they have remained in the church. There is a sense in which this writing is rather defensive, and certainly one does not get the feeling that these women are thriving, but rather that they feel they must battle on within the institution. Are there women who experience the church positively, and who have experiences at variance with those described in the preceding two chapters? Undoubtedly there are women who are able to encounter god within the church, and experience transformation in their lives. However, largely, women are still very conditioned to accepting the gender *status quo*, and, through familiarity with their oppression, may have so lost a sense of their own worth and power that when they hear of a more liberating way of being their souls do not recognise this as providing the nourishment that they need.

In conclusion, I feel that the cries from women in the Eastern Cape and the women elsewhere that I have examined have much in common, although articulated with

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<sup>37</sup>

The title of Schüssler-Fiorenza's 1993 work on the church entitled Discipleship of Equals. New York: Crossroads.

various degrees of analysis and with focii differing in the various contexts. The question often posed is, "does the church help us to live?" Thus far it would seem that the answer to this question cannot be in the affirmative.

## CHAPTER 5

### THE WIDER CONTEXT OF SOUTH AFRICAN WOMEN

This dissertation explores the experience of women in the church. However, women themselves insist that their lives cannot be compartmentalized, and that their lives as part of the church and their experiences in their homes and in the community are part of a whole. Hence this chapter, which will attempt to paint a somewhat fuller picture of the lives of women in South Africa.

#### BLACK AND WHITE WOMEN IN SOUTH AFRICA

The environment in which all South African women find themselves is one that does not affirm women. White South African women do not experience a supportive environment. The woman who dares to articulate a pro-woman stance is often ridiculed and marginalised, albeit in fairly subtle ways, by women and men alike. Very few white women welcome a discussion on the rights of women. It seems to me that they derive certain perceived benefits from their oppression. Often they are supported financially by their male partners, and there is too much (as they see it) for them to lose should they start to question the fabric of this relationship and their place in society.

All women share the fact that they are vulnerable to sexual violence, and this vulnerability is very real in a society like ours with such a high level of gender inequality.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, that so many women are in fact battling just to stay alive in

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<sup>38</sup> Poling, though writing in the American context, is instructive here. He says that "sexual violence is not the isolated act of a few deranged men, but a pattern of exploitation and oppression .... Sexual violence ... is a norm rather than a forbidden activity .... Sexual violence is a shameful secret because it is normal for women and children to be treated in sexually violent ways" (1991:145).

relationships means that they have no energy to work towards change in society. All women face obstacles in every sphere of society that men do not face, and there is always a strong possibility of their contribution in any field being trivialized. (I do not deny for a moment that black women do not face far more obstacles than their white counterparts, or that white women themselves are often an obstacle to black women.) There is a constant emotional and psychological undermining which women experience - so subtle is this that we often fail to see it, never mind name it. The tactics used against women are many and various. There can often be a combination of flattery and abuse. It demands a great deal of astuteness on the part of each woman to be aware of the psychological manipulations she is encountering in her ordinary daily interactions. This "low intensity" abuse that is their daily bread results in all women underestimating themselves, so that one finds that even women who are high achievers feel insecure and have a poor self image (Steinem talks of this in her popular book Revolution From Within: A Book of Self Esteem 1992:3). It has been found that women in fact fear success, as it is seen to bring with it isolation, in that a successful woman is seen as a threat to men, and women fear this will result in them being shunned by men.<sup>39</sup>

It seems to me that there is a much higher degree of awareness of gender oppression among black women.<sup>40</sup> White women have the idea that they are much better off regarding gender inequality when compared to black women. They bewail the chauvinism of African culture. By believing that other women are worse off than they are, white women may be seeking to deny the need for change in their own lives.

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<sup>39</sup> This is looked at in the best-selling book by Dowling entitled The Cinderella Complex: Women's Hidden Fear of Independence (1981).

<sup>40</sup> hooks, writing as an African-American, quotes studies that show that black women in the U.S. are far more committed to gender equality than their white counterparts (1981:147).

There are far more black women that boldly confront the issue of gender inequality. It is black women who are the most passionate spokespeople for the rights of women, and they are far more thorough and radical in their demands than white women. (I am unsure, however, whether this can be generally said of women in the church. It would seem that women within the church are less outspoken on gender equality than those who are less closely attached to the church.) That black women are in the forefront in the struggle for gender equality is not surprising in that black women's more direct experience of oppression and struggle on many levels - economic, race, as well as gender - would surely mean that their awareness of oppression is far wider and more real than that of their white compatriots. Although it is true that the latter can also be said to experience a degree of economic oppression, in that their economic mobility would be far less than that of a white male, as a group, black women are more vulnerable to a range of oppressive structures and practices.

Having made some introductory observations about the context of South African women, and attempting to challenge the conception that white women are not oppressed with regard to gender (albeit it in different ways from black women), this chapter will proceed to look at some issues regarding African culture. I will make reference to the literature,<sup>41</sup> as well as speaking from my own experience.

#### WOMEN IN THE HOME AND IN INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS

Across cultures, the home is considered the business of the family alone, albeit that

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<sup>41</sup> I will also draw on writers from non-African contexts where they substantiate what African women are saying.

in African culture this includes the extended family.<sup>42</sup> This separation of public and private life serves the interests of patriarchy well, particularly since the life of women continues to be lived out largely in the private space. Hence women's claim that the personal needs to be owned as part of the public domain.

Black women point out that they generally have much more "men-free" space in their lives than their white counterparts. Their men are often absent, even if they live in the home, and this provides women with the freedom to get on with their lives with a degree of independence unknown to most white women within a heterosexual relationship.<sup>43</sup> Black women themselves may spend little time in their homes as they are forced, by economic factors, to seek employment (Fischer 1989:46). Black women tend to be more affirming of their life in the home than their white feminist counterparts.<sup>44</sup> Thus some would argue that women's work in the home is more humanizing than their labour outside of it (Fischer 1989:46).

Conscientised women, black and white, find the home terrain a difficult arena of struggle. Hence a woman may be a strong supporter, in public, of women's rights, but in her private world she may be acquiescing to subjugation. A very strong black woman who is a fierce critic of patriarchy in the public domain said to me sadly, "But,

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<sup>42</sup> Poling says that "the idea of family privacy is one aspect ... that contributes to sexual violence .... the isolation of the family combined with the stubborn inequality of men and women has made the family an increasingly dangerous institution for women and children. There is more sexual and physical violence ... in the family than in any other social location" (1991:129-130).

<sup>43</sup> This absence of the man from the home also has significant negative effects on marital and family life.

<sup>44</sup> Johnson-Odim and Strobel sound an important caution in their study on women in the Third World when they say that what white feminists criticize as sexist may be perceived by black women as a source of affirmation (1992:335).

well, I still need to survive at home". Married to an officer in the church, part of an established Anglican family, she "toes the line" in her home and family life, because the alternative seems to her to be constant struggle and conflict and, perhaps, the total disintegration of her family life.

Mofokeng remarks on the invidious position of conscientised women situated within a family context. She says:

Politically vocal women are redefined by domesticity. Outside, we stand up on platforms, but at home, some of us go back to typical African tradition, we are submissive, passive, non-existent. I cannot relate to my husband or my brother the way I do to other men out there (Driver in Bazilli 1991:90).

The family is very important in African society and women easily subjugate their own interests to the interests of the group, in this instance, the family (Nhlapo in Bazilli 1991:118). It may also be of some considerable significance that the behaviour of women, or their perceived misbehaviour, is seen to bring about harm to the family. So Gwagwa says:

It is argued that the breaking of taboos by widows, pregnant women, nursing mothers, etc, could bring down the wrath of the ancestors upon the whole community, while men's actions were hardly ever significant enough to merit the attention of the ancestors .... There is a plethora of rules and taboos governing only women: How they sit, what they wear, when they should not appear without headgear and so on (in Bazilli 1991:123).

It is clear that the relationship of African women to the family is very complex and demands more study. Nhlapo asserts that "analysing the family is also a political task .... The family is a very central site where all forms of oppression are acted out" (in Bazilli 1991:115). A mixed blessing for women is the African primacy of the communal good over individual rights (Maboreke in Bazilli 1991:228). Maboreke continues to say that emotion often has a strong role to play in this regard, and can

take precedence over rationality. Edet and Ekeya, African writers, say that as long as we continue to define womanhood as pertaining to child-bearing and home-making, our participation in church and society will be limited (in Fabella and Oduyoye 1989:9).

hooks (an African-American) cautions black women against claiming the role of matriarch which, she feels, is a way men have of pretending to give a woman power when in fact it promises no power at all, but rather serves to discourage women from organising for change as they imagine that they do not need it (1981:81). (By matriarch here she refers to a role men give women when they [men] claim that women have full power and control in the family and the home.)

