

**Pastoral care with women participating in church leadership:  
Reflections on the Skuling process**

**by**

**KIM ELISE BARKER**

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**SUPERVISOR: Ms E Niehaus**

**CO-SUPERVISOR: Dr M E Hestenes**

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# CHAPTER 1

## THE RESEARCH JOURNEY BEGINS

### 1.1 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH JOURNEY

Early in January 2004, Doug<sup>1</sup>, the pastor of a Baptist church in South Africa, contacted me to find out if my husband and I would be willing to run a weekend retreat for the deacons of his church and their wives. We agreed to meet and discuss the possibilities.

At our meeting, Doug spoke of the need for change in the church. He felt that both he and the church were at a 'watershed' or a 'crossroads' and that 'we've got to do things differently if we are really going to get things going'. He spoke of a sense of 'stuckness' and frustration amongst the church leaders arising from the fact that – although they had done the 'right things', including developing a vision and mission statement, planning strategically, developing action plans and adopting an American church growth plan called 'Natural Church Development' (NCD) – there seemed to be no impact on the wider church at all. He told us that enthusiasm within the church was waning and that frustration and apathy seemed to be gaining the upper hand.

He described the church leaders, or deacons, as 'significant businessmen'. All the deacons were men. Although provision is made within the constitution of the church for women to be nominated and voted onto the deaconate, this had never happened. He said that his deacons were used to running companies and corporations and were well-versed in the language of planning and success. He felt that their desire for the church was to 'be seen as a significant church' and that 'growth in numbers' was a key measure of success for them. He also mentioned their way of being with one another in deacons' meetings, which was frequently heated, confrontational and at times 'brutal'.

Doug shared with us how the church had been through several painful experiences prior to his being appointed, with pastors leaving unexpectedly and under difficult circumstances. He felt that although the deacons had picked up the pieces and continued to lead the church in a businesslike way – strategising, planning and managing – the 'soft issues' had never been addressed. He felt that people might be carrying hurt and 'baggage' from their previous experiences in the church in that they had never been given the opportunity, as a corporate body, to reflect on or share.

It was against this background that Doug asked us to plan the weekend in such a way that the participants would be given the opportunity to reflect on their personal experience of the deep waters that their church had passed through. He wanted us to invite sharing and conversation.

On the suggestion of one of the deacons, Doug had agreed to include the partners of the deacons in the process. This had never happened before. The previous year, the partners had been invited to join the men on the retreat weekend, but were excluded from all the 'business' meetings. Doug called the whole experience a 'disaster' and felt that it had caused more harm than good to have the partners present in a non-participatory capacity.

In issuing the invitation to the deaconate for this year's retreat, Doug emphasised that both the deacons and their partners would participate fully in every aspect of the weekend.

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<sup>1</sup> Pseudonyms have been used to ensure the anonymity of the church and its members.

However, he was aware that a number of the partners were suspicious about what their involvement would look like, and were reluctant to attend.

My husband and I planned and ran the retreat together. In planning the retreat, as in the research journey which it precipitated, we followed a participatory approach to *'doing spirituality, pastoral care and counselling'* (Kotzé 2003:64). We were aware of the historical position of women within the church, and in constructing a process for the retreat weekend, consciously stood in *'caring solidarity'* (Sevenhuijsen 1998:147) with those who had been silenced. We introduced practices which would welcome all into the conversation and would ensure that all who wanted to speak felt as safe as was possible and were given the space to speak and be heard. And we held all participants accountable to those practices. We also constantly reflected together during the weekend regarding the effects of the process on the participants and invited the participants into these reflections.

The weekend was held at a campsite called Skuiling, and what unfolded over the weekend, and was later taken to the church, came to be known as the *'Skuiling process'*. One of the deacons suggested the name later, for two reasons. The first was that Skuiling was the place where the process was birthed, and, secondly, because *'skuiling'* is an Afrikaans word which means *'shelter'* or *'safe place'*; the kind of environment that we were wanting to create within which people would feel safe or sheltered enough in order to risk and share and dream.

In order to create such an environment, to avoid the confrontational pattern which Doug had described, and to invite the participation of all, we established a simple framework for interaction and sharing over the weekend at the outset of the retreat. The framework required each participant to make several commitments to the process.

Firstly, we made a commitment to confidentiality and we negotiated upfront with the group what confidentiality meant for that group (for example, does confidentiality mean that nothing we say within this group can be shared with anyone outside the group, does it mean that the facilitator can take notes or not and, if he/she can, with whom may he/she share those notes, and so on).

The second important commitment we made was to respectful active listening. Kate, Doug's wife, facilitated a short experiential session on active listening on the Saturday morning, which included having the participants practise listening to one another in pairs.

Thirdly, we committed ourselves to giving each person the time they needed to share without interruption. After someone had shared they were not questioned or challenged, and we observed a short period of respectful/reflective silence after each person had shared.

Lastly, we invited each person to share their own story/experience, rather than adding on to what someone else has said or retreating into intellectual or theoretical discussion, and agreed to tolerate silence and let go of the need to fill the spaces.

We then invited the participants to look back and reflect on their positive and negative experiences of life in their church community. Through the telling and retelling of these stories (which were generated in the context of the *'definitional ceremony'* structures as described by White 2003:48-49), the participants developed a description of their church at its best, a vision of what had been possible in the church in the past, and what people appreciated most about their experience of church. We then invited everyone to spend time

in solitude and prayer, reflecting on this description in a meditative way (based on the practice of 'lectio divina'<sup>2</sup>) and to allow their dreams for the future of the church to take shape in conversation with God.

After the time of silent reflection, each person was given the opportunity to share their dreams, first in a small group and then with everyone. We invited reflection on the dreams and the process of dreaming.

By the end of the weekend, the deacons and their partners were referring to themselves as the 'leadership team', and they asked us to continue journeying with them as they offered the same process that they had experienced over the weekend to the rest of the church.

I had taken extensive notes over the weekend, with the intention of making a written record of the weekend's journey available to all who had participated, a practice encouraged in narrative therapy (Epston 1994:31-33). It was as I began typing up these notes that I first began to consider the possibility of continuing the journey in the role of participant/researcher rather than as facilitator<sup>3</sup>.

I realised that what had happened over the weekend as a result of inviting the women to participate in the conversation and share in the process of dreaming and visioning was a 'sparkling moment, [an] exception, [a] unique outcome or contradiction' (White 1995:183). The process of the weekend had made space for women's contributions to be heard and valued, which stood against the dominant practice in the church of silencing women in the context of leadership. It had also stood against the church's strong 'top down', authoritarian model of church government. I was deeply moved over the weekend to witness the immense power of **invitation** (as opposed to 'being told to') and **participation** (as opposed to exclusion), and the richness that it brought to the 'visioning' process.

The leadership team had committed themselves at the end of the weekend, to take the Skuling process to their congregation, and I was curious about where invitation and participation could take the rest of the church body. I was excited to be continuing the journey with the church, and felt that there would be value in documenting the journey as it unfolded. After discussing this with my supervisor and with Doug and Kate, I sent an email to all members of the leadership team asking their permission to approach the unfolding Skuling process from a participatory action research perspective. The response was unanimously positive.

From the outset, my pastoral engagement with the leadership team was shaped by my faith commitment and my theology, and, in particular, by my preferred approach to practical theology. Sheldrake (1998:3) suggests that our 'attempts to speak about our understanding of God (theology) and our efforts to live in the light of that understanding (spirituality) cannot be separated'. In the following section I will outline the approach to practical theology which informed my pastoral practice during the course of this research journey.

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<sup>2</sup> Lectio divina involves a close, prayerful reading of a passage of Scripture or other writings. As we read the passage, we pay attention to our responses to the words and phrases we read. If there is a word or phrase that particularly captures our attention, we take hold of that word or phrase, stay with it and allow it to become our prayer (Silf, 1999:120-126).

<sup>3</sup> My use of an existing situation as a focus for research is not unusual from a feminist research perspective. Fonow and Cook (1991:11) state that feminist approaches to research are often characterised by creativity, spontaneity and improvisation in the selection of both topic and methodology and that feminist researchers will often 'use already-given situations both as the focus of investigation and as a means of collecting data.

## 1.2 LOCATING THIS RESEARCH IN THE FIELD OF PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

Practical theology has gone by several different names<sup>4</sup> and has been defined in numerous different ways since Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) first called it the ‘crown of the theological tree’ (Pattison & Woodward 2000:6). For many years practical theology was concerned primarily with preparing the ‘male, ordained and professionally accredited’ (Graham 1996:48) clergy for their tasks of ministry (Heyns & Pieterse 1990:7, Gräß & Osmer, 1997:1), assisting them to apply appropriate techniques and skills in their shepherding, prophetic and priestly roles within a church context (Gerkin 1997:23-28). For this reason its status as a distinct body of academic knowledge was contested.

However, over the past few decades, the distinction between the pastoral training of ministers – more recently, this has been broadened to include lay people within the church as well – and practical theology as a recognised ‘perspective on theology’ (Heyns & Pieterse 1990:5), with its own field of study, has become more clearly defined: ‘The “new” practical theology no longer views itself as a discipline concerned merely with applications and techniques’ but has a new focus which is ‘closely related to fundamental hermeneutical reflection on the practical character of theology as a whole’ (Gräß & Osmer 1997:1). Graham (1996:204) takes this even further when she suggests that:

Theology now becomes not an abstract series of philosophical propositions, but a performative discipline, where knowledge and truth are only realizable in the pursuit of practical strategies and social relations.

These and other shifting emphases in the field of practical theology present new challenges for those engaged in pastoral practice in the new millennium. Kotzé and Kotzé (2002:201-202) highlight several such challenges, and I will address two of these below.

### 1.2.1 New challenges to practical theology

#### 1.2.1.1 *A shift from confessional to contextual pastoral practice*

Kotzé and Kotzé (2002:201) suggest that it is necessary for practical theologians to ‘shift our focus from confessional towards contextual pastoral practices’<sup>5</sup> (Kotzé & Kotzé 2002:201). This challenge is echoed in Harvey’s (2000:190) conviction that ‘the heart of faith is a disciplined wakefulness, a clear-eyed attentiveness to what is going on rather than a prior allegiance to a set of beliefs and practices’.

Confessional (foundationalist/fundamentalist/‘biblical’) practical theology (Kotzé 2005: lecture notes) seeks to discern and apply doctrine and biblical ‘truth’ to the reality of life, while the objective of contextual practical theology, arising from a fundamental faith commitment, is to participate in and analyse the political, economic, developmental and ecological context in which they find themselves and to address injustice and bring about social transformation (Graham 1996:132). Contextual practical theology therefore

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<sup>4</sup> At various times and in various places the field has been called ‘practical theology’, ‘pastoral theology’, and ‘applied theology’. These terms have different historical backgrounds, uses and emphases. Currently the two most widely used are ‘practical theology’ and ‘pastoral theology’, and these are often used interchangeably in contemporary literature (Graham 1996, Pattison & Woodward 2000). My preferred term is ‘practical theology’ but I will retain the use of ‘pastoral theology’ where it appears in quotes.

<sup>5</sup> Many authors have followed the example of Burger (1991) who distinguished between three different approaches to practical theology to be found in the South African community of practical theologians, namely (i) a ‘confessional’ approach, (ii) a ‘correlative’ approach, and (iii) a ‘contextual’ approach.

demands a pastoral response that breaks silences, urges prophetic action, and liberates the oppressed (Miller-McLemore 2000:242).

Kotzé and Kotzé (2002:201) are by no means alone in highlighting the importance of context in practical theology. Patton (2000:55) observes that the most important recent development in pastoral theology in North America has been an emphasis on context. The contexts considered to be most influential are race, culture, gender and power. Ballard (2000:65), writing about pastoral theology in Britain, describes a growing emphasis in contemporary theologies on 'the importance of lived experience, practice, action and the primacy of human need'. These trends, which are informed by 'human concern and liberationist praxis' rather than abstract, philosophical debates, have moved pastoral theology 'towards the centre of the theological enterprise' (Ballard 2000:65).

Feminist theology has also had a significant influence on the contextualisation of practical theology. Prior to the middle of the last century, and even up until the last two decades, 'gender simply did not factor into the equation as a category of analysis for theology or practical theology... for the most part, women's public leadership was discouraged and women's experience and knowledge were largely ignored' (Miller-McLemore 2000:234). Since then, however, there has been a growing impetus towards correcting women's invisibility within the pastoral care tradition – especially as active agents – by reclaiming their history and articulating a 'theology of women's experience' (Graham 1996:124).

In recent years there has been 'an explosion of literature on gender, sexuality and relationships' (Miller-McLemore 2000:234) which has had profound effects on the field of practical theology. It represents a completely different way of perceiving reality: 'No longer can one study pastoral theology without asking important questions about the role of the social and cultural context' (Miller-McLemore 2000:234).

One such question, from a feminist practical theologian, has profoundly shaped my own perspective on practical theology. It challenges me to live my practical theology in my research and my writing, as well as in the everyday ordinariness of life:

How – under which conditions and in what manner – can people in their various situations and their different positions on the field of power and authority, and in their particular contexts, live their life as faithful and liberated people, in a critical relationship to tradition, shaping liberated and liberating communities of faith in this world?

(Bons-Storm 1998:17)

### ***1.2.1.2 A shift from 'prescriptive and normative' to 'participatory' pastoral practice***

A second challenge is that practical theology needs to shift from being 'prescriptive and normative' to being 'participatory' and 'inclusive' (Kotzé & Kotzé 2002:202). Kotzé (2005: lecture notes) suggests that descriptors such as 'prescriptive' and 'participatory' highlight important dimensions of difference between approaches to practical theology that are not captured by Burger's (1991) classification of the field of practical theology in South Africa into confessional, correlational and contextual approaches.

For example, although it aspires to, confessional theology cannot divorce itself from a 'broader frame of contextual perceptions linked to socio-historical opinions' (Myburg 2000:50), and even contextual theologians will draw on specific doctrines or confessional understandings of the call of the gospel. However, one consistent differentiating factor seems to be whether or not one is prescriptive in communicating or imposing the confessions that one adheres to. Kotzé (2005: lecture notes) therefore suggests that it

would be helpful to differentiate between prescriptive and participatory approaches to practical theology, and advocates adopting a participatory approach.

Participatory practical theology seeks to minimise the tension or bi-polarity between doctrine and lived reality by inviting broad participation in a process of 'doing theology' (De Gruchy 1994:2, Kotzé 2003:64) in which the participants are guided by searching ethical questions (Kotzé 2005: lecture notes).

Kotzé's (2003:46) participatory approach is underpinned by a postmodern epistemology and is informed by social construction theory, the philosophical critique of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, the narrative therapy approach pioneered by Michael White and David Epston, the challenges of contextual and liberation theology, particularly feminist approaches, and a deep commitment to ethical, transformative practice.

From the perspective of a participatory approach to pastoral practice, pastoral practitioners are decentralised but are not neutral. They actively participate, collaborate and negotiate with seekers of care in constructing 'alternative ways of being and doing' (Kotzé 2003:46). Practitioners are also committed to transformation, stand in 'caring solidarity' (Sevenhuijsen 1998:147) with those who are suffering, and challenge all 'oppressive or exploitative discourses and practices' (Kotzé & Kotzé 2001:3). The focus is on negotiating 'ways of living in an ethical and ecologically accountable way' (Kotzé & Kotzé 2001:8).

There are a number of other contemporary pastoral theologians (Campbell 1981; Pattison, 1993, both referred to by Graham 1996:49) who emphasise a 'model of pastoral care as shared companionship on life's journey rather than the imbalance of client/expert or sheep/shepherd' (Graham 1996:49). This is an emphasis shared by feminist practical theologians who commit themselves to 'mutuality in relationship or shared responsibility and equality of power and freedom' (Miller-McLemore 2000:235).

Kotzé (2001: personal communication) sees participatory practical theology as a conversational encounter in which everyone has a voice and can participate as meanings are created, thereby ensuring that the knowledges generated are contextual, local and pluralist, as well as being open-ended. The criterion for evaluating praxis emerging from such a conversation would not be, 'Does it fit in with the bible or with doctrine?', but rather, 'Who would benefit from this and in whose interests is it?' (Kotzé 2003:66) or, put differently, 'Who is getting what out of this?' (Harvey 2000:189).

Kotzé's (2005: lecture notes) is not the only voice in practical theology that is being raised to challenge practical theologians to 'find ways of connecting with the theology of people on the ground' rather than imposing our 'academic theologies from above' (Graham 1996:173). In her approach to 'transforming practice' in practical theology, Graham (1996:173) places emphasis on 'collective practical wisdom and how this is disclosive of theological value'. Her model is therefore 'a refutation of prescriptive pastoral care which seeks to enforce moral conformity to absolute norms on behalf of controlling and dominating interests' (Graham 1996:208-209). However, in Graham's (1996:208) model, practical theology becomes interpretive rather than participatory, and the practical outworkings of her model remain undefined. Graham (1996:137) herself concedes that:

...more work is needed to develop a pastoral care which is reconstructive as well as critical and prophetic. In particular, the question arises of how pastoral care may be guided by a set of values that are both politically-aware and theologically-informed; and how pastoral practitioners can work to achieve these ends in

concert with clients and user groups as well as health care professionals and policy makers.

I believe that a participatory approach to practical theology and pastoral care could go a long way towards meeting these criteria, and I have therefore located my pastoral practice in the section of the field of practical theology called ‘participatory’.

However, to be honest, what most appeals to me about participatory practical theology is Kotzé’s (2005: lecture notes) acknowledgement that it is most often a messy process which simply refuses to be confined within neat categories and simple techniques. This fits with my experience of pastoral care in general and this research journey in particular. Aligned with this acknowledgement is the commitment to voicing the messiness and ambiguity inherent in the lived experiences of people through the medium of stories, rather than focussing on developing systematic and coherent theory-laden accounts (Kotze 2005: lecture notes). Following through on this commitment proved to be more complex than I had expected, and raised a number of questions which I discuss in section 1.4.3.

I appreciate the fact that within this approach I become a facilitator in the process of generating theology rather than an ‘expert’ holding privileged ‘knowledge’ or ‘truth’. The value of holding such a position became increasingly apparent to me as the research journey unfolded and the women generated their own theological understandings and models for the church. These are discussed in Chapter 5.

I am also challenged by this approach’s humility, openness and sense of mutuality: ‘pastoral care is not about me caring for people so that they benefit, it’s about caring with people so that we both benefit’ (Kotzé 2005: lecture notes); also by its commitment to engaging in ‘ethical political practices that will help transform the culture that shape the lives of people (Kotzé & Kotzé 2002:215). Both the research journey and the writing of this dissertation were a concrete expression of my commitment to the transformation of unethical and oppressive practices within the church.

### **1.3 RESEARCH CURIOSITIES**

Curiosity is a vice that has been stigmatised in turn by Christianity, by philosophy and even by a certain conception of science. Curiosity, futility. The word, however, pleases me. To me it suggests something altogether different: it evokes ‘concern’; it evokes the care one takes for what exists and could exist; a readiness to find strange and singular what surrounds us; a certain relentlessness to break up our familiarities and to regard otherwise the same things; a fervour to grasp what is happening and what passes; a casualness in regard to the traditional hierarchies of the important and the essential.

(Foucault 1989:198)

I approached the research journey from the position of a committed and passionate participant with no specific research question but a number of ‘curiosities’, as defined by Foucault (1989:98) above. As the research was participatory and exploratory in nature, we could not predict any particular outcome, although our journey was informed by the hopes and dreams which were shared at Skuiling.

The ‘curiosities’ which I brought to the research process were as follows:

- 1.3.1 What effect will the invitation to participate in a process of reflection and dreaming/visioning have on the role played by women within this church?

- 1.3.2 How can a participatory researcher journey with the leadership team as they explore the unfolding implications of a participatory approach to ‘doing church’ for themselves and for the wider church community?
- 1.3.3 What are the discourses that will influence the process? How will the leadership resist or accede to those discourses that work against participation and the collaboration of men and women?
- 1.3.4 How can the leadership be invited to explore the potential of these discourses for creating and maintaining both injustice and justice?
- 1.3.5 Can a participatory action research approach have an emancipatory outcome for women within the church?

#### **1.4 PURPOSE AND AIMS OF THE RESEARCH JOURNEY**

The purpose of this research journey was to participate in and document what happens when a church community is invited to participate in a process of reflection on their experience of the church’s history and to dream dreams for the future of the church. The issuing of such an invitation was unprecedented in a context where people’s voices, and particularly the voices of the women, had been silenced by a strongly patriarchal model of church governance and spiritual leadership.

To this end, I formulated the following aims:

- 1.4.1 To hold the leadership accountable to the commitments that they made at Skuiling, namely, to meet regularly with the women as a ‘leadership team’ and to invite the participation of the wider church in the Skuiling process.
- 1.4.2 To join with the team as an active participant/facilitator as the research journey unfolds, with a focus on ensuring that the invitation to participate continues to be extended to the women and to stand together in solidarity with the other women on the leadership team.
- 1.4.3 To be aware of the discourses and practices which might get in the way of the full participation of women, to raise the leadership team’s awareness of these discourses, and to engage the leadership team in the deconstruction of such discourses.
- 1.4.4 To reflect in an ongoing way on the process, on how the women are experiencing the process, and on my own involvement in the process.

#### **1.5 RESEARCH APPROACH**

In this section I will discuss the approach that I chose to follow for this research journey as well as the various influences on my choice, and on the approach itself.

##### **1.5.1 From paradigm to strategy**

A strategy of inquiry comprises a bundle of skills, assumptions and practices that researchers employ as they move from their paradigm into the empirical world. Strategies of inquiry put paradigms of interpretation into motion.

(Denzin & Lincoln 1994:14)

The postmodern theoretical framework or ‘paradigm of interpretation’ within which I choose to work [see Chapter Four, section 4.3.1, for further elaboration of my epistemological position], requires me to forego the ‘objectivity’ and ‘certainties’ of a positivist research approach and to adopt an alternative strategy of inquiry. Feminist-inspired Participatory Action Research (PAR) offered such an alternative. As PAR is a qualitative research approach, I will briefly discuss qualitative research, as well as the particular influence of feminist research on my choice of ‘strategy’, before I describe PAR.

#### **1.5.1.1      *What is qualitative research?***

Propelled by a desire to know what is unknown, to unravel mysteries, to be surprised and jostled by what turns up, qualitative researchers embark on an intellectual adventure without a map or even a clear destination.

(Marecek, Fine & Kidder 2001:31)

The field of qualitative research is constantly evolving, and encompasses a wide range of different approaches and schools of thought. However, all qualitative research shares a commitment to studying things in their natural context and ‘attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them’ (Denzin & Lincoln 1994:2). Qualitative research approaches the nature of reality from a social constructionist perspective and is therefore comfortable with multiple meanings and interpretations, without needing to establish the ‘truth’ status of those meanings.

Qualitative research invites researchers to bring their own stories and experience to the research process. Qualitative researchers acknowledge the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied: ‘...research is an interactive process shaped by [the researcher’s] personal history, biography, gender, social class, race and ethnicity, and those of the [participants] in the setting’ (Denzin & Lincoln 1994:3). There is the expectation that both the researcher and participants in the research will be influenced and changed by the process. This particular aspect of qualitative research is strongly emphasised by feminist researchers.

#### **1.5.1.2      *Feminist research***

Feminist researchers embrace lived experience as a means of generating knowledge (Brabeck 2004:44), acknowledge that the researcher cannot possibly be neutral, detached or objective and commit themselves to the essentially political nature of the research process (Gatenby & Morrison-Hume 2001:3). To this end, feminist research, in fact, foregrounds the voice, the assumptions and the agenda of the researcher. Mies (1984:12 cited by Van Schalkwyk 1999:59) speaks of the need to approach any research endeavour with ‘a conscious bias, partiality’.

Current feminist theory accounts for the multiple positionalities of all women and men, and includes an analysis of power and the multiple ways people are both oppressed and oppressing (Brabeck & Brown 1997:23 cited by Maguire, Brydon-Miller & McIntyre 2004:xii). From this perspective, feminist theory goes on to challenge all oppressive practices, structures and relations (Williams & Cervin 2004:4), and it is therefore taken for granted that feminist research should have an empowering and emancipatory effect on the lives of all the women involved by creating ‘new relationships, better laws and improved institutions’ (Reinharz 1992:75). Feminist researchers consciously place the various peripheral or marginal conditions of women at the centre of their research, acknowledging that they will always work from their own frame of reference, and that such

a standpoint is the basis for emancipatory research (Van Schalkwyk 1999:53-54). This enriches the research and locates it firmly within the real world.

However, ‘many... feminist researchers have been frustrated by the lack of an articulated framework for translating feminist insights into concrete actions aimed at achieving social change’ (Maguire et al 2004:xii). Although PAR offers a framework for achieving social change, this field of research, as well some aspects of the practice of PAR, have been criticised as being strongly androcentric (Maguire et al 2004:x). However, feminist researchers have responded to this challenge by proactively expanding PAR’s theoretical base and experimenting with different approaches to feminist-inspired PAR (Maguire et al 2004). This work resonates with my attempts to create a process that was informed by many of the underlying principles of feminism and PAR.

The primary focus of the research journey was to challenge the patriarchal practices within this Baptist church which *excluded* the voices of women and *imposed* constrictions and proscriptions on women’s ways of being. *Invitation* and *participation* were offered as alternative, emancipatory practices.

The feminist theoretical and methodological objectives that informed and shaped the way that I engaged with the team included empowering the women by raising awareness, inviting participation, and creating a safe environment within which all felt able to participate; bringing about individual and institutional transformation; ensuring that the women experienced benefit from the research process; and emphasising the women’s voices and stories in the record of the research journey presented in this dissertation. In addition, the way that I chose to ‘be’ in the group, namely engaged, committed and fully participative, is in line with feminist research practice.

I must also acknowledge, that the particular strategies and practices which I adopted, evolved and emerged with the research process and were not defined upfront. This is in line with Maguire’s (1993:176) assertion that feminist/activist research is not an event but a process ‘that we are living through, creating as we go’.

In section 1.5.3 below I will discuss the influence of feminist research on the approach I have taken to writing up the journey

### **1.5.1.3 *Feminist-informed/inspired Participatory Action Research (FPAR)***

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is, by its very nature, ‘always evolving and in process as the inclusive, accessible, creative dialogue between participants develops’ (Brabeck 2004:48; see also McTaggart 1997:29). Too rigid a definition of PAR would suggest that it is no more than the implementation of a specific strategy and as such it would lose its dynamic and developmental orientation. I will therefore not attempt a definition but will briefly outline the processes, commitments and purposes of PAR and the philosophy which informs it.

PAR happens when a group of people identify a concern, a real-life problem regarding their own practice. They own the problem, assume joint responsibility for solving the problem, and commit themselves to improving their practice. They then engage in a cyclical process of planning, action, observation, evaluation and critical reflection (Zuber-Skerritt 1996:3). This process allows them to learn from their own experience and to make their experience available as a resource for others (McTaggart 1997:27). ‘Thus the research process begins with real-life problems and ends (we hope) with real life changes’ (Brabeck 2004:44).

In the case of this Baptist church, the concerns that Doug brought to us when we first met to discuss the concept of a retreat were concerns that he shared with the deaconate. All were aware that change was needed, but there was no sense of clarity about what kinds of changes were needed. My husband and I were invited to facilitate a process whereby their concerns could begin to be addressed in order to find a way forward.

It seemed that the key change that the team wanted to implement after the Skuiling weekend was to invite participation: the participation of the women on the leadership team and the participation of the wider church in the Skuiling process. It was this process of inviting participation and reflecting on the impact of this within the church which became the focus of this participatory action research journey.

PAR values ‘collective rather than individual knowledge creation and ownership’ (Williams & Cervin 2004:4) and requires communities to ‘claim their right/power to create their own knowledge, enabling them to participate effectively in making decisions that affect their lives’ (Williams & Cervin 2004:4). All records that I kept of the different steps along the journey were made available to all participants, and their input and feedback were requested each time they received such documents.

In addition, PAR has the potential of giving a voice to marginalised groups: ‘Participatory research fundamentally is about the right to speak... Participatory research argues for the articulation of points of view by the dominated or subordinate’ (Hall 2001:62). In fact, Brydon-Miller (2004:12) argues that the greatest responsibility of feminist PAR researchers ‘is to continue to seek means through which the subaltern can find voice and can be empowered to represent their own interests. This is the true task of the intellectual [or researcher] and the potential contribution of feminist participatory action research’.

This constitutes one of my primary reasons for adopting this research approach. By all accounts, women’s voices have been silenced within the Baptist church for centuries, and this particular group of women were now being invited to speak out in a leadership context for the first time. I wanted the research approach to strengthen and support their voices and to create a context in which they felt safe to speak, knowing that their contributions would be heard and valued.

### 1.5.2 The Research Process

PAR is, by its very nature, unpredictable. Responsibility for the research process remained largely in the hands of the leadership team and so it was impossible to predict what steps would be taken as the process unfolded. The meetings and conversations which I initiated, arose out of my own response to the research journey and my own curiosity regarding how others were experiencing the journey. This section describes the key events along the way.

#### 1.5.2.1 *The journey with the team*

Due to the length and complexity of the research journey, I have summarised the key events in the table below. These events are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3.

Date	Nature of meeting	Who attended
30 Jan to	Weekend retreat for deacons and their	Two pastors and their wives, six other

1 Feb 2004	<b>wives/partners, at Skuiling:</b> Process followed during retreat described in Chapter 1, section 1.1 and Chapter 3, section 3.2.1.	couples (five deacons with wives, one deacon with fiancée); Dave and Kim facilitating.
25 March 2004	<b>Conversation with women:</b> Met to give women an opportunity to reflect on their experience of the Skuiling weekend and developments since the weekend (Transcript of meeting incorporated into Appendix 1: 'Reflections on the "Skuiling process": a Book of Women's Wisdom').	Six women who had attended the weekend retreat and one, the wife of a deacon, who had not attended; Kim facilitating.
27 March 2004	<b>Workshop with leadership team:</b> Reflection on Skuiling Retreat, distilling the team's dream from individual dreams and looking at the way forward.	Both pastors and wives, five couples who attended Skuiling Retreat, one deacon who did not; Kim and Dave facilitating.
24 April 2004	<b>Workshop with leadership team:</b> Action planning for taking the Skuiling process to the rest of the church. Team distilled three key visions/objectives for the church from the collective dreams.	Both pastors and wives, two women without partners, two men without partners, two couples; Dave, Kim and pastor facilitating.
Between 24 April and 10 May 2004	<b>Development of Skuiling process for cell groups:</b> Kim (in consultation with Dave) adapted the process followed during the Skuiling Retreat for use in cell groups.	Kim and Dave
10 May 2004	<b>Facilitator workshop:</b> Cell group leaders and others who would facilitate the process in small groups attended a training/development workshop.	Both pastors and wives, four pastors without wives, one couple; Kim and Dave facilitating
Between 10 May and 30 August 2004	<b>Skuiling process taken to the cell groups:</b> Cell group leaders facilitated the Skuiling process within their own cell groups and two other opportunities were offered for those not in cell groups to participate. Cell leaders summarised the feedback and submitted it to the pastors.	Cell group leaders and church members
Before 25 August 2004	<b>Categorisation of feedback:</b> Pastors classified feedback from cell groups into six key points (these corresponded to key points identified by NCD, the church development programme they had adopted in 2003).	Senior pastor, with input from associate pastor
25 August 2004	<b>Feedback meeting:</b> Leadership team discussed feedback they had received in response to the Skuiling process and how to present the feedback to the church at the annual AGM. Pastor presented his classification of the feedback.	Both pastors, one pastor's wife, four deacons without wives/partners, two deacons with wives; Kim (invited, observer status)

25 August to 6 Sept 2004	<b>Letter to the team:</b> Kim transcribed the recording of the 30 August meeting and wrote a letter to the team, reflecting on the meeting. Kim's supervisor gave input on several drafts. It was then emailed to the pastor with the request that it be distributed to all team members (for First Draft and Final Draft of this letter see Appendices 2 and 3 respectively).	Kim and Supervisor
4 Sept 2004	<b>Pre-AGM church gathering:</b> Feedback from Skuiling process to the church body by pastor and cell leaders, discussion in groups regarding the key points.	All deacons and partners except those who had not stood for re-election, church members, Kim (observer, present by own request)
18 Sept 2004	<b>Meeting with new deaconate and wives:</b> Planning how to take forward the dreams/ideas emerging from the church through the Skuiling process; action steps. Decision made to postpone meeting in order to invite participation of all those involved in the original Skuiling process.	Pastors and wives, two of previous deacons and one new deacon with his wife, Kim (by own request)
By 23 Sept 2004	<b>Development of reflection document:</b> Kim developed a short reflection based on the discussion she had witnessed at the meeting on 18 September (see Appendix 4).	Kim
23 Sept (morning)	<b>Meeting with Doug:</b> Kim met with Doug to reflect on the process, to discuss the reflection document she had drawn up and to clarify her role in future meetings.	Kim, Doug
23 Sept (evening)	<b>Meeting with original leadership team plus new deacons and their wives:</b> Same focus as previous meeting (action planning), but now incorporating all those from the original Skuiling process who wished to be present.	Pastors, one pastor's wife, five pastors, one wife
Between October and December 2004	<b>Unstructured reflective conversations:</b> Kim participated in two reflective conversations, one with the two pastors and a separate one with their wives (transcript of meeting with pastors' wives incorporated into 'Reflections on the "Skuiling process": a Book of Women's Wisdom').	Kim and pastors; Kim and pastors' wives

10 August 2005	<p><b>Meeting with the women:</b>          Kim invited all women who had been included on the 'leadership team' to meet in order to read the 'Book of Women's Wisdom' comprising all the women's contributions during the research journey. The discussion was transcribed and incorporated into the Book. Women gave permission for the Book to be part of the record of the research journey.</p>	<p>Kim, five of the women from the original leadership team. [Those who did not attend the meeting were provided with copies of the document and were contacted telephonically. All gave their permission for the documents to be used].</p>
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### 1.5.3 ~~Data Analysis~~

My heading for this section employs one of Jacques Derrida's methodological devices for 'deconstructing' tradition and knowledge (Sampson 1989:7). I have put 'Data Analysis' 'under erasure'. This is the practice of first writing a word and then crossing it out and printing both the word and its deletion. Putting a word or phrase under erasure indicates that while we need the term in order to understand the points being made, we should not use the term as it is not accurate: 'Since the word is inaccurate, it is crossed out. Since it is necessary, it remains legible' (Spivak 1974:xiv cited by Sampson 1989:7).

I use this device to highlight my struggles with the words (and practice) of 'data' and 'analysis'. While the words are necessary to describe my approach to a certain phase of the research journey, they are relics of a modernist approach to research and seem far removed from the interpretive practices which I finally adopted in relation to the story of this research journey. My experience of ~~data analysis~~ was fraught with question and dilemma.

#### 1.5.3.1 *The nature of my dilemma*

The interpretive practice of making sense of one's findings is both artful and political.

(Denzin & Lincoln 1994:15)

In discussing the dilemma that I faced in ~~analysing~~ the ~~data~~ I had gathered and in writing about the research journey, I am responding to Punch's (1994:85) concern that research accounts usually present a 'neat, packaged, unilinear view of research... failures are often neglected... dilemmas in the field are glossed over in an anodyne appendix'. My experience of the research journey itself, the ~~analysis of data~~ and the writing process was anything but 'neat' or 'unilinear', and I feel that in order to present the research journey with any integrity I need to bring some of the confusion and uncertainty that I experienced into this report.

Brydon-Miller (2004:6) provides a further rationale for making my thinking explicit in this way, when she suggests that if we are 'to encourage others to critically examine their own uses and abuses of power and privilege, it is by probing and dissecting [our own] such experiences that [we] can best exemplify the process'. It is only by closely scrutinising the 'near environment' (Morawski 1997:677) in which we conduct our research that we can be fully accountable and transform our own practice.

My first dilemma focussed on the question of how one 'analyses' or 'interprets' the record of a research journey. Eco (1990:23) suggests that 'to interpret means to react to the text of the world or to the world of a text by producing other texts... The problem is not to challenge the old idea that the world is a text which can be interpreted, but rather to decide whether it has a fixed meaning, many possible meanings, or none at all'. My poststructuralist leanings align me with the position that there are 'many possible meanings' for any text. The concept of 'deconstruction', which is a central theme in the

work of French philosopher Jacques Derrida, invites us to view the meaning of a text as an endless free-play between central and marginal understandings, all of which are equally possible (Myburg 2000:8-9). The problem that this presents is how does one write up an 'endless free-play' within the confines of a MTh dissertation?

I was burdened by the responsibility of choice and of attempting 'interpretation' or 'analysis'. I was aware that any interpretation requires the creation of images, 'images which selectively highlight certain claims as to how conditions and processes – experiences, situations, relations – can be understood, thus suppressing alternative interpretations' (Alvesson & Sköldbberg 2000:6). I was troubled by the fact that being an 'analyst' or 'interpreter' somehow elevated me from my position as participant/researcher into a position of 'power over' the other participants, a kind of all-seeing eye. I would become an 'expert', someone who is able to uncover the 'true' meaning of what was said and done, suppressing alternative interpretations, no matter how tentatively I phrased it.

If I was to be true to a postmodern perspective on research and a participatory approach to pastoral care, I could not go along with such a position. The key question that I faced was: How can I write up in a way that does not fix my interpretations as most important, that allows for multiple 'readings' of the research journey, and that does not suggest that what is presented is the 'truth' about what happened?

However, at the same time, as a follower of Christ and a pastoral care worker inspired by feminist theology, I could not allow the status quo to go unchallenged. There is a prophetic urge to highlight injustice and to stand against it with every fibre of my being. How was I to reconcile these two positions?

I was also aware that the research journey was a long and messy one, and that I had hundreds of pages of transcripts and other documents recording the journey. This raised other questions: How should I decide what to focus on? And how do I present the journey in a way that does it justice; that acknowledges its ambiguities and inconsistencies as well as the pain that at least some of the participants experienced, including myself?

### **1.5.3.2        *Emerging solutions***

#### *Telling a story about the journey*

Instead of accepting the invitation to pin down a single meaning of the text of the research journey, I have chosen, firstly, to simply recount a story chronicling the journey. Winter (1996:26) suggests that a '...narrative format can be seen as expressing and recognising the basis of action research – the sequence of practice and reflection'. A narrative format resolves some aspects of my dilemma in that 'unlike science, [narrative] leaves open the nature of the connection between events, it invites remaking and negotiation of meaning...there is openness to competing interpretations' (Czarniawska 2004:7).

However, I also need to acknowledge that I will participate in creating what I see in the very act of describing it (Delgado 2000:61). I am unalterably biased and I *will* tell my own story; in fact, I can only tell my own story, no matter how I frame it. I am therefore consciously choosing to centralise my own story through the use of personal narrative, and choosing to write reflexively, exposing my thought processes and my personal

involvement in the knowledge construction process (Hall 1996:36). Although personal narrative has not been widely used in knowledge construction within academic writing, it is supported by feminist researchers who tend to experiment with innovative formats and create new genres in writing about their research endeavours (Winter 1996:26; Stanley 1990:12; Brydon-Miller et al 2004:xiv). Brydon-Miller (2004:6) expresses her support for the use of personal narrative as follows:

[The] use of personal narrative, once considered anathema to serious academic writing, recognises the subjective presence and active participation of the scholar in any research endeavour. To pretend invisibility through the use of the passive voice or a bland third person narration of events masks the multiple ways in which the researcher, scholar, author shapes any act of enquiry.

This approach to writing up engages the reader in the meaning-making process. I invite you to 'think together' with me (Silverman 1975:1 cited by Hall 1996:36), to weigh up the 'evidence', and to draw your own conclusions.

In order to tell the story in an unfolding, chronological sequence and to stay true to my experience of the journey, I drew on the extensive records that I had kept along the way, including planning documents, workshop handouts, letters, emails, minutes of meetings, transcripts of meetings, and the personal journal which I kept over the time of the research journey (Hall 1996:45-46).

Chapter 3 will therefore comprise my personal narrative of the research journey.

#### *Positioning myself in solidarity with the women*

...if women's experiences, so long ignored and distorted by mainstream social scientists, are to be understood, women as subjects of research must be allowed to express their feelings fully and in their own terms. This would require a more human, less mechanical relationship between the researcher and the 'researched'.

(Maharaj 1997:210)

The research journey was long and complex, and it is impossible to tell the story in its entirety and particularity within the scope of this dissertation. I therefore needed to choose one particular place where I would stand and from which vantage point I would be able to survey the ground we covered on the journey, knowing that the scope of my view would be constrained by the particular place in which I stood. In conducting the research journey, I chose to stand in solidarity with the women, and I will again take up this position as I write up. I will therefore be viewing the journey from 'below' (Mies 1984:12), from the place of the marginalised. This has been called 'standpoint epistemology', a perspective which emerges from the following assumption:

...less powerful members of society have the potential for a more complete and complex view of social reality precisely because of their disadvantaged position in the social stratification. They need a double consciousness: a knowledge of their own immediate social condition and also that of more advantaged groups, in order to survive. This social standpoint of a disadvantaged person or group therefore has epistemological consequences – it constitutes a person's or a group's knowledge of the social world.

(Nielsen 1990:7)

This 'potential for a more complete and complex view of social reality' is one of several reasons why I chose to tell the story from the women's perspective. The second reason is that women's stories, particularly in this Baptist church, have always been defined for them: 'Women's humanity, our experiences, perception, thoughts and beliefs have, by and large, been defined for us by men' (Ackermann 1991:93). I wanted to give the women a chance to tell their own story.

Thirdly, I wanted the women's voices to be heard again, particularly considering that they were silenced and overlooked so often during the Skuiling process. I wanted to resurrect the voices, the ideas, the comments that were simply ignored to death during the meetings. So often women would make a suggestion and the conversation would go on, without acknowledgement, as if they hadn't spoken and their ideas were lost to the team. I wanted to immortalise in black and white, as a matter of record, everything that the women said, and then invite the men to listen to their words again and again. I agree with Delgado (2000:61) that '...stories and counterstories<sup>6</sup> can serve an equally important destructive [*and deconstructive*] function. They can show that what we believe is ridiculous, self-serving, or cruel. They can show us the way out of the trap of unjustified exclusion. They can help us understand when it is time to reallocate power'. It is my hope that this record will serve such a function for the leadership of this church.

And, lastly, I feel very strongly that the women's points of view and their 'realities are integral to the knowledge generation process' (Brabeck 2004:45) that constitutes the writing up of this dissertation.

However, at the same time, I felt immobilised by the need to protect the women who had shared. I could not allow them to be identified in any way in the text. Women had expressed fear at being identified, and I needed to treat their wishes with the utmost respect and care. I could not get my degree at their expense. These crucial concerns called for creativity and ingenuity in the way I included the meetings and interviews that were not for public consumption and yet were rich in reflection and story.

In order to do this, after getting permission from every women involved in the research journey, I again went through every record that I had kept of the research journey, including letters, minutes and transcripts but excluding my personal journal. From every record I extracted everything that women had said: the voices of the women. I put these extracts into one document, and then read through the document carefully, summarising the key theme (Oliver 2004:142) of each contribution.

I then divided the record of the women's voices up into sections according to the themes I had identified. Under each theme, I organised the contributions under headings and ordered them to achieve a logical flow from one to the next. And then I removed all the names so that no single statement could be attributed to any single woman.