A form of abuse of which I am becoming increasingly aware is that of what I would call "street harassment". This refers to the way women and girls are verbally harassed on the streets. A newsletter, Women's Health News, describes one of the findings of a study conducted into violence against women in rural areas:

Girls were often harassed on the streets and footpaths, seemingly in a playful manner, but often with violent results (May 1997:25).

This form of abuse in a sense spans the private and the public space. Living in a rural area at present, I have been very alarmed at this very destructive pattern of abuse, which is difficult to respond to as a woman walking alone.<sup>45</sup>

Tucker, writing in a Western context, suggests that the lack of solidarity among women may be because they are "sleeping with the enemy". Women's intimate relationships with men make it hard for them to stand firm and united for their

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<sup>45</sup> Walker describes the various terms of abuse shouted at her in the course of a visit to the shops in America in In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens 1983:131).

common freedom. So Tucker says that "women and men are brought together by common interests and intimacy that will always take precedence over gender differences" (1992:247). I hope that this is not necessarily so. In Africa, it is an unusual woman who does not have a male partner.

Furlong writes of the experience of a black American woman who says racism is easier to combat than sexism: "you've got to get out of the household at least for a moment to meet up with the race question, but you wake up every morning meeting the gender question, so you don't even notice it. It's pretty intimate" (1991:11). It is clear that "the gender question" as it relates to the home and intimate relationships can be so much part of everyday life as to become invisible. Also, one can confront the race issue without it having a marked effect on how you live your daily life. If you dare to look at the question of gender, it can cause turmoil in all your relationships (Furlong 1991:11). These challenges work against women - and men - facing squarely the question of gender equality.

There are some women who are asserting the primacy of exploring sexuality and intimate relationships. Accad, speaking from her context in the Middle East, says that her studies have shown that this is of great concern to poor women; they do not see it as something to be tackled once other "bigger" issues are rectified (in Mohanty *et al* 1991:239). So she says:

It seems quite obvious that if sexuality is not incorporated into the main feminist and political agenda, the struggles for freedom will remain on a very superficial level (in Mohanty *et al* 1991:243).

Accad says that it is because this sexual analysis has not been part of the political revolution that social relations have remained unchanged; women have participated in the liberation struggle to be sent back to the kitchen after "independence" (in Mohanty *et al* 1991:237-238). She movingly says that when there is love, equal

sharing and tenderness in our relationships and families, this then provides a solid base for transforming patterns of domination in other areas of life (*ibid*:237).

The question of how we live our lives as women in our homes and in our intimate relationships is a vital area that I fear we easily neglect. Is our freedom in the public arena of any value if our home lives and intimate relationships do not affirm our personhood? It is an area in which we will need to support one another, and this is not easy given concerns of loyalty and the mere fact of our relative isolation in our homes (it is quite different from, say, organising as a worker). Sadly, I do not see any way in which the church is helping women and men to build love and justice in their homes and relationships.<sup>46</sup>

## WOMEN AND AFRICAN CULTURE

The previous section introduces the discussion on this question, but I turn directly now to the subject of African culture. In the conversations I conducted in my research for this dissertation, none of the women specifically named African culture as a reason for their oppression. However, in Women Hold Up Half the Sky several of the indigenous writers make reference to African culture. Ramphela, in her foreword to the work, says this:

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<sup>46</sup> Ackermann asserts that "the Christian values of love and forgiveness help to maintain relations of domination and the acceptance of abuse and victimisation. A Christian ethic which stresses an uncritical attitude of love which bears and endures 'all things' (1 Corinthians 13:4-18) and forgiveness up to 'seventy-seven times' (Matthew 18:21-22) merely serves to 'construct a sacred canopy that compels victims to accept their sufferings without resistance' (Fiorenza 1992:xvi)"(in Hulley, L., Kretzschmar, L., and Pato, L (eds). 1996. Archbishop Tutu: Prophetic Witness in South Africa. Cape Town: Human and Rousseau, p 151).

Culture is often brought in as additional armour to defend patriarchy not only by men, but also by women as well. Culture comes to be projected as an unchanging entity which is used as a refuge for those fearing the challenges of modernity (1991:viii).

Mncube, in the same collection, says the following:

It is important to acknowledge that the oppression of women in South Africa is not only a consequence of conquest and white domination. There are also elements of patriarchy in our own African religious education and practice, not just those which are the result of apartheid (in Ackermann *et al* 1991:357).

Mncube is clearly not suggesting that African culture is the central explanation of women's oppression; rather this culture further supports the gender oppression that exists in society. Later, referring to the fact that she is considered a perpetual minor in her family, Mncube says that the struggle is about power (*ibid*:360). Mpumlwana makes a similar point when she says:

People use culture to perpetuate or justify oppression of women. When men are lazy to do all the dirty, boring, routine work at home they say culturally it's taboo (in Ackermann *et al* 1991:374)!

Bam points out (what should be) the obvious aberration of people advocating the maintenance of African culture on questions of gender, while making use of Western models in so many other areas of life.

It is common talk today that our African tradition insists on the subordination of women, so that we should give up talking about equality. It is amazing the way that people re-discover their African tradition only when it comes to women, even though they are quite willing to allow the old ways to be transcended on almost every other issue .... Why is this African tradition suddenly so sacred when it comes to women's rights?... In other aspects of our culture we have been willing to change (in Ackermann *et al* 1991:367).

Women themselves are at a crossroads on the issue of culture, and have very

different responses from one another, with some seeing cultural practices as the essence of their identity and others demanding radical change in this area (Kanyoro 1996:5).<sup>47</sup>

It seems to me that church leaders are anxious to appear sensitive to issues of African culture, and are failing to confront practices that are clearly contrary to the gospel and to equal rights. When I was living in an informal settlement a few years ago, a young man was murdered in a drunken brawl. Initially it seemed that I would be asked to conduct the funeral service, and then I became aware of some discomfort on the part of the family (who were members of the congregation in which I served). They subsequently arranged for a lay person from another area and a different congregation to conduct the service. The reason for this, I found out, was that when a person has died by accident (I suspect this may only refer to a man) women are not allowed to be present at the graveside. It is thought that the deceased, in the event of death from unnatural causes, has been bewitched by a woman, and there is a feeling that if women are present at the graveside they may there bewitch someone else and cause them harm. I attended the funeral in question. (I would have been very compromised if I had been asked to conduct the service and been the only woman at the graveside as a sort of "honorary male". I do not think I would have agreed to that.) After the funeral service in the community hall the women were instructed to stay behind and sing while the men proceeded to the graveyard. (Interestingly there were also women from the regional branch of the ANC Women's League there, the deceased having been a political activist, and they went along submissively with these instructions!) I have raised this issue, which I regard as a blatant injustice, in various forums and have received no support, neither from women

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<sup>47</sup> Sibeko argues that women in the church cannot freely exercise their spiritual gifts as their lives are circumscribed by the constraints of cultural traditions (1997. African spirituality and Methodism: A survey of black members of the ThabaNchu Methodist Church. Thesis MTh. University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg.)

nor men. (Although women in the affected community were clearly not happy with this practice, as they shared with me in private conversation.) Many women deny that this custom is in fact being practised, and seem disbelieving - seemingly deliberately and conveniently so - when I tell them I know that it is! Our diocesan leadership treated the matter as a hot potato, referring it to an all-male commission existing in our diocese on culture and Christianity, which has not dealt with it. In one of my letters in this regard I said:

I think this is not being treated with the urgency it deserves. I will certainly teach and preach about the evil of this practice (1995).

Cultural issues are complex and contentious, indeed they have been so in the church at least since the accounts on matters of faith and culture recounted in the book of Acts! I look forward to a more vigorous debate developing on African culture, particularly as it relates to gender, in South Africa in the future.

## INCULTURATION

Inculturation is very much on the agenda of church leaders in South Africa. By this is meant the encouragement to examine African customs, such as burial rites, puberty rites, and so on, to see how these are compatible with Christianity and how they can be integrated more into the worship life of Christians and not be a separate, often hidden, practice in which Christians engage. So far so good. For too long the traditional, often life-giving practices of people have been denied, as if there is a "pure" Christian practice that should be engaged in by all people, whatever their cultural background. But does the effort towards inculturation in fact make our

expression and practice of faith more resonant with the experiences of women?<sup>48</sup> It seems to me rather that it is an all-male affair. The Christian magazine Challenge frequently looks at the issue of inculturation, and never has the experience of women been related to this in any way. I have raised this concern in letters to the editor, but these have not been published. In our Diocese, I have appealed to the committee that has been set up to look into issues of inculturation to include women in their team! There has been a deafening silence on this. One of my letters to Challenge reads as follows:

I'd like to challenge Bishop Wilfred Napier. He has recently returned from a consultation with the pope on accepting African customs - that is, arguing for a more appropriate form of Christianity for Africa. And yet, in an interview conducted with him, he continues to say that, no, women priests are out as priests need to be as close as possible to what Jesus was - hence male. Is your advocacy of contextualising faith then only for men, Bishop Napier (1994)?

Mandew, writing in Women Hold up Half the Sky, refers to the work of Ramodibe of Namibia. Of her work, he writes:

For her then, the emancipation of Black women will not emanate from an uncritical recourse to and idolization of traditional African practice and values. In fact, this is her main objection to African theology. The fact that African theology endeavours for the "culturization" of the Gospel is according to her unacceptable because its starting point is the African culture which is patriarchal. In her view the vital thing is to ascertain "to what extent African theology has addressed the question of the oppression of women specifically". She questions whether African theology is not just another male theology in the conspiracy to continue the oppression of women (in Ackermann *et al* 1991:131).

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Nasimuye-Wasike argues that African inculturation theology has either relegated the question of women to a marginalized position or ignored it completely, in "Feminism and African theology", C.H.E.A. African Christian Studies 9:2.

This is a very important observation and, I hope, one that will be echoed by others.

The call of male theologians regarding inculturation is important, but they only seem to speak with reference to their own gender. Of what he calls Afro-Anglicanism, Makhulu writes:

For how long must we be nurtured with manuals on spirituality that bear no relationship to our experience and worldview (Makhulu 1995:463)?

Would the same author be as enthusiastic if this call were made by African women in the church? I hope so.

Russell, reporting on the 1996 World Council of Churches Consultation on Gospel and Cultures in Bangkok, says that Western Christianity cannot determine what is orthodox Christianity for all cultures (Umbuliso, Pentecost 1996:5). Indeed. Nor can one gender determine what is orthodox for another.

It saddens me that we see some of our most creative and concerned African theologians calling for a certain liberation of Christian thinking and practice, which is to be welcomed, but excluding from their thinking all women, who form the majority of those worshipping in our churches.

## THE DISSENTING VOICE

A wonderful quality of African-ness is the value it places on community. There is an oft-quoted idiom that says that a person is a person through other people. African language and culture in many instances reflect this. The fact that indigenous people in South Africa have been politically and economically oppressed for generations has also served to strengthen the practice of solidarity in the face of a threatening society. However, there is a "flip side" to the strength of this concern for community and

solidarity which is evident when it comes to dealing with conflict and dissent. Thus Tutu observes:

This strong group feeling has the weaknesses of all communalism; it encourages conservatism and conformity (1972:20).

It seems to me that the wonderful people-consciousness of Africa, from which Western people have so much to learn, militates against people taking a strong stand on issues as individuals when this will cause them to differ from the group with which they identify, in this instance, other indigenous people. So, whereas "The West suffers from an excessive individualism", African communalism "needs to be corrected by the teaching about man's (sic) inalienable uniqueness as a person. We need both aspects to balance each other" (Tutu 1972:20).

In a paper entitled "Ethics in African Theology", Kasenene says the following:

Although African societies respect individuals and members are free to think and act independently, as long as their actions do not harm others or restrict their rights, this autonomy is often disregarded. The good of the group is more important than personal autonomy. This militates against freedom of choice (1994:143).

Sono, in his recently published, refreshing and controversial book entitled Dilemmas of African Intellectuals in South Africa: Political and Cultural Constraints, speaks of the tyranny of the collective, saying:

African culture eschews difference; it is leery of a different drumbeat (1994:32).

He speaks of African culture being tyrannical in that it is so bent on consensus that the dissenting voice is not heard. He calls for an adjustment to the communalism of African culture in favour of an encouragement of independent thinking:

There is ... no collective liberation without an *a priori* individual liberation. Only a free person can contribute to the freeing of another (1994:52).

While indigenous people faced a hostile society for generations, so too did black Christians experience prejudice within the church. Hence within this context, too, solidarity had a necessary function.<sup>49</sup> What I continue to observe in church assemblies is a lack of the dissident voice. This situation is of course far more invidious for women who are from the outset marginalised on the basis of gender. Dissenting by them is thus definitely not tolerated!

I have yet to see black women raise the issue of women's oppression in a mixed-race-and-gender church gathering. In a recent fairly high-powered Anglican gathering, there was an opportunity to look at how questions of culture and gender impact on our spirituality. I, in a small group, raised the question of the oppressiveness of some aspects of African culture regarding women, citing different mourning practices for women and men, the Xhosa custom of "ukutwala" where a young woman is abducted - taken forcefully to be someone's wife (some of my women friends have had first hand experience of this), and so on. I reported back to the plenary from our group. My presentation was vehemently attacked. Men and women alike argued that the custom of "ukutwala" was not oppressive. When one woman expressed this view, there was applause. I found this all very puzzling and distressing. I wasn't known to any of these women, so it may have been that they felt I was just criticizing a culture that I didn't care about. And yet, greeting women at the end of the conference several said things like: "Thank you for your courage .... You have raised such important issues". Puzzling indeed! Sharing my disappointment with one of the

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<sup>49</sup> Lorde, an African-American, said (in 1980) that: "Black women and men have shared racist oppression and still share it, although in different ways. Out of that shared oppression we have developed joint defenses and joint vulnerabilities to each other that are not duplicated in the white community" (in *Sister Outsider* 1984:118).

conference facilitators, herself a black woman, she said that she felt that the women's response was a sign of the times - that people aren't ready to look at certain issues yet. I wonder why not? Is there a fear of victimization?<sup>50</sup>

I do not know whether the class background of the women present was not also a factor. Many were successful in the corporate world. Probably all could be placed in the middle-class. Culture no doubt impacts variously on women's lives depending on their class position. A woman in a management position would not experience culture in the same way as would a farm worker (the sector from which my examples were drawn). Or perhaps the dynamic I have noted at the meeting I attended was simply anger that I, as a white woman, was raising issues which I, supposedly, knew nothing about (or knew too much about, perhaps?).

Although feeling vulnerable about this experience, travelling back from the meeting I attempted to reflect on the incident with my three male Xhosa-speaking travelling companions, all of whom are priests and are considered progressive in matters relating to gender. They strongly criticized my input at the meeting, saying: "you're applying Western logic to African culture ... ideas like inclusivity". I explained that what I had shared had come from black working class women. The response I received was as follows: "you must not use people who are illiterate. You make them say what you want them to say and interpret it as you want to. You just use them. You must get to know some educated black women." I challenged them that the premise of liberation theology, to which they all subscribe, speaks of the hermeneutical privilege of the poor, hence those most disadvantaged economically have got the most to teach us. This too was dismissed. One of the men simply

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<sup>50</sup> Many black women writers speak of the fact that they are called "white" when they raise women's issues. Moraga and Anzaldua say that "accusations that Black feminism divides the Black struggle are powerful deterrents to the growth of an autonomous Black women's movement" (1981:216).

responded: "we come from poverty, and it's important to get out of it".

Recently, the Anglican church held "black consultations", at regional and national level. I was not able to be part of these, but reports indicate that in this forum (at least in my own diocese) gender issues were much more openly aired. Is this because there was less need to present a "united front" in the face of the (previous) enemy? Within this forum a leading layperson, a woman who has worked tirelessly for human rights for all, was reported as bewailing the fact that there are so few black bishops within the Anglican church in South Africa. Did she also decry the lack of a single woman in the episcopacy?

Pertinent to this discussion is something that Walker shares of an experience at a symposium of black women in the United States where, in response to a challenge that she made to the meeting, she records the following.

I will never forget my sense of horror and betrayal when one of the panellists said to me (and to the rest of that August body of black women gathered there): "The responsibility of the black woman is to support the black man; whatever he does".... I burst into the loudest tears I've ever shed. And though I soon dried my face, I didn't stop crying inside for .... Maybe I haven't stopped yet. But that's okay; what I'm crying about is worth it .... It was at the Radcliffe symposium that I saw that black women are more loyal to black men than they are to themselves, a dangerous state of affairs that has its logical end in self-destructive behavior (1983:317-8).

I must say that I felt somewhat comforted to read of this experience which felt so much like my own. Walker reminds us of the commitment that is called for throughout this dissertation - that women value their own lives.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Bazilli asserts that the only profoundly non-racial institution in South Africa is

patriarchy (1991:9)! This chapter began by attempting to debunk the notion that white women are not oppressed in terms of gender, albeit in different ways from black women. I also attempted to show that white women are far less aware, and active in countering, their oppression than are black women. It was also found that women experience oppression differently, with factors such as class being fairly determinable here (hence some of the cultural oppression experienced by women farmworkers in a rural area may not be experienced by urban, black, educated women). The issue of how women experience their life in the home was explored and found to be an area of ambivalence for black women and one which certainly demands further study. It was an issue that was only occasionally and fairly obliquely raised by the women with whom I worked. It was noted that real change for women only comes when issues such as sexuality and intimate relationships are examined and challenged. The question was raised as to whether women could ever succeed in their struggle for full personhood while most of them were in intimate relationships with men to whom they gave their loyalty and support. The cost for women of actually daring to examine these (what have been considered to be very private relationships) was also mentioned.