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<sup>6</sup> Critical race theorists have begun to use personal narrative, or what they call 'counterstorytelling' to give voice to the lived experience of oppressed minorities (Brydon-Miller 2004:7).

I then took these thematically organised sections back to the women. Five of the women met with me one evening. We read the sections aloud and discussed them. Their response was unanimously positive and they gave their permission to include the document in my dissertation. I provided the remaining three women with copies of all the sections, and discussed their feedback telephonically. All were happy for the document to be included as a significant part of the research record and to be submitted as an appendix to this dissertation.

I then compiled the sections together into a book, which we have called, 'Reflections on the "Skulking process": a Book of Women's Wisdom'.

### *Listening to the record of the journey*

I first encountered the idea of 'listening' to research data in an article by Carol Gilligan and her colleagues (Gilligan, Spencer, Weinberg & Bertsch 2003:157-172) in which they described a 'Listening Guide' as a method of interpreting qualitative research data. Although their use of the guide as a method of 'interpretation' and 'psychological analysis' did not fit with my purposes, the idea of 'listening' to the text resonated with my passionate commitment to the value of good listening. They call it 'listening' rather than reading, as the 'process of listening requires the active participation on the part of both the teller and the listener' (Gilligan et al 2003:159).

The Listening Guide encourages multiple listenings to the text and Gilligan et al (2003:159) suggest that 'no single listening is intended to stand alone, just as no single representation of a person's experience can be said to stand for that person'. This seems to provide an opportunity to engage with the 'endless free-play' of meaning referred to by Derrida and described in 1.5.3.1 above. Each listening is documented through notes in the text and summaries. These help the researcher to stay close to the text and keep track of their own thoughts.

I drew on certain aspects of the Listening Guide to compile and later reflect on the Book of Women's Wisdom. I carried out the 'first listening', which Gilligan et al (2003:160) call 'listening for the plot', and which involves attending to what stories are being told and what is happening in those stories (when? Where? with whom? and why?) noting dominant metaphors or themes as well as contradictions and absences (what is not said), and attending to the landscape or multiple contexts within which the stories are embedded.

At the same time, the Guide requires the researcher to consciously and actively listen to her own responses: 'We notice and reflect on where we find ourselves feeling a connection with [people] and where we do not, how [what we are listening to] touches us (or does not touch us). What thoughts and feelings emerge as we begin to listen and why we think we are responding in this way, and how our responses might affect our understanding of... the stories being told' (Gilligan et al 2003:161).

My 'listenings', therefore, formed the basis of my development of the Book of Women's Wisdom, the personal narrative which I share in Chapter 3, my reflections on the women's stories in Chapters 4 and 5, and my reflections on the research journey as a whole in Chapter 6.

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### **1.5.3.3 Reflexivity**

Reflexivity is an interpretive posture which requires the researcher to critically reflect on her practice at every stage of a research process. Reflexivity is a central theme in feminist research, as well as in PAR: 'The subjective experience of the researcher is key to the PAR process as well, for PAR demands constant self-reflexivity about the researcher's assumptions, biases, privileges and power positionalities' (Brabeck 2004:44) as well as her use of language (Alvesson & Sköldbberg 2000:5).

More recently, reflexivity has also come to include the affective aspects of the research process. Delamont and Atkinson (2004:673) suggest that 'the researcher's own emotional work is an integral part of the research enterprise' and cite Ellis (1991) who argues that 'the researcher's own experiences and responses are part of the primary data: they are not gratuitous epiphenomena'.

I engaged in reflection throughout the research journey through supervision and conversations with people integrally involved in the process. Reflexivity is also an important element of my spiritual practice. Prayerful reflection through journaling, silence and solitude and conversation with spiritual directors, played a significant role in this research journey. *However, as I write this I am embarrassed. This sounds like far too sophisticated a description for my very erratic and undisciplined engagement with all of the above practices. Yes, these practices are integral to my spiritual journey, and certainly influenced the research journey at pivotal moments. However, had they been more regular and consistent, their impact on the research journey might have been more significant.*

I have chosen to make my self-reflexivity a significant focus of this dissertation, as discussed above. This will be achieved through the use of first-person narrative, as well as by weaving further questions and reflections into the text throughout the ensuing chapters of this dissertation. Where necessary these will be set apart from the rest of the text through the use of italics, as above.

## **1.6. THOUGHTS ABOUT VALIDITY**

What counts as validity in postmodern qualitative research, or what makes research valid when one can no longer appeal to some abstract standard of 'truth'? Is validity even an appropriate criterion for assessing the quality of qualitative analyses, when knowledge is relative and subjective (Lee & Fielding 2004:543)? These questions have been the subject of much debate in academic circles, and a number of different positions have been taken up. It has even been said that 'no one approach can satisfy every criticism that can be mounted on epistemological grounds; indeed some are so intrinsic they are inescapable by any approach' (Seale 1999 cited by Lee & Fielding 2004:543).

Several researchers have highlighted the importance of reflexivity in ensuring both the reliability and validity of qualitative research (Delamont 1992:9; Walker 1998:250). Delamont (1992:9) suggests that a researcher needs to be 'self-conscious about her role, her interactions and her theoretical and empirical material as it accumulates' and that 'as long as qualitative researchers are reflexive, making all their processes explicit, then issues of reliability and validity are served'. I have discussed my commitment to both reflexivity and transparency in section 1.5.3 above.

As a full discussion of the complex debate around validity is beyond the scope of this dissertation, I will simply acknowledge the contested nature of 'validity' in postmodern research, and align myself with one approach to postmodern research which recognises as 'valid' research approaches which 'empower research subjects, provoke political action

and social change and disrupt conventional understandings of social reality (Altheide & Johnson 1994 cited by Lee & Fielding 2004:543). The effects of research are therefore of more interest than any inherent quality of the research.

Brydon-Miller (2004:14) extends this understanding of validity to the research process itself: ‘...PAR is founded in the notion that action and collective reflection on that action in themselves constitute a valid form of knowledge generation and that the legitimacy of the research endeavour can be judged in part on its success in addressing community concerns’.

Credibility is a concept which some qualitative researchers have suggested should replace validity (Lincoln & Guba 1985 cited by Delamont & Atkinson 2004:669). I have described how I will strive for credibility in my research by making my thinking more transparent and available to the reader alongside my constructions of the research journey. In making the Book of Women’s Wisdom available, alongside many of the other documents generated during the research journey, I am also providing enough of the ‘raw data’ for readers to make their own judgements regarding the statements I make (Potter 2004:618). In addition, I invited the participants to read and comment on all documents that I drew up during the research process, as well as drafts of my dissertation, thus ensuring that the participants supported the validity of the record of the research journey.

## **1.7 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

All ethics – systems of ethics or ideas of what is ethical – are situated within culturally shaped contexts. The enormous diversity of culture on all levels, from macro-cultures to micro-cultures as well as individuals, personal expressions and choices, challenge the creation of any generalised or universal system of ethics.

(Kotzé 2002:19)

By locating my practice within postmodern and social constructionist discourses [see Chapter Four, section 4.3.1], I was required to relinquish the right to appeal to any ‘universal system of ethics’ to prescribe or even guide the choices that I made or the practices I adopted during the research journey. Did this leave me at the mercy of relativism or was there another way? In adopting a participatory approach to practical theology, as discussed in section 1.2, I also committed myself to a ‘participatory’ approach to ‘ethicising’ or ‘doing ethics’ (Kotzé 2002:1-34).

A participatory approach to ‘doing ethics’ required me to shift my focus from the ‘scientific value of paradigms and bodies of knowledge or the doctrinal truths of faith systems’ and instead, consider ‘the effects [that] these knowledges, paradigms, truths, doctrines and beliefs have on people in real life’ (Kotzé 2002:11). I therefore needed to engage in ongoing critical reflection regarding my way of being and doing as a researcher in the light of searching ethical questions like, ‘Who stands to benefit from this?’; ‘Will this cause anyone harm?’; ‘What could the long term implications be of adopting such a practice now?’, and so on. Gatenby and Morrison-Hume (2001:3) describe the reflexive process as the deliberate taking up of a political position with an ethical intent, acting from it, and then intentionally reflecting on the ‘practices and outcomes of that position’. They

also encourage 'reflection on the ways in which we are complicit in the maintenance of those discourses we wish to resist' (Gatenby & Morrison-Hume 2001:3).

As participant/researcher on this journey, I took up a 'political position with ethical intent'. I was/am committed to the participatory practice of theology with an emphasis on the emancipation and healing of women and other oppressed groups, and on changing the structure and practice of churches in the direction of participation and inclusion. The research approach that we followed as a team was also essentially participatory, with a focus on transforming oppressive and unjust gender practices. And a key dimension of that research approach was ongoing reflection on our methods, as well as the effects of any changes that we made (Hall 1996:39).

Kotzé (2002:21) also advocates following a negotiated process of doing ethics, in which everyone who is involved or may possibly be affected by a decision is invited to participate in the decision-making process. One example of this on the research journey focussed on the concept of confidentiality. One of the first things my husband and I did when we met the group at Skuiling was to negotiate a shared understanding with the team regarding what was meant by 'confidentiality' within the leadership team and we referred back to this understanding at various points along the journey.

I have been very careful not to identify the church in any way, and have also developed creative means of ensuring the confidentiality of participants amongst their peers within the church, such as compiling the Book of Women's Wisdom, as described above. I carefully negotiated this process with the women at every step along the way and have respected and implemented their feedback.

## **1.8 LOOKING BACK AND LOOKING FORWARD**

In this chapter I described how this particular research journey began, and located my pastoral practice during the course of this research journey within the field of practical theology. I then listed both the curiosities and aims which shaped my engagement in the journey as researcher/participant. I also described the particular research approach which I adopted, namely Feminist-inspired Participatory Action Research (FPAR), and shared the thinking process which led to me identifying this as an appropriate approach.

I outlined the various steps along the way on the research journey and discussed the dilemmas that I faced as I contemplated how to report on the journey and to interpret the records that I had kept. I described the solutions that I came to and briefly reflected on questions of validity and ethics.

In Chapter 2 I will discuss the need for and significance of this study with reference to the challenges facing the church in a postmodern society and the issue of women's participation in church leadership. I will also reflect on my own commitment to this study.

Chapter 3 tells the story of my own experience of the research journey. I highlight particular moments which were significant in my experience of the journey and relate these moments to the broad themes and movements which I perceived to be important.

In Chapter 4 I invite you to listen to the women's voices as they tell their stories about the Skuiling process. I then reflect on the stories through the interpretive lens of social constructionism and poststructuralist discourse, and engage in a deconstructive questioning of some of the powerful ideas or discourses which exert an influence on both men and women on the leadership team.

In Chapter 5, I hold up the women's vision of what church could be, and invite them to describe, in their own words, the values and practices which would inform a new way of 'being church' together.

Chapter 6 gathers together a number of threads which were left hanging in the first five chapters. I critically reflect on FPAR as a research approach and the implications of this approach in a context where the distribution of power is so significantly skewed in one direction. In particular, I focus on the concepts of 'participation' and 'emancipation'. The question, 'to be or not to be feminist' introduces my reflections on what it means to be feminist within the church and on the attitudes towards feminism and feminists that I encountered during the course of this research journey. I close the chapter with a brief, personal reflection.

## CHAPTER 2

### LOCATING THE RESEARCH JOURNEY WITHIN ITS CONTEXT

In order to locate this research journey within its context, it is necessary to examine the cultural and ecclesiastical landscape within which it was conducted. It is also necessary for me to acknowledge my personal commitment to the research and my discursive positioning or epistemological starting point in embarking on the journey.

#### 2.1 THE NEED FOR AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS RESEARCH JOURNEY

The nature and context of this research journey brings into sharp focus several key issues facing church leaders at present. The first is the challenge faced by the church as it strives for relevance and credibility in a postmodern and, in many ways, post-Christian society. The second is the highly contested question regarding the role of women in church leadership.

##### 2.1.1 Churches in crisis in a postmodern world

There is a growing body of literature which describes the church worldwide as being 'in crisis' (Sweet 1999; McLaren, 2001; Olson 2002; Robinson 2003, to cite but a few). More and more people are disillusioned with the church and its promises and church attendance is declining in most Western countries. People are questioning churches' conservatism, hierarchical structures, imperialism and exclusivity, and inwardly-focused, individualised messages, as well as their failure to address in a united and unambiguous way, the key issues facing communities worldwide. There is a perception that the church as an institution often seems to reflect the prevailing attitudes of the society in which it finds itself, rather than sounding the call for change and taking the lead on ethical issues and moral questions, such as challenging racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination (Venables 1998:2).

At the same time, the prevailing attitudes within Western society are undergoing profound shifts as ideas about knowledge and the fundamental nature of reality are questioned and reviewed. In this regard the church seems to be lagging behind other institutions of society in terms of vision and strategy. This was one of the challenges that Doug expressed as facing his church. Doug described how the church leadership had followed all the strategies currently popular in the Western church of developing vision and mission statements and implementing a church growth programme focussing on the establishment of small groups or cells within the church, but that the response of the church to their

efforts could only be described as apathetic. There seemed to be a mismatch between the strategies that the leadership were adopting and the needs of the congregation.

One of the key problems seems to be that the church is operating largely within a modernist paradigm while the prevailing intellectual climate in the Western world is now distinctly postmodern. In order to understand why this poses a problem, we need to examine more closely the ideals and challenges of both modernity and postmodernism, as well as the effect that modernist thought has had within the church.

### **2.1.1.1        *A few words about modernism and postmodernism***

Modernism can be described as both an intellectual movement and a paradigm or mindset which has framed the thinking of most people in the Western world since the early seventeenth century. Brueggeman (1993:2) describes how, at this time, in the wake of the Reformation, the 'intellectual-cultural underpinnings of Western Europe' underwent a decisive shift from the 'coherent, unified system of meaning and power', which had been pervasive during the medieval or premodern era. This shift set the stage for modernist thought.

Modernism rests on several key assumptions. The first is the assumption that that there exists a stable reality which can be understood in terms of an ultimate and overarching truth or system of knowledge, and that we can discover this truth through the rigorous application of scientific process, reason and rational thought (Burr 1995:12, 14).

A second modernist assumption is that there are hidden structures or rules that underlie the surface features of the world as we see it, and that the truth about the world can only be discovered by studying these underlying structures (Burr 1995:12-13). The term 'structuralist' has also been used to refer to theories that assume such deeper structures or realities underlying our perceptions of the world.

Thirdly, modernism adopted mechanistic metaphors for human systems, and popularised the idea that individuals, relationships, families and communities operate like machines, and that it is possible to locate problems or faults in their functioning and 'fix' them.

A further basic assumption of modernist thinking is that the individual is the basic unit of society and that individuals' potential to bring about change both in their own lives and society at large is limitless, given the correct intrapsychic conditions.

However, scientific methodologies failed to deliver a rational, knowable, fixable, controllable world that is ever-progressing toward perfection and this prompted a questioning and then a shift away from optimism, certainty and objectivity in intellectual circles. This shift has been called postmodernism.

Postmodernism is not a unitary concept but a broad socio-cultural stream or trend of thought which has emerged in response to the 'critical consciousness, fragmentary perspective and reductionism of modernism' (Herholdt 1998:215). Postmodern thinking is characterised by 'doubt that any discourse has a privileged place, any method or theory a universal and general claim to authoritative knowledge' (Richardson 1991 cited by Denzin & Lincoln 1994:2), and thus entails an abandonment of the search for truth in 'grand theories' or 'overarching metanarratives' (Lyotard 1984:53). There is a concomitant loss of faith in the notion of absolute truth. A postmodern approach acknowledges that truth is relational, meaning that it is 'both subjective (creating truth) and objective (discovering truth)' (Herholdt 1998:226).

Postmodernism embraces subjectivity as a valid expression of reality (Herholdt 1998:216) and restores the value of human feelings as part of experience. Therefore, in one sense, postmodernism is a 'rediscovery of the value of human participation, a quest for wholeness and meaning' (Herholdt 1998:218). There is a shift from dualism to reality as a multi-layered process where there exists continuity between all things. Spirit and matter are not contrastive or opposing, rather both are acknowledged as aspects of reality (Herholdt 1998:227). Poststructuralism and postmodernism are allied movements, and the terms are often used interchangeably.

Whilst people in the Western world might not acknowledge or describe their mindset as postmodern, few remain untouched by the disillusionment which has accompanied the relinquishment of the modernist project.

### **2.1.1.2        *The influence of modernism and postmodernism on the church***

Modernist thought has subtly but powerfully infiltrated many of the values and practices of Western churches. However, this influence goes largely unacknowledged. Aquino (1993:82) suggests that this is a dangerous position for the church to occupy:

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.

A focus on the individual is one significant feature of modernist thought which has come to characterise evangelical theology which is the theology espoused by the Baptist Church.

With his philosophy encapsulated in his now-famous maxim, 'I think, therefore I am', Descartes influenced a shift in the intellectual focus of the day from collective to individual cognitive processes. Olson (2002:11-23) describes how this was taken up by the Western Protestant church and contributed to a significant shift in the proclamation of the gospel. For the first time, the church began to make the claim that the gospel of Jesus Christ meets individual people's needs. This resulted in a situation in which, according to Micklem (1948:173 cited by Kretzschmar 1998: 21):

...the prevailing characteristic of the modern age is not the repudiation of religion as such, but its relegation to a private and domestic sphere, as the other-worldly refuge of the individual soul, and its tacit renunciation of any claim to be the main informing and determining influence in the wider fields of study.

This 'prevailing characteristic of the modern age' is what Kretzschmar (1998) has called the 'privatisation of the Christian faith'. She uses this term to describe an essentially dualistic, spiritualised and individualistic approach to the gospel according to which the basic doctrines of sin and salvation are applied almost exclusively to an individual's relationship with God, an approach which fails to engage in contextual analysis or address sin within the wider society: 'Exploitation, discrimination, and injustice are thus, social rather than religious problems' (Kretzschmar 1998:24). This results in a form of faith in which it is 'frighteningly possible to be "spiritual" and racist [or sexist] at the same time because the political side of life is kept separate from the higher "spiritual side"' (Walker 1990 cited by Kretzschmar 1998:23). The result of this is that the voice of many churches has become increasingly silent on matters of social concern and, when they do speak out, their perspective lacks credibility, relevance and follow-through in action.

According to Olson (2002:14), the rise of science and the notion that reality and existence could be understood, controlled and 'fixed' when problematic also influenced the church. The work of the church took on a mechanistic quality with the purpose of 'fixing' the problem of sin in order to achieve the goal of modernity, namely a perfect life, or in Christian terms, 'salvation'. New methods of biblical interpretation emerged, and there was a strong focus on rationality, technology and technique as the keys to 'mastering existence' (Olson 2002:15).

Increasingly, the church found themselves talking the language of psychology, sociology and anthropology. Ideas were also taken on board from business regarding management, organisational development and marketing and the church joined in the quest for progress. The recruitment of new church members became a carefully researched marketing exercise and, in striving to keep their modernist 'customers' happy, the church became a careful 'purveyor of whatever individuals desire' (Olson 2002:20) in their quest for individual freedom. Within this framework, the size of a church became a measure of success and served to validate the goodness or 'blessedness' of the ministry offered there. In many ways, this is still the prevailing mindset of the institutional church in the Western world.

We see this mindset reflected in the information that Doug gave me about his church's deacons: that their desire for the church was to 'be seen as a significant church', and that 'growth in numbers' was a key measure of success for them. They had gone so far as to implement a church growth programme developed for North American churches in order to achieve these goals.

In short, Western churches often seem so to embrace the dominant values and ideals of modernity that they lack the capacity to critically assess those values and ideals (Robinson 2003:9). The voices within the church that have expressed their critique of modernity were, and remain, in the minority and have had little impact<sup>1</sup>. So, as people are becoming disillusioned with modernity's claims and values, if they turn to the church, they are likely to just find more of the same. The church sounds the same as the dominant culture of a passing era (Robinson 2003:9). The majority of Western, protestant churches are still functioning within a modernist paradigm, while their members are increasingly influenced by postmodern scepticism.

Where does this leave the church? Robinson (2003:4-8) describes a number of changes that have begun to take place in the culture of North American society over the past thirty or so years, under the influence of postmodernism, which are having a significant impact

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<sup>1</sup> There is a new 'movement' or 'conversation' which has been called 'the Emerging Church' or 'Emergent' arising from within the church, primarily (but not only) in North America, which takes seriously the questions and challenges of postmodernism. The emerging church movement seeks to explore and develop innovative ways of doing and being church together, ways which are relevant and appropriate for a new cultural context (see [www.emergingchurch.org](http://www.emergingchurch.org); [www.emergentvillage.com](http://www.emergentvillage.com)).

on mainline Protestant churches. These include a shift from obligation to motivation as a key factor in affiliation to any organisation or institution; the erosion of respect, trust and confidence in institutions and authority figures, and a shift towards a more ethnically and religiously diverse society.

In South Africa these changes probably began later than in North America but have been accelerated dramatically by various factors, including our recent political history. The belated realisation by many South African Christians that their church either actively promoted a flawed theology or failed to speak out and/or act against injustice and oppression in the context of an Apartheid government has left many disillusioned and deeply questioning the role and relevance of the church. In many instances the established church is still fairly complacent in the face of these changes, perhaps assuming that 'its place, relevance, importance and constituency' (Robinson 2003:10) will always exist. There seems to be a real danger that this will not prove to be the case.

It seems that churches are facing a critical challenge: Do we simply shift to fit in with the new culture, the new era, in the same way as we adapted to accommodate modernism, or 'is it possible to have a faith that both acknowledges and transcends the historical situation we find ourselves in?' (McLaren 2001:22).

Whichever route churches choose to take, in a postmodern era there is unlikely to be a single strategy or approach to change that works for all, no overarching system for the transformation of churches:

Modernity sought to promote transformation by offering large, overarching principles that would be applicable to us all...I contend that the opposite is true. Significant congregational change will happen one congregation, one pastor and one text at a time.

(Olson 2002:4)

In the light of this statement, my research journey takes on a new significance. I am not looking for an approach or strategy that can be applied to all churches. I am simply seeking to document an action research process that was undertaken in 'one congregation', by 'one pastor' and one leadership body.

### **2.1.2 The role of women in church leadership**

The second key issue underpinning this research journey is the role of women in church leadership. It is related to the first issue in the sense that it is one of the areas in which many churches have failed to address injustice within wider society and have simply

perpetuated unjust practice towards women within the church. The issue of women in church leadership only became the focus of debate in the Christian church at large when attitudes and practices within the wider society began to be challenged and changed.

The history of the exclusion of women from positions of leadership in the church can be traced back to early church fathers such as Tertullian, Aristotle and Aquinas who 'not only usurped positions of power and superiority over women, but also had the temerity to attribute divine authority to their opinions and teachings regarding women...the patriarchal ideology has been easily maintained, because many women, as well as some men, fear that in questioning the church they may be questioning God' (Venables 1998:18).

The role of women in church leadership is still under discussion in many denominations around the world, and there are as many opinions and positions as there are churches. Some churches maintain a firm position against women playing any significant role at all in church leadership, while others are more advanced in terms of this debate in acknowledging the equality of women, affirming their giftedness and calling, and welcoming women into the ordained ministry. However, even in those denominations which welcome the full participation of women, the experiences of many women in the ministry suggest that sexism still plays a significant role in the church hierarchy and in the attitudes and practices of many male ministers and many men and women within their congregations (Becker 1996, Venables 1998). Ketshabile (1996:178) describes the situation as follows:

What is also frustrating is that women are required to exercise their ministry in exactly the same way as men exercise theirs; any woman who does not do so is regarded as a failure. In order to satisfy the status quo some of the women have had to behave like men. They start to walk, talk and behave differently. In this way they disassociate themselves from other women.

In inviting women, albeit the wives and partners of the elected church deacons, to participate fully in the retreat weekend, Doug and the deaconate were taking an unprecedented step for their particular local church, where women are yet to be given a voice in either leadership structures or the pulpit. I have wondered whether they were fully aware at the outset of the implications of such a step, or the expectations that it might set up for the women involved.

In order to fully appreciate the implications of such a step, it would be useful to locate it within the context of current practice within the Baptist Church in South Africa regarding women's role in church leadership.

### **2.1.2.1 Women in church leadership in the South African Baptist Church**

#### *A brief introduction to the Baptist Church in South Africa*

In South Africa there exist several distinct groups of churches which call themselves Baptist. There are churches affiliated to the Baptist Union of South Africa (BUSA), churches affiliated to the Baptist Convention of South Africa (BCSA), and a number of independent Baptist Churches. The church that participated in this research journey is affiliated to the BUSA.

BUSA was established in 1877. This drew together the (mainly white) churches planted by English and German Baptist settlers. Baptists have always emphasised 'voluntary association, congregational government and freedom of religious conscience' (Kretzschmar 1998:28), and therefore speak of themselves as members of a union of Baptists and not as the Baptist Church of South Africa. There have been a number of other associations which have come under the umbrella of the BUSA over the years, including the Afrikaanse Baptiste Kerk (ABK), the Indian Baptist Mission (IBM) and the Natal Indian Baptist Association (NIBA).

'The Baptist Convention of Southern Africa existed, until 1987, as a special association within the Baptist Union. It consists of Black churches that came into being as a result of the evangelising and church planting effort of the South African Baptist Missionary Society (SABMS)' (Vink 1993:12). While under the umbrella of BUSA, Convention churches were not acknowledged as full members, and the entire Convention could send only two representatives to BUSA assemblies, while BUSA churches could send one representative each. The Convention representatives each had a single vote on behalf of the entire membership of the Convention, which in 1978, for example, was greater in number than the membership of BUSA. For this reason and others, in 1987 the Convention withdrew its associational status from BUSA and now forms an independent group call the Baptist Convention of South Africa (BCSA) (Kretzschmar 1998:28-45).

Both Louise Kretzschmar (1998) in *Privatisation of the Christian faith: Mission, social ethics and the South African Baptists* and Sydney Hudson-Reed (1983) in *By taking heed...The history of Baptists in Southern Africa*, trace the historical roots of the Baptist Church in South Africa. In addition, other studies have considered various aspects of Baptist theology and practice within South Africa. These include two unpublished PhD theses: Vink (1993) *The impact of liberation theology on the Baptist Union of Southern*

*Africa and Harris (1996) Baptist identity in ecumenical perspective: A critical exposition of the 1987 Statement on Baptist Principles of the Baptist Union of South Africa.*

However, the study which has the most bearing on my own is the unpublished DTh thesis of Nelson Osamu Hayashida (1999), entitled *Women and leadership within the Baptist Convention of South Africa*. In his study, Hayashida describes and reflects on a series of interviews which he conducted with women, and a few men, within BCSA concerning their experience of leadership within their churches, with a particular focus on the role of women. Although his study focusses on policies and practices within BCSA, he includes a chapter on interviews he conducted with women in BUSA, which is the context of my research journey.

However, although Hayashida (1999) was able to describe how women continue to be marginalised and silenced within many BUSA churches and made a number of helpful suggestions regarding the way forward, to my knowledge, no-one has yet documented a process whereby women were included into the leadership structures of a church. The research journey described in this dissertation was such a process and, in the chapters which follow, I unpack some of the complexities and challenges that we encountered as women were invited to participate in leadership for the first time.

As my research journey took place in the context of a BUSA church, I will focus in the two sections which follow on the policies, theology and practice of churches within BUSA.

#### *Baptist theology and practice and the role of women*

Baptist theology emphasises the priesthood of all believers, the principle of congregational church government (Statement of Baptist Principles, The South African Baptist Handbook 2002-2003:390-391) and a 'non-sacramental' theology of ordination (Kretzschmar 1998:37). Such a theology does not apparently present any obstacle to the full participation of women at every level of ecclesiastical life. However, as Hayashida (1999:75) points out, 'the priesthood of all believers held by Protestants for four hundred years is generally practiced and understood to mean the priesthood of all male believers'.

Baptist women are still largely 'denied authority, status and decision-making abilities', as well as 'influence or genuine freedom of expression' (Hayashida 1999:39-40), even though they are very active and are usually in the majority, in their local churches. They are given the illusion of participation through for example, the Baptist Women's

Association, but are not permitted or empowered to interact in any meaningful way with the theology and practices of BUSA (Kretzschmar 1998:227).

In 1987, a woman's name was presented to the BUSA Assembly for ministerial recognition for the first time. This led to a task team being established to investigate the validity of this presentation. The task team reported that there should be no objection to women's ordination since God not only calls, but equips women for ministries of the church (Harris 1996:246; Hayashida 1999:43).

However, the Regulations Governing Recognition for Ministry in the South African Baptist Handbook (2002-2003:411) state that: 'It remains the prerogative of the local church to appoint whom it will to undertake such ministry roles and to lay down whatever conditions are deemed appropriate'. Therefore BUSA does not have the final say, and while it can state its own position on an issue, such as the role of women in church leadership, churches are not obliged to follow its lead.

Thus, a survey conducted amongst South African Baptists in 1994 concluded that:

Gender plays a significant role in the appointment of leaders... It would be almost impossible for a woman to be voted to a position of senior leadership within the denomination as a high percentage of respondents would vote against any female candidate on the basis of gender alone.

(Harris 1994: unpublished paper cited by Hayashida 1999:44)

This bears out Kretzschmar's (1992:302) study, which showed that by 1991, 72% of BUSA churches had no female deacons, 21% had one female deacon, and 7% had two female deacons.

Many Baptist churches still go along with conservative, literal readings of Scripture passages such as 1 Corinthians 11:2-16, 1 Corinthians 14:26-40 and 1 Timothy 2:1-15, which they believe preclude women from certain ministries within the church, such as preaching and teaching (adult men) and therefore from ordination into full-time pastoral ministry. This theological framework of interpretation has been challenged and deconstructed on a number of levels, by BUSA and by numerous theologians. However, my own experience of the Baptist Church suggests a deep mistrust amongst 'ordinary' church members of academic theology, and I have often heard the question, 'But are they [theologians] saved/do they know Jesus?', when discussing a particular theologian's perspective. There is also a strong resistance to liberation theology and feminist ideas.

However, a recent publication (2000) which addresses the role of women in ministry from a strongly evangelical perspective is *Why not Women?* Written by Loren Cunningham who, with his wife, co-founded Youth with a Mission, one of the world's largest mission societies, and David Hamilton, a missionary, linguist and theologian, this book presents a careful and methodically constructed challenge to traditional evangelical interpretations of the texts mentioned above.

In the first chapter of the book, Cunningham (2000:13-14) describes the dream that he has for the current generation in the church:

I see every little girl growing up, knowing that she is valued, knowing she is made in the image of God, and knowing that she can fulfil the potential He has put within her. I see the Body of Christ recognising leaders whom the Holy Spirit indicates, the ones whom He has gifted, anointed and empowered without regard to race, color or gender... There will be total equality of opportunity, total equality of value, and a quickness to listen to and follow the ones the Holy Spirit sets apart. This new generation will not be bound by traditions hindering women from obeying God's call.

Whilst this formulation is not without its problems (the dream comes from a man and could be seen as patronising; God is still referred to in the masculine and so on), it is a huge step forward in conservative evangelical circles, and its presentation as popular literature rather than academic theology may increase its impact.

In the light of such powerful arguments from within their own theological tradition supporting the participation of women in leadership and ministry, I can't help questioning whether the BUSA is not abdicating its responsibility to more than half of the members of its affiliated churches, by failing to take a clear position in actively promoting the role of women in leadership, rather than by simply permitting it. My question is borne out by the findings of Hayashida's (1999) study, which reveal confusion and double standards within local Baptist churches regarding the role of women in church leadership.

In 1998, Louise Kretzschmar (1998:343) wrote the following regarding the response of South African Baptists to 'gender challenges':

Whilst feminist issues have received some attention both within the BU and the Convention in recent years, the position of women still leaves much to be desired. Only very few women have graduated from Baptist Colleges and, although individual churches within the BU are now free to employ women as pastors, the [white] male-dominated structure of the BU remains completely unchanged. Very few women are employed as ministers, Baptist women as a whole are not conscientised and many men do not support the ordination of women... what is

needed is a comprehensive re-reading of our Baptist heritage and the traditional male-oriented interpretations of the Bible and theological writings.

One current article, which offers such a 're-reading of... the traditional male-oriented interpretations of the Bible' from within BUSA, is entitled '*Good News' for gender issues among Africa's Christians* and was written by Dr Martin Pohlmann, who is currently head of BUSA's Baptist Theological College in Gauteng. In this article, Pohlmann argues that all traditions and cultural practices need to be carefully evaluated in the light of the Gospel. This includes discriminatory practices towards women. Pohlmann (2005:181) goes on to outline his perspective on what it means, 'biblically speaking, to be a man or a woman irrespective of culture or current changes in gender thinking within many societies'.

Although this article affirms the equality of women and argues against any practices which discriminate against the participation of women in ministry on the basis of gender, Pohlmann's (2005:191) conclusions fall short of taking a clear position in promoting the role of women in Baptist church leadership. He provides an 'escape clause' which I believe will be taken up by many congregations: 'Both men and women can serve the Lord in any ministry, so long as a *working relationship* (this may differ from place to place) is developed within their communities'. Without a clear injunction to invite women to participate in leadership, there is no reason for the current leadership structures to change. Also, in failing to specify at least certain features of a 'working relationship', it is likely that even if women are invited to participate in leadership, the nature of their participation will still be in a subordinate role.

#### *The current experience of women in church leadership in the BUSA*

In his doctoral research, Hayashida (1999) focussed on the extent to which South African Baptists (in BUSA and BCSA) have suppressed the roles and abilities of women in church leadership; he hoped to 'uncover through the stories and experiences of women and men in BUSA and in BCSA, the attitudes and practices of local Baptist churches towards women in leadership' (Hayashida 1999:2).

The stories that he gathered confirm that there are a variety of positions taken on women in church leadership across Baptist churches within the BUSA. Hayashida (1999:151) found that there 'exists a range of behaviours and policies – a confusing cloud of theologies'. Here are a few of the replies of respondents and interviewees cited by Hayashida (1999):

A woman can go to the mission field and do all these things [teaching, preaching, counselling, managing and so on] but as soon as she comes back home to the local church she has to sit down and be suppressed.

(Research participant cited in Hayashida 1999:142)

Our church has not given attention to women serving in any leadership position in the church. The issue of women to be free in leadership in the church has never been raised to consciousness.

(Research participant cited in Hayashida 1999:149)

Teaching is not a problem, but when it comes to preaching, the church looks to a man. Biblically I believe this is correct [said by a woman].

(Research participant cited in Hayashida 1999:152).

I'm not a deacon, I can't be a deacon because of the constitution, but I'm allowed to preach. That's the wonderful irony where I'm involved. Officially, I have no kind of standing at all, but practically they have denied me nothing, nothing where my gifts are concerned, where my education is concerned [said by a woman].

(Research participant cited in Hayashida 1999:160).

However, in other Baptist churches women have had exactly the opposite experience. Many Baptist churches have a constitution which allows for women to be elected as deacons and have no official policy prohibiting women from preaching, but in practice in many of these churches, such as the church with which this research journey was undertaken, neither has ever happened.

In one church, women were invited to serve as deacons only because there were not enough men. However, the older men protested at this because 'according to the Scriptures a woman could not be a "deacon"', so the name of the leadership body was changed to a 'management committee'. This appeased the older men and resulted in a situation where the women were then performing the duties of a deacon and doing it well, but could not be called deacons (Hayashida 1999:143).

Older men seemed to have more fixed ideas than younger men, but one respondent reported a shift even in the attitudes of older men in her church:

Today there seems to be more willingness of older men to *allow women greater privileges* [italics mine] than twenty years ago.

(Research participant cited in Hayashida 1999:147)

One would question whether this 'allowing of greater privileges' is due to a re-examination of Scripture and an altered understanding of the role of women. It seems more likely to be a pragmatic accommodation of women's contributions or simply a reflection of the changing attitudes of the society at large towards women in positions of leadership and authority. If the latter is the case, it raises serious questions about the prophetic role of the

church in relation to injustices and oppression in society. Does the church lead or follow in this regard?

History seems to tell us that the Baptist Church (like many other churches) tends to uphold rather than challenge the status quo and changes only reluctantly, when it can no longer sustain its line of argument. This can be understood in the light of our previous discussion regarding the modernist influence on the Western church and Kretzschmar's (1998) argument that the prevalent theology within BUSA churches tends to 'privatise' and 'spiritualise' the Christian faith.

Hayashida's (1999) study highlights the fact that, in many churches within the BUSA, women do not hold leadership positions, and that this is congruent with the theological position taken by most men and many women within the church. But where does this leave the many women within the church who sense a calling to ministry roles traditionally occupied by men such as preaching, teaching and leading? My own experience of journeying with a close friend who faced such a dilemma, is that the only option may be to leave the Baptist Church and find a denomination which welcomes their calling and gifts. In the quotes cited below, Hayashida's (1999) research participants suggest that this dilemma results in confusion and uncertainty amongst women, many sensing that God would have them use their gifts in ministry but finding it difficult to challenge the authority and biblical interpretations of the dominant male perspective on this matter.

It is so right for me to feel *so good* about serving God. I'm thrilled about it, but the Bible says so many things about the subservience of women to men and to the church. This bothers me so much! I am so confused. I would love to be a pastor, except for what the Bible says.

(Research participant cited in Hayashida 1999:163)

A number of the female respondents expressed the hurt, frustration, sadness, anger and powerlessness which they feel in relation to the way that they and other women are treated within their churches. The following respondent was labelled 'a rebel' for taking a stand against the traditional role of women in the church:

I burn to preach the word of God. I always have since I came to Christ... To believe that 'this is God's will' that we cannot do this or that is not acceptable to me. Women are not only here for procreation. For a long time I was hurt, bitter and angry... As women growing up in the church the only role we had to play was to baby-sit and make tea. I have always been accused of being a rebel... I had a grandfather who said that I could be or do anything I wanted.

(Research participant cited in Hayashida 1999:162)

Many women also spoke about the double standards and hypocrisy which they witness in their churches:

Pastor and leadership will be supportive of women in missions or leadership in private or informally but in public they would not be supportive. My pastor will be happy to allow me to fulfil pastoral roles as long as I am not a 'pastoral candidate'. I am seeing hypocrisy and I am struggling to swallow that. At times this makes me feel angry.

(Research participant cited in Hayashida 1999:168-169)

I relate to many of the statements made by the respondents in Hayashida's (1999) study as I, too, experienced what it was to be a woman in the Baptist Church. Having grown up in the Methodist Church, my husband and I decided to attend the local Baptist Church when we moved cities, early in our marriage. We were actively involved in the church for nearly five years. I tell my story of this experience in section 2.2 below, which describes my own commitment to this research journey.

### **2.1.3 A further word about the significance of this study**

It has been noted above that within BUSA churches, there exist many different attitudes, policies and practices regarding the role of women in leadership. The research journey described in this dissertation was undertaken with one particular church within BUSA, and its practices and policies cannot be considered to reflect the position or experience of all BUSA churches. However, I believe that this church is far from unique in the challenges and questions it is grappling with, and that the story of this journey will trace a number of themes which will resonate with other churches in South Africa, across denominational barriers.

## **2.2 MY COMMITMENT TO THE RESEARCH JOURNEY**

In acknowledging my involvement with the subject matter, I am not only recognising the personal sources of my preoccupations, my interest and my writing but I am also recognising the ways in which I am a social/cultural being, a being which seeks to make life matter, to make meaning from experience. I, the researcher, am a socially constructed person, a product of my culture. I speak through my experience of gender, sexuality, race and class.

(Hosking 2001:162)

Hosking's (2001) statement reflects a crucial shift in thinking which has occurred within the social sciences in recent years and which has opened up the possibility of new and creative approaches to research. As I discussed in Chapter 1, researchers can no longer claim to isolate themselves and their agenda from the research endeavour, assuming that their interventions and theorising can occur in a space that is somehow neutral or

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

My own intensely personal commitment to this study is continually under construction within the context of my own geographical and political location, my culture, my gender, my relationships and my lived experience.

I came to this research journey as a woman, as a mother of daughters, as a student, as a feminist-inspired practical theologian, as a friend of the pastoral couple who invited my husband and me on this journey, and as one who deeply desires to follow Christ with integrity in each of these roles.

As a woman, I have known what it is to be on the receiving end of discriminatory attitudes and practices. However, I also realise that there are 'multiple sources of power and privilege that function to create the complex webs of power relationships' (Brydon-Miller 2004:8) and that in many ways I experience privilege and advantage over others. I am white and was raised in a middle-class South African home during the Seventies and Eighties. This afforded me the ambiguous experience of occupying a position of privilege and power in relation to people of colour during the period of my formative years. And in many ways this continues.

So at any one time I occupy different positions within relations of power: I am both privileged and oppressed. 'I can choose to mask this fact... or I can choose to act, invoking my power in ways that I hope will be empowering to others' (Brydon-Miller 2004:8). In embarking on this research journey, I was aware that I would have power, first as facilitator and later as participant/researcher, to speak and act in ways that might not be available to the women in the church. It was my desire to use this power in the interests of the women in the church. I was motivated to do so, at least in part, by my own experience within the Baptist Church.

Three years prior to our first meeting with Doug, my husband and I had left a Baptist Church where we had been worshipping for five years, primarily because of our growing discomfort with their conservative stance on the church's involvement in addressing injustice, poverty and privilege within the wider context of South Africa, as well as their

conservative stance on women's involvement in church leadership. I will focus my further discussion on the latter concern as it is of particular relevance to this study.

Like Doug's church, the constitution of the Baptist Church we attended allowed for women to be appointed to the deaconate and, shortly before we left, the first woman was appointed. While this was a significant step forward, I did not expect that it would have any real impact on the many and varied ways in which women were marginalised and silenced within that church.

The most overt manifestation of this was evident in the sermons preached every Sunday. In all the time we attended the church, I never heard a women preach. I also felt demeaned by the way that women were portrayed in sermons, which was nearly always in a joke or anecdote in which they were cast in stereotypical roles. I cannot remember women being portrayed as intelligent or insightful or powerful or wise or as anything beyond their physical appearance or their role as seductress, wife or mother.

Inclusive language was seldom used in the liturgy or Bible readings. Biblical references in sermons were almost exclusively male and I was invited to take the men in the Bible as my role models. The 'femininity' of God was almost completely ignored, as were Jesus' own 'feminine' qualities and his revolutionary attitude towards the women he encountered.

Feminist theologians have strongly challenged such an 'unreflected' common-sense assumption that 'equates male reality with human reality' (Schussler Fiorenza 1996:165), and Radford Ruether's (1985:4-5) description of the situation resonates deeply with my own experience:

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.

I enrolled for a Master's programme in practical theology during this time, as well as attending a 'Life Revision' course at a retreat centre over the course of a year. I was therefore exposed to other ways of thinking about God and the Christian journey. During that year I encountered my yearning for a more authentic and ethical approach to spirituality, and was also challenged by the commitments and challenges of feminist theology.

Such questions resonated with my own experience, and I was unable to quell the protest that was rising within me. Ultimately, it was the thought of my own daughter's story of herself being influenced by the sexism within the church that convinced both my husband and me that we needed to leave that church in search of a church which welcomed and affirmed the giftedness of both women and men.

This time of decision-making was not an easy one for me as the issues were not as clear-cut at the time as they are in retrospect. The church had a very powerful influence on what I understood to be 'truth' and on my ideas about 'right' and 'wrong'. It was not easy to stand against such powerful ideas, particularly when they were presented as coming directly from God. For much of this period of time I was in turmoil as I wondered whether I was not perhaps going off down a path of temptation rather than a path of freedom. However, by a narrow margin, freedom won and I cut my ties with the Baptist Church.

When Doug asked us to facilitate the leadership retreat and explained the context, I was struck by the opportunity that this offered to offer something positive in a context that I had experienced as hurtful and damaging. It was also a chance to have a voice in a context where I had previously been silenced and to ensure that other women were given the space to speak and be heard. It was an opportunity to go back to a situation that I had walked away from, rather than trying to change it from within. At the time I had experienced the power of the church's authority in its various forms as quite overwhelming, and had simply not felt up to the challenge. Now I felt more able to make a contribution. The invitation to facilitate the retreat therefore represented the possibility of healing and redemption.

### **2.3 DISCURSIVE POSITIONING**

My epistemological starting point for this research journey is informed by the challenges of postmodernism, poststructuralism and the social constructionist movement. My epistemology, in turn, shapes my theological understandings which I would describe as both feminist and postmodern. I am aware that certain schools of postmodern thought might see these two positions as mutually exclusive. I discussed this apparent contradiction in Chapter 1, section 1.5.3.1. In the light of my theology, I prefer a participatory approach to practical theology and pastoral care.

Each of these positions is expanded upon in the figure provided in Appendix 5 and will be developed in the body of this dissertation, interwoven with the story of the research journey.

However, it may be helpful at this point, to acknowledge that my epistemological/theological starting point is probably different from that of many of the other participants on this research journey. The official theology of the Baptist Church is 'traditional, conservative evangelical' (Vink 1993: Abstract). However, my theology is currently more closely aligned with postmodern and feminist theologies. Postmodern theology invites rather than dictates; it opens up possibilities and is unafraid to acknowledge paradox and inconsistency. Thus, postmodernism requires a more humble, tentative and questioning approach, and a shift in emphasis from claiming certitude to exploring convictions.

Thus a postmodern approach is neither exclusive nor ideological but respects other views and ideas, including those generated within a modernistic paradigm. Postmodernism quite openly acknowledges that it only 'serves as a tentative model until a better model can be found' (Herholdt 1998:228). This encourages me to hold my own beliefs lightly and not to feel threatened by different perspectives.

Therefore, my own theological perspective should not constitute a problem as I seek to understand rather than convince, embracing the validity of multiple perspectives without having to pin down a single 'truth' (Brueggemann 1993:9). Postmodern theology challenges me 'to make sense of the world by participating in the creation of a new world' (Herholdt 1998:225). In Chapter 3, I tell the story of my desire to 'participate in the creation of a new world' within this particular Baptist church.

## CHAPTER 3

### MY STORY OF THE 'SKULING PROCESS': REFLECTIONS OF A PARTICIPANT/RESEARCHER

#### 3.1 A REFLECTION ON MY REFLECTIONS

This should in fact be a postscript, as I am writing it after I have written my story of the journey, but I think it will be more helpful to locate it here in order to clarify and motivate the approach I have taken.

First of all I need to say that this is not 'the' story of the research journey. It is 'a' story, my story. Each person who participated in the journey would, if asked, have their own story to tell. So this is one of many stories. It does not carry any more weight than any of the other stories, and needs to be read in conjunction with the record of the journey provided by the documents we kept, and with the Book of Women's Wisdom.

Secondly, I have been frustrated by the constraints of space, and I am all-too aware that this is by no means the 'whole', even of my story. I have been able to provide only a few 'snapshots' of my experience. When one is on a journey, and taking photographs, the composition of the photographs is largely based on what catches the photographer's interest; what he or she sees as significant or important at that moment. I took the same approach in retelling the story of this journey. I tried to fill in essential details, but have focussed only on those moments, conversations, comments or experiences which caught my attention and which stood out for me in my reflections on the journey.

Lastly, I have made a conscious decision to simply allow my story to be. Many times as I was writing, I was tempted to slip back into analysis and interpretation, and to appeal to the authority of those wiser than I to support my ideas and insights. I am fully aware that there exists a body of academic knowledge which intersects with my experience, at times supporting and at times contradicting. I also fully acknowledge that my dialogue with this body of knowledge has shaped my own understandings and knowledges in relation to this journey, and where I am aware of drawing on the specific ideas of particular authors, I have indicated this. However, this chapter is about experience rather than theory and I have therefore chosen not to interrupt the flow of the narrative with reference to the literature. In my writing of all other chapters, I have woven the literature into my reporting and reflecting on the research journey.

## 3.2 MY STORY

### 3.2.1 The journey begins

*I am sitting on the grass, looking out over a vast expanse of green lawn to a row of blue gum trees gently swaying in the wind. The sun is setting, and the scene is bathed in a soft yellow light. My children are playing, enjoying the freedom of space in which they can run and run, and I am leaning slightly against my husband, Dave, who is sitting beside me. The scene seems idyllic, peaceful, inviting rest, but I am anything but peaceful. I am petrified!*

*In a few short hours, Dave and I will embark on a weekend's journey of reflection and prayer with the deacons of a Baptist church and their wives and partners. I feel overwhelmed by the responsibility. Doug, the pastor, used the phrase 'significant businessmen' to describe the deacons, and this phrase haunts me now, inviting its opposite: 'insignificant housewife', to undermine my feminist confidence. I wonder how the other women feel about participating alongside these 'significant businessmen'. It's a first for them as well.*

*The participants are all strangers to us, apart from Doug and his wife Kate, who are friends. As the couples arrive and introductions are made, I feel so young, so vulnerable, and I'm relieved when another young couple arrive with a baby; there is a point of connection!*

*What have we got ourselves into? What if the process we have so carefully and prayerfully developed doesn't work? What if we do more harm than good? What if...*

*I take a few minutes to walk alone, to find again that still centre of calm in the midst of my storming emotions, to share my fears, my pounding heart and sweating hands with the God of peace, and to entrust the weekend again into God's care. Then I turn and walk quickly towards the meeting room.*

In contrast to my fears and uncertainties before the Skuiling Retreat, the retreat unfolded in a gentle and beautiful way, and with outcomes that, I think, took us all by surprise. Both the men and the women were willing to go along with the simple framework for sharing which invited respect, listening, care, silence and reflection into our conversations together. I commented at a later meeting:

From my perspective, what happened on the weekend [the Skuiling Retreat] was not rocket science... There was honest sharing and real listening, and that was the essence of what happened on the weekend; that there was space created, a safe space created, for people to share, when others were listening, and you know that... I think if we're looking for something fancy to take back to the church, we're missing the point, you know, it's almost that we need to create opportunities where people feel safe to share, and others really listen... that's the sense of connection, of being real, of not pretending, of trust.

Two other things struck me deeply about the weekend. The first was that, in planning the process for the retreat, I took seriously the fact that we were asking God to share God's

dream for the church with us, through each person who was invited to participate. Each person's dream would reflect a facet of God's dream for the church.

However, while this was our aim, I am deeply aware that we cannot coerce God or demand God's involvement in any process. All we can do is to humbly invite God to meet with us and then wait and hope. This we did, but for me, hope and fear, faith and doubt all co-exist fairly peacefully within my spirituality. And so it was that what we understood to be God's profound involvement in the process over the weekend took me by surprise, and I wrote the following in my journal at the end of the weekend:

*It's hard for me to put into words what happened this weekend, but... I think that everyone, including Dave and I, came away changed... I am so struck by the image I am left with of God's willingness, eagerness, and perhaps even God's longing, to meet us more than halfway. I am grateful to God for responding to people's willingness to be open, and to receive a part of God's dream.*

The second thing that struck me about the weekend was a realisation that grew as I listened to people sharing their dreams. This is how I recorded it in my journal:

*I was moved to realise how similar our deepest needs are – all people, men and women, old and young – we long to be accepted, loved, heard, acknowledged. We want to feel safe; we want to belong. We want – need – to be in deep, real relationships with people.*

I went away from the weekend with immense excitement, and hope for the leadership and the church. The women's responses to the weekend have been recorded in the Book of Women's Wisdom, but it was the men whose support for the process was necessary for it to continue once they were back home. So I would like to highlight a few of the things that the men said, which grew my sense of hope.

The men had welcomed the women's participation, and many expressed their appreciation of the women's contribution. One of the men said, 'I am amazed by [the women's] ability to dream. We need everyone's participation'. Another man said that he wanted to hold onto 'the awareness that God will speak through anyone, even the person that we don't think He will speak through'. Another man recognised 'the need for loving relationships in the life of the church' and 'the need to try and listen'. He said, 'I found this a strain initially, but it has become easier over the weekend'. Others were also struck by the importance of listening well. One man expressed it as follows: 'For me, listening is vital. We should never stop listening to one another. We should listen, and stop ourselves from pushing our own ideas. We need to consider each other'. Another man highlighted the importance of going forward with 'unity of purpose' and of everyone 'using [their] gifts and talents under God's direction'.

At the end of the weekend, the team agreed with one of the men's suggestion that 'the entire church needs to go through the same process that we have been through – wave after wave of looking back and dreaming'. Dave and I were therefore asked to continue journeying with the leadership team as they planned how to extend the invitation to participate to the rest of the church. We left expecting that we would meet again with the leadership within weeks of our return home.

It was my hope that, having experienced what they did over the weekend, the team would take joint responsibility for ensuring that the same features and quality of interaction that had characterised the weekend, would be taken along on the journey as it continued to unfold. However, although I realised that this level of participation and sharing was unusual for this group, I had no idea just how unique this experience had been. To be honest, at this time, I could not actually conceive of the situation as it had been prior to the weekend and the extent to which the women had been excluded and silenced.

Only recently, when compiling the Book of Women's Wisdom, did I notice how different the men's and women's hopes were for the Skuling Retreat. The men's hopes were largely about wanting to impact the church as a whole, despite the fact that only the deacons and their wives were attending the retreat. In contrast, the women's hopes were largely focussed on the weekend of the retreat. Their hopes spoke of the welcome they hoped to find in the team, how they would like people to *be* together over the weekend, and the quality of relationships they would like to see unfolding in the team. I wondered what this said about where the men and women were coming from as we embarked on the retreat. Was it that men were used to these 'retreats' being about planning and visioning for the future of the church, so they slipped naturally into that mode? Was it that the women, having had no experience of such retreats, were still unsure of the exact nature of their role and their welcome, so their hopes expressed a sense of wanting to be safe, and of wanting the team to be together in a way that did no harm? These questions make me wonder about the kind of courage that it took for the women to agree to attend the retreat in the first place.

In retrospect, I was immensely naïve in expecting that one wonderful, emotional weekend of participation would transform nearly two thousand years of theologically sanctioned patriarchy in the church! I began to realise how wrong I had been as the journey unfolded, and as I began to talk more with the women. I also began to experience the effects of the patriarchal attitudes within the church for myself.

### 3.2.2 The weeks that followed the Skuiling Retreat

Within days of returning home from Skuiling, Doug telephoned me to reflect briefly on the retreat and the positive feedback he was receiving, and to confirm his commitment to taking the process forward. We agreed that a whole Saturday would be set aside for the leadership team to meet again and talk about how to take the process forward.

However, as the weeks passed with no further word from the church, I became increasingly concerned about where people were with the process and, particularly, where the silence was leaving the women. After four weeks, I was contacted and a date was set for the next meeting, two weeks later. The day had been reduced to a morning, and Doug said that he would also be using the opportunity to give feedback to the leadership team regarding a workshop on cell group ministry, which he had attended.

To be honest, I was frustrated that so long had passed without any further interaction between the men and the women at a leadership level. I wondered if the women felt the same, or something different, and asked Kate if she felt a meeting with the women prior to the joint leadership meeting might be helpful.

Kate was also curious about what the other women were thinking and feeling and, with Doug's knowledge, we set up a meeting for a few days before the joint meeting.

### 3.2.3 The meeting with the women

*The conversation is in full swing when suddenly we hear the crunch of footsteps on the gravel outside. Our voices fade, and we are all tense, on the alert, listening. The footsteps stop outside the door and we can hear someone trying the handle. We look at each other, not knowing what to do until someone calls out, 'Who's there?' A man's voice responds. It's the pastor. We all relax and there are a few giggles as someone goes to open the door for him.*

*He has come to convey a message to his wife, and pops his head round the door to greet us all: 'Ja, I know you're plotting a revolution here. The doors are locked and everything. Howzit Kimmy'.*

*He speaks with his wife, says goodnight and goes on his way. We lock the doors again (this is South Africa after all). There is silence for a few moments as we listen to his fading footsteps, then a few giggles, and then the voices start again.*

*The conversation continues, but for a few minutes I am not present to the women. The man's comment is playing over and over in my head. I am irritated and I'm not quite sure why. Wasn't his comment intended as a joke? But his words said so much more. Is he afraid of the women meeting together like this? What could he be afraid of? Did it mean anything that he called me by the diminutive of my name? Was he just being affectionate*

*or was he asserting something about his position and my position? And what effect did his comment have on the other women there?*<sup>1</sup>

*I drag my thoughts back to the conversation with the women, which is racing ahead, leaving me behind. I never get the chance, or muster the courage, to ask my questions, but they continue to dance on the edges of my consciousness.*

The meeting with the women started slowly and cautiously, but it wasn't long before the conversation was flowing rapidly, having taken on a life of its own. One of the women who attended the meeting had not been present at the Skulking Retreat and so the others filled her in on what had happened. I was able to recapture some of the sheer thrill of the retreat as I listened to the different women's reflections on the weekend and what it had meant to them (see Book of Women's Wisdom:1-3). However, their excitement soon gave way to sadness and frustration as they began to talk about their experience of church since the weekend (see Book of Women's Wisdom:3-7).

I was touched by the level of trust and honesty amongst the women, but I had many questions as I witnessed the advances and retreats of our conversation. As we gathered strength from one another, the conversation would flow more quickly, voices would grow louder and more powerful and there would be clear imperatives for action to be taken: The men need to know what we are feeling; how can we tell the men this? And then, almost as if we realised what we were doing and the enormity of what we were suggesting, there would be a retreat into laughter and quiet despair. Was this fear? What were we afraid of?

During the meeting, I realised that my role as facilitator/participant presented interesting challenges and responsibilities. As a woman, I was an 'insider' to the experience of being silenced and sidelined. However, I was not a member of this particular church community, so I was an 'outsider' to the particular experience of these women. My 'outsiderness' also resided in the position of power that I occupied as a facilitator in this meeting and within the wider leadership team, a position that had never been held by a woman in this church before. I was aware of my power and the immense responsibility of using it wisely and creatively.

As I witnessed the ebb and flow of the meeting, I felt quite strongly that I needed to support what the women were saying in their stronger moments. The essence of what they said was: We need to communicate with the men about how we are feeling. I

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<sup>1</sup> After reading this chapter, the pastor who made the comment expressed his deep concern regarding my reflections on his comment. He insisted that he had not intended it in any negative sense and that it was simply a joke. We reflected together on how different people might perceive the same comment differently, depending on where they are positioned in a relation of power.

suggested that the women prepare a statement to present to the men at the beginning of the joint meeting to be held a few days later. It was my sense that a written statement would present a unified voice and would be more difficult to dismiss than individual voices. However, I wondered how 'safe' such a step would feel for the women, and I did not want my suggestion to be an imposition. My insider/outsider status was highlighted as I very tentatively gave voice to my thoughts:

Kim: I just have a sense that it's important for the women to send a message of some sort to the men to prevent some kind of... you know... back off? But, you know, I'm so aware that I'm an outsider here so I can't...

S: Wouldn't you include yourself, 'cos you were at the weekend?

Kim: Well if you'd invite me to, I'd like to.

S: Are you happy to be included? I would rather that you were included than you weren't 'cos it feels like you have wisdom having contained us so amazingly... that you could become an insider.

Reflecting on this dialogue in retrospect, my response probably says more about my own need for acceptance and belonging than it does about my actual status amongst the women. It probably would have been more helpful to acknowledge my 'insider/outsiderness' at this stage.

The women agreed that a statement would be helpful, but it was time for the meeting to end. We quickly brainstormed ideas for the statement, and it was agreed that I would compile the ideas into a statement and that the other women would have the opportunity to check the statement before the joint meeting.

In retrospect I realise that there is a fine line between using your power positively to support those whose freedom you seek and taking control in a way that diminishes others' power. Why did I need to write that statement? There was a room full of competent women who could have done it. I can see now that 'participation' is not something that we invite only into a research process as a whole; participation needs to be invited in every 'micro-process' along the way.

### **3.2.4 The first joint meeting after the Skuling Retreat (March 2004)**

*I am sitting at my computer reading over the statement that I have just compiled from the women's words at our meeting last night. The statement is clear and direct. It expresses what the women are feeling and thinking at this point, all that they felt they needed to communicate to the men. But something is not right.*

*I read through it again. Why am I so uneasy? Isn't this what we all agreed to? Then suddenly, in my mind, I am sitting in the meeting and reading the statement. I look up and*

*see the men's faces – and I see the women watching the men's faces. An icy silence descends on the room. I realise that I am afraid of the implications of reading out this statement, afraid for myself and afraid for the women. The statement polarises the team into 'them' and 'us'. It invites blaming and defensiveness into the conversation. It opens the door for conflict.*

*I am torn between honouring the women's decision (at my suggestion) to make the statement and abandoning the statement altogether. Is there another way, a safer way that does not compromise on communicating the women's thoughts? Is there a safe place for the women to stand as they speak out, a place of protection that shelters them just a little?*

*An idea begins to form. Can I provide the team with a metaphor, an image that will allow them to say what they need to say, without being completely exposed and vulnerable? Is it possible to take refuge in a haven created with words? I smile and begin to write.*

Before the joint meeting on the Saturday morning, I made a point of speaking to each woman and explaining why I had decided to abandon the statement. I explained how I planned to create a space for the women to share their own thoughts without the polarising effect I had come to realise the statement might have. All the women agreed, many having had similar reservations after our meeting.

This was how I opened the joint meeting:

Those of you who are hikers will know that on some hiking trails the paths are well-worn, broad, fairly smooth, in some cases, even concreted. These paths lead through familiar territory. They've been around a long time, and they allow us to explore certain parts of the territory, enjoy certain aspects of the scenery. It's safe, we know what is expected of us and we know what we can expect in return – but it's limited – all we can experience is what we can see, reach, taste, smell, hear, feel from that path.

It seems that on the weekend away, we were invited to get off the familiar, well-worn path, climb up onto a rocky outcrop (a bit like the outcrop on the top of the koppie at Skuiling) and take a good look at the path that we had been travelling – where it had come from and the kind of territory it was leading us into – as well as catching a glimpse of the rich and fertile territory that lies beyond what we have experienced on the familiar path. And it was exciting. And beautiful. And inviting.

There was no clear path leading into the new territory, but we had the exhilarating sense that to step out in that direction, as a team with all participating, there was the possibility of travelling to places we could never have imagined travelling to, of experiencing new horizons, new mountains, new valleys, new scenery that would be life-giving, energising...

And then we came down off the rocky outcrop, having glimpsed the richness of possibility, but having no clear idea of how we were going to carve out the new path, and when we got back onto the old path, it was so busy – there was a whole church full of people who had no idea about the territories that we had glimpsed and who were still firmly of the belief that this was the only path and the only possibility and perhaps even suggesting or demanding that we actually need to be improving this path rather than enduring the unknowing of foregoing new paths.

And perhaps, over time, our picture of what the new territories looked like has faded a bit, and perhaps we have even questioned whether it was real. And the trace of a new path that looked so promising doesn't seem nearly as secure as the tried-and-tested broad road that no-one else really seems to have a problem with.

I offered this as a picture, a story. I asked the team if anything in the story resonated with them and invited them to spend a few minutes either enriching or changing the story or telling a different story. I was amazed at how readily the team embraced the imagery and how willing both the women and the men were to describe their experiences through the lens of the metaphor. It seemed to open up the possibility for saying things that could not be said directly (see Book of Women's Wisdom:10).

During the course of the meeting, the women were able to express all the key issues that had been raised at the women's meeting, and the men were willing to listen. Would it have been more powerful to present a united statement? Perhaps. Did I just retreat at the thought of conflict? Perhaps. Would a written statement have polarised relationships further? I still think it may have. Did we achieve what we had set out to, as women? For this meeting: yes. In the longer term: no. Even in retrospect, it is still not clear what course of action would have had a more lasting impact on men's attitudes towards women's participation.

After every meeting, I had written letters providing a detailed record of the meeting, and I invited participants to comment, change, add, and make the record their own. However, only once did someone ever comment on a letter – a valuable question about the use of a single word. Apart from this, people accepted the record as being an accurate reflection of the meetings.

I have wondered about what people's silence meant. The documents were usually distributed by email, with many of the women not having access to email themselves. Did all the women even get to read the documents prior to the meetings? Several comments suggested not. Were the team silenced by my 'authority' or 'power'? Was I seen as an 'expert' who could not be challenged?

I have wondered in retrospect why I didn't let someone else create the record – an insider/participant. Perhaps one of the reasons was that I had the sense that the documents held little value for the majority of participants, and that they regarded them simply as something I needed to do for my research. For me, they were far more than this.

I was hoping that the letters would 'extend the conversations'<sup>2</sup> begun in each meeting. I am aware that people quickly forget what is said during conversations and meetings, while the written word endures through time and space, bearing witness to the contributions, ideas and decisions which constituted each meeting. I hoped that these would become a resource for reflection both between and within each of our meetings.

### **3.2.5 The second joint meeting after the Skuling Retreat (April 2004)**

*We have just opened the second joint meeting with a Henri Nouwen reflection on success and fruitfulness. The response has been positive, laying a foundation for the process that I am hoping will unfold over the next hour or so. I begin to talk about an outcomes-based approach to educational planning and how we can apply similar ideas in our planning of a process to take to the church. I mention the importance of setting objectives (our dreams) upfront and then deciding how we will assess whether or not we are meeting those objectives. Will we be measuring success or fruitfulness?*

*I am about to ask the team for their thoughts about this as a process, when Patrick stops me short. He is angry and frustrated and his voice rises as he expresses his frustration:*

*'I am an engineer and I just feel like we are talking around in circles and not getting anywhere. This that we are talking about is nebulous. There is no vision. Where are we going to? I am frustrated. We are talking in word pictures... This is taking hours and hours. We are not talking practical issues. There is no clarity about where we are going. We can draw this out for the next few years. I am so frustrated! I feel a spiritual frustration! Where do we want to go? What is God's purpose for the church? What does God want?'*

*I freeze inside. It feels like his words are bulldozing over the foundation we have laid. His understanding of what is happening is so different to mine. How do I handle this? How do I contain this man's anger in a way that will not destroy what we have already achieved? I am afraid of his anger but as I take a deep breath I feel a calmness take over. I begin to speak, slowly and carefully.*

*'Can I just go through my understanding of the process that we have been on together?'*

*Slowly and methodically I describe each step of the process that we have undertaken together, the objectives we set and the outcomes already achieved. I am hoping that my calm response will take the edge off his anger.*

*I finish speaking and Patrick is silent. I am trembling slightly. I wait. Ben begins to speak and I take another deep breath.*

Reading again through my response in the transcript, I realise that I failed to acknowledge Patrick's anger and frustration. I simply tried to reason it away. I wonder what effect it might have had if I had had the courage to allow Patrick's contribution to inform the direction we took, rather than trying to divert him. I wonder where it might have taken us if I had invited the rest of the team into a conversation about frustration: where it comes from, what it says to us, what increases it and decreases it, and what its effects are on us as individuals and as a leadership team. It's an interesting wonder<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Epston (1994:31)

<sup>3</sup> I am indebted to Sophia for this wonderful phrase.

Patrick was not alone in his frustration at that meeting. His sentiments were echoed by several other men and one other woman: we need to get on and *do* something now. And so, as the meeting unfolded, we did something. We distilled two key objectives and a number of sub-objectives that the leadership team wanted to set before them as a goal:

1. Create an environment in which there is the invitation/freedom for God to work
2. Create an environment in which real community is established

Although the meeting had assumed a completely different focus to what I had imagined, I felt satisfied with the wording of the objectives, which expressed a sense of invitation and creativity rather than imposition. And many of the team seemed happy that they had achieved something in setting the objectives. I reminded myself that as participant/researcher I could not set the agenda for the team or impose my thoughts and ideas on them. I was simply one participant along with all the others.

This focus on doing, on action steps, on developing lists of things that could be done and ticked off was a theme that recurred at many of the subsequent meetings, most notably at the feedback meeting after the Skuling process had been taken to the church.

However, one question remains unanswered for me: What happened to these two key objectives and the many sub-objectives that we developed that day? They were never referred to again in any meeting I attended. Were they lost entirely? Or were they slotted into the six key themes that the pastors developed after receiving feedback from all the cell groups? I am sad that the invitational ethos and the focus on freedom and creativity expressed in these objectives never seemed to find its way back into the conversation after this meeting.

### **3.2.6 Facilitator Training**

*The silence is thick and heavy with tension. I hold my breath as I wait for someone to speak. The journey has been heading inevitably towards a moment like this and now it has happened: Sophia has just suggested that the women should attend the next deacon's meeting to be part of a discussion that will affect them directly.*

*The men are clearly stunned. I am beginning to wonder if anyone will respond when Sophia's husband says slowly, deliberately, 'Well then, perhaps the women should come to the deacon's meeting'. Now the other men find their voices very quickly and provide a list of objections:*

*What about the finance report? Do the women really want to sit through that?*

*The discussion is really about nuts-and-bolts issues, wouldn't the women just feel that they were wasting their time?*

*Do the women really want to come?*

*The meeting is to be held at a house that is located in a fairly dark and inaccessible place. Would the women feel safe in getting there and back again?*

*I am aware of the heat of anger rising within me. I want to stand up and look each man in the eye and say, 'Have you even thought about how the women will be experiencing this discussion? Where is the talk of transformation and "everything's up for grabs" now?'*

*Someone is speaking: 'Well, I suppose that if the women really want to be at the deacon's meeting, they can come'. I find my voice and speak softly, carefully maintaining an appearance of calm: 'Do you think it would be possible to rephrase that as an invitation?'*

*But it is one of the other men who speaks: 'Look, guys, we've messed up already and we can't really get ourselves out of it. The feeling about women attending the deacon's meeting is very clear. Let's start from scratch, set up a separate meeting specifically to discuss this and only talk about the [Skuling process] when the ladies are present'.*

*The team agrees on a date and a time. I am not invited to attend.*

### **3.2.7 Feedback meeting after Skuling process taken to the home cell groups**

*I do not enjoy driving at night. The glare of the oncoming lights hurts my eyes and I never feel as sure of the road as I do in the daylight. Tonight I am finding it particularly difficult. It is late and I am tired. I am also struggling to contain my emotions. What I witnessed at the Skuling feedback meeting tonight invites me to believe that this whole journey has been a waste of time and energy. My presence at the meetings is so tenuous, I feel like I am squeezing my way in. I have no mandate to speak out. Is there anything more I can do?*

*I glance over at the seat beside me. My tape recorder is lying on the seat. I pick it up, turn over the tape, push the record button, and begin to talk:*

*What am I feeling right now? I'm angry, I'm frustrated, I'm sad... I'm frustrated that the team just can't see that there's another way, or that they have seen that there is another way and they have seen that it works, but somehow the old ways are just so much more powerful.*

*What have the men learnt about listening to each other? Tonight was just exactly the same as that first evening before we laid the ground rules: we chip in, we argue, we just don't listen to what someone else is saying. The women's voices were just completely overlooked... is it just because I am a woman that I am hearing the value in what the women are saying or is there inherent value in what they are saying?*

*There is this huge rush to get this process done so that we can tick it off a list and say: 'We've done it, we've got an action plan happening and once there is **action**, then things are really going to happen in the church'.*

*Andre is saying that we have wasted a whole year. Has there been no value in what has been done? Is there no value in hearing people's voices? Are patriarchy and hierarchy so firmly entrenched that the value of hearing unimportant peoples' voices has been completely undermined? Is there any way for this team to move forward if patriarchy remains unchallenged; if men's domination and men's ways of being and doing remain unchallenged? But how do I as a researcher, who has been invited into this church community, challenge their practices? I'm just feeling more and more that I have to. Should I write a letter? I have to raise the questions: 'What are your current practices saying to women? What are your current practices saying to children? What are your*

*current practices saying to those who are not part of the inner circle of the church, of the deaconate? How are your practices being interpreted?’*

*I feel that I will have failed the church, and particularly the women of the church, if I don't speak out. On the one hand, the risk is minimal for me. I can't be excluded from the church. The worst that can happen is that they just dismiss the letter as the rantings of a rabid feminist, so I haven't got much to lose, except perhaps the integrity of the research. But if it is participatory research and I am a participant, can I reflect on the process and what happened tonight and share my reflections with the group? It will not just be a documentation of what happened but a reflection on it. I've not really done that up until now and perhaps that has been a failing, a lack. Perhaps I have trusted the process too much.*

*The men have said that they need to improve communication. I'm saying, 'Hey, guys, it's not about communication, it's about how you are positioned in terms of power, how you are sharing power, how you are imposing power...'*

*To what extent is a business mindset holding sway here? The confrontational way of being together and the sense of urgency about action and achievement and measurable outcomes seem to me to be more appropriate in the boardroom than in the church. What are some of the business ideas that I have seen in operation tonight?*

*The person who has the new ideas holds power.*

*It's okay to bully people to achieve results.*

*Time is money – everything has to be done quickly.*

*Transformation in the church is something that we can 'do' and then tick off a list.*

*Nothing will succeed without a plan.*

*Managers need to keep control of the people that they are managing.*

*You consult with the people in order to give them the feeling that they have a voice, but ultimately it is a form of manipulation to get them to go along with what management wants.*

*Management versus 'the workers' – it's a 'them' and 'us' situation.*

*We avoid any hint of weakness or brokenness – only the strong shall rule.*

*Why do the men need to pin it down into a plan? Why can't it just be an ever-unfolding process of participation, of inviting further and further participation? Why is there the need to go back to the book [Natural Church Development]? Aren't we then saying that the person who wrote the book has more knowledge than our entire congregation put together; that our congregation can't come up with the ideas about what our congregation needs and how our congregation can implement those ideas? I want to challenge that fundamentally. Ask the congregation. Ask the people!*

*I really do see that this is a completely different way of doing church to what has been done in the past – I acknowledge that. Do I acknowledge that fully enough? I don't know. Maybe as a woman, as a non-ordained person, as a non-deacon, as non-responsible for what happens in the church, I can see it or envision it and it's more difficult when you are tasked with the responsibility of making it happen in the church. But are they? Who gave them that responsibility? The problem lies with the whole structure of church, this hierarchical structure with the power and responsibility being in the hands of a few. And my question is: is that what God intended? Aren't we designed to work together as a body? Yes, there are different parts in the body but each part has a function, an integral function, an important function. Church is not something that we do for the congregation; church is the congregation.*

*Why can't I think of these things when I'm in the meeting? What silences me when I'm actually in the meeting?*

*I feel very tired after a meeting like that... and I realise that my suggestions, my observations shifted the conversation, they shifted the way things were going and have shaped how the AGM feedback is going to happen. But what happens when I am not there? I am an outsider here; what am I doing wrong that the group are not embracing and owning the process? How do I encourage the team to take responsibility for holding each other accountable to respectful and caring ways of being together? Or better yet, how do I encourage them to hold themselves accountable?*

I did write that letter. I first transcribed the entire tape recording of the meeting and then wrote a letter. It was an honest letter and it reflected my passionate involvement in the unfolding process (see Appendix 2). I sent it to my then-supervisor who cautioned me not to send it as it was. He pointed out how I was actually collaborating with the 'dominant story' by using problem-saturated language such as I have underlined in the following paragraph:

Sadness also drew my attention to the destructive patterns of relating that I witnessed as the meeting unfolded. I witnessed people's voices and opinions being devalued, disrespected and ignored. I witnessed interruptions and confrontations. I witnessed voices getting louder, as the only way to be heard was to speak louder than the others and to jump in quicker than the others, as the previous speaker paused to think or breathe. I saw commitment to a task taking precedence over relationships. I witnessed valuable comments, suggestions and reflections lying forgotten in the dust as the conversation raced off in a new direction. I witnessed women struggling to claim their right to speak, and their contributions being overlooked. I witnessed a lot of talking and very little listening.

I realised how the questions I had asked were overshadowed by the negativity of the text.

The letter went through four revisions before I eventually sent it. The final version (see Appendix 3) removed me and my emotional responses completely from the picture. It was the voice of an uninvolved observer, wondering about various aspects of the team's 'being' and 'doing' together.

I sent the letter to the pastor with the request that it be forwarded to all members of the leadership team, men and women. I had a brief discussion with the pastor regarding the letter; and a conversation with one of the pastor's wives, and later raised it once again at a team meeting. My comment was overlooked and the conversation moved on. By and large the letter was ignored.

This was a significant experience for me. Attending the meeting, listening to it all again as I transcribed it, and writing and rewriting the letter had been draining intellectually and

emotionally. I felt as if I had poured my soul into the letter. My passionate commitment to what I had realised about the value of inclusion and participation allowed me to do no less. And no-one responded.

I still wonder whether the letter would have had more of an impact if my own voice, my passionate voice, my emotional voice had not been edited so ruthlessly. Or would it have simply alienated the men and made any further dialogue impossible? I also wonder whether it would have made a difference if the letter had come from a man and not a woman.

In a sense I was able at this point to identify more profoundly with the women in the church than at any other time during the research journey. I had a new understanding of and respect for their choices to withdraw and to be silent. What was the point of risking when the response hurt so much? I felt the sheer weight of powerlessness pinning me down, bullying me into believing I was incapable of meaningful action.

The intensity of my feelings made me realise that I needed to take some time to reflect on the journey thus far and on my own responses to the journey. In doing so, I came face to face with my own desire to 'save' the church through the Skuiling process. I had wanted to go in there and change the church. I had wanted the value of what Dave and I had offered to be valued and acknowledged as a major turning point for the church. I realised that a significant aspect of my motivation was about wanting to exert my own power and influence. These were the very things I was accusing the men of. It was a painful realisation. The voice of failure was very loud in my head and, at times, drowned out the voice of hope and possibility.

I was sorely tempted to abandon the research journey at this point, and I wavered between commitment and despair for months afterwards. I considered not writing up the process at all. It was too painful to write about what I perceived to be my failure. But then there is the mystery of grace and new beginnings. And if there was hope for me then there had to be for the church as well.

It was ultimately my conviction that I *had* to 'wield the power' granted to me, however marginal, on the side of hope, change, freedom and the meaningful participation of all in the conversation that is 'church', that convinced me to go on, and continues to influence my pastoral work.

### 3.2.8 Feedback to the church at the Annual General Meeting (AGM)

*I have observer status today. I am sitting watching as the groups discuss the Skuiling process and share ideas about how to put their dreams into action. It is encouraging to hear the enthusiasm, to listen to the buzz, to see people participating. It is hard for me to grasp the fact that this has never happened before – the church members have never before been invited to give their input into a process like this. I need to hold onto the wonder of what is happening, because right now, I am feeling sad about what is not happening.*

*My dream, my vision for this ‘feedback session’ was to hold a ‘church-wide gathering’<sup>4</sup> that stretched over a whole day. A gathering would have involved the telling and retelling of stories in small groups and then within the entire gathered community, with the community creating new meanings and envisioning new possibilities through the storytelling and reflection. That was my dream, and it was reduced to a two-hour feedback/discussion session.*

*I need to let go of my dreams for this church. Are my dreams not simply my way of wanting to control the process and its outcome? If it is to be a truly participatory process, I cannot hold onto my own hopes or expectations about where it will end up. It is not my church and it is not my process. But is the process truly participatory? If I look back over the year, I see that the invitation to participate has gradually been withdrawn, or perhaps become more conditional – the women may participate, as long as they play by the same rules as the men, as long as they shout loud enough to be heard. Every participant’s contribution is not given equal weight. The power to shape the process and its outcome is unequally distributed. And the invitation that I had, the power that my position as facilitator afforded me, has largely been withdrawn.*

I was not able to stay for the AGM which followed the Skuiling feedback session. I was sorry afterwards that I had not been there as what unfolded seemed to provide an interesting commentary on the effects of the Skuiling process within the wider church. One woman stood for election to the deaconate. She missed being elected by 5 votes. Two of the deacons did not make themselves available for re-election. And several of the other stalwarts of the deaconate, who had been in leadership roles in the church for many years, were not re-elected. This left an unusually small deaconate consisting of only three elected deacons and the pastors.

I have wondered what message the congregation was sending through their vote. It was the only meaningful voice that many of them had, and still have, within the church.

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<sup>4</sup> The idea of a community-wide gathering was sparked by Michael White’s (2003a:17-56) description of his use of narrative practices in community work, which involve participatory processes in small groups followed by community-wide gatherings.

### 3.2.9 First action planning meeting after the AGM

*The room was alive with the clinking of cups and saucers and the lively chatter of voices, punctuated by bursts of laughter. I had my tea and was standing alone, watching, thinking. A man found himself beside me and smiled.*

*'So, Kim. Where do you worship?'*

*I gave the name of my church. It was Methodist, not Baptist.*

*'Oh. Is it a big church? I would imagine you belong to a really thriving community.'*

*'No,' I reply. 'We're actually quite a small church. Struggling. The church has had a difficult year. But we are getting a new minister at the end of the year, a young man from Swaziland. So I'm excited about the possibilities for our church; we're entering new and exciting territory. But, no, I can't say we're thriving or successful.'*

*My words kind of hang there between us. He chooses not to take them up and we both move on to other conversations.*

*Afterwards the dialogue plays around in my mind, raising difficult questions. I can't help questioning the relevance of a church community located in South Africa, in 2004, who are still grappling the issue of inviting the participation of women in leadership. There are so many pressing issues which face the church in South Africa today, issues of immense proportions that require the united efforts of all people of faith: overcoming mistrust and racial prejudice and building relationships between racial groups, alleviating poverty, the myriad challenges related to HIV/AIDS, substance abuse, domestic violence, child abuse and on the list goes... How is a church which still excludes more than half of its membership from active participation at every level of ministry going to even begin to address these other challenges?*

*I do acknowledge that the church has made a start. The pastor took a risk in inviting the participation of women in the first place. The leadership acknowledged the value of the women's contribution. Change is happening, even though it is slow and incremental. If the leadership was willing to risk once, to challenge tradition and try new ways of being, what does that say about the potential for change up ahead as times and leaders change?*

Prior to this meeting I had asked if I could have some time to invite reflections from the leadership team regarding the letter I had sent after the previous meeting. However, there had been significant changes in the deaconate since the previous meeting and so, instead, I simply asked the team members who were present to tell me some stories about what had been happening in the church since we last met. My role at the meeting had not been made clear, so I just listened as the conversation unfolded rather than actively facilitating.

The stories generated an energy and enthusiasm amongst those present, who shared about many positive changes and incidents that had occurred during the weeks prior to the meeting. I enjoyed the stories but was saddened again by the patterns of interaction I witnessed amongst the leaders.

The following exchange between a man (M) and a woman (W) stood out for me as I listened to the transcript of the meeting:

M: You know the other thing that...sorry, I don't want to dominate this meeting but...

W: But you are...[laughter]

M: Ja, I'm just being real, hey?

W: So real and dominating go together?

M: Ja [laughter].

The conversation moved on after this, but I am struck by the courage that it took for this woman to resist domination, even in this quiet and gentle way. I wonder what led up to her speaking out, and what resources she drew on as she made the decision to speak. I wonder what effect her speaking out had on her. Did she even realise what she had said? And if such an apparently small, but utterly unique, moment of resistance is possible, what else might be possible in terms of future acts of resistance?

### **3.2.10 Second action planning meeting after the AGM**

*I am in conversation with Doug. Although I am listening to what he is saying, I am not fully present. I am aware that I am avoiding an issue, and am wondering how to raise it. I respect Doug immensely and value his family's friendship outside the context of this research journey. How do I express my thoughts in a helpful and constructive way?*

*The opening comes and I begin:*

*What I have witnessed in the meetings is that the 'how' of being together, where there is respect for every person's contribution, where every person has a voice and it is heard, that 'how' is being lost. It is back to: the loudest voice gets heard, the strongest personality gets heard, the others struggle to even get a place to speak. If I'm honest, on Friday when I was watching, I wondered how many times one contribution to the conversation actually followed on from the previous one. There were a lot of opinions expressed, but there was very little, umm, it wasn't kind of building on what the previous person had said. There was almost very little listening to what other people had said.*

*How is it that one makes the 'how' of being together a priority in a group? Say it's a deacons meeting or a leadership team meeting, to say, 'These are the ground rules for the meeting and somebody is going to hold us accountable to them'.*

This conversation took place between the first and second action planning meetings. It had been decided to have a second meeting so that all those who were part of the original Skuiling Retreat could be invited to see the process through to its fulfilment. Several of the original team accepted the invitation.

I had asked to meet with Doug because I was increasingly uncertain about my ongoing role in the process and wanted to clarify whether there was any value in my being present at this second meeting. I had also, on reflection after the previous meeting, developed a brief document outlining my understanding of the difference between 'what' we do as a church and 'how' we do it (see Appendix 4). My concern was that the 'how' of the Skuiling

process was being left behind in the rush to make the 'what' happen. I wanted to explain to Doug what I was thinking in the hopes that it could be taken to the meeting.

This is a part of Doug's response:

You know, I think when one is under significant pressure and under significant time constraint, you get into performance mode and [the focus is on] 'Let's produce it'. What I would like to suggest in trying to appease those who are wanting to produce something, my gut would say to me that tonight we go through the process of identifying what the key action steps are but, having done that, to say well, we've more or less come to the end of the process, but to set aside significant time to reflect back on the process and to say, 'Let's establish some parameters or ground rules or re-affirm that which we established originally at Skuiling in terms of how we are going to implement this and have that spelt out very, very clearly, you know, which could be used in leadership meetings and other meetings as well... Just reaffirm some of those things that brought us to where we are now, as opposed to getting to the end of the process and saying, 'Well, it served us well, now we'll go back to the way it was'.

I recognise and acknowledge the pressure that is brought to bear on church leaders to be seen to be 'delivering' whatever it is that the church members expect them to 'deliver', and I am aware that certain individuals were exerting significant pressure on Doug by this stage in the process<sup>5</sup>. However, can 'delivery' be achieved at the expense of respect and care? Is an invitation to participate something we can tag on once we have fulfilled the imperatives of planning and action? What effect would it have on the leadership and on the church if our way of being together, how we relate to one another, took precedence over what we do together? I am reminded of the words of Jesus: 'By this will all people know that you are my disciples, if you love one another'<sup>6</sup>.

Even as I am writing this, my pointing finger turns right back at me. How is my commitment to the task of completing this dissertation taking precedence over relationships within my family? Is it acceptable for me to be short-tempered, impatient and disrespectful because tiredness and time pressure are getting the better of me? Christ calls me to be like him in the midst of the chaos of life, not only once I have got the chaos sorted out. Please excuse me. Right now I need to go and give my husband a hug.

### **3.2.11 Reflecting on the journey with the pastors and their wives**

*We are coming to the end of the conversation when Kate asks, 'And you, Kim? What are you going away with from this conversation?'*

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<sup>5</sup> I would question though, what this pressure says about people's picture of what 'church' is, and also about the effect that a strongly hierarchical structure of church governance has in restricting participation, thereby increasing pressure on the leaders.