With regard to African culture, the observations of several courageous women were shared, who noted that the call to preserve black culture is often merely a useful way of maintaining male supremacy. In the section on inculturation, while the attempt to root our expression and practice of faith more firmly in Africa was lauded, a deep concern was noted that there has not been an attempt to relate this to the majority - who are women - who make up our congregations. How free is one, particularly a woman, in society and the church, to really articulate one's feelings? This was explored in the section entitled "The Dissenting Voice". This is surely an issue in any society or group. In gatherings of white women or in heterogeneous white groups the gender issue is seldom raised in earnestness. (Many white women enjoy a degree of economic protection from their male partners which they fear foregoing if

they are to challenge the very systems on which their life is based.) I think this is probably more likely in black groupings. However here, too, speaking out is a lonely affair. This is a theme mentioned by many of the women that I worked with in the research part of this study. There was almost a sense of despair about the loneliness of speaking out for justice for women. It was suggested that, in mixed-race gatherings, (the example cited was of a church meeting) the emphasis will still be on maintaining unity as black people rather than women being ready to stand together against sexism.

The picture that has been painted of how women experience their lives is not very heartening. What are the prospects for change? How are we to live as women within the constrictions that would squeeze out our energy and vitality? These are the questions that are explored in the final chapter.

## CHAPTER 6

### HOW THEN ARE WE TO LIVE?

*The bridge I must be  
Is the bridge to my own power ....  
I must be the bridge to nowhere  
But my true self*

*(This Bridge Called My Back, Moraga and Anzaldua)*

This dissertation has called for the experience of women to be valued in the doing of theology. If this is the case, our theology and spirituality will be enlivening for women and for the world. The research aspect of this study revealed that women are undermined within the church, that their gifts are negated, they are humiliated, and many have so lost faith in their own worth that they exhibit negative behaviour towards other women who struggle for change. In investigating the experience of women in various contexts, this same observation was found to be true.

Women are calling for theology and faith practice to be informed by their life experience. Indeed, many contextual theologians loudly appeal for consideration of one's context as being one's starting point, but they tend to exclude the experience of women as being an important part thereof. Is this all simply rhetoric? Are these to remain calls made at politically correct meetings and in academic papers such as this one, without the serious application of this call to the life of worship and service of the church? Can this present dissonance be bridged? This is the question that is explored in this chapter.

While the previous chapter examined some aspects of the broader context of South African women, I begin this final chapter by describing, in broad terms, the historical moment in which women find themselves in South African society and within the

church. Thereafter I suggest ways in which women can act to deepen their own self-knowledge and power.

## OUR NATIONAL CONTEXT

Who are South African women? Many are desperately poor. They spend their days trying to feed, educate and love their children. Very often there is little support from their partners in this. Women sell oranges, matches, anything to earn money that will help the family for that day. And yet despite this awesome struggle and their great strength, women seem content that men lord it over them in so many ways - in the home where they wait on men, and in organisations, notably the church, where all the key leadership roles are held by men while women are deliberately "used" for menial and "domestic" chores in the church situation. Women are being silenced and being beaten. Why is there this terrible enmity between women and men? Why do relationships feel as if the people involved are at war? Why do women stay in abusive relationships and not act towards their own freedom? Experiencing life within the body of a woman is enough to subject one to experiences of terror that continue to be largely sanctioned in our society. A film recently made in Zimbabwe showed scenes of women-combatants' sexual abuse during the liberation war by their fellow male-combatants. The Zimbabwe government was outraged and tried to ban the film. It shows how, years after "liberation", the women are still fighting for the same thing: their freedom (Matambanadazo, Mail and Guardian April 1996).

In South Africa, we have a new constitution, gender commissions are being put in place, and there is a Women's Charter. But will these be able to achieve even an environment which is safe for women?

Women have struggled alongside men in the struggle for political liberation in this country. Is this liberation to be only for men? South African women in exile noted

how women in other African countries did not experience an improvement in their own situations after their countries attained political liberation. They vowed that this would not happen to them (Ginwala on "Total Exposure", SAfm Radio Program 6.2.97).

Ruether writes in the American context, but with wide knowledge of and concern for issues of culture, faith and freedom for all women. She examines, albeit briefly, the liberation movements in the Third World in the 1960's until the present. Of these she says:

Third World liberation movements based on cultural nationalism ... have been pathologically chauvinist against women. Feminism is seen as a decadent Western colonialist ideology that weakens the fibre of the traditional family and society. The revolution is seen as reestablishing a traditional patriarchal culture over against modernism (1985:53-4).

Ruether comments on how, to advance the unity of the liberation struggle, class and gender analysis was not engaged in, the focus being only on oppression by virtue of race (1985:54). She cites that where racial liberation is supposedly achieved, this may in fact lead to a reduction of the freedom experienced by women in the society. She says:

In fact, a lessening of hierarchy among males is often compensated for by a more rigid marginalization of women as women (1985:55).

Socialist movements have proved to be no different. Ruether suggests that the injured masculinity of colonized males leads to them taking out their resentment on women (1985:55). There is an attempt to block efforts to joint working between Western and Third World women, thus hindering them from discovering the common ground they share (1985:55). As a result, says Ruether:

Many Third World women have been intimidated by this male revolutionary rhetoric and have been prevented from doing their own analysis of sexism (1985:55).

I am constantly angered and saddened to meet men who have struggled tirelessly for political freedom in this country, but are not willing to even recognise that there is a struggle yet to be waged for the freedom of women, let alone to commit themselves to this cause.<sup>51</sup> But perhaps this is being naive in terms of power relations. It is often said that people do not give up the power that they are enjoying. Are women in South Africa then ready to stand together to continue our own struggle for justice?

The position of women in South Africa needs ultimately to be judged by the situation in which rural women find themselves. While I began this dissertation living in a small rural town, in the last few months I have moved to a very poor informal settlement. Gender issues here simply aren't on the agenda (at least not overtly)! Conversations I try to encourage on the subject do not get off the ground. (This might also be related to the fact that I am new to the community.) It will never be enough that only educated, urban women are self-assured and engaging creatively in society. Until this can be said of girls and women in the rural parts of our country, freedom cannot be said to have been realized.

## THE CHURCH

Women in the church are not united. In our diocese, there are five ordained women, one of whom is black. Some women belong to the church women's organisations, while others do not. There is no working together across these sectors for change. On the broader national ecumenical level, division is also evident. At ecumenical

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<sup>51</sup> Mashinini, a South African activist, identifies her first husband with a "white boss" for sitting around reading a newspaper while she works (Driver in Bazilli 1991:99-100).

women's conferences, various divisions among women become evident. Thus tension can be observed between lay and ordained women, black and white women, between women who are more conscientised than others, and so on. Often these tensions surface after several days of being together, and then it is time for the gathering to end, resulting in women never really facing the painful separations that exist and not being able to integrate these at least to some extent. Women need to seek healing on an individual and corporate level.

Although women are now being ordained as priests, this has not resulted in any fundamental change in the churches. Women are kept in relatively subordinate positions, and their very existence allows men, and women possibly, to think that there is no longer gender oppression in the church. Many of the male clergy are deeply antagonistic to women being among them as colleagues, and are certainly not encouraging women candidates to present themselves for ordination. If a woman is part of a church delegation, she is often the only female representative. Thus the delegation from my local Diocese to the last Anglican Provincial Synod, the church's highest decision-making body, consisted of nine men and one woman. Women cannot hope to be effective operating in such isolation.

Perhaps a petty issue, but one that illustrates a certain mind set, is the issue of male priests being called Father, while women are referred to by name (within the Anglican context). I have tried to challenge this, and a Commission was set up, of which I was a part, to make recommendations on terminology. It was recommended that all clergy be referred to as Reverend followed by their name. However, no one abides by this. I would prefer that each person is called by their first name, but this seems to only be in order where the cleric is a woman. Unheard of when he is a man!

Harrison makes a comment that I have found to be true in my experience in the church:

Misogyny's real force arises only when women assert ourselves and own our power. Mark this point well: It is never the mere presence of a woman, nor the image of women ... that is the heart of misogyny. The core of misogyny, which has yet to be broken or even touched, is the reaction that occurs when women's concrete power is manifest, when we women live and act as full and adequate persons in our own right (1985:5).

I have seen that it is when women really assert their truth in a situation that one sees the hostility of men. Or is this perhaps their fear?

What are women to do if their experience of the church weakens their sense of who they are rather than giving them power to live? Ruether comments that the more women become aware of their goodness and power, the more alienated they feel from the church (1983:193-194). Women's experience of Jesus in the Gospels is in stark contrast to the "bad news" that they receive in the life of the church (Ruether 1983:193). What women experience in the church is another form of violence against them (Abraham and Mbuy-Beya 1994:191). Daly talks of the effect of various cultural institutions of patriarchy on women as "a kind of gang rape of minds as well as of bodies" (1986:9). When women assert their own inner authority in the church, this is feared by others, both men and women. Can the church offer women anything that is good? A classic 19th century critic of Christianity, Feuerbach, said concerning the role of religion:

If religion results in people's relinquishing their own powers, it impoverishes humanity; its effect is not human salvation, but degradation (in Johnson *et al* 1990:222).