<sup>6</sup> John 13:35

*It was not a question I had been expecting. I am silent for a few minutes while I allow a response to formulate itself.*

*Kim: There's a part of me that regrets not having done things differently and regrets the fact that I didn't speak out more, and there's another part of me that knows I did what I could at the time and I that I gave all I had to give at the time...and I think just this conversation... even if it was just for this conversation, there's a sense that the journey wasn't wasted. 'Cause that's something that I have kind of come away thinking: I've wasted my time, I'm wasting my time, I'm just not doing the thing right and so it's not happening and I'm wasting other peoples' time... and maybe in looking back there now, it wasn't... because the process wasn't to be proved right or wrong... it just was.*

*Sophia: That was an interesting use of words because sometimes the feeling was that we should have a right or wrong outcome and look how somewhere you were hooked into that... instead of going with the process, you suddenly went with an expectation.*

*Kim: Mmm, the pressure that we should be seeing results.*

Towards the end of the year of the research journey, I realised that it might be important to reflect with the women on their experience of the year. However, I felt unable to face the whole group of women, feeling in many ways as if I had let them down because the process had not had the effects we had hoped, participation had gradually decreased, and the invitation had silently been withdrawn. I could not face the disappointment, the frustration, perhaps even the resignedness, that I thought I might encounter. And so I asked for a meeting just with the pastor's wives to reflect on the process, knowing that I felt comfortable and safe with them.

It was a rich and fruitful conversation, but I realise now, that in meeting only with them, I was privileging their knowledge and experience above that of the other women. My justification for the meeting was that it was the end of the year and school holidays, and the whole group of women probably would not have been available anyway. And I balanced it with a similar meeting with the two pastors. This was a fairly unstructured conversation reflecting on the research journey.

By the time I met with the two pastor's wives, I just wanted to tie up loose ends so that I could bring some sense of closure. It had been nearly a year of journeying with the church, a year in which my personal life had presented a number of its own challenges, and I felt emotionally battered. I was also wondering what the point would be of such a meeting. I had no energy to take the process any further and had the distinct impression that the door had been closed on my continuing involvement in any meaningful way.

By this time I was also grappling with terrifying questions about institutional Christianity. After a painful and destructive experience in our own church during the year and the challenges and hurts that my husband was experiencing in his new job with a Christian

NGO, I was wondering whether the whole research journey wasn't an exercise in futility. The kinds of questions that I could no longer escape included: Does the church, as an institution, have any positive role to play in society? Is it not so caught up in tradition and rules and hierarchical power structures that it is an unhealthy place for anyone to locate themselves, man or woman? Is there an alternative model for being church together, in which power and achievement are marginalised and respect and care are centralised?

I had no particular expectations of the conversation with these women, apart from a deep respect for their insight and wisdom, and a faith in the power of conversation which makes it possible to create new ideas and new knowledges in a way that is not possible when one is thinking alone. My faith did not disappoint me, and I came away from the conversation with the realisation that I, too, had been caught up in the need to achieve tangible results. It also became clear that it was futile to try and *prove* the value of the process in any objective sense. All that any of us could do was to reflect and learn, reflect and grow, and to live out whatever emerged with integrity.

I left with Kate's words echoing in my soul:

[It's] kind of like planting a crop and some of it never germinates. I look at it now and there's a sadness for me, but, but for the seeds that have grown... and flourished... I can only be grateful for those.

### **3.2.12 A final meeting with the women**

*My nose is streaming and my head aches. I am torn between taking the Sinutab and possibly dozing off, and not taking it and probably sniffing and sneezing my way through the meeting. I opt for taking it, ask for a glass of water and walk into the room where I am meeting with the women – again behind closed doors. There is a faint sense of déjà vu – even the tension in the air feels familiar. I really don't feel up to this but I have no choice. I am moving towards a deadline on my dissertation, and my ethical commitment to the women requires that they have a chance to engage with the documents that I have compiled using their own words, to make whatever changes or suggestions they would like to, and to give me permission to use the amended documents in the writing up of our research journey.*

*I am uncertain what to expect. It has been more than a year since I met with the women alone and I am wondering where they are now. How will this meeting unfold? I am anxious about how they will receive the documents. Will they welcome the hiddenness of anonymity or will they experience it as a further silencing of their individual voices?*

*As I begin to speak, my voice wavers and dies. I clear my throat and start again.*

Have you ever been caught off guard by an insight which instantly changed your perception of something forever? I was surprised by such an insight during this final meeting with the women. My dominant story of the research journey up until this point was

that it had been a fairly futile exercise, potentially more harmful for the women than helpful. This story had effectively got in the way of me seeing any alternative possibilities. As a result, I was reluctant to meet with the women, expecting that they shared similar perceptions of the journey.

However, it was as if a candle had been lit in a dark room when one of the women said:

Maybe it's an awareness thing... maybe if you're not aware of it, it doesn't bother you. Whereas, when we went to Skuiling, we became aware. We allowed ourselves to express what we were aware of, what we know of our church.

We became aware. We became aware. Somehow the Skuiling process invited the women into awareness. But awareness of what? I had barely formulated this question in my mind when another woman said:

I think that we have walked a mile. Because before we went to Skuiling we never would have thought about suggesting anything to the deacon's meeting because that was just ... whereas now we are thinking, 'Perhaps we can contribute'.

The women became aware that they had something to contribute to the ongoing conversation that is 'church'! This was reiterated by several of the other women during the course of the evening.

*We have something to say* – as we have already said, we are worth it!

I really identified with that comment that was made a little while earlier, and it was beautiful, that before Skuiling we didn't realise we had anything to offer, and Skuiling showed that we actually do have something to offer.

These comments entirely changed my perception of the research journey. I had set the standard of 'emancipation' as being the full participation of women at every level of decision-making and ministry within the church. I had also envisaged a situation where respectful listening and reflection were characteristic of every interaction at every meeting. Anything less than these ideals somehow fell short of the mark (which says far more about me than it does about the church).

However, what the women were telling me was that the journey had precipitated a significant shift in the way they saw themselves and what they had to offer the church. Although the structures within the church had not changed, and although the invitation to make that contribution was not always extended, the women would never again be unaware of the value of the contribution that they were able to make. A small step? Perhaps. But I can't help but wonder where such a small step could lead.

One of the women said:

We started eating an elephant and I think that you... eat an elephant bite by bite. So maybe we need to carry on eating the elephant... [long pause] But five people can't eat an elephant. We really need some other people to help us... We're too few.

I am moved by this image. It acknowledges the hugeness of the task ahead for the women and for the church, but it acknowledges that the process has already begun. It leaves me wondering what is needed to eat an elephant. Certainly time and effort and solidarity are needed, but you also need a fundamental commitment to eating the elephant. If you don't understand why you are eating the elephant, if you are not sure whether or not you *should* be eating the elephant, if you are not hungry for the eating of an elephant, will you have the motivation you need to keep going to the tough and chewy end?

One of the women made a suggestion that might just be the right thing for refreshing a group of committed elephant eaters:

Every now and then I would love for us just to gather as women and to say, 'Where are we and how are we doing?' I think that would be very valuable... How are we experiencing our lives? How are we experiencing church?... [long pause] Even just to pick up with some of the women on their dreams would be fascinating... How do you see your dream coming about? Is it coming about or is it... you know, has it died, or are there things that we have been able to pick up on, um, incidentally... I would love to do that.

I... for some time I've really believed that it's the men who need to give us permission to speak, or kind of invite us to speak, but, you know, really, I kind of think that they are where they are at because of their own journeys and history and ideas and so on... But that really oughtn't to stop us doing what we need to be doing... and the time will come when... we will find each other. But unless we begin to speak amongst ourselves... maybe that will make a way for us to connect with [the men] again at some stage.

This meeting with the women invited me to go back again to the Skulling Retreat and to hold up what happened as a vision of what is possible. We met with God and with one another in an authentic way, or as authentically as was possible, given our individual and collective histories. Although this vision has faltered, we cannot deny that it is possible. The vision stands before us and invites us on.

## CHAPTER 4

### WOMEN'S REFLECTIONS ON THE 'SKULING PROCESS'

This chapter explores the women's stories about and reflections on the 'Skuling process'. I begin by motivating my choice to focus on the women's stories almost exclusively, as well as the approach that I have adopted in doing so (4.1). I then present a chronological account of the Skuling process as reflected upon by the women on the leadership team (4.2). In the section which follows, I describe the 'interpretive filter' through which I 'listened' to these reflections (4.3), which drew my attention to the 'discourses' in circulation within the wider church, as well as within the leadership team (4.4). My reflections on the effects of these discourses on the men and the women (4.5) lead me to ask the question: Is change, in fact, possible? My responses to this question constitute the final section of this chapter (4.6).

#### 4.1 SETTING THE SCENE FOR THE WOMEN'S REFLECTIONS

Do we or do we not think that women are equal partners with men in God's creation and kingdom... and in particular, do we think that they are equally gifted? If we do think they are equal, we had better listen carefully to a description of the ways in which, in the past and yet today, we indicate otherwise.

(Wolterstorff 1986:287)

This chapter is based on my 'listening' (Gilligan et al 2003:157-172) to 'Reflections on the "Skuling process": a Book of Women's Wisdom'. Where appropriate, I relate my reflections to the complete record of the journey, which includes the voices of the men. However, my primary motivation in this and the next chapter is to celebrate the resilience of the women's words and ideas despite interruptions, dismissal and simply being ignored. There is an 'alternative, competing story' that was seldom heard in the first telling:

...dominant narratives are units of power as well as of meaning. The ability to tell one's story has a political component; indeed one measure of the dominance of a narrative is the place allocated to it in the discourse<sup>1</sup>. Alternative, competing stories are generally not allocated space in establishment channels and must seek expression in underground media and dissident groupings.

(Bruner 1986:19)

I have to confess that it feels deliciously subversive and wonderfully hopeful to be associated with 'underground media and dissident groupings' and to participate in some

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<sup>1</sup> The concept of discourse will be addressed in more depth in section 4.3.3 below but, used in this sense, it refers to the ongoing historical conversations within a society that constitute our notions of normality and 'the way the world is' (adapted from Freedman & Combs 1996:38).

small way in challenging 'dominant narratives' and 'resurrecting alternative stories' (White 1992:127).

I would not describe what I am doing in this chapter as 'giving the women a voice'; they spoke up themselves during the research journey. I simply invited the women to make their voices available to a wider audience, and they have accepted the invitation (Maguire 2004:125). This is in line with my chosen research approach:

Approaches to PAR... [and] feminist work... seek to reappropriate the traditionally silenced voice and agency of oppressed people, with the ultimate aim of people transforming their peripheral status and creating social change. This reappropriation of voice is an act of redefining reality from a historically marginalized point of view.

(Brabeck 2004:46)

This stance is also supported by narrative practical theologians, Anderson and Foley (1998:48), who suggest that the 'primary aim of pastoral care is to assist people in weaving the stories of their lives and God's stories, as mediated through the community, into a transformative narrative that will confirm their sense of belonging, strengthen them to live responsibly as disciples in the world, and liberate them from confinement'.

In ensuring that the women's voices are heard, my desire is to legitimate women as 'knowers' or 'agents of knowledge' (Harding 1987 cited by Brabeck 2004:46), believing that as they speak, '...they reveal hidden realities: new experiences and new perspectives emerge that challenge the "truths" of official accounts and cast doubt upon established theories' (Nielsen 1990:95). It is only as women speak out that their reality will be heard and take its place in the language of our society (Isherwood & McEwan 1993:108).

However, Nielsen (1990:11) does caution 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.

In responding to this caution, I need make it clear that there was not one standard 'women's experience' of the Skuling process. In fact, most feminist theorists would agree that there is no single, standard 'women's experience' of anything (McClintock Fulkerson 1994:355; Brydon-Miller et al 2004:xiv; Davies 1991:47). Current feminist perspectives challenge the appeal to a universal or normative expression of 'women's experience' and call for 'a greater attention to the particularity and diversity of (gendered) human nature. By sustaining a notion of a universal or single definition of experience and need practitioners may actually perpetuate the interests of a patriarchal social order' (Graham

1996:47). It is therefore important to acknowledge that 'each woman has her own individual experiences which only she can articulate' (Young 1996:61).

Individual women's experiences are profoundly influenced by multiple factors such as class, race, faith, education, and so on, which position her in different ways within the social order. McClintock Fulkerson (1994:142), coming from a poststructuralist feminist position, suggests that we replace the notion of the 'universal woman' with the awareness that each woman occupies multiple subject positions. The poststructuralist argument will be taken up again in section 4.3.2 below.

While acknowledging the particularity of each individual woman's experience, I felt it necessary to ensure that all the women felt safe in having their voices heard. I therefore followed the process outlined in Chapter 1 to develop the Book of Women's Wisdom, which reads as a unified voice and which obscures the identity of all speakers. While the women experienced this as positive, and it achieved the anonymity which it set out to, it does seem to suggest that all the women contributed equally to the content of the document and that all the women challenged the 'dominant worldview' within the church in the same way. This was not the case. Some voices fell silent sooner than others, and some were more accepting of the 'dominant worldview' than others.

Similarly, although 'the men' were often referred to as a single homogenous group by the women on this research journey, this was not the case either. The men had a range of perspectives on the Skuiling process and the importance of participation, and were themselves positioned differently in relation to the dominant worldview. When the women speak about 'the men', they are often referring to those with the most forceful personalities and the loudest voices. This needs to be borne in mind as you read on.

Poststructuralist theory asserts that language does not simply reflect reality; language mediates and constitutes reality (Kotzé & Kotzé 1997:34). I have therefore chosen to use the women's own words and ways of speaking as far as possible in the telling of their stories about the Skuiling process in order to stay as close as possible to the women's own construction of reality. I have also tried to suspend my prior assumptions about what the women might have said and to listen very closely to their words and to the record of the journey from a 'not knowing' position (Anderson & Goolishian 1992:31). This does not mean that I suspend my emancipatory focus, simply that I acknowledge that I do not hold any privileged knowledge about these women's lives and that I do not have the 'right to

speak on behalf of those whose true experience [I] have no way of fully comprehending' (Brydon-Miller 2004:12).

However, I am aware that any response to a text constitutes an interpretation (Eco 1990:23), and that my response to this text is one interpretation of many possible interpretations (Derrida cited by Myburg 2000:8-9). Ricoeur (cited by Capps 1984:17-20) agrees that both words/language and texts have multiple meanings in that they open up or disclose 'possible worlds' beyond their immediate context to which a reader may orient him or herself. He therefore suggests that the interpretive process is reciprocal: 'in a sense the text interprets the reader' (Capps 1984:18). I therefore offer my interpretations tentatively and humbly, aware that they may reveal more about myself than about the other participants on this research journey.

In offering this interpretation, I have sought to connect my responses to the body of knowledges that have been called 'academic'. This is not to lend support to my interpretation as being somehow 'truer' than any other, but simply serves to locate my 'interpretation' within the intellectual landscape and to acknowledge the many thinkers and writers whose thinking and writing have shaped my interpretive practice.

## **4.2 WOMEN'S REFLECTIONS ON THEIR EXPERIENCE OF THE 'SKUILING PROCESS'**

When 'listening' to the record of what the women said over the course of the research journey, I realised that they told many stories about how they experienced the Skuiling process. In this section, I have taken these stories, which were told at different times and in different places, and arranged them chronologically to reflect the different phases of the journey. (For a complete record of the women's stories see Appendix 1: 'Reflections on the "Skuiling process": a Book of Women's Wisdom').

### **4.2.1 Women's experience of their role in the church before the Skuiling Retreat**

Two words seem to summarise the women's experience of leadership roles within the church prior to the Skuiling Retreat, namely, 'exclusion' and 'secrecy':

...we wouldn't have had an opinion about being included before, because we weren't included in the deacons' things and so... It was just a matter of that was that...

[The deaconate's] like this whole closed door...like a Secret Society.

It's something that's just always been: a deacons' meeting was for deacons so you never expected to give any input or give an opinion.

...they have never asked for the women's input.

## **4.2.2 The significance of the Skuiling Retreat**

### **4.2.2.1 Women were included for the first time**

...this Skuiling experience is the first time that we have ever all been included; we have all had the chance to have our say, we all know what is going on.

### **4.2.2.2 We did things differently**

The weekend at Skuiling allowed us to deviate from the norm. It was a new experience. It was more inviting and we experienced more freedom to speak and participate than we ever had before.

It was so amazing that we never did the 'normal' stuff...we didn't open in prayer and close in prayer and do worship... and yet I said over and over to myself and to people who asked me about the weekend, it was like Glory-... a God-glory weekend, God-steeped, God was steeped and seeped in the weekend and some of that was about 'no pretend' for me... there just wasn't a sense of pretend or having to try... I didn't have to impress, I didn't have to try, cause nobody else was and yet we were being the closest to Jesus and to each other... than we have ever been.

This was a powerful and moving expression of this woman's experience of the weekend, and I have wondered what it was that made it possible for the team to be 'the closest to Jesus and to each other than we have ever been'. The speaker emphasises the importance of being 'real': 'no pretend', not 'having to try', 'I didn't have to impress'.

Heshusius' (1994, 1995) notion of 'participatory consciousness' seems to offer a valuable insight into how the sense of closeness with the rest of the team came about. Heshusius (1995:118) suggests that we make possible the experience of participatory consciousness when we listen with full attention to another person, suspending our own concerns, however momentarily. This is the kind of listening we invited, modelled and held the team accountable to over the weekend of the Skuiling Retreat (as discussed in Chapter 1). When we are listening in this way, we are able to 'temporarily let go of the self' and 'our egocentric concerns' (Heshusius 1995:121). This opens up the possibility of entering a liminal space, which Heshusius (1995:121) calls 'a participatory mode of consciousness' in which the boundaries that we continually draw around our 'self' to maintain distance and distinctiveness from the 'other' blur and may even dissolve.

Heshusius (1995:121) suggests that entering into participatory consciousness 'opens up access [between persons] in new and unanticipated ways' and allows us to 'come to know the other, and paradoxically also the self, more fully'. This seems to describe the experience of 'closeness' that people experienced at Skuiling.

There is also the question of how it was that this woman experienced the leadership team as being 'the closest to Jesus' than they had ever been. There are many possible answers to this question, but I will just briefly reflect on Cochrane, de Gruchy and Peterson's (1991:59) discussion of the central mission of Jesus as being the fulfilment of the liberatory prophetic tradition:

Jesus' mission... is demonstrated in his liberating praxis, his concern for the oppressed, whether they be women, the poor, or those who are deaf, dumb, blind or possessed by demons.

Jesus' vision of the church as His body, in which all parts are equally valued and respected and allowed to minister to the world and serve one another (Cochrane et al 1991:64) requires that all oppressed and excluded people be restored to their rightful place. Heyward (cited by Waldron 1996:67) also emphasises the concern with relationality that was integral to Jesus' ministry. In the process of inviting and valuing the women's participation, the leadership of this church were in fact taking up the central call of Jesus' mission and were, perhaps, being 'closer to Jesus' than they had ever been before.

#### ***4.2.2.3 We were invited to relate to one another in a new way***

From my perspective, what happened on the [Skuling Retreat] was not rocket science... There was honest sharing and real listening and that was the essence of what happened on the weekend, that there was space created, a safe space created, for people to share, when others were listening and you know that... we need to create opportunities where people feel safe to share and others really listen.... that's the sense of connection, of being real, of not pretending, of trust.

On listening to the women's descriptions of what they appreciated about the Skuling Retreat, I was struck by the frequent use of various forms of the following words: acceptance, freedom/liberation, participation, contribution, sharing, emotional, listening, surprise. Many of these words speak of qualities of relationship that women hold to be important, while others refer to ways of being that are often considered to be feminine. These values are shared by feminist theologians, and these words are integral to certain key concepts in feminist theology such as relationality, mutuality, community and liberation (Isherwood & McEwan 1996).

I also heard frequent descriptions of what it was like for the women to have their contributions valued:

I experienced... a flourishing freedom to participate in the group and to have the freedom to say what I was sitting with and be able to contribute that in a way that I hadn't experienced before. And with that freedom came an enormous sense of being part of the group, and that was very exciting for me, enormously.

... maybe a surprise for me was the acceptance of us [women] being emotional, that we were allowed to be emotional... I just didn't feel like an idiot because I had been emotional or expressed how I felt and for me... that I really enjoyed, I appreciated that I didn't feel I was being judged... It was nice just to feel support from others and nobody sort of looked down on what your dream was, nobody sort of said, 'that's ridiculous' or 'we'll never get to that', that was nice... even if it is unattainable, it was accepted... I appreciated that.

It was a total surprise. I didn't realise that the group could actually be like that. I spoke my heart and it actually felt valued and that made me want to talk more and free to speak more.

#### **4.2.2.4 Awareness**

Perhaps the most significant outcome of the Skuiling Retreat was acknowledged only in retrospect, eighteen months later:

...when we went to Skuiling, we became aware. We allowed ourselves to express what we were aware of, what we know of our church.

I think that we have walked a mile. Because before we went to Skuiling we never would have thought about suggesting anything to the deacons meeting because that was just...Whereas now we are thinking, 'Perhaps we can contribute'.

As I mentioned in Chapter 3, these statements transformed my perspective on the value of the research journey. Groves (1997:40) seems to concur that, for women, the movement into awareness is a crucial step in the process of liberation:

Women's stories about themselves have been shaped by centuries of patriarchy. The change that happens in the consciousness of women is arguably the most important thing that can occur.

Consciousness-raising has been central to feminist research methodology, and has even been called 'the unique feminist method' (MacKinnon cited by Reinharz 1992:220), as it invites women to talk about and understand their experience from their own perspective, and its outcome is usually 'a new way of thinking, relating, naming or acting' (Reinharz 1992:221). From a poststructuralist perspective, the new ways of 'naming' and articulating their experiences are crucial for women to speak an alternative, preferred story 'into existence' (Davies 1991:20). New words constitute new realities and produce knowledges which open up possibilities for new ways of 'thinking, relating and acting'. It is my hope that this will be the case for these women.

#### **4.2.3 Hopes and expectations after the Skuiling Retreat**

One of the regrets that I have regarding the research journey is that I did not urge the team to clarify both the immediate steps that were to be taken on returning from the Skuiling Retreat, and how the men and women were to operate together as a team on their return; what their respective roles and responsibilities would be. I think that we were

all so caught up in the experience of the weekend that we could not have anticipated how, in the absence of a clear picture of the next step, the energy and excitement it had created would be 'dissipated' and how quickly we would slip back into 'normal ways of doing things'. The women expressed disappointment and frustration that their hopes for immediate action and meaningful change were not met.

I really thought that it would be acted on as soon as we got back. And I thought everybody felt the same.

[At Skuiling we didn't] put some concrete details on what our expectations are as a team... you know, we didn't even get to... 'So, how are we going to operate together?' There was just a suggestion thrown in that maybe every now and again we would meet together, so even that wasn't a solid, fixed thing.

We also need to establish expectations because we all have expectations of [the men] and [the men] surely must have expectations of us... but we don't know... What do they expect of us as a group of women ... what do they see as our roles and duties?

Including the women set up certain expectations. I have expectations.

#### **4.2.4 What happened during the weeks following the Skuiling Retreat?**

##### **4.2.4.1 *The door closed***

I think for me the wonderful part, the amazing part and the very good part of the weekend was the sense of invitation where it was really easy to just be... And it hasn't continued... it just hasn't... it's kind of... that was for the weekend and [now we] go back to the secret society... something about it being over time and the vision has gotten smaller and I've got to kind of look for it, you know where's the vision, where's the dream, where's the togetherness, where's the freedom, I'm looking for it and I'm not finding it... [It's] almost like we've been shut out you know... the door has closed for me... like it was before... it's almost like it was open on the weekend and somehow along the way it has gotten shut and it's been locked and that's it.

And there may be a sense in which nobody has specifically closed the door intentionally but that a number of circumstances... the time lapse, the non-communication, all of that has actually communicated something different, like 'It's closed'.

We were invited to come and share and to be part of it and it stopped... On Sunday night when we left it was like, 'Thanks very much, it was lovely to have you part of us for the weekend, but that's over now' and that's like... that's hard.

This experience of the 'closed door' is precisely what has led certain feminist theologians to give up on Christianity altogether, claiming that Christian tradition is so deeply rooted in patriarchy that it will never change. Mary Daly, for example, believes that 'the only hope for women is to leave the church and patriarchal spirituality and, in one another's company, to build an Otherworld... [and] become who they are as women-defined women (in Heyward 1996:85). Webster (1991 cited by Isherwood & McEwan 1993:62) articulates

a similar commitment: 'Working for change within the structure which draws its strength from our subjugation verges on the futile and is damaging to ourselves'. However, other feminist theologians such as Virginia Mollenkott, Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, Rosemary Radford Ruether and Carter Heyward maintain that women's power to 'god'<sup>2</sup> exists in struggling 'sometimes apart from men, sometimes with men, for [liberation and] mutual relation, in and out of the church' (Heyward 1996:85). These are two of the options available to the women of this church as they decide how to respond to the closed door.

#### **4.2.4.2 Women's voices were gradually silenced**

'Voice' has been widely used as a metaphor for women's efforts to speak and act as persons with authority and value in their own right. This use of the metaphor suggests that 'the voiced woman is one who recognises her own value and thus accords herself the right to speak' (Turner & Hudson 1999:12). It follows that a woman whose voice, or attempt to speak out, has been silenced has been devalued or diminished. In fact, Turner and Hudson (1999:3) suggest that '... to silence voices is doing more than oppressing; it is stifling a creature's god-likeness' (Turner & Hudson 1999:3).

Scripture gives us an image of a God who speaks and, in speaking, creates the reality in which we 'live and move and have our being'<sup>3</sup>. As creatures with voice, made in the image of the God who speaks, our own words have similar creative power: we speak and create new meanings and construct new realities in our speaking (Kotzé & Kotzé 1997:32). When our voices are silenced, it is a denial of our very nature and of the creative contribution we are able to make to the conversation that is life.

In this light '...the silencing of many women can be seen as an act of violence by powerful groups against those who are seen as less powerful. Any hierarchy can force people into silence' (Addy 1993:84-85 cited by Bons-Storm 1996:26).

The women described vividly how their voices were gradually silenced over the months of the research journey:

I am aware that my voice just became more and more silent because I just didn't want to, I didn't have the 'want to'... and the other voices were so loud, I didn't have the want to, so I just stayed quiet. I had lots of thoughts, but I didn't want to put them into my mouth. It felt dangerous... and it made me as a person feel vulnerable. But... I was thinking, it wasn't just my

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<sup>2</sup> Feminist liberation theologians use the verb 'to god' based on the premise that God may best be understood as a verb. Carter Heyward (1996:85) defines 'godding' as 'a mutual process of co-creating right relation in which all participants – including the relational power and process – are being affected and are changing'.

<sup>3</sup> Acts 17:28

voice that was silent. It was the voices of women, the women really became silent. I would like to hear from [the other women] what happened to them, in their silence, what happened, what made them silent? That's what made me silent... because we weren't silent at Skuiling, every one of us. We all had wonderful voices, with *different* things to say. [softly] It was easy to speak.

I just found in the meetings we had after the weekend that often, you would start to say something and somebody would say 'Yes, but if you did so and so... and if we went so and so' and then it's almost like [made a sucking in sound and motion, demonstrating withdrawal] 'Okay, I won't say anymore'... I just noticed that and I thought 'Ooh, gosh'.

I'll give an example. At [a recent leadership meeting] I asked for [a couch for the counselling room]... [I explained my reasons], and there was no understanding of that because no-one else has ever asked for [a couch], and I thought, 'Oh my gosh, [slapped her wrist] the voice has to be quiet' because if there is a need for [a couch], it seems to me there has to be lots of voices, but one lone voice can't ask for [a couch]... and I felt alone... and I withdrew... and I won't ask for the [couch] again...why should I? Why should I? It's too hard.

#### **4.2.4.3 We went back to 'business as usual'**

[I] watched that 'business as usual' kind of come back into the flavour of the meetings...

I watched how we got back into some of the old patterns of being where one person dominated and space wasn't given for other people to participate equally, you know, I watched some people retreat more and more and just be more and more silent... But it didn't seem as if there was an awareness of what was happening.

What I did see was that it was kind of becoming very management-like, you know, doing things so that you could tick it off on a list as opposed to... maybe building and growing things in a different way.

The men acknowledged that we are worth it, but then they've moved back into position and we've moved back into position. They've moved forward again and we've moved backward again, without valuing each other, that's just what happened.

#### **4.2.4.4 We went back to pretend**

A few of the women described how there was the appearance of the women being invited to participate in the men's meetings, but that the patterns of interaction and the ways of being in those meetings did not in fact allow for the women's participation on their own terms. They therefore felt that both the men and women were participating in a pretence.

... we're back to pretend...we found reality and we found intimacy and wonderful stuff and it seems like pretend is now coming back...It's a more comfortable place to be.

[The men] are not inviting us into their process; they're allowing us to sit here... and we are... sitting here – *that's* where the pretend comes in! Then we *seem* as if we are part of the process, but guess what – we're actually not part of the process – that's very important for me.

... it's seen, it sounds legit, you know, we're all together. We're all together, but there's something about just pretend, and everybody believes it, somehow we all believe it... except

[some] of us... it is seen as being good and right and open but when push comes to shove, it's not... It's pretend, it's really pretend and we're all feeding into that pretend – the men and the women.

Nobody has actually asked the question, 'Ladies, how is this for you?' Nobody asks that question.

Feminists have long criticised the 'pretence' that happens when women appear to be given equal status as long as they do things on men's terms, that is, the same way that men have always done them. Ramodibe (1988:15) strongly challenges such pretence, and encourages women to clarify the nature of the invitation when they are invited to participate in church leadership:

Which church are we building – the historical church of the dominant classes or the church of Jesus Christ? Is it the old, oppressive church or is it the 'new' liberating church? 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?

The women's stories about their experience of the Skuling process offered me new perspectives and insights. On my second and third 'listenings' to their stories, I began to question how it was that the journey unfolded in the way it did. What was it that got in the way of change, that stopped the new ways of being together in their tracks, and that convinced the men in particular that they needed to go back to 'business as usual'? My reflections on my 'listenings' and on these questions form the basis of section 4.3.

### **4.3 THE INTERPRETIVE FILTER THROUGH WHICH I LISTENED TO THE WOMEN'S REFLECTIONS ON THE SKULING PROCESS**

The particular questions that I asked and reflected on as I was 'listening' to the record of the women's stories were shaped by my epistemology and discursive positioning. I stated in Chapter 1 that my epistemology is informed by postmodernism, poststructuralism and the social constructionist movement, and in the sections below I will briefly describe the influence of each of these schools of thought on my interpretive practices. The approach that I take is also influenced by the commitments and practices of narrative therapy and participatory approaches to pastoral care. Together, these discourses constitute the 'interpretive filter' through which I listened to the women's stories and reflections.

#### **4.3.1 Postmodernism**

In Chapter 2 I discussed the key features of postmodern thought. What is of particular relevance here is postmodernism's abandonment of the search for truth in 'grand theories

or metanarratives' (Lyotard 1984:53). Instead, Brueggemann (1993:9) suggests that 'contextualism, localism, and pluralism' should be key features of a postmodern thinking:

Contextualism argues that the knower helps constitute what is known, that the socioeconomic-political reality of the knower is decisive for knowledge... Localism means that it is impossible to voice large truth. All one can do is to voice local truth and propose that it pertains elsewhere. Indeed, pluralism is the only alternative to objectivism once the dominant centre is no longer able to impose its view and to silence by force all alternative or dissenting opinion.

(Brueggemann 1993:9)

My interpretation of the women's experience is firmly rooted in an awareness of the context in which they are speaking, and I acknowledge that their stories speak only of their experience within their particular context. They are not speaking on behalf of all women in all churches or on behalf of all women within their church, or even on behalf of all the women in the leadership team. Thus, the women's stories, and my interpretations, constitute one of many co-existing and equally valid perspectives (Burr 1995: 13, 185) on the research journey.

The willingness to embrace multiple perspectives is part of the richness of postmodern research, which invites 'indeterminacy rather than determinism, diversity rather than unity, difference rather than synthesis, complexity rather than simplification... social science becomes a more subjective and humble enterprise as truth gives way to tentativeness' (Rosenau 1992:8).

However, the acknowledgement of the existence of multiple perspectives raises a number of other questions: How do these perspectives arise? How can all perspectives, particularly contradictory perspectives, be equally valid? Poststructuralism and the social constructionist movement, which emerged against the backdrop of postmodern scepticism, provide a response to such questions.

#### **4.3.2 Poststructuralism and the social constructionist movement**

Burr (1995:3-7 citing Gergen 1985) and Freedman and Combs (1996:22) describe several key assumptions of a social constructionist perspective. Firstly, social constructionism questions all taken-for-granted knowledge and our assumptions about how the world appears to be, and wants to make sense of how these 'knowledges' have been constructed. Social constructionists see all 'assumptions' and 'knowledges' as being specific to the culture and period of history in which they are located, and as products of socio-economic conditions/forces prevailing in that cultural and historical location. In other

words, 'societies construct the "lenses" through which their members interpret the world' (Freedman & Combs 1996:16).

Such a perspective encourages us to uncover the often unacknowledged agendas that underpin our world views (Sheldrake 1998:12) and reminds us that what we 'know' and accept as 'truth' is in fact only an interpretation that a community of people have come to agree or reached consensus on over a period of time. For example, the theological 'truths' we hold to depend upon the questions we ask, the needs we hope to fulfil, the prevailing intellectual climate and culture, and the personal presuppositions of the theologian – they are neither neutral nor value-free (Herholdt 1998:221).

When we lose touch with the history of an idea, we tend to assign it truth status, while we should be asking: How do we know this? What is the status of this knowledge? Thus, a social constructionist perspective invites a more humble, tentative and questioning approach to 'knowledge'.

This understanding shapes my interpretation of the women's stories in that I am actively engaged in exploring the history and questioning the truth status of certain beliefs and practices within the church which marginalise and silence women. In doing so, I am more concerned with exploring the effects of these beliefs and practices than I am with proving them right or wrong (a binary opposition that is rendered meaningless in postmodern discourse).

Another key assumption of a social constructionist perspective is that people construct knowledge, and constitute reality between themselves, through language and organise and sustain these realities through narrative, as well as the other social processes of their daily interactions. Also, the understandings or constructions or knowledges that emerge from social processes have implications for social action. Each construction will invite, encourage or sustain certain types of action, while excluding or discouraging others (Burr 1995:3-7; Freedman & Combs 1996:22). For example, although the constitution of the Baptist Church referred to in this dissertation allows for women to be elected onto the deaconate, the social construction of authority structures within the church as exclusively male discourages the congregation from nominating women for election.

Roux and Kotzé (2002:145), following post-structuralist and literary deconstructionist discourses on language, particularly the work of Jacques Derrida, take this a step further with the assertion that:

Words are not innocent. The language we use shapes the realities we live in and the realities we create. Our practices are shaped by our languaging. Sometimes we shape our world deliberately when we are aware. But mostly, we are unaware of how the ways in which we language our realities create and restrict the possibilities of life.

Freedman and Combs (1996:29) take a similar approach when they state, 'Speaking isn't neutral or passive. Every time we speak, we bring forth a reality. Each time we share words we give legitimacy to the distinctions those words bring forth'. For example, to talk about God as 'father' is to legitimate this understanding. However, over time we come to reify whatever concepts we discuss and forget that other concepts are equally possible and valid. It follows that the way we language our lives, the stories we tell, the meaning which we attribute to our experience will constitute and shape our lives.

Therefore, in trying to understand the women's experience of the Skuiling process, I will pay particular attention to the language which they use to describe both themselves and the process. I will look for ways of speaking that restrict possibilities, and ways of speaking that open up possibilities.

#### **4.3.3 Discourse Theory**

The term 'discourse' has become a central concept in postmodern theory. Lowe (1991:45) describes 'discourse' as 'systematic and institutionalised ways of speaking or writing', while Drewery and Winslade (1996:35) understand a discourse to be a 'set of more or less coherent stories or statements about the way the world should be. They are social practices – organised ways of behaving. They are the frameworks we use to make sense of the world and they structure our relations with one another'. Discourses include taken-for-granted knowledges and 'common sense' ideas which constrain or prescribe the options available to men and women in thinking, speaking, doing and being.

While social constructionism accounts for the many different ways of seeing the world, our experience of the world tells us that not all constructions or discourses (ways of seeing and being in the world) are afforded equal status. Certain discourses, knowledges, narratives and interpretations dominate, while others are marginalised or 'subjugated'. Foucault (1980:82) defines subjugated knowledges as 'a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated'<sup>4</sup>. In many ways, women's knowledges and ways of being fit this definition in that they have been

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<sup>4</sup> Foucault (1980:81-82) defines subjugated knowledges in two ways. The first definition refers to 'historical contents which have been buried or disguised'. It is Foucault's second sense of the term that I refer to here.

considered emotional, subjective and unscientific and have largely been ignored within the patriarchal hegemony of church and theology. How does this happen? Who determines which perspectives are validated and which are not?

Foucault's (1980:81) notion of '...the productive potential of power...' is useful here in that it highlights the role of power relations in the creation of discourses and knowledge, as well as the way in which 'alternative knowledges' (Flaskas & Humphreys 1993:42) are marginalised and disqualified. According to Foucault, 'power is not simply a negative or obliterating force possessed by some and imposed on have-nots' (McClintock Fulkerson 1994:98). Foucault (1980:119) suggests that power is something which 'traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourses'.

Foucault (1980:49) believes that discourses are practices which 'systematically form the objects of which they speak', that is, discourses exert constitutive power. In Foucault's view:

... individuals are not the abstract entities of liberal philosophy: they are 'constituted subjectivities', reflecting in their everyday thought and practice the structures, ideologically imposed by a society's dominant groups, that are constituted by and constitute the knowledge of the time.

(Maharaj 1997:207)

For example, patriarchal discourses constitute men as powerful, decision-making agents, while constituting women as the 'other', namely, weak, dependent, passive recipients. Discourses therefore shape the subjectivities of those that they constitute. Burr (1995:62) describes how discourses or 'representations of people (for example as 'free individuals', as 'masculine' or as 'well-educated') can serve to support power inequalities between them, while passing off such inequalities as fair or somehow natural'. In this way a discourse may become a 'conceptual trap' when it is assigned truth status and we are unable to see beyond it (Becker 1996:49).

Foucault argues that there is an inseparable link between 'knowledges' or discourses and power: the discourses of a society determine what knowledge is held to be true, right or proper in that society (Parker 1989:61), so those who control the discourse control knowledge. At the same time, the dominant discourses within a particular context determine who will be able to occupy its powerful positions (Freedman & Combs 1996:38). This results in self-perpetuating systems of domination and suppression.

In listening to the women's stories contained in the Book of Women's Wisdom, I wanted to be alert to taken-for-granted knowledges, 'common sense' ideas and representations of

people and groups which function to subjugate or elevate particular groups, and which have influenced the outcome of this research journey. I was curious to see whether there were knowledges and ideas which invited 'the way things were' to take over again after the Skulling Retreat, and which stood against a new way of being together. If there were such ideas, I was keen to understand more about how they operated. This focus on the 'discourses and practices which might get in the way of the full participation of women and other marginalised groups' relates to my third aim for this research journey, stated in Chapter 1, section 1.3.

I was also hoping to trace a story of the women's resistance to the operation of such discourses. While Foucault insists upon the 'ever-present nature of power relationships', he also acknowledges the 'ever-present possibility of resistance' (Flaskas & Humphreys 1993:41) as people struggle to 'negate particular definitions of subjectivity and to claim different subjectivities' (*ibid*:42). I was listening for the echoes of such a struggle in what the women said.

As I listened again to the Book of Women's Wisdom, I was to discover a range of discourses which powerfully influenced the women's stories and the research journey. I draw on the women's own words to describe these discourses in the next section.

#### **4.4 IDENTIFYING THE DISCOURSES**

In listening to the Book of Women's Wisdom for the discourses which interacted to constitute the ways of being available to men and women in this Baptist church, I was guided by Terre Blanche and Durrheim's (1999:154-167) three-faceted approach to discourse analysis which includes identifying the discourses (4.4), looking at the effects of the discourses and how these effects are achieved (4.5), and looking at the contexts in which these discourses operate (Chapter 2; 4.4-4.6).

Through my 'listening', I identified three 'clusters' of discourses which I have called 'patriarchal discourses' (4.4.1), 'Christian traditional ways of doing things' (4.4.2), and 'discourses borrowed from the business world' (4.4.3). What follows is a sample of the discourses within each cluster. However, these are not the only discourses, nor are these the only 'clusters' of discourses which operate in this church. Space will not permit a more extensive discursive analysis.

#### **4.4.1 'Patriarchal discourses'**

The exclusion of women from positions of authority in the institutionalised church, regardless of whether or not she is ordained, [and] the stereotyping of women's role in these institutions regardless of what her gifts might be, are exercises in patriarchal views of humanity.

(Ackermann 1991:94)

Radford Ruether (1996:173) defines patriarchal societies as 'those in which the rule of the father is the basic principle of social organisation of the family and of society as a whole'. Patriarchy therefore enforces relations of dominance of men over women, the strong over the weak, adults over children, and so on. Feminist theologians strongly resist the oppression and marginalisation of any subordinate groups within society, and challenge patriarchal practices both within and outside of the church. Patriarchal discourses serve the interests of patriarchy in that they constitute women in subordinate and devalued subject positions. In listening to the Baptist women's stories, it was evident that patriarchal discourses play an important role in their experience of themselves and the church.

##### ***4.4.1.1 Naming the 'forces' of patriarchy***

One of the women named some of the patriarchal discourses very vividly as follows:

It just feels like... what I'm fighting against are the forces that try to... the forces that say things like, 'only one person's idea counts', or, maybe, 'you need to be a man to have your voice heard', 'you need to be maybe one of the 'boys' or, maybe, 'you need to be one of the more powerful characters in this group'.

Another woman described how she saw power distribution within the church and the effect that discourses about 'submission' have on women. She also describes the struggle, and loneliness of resistance.

What I know about our church, for me, is that it's male-dominated, personality-dominated, loud voice dominated and what I know about our church is that we women tend to accept that... sometimes grudgingly and sometimes because it's what we do, the submitting female for ever, my mommy taught me to do that and... so if I go against that, there are huge ripples that happen because I go against that and it's one voice... and it's hard, it's difficult for me and I feel like the 'baddie' and everyone else is the 'goodie'... even though I see nods, I don't hear voices.

##### ***4.4.1.2 What women think and feel is not as important as what men think and feel***

This patriarchal discourse was named by the women when they were discussing the fact that they had not been consulted about the date, time or agenda for a meeting:

It was not given to the women to decide on, it was decided for the women... You see it kind of says, they are important and we are not, we're little; that's what they're saying.

It was also possible to observe the effects of this discourse during meetings where there was no outsider/facilitator to facilitate the process. On these occasions women found it difficult to break into the conversation and, when they did, their contributions were frequently belittled or dismissed. The following interaction is taken from the transcript of the Skuiling Feedback Meeting. I have annotated it with my own reflections in italics. The interaction comes after one of the men had expressed his dissatisfaction with the Skuiling process, feeling that we had wasted our time with 'consultation'. He called for the leadership to get back to the programme the deaconate had implemented the previous year, namely Natural Church Development (NCD), and to formulate clear action steps.