What, then, is the way open to women who seek a life of worship and community? Several writers, women and men, speak of the value of working on the periphery. So Roose-Evans says:

What is happening at the fringes of the Church is a quest for authenticity, a

desire to discover and pay heed to the imperatives of one's own being (1987:49).

Townes speaks of the dangers of working within an oppressive system, saying that one slowly assumes that mind set simply by trying to survive in the system (1993:95-97). She in fact argues that one's position on the periphery is a more powerful one. Situated thus one is able to maintain one's strength as one does not depend on the system for life, but draws strength from other sources.

However, none of these writers spell out what it means in practical terms to work "on the fringes". Does this mean leaving the institutional church? Seemingly not. The way the church is presently constituted does not seem me to offer a possibility of "working on the fringe". Certainly as a priest in South Africa the only real job opportunity is to serve as a parish priest.

Villa-Vicencio talks about what he calls the alternative church, or "a church within the church", which seeks to rediscover the revolutionary gospel identity. He questions, however, whether what is new can penetrate the more traditional institutional structures of the church, or whether, as Weber, looking at the social role of religion, had noted, such institutions are so powerful that any sources of renewal are simply enveloped and subsumed (1988:209).

What is clear is that the questions that women, and men, are raising are not incidental but rather fundamental, and they are part of a spiritual quest. In the final analysis, they are indeed questions about ourselves and god. So King says that "at the roots of women's protest lies ultimately a spiritual protest" (1989:14). And Clanton similarly that

What many interpreters have failed to realize is that the "woman question" is also the "man question", and ultimately a "God question" (1990:1).

## WHOSE INTERESTS DOES THE PRESENT SITUATION SERVE?

H. Richard Niebuhr, in a work written in 1929 entitled The Social Sources of Denominationalism, shows how, throughout history, the church has allied itself with political forces and its theology has served to support the societal structures that the church has found it expedient to support. Ruether, too, in Women-Church illustrates how, throughout the history of the church, there has been a struggle between different theologies, with those that "lose" being anathematized. It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to trace this ongoing tension in the church, which often seems to be between a theology that is more life-centred and that which focuses more on doctrinal knowledge, the latter being that which always seems to triumph.

It would seem that the Christian stress on obedience, to god and to church teachings, has been fairly paralysing for Christians, among whom fear is very evident. I am frequently saddened, and mystified, that Christians who apply critical thinking to every other area of their lives leave this faculty behind when it comes to issues in the faith arena. The emphasis on uniformity in Christian thinking stifles creativity, and, I believe, stifles god's work in our lives. I have been told that, in teaching, I must represent the official teaching of the church. This goes entirely against trust in the holy spirit to continue revealing new insights to us. At worst, this is a form of totalitarianism that, perhaps, is part of the weaponry to be used particularly against "wayward" women in the church.

As I reflect on H. Richard Niebuhr's work, it is clear to me that the interests of women are not served by the way in which the church functions at present. But, then, neither really are the interests of men. In the final analysis, what serves the interests of

women will also serve those of men.<sup>52</sup> Presently the church sanitizes and legitimates the attitudes towards women that prevail in society (others would say that the attitude of the church is even more reactionary). How then are women to live?

#### A WOMAN'S COMMITMENT TO HERSELF

The situation that has been depicted of women's experience of the church can tend to leave one unsure of the way ahead. It has been noted that women are, at least in certain contexts, more loyal to men than they are to one another. Within the church as it is presently structured, there seems to be no room for women to explore and develop their own spirituality. Is the experience of church life-giving for women? If, as it seems, it is not, should women leave *en masse*? While women are such a minority in church leadership they, by and large, conform to the prevailing ethos rather than being able effectively to challenge and change it. What are transformed people to do in untransformed institutions? In South Africa, we are seeing how hard it is to change institutions that one inherits. Working within the system, as was noted earlier, one runs the risk of adopting its mind set. But if women are to leave the church, are they then to disengage from all institutions, as these have, invariably, been formed and maintained by men? I do not know the answer to this.

The issue of the lack of solidarity among women is also terrifying, as such unity has generally been regarded as a prerequisite for change (I think of the political unity

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<sup>52</sup> Men, too, need healing. They do not experience wholeness while they are allowed to lord it over women. It has been said, very truly I feel, that it is as dehumanizing to be an oppressor as it is to be oppressed.

displayed by vast numbers of people in South Africa in the struggle for freedom).<sup>53</sup> It has been noted that many women do not, for whatever reason, actively support the struggle for change. Does the conscientised woman then try to forge ahead alone, building alliances where possible?

The call for gender equality is not a new one. It was put thus by a woman more than a century ago:

It is not the intelligent woman vs. the ignorant woman, nor the white woman vs. the black, the brown, and the red, - it is not even the cause of the woman vs. man. Nay, 'tis woman's strongest vindication for speaking that the world needs to hear her voice .... The world has had to limp along with the wobbling gait and the one-sided hesitancy of a man with one eye. Suddenly the bandage is removed from the other eye and the whole body is filled with light. It sees a circle where before it saw a segment. The darkened eye restored, every member rejoices with it (Cooper, A Voice From The South, writing in 1892 and included in Grant, 1989: unnumbered)

Do we simply continue repeating the same call, century by century, decade by decade? Can we be as sure as was the South African poet, Matthews, that we will attain our freedom? (He refers in his poems to political freedom.)

no matter their might  
a day will dawn  
when my father and me  
with the rest of mankind  
shall be free (in no time for dreams 1981:5).

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<sup>53</sup> I am not suggesting we need to fear a degree of difference and even conflict between us as women. We will not speak with one voice. As Oduyoye says: "just as African men do not speak with one voice on Africa, so African women should not be expected to speak with one voice" (in King 1994:29).

No, I do not feel as sure.

I can only look at the individual woman's search for wholeness. Again I ask, can we say, as Matthews did, writing of his prison experience:

my body is  
behind bars but  
my mind rebels  
and walks freely (1981:3).

This seems to be the most I can hope for at present - that increasingly women will experience freedom within themselves despite the forces pitted against them.

This dissertation has pointed out that, while all the women with whom I engaged - in the literature and in my field research - longed for change in the church, many others, seemingly the vast majority, were not committing themselves to this. It may well be that there is a dissonance between the attitude of women and their behaviour, so that, while finding the present situation deeply offensive, women may not be prepared for the cost of standing against this oppression:

It is easier to accommodate the expectations of the oppressor groups than to defy that group and enter the uncharted territory of self-knowledge and free self-identification (Swart-Russell in Ackermann *et al* 1991:299).

Or it may be that women have absorbed the culture of the dominant group and do not expect things to be any different. I remember, as I noted earlier, about 15 years ago, being unable to relate to concerns of god-language reflecting all of humanity. Each woman's life is a process, and there is a sense in which one cannot hasten one's own development, but rather that this unfolding happens as a movement of the Spirit in one's life. Women are often so estranged from themselves that when they are presented with good news they may not recognise it as such. One cannot make

oneself change, or make others change. This is not to say that one cannot create spaces, programs, and so on, that enable this healing and self-discovery to happen for women.

Our journey to ourselves is surely the most important road for each of us as women. I suppose this message could be equated with the call of Black Consciousness proponents - that the first step in liberation is to believe in who you are. So, in fact, the challenge for women to embrace who they are is not a "soft option", or a deferring of the struggle for "real" change, but rather a prerequisite if change is to be meaningful. Writer after writer highlights the fact that, as women, our image of ourselves needs to be restored. Hull, an African-American woman, describes the present situation thus:

The psychological toll of being a Black woman and the difficulties this presents ... can never be underestimated. There is a very low value placed upon Black women's psyches in this society, which is both racist and sexist .... We are all damaged people merely by virtue of being Black women. We are dispossessed psychologically and on every other level (1982:18).

Aquino speaks of the danger of women trying to affect the broader political terrain without working on the inner changes that need to be made within themselves.

Women's participation in popular social movements is often described without touching upon the nucleus of this commitment: the necessary first step toward themselves (1993:113).

And Cock concurs:

Change can only proceed from the changed (in Bazilli 1991:31).

With our strong activist culture in South Africa, this is a warning that women need to heed.

Women writers stress repeatedly the need for women to pay attention to themselves so that their image of themselves might be healed. This is what constitutes salvation, says Townes.

The womanist notion of sin ... takes seriously Black women's depleted self-esteem. Thus elevating and healing Black women's self-esteem figures into womanist notions of what constitutes salvation for the oppressed African-American community (1993:147).

And

Self-love then is probably the most critical task we complete (1993:247).

Aquino says that part of our theology needs to be to assert our goodness as women. We have been taught that we are good insofar as we fulfill the tasks assigned to us by the patriarchal world (1993:184). We are more familiar with the experience of being "bad", a sinner (Aquino 1993:183). The call to "deny ourselves", which has been so much part of the Christian ethos, has been terribly obstructive of women's growth. In the face of all that would tell us otherwise, we need to claim our goodness and value.

## SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

"Spirituality" can be a daunting and rather intimidating word for people, seen to refer to something that is important for somebody else, but as something that I cannot practise. Keane, writing in the South African context, speaks of spiritual practice as not a luxury but a necessity<sup>54</sup> (in Ackermann *et al* 1991:186). The way that one practises one's spirituality is very individual, and a person needs to find a way that works for her. (Once I was preaching about prayer to a congregation of farmworkers

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<sup>54</sup> Although she is particularly addressing women, what is said in this section can apply also to men.

and referred to the text about going into one's room to pray. I was challenged by one of the women who explained that for her the time she prayed best was as she undertook her regular task of collecting firewood.)

The women that I worked with from the Eastern Cape expressed that need for an engaged spirituality born out of and supportive of one's life experience. This was not forthcoming in their experience of the church, where spiritual practice was rather removed and disengaged from their concerns.

The challenges faced by women are so many and various, and they threaten the very core of our being. It is vital that we are able to be nourished deep within ourselves. We do not look outside of ourselves, as it were, for a way to practise our faith. Keane encourages women to be intuitive, and to follow their hearts, in developing a spiritual practice. She refers to a verse from the book of Proverbs: "Drink water from your own cistern, flowing water from your own well" (Prov 5:15) (*ibid*:187). It is clear that the church is not providing women with the spiritual resources that they need. Instead, women find that their experience of religion in the church serves as a deterrent to growth and inner change (Leech 1980:39). (I do not think that this experience is peculiar to women, but also the experience of many men.)

A grounded and practised spirituality is necessary if women are to come to a place of healing and to have the wisdom and courage to engage creatively in society. The absence of such a focus in one's life will easily lead to one becoming tired and rather brittle in the face of what will necessarily be a very protracted struggle. If one is being nourished in one's spirituality there is a greater chance of one being able to be more creatively present within the various situations which one will face, and to be able to bring a clearer perspective to the issues, perhaps also keeping a degree of openness to those with whom one is fundamentally differing.

An authentic practice of spirituality is not, then, for "the few who appear to have the time, the space or the inclination for it" (Keane in Ackermann *et al* 1991:186). In this section I provide some ideas on what a meaningful spiritual practice for women might mean, being mindful that all practices require just that - practise! - and that each person needs to take responsibility for finding those that work for her. I hope that what follows will be an encouragement to explore this area of one's life.

It is only in the last couple of years that I have developed a spiritual practice of my own, which resonates with what other women have also found useful. Previously I had been employing methods taught in the church. Although I had already arrived at what I considered very liberating ideas in my theologizing, my spiritual practice had not yet been freed from what I suppose was traditional male teaching. So, while I was very creative within the use of traditional models of spirituality, I was still using them as my springboard rather than finding my own way. I now, in my prayer time, use methods that engage my creativity and help me to explore more about myself. Thus I draw, dance, and write in a journal. All these expressions are very uninhibited and help me get in touch with what is occurring at a deeper level than my immediate consciousness. I also use what is sometimes called meditation (or contemplation). I sit in silence. I feel quite averse to praying using words at present, but this varies. Along with these practices has been the discipline of getting in touch with my feelings, and honouring these. This was quite a novel experience for me, but one that I have found extremely healing. It is so important to be able to embrace all of who one is, including the parts of oneself that one might tend to label as being negative. The spiritual practices I have noted above have assisted this process.<sup>55</sup> It is a sadness

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<sup>55</sup> Please do not think I am an artist or a dancer! Or if I am, we all are. My drawing, in my quiet time, is more a simple doodling, with wax crayons, and my dancing is simply doing any movement that I want to, even just moving my hands or arms, usually to recorded music. These simple activities help me tap into what is going on in my emotions and the less conscious part of myself. Try it!

to me that I was not encouraged in the forms of prayer that I use now earlier in my life. I longed for a more "real" form of spirituality, but it was only really when I met friends who were praying in some of the ways that I have described, that I too attempted these. I am sad that such creative approaches are not generally part of the teaching about prayer which one receives in the church, and suggest that this should be urgently rectified (also in terms of resource material that could be made available).<sup>56</sup>

More traditional forms of spiritual practice may be empowering and life-enriching for women, but they may not be. If there is a strong emphasis on working from the Bible, this approach would be unhelpful for a woman who is really struggling with the Bible. I think the major difference between what I am proposing and more traditional practices is that the starting point is the reality and feelings of the individual, and practices are utilised that may help these to surface. So there is not the use of the Bible, or any other pre-formulated material, as the starting point, but rather a woman is encouraged to be "in touch" with who she is, where she is, NOW. (Certainly there are great Christian writers who have stressed the importance in being in touch with the present moment.) Flexibility is important in one's spiritual discipline, and women can trust that they will know, each prayer time, what feels "right" as a method to follow - being in silence, dancing, or other forms of prayer.

I return briefly to the subject of getting in touch with one's feelings, as I believe it is very important. A large part of the value of meeting with the women in the study that I conducted was that we shared our feelings with one another. We need, also in prayer, to allow ourselves to become present to our feelings. Very often, we may become aware of a deep and raging anger. It is important that we are aware of this,

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Some writers on spirituality also speak of the fact that one's personality influences the way in which one prays. Cf Duncan, D. 1993. Pray Your Way: Your Personality and God. London: Darton, Longman & Todd.

and that we allow it into our consciousness. Experiencing anger can be very healing for women. What this means is that in our approach to prayer we come as the women that we are, owning our experiences and our feelings.

Mystics throughout the ages - often marginal people in their time - have written on the spiritual life. They have often encouraged the practice of silence. A more contemporary writer on the spiritual life, Leech, in True Prayer: An Introduction to Christian Spirituality, speaks of the importance of this.

There has to be a movement towards the still centre, the depths of our being, where, according to the mystics, we find the presence of God (1980:43).

Some women religious writers are echoing this concern. (Although I would like to hear it even more.) Townes, an African-American woman, says:

We cannot know ourselves unless we are willing to be still and listen to the still, small voice within (1993:196).

And Anderson and Hopkins similarly:

Every woman we spoke with told us that coming to terms with and honouring the need for solitude in her life has been essential to her unfolding process (1991:200).

Mystics throughout the ages have spoken of the connection between self-knowledge and one's knowledge of god. So Keane says that "it is in stillness ... that we are led to discover something not only about who God is but also about who we are" (in Ackermann *et al* 1991:189). Praying silently can sound terrifying, or crazy, to one starting out with this form of prayer, but it does become easier if practised over time. People who pray in this way talk with wonder of the transforming effect it (gradually) has on their lives.

There has been a recognition, in this dissertation, that women are often alienated from themselves, and need, as it were, to befriend and discover themselves. Prayer has an indispensable role to play here. It is people's experience that in prayer, particularly I think through silent prayer, they begin to realise that there is, in the end, no division between the self and the divine. Leech says, "self-knowledge ... is also God-knowledge" (1980:43 &135). Thus a meaningful practice of prayer can greatly assist women in their journey to discovering who they are, and so really strengthen their inner being, helping them to recover a sense of their own goodness and power. I do believe this to be true.

The women in my study recognised that their faith needed to be engaged with their life experience and so their social context. In what way then, if any, is our practice of faith linked to our lived experiences in the broader society? It is the experience of concerned people who practice prayer<sup>57</sup> that this discipline profoundly influences one's way of being regarding social matters. The depth of one's understanding is often deepened, and one may find oneself more courageous in tackling issues of concern. In short, one's spiritual practice certainly influences the whole of one's life, and this can be particularly perceived in relation to social issues, which are often an area of great concern and pain for people. Leech talks of the inner and the outer revolution as being one and indivisible (1980:89). This is my experience. Thus, he says, "political depth and spirituality meet" (1980:89).

Regarding the way in which our spirituality fuels our action in the world, Leech affirms that the mystic and the militant go together.

It is in solitude, in the depths of a person's own aloneness, that there lie the

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<sup>57</sup> When I speak of "prayer" in this section I do so in the broadest of terms, referring to any practice that people use in furthering their journey of self and god knowledge. This may be through dance, drawing, or sitting quietly in the garden.

resources for resistance to injustice. On the other hand, a resistance which has not been wrought out of inner spiritual struggle must remain superficial or degenerate into fanaticism (1980:82).

It is the contemplative person, says Leech, who is a greater "threat" to unjust systems.

The contemplative who can stand back from a situation and see it for what it is, is more threatening to an unjust social system than the frenzied activist who is so involved in the situation that he (sic) cannot see clearly at all (1980:85).