*[M1, M2, M3 and M4 are four of the men present at the meeting]*

Doug: But we have to... because those are the key issues.

[A woman tries to speak, is interrupted]

M1: In here [NCD] it talks about worship. And worship is all about the Holy Spirit, you know what I mean, and I mean that's what it [NCD] says. The whole central theme about worship is the Holy Spirit. So we've got everything we need.

Doug: What I'm saying is, when I put 'Relationships' up on the board, the document that we need to be going to for key implementation steps is that [NCD] For me, the first thing about 'Relationships' is significant small groups, I don't know what you guys think...

Kim: Doug, Susan wants to speak. *(I tried to use the power I had in the group to make space for this woman's voice, but I was ignored)*

Doug: Ja, I think that is a key issue and I think that dovetails directly with NCD.

M2: But my understanding was that's why we are here tonight...

[Doug interrupts, both speaking across each other]

M3: Susan has a question. *(Now a man tries, still to no avail. Was his voice not loud enough?)*

[Discussion continues]

M4: [loudly] My wife wants to talk. *(Spoken very firmly and clearly and in the silence which follows, his wife speaks)*

Susan: No, just as somebody off the deaconate, this Skuiling experience is the first time that we have ever all been included, we have all had the chance to have our say, we all know what is going on; whereas NCD, I didn't know what NCD was until just a little while ago.

M2 [interrupting]: No Can Do.

Susan: Ja, or a dairy, I know it's a dairy [laughter] but now I know [people talking across her, making her words unintelligible] *(despite the energy it takes to claim the right to speak, this does not guarantee you will not be interrupted or overridden)*...we're all included now, and folk have come to me and said, 'Gee, I want to make sure I'm at the AGM'. Not because they are interested in the AGM. They are interested in this feedback report on Skuiling because they have all been included. So, however it goes from here, I think that things will happen because everyone is involved.

M1: [patient and patronising tone] You see the difficulty, Susan, is not that it's NCD, I mean that is just the name, I mean the principle of going forward with action plans. I mean, I was blessed at

Skuiling, don't get me wrong but what I'm just saying is, let's not have a new vision every six months, let's stick to the plan, because there is nothing wrong with the plan and incorporate this Skuiling thing into the plan. (*The man uses this opportunity to belittle what the woman said and then proceeds to ignore it and press his own point*)

Doug: That's correct and I agree with you 100%. (*This was said to the man! What the woman said was never referred to again*)

#### **4.4.1.3 It is dangerous for women to meet together without the men**

Patriarchal discourses often seem to define what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour for women. This was evident in the following exchange, which took place during a meeting of the women only. One of the women had just referred to an incident at the first women-only meeting, when one of the men had popped his head in to the meeting and said, 'Ja, I know you're plotting a revolution here. The doors are locked and everything'.

There's almost a sense of that when women get together: 'What's going on here? What are they plotting? And it was said in a joking way, but it was kind of 'What's this... women meeting together... to talk about *what!*'

And that kind of comment or insinuations that have a similar meaning, actually play over and over again in my head, so that even a meeting like this with a closed door I keep thinking...how does this feel? Does this feel like kind of a secret gathering? Stuff that's being plotted? How much of this do I need to explain? And why don't I feel okay about it?

Precisely! Because we haven't conditioned ourselves to say, you know, I'm really allowed to do this... I'm really allowed.

McBride (1996:182) says that 'any claiming of power by oppressed and marginalised people is perceived as a threat by those in power and is often suppressed in one way or another'. One can only wonder whether the man's comment referred to in the incident above, while superficially innocent and jovial, revealed his own sense of the potential threat of women meeting together, particularly in the presence of an 'outsider' with ideas that he may have suspected were quite different to the norm for the women of this church.

His comment did, however, sow the seeds of uncertainty for the women regarding whether or not what they were doing was 'acceptable' behaviour for good Christian women. In their responses, though, we do hear the wonderful possibility of resistance: one of the women knows that it is possible to 'condition ourselves' against the guilt by saying, 'I am allowed to do this'. What a powerful destabilising discourse!

#### **4.4.2 'Christian traditional ways of doing things'**

The second cluster of discourses which caught my attention was named by one of the women as 'Christian traditional ways of doing things'. These are largely manifestations of patriarchal thinking within the Christian tradition. Within this cluster, the women did not describe the discourses as much as their effects on women. What struck me about these 'Christian traditional ways of doing things' is that they all contribute to the silencing of women's voices. This is apparent in each of the quotes below.

##### **4.4.2.1 *Christian traditional ways of doing things uphold men's power***

I almost have a sense of, you know, there's these men with loud voices... or not so loud... but powerful influence, voices and influence. Okay, maybe men with power, with position, with authority that has been given to them by their position, and almost standing behind them, even bigger, seems to be the 'Bible' and 'Christian ways of doing things'... *Traditional*, traditional ways of doing things... Christian traditional ways of doing things.

Ja, religious stuff, you know that kind of, almost seems to grow the men's power, or grow their position somehow or... [long pause] They depend on that... and we as women, allow it... it's quite hard to fight against that though.

I wonder if the men are aware that they have this traditional thing and... the Bible or whatever it is that they are leaning on or being supported by, you know, I wonder if they realise that that is how they are perceived by many people, and if they did realise it, I wonder what kind of influence it would have on them.

##### **4.4.2.2 *Christian traditional ways of doing things dictate how Christian women should behave***

Throughout history women have had to fight to participate, to enter debate in public, to be heard, to be seen. When they have tried they have been ridiculed and told it was virtuous not to be selfish and told to look after others. The churches have sanctioned this view by calling it God-given, and natural for woman to regard herself as of little value and to continue in the service of others.

(Isherwood & McEwan 1993:24)

It felt like... I don't know if the word is fear, that we should rather stick with the submissive thing rather than the 'what we want' thing. [The what we want thing is] too... um, risky?

I think for me as a woman... in these kinds of meetings, because they are church meetings, I have to behave, and 'behave' means that I don't shout at somebody, I don't be ugly to them even if they have been ugly to me or hurt me, um...that I try not to be conflictual or argumentative, that I need to, um... *especially* as a woman, I feel like I need to behave.

Bons-Storm (1996:18) describes how these patriarchal ideas about a Christian behaviour code for women contribute to the silencing of women's voices:

The assumed behaviour code of the proper Christian woman causes many women to feel guilty and ashamed. When ashamed, a woman feels that she has missed the

mark. She does not live up to the expectations of others, of God/dess, or of herself. Being ashamed easily leads to silence.

I am left wondering why the behaviour code for men does not seem to carry as much weight in Christian circles as it seems to for women. Why is it permissible, and almost unquestioned, that a man should 'shout' and 'be ugly' and 'hurt' as the woman describes above, while the woman's response is constrained by the injunction to behave?

#### ***4.4.2.3 Christian traditional ways of doing things prevent people from speaking out***

Some women spoke about how Christian patriarchy seems untouchable because it appears to be divinely sanctioned.

[Traditional Christian ideas] also disable people from talking about why they have left [the church]... because, okay, if those are kind of God's anointed people, um who are in these traditional roles, you can't be honest about things which show them up in a bad light, you can't do that.

#### ***4.4.2.4 Christian traditional ways of doing things mystify the role of women***

I know for me there's a big question mark in terms of where women stand in the church and what their role is and should they be in leadership positions and so on, but I would find it interesting to see what the view of men is and where the boundaries are... it's not about [revolution]... it's not about women's lib... I'm not for women's lib, I think it can be very damaging, and I think that having a proper understanding of where both men and women's roles fall in the church would enrich the church and I think... if those roles were well-defined it would be easier to feel comfortable in them.

I also think in terms of women in leadership positions, I think there's a question mark whether it's something that needs to be asserted or it's something that needs to be invited... And if it's asserted then the assumption is that we need to be doing something, whereas, if it's invited then the assumption is that men should be doing something so, umm, ja it depends again where the responsibility lies...

It seems that the lack of clarity about women's roles in the church is a simple but very effective way of suppressing women's voices: 'Well, we're not too sure what God would say about that, you know'. I wonder whether by not taking a clear position the church is actually taking a position against the involvement of women. While there is doubt in women's minds, it will always be a struggle to take up a position in leadership, even to ask for it, because you may, in doing so, be challenging God. Your sense of calling may, in fact, be sin!

It seems that it might be a very important thing for this particular church to re-open the theological conversation about the role of women in leadership. If the church can develop a clear statement of position which will be made known to all men and women in the

church and which is then carried through in practice, it would at least let women know exactly where they stand and allow them to make informed decisions about their involvement in the church.

#### **4.4.3 Discourses borrowed from the business environment**

This constitutes a third cluster of discourses which had a significant influence on the subject positions made available to both men and women participating in this research journey. Prior to the Skuiling Retreat, the pastor described the men on the deaconate as 'significant businessmen'. It was evident from their approach to church leadership, and the patterns of interaction amongst the deacons, that they had imported many ideas about how to plan and get things done, what counts as success, and how one relates to colleagues and subordinates, from a fairly traditional and conservative business environment. The following are a few of the ideas which the women described as influencing the men.

##### **4.4.3.1 *What we achieve is more important than how we relate to one another***

The women said a lot about the conflict that they experienced as they tried to hold onto the new ways of relating to one another that they had experienced at Skuiling in the face of the sense of urgency expressed by the men that the team should be 'doing' or 'achieving' something, often at the expense of respectful ways of relating.

There came a point where there was impatience with the process... we had to *do* things, we had to be seen as, ja, ticking things off, and then the process started getting smaller and smaller and the normal 'task' became bigger and bigger, and then the value of what we had done disappeared, the togetherness, the women and the men.

It seems to me as if there is some voice that is very loud in the minds of the more outspoken in the [team] which is saying, 'you are letting everybody down unless you deal with the "what"[what we achieve]. It seems as if that voice, whether it comes from the business environment, whether it comes from, 'that's the only way that I can be valued as a man is if I attend to the "what"', it seems as if that voice somehow pervades the being back in [our city] and the 'how' we are doing church and that almost there's a... I don't know, it's almost that every now and then you get a sense of urgency that comes through some of the [team] members' voices which says, 'Come! We need to *do* this'.

What is the name of that voice? Power? Control? Ego?... To me it's about 'Being successful', means you have to be productive, which means you have to be able to come up with... stuff... a plan, so that you can 'tick it off'. That's what it's called for me. And if you don't play that game then you don't belong here... cause that's how we've always done it... that's what we know, that's how we know how to do this... that's how we work...

And that's why I think our voices as women are quiet, become quiet, because the flavour is something about that... and it *quietens* our voices; I suppose that's what you could say... it

*quietens* our voices... It just doesn't make space for the women's voices... it crowds out the joy of being together, the joy of dreaming together, of relating and of... of being in a very rich way together. It crowds all of that out, there's no space for that, because, I mean, how can you tick that off on a list? You can't really. It's blimblingwell ongoing, it never ends and I think that's what the [men's] frustration with some of this process was – *when* can we tick this off?! How many *more* meetings do we have to come to before we...

You can talk until you are blue in the face, and preach and sing and all of that kind of thing, but if it's not true to the principles of, or the values, which are ultimately God-values, you know, that each person is the same and each person's voice has ...um, equal value, it's actually pointless.

The women describe a powerful patriarchal discourse in which 'power is conceived as the ability to get things done' (McBride 1996:182), and which incites men to action. The women express their strong resistance to these voices, saying that we cannot *do* all sorts of things and achieve all sorts of things as the Body of Christ without paying attention to *how* we relate to one another. It seems that the women's ways of being together powerfully subvert the messages of the business culture, which the men have imported into the church leadership context. Is such subversion not the way of the gospel? Richard Rohr (1996:14) describes the call of the gospel as follows:

The gospel will always insist that means and ends must be in complete agreement, or the final end is always polluted. There is no way to peace. Peace is the way. There is no way toward love except by practicing love.

Rohr (1996:77) goes on to suggest that Jesus didn't want his community to *have* a social ethic; he wanted it to *be* a social ethic. Their very way of relating was to be an affront to the system of dominance and power; it was to name reality in a new way.

This emphasis on the importance of relationship is echoed by Leonard Sweet (2004) who has written extensively about the need for the church to respond with love and creativity to a postmodern world. Sweet (2004:2-3) believes that, both as individuals and as communities, Christians 'need less to be true to our principles and much more to be true to our relationships'. He suggests that in order to save both the church and the world, 'we don't need the courage of our convictions. We need the courage of our relationships' (Sweet 2004:3).

#### **4.4.3.2 *Everyone needs to think the same, act the same, be the same***

There just doesn't seem to be much space to be different from the status quo, the dominant voice, the dominant way of thinking and being and... in fact there's quite a pressure to agree with the dominant voice... let alone space given to an opposing voice or even inviting a different point of view.

Conformity to a perceived norm is a powerful form of internalised disciplinary control (Foucault 1980:119). The invitation of conformity is, once again, to go back to 'pretend' and deny or suppress thoughts, words or ways of being that are in any way different to the norm. Turner and Hudson (1999:136) describe such conformity for the sake of 'peace' or 'unity' as 'coercive conformity' which 'stifles the voices of God, self and others', while Yocum (1991:71) calls this resistance to what is different, the 'ungifting of our gifts' as women:

Women have time and time again had the painful experience of the church ungifting our gifts. Our gifts are deemed undesirable because they do not match the ecclesial furniture or because they are not like anything anybody has envisioned... ungifting is a denial; a denial of the giver as well as the gifts.

One woman spoke out about the fear that this discourse evokes in her, which causes her to withhold her own unique and 'different' gifts from the church:

I kind of get a fearfulness in me because I think that [there] is a pattern – I don't know if anyone would recognise it – but for me there is a pattern that if something becomes *too* loud and *too* different and *too*... in our midst, umm, that's one of the ways of... getting rid of it... handling it, you just shake it out, you push it out... and then everything will be back to normal again. And that, it kind of sits with me here [putting hand over stomach]. I need to kind of just, you know, I need to watch myself because if I get too loud or too different or whatever, maybe the same thing would happen to me. Yes, I do, I fear that.

In identifying the discourses that are in circulation within this Baptist church, it was often difficult to separate the discourse from its effects on both men and women. Some of these effects have therefore been touched on already. However, in the next section I will focus more specifically on the effects of the discourses which have been identified and how they achieve these effects.

#### **4.5 WHAT EFFECTS DO DISCOURSES HAVE ON MEN AND WOMEN IN THIS CHURCH?**

In section 4.3.3, I discussed Foucault's (1980:49) belief that discourses are practices which 'systematically form the objects of which they speak'. This means that discourses constitute how one perceives oneself and the world, and one's ability to act in the world. In this section I will look at how the specific discourses in circulation in this church operate to constitute both men (4.5.2) and women (4.5.3).

##### **4.5.1 Discourses constitute men and women in distinctive subject positions**

To talk about the constitutive effects of discourses is to talk about power relations (Foucault 1980:142) and how the discourses we have identified, as well as other discourses, invite the men and women to take up certain subject positions, depending on

where they are located within the relations of power (Flaskas & Humphries 1993:41). Their subject positions in turn shape and constrain the ways of being and speaking that are available to each one in various contexts (Burr 1995:145). We have seen this expressed to some degree in the women's stories, as they described the silencing of their voices and the dissipation of their dreams. In the sections below, I will first discuss the effects of discourses on the men who participated in this research journey, and then examine in more detail, the effects of the discourses on the women.

#### **4.5.2 The effects of the discourses on the men**

It should be noted that the effects discussed here have been identified and described by the women in the church. The men might have a different perspective on their discursive positioning.

##### **4.5.2.1 *Patriarchal discourses constitute men in a relationship of power over women and children***

Let us not, therefore, ask why certain people want to dominate, what they seek, what is their overall strategy... rather...we should try to discover how it is that subjects are gradually, progressively, really and materially constituted through a multiplicity of organisms, forces, energies, materials, desires, thoughts, etc. We should try to grasp subjection in its material instance as a constitution of subjects.

(Foucault cited by McClintock Fulkerson 1994:61)

I am deeply aware that the key themes of this research journey are controversial and potentially divisive. I therefore want to be clear on my position which acknowledges that men's subject positions are constituted by the prevailing discourses in the same way as women's are. I am not seeking to apportion blame for patriarchy, but I want to understand the processes and practices which sustain it in order to make space for meaningful dialogue about a way forward in which both men and women are invited to participate and have their contributions heard and valued.

The patriarchal discourses which constitute men in a relationship of power over women and children have a long history in society as well as in the Christian church. These discourses are sanctioned by the conservative, evangelical theology of this Baptist church, and are sustained by the dualism and spiritualisation that results from the 'privatisation' of Christian faith (Kretzschmar 1998) as discussed in Chapter 2.

Therefore, while there is no meaningful challenge to men's power from within their denomination or their local church community, there is no need for them to change the status quo. Swart-Russell's (1991:301) observations and experience led her to suggest

that 'men are not going to easily dismantle ideologies and structures of sexism in the church', primarily because 'many don't recognise that they are evil'. Wildman and Davis (1996:20) agree that in order 'to end subordination, one must first recognise privilege'. However, they acknowledge that '...privilege is rarely seen by the holder of the privilege' (Wildman & Davis 1996:13). We have already discussed how dominant discourses achieve their own invisibility when they are assigned an unquestioned truth status, and come to pass off power inequalities as 'fair or somehow natural' (Burr 1995:62).

There may also be some element of choice in not seeing privilege on the part of those who benefit. Rohr (1996:54) describes what happens when people operate from a position of power:

As soon as people are comfortable, they don't want any truth beyond their comfort zone. People who are at the top of the system will vote 'conservative' because once you are at the top of a system you want to conserve the system as it is. You're enjoying the fruits, why would you want to change it? Yet those who are not enjoying the fruits of the system are always longing and thirsting for the coming of the Kingdom, for something more. They are not as likely to vote for the status quo, which is invariably built on those bottom lines of money, power and God-talk.

It is only when we ask the question, 'Who benefits?' that it is possible to see more clearly how 'self-interest rather than the interests of others' supports the maintenance of 'current religious "truths"' (Gallagher 1996:119 cited by Kotzé 2002:14).

It is therefore usually those who have been oppressed within a particular situation who are the first to perceive and point out the oppression. Turner and Hudson (1999:143) agree that 'God seems to choose as agents of the new creation those who have been oppressed by the old. They are often the most qualified to relate to the new and the most eager to imagine it'.

Some of the women described their perceptions of the men in this church's comfortableness in their current positions as follows:

I think they [the men] are afraid of this: that openness and honesty will get us to a *totally* different place, which would require different things of them... and so, 'We can't let the women's voices become too prominent in case it becomes part of the norm of (being)', I don't know, maybe? I do have a sense that they're quite okay in the glass box... safe... and that our knocking is not something that [they want to hear].

... we're not prepared to force our way in and they are so comfortable with us not forcing our way in that it doesn't open up...

What would it take to challenge the taken-for-granted discriminatory practices of patriarchal Christianity in this Baptist church? Kretzschmar (1998:343) has called for 'a

comprehensive re-reading of our Baptist heritage and the traditional male-oriented interpretations of the Bible and theological writings'. I support this suggestion wholeheartedly, but would like to take it further and say that such a re-reading would need to be a participatory process in which the voices of women and all marginalised groups within the church, including people of colour, the aged and the youth, are welcomed into the conversation. It is important to remember that, in the Book of Women's Wisdom, the women are not just speaking on behalf of the women in the church. They are speaking on behalf of all in the church who have not had a voice, who have not been invited to participate.

From the perspective of participatory practical theology, the criterion for evaluating praxis emerging from such a conversation would not be its doctrinal correctness but its effects: 'Who will benefit from this and in whose interests is it?' (Kotzé 2003:66).

#### **4.5.2.2 Action/Success-oriented discourses drive men into busyness**

I have already mentioned the powerful ideas which seem to instil a sense of urgency in men to make plans and 'get things done'. It was this sense of urgency that seemed to be at odds with a more participatory and respectful way of being together in meetings. However, there was a sense that it was not only the women who were dissatisfied with the exhausting effects of urgency and the need for action:

At Skuiling there was a sense of dissatisfaction with the way things were... I just remember hearing so many of the men saying that involvement is just an obligation and that the passion is gone and 'We just go because we feel we should'.

#### **4.5.2.3 Discourses invoke fear of change/difference in order to maintain the status quo**

I want to acknowledge again the significant step that the deaconate did take in challenging both traditional Christian ideas and patriarchy when they invited the women to participate in the Skuiling Retreat. The long-term implications of this step cannot be underestimated. However, the women felt that fear may have later convinced at least some of the men to withdraw their commitment to inclusive practices:

Maybe fear [of women's participation and women's role and women's contribution] could be encouraging the [men] to keep the status quo, keep things as they've been. You know, 'We've been on this little diversion but now we've got things back and um...we'll tolerate this for this much but then...', or 'We'll appease the process, but we'll take our own back again', somehow control came in and said 'Whoops, we're going to change, we've walked that walk now, journeyed that little journey, [now we're] off to the real thing, the tasks'.

### 4.5.3 The effect of the discourses on women

#### 4.5.3.1 Patriarchal discourses constitute women as the marginal 'other'

We have already seen how patriarchal and traditional Christian discourses conspire to marginalise and silence women, and how women respond with a complex interweaving of resistance and withdrawal, which in itself can be an expression of resistance, at times. Two of the women expressed the struggle that lies behind their silence in this way:

We had that one meeting with the women, and it felt like people were quite real and quite open at that meeting... and they knew... at that meeting I think we were all aware that already there was a retreat of power... of voice, I would rather use the word 'voice'. There was a sense we were retreating. We didn't **want** to, we didn't want to, but we were and we were giving the voice back to the men and only the men, and we just gave over. There was a sense that we just gave it away.

And yet, coming out of that meeting there was a sense of protest because, remember, we prepared that statement which we never actually used; it kind of came out in different ways in that meeting with the men, but there was definitely a dissatisfaction with what was happening and not happening.

I think we still are dissatisfied but we just... we're just being quiet.

The women also spoke about engaging in the struggle and then withdrawing when it becomes too exhausting, too hard and too costly:

We get tired... we did get tired... there was sense of uselessness and 'Ag, let's just go back to what we know... the line of least resistance, it seems we took the line of least resistance... and gave up on ourselves... because of the discouragement.

Even we women were saying the same, 'It's easier to be going back to the old way'. The struggle is too hard, or it's what we know how to do, or let's just go with the old system.

Some women also spoke about fear – the fear of resisting, the fear of risking, the fear of challenging the possibly 'God-ordained' status quo:

And that's what we don't do with each other, is risk... *That's* what we don't do, we *don't* risk... 'cause we're too scared. It's like the women have lost the courage to risk.

Fear also seemed to play a significant role in separating women from one another. Many women expressed sadness and regret that the women had not kept closer contact during the course of the research journey. There had been the desire, but this was not translated into action.

How does one understand such apparent contradictions between resistance and withdrawal, between what women desire and what they do? The feminist researchers, Cook and Fonow (cited by Nielsen 1990:74) talk about the struggle between what they

call 'women's consciousness' and their behaviour, and they describe how women often 'simultaneously oppose and conform to conditions that deny their freedom'. If one looks at women's behaviour only, it might suggest conformity but at the same time, 'consciousness' can be a sphere of freedom for women (Nielsen 1990:74). In other words, women may seem to be conforming but may, in fact, have very strong feelings against the very behaviour they are being coerced into enacting (Groves 1997:40).

Poststructuralism and social construction theory offer further insight into these apparent contradictions with their conviction that subject positions or subjectivities are not fixed (Dunlap 1999:138), but are 'continuously emergent, re-formed and redirected as one moves through the sea of ever-changing relationships' (Gergen 1991:139). This means that '...who one is, is always an open question with a shifting answer depending on the positions made available within one's own and others' discursive practices and within those practices, the stories through which we make sense of our own and others' lives' (Davies & Harré 1991:46). Thus McClintock Fulkerson (1994:11) encourages us to acknowledge and respect each woman's 'multiple identities'; her 'many differently constructed subject positions' (*op cit*:355).

Such an approach suggests that, for example, while women might be able to occupy a subject position in which active, verbal resistance is a possibility when participating in a conversation with other women, the discursive practices operating in a meeting of both men and women might constitute her subject position in such a way as to restrict her options for resistance to withdrawal and silence.

However, our potential for resistance is diminished when we have internalised the 'dominant narratives' and begin to believe that they speak the truth about our identities. These internalised and internalising discourses 'constitute our blindness to life as it is produced, and as we produce it' (White 1995:42), and recruit us into participating in our own subjugation.

McClintock Fulkerson (1994:100) explains how, at the heart of Foucault's 'disciplinary power', is the assumption that being watched, and the internalisation of the knowledge that one is watched, has become the most effective way of recruiting persons into policing their own thoughts and self-censoring what they are allowed to think, believe, say and do. Using Foucault's terminology, people tend to become 'docile bodies' under 'the [internalised] gaze' of those who control the discourses of power in our culture' (Freedman

& Combs 1996:39). This self-censorship was expressed by one of the women in 4.4.2.2, and by another woman as follows:

There's a perception that has a fear about it of what other people or the men are thinking and for me, I don't know what they're thinking, but comments like you've just made, 'plotting a revolution' are ones that happen in my head, that I need to fight against, even though I know the men aren't necessarily saying it or thinking it, it's kind of something in my head that's keeping me from having the conversations... it's not the only reason, but it's kind of, it's there ... and I don't know why.

'The Mud Flower Collective' (1985:158) describe the same struggle in translating awareness into action, from the perspective of a depth metaphor of identity:

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

But how does such transformation happen?

#### **4.6 IS CHANGE POSSIBLE?**

As I have journeyed with the men and women on this research journey, there have been times when, in frustration and despair, I have wondered whether meaningful, lasting change is possible when there are so many powerful discourses which stand against change and serve to maintain the status quo. This, in turn, raises other questions: If the dominant discourses of the day constitute us in certain subject positions which limit the options available to us for thought and action, are we not reduced to living out our 'fate'? How does one challenge or resist a discourse? It seems necessary therefore to address the question: Is change possible?

There are many lenses through which I can view this question and arrive at an answer. If I look through the lens of Christian spirituality, my answer has to be a resounding 'Yes!' Change seems to be at the heart of the gospel of Jesus, which invites us to be 'born again' into a new way of seeing, thinking and doing. Romans 12:1 extends this new way of seeing to our culture and the dominant discourses of the day: 'Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind'.

The belief in a transcendent, creative God who actively participates in the lives of individuals, communities and nations offers the hope of resistance, the hope of renewal and the hope of change.

It was also helpful to recognise with McClintock Fulkerson (1994:118) that Christian women *do* 'make trouble with their faith in ways that advance their gender emancipation'. This recognition precludes us from subscribing to the 'essentialising idea that Christianity (or any tradition) is always emancipatory or that it is always oppressive' (McClintock Fulkerson 1994:118). This is a conviction shared by Miller-McLemore (2000:239) and Graham (1996:111) who writes:

Religion... carries implicit values and serves to prescribe, recreate and subvert many different aspects of our cultural practices concerning human nature, knowledge, values and meaning.

This raises a number of questions regarding resistance and change. For example, how are some women supported by Christian tradition in their resistance to oppression? And how are Christian traditions constitutive of both oppressive gender constraints and emancipatory possibilities for different communities of women? I will explore these questions further in Chapter 5.

My hope regarding the possibility of change is further strengthened by those who view life through the same interpretive lens as I have viewed this research journey, and find reason, themselves, to hope:

It is impossible for us to arrive at a vantage point from outside of culture – and therefore outside of language and known ways of life – by which we might review our culture. However, this fact does not condemn us to blindly reproducing culture, without any hope of refusing or protesting those aspects which we experience as problematic.

(White 1995:45)

White (1995:45) goes on to suggest that it is possible to challenge practices of power and refuse the practices of self such as self-policing and self-censorship. However, he does not see this as something that happens overnight but as a process that happens over time. One metaphor that he uses for such a process of change is the 'migration of identity' (White 1995:99-104).

Migration of identity, like any transition process, involves a separation from a particular situation or way of being and, later, a point of arrival at some 'preferred location in life, and at some alternative and preferred account of one's identity' (White 1995:99). However, in between separation and arrival is a 'liminal space' (White 1995:100) in which confusion, disorientation, fear, desperation and acute despair might try to convince the person in migration to return to familiar territory, and give up on their journey. This metaphor provides helpful insight into the pattern of resistance and withdrawal that some of the

women discussed in section 4.5.3.1. It also helps us to understand how the men on the church leadership resorted to 'business as usual' so quickly after the Skuiling Retreat.

Davies and Harré (1991:46) suggest that, while it is important to acknowledge the 'constitutive force of discourse and in particular of discursive practices', it is equally important to affirm that 'people are capable of exercising choice in relation to those practices'. Graham (1996:109) agrees that the 'constituted' subject is 'also self-reflexive: it has some capacity for acting purposefully and self-critically, albeit within the constraints of shared meanings, social structures and systems of power. Thus, to argue that one is constituted through discourse does not deny agency and subjectivity; it is merely to insist upon the cultural context of action and identity'.

McClintock Fulkerson (1994:105) suggests that the possibility of choice and resistance arises from 'the complex subject positions in which women find themselves' as the 'convergences of multiple discourses are always their potential destabilisation'. She also affirms that it is the discourses outside of a dominant discourse that 'have the potential to destabilise [the dominant discourse's] power to function in an utterly determinist, monolithic way' (McClintock Fulkerson 1994:104).

It seems, therefore, that both the men and the women have choices regarding the subject positions in which they have been constituted. They can 'go with the flow' or they can resist. One of the women described her choice like this:

Maybe I just don't want to [expose] myself and maybe that's okay... in our church... It's not okay for me, but it is wise...

#### **4.6.1 If change is possible, how can we create the conditions in which it will take place?**

While I would expect and count on the mystery of God at work in the process of renewal and change, the approach that I take to Christian spirituality as well as to practical theology (as described in Chapter 1), sees transformation as a co-operative endeavour between willing persons and God. I am therefore keen to discover all I can about the practices, mechanisms, processes and conversations that people can engage in to participate with God in bringing about transformation.

##### **4.6.1.1 *Spiritual practice to facilitate change***

The purpose and goal of all Christian spiritual practices or 'disciplines' is for the followers of Christ to begin to think and act and speak and love and live like Jesus did. Willard (1988:ix) suggests that we can 'through faith and grace, become like Jesus by practicing

the types of activities he engaged in' and to order our whole lives around those activities. But what were these activities that Jesus practised? Willard (1988:ix) lists the following: 'solitude and silence, prayer, simple and sacrificial living, intense study and meditation upon God's Word and God's ways, and service to others'. These are all activities which we can undertake to 'bring us into more effective co-operation with Christ and [Christ's] kingdom' (Willard 1988:156). Foster (1978:6) suggests that these practices, which he and Willard call 'disciplines', 'allow us to place ourselves before God so that [God] can transform us'. I would also suggest, using poststructuralist terminology, that spiritual practices offer the possibility of being 'positioned differently within new discourses' which can bring about observable personal change (Davies 1991:50).

Although this is not the place to explore these practices in any depth, it seems that they might be crucial to any process of transformation in this or any other church. Nouwen (1989:35) particularly calls on those in Christian leadership to take seriously the call to 'place themselves before God' and be transformed:

Christian leaders cannot simply be persons who have well-informed opinions about the burning issues of our time. Their leadership must be rooted in the permanent, intimate relationship with the incarnate Word, Jesus, and they need to find there the source for their words, advice and guidance. Through the discipline of contemplative prayer, Christian leaders have to listen again and again to the voice of love and to find there the wisdom and courage to address whatever issue presents itself to them.

#### **4.6.1.2 *Changing the way we speak***

Freedman and Combs (1996:29), drawing on the poststructuralist perspective of Jacques Derrida, suggest that 'change, whether it be change of belief, relationship, feeling, or self-concept, involves a change in language'. Such a suggestion is rooted in the belief that language disperses (creates) meaning, and that 'when language creates and invents, it generates new possibilities for alternative actions, impossible before' (Roux & Kotzé 2002:149). Consider the difference in response that the following two sentences evoke in you, as well as the possibilities for action that each conjures up:

- (i) Please be at the meeting at 7pm sharp tomorrow night.
- (ii) You are warmly invited to participate in a discussion tomorrow night at 7pm.

This perspective suggests that we can invite people to describe their experience in new ways, using new words or ascribing new meaning to old words and, in so doing, call forth new realities and new worlds of possibility. For example, women who describe themselves as 'submissive' in a particular context will have a different experience of that context to women who describe themselves as 'silenced' or 'suppressed'. Their reality may be

exactly the same, but the way they describe it will call forth different experiences of that reality and invite different responses.

Social construction theory and post-structuralism offer the hope that in the course of conversations and through the language that we use, new understandings can be arrived at and new, hopefully more just and equitable, knowledges and realities can be constituted. As individuals who speak we can 'mobilise existing discourses in new ways, inverting, inventing and breaking old patterns' (Cixous 1981 cited by Davies 1991:50).

I wonder what the impact would be on the men and women who participated in this research if such conversations could be opened up which invite different ways of describing their life together. And I wonder what the impact might be if men started using words like 'participate', 'invite', 'welcome', 'include', 'open', and 'safe', and engaged in conversations to negotiate a shared understanding of words like 'leadership', 'decisions', 'meetings' and many others. Would these conversations give rise to new constructions and invite new ways of being together?

One of the women had an idea for one such conversation:

Imagine the richness of being together if we could be together, as men and women... and say, 'You know what, we've just discussed this and this is what we'd like to throw into the melting pot for tonight... the fact that we as women seem to fear you... some of us, most of us?... and ... what do you think about it'. Ha, we could have such an evening round this and... [other] taboos.

#### **4.6.1.3 *Challenging the 'political, economic and institutional regime of the production of truth' to bring about change***

Although changing the language we use may begin to change people's perceptions of themselves and the role they can play in a particular context, Foucault (1977:14) seems to suggest that this may not be sufficient: 'The problem is not one of changing people's "consciousness" or what's in their heads; but the political, economic and institutional regime of the production of truth'. Along similar lines, Ackermann (1991:100) suggests that what feminist theology needs is 'a transformative view of humanity which wants not only a newly integrated self, but a newly integrated social order'.

Rohr (1996:29-30) provides us with a biblical metaphor which highlights the same challenge that Foucault and Ackermann have identified:

In Matthew 9:17 Jesus says, 'Nor do people put new wine in old wineskins; otherwise the skins burst, the wine runs out and the skins are lost. No; they put new wine into fresh skins and both are preserved'... Jesus' image is this: 'I'm going to give you a new vision of the world that will taste like new wine, but it isn't going to make a bit of

difference unless you have some new wineskins. If there are not new structures that reflect the new attitude, then even the attitude will be lost. Both container and contents must be renewed, or they will both be lost.

How does one participate in challenging and dismantling 'the political, economic and institutional regime of truth' and creating a 'newly integrated social order'? How do we dismantle the old structures and create new wineskins to hold the 'new wine' of invitation and participation?

Perhaps, before we can challenge the old structures, we need to acknowledge the role that we each play in maintaining them. Sampson (1989:6) suggests that while people are 'the mediated product of society', their way of being in that society, how they act and speak, either 'reproduces or potentially transforms that society'. Thus, each person has both the potential and the responsibility to contribute to the dismantling of the 'political, economic and institutional regime of truth'.

In resisting oppressive discourses and speaking out against the status quo in the way that they did, I believe that the women were making such a contribution. They were exercising a prophetic ministry in the Mosaic tradition, a tradition which Jesus made central to his own mission (Cochrane, de Gruchy & Petersen 1991:57-59). Prophecy in this tradition does not stop with a critique of a particular problem. An essential dimension of Mosaic prophecy is to build people up, to bring people hope and to set them free (Cochrane et al 1991:56). And as the women engaged in conversation together, hope-filled possibilities and liberatory visions began to emerge that seem to point to a way forward. We will look at these visions and possibilities in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 5

### WOMEN'S VISIONS OF A NEW WAY OF BEING CHURCH TOGETHER

What would a woman's way of doing it be? How could we have taken it further? How could we still take it forward? Is it still possible? I wonder what it would take to keep [what we experienced at Skuiling] alive. Would it take a new way of being [church] together?

(Book of Women's Wisdom:5)

#### 5.1 INTRODUCING THE WOMEN'S DREAMS AND VISIONS

The main stimulus for the renewal of Christianity today is coming not from the centre but from the bottom and from the edges... It is coming from those places where Christians are poor...; from areas where they live as small minorities surrounded by non-christian cultures...; from churches that live under political despotism...; from those women who are agonising together over what it means to be Christian and female in a church that has perpetuated patriarchy for millennia.

(Cox cited by Furlong 1988:11)

In Chapter 4, I focussed on the stories that the women told about their experiences of the Skuiling process, and the tangled web of discourses which conspired to frustrate change and maintain the patriarchal status quo in the church. I also spoke of my own despondency, at times wondering if transformation within the church leadership structures would ever be possible. However, encouraged by the optimism of my spirituality and my own discursive positioning, I chose to listen again to the Book of Women's Wisdom, this time listening for a story of resistance and possibility. What I discovered was an alternative vision for being church together. The clarity and depth of the vision took my breath away. It is a testimony to the power of participatory theology.

This chapter documents the unfolding of the women's vision for the church. The vision has several threads, namely, invitation and participation (5.3), relationships (5.4) and solidarity (5.5). These threads are finally woven together in a vision of wholeness and community that seems both surprising and natural<sup>1</sup>. As in the previous chapter, and for the same reasons, I will use the women's own words as they describe their dreams and visions.

#### 5.2 THE INVITATION TO DREAM

The prophetic vision that is described in the biblical witness presents a compelling ideal, bringing hope to the people of faith. At the same time it serves as an act of resistance, refusing to allow the present order to define the life of humanity. The same Spirit that inspired this vision continues to inspire the people of God today.

(Turner & Hudson 1999:120)

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<sup>1</sup> I was interested to note that for Slosson Wuellner (1987:15) the combination of surprise and naturalness in her response to a thought or felt sense, signal guidance from God.

This research journey began with an invitation to reflect and then to dream. In planning the process for the Skuiling Retreat and for the wider church community, I was intentional about opening up a space within which people were invited to listen for the still, small voice of God speaking God's dream or vision for the church. My hope and prayer was that each person's dream would reflect a facet of God's dream for the church. I had hoped and prayed, but was still taken by surprise when the dreams were shared and, in a collage of words and images, created a vision of church that was both vibrant and powerful and, to use the words of one of the women, 'God-steeped'.

However, it was not only the dreams that were shared at Skuiling that contributed to the team's vision of a new way of being church together. The Retreat itself provided a concrete experience of this alternative vision. Participants on the retreat experienced an authentic meeting with one another and with God which became part of the vision they took back to their church. Although, in the women's own words, this vision 'got smaller', 'dissipated', and 'retreated', it never completely disappeared, and the women often referred back to it.

On listening again to *The Book of Women's Wisdom*, I was struck by the fact that the women kept speaking out about their dreams and desires for a new way of being church together. In narrative therapeutic terms, these dreams and desires would qualify as unique outcomes: 'A unique outcome may be a plan, action, feeling, statement, quality, desire, dream, thought, belief, ability or commitment' (Morgan 2000:52). The women's dreams and desires speak of self-care and mutual care, and 'provide a point of entry to the counterplots of women's lives, those accounts that have to do with survival, resilience, protest, resistance, and so on' (White 1995:94).

Taken together with the dreams and visions of the Skuiling Retreat, the women's ongoing dreams and desires constitute an alternative story (Morgan 2000:14) or preferred way of being. The work of narrative therapy and of participatory practical theology (see Chapter 1, section 1.2) is to work with people to bring forth and thicken such alternative stories: 'Within the new stories people live out new self images, new possibilities for relationships and new futures' (Freedman & Combs 1996:16). My purpose in drawing together the threads of the women's dreams in this chapter is to thicken and enrich the alternative story of the women's dreams and visions, which stand against the constitutive power of the discourses which we looked at in the previous chapter.

At one of the later meetings during the year of the research journey, I invited the participants to reflect for a few minutes on the changes that they felt *had* happened during the year. Many people had stories to tell of change, but seemed unsure of what had precipitated the changes. Most attributed the change quite broadly to 'the work of the Holy Spirit'. One of the women wondered about the influence that the Skuiling dreams may have had on people's attitudes and behaviour, simply by virtue of having been articulated:

I wonder how much of [what has changed] has been influenced by... the dreams that we dreamt and in our minds, the influence of that dream on our minds. You know what I'm saying, it's just a fascinating thing for me that if you choose to look in a particular place and you've got a dream in the back of your mind that [for example] describes people just standing and worshipping God, like [one of the women] described, that your eyes are able to see something different, it's just... a question that I have ...

Poststructuralist theory and social constructionism would concur that articulating a different reality effectively calls the new reality into being or 'names it into existence' (Turner & Hudson 1999:20). In fact, Turner and Hudson (1999:142) suggest that the power of our naming and speaking may be inscribed in our very nature as human beings: 'Could it be that being created in the image of God means that we have the power of speaking new worlds into being?'

This lends further support to my decision to record the dreams and desires articulated by the women over the course of the research journey. It is my hope that in listening to the written record of their own visions, the women will open their imaginations again to the new, 'always hoping, of course, to open the imagination of those in the community so that they, too can keep dreaming' (Turner & Hudson 1999:104). My guiding questions as I do so are: How can we hold onto the vision, and what do we need to do to implement the vision?

### **5.3 INVITATION AND PARTICIPATION**

Most women on the leadership team felt that the 'invitation to participate' was central to their experience of the Skuiling Retreat. This theme was evident in several of the dreams shared at Skuiling, and was something that recurred during most conversations with the women over the course of the research journey. Invitation and participation were also key features of the church which they envisioned.

### 5.3.1 Skuiling dreams which focussed on invitation and participation

The following are three women's dreams, shared at Skuiling.

My dream is... is one of working together – hands and arms clasped together.

In my dream I was left with one word. The word is participation. [The women held up a row of paper cut-out people, joined at the hands]. On the paper cut-out, some people are happy, some are angry, people are different, but they are all participating. Part of my dream already exists – it has happened here over this weekend. As we have all participated here, so we must include others. This group must go forward and have an impact in the church.

I deliberately have left the line of people open, and that is significant. I considered getting some sticky tape and closing the circle, but I decided that it has to stay open so that others can come in. Openness is important. It is also significant that the figures are not specifically men or women – all are participating together. There is no big person and no little person, no young and old, no important person or unimportant person. All have equal importance and all participate.

I wish I could tell this as I experienced it. It was a vision or visualisation. I am feeling reluctant to tell my story for fear of embarrassment or of being misunderstood, but I will. Words that kept coming up were 'dynamic', 'moving', 'change'. I wanted to see colour but there was a dove-like grey, a hazy 'atmosphere' rather than a colour. It represented contentment and comfortableness, like when something is *fitting* well.

It *started* with 'us' [the team] in a 'togetherness line', and there was a sense of gentleness and connectedness. But 'we' changed to a *movement*, into what was people but *not individuals*, a *dynamic of people*.

Then I saw what was a [church] building, but not a building. I was aware of freedom, of *companionable* comings and goings: movement and change and ease and it's okay to be moving in and out. It was not about individuals. And there was a sense of surprise – there were no taller or smaller individuals, rather there was a sense of unity.