Leech answers a concern expressed by women with whom I engaged in my study by affirming that authentic and engaged spirituality will have a bearing on one's context. He reminds us of the yardstick used in the New Testament being that which contributes to the common good (1Cor.12:7) (1980:66).

Leech too is aware that the practice of spirituality will lead to one questioning what is regarded as established wisdom, and will lead one to become a marginal person (1980:84). I believe that as much as prayer will change the way in which a person sees her/himself, so too there may be a greater freedom to be far more creative in the way one thinks about matters of god and life. There will be no need for fear and defensiveness, and one will feel free to be questioning.

Women need to recognise themselves as adults, and be recognised thus by others. In relation to matters of faith, too, it has been said that what we need is not "children of god" but "adults of god". I would agree with this. The church has helped perpetuate our childishness. As the Egyptian woman activist and writer El Saadawi has said, women need to learn to be disobedient. I feel that this is a highly creative call (and of course also controversial).

As women are called to trust themselves, this has implications for their perception of

god. So an Asian woman theologian can say:

As a woman .... No longer do I see God as a rescuer. I see her more as power and strength within me .... I no longer see the victim-rescuer game as healthy, so I have learnt to shed the needless dependence on God (Lobo in King 1994:255-256)

This claim, of course, also has christological implications. (For example, if I am looking towards a more adult-adult relationship with god, what need have I then for a Saviour figure?<sup>58</sup>) The women in my small study did not challenge issues of doctrine, but I am highlighting this as an area that could prove to be a very fertile area of study.

In conclusion, in this section it has been suggested that, in prayer, as in doing theology, women (and men) need to begin with their own questions and experience. Women need to develop ways of nurturing their spirituality that are life-giving for themselves, and may be at variance with the traditional methods used. People should be encouraged in the use of silence, which initially is a daunting form of prayer but, I would suggest, is possibly the most meaningful - and revolutionary. Through our practice of spirituality we are able to bring integration to our lived experience, so that our knowledge of ourselves, our knowledge of god, our action in the world and our doing of theology, all form part of one whole with each informing the other. If women are to explore new ways of relating to themselves and to god, they will need support in this. This will be the theme of the next section.

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<sup>58</sup> The question of what an empowering Christology is for women (the term used to refer to how one understands Jesus) is a huge field, and a fascinating one. As I cannot give it the treatment it deserves in this study, I am choosing rather not to embark on any specific Christological discussion for the purposes of this dissertation.

## WOMEN MEETING IN GROUPS

In calling for women to welcome who they are and commit themselves to their own healing, and in suggesting that women take an active part in developing their own forms of spiritual practice, I am calling for exploration into areas where few of us have walked. What do women need if they are to be enabled to take these steps in their lives?

Looking at my own experience, for years I was sensing that I was drawn to "something more" regarding my faith and my own self-knowledge, but I did not know the way forward. I eventually joined a group of women who meet monthly to reflect on their faith journeys and to explore spirituality together. Initially I found it very difficult to be part of such a group. I found it difficult to share about myself in depth, and did not particularly enjoy the extended times of silence that the group practised (within the group setting itself). However, with time, this gathering proved to be of great value to me. Others in the group had been more exposed than I had been to alternative forms of spiritual practice, and thus I was able to learn from them.

The field component of this study was an example, in certain respects, of this form of women meeting together. As I have indicated, this was a profound experience for those who participated. Women writers have testified to the deep value of such sharing of our lives. Anderson and Hopkins relate the responses they received on inviting women to become part of such a group.

Not one woman we invited to join us said no, and more than one woman's yes was accompanied by eyes filled with tears, which testified far more than her words (1991:143).

The joy women feel on being together is quite palpable. Loades says she imagines this is the sort of great joy experienced by the early Christians as they gathered

together, sharing all that they had with one another (1990:277).

Women need the support of one another as they travel forward. There is so much that would discourage us, that to hope that we can manage alone is perhaps not realistic. Hence the great value of the support of the group.

We sensed how precious small women's circles are at this time when we are just beginning to trust the truth of our experience (Anderson and Hopkins 1991:22).

The field work section of this study has shown how simple it is for women to meet together in the way that is being suggested here. And yet this still requires someone to have the idea and, at least initially, play some form of facilitating role. Ideally, after a time, leadership of the group would be shared. For the groups to have value, members would need to set aside at least 2 hours for each gathering. There should not be a "busy" agenda. A notice time at the end or beginning can take care of practical details. In my experience, the gathering would have various different components. There would frequently be a time of sharing from life experiences of the participants since the last meeting, but often done in drawing or another creative medium. There may be a time of silence, or a time of praying for one another. In the group of which I was part, we never commented on the sharing of another person. Each contribution was rather honoured by our silence. I found this very freeing for myself, that is, the fact that I knew I would not be questioned or advised regarding what I had shared.

Groups will take different forms, depending on their participants. Thus another group of which I am aware discuss articles or books together and use this as a focus for their sharing, and they find this very valuable. I feel that encouragement to share from one's life experience is a very important part of the group process, and that this should (at least frequently) be built into the format of group meetings. I fear that we

will too easily adopt an approach that might appeal to our minds and not engage ourselves adequately from the depths of who we are.

It is with some hesitation that I suggest that these groups would need some initial stimulation and facilitation. In my research, I could see how easily people who are generally in an activist mode could make such groups simply another forum for activism rather than for the deep replenishing of one's own resources. However, I do not think that the facilitation that I advocate will generally be possible. There are simply too few women in South Africa who have been exposed to this kind of experience, particularly in the more rural parts of our country. Thus I would encourage women to simply form such groups and trust god to inform their process. But, again, there is the question of who would initiate the groups. It is also evident from my study that, life-giving as the group encounters were for women, they easily get crowded out of women's lives unless one makes this time a priority. (How good we are as women at giving our time away to others - in the name of being unselfish!) For myself, I found that this commitment to the group only happened over a period of time as I became more and more aware of its value in my life. There is a need for individuals who will encourage these groups in their formative stages. It is also helpful if there is a member of the group who has experience in alternative practices of spirituality, such as have been described. It may be that it would be useful if some simple resource material could be made available for such purposes.

For women to become part of such groupings involves a commitment to ourselves, which is something this study has encouraged women to make, and is a step that is very new for most women.

The purpose of such gatherings of women would be to affirm the commitment of each woman to herself. Each woman would grow in her appreciation and love of herself. She would hear the victories and struggles of other women. Each would grow in self

knowledge and knowledge of god and so come to view life with greater depth and understanding. This process does not promise immediate change to the fabric of the church. Rather the process envisaged is one that will be radically strengthening of the being of the women who are involved. A small revolution will, in fact, happen in the life of each woman. One's engagement in the world then will be from a different premise. Women's self-love will enable them to stand in support of other women. It will be for these transformed people to then decide how, or how not, to work for change within the formal church. Certainly these groups could themselves be regarded as church, and, it could be argued, women who elect only to attend such groups need not thus be said to be leaving the church.<sup>59</sup> But it would be for each woman to name the experience for herself. It seems to me that being part of such groups enables some women to remain in the formal church, as they have a meaningful forum of worship and community elsewhere. This may be a good decision for them, but it needs to be that, a decision. Women need to dare to make the choice to leave the formal church if that is what their soul requires. Whether these groups can bring any influence to bear on the institutional church I judge to be doubtful (at present).

It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to suggest how women might impact creatively on political life. However, the personal change that would take place for women who are actively engaged in seeking to nourish their own spirituality would certainly enable women to bring a deeper quality of integrity to the issues with which they might engage. Women would also have more insight into where they should invest their energy, and be able to decide more pro-actively on this. Women might choose in fact to withdraw from certain arenas in which they have previously been involved. Similarly, within the church, women would feel free to make the choices

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I see no reason why these groups should not involve women of other faiths or those with no particular faith affiliation. The group would in a sense serve then also to awaken women to their spirituality.

of involvement or non-involvement as seemed right for themselves. How would women make these decisions? Women may develop their own criteria to guide them, concerns such as whether the involvement is life-enhancing for themselves, whether they are able to help effect change, and so on. It is important that women try to sense the call of god, the Spirit, in these matters.

#### WHO THEN IS THE CHURCH?

Usually when one is asked this question as a young person the answer awaited is that the church is the people. And yet typically when we think of the church we tend to associate this with the institutional church. Ackermann calls for a more open understanding of the church that views the community of faith as broader than the institutional church (1984:77, 1985:41 and 1991:109). It is the church's business, she says, to practise freedom, and where there is discrimination and oppressive structures, this is not the church (1985:41). She notes how the history of the church points to a negation of the central tenets of Christianity (1992:16). People being in right relationship with one another is fundamental to what it is to be the church (Ackermann 1992:16). The tendency to view the institutional church and its traditions as sacred has reinforced its sinful practices (Ackermann 1991:108). We begin, says Ackermann, with the question of humanity. Women are fully human and need to critique any ideology or system that denies this (Ackermann 1992:14). In developing her thoughts on a feminist anthropology she says that:

The affirmation and promotion of the full humanity of all is the starting point for our theorizing and our praxis (1991:111).