These dreams present powerful images of equality, community, participation, freedom and openness. What is interesting to note is that these are all central themes in feminist liberation theology. In fact, feminist theologians' descriptions of ideal community life include many of the features that these women described in their (God's?) visions for their church: 'no domination, hierarchy, coercive power or privileges of gender, race or wealth; freedom and justice for all and by all; individuality without individualism; equality without sameness' (Gelder 1996:32). These ideals are echoed by Isherwood and McEwan (1993:134) who describe the vision of feminist theology as 'a world where individual dignity and integrity are honoured in mutual relating, where life-giving power replaces life-denying power and people are enabled to accept their humanity joyfully'.

### 5.3.2 Women's desires for invitation and participation to be part of the way we do church together

A number of women described how the invitation to participate at Skuiling was a liberating experience:

Over the weekend there was such a... I experienced... a flourishing freedom to participate in the group and to have the freedom to say what I was sitting with, and be able to contribute that in a way that I hadn't experienced before. And with that freedom came an enormous sense of being part of the group, and that was very exciting for me, enormously.

At Skuiling, many of the women came to realise that: 'in our participating, something much richer is created than one person can come up with'. It was this experience of invitation and participation that women envisaged being transferred to the rest of the church, transforming the usual ways of being and doing church together. These were some of the hopes and commitments that the women expressed:

[I hope that we will] include the voice of women and invite the voice of children.

[I hope] that everyone's contribution will be taken seriously, and will be seen as something that really counts

I **really, really, really** do believe in the fact that each human being should be given the space, a space, in any context, a space to participate and contribute; I really, really believe in that.

I know my passion, and my passion is because *we [women] have something to say* – as we have already said, we are worth it!

I would like to add value. My contribution should be valued.

A group of people speaking together has unbelievable power. [I have been taken by] surprise at the power of participation.

These women seem to be highlighting an important point about women's participation in church life, a point which was also made by Govinden (1991:286) and which often seems to be overlooked or forgotten: the 'ministry of women is not there for itself, but for the enhancement of the church's mission to a broken and divided land' and to a broken and divided world. This point is taken a step further by Cunningham and Hamilton (2000:15) who question why we eliminate desperately-needed workers from the 'harvest field' simply on the basis of gender, and who quote Franson who said, 'When two-thirds of the Christians [namely the women] are excluded from the work of evangelizing [or any other form of ministry], the loss for God's cause is so great that it can hardly be described'.

### **5.3.3 How do we make invitation and participation a central focus of our life together as a church community?**

The question in the heading of this section could also be expressed as follows: 'How can we create life-giving participatory practices that will contribute to a more ethical society?' (Kotze, Myburg, Roux & Associates 2002:ix). This section focusses on the concrete practices which women felt would extend the invitation to participate to all sectors of the church community. These include creating space for meaningful participation and sharing (5.3.3.1), inviting rather than imposing participation (5.3.3.2), inviting creativity into the conversation (5.3.3.3), starting to question 'taken-for-granted' realities together (5.3.3.4), holding ourselves accountable to core principles or values (5.3.3.5), making a long term commitment to a process of change (5.3.3.6), and nurturing the sacredness of community and participation (5.3.3.7).

#### **5.3.3.1 *Create space for meaningful participation and sharing***

From my perspective, what happened on the weekend [the Skuiling Retreat] was not rocket science... There was honest sharing and real listening, and that was the essence of what happened on the weekend, that there was space created, a safe space created, for people to share, when others were listening and you know that... I think if we're looking for something fancy to take back to the church, we're missing the point, you know; it's almost that we need to create opportunities where people feel safe to share and others really listen... that's the sense of connection, of being real, of not pretending, of trust.

I think there is a fundamental, foundational difference between coming in with a prescribed plan and creating space, inviting people to bring what it is that they have and going with it themselves. The one implies that people don't have anything to offer, and the other one says 'It's all about you. It's about *you* and what *you* have to bring to this'.

#### **5.3.3.2 *Inviting rather than imposing participation***

[We need to] change the kinds of words that we use, use more invitational language rather than the 'shoulds' and 'musts' and 'have tos'.

One thing, in terms of maybe holding the group accountable to the Skuiling process, is the whole emphasis on invitation rather than imposition.

We must not 'tell' people. The traditional stuff stops the process.

These desires echo the struggle of feminist spirituality 'to free itself from fixed ideologies in favour of authentic freedom of individuals and groups to be faithful to their own experiences' (Waldron 1996:65). The women are expressing their resistance to the imposition of roles and ideas, and emphasising their desire to be invited into the process of negotiating meaning and making decisions.

### **5.3.3.3      *Invite creativity into the conversation***

I'm thinking about the Wednesday evening meeting and I'm coming with the tool of creativity. Perhaps in a different mindset we need to use different tools. With the tool of creativity I can think about the possibility of going through our dreams, and each week taking one aspect to 'brainstorm pray' through. We will be doing the same thing [praying] for the same amount of time, but with a different tool. There would be an invitation to come, and a freedom about coming or not coming. And a realness could start happening that could just overflow into other areas.

It may be a radical suggestion, but would it be possible to have one deacon's meeting every month... set aside for prayer?

The idea of doing communion differently really excites me. Could we one day say that today communion is about us all – and invite participation.

If we acknowledge when we meet that everyone brings something of God, experiences that have happened in the last week, then the time together becomes God-centred. The space needs to be made for participation, and if it overtakes the time together, so be it. But it takes risk and vulnerability to open up such a space.

I wish I could convey the energy and excitement with which these suggestions were made. They sneaked in through a tiny window of creative opportunity during one of the joint meetings held after the Skuiling Retreat. They were ignored, and the meeting moved on, but that sparkling moment has become a matter of record. As I listen to their suggestions again, I cannot help but wonder what the outcome might be if the women's creativity was given free reign in an environment which valued and seriously considered all contributions.

### **5.3.3.4      *Start to question 'taken-for-granted' realities together***

I feel sad about that voice [which says to the men, 'We need to *do* this otherwise we are failing'], and about the fact that it's not reflected on, and we don't allow one another to even recognise that it's there. If I was... I would love to come to the group and say, 'Where does this voice come from? Is it true? What does it say to you? What are we losing by listening to that voice? Is there another voice we could be listening to? If we allowed ourselves to listen to another voice what would be? Would it be the same one we listened to at Skuiling? And then what could it give us? And so if in fact we are in a better place if we turn a deaf ear to that voice, umm... what we get out of that, is that what we want?'

If we began to talk about, 'Okay, actually that *is* what we want. We don't like that other voice because it drives us into the ground. Okay, how could we agree to turn a deaf ear to that voice? How could we be as a group? How could I hold you accountable, hold the whole group accountable, to turning a deaf ear to that voice?' But it's like even that strong voice doesn't give us the permission to question it.

What these women are describing seems very close to what White (1992:121), drawing on the work of Jacques Derrida, but adding his own therapeutic emphases, calls

'deconstruction'. Deconstruction is one of the key elements of narrative therapy and has to do with practices which take apart, examine and subvert 'taken-for-granted' 'realities', beliefs, ideas and practices; the discourses of the broader culture (White 1992:121; Morgan 2000:45-46). Deconstruction is not about destroying or breaking down, but rather aims to tease ideas or discourses apart in order to understand better how they work and their effects on persons, families, groups or communities. Deconstruction thereby renders visible the invisible or 'absent but implied meanings' (White 1992:136) of discourses and practices.

As we saw in Chapter 4, discourses play an integral role in the constitutive operations of power, and White (1992:137) shares Foucault's conviction that 'efforts to transform power relations in a society must address these practices of power at the local level – at the level of the every-day, taken-for-granted social practices'. Deconstruction is therefore a tool which can be used in dismantling oppressive relations of power.

The questions that these women ask serve to deconstruct the ideas that drive the men to focus on 'doing' and 'achieving' as they lead the church. Their questions highlight what the discourse is not saying and expose its effects on the leadership team. In doing so they are exposing and resisting the operations of power which contribute to the maintenance of the status quo.

#### **5.3.3.5      *Hold ourselves accountable to core principles or values***

Women spoke about the need for the team to agree and hold themselves accountable to a set of values which would guide their interactions during meetings. This would ensure that the women would not have to play by the men's rules, and that everyone would be given the space to be heard and have their contribution valued:

Ja, and the way that deacons' meeting happens, the guys need to obviously have some way that it works for them, but somehow when we're together as a team, as the girls as well... there needs to be a different set of values somehow that make sure that everybody is included, because it looks as if what works for a deacon's meeting doesn't actually work for us as a team; there needs to be two sets of values and, I don't know, it doesn't seem that the one set works for the other group.

...if it's not true to the principles of, or the values which are ultimately God-values, you know, that each person is the same and each persons' voice has... equal value, it's actually pointless.

#### **5.3.3.6      *Make a long-term commitment to a process of change***

I really don't buy into doing things just so you can tick them off, just so you can say okay, we've done that process and now we can do another thing.

A few of the women expressed their frustration that the Skuiling process had been reduced to a mechanistic strategy that could be completed and ticked off a list. They felt that 'invitation and participation' was more of an ethos, an unfolding process that should characterise the approach of the church to all its activities in an ongoing way and required and long-term and ongoing commitment to change.

### **5.3.3.7 *Nurture the sacredness of community and participation***

What happened within the group at Skuiling is like 'the candle of God' which has 'come into our midst'. We have all caught the light and there is a new enthusiasm and excitement. It is important that we pass it on and keep fanning it into flame for one another, encouraging one another, rekindling the fire. We all need to 'tend the flame' and not let it go out.

The women, far more than the men, seemed to acknowledge God's role in initiating the dreams and visions which were shared at Skuiling, as well as God's 'bias' towards a way of being together as church which is based on mutuality, respect and relationship<sup>2</sup>. They also acknowledged that it would require awareness and action to sustain and develop the shift towards openness and participation which had begun within the leadership team.

## **5.4 RELATIONSHIPS**

The majority of the women's dreams, shared at Skuiling, focussed on enhanced relationships within the church. Throughout the research journey, the women emphasised factors which would facilitate better relationships. This is not surprising when one considers Gilligan's work (cited by Hogan 1996:203; Cozad Neuger 1999:115), which highlighted the central role that the maintenance of relationships plays in the decisions and choices that women make. Relationship and relationality are central concerns for feminist theology and ethics (Farley 1996:238; Kotzé 2002:17), as well as for pastoral theology and pastoral care (Cozad Neuger 1999:116; Sweet 2004). Cozad Neuger (1999:118) describes how, for feminist pastoral theology, the work of 'deconstructing the unjust ordering of relationships' is central to developing 'strategies of pastoral care and counselling that help people live in right relationship with one another'. I would argue that the same is true for this research journey.

### **5.4.1 Dreams about new ways of relating**

I see lots of people together in a place. I don't think it is our church building. Some of the people I know and some I didn't know. The people are excited. There is a feeling of warmth

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<sup>2</sup> These are central themes for feminist theologians (Isherwood & McEwan 1996).

and such love. It is a safe place. I feel that I belong. Everyone is willing to do things. It is a lovely place.

My dream is one of togetherness – a coming together of all age groups within the church. From there all other things branch out... There is the opportunity to get to know all the people better.

In my dream, I see the church as a family home. It is a place of caring for each other, where people feel free and are accepted. It is a place of love. In this family, the younger members learn from the older family members. It is a place where we are able to bring friends home. There is a sense of togetherness.

I see two pictures. In the first there are people having a picnic. There are many different people; people of all ages, personalities and colours, and they are relaxing, having fun and enjoying one another's company. I hear laughter and see children running around. People are playing games, lying under the trees chatting. The people are transparent and real, they are not wearing masks. They are unified with a common goal and there is a sense of harmony.

In these dreams that women shared at Skuling, right relationships are pivotal in creating an atmosphere of warmth, love, safety, acceptance, freedom, togetherness, relaxation, enjoyment and transparency. In such an atmosphere people flourish and grow.

The belief that people grow and develop in relationship is a fundamental tenet of feminism (Maguire 2004:131) and, some would argue, of Christianity:

Christianity is not a system of laws and principles, but a pattern of relationships... Truth is right relationships. The right relationship is everything. And for the Christian, truth is a Person.

(Sweet 2004:31-32)

Many feminist theologians, including Heyward (cited by Waldron 1996:85) and Ackermann (1991:100), suggest that both personal and corporate or systemic sin should be defined as 'the violation of right relation'. Heyward also draws our attention to the evidence which suggests that relationality was central to Jesus' ministry (Waldron 1996:67), and that traditional Christian theism has wandered away from this central concern. These Baptist women's dreams put relationality back on the agenda of what is important for this church.

## **5.4.2 Women's desires for new ways of relating in the church**

### **5.4.2.1 *'No pretend' as a new way of relating in the church***

... it was like Glory... a God-glory weekend, God-steeped, God was steeped and seeped in the weekend and some of that was about 'no pretend' for me... there just wasn't a sense of pretend or having to try... I didn't have to impress, I didn't have to try, 'cause nobody else was, and yet we were being the closest to Jesus and to each other... than we have ever been.

...we are saying it's okay to be just who we are with each other...

I would love the men to know what we have spoken about [in a meeting just for the women], I'd *love* to be that honest: 'Guys, this is what we've spoken about'. I would *love* that. I don't want to pretend about *that*.

The women express the desire to journey together with the men in authentic relationship. However, I wonder whether this is possible within the constraints of the current hierarchical and authoritarian leadership structures. Authoritarian religion needs to control the beliefs and behaviours of its members, whereas what these women describe is an openness to people's different experiences, questions and struggles in an atmosphere of acceptance and care. Perhaps what the women are hinting at here is a completely different way of being church together which is focussed on mutuality rather than authority.

In a similar vein, Duncan (1991:389) asks whether we should not 'be questioning the whole concept of authority in the church and seeking to restore it to where it belongs – to God'. It seems to me that the women are not simply seeking equal access to the authority structures or hierarchy. What is necessary is a fundamental change in the system.

#### **5.4.2.2      *Acceptance as a new way of relating in the church***

I experienced a feeling of acceptance at the weekend. People could say the things they wanted to and they were accepted. The ladies want to be accepted.

What came out of the whole weekend [for me], I think, [was] the whole acceptance of our emotions. I found that even the men were able to be more emotional, and I think they shared more. I think the men were even surprised at themselves at what they were able to share, and I think that was maybe because we were there. I think it could have been quite a formal thing otherwise...

I appreciated that I didn't feel I was being judged... It was nice just to feel support from others and nobody sort of looked down on what your dream was, nobody sort of said, 'that's ridiculous' or 'we'll never get to that'; that was nice... even if it is unattainable, it was accepted... I appreciated that.

The liberation was wonderful for me, it didn't matter what I said. I spoke my heart and it actually felt valued, and that made me want to talk more and free to speak more.

Both in what the women have said here and in feminist theology, a sense of acceptance and acknowledgement is closely tied to the concept of liberation: 'Liberation means that... [people] have a sense of worth, they have dignity, equality and the acknowledgement that their distinctive identities are valued by the community' (Isherwood 1996:121).

### **5.4.3 How does a church facilitate better relationships?**

I guess what I'm wondering is, 'How does one facilitate better relationships?'... it's difficult to have a team driving relationship development... relationship is almost something you can't do directly; you can only create an environment in which relationships can grow. So that almost seems... it's almost foundational.

In several of the later meetings, much discussion was focussed on how to enhance or develop relationships within the church. The pastor was concerned with identifying 'vehicles' for 'driving' the development of relationships within the wider church. However, the women seemed to feel that it might be more helpful, firstly, to take an honest look at relationships within the leadership team and work on enhancing those and, secondly, to look at what kind of environment facilitates the development of relationships and to work at developing such an environment within the church. The following are some of the women's ideas for creating such a relationship-enhancing environment within the church.

#### **5.4.3.1 *Everybody is the 'vehicle' for developing relationships***

...when you come to church you are invited to get into relationship with people; it's about the people who welcome you at the door – they are thinking 'relationship'. 'How can we build relationships with these people?'... anyone in the church that does anything is thinking 'relationship'... when you are pouring tea for somebody you are thinking 'relationship'. Everybody is the 'vehicle' [for developing relationships within the church], if they know that building relationship in our church is important... It's about value[s].

This woman felt that the focus on relationship needed to be a core value of the church which translated itself into a commitment from each person to develop relationships, no matter what activity they were engaged in.

#### **5.4.3.2 *Establish principles/values/ways of being together that create an environment in which relationships can be nurtured***

[People in a group can] distil elements of what for them is the bottom line, so maybe trust, maybe a certain degree of honesty, you know... so that every group, umm, either formally or informally, knows that there are certain core elements, which are necessary for them to be able to feel part of the group.

On the [Skuling Retreat], we all agreed to something and in agreeing to it we found something that we didn't know we could actually experience. So you can't do it on one person's terms; it has to be an agreed process, and we seem to be held together by those principles, and I think that was the magic of it, because we were held accountable to those ways of being together, and I think that that is maybe what has slipped by. We didn't realise how important those ways of being were to us.

These women are suggesting that people need to be invited to participate in developing and agreeing upon the values or practices to which they will hold themselves accountable when relating to one another in small groups within the church (such as the worship team, deaconate, home cells, and so on). The emphasis is on negotiating a set of values rather than imposing these values.

#### **5.4.3.3      *Listening and reflection facilitate the development of relationships***

It was a total surprise. I didn't realise that the group could actually be like that. I didn't realise that we were capable of listening to each other, sharing our stories and being heard and finding something that was [immensely] hopeful in the midst of that kind of being together.

...[I]t's about, 'Come and sit here next to me, and I'll listen to you; you're the only the one'.

Something that comes out for me... At Skuiling you had to be quiet, and you had to listen to what other people were saying... You weren't allowed to interrupt, and so everyone could say what they wanted to say, and finish what they wanted to say without... But in the other meetings people would just... we did try to carry on with that theme but people are so involved in thinking what they're thinking, they can't wait to jump in, and I think that's why sometimes something is brought up, and then it's lost because the next person is so keen to say what they want to say, and so things aren't followed through because everyone is coming in with their ideas. Whereas at Skuiling that didn't happen because it was run differently, and you weren't allowed to you know, jump in, sort of thing... and that was why I think so many things came out and were taken note of.

What's the name of that? I don't know... I suppose, listening... No, I'm not saying people don't listen, but what I am saying is that people are wanting to say their say, and that's why things are lost because we are so quickly jumping on to the next thing, and I think there needs to be more of a 'Okay, don't... Let's just stop now and let's just discuss what [this person] said before we move on to [the next person] and then we wouldn't lose things so easily.

It's about respecting.

I mean, imagine what a question like this at the end of a group meeting: 'So how have you experienced this meeting?' I mean, imagine how that would change things.

These women envisage a church in which priority is given to listening and reflection. Both of these practices are essential for transformation. In Chapter 4, I discussed Heshusius' (1994, 1995) concept of 'participatory consciousness', which is made possible by focussed and attentive listening. Waldron (1996:68) reminds us that both our experiences and our responses to others' stories can contribute to our spirituality only when they are understood in the context of the life in which they arose. In other words, experience only becomes meaningful and transformative when it is reflected upon.

However, giving every person the space to speak and be heard, and creating opportunities for reflection on what has been said, slows down the pace of a meeting considerably. Although it is arguably a more efficient approach, listening and reflection are in direct conflict with discourses such as 'time is money' and 'we need to get things done as quickly as possible'. It may be necessary to take time to deconstruct the effects of these and other similar discourses before the men and certain of the women would be willing to commit themselves to adopting an approach of listening and reflection in the leadership meetings.

#### **5.4.3.4 Foster the development of existing relationships**

I have a real... resistance in me when we talk about relationships and *doing* this thing as a 'tack on', because we are all in relationship. How about just making, creating places where we can learn about how to make the existing relationships better, talking about, well, what are relationships like on the leadership? Are they good? What's good about them? What are maybe some of the things that are hurtful to others?

Let's not do another whole thing on relationship. I mean we are all here in relationship, we have all been with each other numerous times, and surely we can just kind of distil it into: Okay, so what about our relationships are good? What things can we build on?... So much of this family that exists, that meets Sunday by Sunday by Sunday are already doing things – they're already talking to each other, they are already –... It seems crazy to create this whole kind of strategy of how we're going to do this better when it's already happening, and each of us has a sense of what here works for me and what doesn't. You know I know that, for me, that's where I'd love to start...

#### **5.4.3.5 Differentiate between the 'How' and the 'What' in developing relationships**

It seems to me almost that there's two dimensions to [developing relationships]... There's... the strategy side of it that's saying, 'we've got to create more relationships and get more people connected'... but... there are [also] existing relationships, and you're talking about [the] depth and quality of those relationships.

In terms of the relationships, I think there is quite a difference between the 'how' of relationships and the 'what' of relationships... The 'what' of relationships, you know, organising social functions and keeping people meeting is a very different function to holding people accountable for *how* they are relating to people.

I have a sense that it's not always the path and goal that's the most important, but how a group of people travel together.

...'how' [we are together] creates a context in which people connect, in which it was possible for people to participate and to share and to be safe and... that the 'how' is almost about being church together, you know, that it's how we are together that is the body of Christ, rather than what we're doing and sort of... and maybe just the absolute importance of the 'how' is very

clear to me... That's what we had at Skuiling, the joy of just being together, how we were together: the freedom to relate, differ and just all that stuff.

And that is the gift that I think we, as women, give to a group. We are more focussed on the 'how'. Somehow there is more of a freedom [within women] to revel in the 'how' and to reflect on it... and enjoy it! Because we all enjoyed it – the men and the women enjoyed it. It wasn't just about the women there. Maybe we gave each other permission to be less than... busy, but just to kind of enjoy listening to each other.

The question of the HOW and the WHAT seemed to me to be a key source of confusion and conflict during meetings that followed the Skuiling Retreat as the men seemed to focus almost exclusively on WHAT needed to be planned, done, organised and made to happen in the church, while the women (including myself as participant/researcher) seemed to be more focussed on HOW they would like the church to operate and HOW they would like to see people relating to one another, no matter WHAT the church would be doing.

I was left wondering about the relationship is between HOW and WHAT. As I looked back on the Skuiling Retreat, it seemed to me that my husband and I came to the weekend with a HOW, a process, not knowing at all what the outcome would be. We structured the HOW of the Skuiling Retreat to invite participation, to give people a safe space in which to share, and to entrust the dreaming process to the participants, and somehow, to God. It seemed to me that the HOW facilitated WHAT happened on the retreat and later, when the process was taken to the home cell groups in the church.

After the second last meeting I attended with the team, I prepared a short document outlining this understanding (see Appendix 4) and asking the following questions, in the hope of drawing the team back to focus on the HOW of their vision for the church:

1. What might the effect be on the church if we lay aside the HOW to focus on the WHAT?
2. What effect might it have if we hold onto the HOW and allow it to inform our plans and strategies?
3. What are the key features of the Skuiling process that people would like to become an ongoing characteristic of HOW we do church here?
4. What would this church choose as its foundation: HOW we 'be' church together or WHAT we do together as a church?

I still wonder whether it is possible to establish a church on the foundation of HOW we relate to one another and HOW we 'be' church together, and then reinvent WHAT we do together as a fellowship of believers. When I raised this question with the pastor of this

church, he described such a way of approaching church as radically different'. It *is* radically different if we look at the church today. But what if we take as our starting point the words and life of Jesus: 'By this will all people know that you are my disciples, if you love one another'<sup>3</sup>?

#### **5.4.3.6      *Communication facilitates better relationships***

Communication seems to be absolutely key to the way forward. The perception seems to be a shroud of secrecy or mystery around decision-making in the church. Is it possible in some way to demystify leadership and lower the barriers?

It has been my experience that by not doing anything or saying anything we reinforce the old paradigm without realising it. Habits of old speak louder than words. Communication is essential to counter the voices that invite us to think and do in the old way.

What I am realising is that perceptions are more important than reality. If we [as wives of the deacons and pastors] have thought that the deacons are a closed circle what have the others in the church felt? We must go the extra mile to... increase openness, inclusivity and transparency.

The women strongly emphasised the importance of openness and transparency to counteract popular perceptions within the church of the leadership as a 'secret society'. Once again, this seems to be about more than just telling people what was discussed in deacons' meetings. It seems that what the women are calling for requires a more participatory approach to leadership in general.

### **5.5      SOLIDARITY**

Several times, during both meetings held with the women only, women wondered about the difference that it might have made to the outcome of the Skuiling process if the women had met together more regularly and stood together in solidarity:

I'm thinking that I wish we could do it again and say, 'Come on girls, let's get together, you know, for our sakes and give ourselves a voice within each other, in order to thicken our own voice', and let's kind of covenant with each other that at the meetings, the together meetings, we would allow ourselves to speak. Because it was so worthwhile speaking at Skuiling; what's become not worthwhile? You know, so, we don't know what we're going to speak about but let's try and make it worthwhile.

They described how their uncertainty and fear about what one another were thinking and feeling about the unfolding process and their perceptions of the differences between them as women, kept them apart. However, there seemed to be a general consensus, particularly during the last meeting that I held with the women, that it would be valuable to

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<sup>3</sup> John 13:35

continue meeting together as women in order to strengthen and nurture one another's voices.

White (1997:141) suggests that when people stand together in solidarity, however briefly and partially, it '...provides us with the opportunity to look back on our taken-for-granted ways of thinking and being in the world'. White (1997:141) believes that this makes it possible for people to 'think outside the limits of what we would otherwise think, to challenge aspects of our own participation in the reproduction of dominance, and to identify options for action in addressing disadvantage and inequality that would not otherwise be available to us. Our lives are invigorated for this'.

### **5.5.1 What it feels like to experience solidarity**

The first meeting together as women, after the Skuiling Retreat, was a positive experience for many of the women. These were some of their observations:

[Meeting with the women allows me to feel] supported, it feels amazing, it feels like 'I've got the girls around me'.

We're strong at the moment [because we are standing together] [laughter].

### **5.5.2 Solidarity amongst women in getting things done**

I feel that if we go together as women, we would...um, we would be able to have a combined voice,... a support voice for each other and it wouldn't matter if it came from you or from [another woman], we would all know that that's what we want to say, you know.

How would you feel if the ladies got together just for a ladies' discussion sometimes so that some of the ladies who feel that they can't talk in front of the men, but have got things they want to say and don't get a chance to say them, do you think that would help draw us together more... 'cos if we're united then... it would be lot easier to come over if we knew what each other were thinking... I know we're all different, but if we kind of got together and said, 'You know, guys [women], how are we going to handle this?'

Maybe things that are important to us women... maybe we first need to say, 'Listen, guys [women], we need a [couch for the counselling room]'. When we come to the meeting we are going to ask for our [couch for the counselling room], but we are all going to say, 'Yes, we do need it', you are not going to stand alone.

I'm seeing it for myself, that we are wanting to be part of the leading of the church, the leading of the people. So if we are wanting to be part of the leading of the church, we should be at their [the men's] meetings...while they meet and do their planning and we meet and make our little voice and that, we've got a big gap in between here, I don't know, maybe I see it differently, but I don't see how we are united then, I don't see how, if we are doing our two separate little camps, that's how I see it, maybe I'm wrong.

Would it be helpful to do the two separate little camps and then come together?

Yes, I'm sure it would be, ja ...

If we have our meetings [we can put down our suggestions and give them to the deacons] because, let's face it, we're never going to go to the deacons' meetings [agreement], but at least if we can come up with suggestions that we've made: 'We've got together as ladies, we've discussed things that we feel need to be done... We need to write it down and say, 'This is what we need'... and then they can at least read it and say, 'Oh well, okay'.

What the women describe here is a process of collaboration and solidarity through which they could present a united voice to the men in order to get things done that they feel are important. It would involve withdrawal from the men into their own meetings and then re-engaging, knowing that they have been heard by the other women and are supported. It would be a powerful form of resistance to the male-dominated meetings where women battle to make themselves heard and are overlooked when they do speak. Swart-Russell (1991:301) suggests that this may be the only way that Christian women can achieve liberation from sexism, namely, "from below" through community with each other and with liberated Christian men'.

### **5.5.3 Solidarity in relationship**

I really do know that some of the ways, traditional ways, in which women met are not altogether satisfying for me... and I know for some people, unless you are meeting together to actually work out a plan of what exactly needs to be done, and how you are going to it, it seems a bit of a waste of time? But every now and then just to gather as women, and to say, 'Where are we and how are we doing?' I think that would be very valuable... How are we experiencing our lives? How are we experiencing church?... [long pause]. Even just to pick up with some of the women on their dreams would be fascinating... How do you see your dream come about? Is it coming about or is it... you know, has it died, or are there things that we have been able to pick up on, um incidentally... I would love to do that.

I... for sometime I've really believed that it's the men who need to give us permission to speak, or kind of invite us to speak, but, you know, really, I kind of think that they are where they are at because of their own journeys and history and ideas and so on... But that really oughtn't to stop us doing what we need to be doing...and the time will come when, you know, we will find each other, but unless we begin to speak amongst ourselves...maybe that will make a way for us to connect at some stage.

I recently came upon a World Council of Churches publication which tells the stories of various women of colour. The title of this publication beautifully expresses this woman's realisation that she did not need to wait for men's permission to speak out. The publication is called: *We are the Ones We are Waiting for* (Sen 1995).

When I think of the women, I do know that many of us have incredibly valuable voices, they have valuable things to say, and valuable contributions to make, and, if anything, I would see myself creating space where those contributions can be heard and... I think the Skuiling process has given me... an understanding of the value of women's voices, I mean just *hearing* on the Skuiling weekend and at some of the other meetings just *what it is* that women say, and just to hear the beautiful words and the beautiful hearts behind the words, it's given me the opportunity to see something that I don't know if I realised fully beforehand... I just think that some kind of context where, where we discover and give space for each others' voices would be really valuable, and at this stage in order to strengthen and nurture those voices. Maybe the men needn't be part of it at this stage.

Maybe it's not even necessary to catch people up with the process, but to just create the context again in terms of the 'how', you know, in creating a safe place again for people to share, and the 'what' of what is shared and what comes out of it is almost not as important... for me it's almost as if there are a couple of things that we've learnt and picked up through this process, and if, instead of just kind of tagging along with the ground rules that have now kind of been adopted, you know, what really stops us from... picking up the 'how' and saying, 'Okay girls, what will happen when we create this how, you know, when we create this context for ourselves, you know, we can choose what we want to talk about and where we want to go.

And do we want to start off with saying, 'Well, where are we going as women? Do we want to go somewhere together? What is it like being together? Does it do anything for us, you know, all those kinds of things and so, to me, it's almost as if I want to leave the Skuiling process. I want to leave that, but there are some things that I really believe in that I want to take with me, and I am kind of curious about who else wants to... go there, umm. I have a suspicion that there'd be quite a few people who, in that, creating that context, would really enjoy it.

Maybe my way of saying it would be to regather our forces... not for a fight but just for the sake of... regathering, because we aren't together; the *women* aren't together; we've forgotten that we can be, so all we need to do is regather.

The vision that these women are describing is shared by feminist theologians such as Isherwood and McEwan (1993:144) who talk about women coming together in small groups 'to deepen their faith commitment and to receive spiritual nurturance in an atmosphere of trust and solidarity and non-competition'. Such small groups are what started the Women-Church movement which Hunt (1990 cited by Isherwood & McEwan 1993:78) defines as 'a global, ecumenical movement made up of local feminist base communities of justice-seeking friends who engage in sacrament and solidarity'. Hunt (1991 cited by Isherwood & McEwan 1993:131) suggests that it is more positive to allow women 'to be' outside the framework of patriarchal structures which are not, as yet, ready to take women's experience positively'. Bons-Storm (1996:147), a feminist practical theologian, also feels that '...women first have to tell their stories among themselves, get used to their own voices, and listen to one another'. In doing so it may be possible to offer

one another the gift of hearing each other into speech (Turner & Hudson 1999:104), and we may begin to shape our own future with our own words.

The focus of such meetings of women is often simply the telling of stories about their lives and faith journeys. However, a narrative approach to story-telling suggests that 'in the telling [of stories], not only do new stories emerge, but a person changes in relationship to them: the narrating self changes' (Anderson 1997:109). New meanings will be generated as conversations unfold, so there is no way of predicting the outcome of such a process (Anderson 1997:116), but there is the understanding that all who participate 'risk transformation of self' (Anderson 1997:110).

We would have to encourage each other not to be fearsome, or fearful, when we are together, so we need to know how we can encourage each other to do that because... we still are so fearful, and I think each one of us would be fearful of different things.

So even getting to the point of creating a safe place would be a lengthy, not a lengthy... but a process. There would need to be a lot of hard work done... commitment to each other... to create a context in which people can even begin to stand together.

Now I know why that story was so important for me. Ah! [laughter] I **knew** it was very important for me. The silly story about the farmer and the carrots [laughs].

One of our church members, he's a vegetable farmer, so he's wanting to know, how can I plant better vegetables? So he's going around to all the successful farmers in the area and he's asking them, 'How can I grow better vegetables?' So he discovered that there's this one farmer who spends nine months of the year preparing the soil. He plants *one* crop and he gets about 90 tons of carrots. There are other farmers in the area who put in three crops a year and all together they only produce 75 tons of carrots. *It's about preparing the soil.* Preparing the soil is creating a safe place and that sometimes, if peoples' voices are so, not heard, so silent, there needs to be an enormous amount of work that happens before you even get to place where the voices feel like they have the space where they can be heard. Now I know why that story was so important.

These women's awareness that the process of sharing as women in a small group might be a struggle for many women and may need a lot of preparation is echoed by 'The Mud Flower Collective' (1985:69), who wrote a book as a group, telling their stories to each other:

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.

The strength that women find in such small groups is often precisely because they can break many silences within themselves by speaking with others (Isherwood & McEwan 1993:106).

I'm fighting for... I'm no longer fighting for this group, I'm fighting for... creating space where or a context where, umm, women would be able to see themselves as valued, and that is done by creating a context where your voice is heard, you're not interrupted... and it happens.

But it doesn't matter if what we say doesn't happen, that's not important... The point is that I've been able to say it. I like rain. You don't like rain. But it's just so nice to say, 'For me it's nice'. I don't want it to rain every day, that's not what I'm saying.

Mmm, and it's not important that the men approve of it either, or... or not... or that it's part of a programme, but it's that it happens.

And it's not important that everybody comes or even the Skuiling group comes. What is important is that there is a space for people who want to be there ...and that maybe some of them would get so darn curious that they couldn't keep away.

Can you feel the lightness of this dialogue? What the women are describing is an open-ended process with no rules, no expectations and no intended outcomes. It feels full of hope and promise like a lazy summer day when there is nothing pressing to be done. It tastes like the first sip of freedom: 'Liberation... is a process that begins with trusting your own experience and then acting on it' (Isherwood 1996:122). Solidarity seems to open up the door to liberation.

## **5.6 GATHERING THE THREADS: A VISION OF A WHOLE COMMUNITY**

In the institutional church, women are faced with confronting and challenging patriarchal structures and traditions. Alternative models are needed to shape and build up a new faith community of women and men.

(Jin 1988:104)

This research journey began with a process of reflection and that is how it drew to a close. After I had drawn up a first draft of a few sections of the Book of Women's Wisdom, I met with five of the women who had been on the Skuiling Retreat. We read aloud from the Book of Women's Wisdom and then had a conversation about their responses to what they had read. It was in the course of this conversation that a whole new vision or model began to emerge for 'being church' together as men and women. This new vision incorporated many of the Skuiling dreams and resonated particularly with the following dream, shared by one of the women at Skuiling:

I see a group of many different people singing, worshipping together in unison. There is perfect harmony. It looks like a choir but they aren't performing for an audience; they are looking upward, to God and are singing for God. They are each singing different notes of a common song, blending in perfect harmony. I see openness and transparency with each other and with God. The people are free, expressive and sincere.

This is how the new vision of a whole community emerged.

...[T]he only way that [the beauty of the Skuiling Retreat] was created was by doing it together... both the men and the women.

Remember, that it [the Skuiling Retreat] was a together 'capture';... it wasn't just about the women. The freedom came from the women but... was within the women, but it was a together capture, it wasn't a women-thing, it wasn't only about the women; it was [the men] as well...

...Sometimes I wonder about umm... our participation with [the men] as a group, you know, if we don't sense how good that actually was more than they do, but not only for us, but for the whole group, and so it's almost as if we have a responsibility somehow to say, 'This might be, um, odd, or uncomfortable or whatever, but there's a sense in which for some parts of the year or whatever, almost we need to be together because we give each other something that is richer than what either group can contribute'.

I think just reading this [The Book of Women's Wisdom] and remembering the sheer delight at listening to the contribution that the girls made at the Skuiling weekend, makes me realise that this community is the poorer if the women's voices aren't heard... we really are the poorer. I think that women bring to any conversation, things that are... so valuable to a community... There's just ways that we see things and therefore can contribute and it helps to form a wholeness in conversations and in the way things are done.

I know that if I'm not with my family for a day or two, there are things that they miss. It's not just the food...; it's... what is me that is feminine that they miss out on and because of me being woman and my particular personality, there are things that aren't there. It's about smoothing the waters, it's about gluing, you know a [family] together that might be pulled apart. So, if that is true of me in my family, how much more is it not true of us as a group [of women], who have... God's wonderful feminine side, um, to contribute into this place.

In my family, if my two boys weren't around, I'd be so sour and serious. They're the ones that bring the fun out and the childlikeness out of me... All of us when we begin to work in a dynamic interrelatedness together, um, we draw things out of each other... umm, and there's a softness and a... gentleness and a... nurturing when women... thrive and participate in something... and I long for that... I'm not saying it's not happening, but I just feel that there could be more of that kind of thing.

I'm kind of asking, if I've seen this kind of thing happen at Skuiling, what then is this church community missing by us not contributing? It's not that I want to be at leadership meetings and have all the decisions and stuff go my way... It's not that at all... I have a question about, what is being lost by us not making a contribution and participating... and I don't know who can tell us that... you know, maybe there's a newcomer who is really hurting, and if there's not the space for, um, just a kind of a feminine welcome at the door, then there's just something missing... I really have a yearning for a wholeness, and I think wholeness is God's design for us as people and as community... You know that all of us, women and men and children, kind of pull together in all of who we are.

I really identified with that comment that was made a little while earlier, and it was beautiful, that before Skuiling we didn't realise we had anything to offer and Skuiling showed that we

actually do have something to offer, but now we've kind of forgotten about it. I think it's just raised within me an awareness that there is...[the men's] picture is not the whole picture and our contribution is valuable in whatever form, that somehow what we bring into a group, could have an enormous influence on how people experience church... I think that's just a realisation that has just been reawakened for me, that has umm, is making me think about whether I want to just let it go, mmm... I'm not sure where I would go with it.

The women's vision is one of wholeness, where both men and women participate together in a 'dynamic interrelatedness', each acknowledging and valuing the unique contribution of the other. The inclusivity of this vision provides a hopeful new image for both men and women in the church and for humanity. Ackermann (1991:94) believes that 'the practice of sexism is as much a distortion of men's humanity as it is an affront to women's personhood', and that 'the kind of liberation that we need is that which is freeing and wholemaking for both women and men'. For Ackermann (1991:94), and it seems for the women on this research journey, the well-known slogan of the apartheid struggle, 'none will be free until all are free', which expresses both our 'present incompleteness' and our longing for the restoration of humanity to its intended wholeness: woman and man together in the image of God' (Ackermann 1991:98).

It must be said that not all feminist theologians share Ackermann's optimism that such mutuality and wholeness is possible and that women and men can actually work together, respecting their individual and collective giftedness. Keane (1998:123) describes two distinct streams of feminist theology, namely, revolutionary and reformist streams. Revolutionary feminists advocate a separatist approach which rejects Judeo-Christian tradition on the grounds that it is fundamentally patriarchal and seeks to establish faith communities for women which exclude men. However, reformist feminist theologians advocate mutuality and reconciliation between the sexes, while working gradually towards change and reform of those practices which prevent women from fully exercising their God-given gifts (Keane 1998:123).

Wholeness is a central theme in reformist feminist theology, and refers to the wholeness of individuals, communities and our planet (James 1996:233). Isherwood and McEwan (1993:149) define feminist spirituality as 'imagining wholeness'.

One thing that the women made clear in articulating their vision for a whole community is that it does not entail the women taking over from the men: It's not that I want to be at leadership meetings and have all the decisions and stuff go my way... It's not that at all... This

too is in line with reformist feminist theology (Keane 1998: 124). Isherwood and McEwan (1993:106) state categorically that 'feminist theology does not aim to replace patriarchy with matriarchy'. Instead, reformist feminist theologians seek to do away with all systems of domination and oppression:

...the struggle is not *against* men – who, like us are victims of the pressures of a society that desires to make us in its own image and likeness... ? but rather our struggle is *on behalf of* a true humankind: participatory, family-spirited, creative and united in solidarity.

(Ritchie 1988:155)

Within this inclusive vision, women who do take up leadership roles need not follow the same destructive paths that many male church leaders have walked, such as being caught up in practices of authoritarianism, power and control (Hayashida 1999:267-268). Women have the opportunity to redefine 'the meaning of leadership' (Hayashida 1999:268) by using their skills to nurture, to encourage, to journey alongside, to invite participation and to trust the process of spiritual growth within individuals and groups.

Another facet of the women's vision of wholeness in their church community related to what is lost to the community when women do not participate. This theme has also been addressed by feminist theologians such as Kretzschmar (1991:112) and Ackermann (1991:101); the latter suggests that excluding women from ministry within the church 'deprives the worshipping community and women of reciprocal spiritual nurture'.

The vision of a whole community stands before us. I wonder what it will take for the women and men of this Baptist church to begin to live the vision or to live the vision more fully. I wonder what it would take for you and me to begin to live it or to live it more fully in our homes, our workplaces, our churches and our communities. And I wonder what effect it might have if we did.

## 5.7 PARTICIPATION AND PROPHECY

Theology is too important a matter to be left to the [professional] theologian.  
(Forrester 1989:17)

As I listened to the Book of Women's Wisdom, on the one hand, and to books and articles about feminist theology, on the other hand, my surprise grew at the extent of the overlap and resonances between the two. I wondered what the women's response would be if they realised that the thoughts that they had dared to express are shared by many other women, and find expression in numerous books on feminist theology. I suspected that they would not be too thrilled.

I met with one of the women who had contributed extensively to the Book of Women's Wisdom and shared what I was discovering. She replied that she had never read anything about feminist theology and, if she saw a book with that title, it is unlikely that she would choose to read it. While this response revealed a lot about this woman's resistance to the label feminist (a phenomenon which I will explore further in Chapter 6), it did not help me at all in understanding how it was that these women were expressing feminist perspectives on being church and being Christian and seemed to share the values and ideals of reformist feminist theology.

One possible explanation is that the experience of being marginalised and silenced in the church makes women more open to such visions and perspectives. McClintock Fulkerson (1994:53) seems to suggest that this is the case:

[T]he position of oppression gives women (the subject) a special vantage on reality ... Those without power see best the structures that keep them in place and the illusory views of the advantaged.

This perspective is shared by Isherwood and McEwan (1993:17) who state that, due to their position 'outside the power arena', women are often able to see how discrimination affects both those on the margins and those at the centre.