This consideration precedes any speculations or faith statements about god, Jesus Christ, the church, ministry, and so on (*ibid*:108). Where teaching or practice does not affirm the humanity of women, it is not redemptive (Rhodes 1987:31).

A central metaphor in the biblical tradition of that of the kindom<sup>60</sup> of god. This speaks of relationships of equality and mutuality. Although Christian theology has spoken of the kindom of god as being wider than the church, in practice, this has not been taken very seriously. It is clear that the church is not necessarily part of the kindom.

Language has been defined by men, and perhaps the very word church is unhelpful. Community may be a better term to describe what women are seeking in their worship and sharing of their lives.

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

This chapter began by painting a picture of the historical moment in which South African women find themselves, within the country and within the church. It was noted that the situation in which women find themselves is not one that welcomes the richness of their gifts and humanity. Rather women live threatened lives, and, without great vigilance, will begin to believe society's judgement of them and lose a sense of their own goodness and power. Though women have struggled for national liberation in this country, it may be that the experience of freedom will be denied them. In the church, rather than the experience of freedom, women speak of experiencing the violation of their very being. Questions have been raised as to the nature of the church, asking whether a group that does not foster life and freedom in its members can really be said to represent the gospel image of church. This chapter sought to explore ways which might offer healing and joy for women within themselves, resulting in them then being enabled to engage in fresh ways, and with a new strength and freedom, in church and society.

In the face of huge challenges, this chapter really issued a plea to women, that they

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<sup>60</sup> This term is preferred to kingdom with its male and hierarchical tone.

be committed to their own healing and growth, and that they make the necessary changes in their lives that would enable them to work towards their own empowerment. A practice of spirituality was advocated as not something for "specialized" Christians, but for every person, as a way of journeying towards greater self-knowledge and knowledge of god. Practices of prayer enable a woman to integrate all aspects of her life and being, and enable her to make choices that are life-enhancing. It was strongly suggested that a creative, and healing, way for women to be the church is to form small, committed groups who meet together regularly to develop spiritual practices that are life-giving and to share one another's journeys. The results of this would be nothing short of entirely transformative of women's lives.

## CONCLUSION

*If I am not for myself, who am I?*

*If I am only for myself, what am I?*

*If not now, when?*

*(Eck and Jain)*

This dissertation has been a joy to write. I have written from my heart as well as from my head. I have attempted, I feel successfully, to make the very researching and writing of it part of my prayer. And, indeed, this work has informed my own particular journey at this time.

The study has stood, as it were, on three legs. My own experience, that of the women whom I met in the Eastern Cape, and women whose writings I studied were in dialogue with one another. Written within the sub-discipline of systematic theology, it was argued that women's experience should be the source of the content as well as a criterion of truth in the doing of theology (Ruether in Rhodes 1987:31). If this call is not heeded, theology will continue to be separated from women's lives and remain very peripheral to their ways of being in the world. Thus my approach to the church was not to theorise about what the church is but rather to ask women how they experience the church.

What is the ground that has been covered in this dissertation? The journey began with a chapter entitled "Methodology for Life", where it was argued that, as one woman said, "our method is our spirituality". It was stressed that methodological concerns are of utmost importance. A certain recklessness was called for, so that, as a woman doing theology, one would not take as one's framework past ways of doing theology, nor take for granted accepted "truths" about god or about life. There was an encouragement towards critical, engaged and passionate work and thinking.

The second chapter spoke of the value of women sharing, as freely as possible, their experiences with one another. It was explained that this was the framework that I had chosen for the field component of my research. In this chapter I explained how I as a researcher was to relate to the groups of women with whom I worked, which was greatly at variance with the formal distance traditionally maintained between the researcher and the research participants. The equality of relationship that existed between myself and the study participants meant that the entire research process was humanised, and, I would argue, was able to yield far more effective results.

The third chapter put flesh onto the research process that was undertaken, explaining how it was begun, who the participants were, and what they shared regarding their experience of the church. This is a central part of the dissertation. The women unfailingly shared feelings of anger, alienation and pain. The women were clearly not being nourished by their experience in the church. They were frustrated in not being allowed to share their giftedness within their congregations. They experienced hostility from other women who largely maintained a very conservative stance towards the religious *status quo*. Many of them were visibly highly distressed through their participation in the faith community where they knew they should find love and justice but instead found hostility and partiality. It was an enormous relief for the women to be able to gather and openly own their feelings which they seldom, if ever, are encouraged to express.

Chapter four then sought to explore whether these women were an anomaly, or whether other women in various parts of the world witnessed to similar experiences. I looked at certain women in Africa, Asia and the West, as well as examining other writings from South Africa. This comparative study revealed that indeed the same issues were repeatedly raised by these women, although they may have been given different nuances in the various contexts. A recurring theme in the field research and in the comparative study done was the fact that women who want to work for gender

equity in the church stand alone, and are not supported, in fact, they are even ridiculed by other women.

In exploring, thereafter, the broader context of women in South Africa, a rather depressing picture emerged. It seems evident that the home context and that of intimate relationships are two areas in which it is very difficult for women to assert themselves. The contemporary call for inculturation was critically examined, and it seems that the experiences of women are quite excluded from this, and thus the envisaged inculturation will not serve to empower women as much as would be possible if their experiences, too, were to be considered foundational to a transformed articulation and practice of faith. How is the woman received who speaks out against gender oppression? This question was looked at in the same chapter, and the answer was found, again, to be distressing. There is no encouragement towards this sort of independent thought; rather it is fiercely punished. (Although it was noted that this seems to be most notable in gatherings that are racially heterogeneous.)

The concluding chapter proposed, as a way forward for women, a commitment to themselves. The importance of relevant spiritual practices to sustain and nourish women's lives was dealt with, it being argued that inner change is of vital importance if one is to be able to struggle effectively for change within society. The value of solitude and silence for the person serious about caring for their spiritual life was stressed. As a means of making a commitment to oneself and one's own spirituality, the formation of women's groups was strongly advocated.

Written within the discipline of systematic theology, contributions were made in the areas of methodology, ecclesiology and anthropology. Regarding methodology, it was argued that the experience of women should be a starting point for theologians and that our method and our theology should impact creatively on women's lives. Regarding ecclesiology, a wider approach was called for regarding what one

considers to be the church. It was suggested that where people come together in equality and freedom, this is the church. Regarding anthropology, women's full humanity is taken as the starting point of theology, before any statements are made about god or the church (Ackermann 1991:108).

I proceed now to make some conclusions on the basis of this study.

Let me begin with women themselves. This dissertation calls for them to make a commitment to themselves, to value themselves. I see little evidence that women are able to respond to this call. Women have a certain sense of power derived from being "all things to all people" in the home space, and are reluctant to relinquish this power, which may be their only source of affirmation. If women continue to put everyone else's needs before their own, they will certainly not take the time and space that is required for their own growth and nurture. Indeed, women are aware that should they do this they will be punished in some way by those close to them. The call is for a woman to give loving attention to herself. This idea in itself is so novel that I do not see it taking root yet in many people's consciousness. The church certainly does not help women to make this shift.

This study has found the church to be highly hypocritical. While affirming an ethos of liberation and care it, in fact, scorns most of its members by keeping them from using their gifts and by maintaining them in submission and dependence. There are women in the church who are highly frustrated but, I feel, often remain where they are because of fear of conflict and from (perhaps misguided) loyalty. The questions and concerns that women raise are not taken seriously by men. There is no evidence that the dominating gender is going to willingly or easily loosen its grip on their control of the church. I do not see real and meaningful change happening at present within the institutional church.

Within South African society and within the church there is no evidence of the emergence of a widespread grassroots women's movement. Thus individual women who struggle for gender equality in many sectors of society today will not find the support for which they hope and long. This being the case, there is little hope of change happening towards gender equity within the official institutions and structures of the church and society.

Women who are working for change are in a vulnerable situation. They need to take good care of themselves. It would be very good for them (as indeed for all women) to find a small group of women with whom to meet regularly in the way that was outlined in the last chapter of this dissertation. Women's support of one another is, as Lorde puts it, redemptive (1984:111)! It is vital for women's survival.

Women of the Christian faith will, frequently, not be satisfied with the worship and other practices of the institutional church. Women's experience is simply not valued and not wanted here. Women may choose to continue, or terminate, their participation in the formal church. In either event, it will be very important, and indeed life-saving, for them to pray and work towards involvement with a small group of women with whom they can worship, share and pray, developing their own way of doing this, and seeking support where they can. The development of our spirituality is of paramount importance to us as women, and we need to support each other's journeys in this wherever possible.

Finally, I believe that where women gather together in such groups experiencing joy, equality, respect and sharing, This IS the church. Long live the church!

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