I still wonder, though, whether it is also possible that I what I have observed and documented and reflected upon is what Sweet (2005, personal communication) calls the 'resonance of the Spirit': that God is simply issuing the same challenges and invitations to the church through all those who are willing to listen and have the courage to speak out.

If we answer this question affirmatively, and if we take seriously the possibility that the conversation of God with humanity is open-ended and ongoing rather than having drawn to a close with the last full-stop of the book of Revelation, we need to be open to hearing God's voice in unlikely places and from unlikely prophets.

My conversations with the women during the course of this research journey gave me new insight into the practice of participatory practical theology in action. Kotzé (2003:55-56) describes participatory practical theology as a conversational encounter in which every one has a voice and can participate as meanings are created. It is about listening to and learning about how people make theological sense of their own lives and about searching together with people for more life-giving and liberatory knowledges (Kotzé 2005, lecture notes).

In our conversations, the women and I were 'doing theology' (Gutierrez cited by Isherwood & McEwan 1993:77). The women did not need to have undergone theological training to offer profound theological insight and wisdom. Would it be revolutionary to suggest that revelation and inspiration may not depend on factors such as gender, academic qualifications or intellectual capacity, and that Christian leaders need to face and honestly answer the question, 'Do I really believe in the priesthood of all believers?'

If God is willing to speak through all who are willing to listen, then perhaps we do not need to be so concerned about 'controlling' theological knowledge. Perhaps church leaders would do better to teach their congregations skills in prayer, reflection and discernment rather than teaching doctrine. And perhaps leaders need to be trained to facilitate conversations about God and life, rather than being taught to perform and profess and persuade. It seems to me that the essence of Jesus' teaching and practice was about inclusivity; breaking down the barriers to entry and throwing the gates open wide. Can we do the same?

What is clear is that a vision of wholeness within a church community is not just about inviting the participation of women. It is about extending the invitation to all who have been marginalised in the institutional church: children, people of colour, people who are physically or intellectually challenged, the aged, people who are emotionally unstable or psychologically unwell, homeless people, people who struggle with addictions, and prostitutes, to name but a few on a long and shameful list of those who have been excluded. Turner and Hudson (1999:136) suggest that a 'prophetic church would look for value and meaning in every voice that attempts to articulate its own experience... it would tune its ear to the subtle nuances of the distinctive voices of persons, faithfully listening for the truth of God's voice within each'.

Prophetic imagination has an immense power to 'lead communities out of the old and into the new' (Turner & Hudson 1999:120), but the community first needs to receive and honour what is spoken, as prophetic. I am reminded of Jesus' words: 'I tell you the truth, no prophet is accepted in his [or her] hometown'.<sup>4</sup> These women's dreams and desires were not always embraced by their church when they were first shared, and when they were, they were soon forgotten. Perhaps having them recorded in this way will invite the leadership to reconsider their value. Perhaps, also, leaders from other churches will listen to and reflect on the implications of these women's words for their own churches.

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<sup>4</sup> Luke 4:24

My story of this research journey is drawing to a close. In the final chapter I will reflect briefly on my research aims and how they have been addressed in the course of the research. I also reflect on several key questions that the research journey raised and make some recommendations about the implications of these questions for this church and for the community of researchers in practical theology.

## CHAPTER 6

### LOOKING BACK: REFLECTIONS ON THE RESEARCH JOURNEY

At this point in a dissertation it is customary to reflect on the aims with which one embarked on the research journey and to see how these were addressed, or not, as the journey unfolded. I will follow this custom in section 6.1 and then, in the sections which follow, offer my thoughts in response to several questions that were raised for me during the course of the research journey.

#### 6.1 REFLECTIONS ON MY RESEARCH AIMS

In this section I will reflect briefly on each of my research aims and indicate how they were addressed during the course of the research journey and where they are discussed in this dissertation.

##### 6.1.1 Hold the leadership accountable

*Aim 1: To hold the leadership accountable to the commitments that they made at Skuiling, namely, to meet regularly with the women as a 'leadership team' and to invite the participation of the wider church in the Skuiling process.*

This was my primary goal during the first few months of the research journey. However, my role within the team evolved and changed over the course of the research journey, and there were many times when I was uncertain of the exact nature of my role and what the team's expectations were. In the latter part of the research journey, I no longer had a mandate to hold the team accountable to anything. I reflect on my changing roles in Chapter 3 and in section 6.2 below.

##### 6.1.2 Join with the team as participant/facilitator

*Aim 2: To join with the team as an active participant/facilitator as the research journey unfolds, with a focus on ensuring that the invitation to participate continues to be extended to the women and to stand together in solidarity with the other women on the leadership team.*

I met with the women alone twice during the research journey and also on occasion, with the pastors' wives. I met with the pastor three times and used those opportunities to raise questions about the women's role on the leadership team and their increasing marginalisation. I raised similar questions in letters to the team. I reflect on these actions/conversations in Chapters 3, and 5, and in sections 6.2 and 6.3 below.

### **6.1.3 Be aware of oppressive discourses and practices**

*Aim 3: To be aware of the discourses and practices which might get in the way of the full participation of women and other marginalised groups, to raise the leadership team's awareness of these discourses, and to engage the leadership team in the deconstruction of such discourses.*

In Chapter 4, particularly from section 4.2 onwards, I reflect on the discourses in circulation within the church, as well as their effects on both men and women. I tried in various ways to raise the leadership team's awareness of these discourses, through devotional material, letters, conversations with the women and the pastor, and so on. I describe some of these attempts in Chapter 1, section 1.5.2.1, in Chapter 3 and in section 6.2 below. It is my hope that this dissertation itself will contribute to consciousness raising and deconstruction in relation to these discourses, and that it will open up the possibility of further conversations with the leadership.

### **6.1.4 Reflect on the process**

*Aim 4: To reflect in an ongoing way on the process, on how the women are experiencing the process, and on my own involvement in the process.*

I achieved this aim by keeping a research journal, engaging in reflective and reflexive conversations with the women participants, and in engaging in conversation with my supervisor and colleagues. Chapter 3 tells the story of my reflections.

Reinharz (1992:194) suggests that researchers should reflect on three key aspects of the research journey, namely (1) what they have learned about doing research, (2) what they have learned about the research topic and lastly (3) how the research has influenced they themselves as researchers. I reflect briefly on each of these aspects, in that order, in the three sections which follow. In section 6.2 below, I discuss what I have learned about doing participatory action research. Although the entire dissertation reflects what I have learnt about the research topic, I reflect specifically on the concept of emancipation in section 6.3. In Chapter 3, I reflected on my experience of the research journey as a whole, but in section 6.4 I reflect specifically on how it influenced me as a researcher and as a human being.

## 6.2 WAS THIS RESEARCH JOURNEY PARTICIPATORY?

In theory, PAR requires that issues of ownership and agency be openly acknowledged and negotiated with research participants who define issues, generate and interpret the data, and determine the action to be taken as a result of the study. In too many cases, however, theory and practice diverge, often due to unacknowledged tensions and differences in perceived power and authority both between the academic researcher and members of the community in which the research is being conducted, and among community members themselves.

(Brydon-Miller 2004:14-15)

Ideally, participants in [PAR] are subjects rather than objects, involved at best in research design, data collection, analysis and reporting. In practice, complicated contextual conditions may well make such an ideal difficult to realise fully. Nonetheless, participation is still a value to be clarified through practising research. Such processes are reflexive rather than only reflective in that the researcher's own actions are always subject to critical scrutiny.

(Walker 1998:242)

In the quotations above, Brydon-Miller and Walker acknowledge the tension between theory and practice in PAR. Our noble, emancipatory ideals often begin to sound a little hollow once we get our hands dirty in the messy reality of participation, and when we encounter some of the 'political perils' and 'ethical pitfalls' of actually carrying out research (Punch 1994:85).

This tension played itself out throughout my journey with the leadership team. As time went by, the process and meetings felt less and less participatory, and I found it difficult to put my finger on the source of the problem. 'Participation' is a fairly slippery concept to pin down in a definition, but I knew that what I was witnessing could not be called participatory.

In my quest to understand what was happening, I consulted with seasoned participatory action researchers through their published works (Brabeck 2004; Brydon-Miller, Maguire & McIntyre 2004; Hall 2001; McTaggart 1997; Walker 1998; Williams & Cervin 2004; Zuber-Skerritt 1996) and tried to distil again for myself the key elements of PAR. These I expressed in Chapter 1 as follows:

PAR happens when a group of people identify a concern, a real-life problem regarding their own practice. They own the problem, take on joint responsibility for solving the problem and commit themselves to improving their practice. They then engage in a cyclical process of planning, action, observation, evaluation and critical reflection (Zuber-Skerritt 1996:3).

If I look at this definition, what the leadership team engaged in was PAR. At Skuiling, the leadership team defined the issues that were of concern, participated in generating visions/dreams for the church, and decided on an action which they wanted to take: they wanted to take the process of reflection and dreaming to the wider congregation. They then invited the members of their own congregation to participate in the reflection/dreaming process, facilitated the process, and gathered and collated the information/knowledges that were generated within these small groups. They then distilled the key elements from all the feedback, and met to reflect on the process and determine the action that they wanted to take as a result.

It all seems to be participatory and seems to fit all the criteria, until you scratch below the surface a little. What one finds there is a little messier than the sanitised picture I have just presented. One finds evidence of multiple instances in which the women on the leadership team were sidelined and excluded during the course of the research journey.

For example, at no point in the journey did the women have the freedom to call a meeting; they were not consulted about dates for meetings, and they were not invited to give input to the agenda for any meeting. The Skuiling process was taken to members of the congregation in the bible study groups, rather than voluntary participation being invited, and it was male deacons who facilitated the process in the bible study groups – which they usually lead and within which they wield enormous influence. Although women had attended the facilitator training and were more than competent to facilitate the Skuiling process in a small group, none was invited to do so.

Other aspects of process excluded all but the most senior leaders. The feedback from the process in the bible study groups was submitted to the pastor who, in consultation with the associate pastor, summarised the feedback into six key points which were disturbingly similar to the key points in NCD, the church development programme which the church had adopted the previous year. This summary was presented to the leadership team at the next meeting. There was a very positive sense at this point about changes that were happening in the church in terms of the congregation's participation in services and events and their levels of enthusiasm and commitment. However, at this meeting, very little time was given to reflection on the process itself, and the men moved immediately into planning mode: what are we going to *do* now?

Maguire, Brydon-Miller and McIntyre (2004:xiv) suggest that, in order for PAR to contribute to social change, all participants need to have a 'meaningful voice' at every stage of the research process. As I have shown, this was not the case for all of the women and, I would argue, for at least some of the men, some of the time. The pressing question that I need to ask as participant/researcher is: Why did I not insist that my questions and challenges to these exclusionary practices were heard?

There is no simple answer to this question, except perhaps that my own discursive positioning precluded 'insistence' as a way of being with the leadership team. As a researcher I have to acknowledge the fact I, too, am a socially constituted being who was working under the influence of the same discourses which constituted all the women's subjectivities. Although my role as researcher afforded me greater potential for resistance, I was aware that my position within the group was extremely tenuous. The team had no obligation to accept my involvement in the process. I was an outsider, present by invitation only. These factors served to silence my voice in instances where I should have spoken out.

However, I also felt that my role was restricted by academic discourses around PAR. My understanding of the role of the researcher in PAR was that as a participant I was to observe, comment and question along with the other participants, but that I could not impose or dictate. So I was constrained by my awareness of my power, as well as by my powerlessness.

It was for these reasons that I chose a more subtle, even subversive, approach over direct confrontation. I continually invited the leadership team to reflect on their practices and values and the real effects that they were having on people. I carefully selected the images and devotional material with which we opened the meetings where my husband and I were facilitating. The separate meetings that I set up with the women were also acts of resistance, and I hoped that the women's voices would be strengthened by their solidarity. This proved to be the case, although I was not fully aware at the time of the first women's meeting how crucial it had been in facilitating the women's honest 'speaking out' at the next joint meeting. I also wrote letters to the team after most of the meetings in which I recorded the content of the meeting and asked questions which invited the team to reflect on the conversations which had taken place. Some of these letters addressed the factors standing in the way of participation very directly. Unfortunately, these letters were never responded to.

I acknowledge that my attempts had little or no impact on practices within the leadership team. I can only wonder whether a more direct approach might have had a different outcome. However, this would have required either that I revise my understanding of the role of a PAR researcher or that I adopt a different research approach which was more directive.

What I have come to realise is that there were a number of factors that worked against participation during the course of this research journey. I was aware of some of these at the time and attempted to address them, while others have become clear only in hindsight. I discuss three of these factors in the section which follows.

## **6.2.1 Factors which worked against participation during the research journey**

### ***6.2.1.1 Different perceptions about the changes that needed to happen***

By the end of the second meeting after the Skuling Retreat, I realised that the leadership team was not unanimously committed to the same kind of changes or to the process we needed to follow in making those changes. The men were largely committed to achieving a successful church which could be measured in terms of growth in numbers and active involvement in church activities. They were therefore motivated by the desire to transform the size of the church, activity levels within the church, and also the enthusiasm and commitment of church members. This was a goal shared by several of the women. The men spoke out very strongly about the need for the leadership team to make action plans and develop strategies for achieving this goal. These were to be clearly defined activities which would have clearly defined outcomes. One man expressed this position very succinctly: 'The leaders must lead'.

On the other hand, a number of the women and a few of the men were under the impression that the transformation the leadership team was seeking was primarily about inviting participation in ever-widening circles within the church. The leadership team had committed themselves to taking the Skuling process to the rest of the church, some of them perhaps without realising that the whole ethos of the process was about relinquishing control over the outcome and believing that each person within the church had a contribution to make in shaping a vision for the church. The goal was the participation of every church member, and the challenge was to develop practices which would invite and nurture such participation' practices such as respectful listening, creating space in which people could tell their stories and be heard, valuing and honouring the

contributions of every person, and so on.

However, what soon became clear was that these practices were missing in the very way that the men on the leadership habitually related to one another and to the women during meetings where a facilitator was either not present or did not have a mandate to hold people accountable to these practices. However, when one of the women suggested that relationships within the leadership team needed to be addressed and transformed, the suggestion was dismissed by more powerful voices who insisted that transformation needed to happen 'out there', in the church.

These fundamental differences between the agendas of different participants need not have been a significant problem if they had been made explicit and if the various positions could have been openly discussed and debated. One of the problems was that these agendas were not always articulated by those who held them, and it is only with hindsight, through my reflections on the process with the women, that they have become visible. However, a second factor proved to be a serious impediment to open and honest discussion. This was the issue of power.

#### **6.2.1.2      *Power and privilege***

The challenge for participatory action researchers is in overcoming the naïve sense that we can somehow set aside differences of power and privilege that exist within our community settings, just as they exist within all aspects of our society. We have tended to overlook critical issues of representation and voice.

(Brydon-Miller 2004:15)

In Chapter 4 I looked at how the various discourses in circulation within this Baptist church constituted the men in a position of power over the women. However, these discourses were never directly addressed during the course of the research. In failing to do so, I was naïve in the extreme. My naïveté was largely based on the positive experience of the Skuiling Retreat and the enthusiasm it generated within the leadership team. However, Rudduck (1994:122) warns that participatory researchers need to 'look beyond the short-term successes and understand the tight weave of structures that hold inequality in place'. In many ways, I had an unrealistic faith in the potential of participatory action research to transform patriarchal thinking as well as practice<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> When reflecting on the many ways I could have done things differently during the course of the research journey, I take comfort from Mary Brydon-Miller's (2004:15) reflections on her own work in the field of PAR: 'I screw up... Sometimes it takes me months or years to realise that I have acted in such a way as to

Wedekind (1997:342-348) points out that some of the 'unfulfilled promises'<sup>2</sup> of action research arise from its (mis)appropriation of Habermas's concept of an ideal speech situation (ISS) as a theoretical foundation. Habermas's ISS consists of 'a community where all participants are autonomous, have the same rights and responsibilities, and are able to talk freely, without distortions' (Wedekind 1997:343). However, Wedekind (1997:343-344) argues that to suggest that such an ISS is concretely achievable in the real world is to ignore the complexity of Habermas's theories. It is also to ignore Habermas's own acknowledgement that while the ISS highlights factors that could get in the way of 'symmetrical communication', it cannot reduce or eliminate them (Wedekind 1997:344).

Foucault (1980:141) would agree that 'power is "always already there" and that one is never "outside it"'. He also argued that power 'isn't something in and of itself' (Flaskas & Humphreys 1993:40), but that it shows itself in the 'structuring of relationships between people' (*op cit*:41). It is only within the context of such power relationships that it is possible to determine 'what can be said when, who can say what and with what authority' (Madigan 1996:51). In other words, those who are constituted in positions of power over others are the ones who decide who gets to speak and what they may say.

As was discussed in Chapter 4, there exists a 'tangled web of oppressions and privileges' (Maguire 2004:131) related to gender, age, position within the church, social status, education level, and so on, which constitute the subjectivities of all the research participants, including myself as researcher. Our subjectivities in turn constrained the ways in which participants felt able to contribute, as well as what they contributed to the research conversation. The men's position of power, afforded them by the various discourses which we looked at in Chapter 4, served to silence the women in the process of this PAR journey. Wedekind (1997:345) feels that the action research cycle often seems to ignore or deny this discursive positioning of participants, while holding on to a utopian ideal of equality and democracy.

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silence discussion, I have failed to recognise disagreement and resistance, or I have taken charge when others could more effectively have led. This is largely uncharted territory, and it is impossible not to make mistakes... [However] the inevitability of error is not an excuse for inaction'.

<sup>2</sup> A phrase used by Venezuelan community psychologist, Esther Weisenfeld (1999:2 cited by Fine et al 2003:177.)

Even if one attempts to address the issue of differences in power and privilege, such a conversation will itself be embedded in power relations related to the particular time, place and context in which it is taking place (Wedekind 1997:347). It seems that we can never negate or step outside the power relations which are 'always already there' (Foucault 1980:141). Is it then possible to negotiate different, more inclusive practices from the positions in which we are currently constituted? Foucault (1988:18) offers the following opinion:

I don't believe there can be a society without relations of power, if you understand them as the means by which individuals try to conduct, to determine the behaviour of others. The problem is not of trying to dissolve them in the utopia of a perfectly transparent communication, but to give one's self the rules of law, the techniques of management, and also the ethics, the ethos, the practices of self, which would allow these games to be played with a minimum of domination.

One practice that did seem to ensure that the games of power were 'played out with the minimum of domination' was the invited presence of a facilitator or facilitators who ensured that every participant had the opportunity to speak and be heard. When the role of the facilitator was no longer clearly mandated by the team, patterns of interaction amongst the participants changed significantly.

### **6.2.1.3      *A shift in the role of the facilitator from 'influential' to 'non-influential'***

A number of women spoke about their perceptions of role that facilitation played in the Skuiling process:

[At Skuiling] we had the safety of facilitators to facilitate the process. That was very important for me. I felt safe.

It feels like we left Skuiling at Skuiling, to me. And I think that a lot of that was about the protection that the facilitation gave to me and then the freedom to speak within the protection.

...at Skuiling you had to be quiet and you had to listen to what other people were saying... You weren't allowed to interrupt and so everyone could say what they wanted to say and finish what they wanted to say without... But in the other meetings people would just... we did try to carry on with that theme, but people are so involved in thinking what they're thinking, they can't wait to jump in and I think that's why sometimes something [ideas are] brought up and then... lost because the next person is so keen to say what they want to say, and so things aren't followed through because everyone is coming in with their ideas. Whereas at Skuiling that didn't happen because it was run differently, and you weren't allowed to, you know, jump in, sort of thing... and that was why I think so many things came out and were taken note of.

...I think there needs to be more of a, 'Okay... let's just stop now and let's just discuss what [this person] said before we move on to [the next person] and then we wouldn't lose things so easily'.

It's about respecting.

Is there any way of putting something in place so that respect and listening and space for people to talk, can be a part of other meetings. How does one do that?

I think you will always just have dominant people... that will just... you know, and those that think faster and move faster and have it all set in their minds before you have even gone there.

...I think that the mediator has a vitally important role to play because they are drawing out certain people and not allowing other people to dominate, and I think that's a key role for someone to play if we do want to integrate women...

I think that was the magic of [the Skuiling Retreat]... We were held accountable to those ways of being together and I think that that is maybe what has slipped by [since the retreat]. We didn't realise how important those ways of being were to us, and that now they have slipped through our fingers and it has resulted in a different way of being. [Silence] You [Kim] certainly helped in holding us accountable to those as a group, and with your not being at some of our meetings and being at others has shown that with your presence comes a being held accountable to those principles and as soon as your facilitation is not there...

I was very aware that something was being lost as each meeting happened after Skuiling and for me, what was being lost was that equal contribution by everybody, so much so that I think... each meeting there was another woman that didn't come, and often I felt like I had to be here, but sometimes I felt like, 'Well, I don't know if I've actually got the fight in me to say what I need to say', and... so eventually it left me feeling like I was intruding on a deacons' meeting, and that I actually shouldn't really have been there.

It felt like without [the facilitators from the Skuiling Retreat] who were kind of holding the flags of what we all had agreed on, that the group couldn't keep to those values somehow... So even though you were here [for some of the meetings], it was like, well, somehow we have reached a silent consensus that even though Kim is here, the kind of flag is not loud enough or bright enough so we... so this thing can carry on like it usually does... There has to be an agreement that the way you are going to do something is what everyone is going to do otherwise... And it looks like as a group we need someone to hold us accountable to that, else it doesn't happen.

What the women seem to be suggesting is that an outside facilitator may be needed to ensure the full participation of all, in situations where the playing field is not level while our previous discussion seems to suggest that the playing field is never level, no matter what the context. A facilitator would ensure that everyone is safe, everyone is heard and that participation doesn't happen only on the terms of the dominant group. This is achieved by holding people accountable to values such as respect, good listening, giving space, not interrupting, challenging or adding and giving time for reflection after each person contributes. Facilitation would need to continue until such time as the group are able to commit themselves to such values or develop their own agreed-upon set of values, and put accountability measures in place.

Wedekind (1997:351) argues that the ‘action research leader’ or ‘group leader’ needs to take up a role in which they are ‘centred and not obscured by the rhetoric of democracy’, and suggests that the group leader’s role should be ‘to interpret, challenge and gently remind group members about the object of the project’, as well as addressing questions of methodology. My concern with this position is that it invites the ‘group leader’ to take up an expert position and impose his or her interpretations onto the group’s story. This position is what Michael White (2003b, seminar notes) would call ‘centred and influential’. The diagram below (White 2002, workshop notes) shows White’s conceptualisation of the different postures that can be adopted by therapists in their conversations with individuals, families, groups or communities. I would argue that the same applies to pastoral therapists/workers.

	<b>De-centred</b>	<b>Centred</b>
<b>Influential</b>	De-centred and influential (potentially invigorating of therapist/pastoral worker)	Centred and influential (potentially burdening of therapist/pastoral worker)
<b>Non- influential</b>	De-centred and non-influential (potentially invalidating of therapist/pastoral worker)	Centred and non-influential (potentially exhausting of therapist/pastoral worker)

According to White’s model, the preferred posture for a therapist/pastoral worker to adopt would be ‘decentred and influential’, and I feel that I was able to maintain such a posture during the Skuling Retreat, for the first two joint meetings with the team and in my conversations with the women. This means that I was able to provide scaffolding, through questions and retellings, that enabled the women to gain access to alternative stories of their lives and (re)discover knowledges about themselves and about being church together that were hopeful and invigorating for them (White 2003b: seminar notes).

However, as I have described previously my role changed during the course of the research journey and the mandate to facilitate meetings and hold the team accountable to certain practices during those meetings, was withdrawn. The position which I ended up occupying within the leadership team, which I can only describe as ‘decentred and non-influential’, was not of my own choosing. It seems that, when working with communities, it may be necessary to negotiate the role and posture of the pastoral worker in an ongoing way, as it is not only dependent on the pastoral worker’s own perceptions of how they would like to be with a community.

It is my recommendation that any participatory action research project needs someone to take up the role of what I would like to call the 'research facilitator'. The research facilitator would be a participant with the other participants, but would need to have expertise in holding the participants accountable to an agreed-upon way of being together, an agreed-upon process. In order to do so, the facilitator must have the trust of the group and must have been given a mandate to do so.

The research facilitator would be 'decentred and influential' in that they would not be authoring the story of the group, but would be facilitating the authoring/re-authoring process. The facilitator would not dictate the content or direction of the research but would hold the group accountable to HOW they participate together. The facilitator needs to ensure that everyone is given the space to articulate their own desires, needs and expectations and to ensure that differences in desires, needs and expectations are acknowledged and negotiated.

However, the aim of the research facilitator should be to work herself out of a job. In the case of PAR, the time that a researcher will spend with a particular group of people is limited by the scope of the project, and one needs to ensure that when the researcher withdraws the group does not revert to 'business as usual' in their patterns of interaction, as happened on this research journey. Therefore the team need to experience the benefit of a new way of being together and commit themselves to holding one another accountable to this new way. This is not to say that such a commitment will automatically ensure the participation of all on an equal basis. We can never escape the games of power, but we need to continually update our game plans in order to ensure that we all win: 'The struggle continues ever afterwards. Because afterwards is where we live' (Nicol cited by Ross 2001:273).

### **6.2.2 An answer to my question**

Therefore, in answer to the question that I asked in the title of this section, 'Was this research journey participatory?', my answer has to be, 'Yes and no'. The men on the leadership team had an ambivalent relationship with Participation. At times they welcomed Participation at our meetings and at other times they did not. Facilitation certainly invited Participation in, but I think that even then Participation was quite intimidated by loud voices and people in powerful positions. What is encouraging is that Participation seems to have crept into the hearts of a number of the women and some of the men, and they

are very keen to have Participation around on a permanent basis. It is my hope that Participation will teach them her secrets and strengthen their resolve to nurture and grow her in whatever ways are available to them, in their church.

### **6.3 WAS THIS RESEARCH JOURNEY EMANCIPATORY?**

All practices and theories [relating to action research and participatory research] need to be continually open to question, rather than pushing for closure, not least around what a complex term like 'emancipation' means at different times and in different contexts, and given new post-modernist readings of a non-unitary self.

(Walker 1998:239)

'Emancipation' is another slippery concept that defies simple definition in practical terms. It is closely related to the concept of liberation, and the Concise Oxford Dictionary (Allen 1990) defines both in terms of freeing persons from restraint, oppression or rigid social conventions. However, as Walker (1998:239) points out in the quotation above, emancipation may mean different things to people in different contexts, or to different people in the same context, or even to a single person within one particular context at different times.

Despite the 'endless play of meanings' which the term generates, it is an important concept to grapple with, as the concept of human emancipation constitutes the theoretical core of action research (Carr & Kemmis 1986; Kemmis 1993 cited by Wedekind 1997:334), as well as being the primary aim of feminist research (Fonow & Cook 1991:6). Miller-McLemore (1999:80) also suggests that the practice of liberation, together with 'resisting, empowering and nurturing' should be added to the core functions of pastoral care which have traditionally consisted of 'healing, sustaining, guiding and reconciling' (Hiltner 1958; Clebsch & Jaekle 1964).

Therefore, as a pastoral worker and participatory action researcher, it is necessary for me to ask the question: Was this research journey emancipatory for the women on the leadership team or within the church?

If you had asked me that question prior to collating the Book of Women's Wisdom, I would have answered with a resounding 'No!' The vision of emancipation that I had in mind was one in which women were invited to participate fully at every level of church life. Clearly, this had not been the outcome of the research journey. However, during my meeting with some of the women to discuss their responses to their Book of Women's Wisdom, they described how the Skuling Retreat and the ensuing research journey had transported

them from unawareness into awareness. Before Skuiling they were not aware that they had a contribution to make to church leadership; now they are convinced that they do. Another way to describe what happened is to say that the research journey precipitated a paradigm shift for some of the women. The women shifted from the paradigm of 'women have nothing to contribute to church leadership' to 'women have a valuable contribution to make to church leadership'. Although the church structures have not welcomed this contribution as fully as they would like, this realisation cannot be unrealised, and the women cannot unshift the shift in their thinking. In the light of the women's own experience of the research journey, I need to change my answer and say, 'Yes! This research journey did fulfil an emancipatory goal'.

However, this shift in the women's thinking also raises uncomfortable questions for a way forward for the women. Prior to the research journey women were not invited to participate but were largely comfortable with the status quo because that was the way things had always been done and it fitted in with their paradigm of 'church'. However, they are now aware of the valuable contribution they are able to make, and yet the structures have not changed substantially enough to welcome women's meaningful participation in leadership. I realise, in hindsight, with Fonow and Cook (1991:8) that:

...the action orientation of feminist research can create a number of ethical, political and practical dilemmas. Because much of feminist research involves the personal and intimate lives of women and men, any intervention risks the possibility of disrupting relationships that are personally satisfying to the participants and perhaps materially necessary for survival.

In the light of this realisation, I am more comfortable with envisioning emancipation as a process, a gradual process, a 'migration of identity' (White 1995:99-104) for both the women and the men. McTaggart (1996:245) speaks from her experience as a PAR researcher when she highlights the importance of 'sustained effort and tolerance of slow progress' when working towards transformation and change. One 'must simply ask regularly whether things are a little more rational or (reasonable), just, humane and satisfying for participants and others than they were' (McTaggart 1996:245) before the journey started. This was echoed by Doug, after reading this dissertation, when he said, 'One of the key issues is time-frame. Things change slowly in a church... and it frustrates the living daylight out of me'.

I agree that we need to acknowledge and celebrate the steps along the way. My only caution would be that we should be careful not to mistake the steps for the goal, and to stop short of fulfilling the women's vision of a whole community.

Perhaps one step of the process would be for the women to acknowledge that their values, commitments and dreams in relation to their church community are shared by women around the world; women who have come together in a conversation called feminist theology.

#### **6.4 TO BE OR NOT TO BE A FEMINIST**

I have never been able to find out precisely what feminism is: I only know that people call me a feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiate me from a doormat.

(Rebecca West 1913)

I am a feminist: a feminist practical theologian, a feminist mother, a feminist wife, a feminist friend, a feminist writer and a feminist follower of Christ. However, if you had asked me where I stood six months ago, I would have gone to endless lengths to avoid admitting it. One of the fundamental shifts that has happened within me over the course of this research journey has been the realisation that I can 'unapologetically own my feminist values and beliefs' (Maguire 2004:132).

But what does this mean? I have realised that the term 'feminist' means different things for different people, and that in society at large, and particularly in Christian circles, most of those meanings are negative. The term 'feminist' evokes ridicule, suspicion, opposition and even fear. The fact that there is a wide diversity in feminism and in feminist theology 'in perception and formulation, as well as in strategy... is often forgotten, as may be gauged from the kind of flippant and stereotyped criticisms that are usually made of feminism' (Govinden 1991:276).

This is what some of the women on this research journey had to say about feminism:

I'm very fearful of the unknown, because I think... I anticipate a little bit and I assume a little bit and I think, well, this unknown for some people might be called, hmm, it might be called 'feminism', it might be called those kinds of things. And I know it's not about that necessarily for me; it's just about participating in a group and having my voice heard and feeling like I'm contributing. That's what it's about for me. But nobody's asked about what it's about for me, but I kind of have a sense that maybe the men are becoming a bit irritable, you know, because, 'This thing needs to be held in check now; we can't let it go too loose and too free because then

we don't know where we'll be. You know, we really might be in a church that has a woman minister and God forbid that' [laughs].

Really, in meetings I sit and I have those thoughts that come into my mind and I sense the agitation of the men and I'm thinking, 'That's what they are thinking, they're thinking that we want to take over, that's what they're thinking, that's why they want to control and make sure this process is managed so that it doesn't get into the hands of women'. And that kind of thing I have to even fight against in myself. Ja, it's just things that I interpret in body language and so on, but it might not be real, but because we don't talk about it and because it's unknown the fear grows...and it keeps me back from speaking out... It keeps the power the way it is.

I know for me there's a big question mark in terms of where women stand in [this] church and what their role is and should they be in leadership positions, etc., but I would find it interesting to see what the view of men is and where the boundaries are because, like that comment of the man who popped in and sort of mentioned, 'Oh, are you starting a revolution?', umm, I don't think that anyone here has that intention and its not about [revolution]... it's not about women's lib... I'm not for women's lib. I think it can be very damaging, and I think that having a proper understanding of where both men and women's roles fall in the church would enrich the church...

The fear of being labelled 'feminist' serves to silence expression of the unique perspectives of women within the church. The price that women pay for overstepping 'the boundaries of the confined space of the proper roles' (Bons-Storm 1996:135) assigned to them within a patriarchal system is high. The consequences usually include feelings of guilt and shame and various punishments which include being ridiculed, ignored or aggressively challenged. Similar consequences were referred to by respondents participating in Groves's (1997) research amongst Xhosa-speaking Christian women in the Eastern Cape. A number of women described to their reluctance to speak out in the church, for fear of being marginalised. One woman said:

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.

(respondent in Groves 1997:59)

There are powerful discourses in the church around feminism which say something like 'Women who challenge the status quo are troublemakers/evil/strange/unnatural/not Christian'. Calling someone a feminist seems to have become a handy way to dismiss their ideas and the goals of any efforts at bringing about an end to unjust and discriminatory processes (Noffke & Brennan 2004:99).

However, it is not simply the term 'feminist' which evokes such responses. If it was, we could simply adopt a different term with fewer stigmas attached. But, as Paula Kamen (1991:50-51 cited by Maguire 2004:132) points out '...inevitably the same thing will happen to that magical word. Part of the radical connotation of feminism is not due to the

word but to the action. The act of a woman standing up for herself is radical, whether she calls herself a feminist or not'.

What I discovered in my explorations of feminism is that, while the term may only have been coined in the last century, it is by no means a new concept. There have been women throughout history who have resisted their positioning in terms of patriarchal power. This is clearly evident in New Testament times when the women who encountered Jesus came to perceive 'themselves and their roles in life in a radically new way because of the liberating influence of the gospel' (Kretzschmar 1990:37-51). It saddens and frustrates me that the 'liberating influence of the gospel' has been denied to so many women in the name of institutionalised Christianity, including many of the women of this church.

I realise that in identifying myself as a feminist, I run the risk of this work being judged and dismissed on that basis. However, I felt compelled to share an alternative story about what it is to be a feminist, and to try to live feminism as a practical theologian within the context of Christian faith and service.

The following conversation, which I engaged in with some of the women towards the end of the research journey, tells a little of that story.

Kim: [In listening to what you have said, what I am hearing is that] there... just doesn't seem to be much space to be different from the status quo, the dominant voice, the dominant way of thinking and being and...

B: ...in fact there's quite a pressure to agree with the dominant voice... let alone space given to an opposing voice or even inviting a different point of view.

Kim: And I think a lot of what you are talking about I have experienced during this year [of the research journey]... the fear of being just rejected and sidelined and of just being too different...just that real sense of having to push all the time, fight all the time, squeeze...

B: What was that like for you as someone who had been invited to be part of the process?

Kim: [Silence] It's been for me a very painful place at times... and I think that something that you [B] said after the last meeting was really helpful in that you said you had to let go of your dreams for the process and for the group, and I realised then that I needed to do the same because, um, I don't know, I came away from the Skuiling weekend just with a sense of awe at what had happened; it was just... I couldn't actually take in what had happened on that weekend and then I just couldn't believe that things just went back to the way they were; it was like, you know, this is so exciting and this is so amazing, and I think that part of [my experience of what happened after the Skuiling Retreat] was like a rejection, a personal rejection of, you know, a different way of thinking and a different way of being, and I often

wondered what the outcome might have been if Dave had been the one who ran with it afterwards rather than me, and if it would have been any different and if me being a woman has made it easier for the process and my voice to be sidelined and ignored, and if it had been Dave as a man with a different voice, whether it might have been different or not...

B: We can only wonder at that...

C: We can only wonder; it's an interesting wonder

B: I've had the same question in my mind and I've... it's added to the sadness for me, that two people can come with exactly the same process, and because the one is male the process is accepted and because the other is female, the bearer of it is female, it is rejected, that's very sad...

I've kind of felt angry that there's been this kind of sidelining and so on, but part of me has also had to realise that this is about you and the group and I can't be held responsible for what the group does, you know, and sometimes I've wanted to say, 'Do you realise what you're doing?', you know, and, 'By sidelining Kim, do you realise where we are going?' [I have] been watching that with *real* frustration and, umm, so I think that the journey has been *hard* in that sense, you know, kind of bringing someone that you value into a process and watching you kind of getting frustrated and hurt by it has been hard for me, but it's also been growthful, you know, because I've just realised that you can only really be responsible for you... And people can only take and see what it is they allow themselves to see.

C: Or choose to...

B: Or remain open to... And that's kind of like planting a crop and some of it never germinates, you know. I look at it now and there's a sadness for me but, for the seeds that have grown and flourished, I can only be grateful for those.

To live feminist practical theology is to struggle and to fail and to weep and to get up and struggle again, inspired and strengthened by a vision of church in which all are invited, all are welcome and all participate in the 'mending of creation' (Ackermann 1996:34). For me, feminist practical theologians, both male and female, are those persons who refuse to cooperate in their own dehumanisation and or that of the other on the basis of gender or any other dualist system of classification that divides human beings into 'them' and 'us'. They act against actions or attitudes, institutional or personal, that systematically subordinate a person or persons or a group. They are convinced that anything which suggests one is less than what God created, is sin, and take steps to address sin and participate in restoration and healing.<sup>3</sup> This is by no means an easy task. Feminist practical theology requires far more than being 'nice' and 'helping people'. Pastoral theology and care oriented to the cry for gender justice disrupts and disturbs as much as it comforts and consoles' (McLemore 2000:242)

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<sup>3</sup> This definition is loosely based on a statement made by Mercy Oduyoye (Institute for Contextual Theology 1984:13).

In the light of the above definition, many of the dreams and visions shared by the women at Skuiling and throughout the research journey would constitute a feminist practical theology, a 'theology of women's experience' (Graham 1996:124). My curiosity is aroused once again as to how such a thing happens: how do women who have never encountered feminist theology envision the same ideals as seasoned feminist academics? Was this a completely unique occurrence, or is it possible for all women and men of faith, participating in conversation, to generate similarly unique yet universal dreams and visions for their own churches? And is it possible for them, then, to be transformed by these visions, to act in order to implement them?

I believe that this research provides a powerful argument for pursuing an 'ongoing conversation between... multiple and diverse voices' and engaging in 'critical theological reflection, [which] is indispensable for theorising, not for right answers but for emancipatory practice' (Ackermann 1996:34). 'Ongoing conversation between multiple and diverse voices', 'critical theological reflection' and 'emancipatory practice' constitute both the means and the end of participatory practical theology.

## **6.5 CONCLUSIONS AND NEW BEGINNINGS**

This retelling of the research journey cannot claim to be anything but a 'partial and incomplete' account (Walker 1998:250), which hides more than it provides. It provides the socially constructed perspectives of a particular group of participants reflecting on socially constructed realities and experiences. To use narrative terminology, it represents only one story of the multiple possible stories that could be told about the research journey. I do not claim that this dissertation is anything more than my own 'inevitably prejudiced' (Andersen 1997:126) story of the research journey.

I have to say that this was never the story I intended to tell. My intention at the outset of the research journey was simply to document the process. However, my latent feminism would not allow me to gloss over the women's experience of the journey, and the conviction grew that it would be both necessary and beneficial to invite the women's voices to be heard again where they had been silenced before, and to locate the story of this journey within the discourse of feminist practical theology.

I could not have anticipated what a challenging and inspiring process the writing up of this dissertation would be. I had hoped that it would bring closure to the research journey, but instead it has opened up new possibilities and paved the way for new beginnings. I have a

fresh appreciation of the power of reflection and reflexivity to inspire new awareness and effect change. This was particularly evident for me when I met with the women to reflect on the Book of Women's Wisdom. Rather than being a necessary evil tagged onto the end of the research journey, the writing of this dissertation has become an integral part of the research journey. It is my hope that this document will be incorporated into the ongoing conversation of the leadership team who participated in the research journey and that it will continue to stimulate discussion and debate.

My prayer is that God will work through the questions that this dissertation raises in the minds of its readers, and that the Skuiling process will continue to unfold in the life of this church. And perhaps what we discovered together will be taken up by other groups of Christ followers who dream of journeying together towards a vision of wholeness where all are invited, all are welcomed, and all participate in being the Body of Christ together.

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## **1. THE SKUILING RETREAT: A WOMEN'S PERSPECTIVE**

### **1.1 What happened?**

What we were asked to do was to share our experiences, our memories, what things are like at present and our dreams and then we had group to listen to that and to take us seriously.

We were asked what we would dream we would like our church to be like... or what you'd like to see happening, you know. When we say dream, we didn't go into a trance or anything like that... you just had to think about 'What would you want in your church? What would be your ideal? That type of thing, you know... or what would you like to see happening, that's what we mean by a dream.

It was daytime, we were asked to go away, just for half an hour and then put down what came to us.

Everybody had a dream... we've all got dreams... some of us had real dreams and some of us were more practical in like if you were to read mine it was more of a practical sort of thing, it wasn't so much as a dream

Mine really felt more like a vision, cause I really saw it.

We didn't do a lot of planning on that weekend... as I saw it a lot of things that were like stewing in the background were dealt with and then we needed to do planning... I don't know, maybe I saw it from the wrong way, but that's just how I saw it.

What happened at Skuiling was a gift. Something happened. I had new insights and felt a togetherness that I had not experienced before. And I feel that it would be a tragedy if that experience was left at Skuiling. Something happened there that would be of value to the whole Church. That experience of togetherness could be a magnet that draws people in.

### **1.2 What women appreciated about the weekend**

It was so amazing that we never did the 'normal' stuff...we didn't open in prayer and close in prayer and do worship... and yet, I said over and over to myself and to people who asked me about the weekend, it was like Glory... a God-glory weekend, God-steeped, God was steeped and seeped in the weekend and some of that was about 'no pretend' for me... there just wasn't a sense of pretend or having to try... I didn't have to impress, I didn't have to try, cause nobody else was and yet we were being the closest to Jesus and to each other... than we have ever been.

You know that was important for me over the weekend was the safety that came through a facilitator... the safety of the facilitation really helped me... it really just supported and helped me so that when I think of what we're saying I'm thinking 'whoa!' I couldn't do it unless I had facilitators and yet it wasn't the facilitators doing it, we did the work but the facilitators sustained it... I needed a sense of being sustained.

To add to that... what also helped me was the whole confidentiality thing and I knew that what I was saying to you, you weren't going to go and discuss out of our group, or with other people who wouldn't understand what we had actually gone through.

I appreciated the ability to be open and honest and a sense of it being OKAY, a sense of being accepted.

I experienced a feeling of acceptance at the weekend. People could say the things they wanted to and they were accepted. The ladies want to be accepted.

The weekend was a coming together.

Over the weekend there was such a ... I experienced... a flourishing freedom to participate in the group and to have the freedom to say what I was sitting with and be able to contribute that in a way that I hadn't experienced before. And with that freedom came an enormous sense of being part of the group and that was very exciting for me, enormously.

I am left with a greater understanding of how eachone feels.

The Skuiling weekend gave me... a sense, that we are all free to participate and that in our participating something much richer is created than one person can come up with and I really love that because I just think that is the way I would really love to be in the world, where people aren't put onto one being more important than another.

What came out of the whole weekend [for me], I think [was] the whole acceptance of our emotions. I found that even the men were able to be more emotional and I think they shared more. I think the men were even surprised at themselves at what they were able to share and I think that was maybe because we were there. I think it could have been quite a formal thing otherwise...

I think that if they had been on their own, they wouldn't have been able to share like they did, you know and the things that they did, had it just been the men.

In our group [one of the men] was quite amazed that [one of the women] could have the kind of dream she did have. He even said 'Wow, you know, that's fantastic to be able to have a dream like that, and to be able to share it... because for him it was also more of a down to earth... it probably would have been more like that for the men if there had not been the women...

What was quite significant for me over the weekend was the opportunity, as individuals, but within groups, to talk about your experience of the church for however long you have been here and ... what that did, it was like almost being with another family, or with a family at a reunion. It was kind of just getting a picture for me, whose been here a relatively short time, of much further back and kind of some of the history of some of the connections, how they happened, who they happened with, some of the highlights and that was a very, it was a very enriching experience for me and I really enjoyed... it made me feel part of instead of a kind of a newcomer, in a sense.

For me, it was an extremely emotional weekend, um, and even if I think about it I can get emotional again... and maybe a surprise for me was the acceptance of us [women] being emotional, that we were allowed to be emotional, from the guys especially and, afterwards, a

few of the guys came to me and said, 'Wow' and, you know, patted me on the back and that and I just didn't feel like an idiot because I had been emotional or expressed how I felt and for me... that I really enjoyed, I appreciated that I didn't feel I was being judged... It was nice just to feel support from others and nobody sort of looked down on what your dream was, nobody sort of said, 'that's ridiculous' or 'we'll never get to that', that was nice... even if it is unattainable, it was accepted... I appreciated that.

There was a sense of acceptance, both of your emotions and the contribution that you made – your dream.

And [the men] were really prepared to listen and were interested.

It was a total surprise. I didn't realise that the group could actually be like that. I didn't realise that we were capable of listening to each other, sharing our stories and being heard and finding something that was [immensely] hopeful in the midst of that kind of being together.

The liberation was wonderful for me, it didn't matter what I said. I spoke my heart and it actually felt valued and that made me want to talk more and free to speak more.

[I have been reminded] about um, about the Skuiling weekend and how... what an enormous thing that was for me, to participate and contribute in a new way um, in a group and... how much I enjoyed that. And what that freedom felt like... it is something worth fighting for, but... I can't do it on my own... the only way that that was created was by doing it together... both the men and the women ... and so, kind of, even thinking about it, you know, re-engaging in it and finding the courage to re-engage in it, doing that on my own is pointless because it will never it will never give us what we had all together.

## **2. WOMEN'S REFLECTIONS ON THE UNFOLDING PROCESS AFTER THE SKUILING RETREAT**

### **2.1 Immediately afterwards**

Even when I came back... as much as I wanted to share what I had experienced, I knew that people wouldn't understand anyway... they wouldn't feel what you had felt when I was telling you my dream and my experiences and it was actually quite frustrating because I was like so excited about what had happened and I was so emotional about it and then I knew that even if I told my closest friend, she wouldn't understand what I had experienced.

I experienced it differently because when I went to work, which is, for me, the safe place to do this, I was so enthusiastic, that they noticed it and they said, 'What happened?' and I had no need to tell them details and I can't remember now what I said but I know that the enthusiasm of the weekend... many of them kind of said, 'Sjoe, I wish I could have been there'... and they're not our church people... it was the enthusiasm that was catching.

I also had that and... people said to me, 'What's happened? You're so excited' and I just said, 'I had the most *unbelievable* experience this weekend', and that was all that I needed to say, and yet there were still people that I would have loved to have told *exactly*... but I knew... not just because of the confidentiality...but I knew they wouldn't understand if I did... even

if I gave them... every single detail they would not have understood... they weren't there to experience the whole weekend.

There was a certain amount of excitement because I remember saying to [my daughter], but don't worry, it's going to be brought to you... this sort of... type of thing happened but it's still going to be brought to you.

I do think that I have sensed a less... tense... feeling in the church since that weekend. I have felt that there's been a lot more warmth among the leadership and I think that people who had hurts have actually been able to express them and people have been able to say, 'Gee, they're not that different from us', but I think there's been a softening almost, I don't know.

## **2.3 Six weeks later**

### **2.3.1 Expectations**

We all came away from [the weekend] with expectations, with hopes, anticipations and I'm very aware of how long has gone past since that weekend.

You know when we got back in the groups [at Skuiling] and gave feedback on our dreams, there was such a high, or I found there was such a high and it was so exciting to hear from everybody what their dream was and what their vision was and in our small group we had raised the very thing of: what's going to happen? Is it going to be left here or are we going to take it with us and I think we were all so... like excited about what we had all dreamt and hoped for and I really thought that it would be acted on as soon as we got back. And I thought everybody felt the same.

You know, there was a common thread in everybody's dreams, this thread of freedom, belonging and love, it seemed to sort of come out in a lot of people's dreams and I went away thinking or feeling that there was gonna be action on this... and I think from where I'm at now, I'm back where I was before the weekend. I don't feel that belonging that I want to feel, you know and it sort of feels like... back to pretend. You know it just feels... almost like it was a waste of time and not from the point of view that we expressed what we did but sort of... we were invited to come and share and to be part of it and it stopped... on Sunday night when we left it was like, 'Thanks very much, it was lovely to have you part of us for the weekend, but that's over now' and... that's hard.

It's not like I want to go to deacons' meeting or anything... I mean I even joked with Doug, that first week we were back they were having a deacons' meeting and I said to Doug, 'What time must I be at the deacons' meeting?' and he was like [demonstrated facial expression of shock]... he looked at me and he went, 'Haaaah' [panicky laugh] [laughter from women] and I was just you know, sort of giving him a dig, you know what I mean?

Well we spoke that perhaps every second or third or whatever deacons meeting the ladies would be invited... we've had two deacons meetings, I think, since then and there's been sort of nothing... we spoke about getting together for Valentine's Day, we didn't, we spoke about ... you know there were a lot of little like, I don't know, not promises but...

But all of these things need a champion, and our lives are busy and everything... but I kind of feel that we've gone back to where we were.

But you know, it's like a little bit frustrating and disappointing, but then I can also perhaps understand why the men withdrew... and I think again that it's maybe that the men haven't thought about it and, I don't know, maybe I'm looking for excuses for them.

On the [Skuling retreat] what happened was that things were done differently and somehow coming back we got into doing things the same way as before... we didn't make time and space for the change.

Since we've been back, I mean, nothing has happened, so... it was almost a waste of time.

I said to [my husband] nothing's been done about it again... and it should have been done earlier and there should have been a report-back to the church before now.

It's been an interesting thing for me... I remember feeling a real sense of hope on the weekend and I think somehow just the connection with people brought that hope about. You know, the connection with the other women and just listening to people having a part to play and something to say and just watching how each person was given welcome and so on... I guess one of my hopes is that that would be kept alive... and there have been little glimpses of it, because I have bumped into people at a church service and, you know, that warmth that we were talking about has been there and I think also a sense of just a relaxedness and more of an openness and having listened to some people share dreams kind of gave me an insight into another part of that person on the weekend, so people who I may only have known as kind of a Sunday face, it kind of gave me a sense of who they were and what some of their real longings were and so some of that has been part of the little glimpses on some days, but I do think that for me there has also been a kind of a dissipation of it... and that hasn't been good and I kind of was left wondering, 'What would a woman's way of doing it be? How could we have taken it further? How could we still take it forward? Is it still possible? I wonder what it would take to keep that alive. Would it take a new way of being together?'

I had some questions about it, because obviously the way that we moved from the weekend back into kind of regular church and that sort of thing... the hope didn't come with it. Maybe my hope was that it would just tag along... and it doesn't seem to have... and I kind of wonder why, because the Sue and the me of the weekend is still the Sue and the me that meet here, but somehow, umm, the rest of what happened there doesn't seem to have come with.

[At Skuling we didn't] put some concrete details on what our expectations are as a team ... you know, we didn't even get to... 'So, how are we going to operate together?' There was just a suggestion thrown in that maybe every now and again we would meet together, so even that wasn't a solid, fixed thing and I think we all have ideas about... I mean, I don't want to go to a deacons meeting/

No thank you/

You know with [my husband] there I can't be there... so but for me there's a sense again that ... we were a gift to each other on the weekend and I think that a door of opportunity was opened that many people could see the benefit of and to close that would be really quite sad,

and destructive, I think. So, to even talk about how that would work itself out and the practicalities of that seems a bit... I think these things still need to be spoken about.

We also need to establish expectations because we all have expectations of them and they surely must have expectations of us... but we don't know. I mean, we are raising expectations now, but they don't know about them... What do they expect of us as a group of women? ... What do they expect? ... What do they see as our roles and duties?

What do we expect from them? What are we going to tell them? [laughter, all talking together – almost fear and backing off at this point] But maybe it *would* be a good thing because then they would know what we were feeling.

### **2.3.2 Feelings**

I think for me the wonderful part, the amazing part and the very good part of the weekend was the sense of invitation where it was really easy to just be... and it hasn't continued... it just hasn't... it's kind of... that was for the weekend and go back to the secret society... something about it being over time and the vision has gotten smaller and I've got to kind of look for it, you know where's the vision, where's the dream, where's the togetherness, where's the freedom, I'm looking for it and I'm not finding it.

It felt like we lost intimacy...intimacy was really just knocking at the door and we had opened the door and suddenly we shut intimacy out, or left intimacy at the campsite, umm, I don't know... we're back to pretend... we found reality and we found intimacy and wonderful stuff and it seems like pretend is now coming back... it's a more comfortable place to be.

I think for me about Saturday [first team meeting/workshop after Skuiling], I'm apprehensive about Saturday. I feel about Saturday like I did before I went on the weekend... I didn't want to go on that weekend, I just didn't feel comfortable and that's how I'm feeling about Saturday... because I feel we've just gone back to where we were before that. I feel like we're going to need a whole day to break that ice again, and to get back to that whole trusting situation. That's how I feel... it may be totally different, but that's how I feel.

I think we need to include [in what we tell the men on Saturday] the fact that we are feeling disappointed and that we are feeling despondent... that nothing has come of the weekend, well not nothing because there have been some things, but that not enough has come of the weekend... so that they know that it is frustrating and it is disappointing and that we expected more... it's almost like we've been shut out you know... the door has closed for me... like it was before... it's almost like it was open on the weekend and somehow along the way it has gotten shut and it's been locked and that's it, you know.

And there may be a sense in which nobody has specifically closed the door intentionally but that a number of circumstances... the time lapse, the non-communication, all of that has actually communicated something different, like, 'It's closed'.

In the beginning I experienced support and participation... we need however to get to the real issues, that this [support and participation] has been withdrawn. I now feel hesitant to get involved.

You know this person [one of the women who had been at Skuiling] said to me... she asked me to pass on a message that we should talk about practical things, like the action things that we're going to do, so I think maybe she's also got a different perspective on our group and she's spoken to me before, she's said that she just feels like the vision is getting smaller and it's going away.

And what also happened two weeks ago, I was talking to [a woman in the church]... I was saying about the weekend and she said, 'You know, I believe it was quite emotional and I believe it was very exciting', but she said, 'In all the time I have been in this church it has happened so many times and nothing changes'. And I was like so sad when she said that, she said, 'So I will really...when I see a change then I will know that something has come out of it' And you know I really felt very sad...

It's almost like we were invited to be part of it but just for the weekend and now that the weekend's over and gone it's been forgotten about, it's just a little bit of old gobble-de-gook... we've come back and just picked up and it's usualness, tradition, humdrum and suddenly, whoops, the weekend's flown away, gone back to the camp and we're just sitting with 'Oh ho-hum, we'll just carry on with the normal, things like that what we've gotta do'...but if we let it get that it will be depressing, we've got to do something about it and not just step back and say 'Oh well...

I guess I'm just wondering... if the men's way of doing it and being since the camp has taken us back to where we were before, has taken us back to pretend and left the intimacy behind... what would a women's way of doing it be? How could we have taken it further? How could we still take it forward? Is it still possible?

I'm the one who's saying that nothing has been done... but I've also allowed that to happen... really. I was also there over the weekend... we could have done something to not have it go back to what it was and we haven't.

## **2.4 Discussion regarding the proposed agenda for the team meeting after the Skuiling Retreat**

[The agenda] starts with devotions... then we do review the [Skuiling retreat] and then [reads] 'Andre and I [Doug] will highlight some of the themes coming out of the home cell workshop. I will do a brief presentation on the emphases of the NCD. I will do a brief presentation/review of our current vision, mission and core values... I would suggest that the bulk of our time be spent on how we integrate these four dimensions in terms of their themes, emphases with a view to establishing a broad strategy in terms of meeting our mission and vision'.

It doesn't say anything about what's happened!

I will tell you that it is offered as a suggestion but it looks pretty black and white to me.

Well when we get there we'll tell them, 'we don't like that agenda, scrap it'.

I just want to say that I haven't seen it.

I went to get it from the office myself, my very own self.

All I know about the weekend is that it starts at 9 o'clock and it is a feedback from the weekend.

[Saturday] is supposed to be about the weekend, not other things.

But are they not breaking after a certain time for the guys to go back on their own?

I don't think so.

Please will you tell me what time it is – I don't even know when it is.

I went to get this from the office and it says... nine sharp

You're going to be late... you said ten.

And when I saw this I thought... I was going to cancel my meeting for Saturday but hmmm... I'll just carry on with my thing and come a little bit later because it won't really matter... sorry... but that's being totally honest with you... That meeting that I planned two months ago is important... it would be letting down a whole group of about nine people, which wouldn't have been impossible but...

I have a real expectation that our time together as women and men will be about putting feet to some of the dreams... that's my real expectation and that's what I believe it will be.

Well that's why I planned to come on Saturday, until I read this and thought, 'hmmm'.

The wrong things are on the agenda.

[Spoken very strongly] It seems really important. It almost seems that if we are not able to put some feet to the dreams, the weekend will have been a waste of time... not that to get down and do things is most important, but that's where we were going for me, I sensed on the weekend, that was the next step from where we ... and it looks like we'll be [betraying?] the next step for me

I think the men should know how we feel about it, what's on that [the agenda].

We have freedom to tell them...

Yeah, but before we get here, before we get to Saturday.

But we've only got tomorrow.

Well, I can go home and get hold of [my husband] and say, 'Listen here'...

That may not be how we all do it!

That's not how I would do it.

They're not listening to us!

There's almost no point for me to Saturday unless we are able to do that.

They should know where we are.

I didn't know about Saturday. I only heard about it today.

That's also the problem. We didn't know about it earlier. If we had known last week, I could have made a plan, but to be told this week... five days before something, you can't do that to people... because they are as busy as I am and they fill their diaries... I just can't do that.

Ja, and we can't go on to the braai on Saturday. I said to [my husband] I'm sorry but we have made other arrangements.

I didn't know there was a braai on Saturday.

Yes, there is supposed to be afterwards.

I didn't know!

Their communication!

That is why I think it is no good coming to the meeting on Saturday and then saying this, I think they've got to know what we feel now, so that they can do something about it.

So what is a good way of communicating what we are feeling?

Send an email tomorrow [laughter].

It almost feels like we need to say, 'Saturday doesn't suit us because we haven't had a part in it...we haven't had a part in it again...and we need to make it for a day that we have been part of it'.

I think we need to be careful because there are some things that have been cancelled for this Saturday... I know from some people that they have cancelled things... so if we just say, 'no' then they need to know early so they can redo whatever they were going to do.

There's not much communication.

You see it kind of says, they are important and we are not, we're little, that's what they're saying.

It was not given to the women to decide on, it was decided for the women.

I just have a sense that it's important for the women to send a message of some sort to the men to prevent some kind of... back off?

What were your expectations of the weekend (directed at Kim)? I mean, what are you coming to facilitate on Saturday?

Um, my... if I'm really honest, my expectation over the weekend was certainly that there would be a lot more working together... and in my mind that was almost what everybody had agreed on, that was my understanding of it, that there was this anticipation of the Valentine's event together and that there would be meetings together and also my expectation was that our follow-up would happen soon, so those were my expectations and it was because of this that so much time has passed and maybe my own sense of frustration with that, if I'm really honest, just frustration at the, what did you say, the dissipating, that was my own experience of it and maybe I expected or anticipated that might be other peoples' experience and so I asked if we could have this meeting with the women because it was my suspicion that there were these kinds of feelings.

I suddenly had a feeling while you were speaking... I thought... we've actually separated ourselves to discuss... the men should be listening.

The men should actually be hearing this... that's the problem. So how are they going to hear it? This is the next thing... how are they going to hear this?

Maybe my concern and why I called the meeting is that [the weekend] was a first in terms of the women being invited to participate and I think that I was concerned that if we just went back to Saturday with not having, maybe strengthened one another, strengthened our voices...

Supported, it feels amazing, it feels like, 'I've got the girls around me'.

We're strong at the moment [laughter].

I don't want to... I really don't want to establish a 'them' and 'us' thing and... but it was just a sense of there being almost a fledgeling participation that I wanted to nurture a bit and say 'Hey, is this okay for you? Is it okay what's been happening? Is it not okay? What's your experience of it? And how do we go into Saturday...

## **2.5 Using a hiking metaphor to describe the women's experience of the six weeks following the Skuiling Retreat**

On our weekend away I experienced a new path. I would like everyone in the church to join us on this path. I felt I was invited to participate on the path. It was a new path for me.

Before the weekend away I felt some people were on a path but that I was on a different path. On the weekend, we got to a hut. I met people at the hut and we shared a wonderful experience and wonderful ideas. The others invited me to join them on their path and I accepted, but since then I have been left behind. The 'main' group has gone on. On the weekend there was a sense of invitation somehow I feel I have been left behind.

I would like to move into new territories. It is easy to follow the comfortable path. It is scary going into new territories, but I want to do that. I want to be with people who want to be doing things better.

It is so easy to go back to the original path. We went on the weekend by invitation but we have just slipped back into the old way of doing things since then. Since then we have all stayed still and nothing has really changed.

What might conspire to keep us walking the same well-worn path; those things that might contribute to us avoiding/forgetting about the territories that we have glimpsed beyond our usual way of doing thing?

Poor communication

Busyness

I have a sense that it's not always the path and goal that's the most important but how a group of people travel together. Perhaps we aren't on a different path, perhaps the same path is just being trod in a different way.

### **3. INVITATION AND PARTICIPATION**

#### **3.1 Hopes for the Skuling Retreat which focussed on invitation and participation**

- ♦ That we will include the voice of women and invite the voice of children
- ♦ That there will be a real sense of participation that will be carried through to others in the Church
- ♦ That everyone's contribution will be taken seriously and will be seen as something that really counts
- ♦ That we will [all] become a real team

#### **3.2 Invitation/Participation-focussed dreams at the Skuling retreat**

My dream is that whatever happens in the church, everyone in the church would be thinking: What can I do towards that? My image is one of working together – hands and arms clasped together.

In my dream I encountered a struggle. I saw a boulder with the word criticism on it. Criticism seemed to close the door on my ability to dream.

I was left with one word that I translated into a symbol [*Line of paper cut-out figures, hand in hand*]. The word is participation. On the paper cut-out, some people are happy, some are angry, people are different but they are all participating. Part of my dream already exists – it has happened here over this weekend. As we have all participated here, so we must include others. This group must go forward and have an impact in the church.

I deliberately have left the line of people open and that is significant. I considered getting some sticky tape and closing the circle, but I decided that it has to stay open so that others can come in. Openness is important. It is also significant that the figures are not specifically men or women – all are participating together. There is no big person and no little person, no young and old, no important person or unimportant person. All have equal importance and all participate.

I wish I could tell this as I experienced it. It was a vision or visualisation. I am feeling reluctant to tell my story for fear of embarrassment or of being misunderstood, but I will.

Words that kept coming up were 'dynamic', 'moving', 'change'.

I wanted to see colour but there was a dove-like grey, a hazy 'atmosphere' rather than a colour. It represented contentment and comfortableness, like when something is *fitting* well.

It *started* with 'us' [the team] in a 'togetherness line' and there was a sense of gentleness and connectedness. But 'we' changed to a *movement*, into what was people but *not individuals*, a *dynamic of people*.

Then I saw what was a [church] building, but not a building. I was aware of freedom, of *companionable* comings and goings: movement and change and ease and it's okay to be

moving in and out. It was not about individuals. And there was a sense of surprise – there were no taller or smaller individuals, rather there was a sense of unity.

Then a *shape happened*. The picture became a star, like a star fish, gentle but shaped. The starfish changed into an arrow and then, at last, a colour, a yellow light which was warm and comforting, but the light was not there for long.

There were *hindrances* that were like a wall. These included: My sister's problems, myself and my stuff, outside sounds and unsympathetic voices (here she goes!).

I was comforted *somewhere* by the reminder that when Jesus *healed* (that seemed important) the blind man, he asked the man what he saw. At first he only saw a vagueness and so what seemed vague to me was okay.

I was left with a feeling of amazement, at the enjoyment of my experience, at the possibility of the experience and a sense of 'sacredness', of a 'treasure'.

### **3.3 What women wanted to take home with them after the Skuling retreat**

A group of people speaking together has unbelievable power.

We are all the same – no big people and no little people. We were all given the opportunity, all given space.

A sense of invitation.

I want to take home with me the sense of surprise at the power of participation.

I think one of the things that surprised me was the acceptance of everybody and the men didn't make you feel that you weren't included, they made you feel that were really part of this whole thing and a lot of them said that they really thought it was beneficial and worthwhile having the ladies there. You know, that's the first time that's ever happened. The ladies have never really been included in something like that before that I can think of.

[The women] just brought another perspective.

It was good to be included.

### **3.4 How did it come about that the women were invited to participate?**

Well, we went along last year but we didn't go into the meetings...and I think it didn't quite work out the way we did it last year....

For me there's been a growing sense that women have so much to offer, kind of a question that almost grew louder for me in my head: But why aren't we participating *sometimes*? Um and I guess I didn't really have an answer for that and so it just seemed to be the natural step to do something as a joint group.

I think that sometimes the men come home and say we're going to have this at the church and then the wives maybe give an opinion and they turn around and say, 'Oh, we didn't think about that', and I think that's perhaps how it came that we were asked to come.

### **3.5 Exclusion and secrecy before the Skuling retreat**

What has your experience been in the past of not being included? Has it been something that's bothered you or not bothered you? Have you thought about it or not thought about it? It seems like quite a historic moment this coming together of men and women and I just wonder what women's experience of the church has been... of not having had a voice before.

I don't think it's even been thought about before so we wouldn't have had an opinion about being included before, because we weren't included in the deacons things and so... It was just a matter of that was that.

There was no invitation and so we just backed off.

You know, even when [my husband] comes home from the meetings and you ask, 'How was it?', it's just, 'Fine' and that's it... I don't even ask anymore how it was, not because I'm expecting him to tell me what's happened, but to just try and be supportive somehow, in some way... but it's like this whole closed door... like a Secret Society.

Sometimes at the deacons meetings there are touchy subjects that we shouldn't hear and they can't come home and tell us that, but I mean... the rest of the church functions... things that aren't secret.

You know before, the minutes would be handed out secretly [demonstrated] it would be like, 'Here are your minutes, don't let anyone see', you know that sort of thing... then it was sent out on email, so now if they are left lying around...

We can read it anyway... I would... I would read it.

I never ever looked...

How did you experience that?

I don't know... well... It's something that's just always been: a deacons' meeting was for deacons so you never expected to give any input or give an opinion but then when they came back and said, 'Oh well we may have a big braai... or do something' then we might say, 'Well why didn't you do this?' and they would say, 'Oh well, we didn't think of that'.

But [my husband] wouldn't even say that... but never, never... he wouldn't say a word.

I think they're so used to having a deacons meeting and it's been for deacons, they have never asked for the women's input.

Once, one or two years ago, I asked why there are no women deacons/

There can be and there have been women nominated but they haven't gotten the vote/

Well, that's what I was told, but then I thought about it and I thought, imagine being a lady being voted onto the deaconate! I wouldn't actually, if that was to happen to me I would have to say, 'No, thank you' because I would feel too intimidated to go into that situation. Maybe things would be different now, I don't know... but when I asked that question and thought about it that's how I felt.

But I think it needs a certain type of person and sometimes that type of person hasn't been nominated and I think that sometimes the wrong person has been nominated and that's why they didn't get the votes.

### **3.6 How does one sustain participation?**

For me, one of the key words that I carried with me from the Skuiling weekend was participation and I think it was [one of the women's illustration of this] people all holding hands, umm, but just the whole idea of the invitation to participate and that invitation being extended as widely as possible, umm, and I think my curiosity has been through this whole process: What will it take to hold onto participation as we move forward?... But I just wondered if anyone else had anything else to say about participation and how does one sustain participation in that way? And is it happening as fully as it could be happening, or... I don't know, those are the kinds of questions that are around in my mind.

I **really, really, really** do believe in the fact that each human being should be given the space, a space, in any context, a space to participate and contribute, I really, really believe in that.

### **3.7 Invitation**

The word that keeps knocking at my mind, and knocking, is invitation...I don't know but there's something about the word 'invitation'...it's very important to me.

[We need to] change the kinds of words that we use, use more invitational language rather than the 'shoulds' and 'musts' and 'have tos'.

But there hasn't been the invitation to participate again...there hasn't been the space and the time.

### **3.8 Extending the invitation to participate to the rest of the church**

#### ***3.8.1 Before the church was invited to participate in the Skuiling Process***

Well if you consult the people then they almost feel they're part of the church anyway whereas if you don't and it's all [decided] in the deaconate then all of a sudden they say 'Well where do we stand in the church?' and it is like [one of the men] says, 'You've almost got to get away from functioning as in a business you know, you can't bring a business kind of structure into a church environment'.

I have a sense that the Church is feeling the same as the women speaking here. They all want to be involved.

Perhaps we need to remember that the women are not just speaking here on behalf of the women in the church. They are speaking on behalf of all in the church who have not really had a voice, who have not been invited to participate.

*At the second leadership team meeting (April 2004) one of the men spoke about getting the church to 'buy into' the objectives that the leadership team had developed as a result of the Skuiling Process. This was one woman's response:*

I don't think that the church should be asked to 'buy into' these objectives. The crucial element for me was that we all participated in developing the objectives. Rather than asking the church to 'buy into' the statements that the leadership team has developed, they should be taken through the process themselves, and be invited to develop their own objectives.

Perhaps a point of departure in taking this journey/process/experience to the church is to acknowledge that we are all wounded within ourselves, and to say that although the church seems to be going well, there is an unseen part that is not going well. We want that part to be less than wounded. We need to acknowledge that we have all put our best foot forward, and it has not been enough.

For me, there was a sense, and I don't think it's just my sense, it's something that came from the whole weekend, there was the sense in which what happened on the weekend was a great gift to each one of us and as a group. Somehow...by participating we gave each other a huge gift of just being part of something that turned out to be quite glorious, and there would be a sense in which, if that could be an ongoing thing it could almost be a gift that could be given to the church, somehow, so that it would be something that would be passed on. I think that what would be passed on perhaps would be that sense of invitation to participate with people, and for people to belong... and maybe that's part of my expectation but there is a sense in which, if we can't pass what we experienced on to the church then somehow it would be a huge waste... you know it was almost a gift that was given to us for a reason and that by somehow by allowing it to go back to pretend would be a great sadness and a great loss...

I feel so strongly about it... I remember coming home and in that week I was thinking about it and thinking, 'if only *that* woman could have been there' or, 'if only *that* woman could have been there and felt what it felt like'... I kept bumping into people and kind of needing to hold myself back... but that's what I was longing for and I guess the longing is still there and it kind of grows now as we talk about it... just a longing that people kind of have a sense of the gloriousness of that participating and belonging, and being invited to do that... so I guess if I had something to say to the men, that would be it, 'How can this participation somehow be given to the people in the church?'

What we need to pass on to them is the invitation... we need to pass on this stuff to them [the dreams] and this stuff to them [what we are talking about now]. It's about, 'Come and sit here next to me, and I'll listen to you. You're the only the one' and then make a time for it... so we can't give them all the experience... but we can give them an invitation... we can give them time, we can make place.

People need to experience an attitude change and a mind change before they can change their behaviour. So people must go through the process themselves.

I hope that what is taken to the groups will be more simplistic than it has been with us. We have been in the sky half the time. Half of what we have worked through has not been clear.

### **3.8.2 *Just prior to the AGM***

What I am hearing is that, through this process, a lot of people have participated in visioning and dreaming for the church that would not have otherwise done that, that it has usually been a small group that has done that. You've opened up the process of participation, where a lot of people have got involved, and my sense from reading the document and from talking to people is that there is excitement about that, that people are enthusiastic about having participated and possibly the response to the camp is part of that excitement.

Would it be possible to continue the process of participation and to take the document back to the church and to say, 'these are the issues that you have identified through this process. Can we get everyone together into small groups and then brainstorm how we are going to do it. And rather than the leadership coming back to the church and saying, 'Okay, you've identified this and now this is how you are going to do it, saying, 'this is what you have identified, how are we going to do it?' And if somebody, say their dream was about relationships, they meet in that small group and maybe it needs to be a day, maybe it needs to be a morning and to invite people to participate in the process of the implementation.

I think there is a fundamental, foundational difference between coming in with a prescribed plan, and creating space, inviting people to bring what it is that they have, and going with it themselves. The one implies that people don't have anything to offer, and the other one says, 'It's all about you. It's about *you* and what *you* have to bring to this', and I think that you need to be careful of what it communicates to people. For someone who facilitates a group, in your back pocket you can have information on having studied the NCD and you can offer suggestions but I think if you come in there with a prescribed plan, once again you are saying, the leadership knows what is going on here, you don't have anything to offer, and you have no value. And I think that is very disempowering.

### **3.8.3 *Discussion concerning who should be invited to meeting to discuss action plans, after AGM***

I wonder about the merits of just for us to decide who should actually be invited. I wonder if invitations shouldn't go out to *everyone* who was part of it... even those that have left, so that they know that they are still part of the process and it would be their prerogative to say whatever they need to, but I think for us to exclude some just because we think they 'fell off the bus' or whatever, would be the wrong thing to do.

I think then that excluding or determining who is part of this group actually works against that participation, you know what I mean, if some people are saying, well we're not on the leadership so we are no longer part of that then there would be a sense of, 'well then, it's their dream, let them carry on with it', whereas it's actually everybody's dream...

### **3.8.4 *Discussion about inviting people to 'champion' certain ministries within the church***

How are you going to know who those champions are? How are you going to draw them in? Is it going to be people who are already active and involved or are you going to draw them in from those who might not be?

I'm curious. If champions are, say, going to be selected or whatever, is that going to be a deaconate appointed thing, or are we going to... is there another way of doing it? For instance saying, 'We're looking out for someone with these kinds of skills to champion 'Relationships'. This is what we're looking for', and kind of opening it up to people.

[Being a 'champion' of a particular area of ministry in the church] needs to relate to the person's own passion, You know, to have somebody who is doing it just because they were assigned it by the leadership, then you are going to get back into that grind of it. But finding a person who just naturally is pulled in that direction, makes a lot of sense.

One thing, in terms of maybe holding the group accountable to the Skuiling process is the whole emphasis on invitation rather than imposition. And I'm aware that [one man who's name had been accepted by the meeting to head up a certain area] isn't here but [a woman who had been nominated to head up another area] is. Perhaps the invitation could be extended to her...rather than assuming...

It concerns me that we're a group who are deciding who's going to be involved. What about those people who have just not communicated to us that that's their real hearts desire? How are they going to be included into this process?

*[One man suggested putting lists up on noticeboard where people could 'sign up' for different areas of ministry that they felt drawn to. A woman responded:]*

That for me is more about the Skuiling ethos than us prescribing.

### **3.9 Positive changes in the church after cell groups were invited to participate in the Skuiling process**

Just as somebody off the deaconate, this Skuiling experience is the first time that we have ever all been included, we have all had the chance to have our say, we all know what is going on, whereas NCD [*Natural Church Development, an American church growth programme adopted by the deaconate the previous year*], I didn't know what NCD was until just a little while ago... I know it's a dairy [laughter] but... we're all included now, and folk have come to me and said, 'Gee, I want to make sure I'm at the AGM'. Not because they are interested in the AGM. They are interested in this feedback report on Skuiling because they have all been included. So however it goes from here, I think that things will happen because everyone is involved.

When you think about what our dreams from Skuiling were, and you look at the church now, it's interesting to notice that a lot of things *have* changed. I wonder... if there would be value in us... spending a little bit of time saying from our point of view, 'What is it that has changed?' or, 'What are we seeing that has changed?' And, in fact, how, if at all, does it relate to Skuiling? It's just, it seems to me, something that could be quite a powerful exercise...

I don't know about you but I still have [one man's] words ringing in my ears from that meeting where he was very frustrated about the fact that things weren't getting to some kind of very concrete agenda, so, in my mind, I'm kind of holding that concrete agenda which kind of says that nothing has happened. I wonder if we could kind of hold that and hold the discussion about things that *have* happened, and maybe just have a look at these two. I mean,

I don't know if that's just for me that those words still ring in my ears, but I'm almost curious to find out how much *has* actually changed that we haven't really um, kind of put into a plan but that has somehow happened. For me that... might be valuable.

I think that it is important to acknowledge that already within this [leadership] group there is a sense of togetherness, of community that there has never been before. So by going through the process, we are already beginning to meet our objectives, to realise the dreams. We are not just hedging – the things we are looking for and dreaming of, have already started.

I wonder how much of [what has changed] has been influenced by ... the dreams that we dreamt and in our minds, the influence of that dream on our minds? You know what I'm saying, it's just a fascinating thing for me that if you choose to look in a particular place and you've got a dream in the back of your mind... that your eyes are able to see something different, it's just... a question that I have...

Can I ask... as an outsider...and I haven't really been part of what's been happening at the church, I haven't seen any of it, would it be okay to take a couple of minutes to tell some stories about specific incidents, you know I'm hearing that people are more tolerant and less critical and there's more openness and relationships are improving are there any specific stories about, 'this has happened', and you don't have to mention names, but, 'this happened to a person' or, 'this happened', that sort of explain or describe to me what's actually happening in the church?

*One of the men related an incident where two members of worship team had a disagreement. In the past this would have become a huge incident and the pastoral couple would have had to sort it out. It looked like it was going that way but then one person initiated reconciliation 'off his own bat' and the issue was resolved without any intervention:*

And both members played in the band that evening and the worship was just something to behold, it was just the most amazing thing

To mention this concert we had a while ago, [a man in his early eighties] off his own bat recruited a number of people who can sing and who can participate musically and he approached them as well as a group of children that he personally coached...and put together a concert which had an amazing intergenerational mix of people so when you sat there at the concert there was just this huge sense of family. It wasn't music for the old, it wasn't music for the young, everyone just joined together and enjoyed music and that was very satisfying for me to be part of because it showed me that our church can be together, all ages with perhaps music that is not particularly what we would have chosen necessarily and yet there was an appreciation of it by a lot of people. So it really showed me how we can be family.

I think [at the concert] [one woman's] dream of the people at a picnic, just fine with their shoes off and laughing and enjoying each other... that dream was well and truly alive... It was just a yearning to not be stiff and formal, but to be willing to dress funny and sing funny songs so that people can have a laugh. For me, then the guards are down and we are saying it's okay to be just who we are with each other.

I would just like to echo what has already been said. The services and the worship have definitely been... there's just been something wonderful and [my husband] and I have been

speaking about it at home, and every week we sort of say, 'Wow, what's going to happen again in the morning service?'

I think in some ways there have been some changes in our church... I think that in some ways there is a greater openness towards women in leadership roles and I wouldn't like to see that lost.

I almost wonder, if the church was called together for a meeting like this, and they were also asked to share stories about how real the Spirit has been in their lives, what kind of stories they would come up with...we can't speak on behalf of other people but you would almost wonder...

I just wonder at the impact of... hearing the stories that Kim asked to hear about how things have changed in our church. Kim just said, 'Fill me in on things that have been happening in church'. And for me, who is an 'insider' of church, I just found that having to hear those stories really encouraged and uplifted me. And it was almost an incidental thing that happened. And I couldn't help noting what an influence a little thing like that had. Just ten minutes of sharing, kind of 'How are you experiencing this currently?'

I'm just wondering whether part of that document to the church [*which was to outline the plan of action that the leadership team had come up with to address the six key areas that had come out of the Skuiling feedback from the church*] can't be acknowledging what has been achieved, you know, in that document to say, this process has been undertaken, and highlighting areas that we want to take further steps in, but also that it has opened up a whole lot of stuff in the church that is incredibly valuable and even some of the things that we recognise are already part of [the church]...could that be part of the document as well as, 'this is what we are going to do'. And [the Skuiling process] has given us a way of doing it that is uniquely [our church] and we'd like to continue that way of doing things as we do new things.

#### **4. THE ESSENCE OF THE SKUILING PROCESS: A DIFFERENT WAY OF BEING TOGETHER**

From my perspective, what happened on the weekend [the Skuiling Retreat] was not rocket science. There was honest sharing and real listening and that was the essence of what happened on the weekend, that there was space created, a safe space created, for people to share, when others were listening and you know that... I think if we're looking for something fancy to take back to the church, we're missing the point... it's almost that we need to create opportunities where people feel safe to share and others really listen... that's the sense of connection, of being real, of not pretending, of trust.

The process is crucial. I reject the statement that that the entire Church must 'buy into' it. I have had a say in it, I have participated in the process and that is why I am enthusiastic.

The process is critical. I think... the one thing that really strikes me is that the church has engaged in the process now for ten months [and is it] possible to look at that and say, 'What about the process has been critical?', and we need to take further whatever it has been.

We must not 'tell' people. The traditional stuff stops the process.

The weekend at Skuiling allowed us to deviate from the norm. It was a new experience. It was more inviting, and we experienced more freedom to speak and participate than we ever had before. We gave one another the space to share our stories, and we really listened with respect. That was the essence of it.

If we got quite specific about the influence of the Skuiling process, I don't think you could measure it, but I think it would inform the process further so that the champion of the [relationships] task team, we could say to the champion of the task team: this is what we discovered in the process: that when you dream about something, you participate together, look what happens, so it wasn't just lovely to participate, but ...If we as a group were able to say, maybe attribute the openness, the enthusiasm, the willingness to participate, if we could together come up with that and not ...I would like for us to formalise....[interruption] we've discovered that maybe people are more willing to participate...so in our recommendations to the people I would like to say that umm, ....I would like to have that concretised [*Gist: We need to formalise and put down what we have learnt from the Skuiling process and to pass that on to people who will be championing the different key points so that what we have learnt is taken forward with us*]

#### **4.1 Inviting Creativity into the Conversation**

I'm thinking about the Wednesday evening meeting and I'm coming with the tool of creativity. Perhaps in a different mindset we need to use different tools. With the tool of creativity I can think about the possibility of going through our dreams and each week taking one aspect to 'brainstorm pray' through. We will be doing the same thing [praying] for the same amount of time but with a different tool. There would be an invitation to come and a freedom about coming or not coming. And a realness could start happening that could just overflow into other areas.

It may be a radical suggestion, but would it be possible to have one deacon's meeting every month... set aside for prayer?

The idea of doing communion differently really excites me. Could we one day say that today communion is about us all – and invite participation.

*One of the pastor's wives shared her and her husband's experience of bible study the previous week, when they were exhausted and had the choice to go ahead with 'bible study' as planned or to be real about where they were and how they were feeling. They chose to be real and it was like a 'switching of gears' – it opened up space for others to share and be honest – a rich experience of community.*

If we acknowledge when we meet that everyone brings something of God, experiences that have happened in the last week, then the time together becomes God-centred. The space needs to be made for participation and if it overtakes the time together, so be it. But it takes risk and vulnerability to open up such a space.

## 4.2 The role that facilitation played in the Skuiling Process

[At Skuiling] we had the safety of facilitators to facilitate the process. That was very important for me. I felt safe.

It feels like we left Skuiling at Skuiling, to me. And I think that a lot of that was about the protection that the facilitation gave to me and then the freedom to speak within the protection.

Some thing that comes out for me... at Skuiling you had to be quiet and you had to listen to what other people were saying... you weren't allowed to interrupt, and so everyone could say what they wanted to say, and finish what they wanted to say without... but in the other meetings people would just... we did try to carry on with that theme but people are so involved in thinking what they're thinking, they can't wait to jump in and I think that's why sometimes something is brought up and then it's lost because the next person is so keen to say what they want to say and so things aren't followed through because everyone is coming in with their ideas. Whereas at Skuiling that didn't happen because it was run differently and you weren't allowed to jump in... and that was why I think so many things came out and were taken note of.

What's the name of that? I don't know... I suppose listening... No, I'm not saying people don't listen, but what I am saying is that people are wanting to say their say, and that's why things are lost because we are so quickly jumping on to the next thing and I think there needs to be more of, 'Okay... let's just stop now and let's just discuss what [this person] said before we move on to [the next person]', and then we wouldn't lose things so easily.

It's about respecting.

I just found in the meetings we had after the weekend that often, you would start to say something and somebody would say, 'Yes, but if you did so and so... and if we went so and so', and then it's almost like [made a sucking in sound and motion, demonstrating withdrawal], 'Okay, I won't say anymore' and then there was... I just noticed that and I thought, 'Ooh gosh'. Whereas at Skuiling we were... if you wanted to spend twenty minutes on what you wanted to say then that was fine, and nobody else could interrupt. But I think it's that some personalities are a lot stronger than others, and they feel that maybe you're just wasting the time or it's not that important.

Is there any way of putting something in place so that respect and listening and space for people to talk, can be a part of other meetings. How does one do that?

I think you will always just have dominant people... and those that think faster and move faster and have it all set in their minds before you have even gone there.

I think that the mediator has a vitally important role to play because they are drawing out certain people and not allowing other people to dominate, and I think that's a key role for someone to play if we do want to integrate women...

I know that I can't do it on my own... And I don't think it can be done on ones' own, it needs to be... like what happened on the [Skuiling retreat]. We all agreed to something, and in agreeing to it we found something that we didn't know we could actually experience. So you

can't do it on one person's terms, it has to be an agreed process, and we seem to be held together by those principles, and I think that was the magic of it, because we were held accountable to those ways of being together, and I think that that is maybe what has slipped by. We didn't realise how important those ways of being were to us, and now they have slipped through our fingers and it has resulted in a different way of being. [silence] You [Kim] certainly helped in holding us accountable to those as a group, and with your not being at some of our meetings and being at others, has shown that with your presence comes a being held accountable to those principles and as soon as your facilitation is not there...

I was very aware that something was being lost as each meeting happened after Skuiling and for me, what was being lost was that equal contribution by everybody, so much so that I think... each meeting there was another woman that didn't come, and often I felt like I had to be here but sometimes I felt like, 'Well, I don't know if I've actually got the fight in me to say what I need to say', and ... so eventually it left me feeling like I was intruding on a deacons meeting, and that I actually shouldn't really have been there.

It felt like without [the facilitators from the Skuiling Retreat] who were kind of holding the flags of what we all had agreed on, that the group couldn't keep to those values somehow... so even though you [Kim] were here on some of them it was like well, somehow we have reached a silent consensus that even though Kim is here, the kind of flag is not loud enough or bright enough so... this thing can carry on like it usually does. There has to be an agreement that the way you are going to do something is what everyone is going to do... and it looks like as a group we need someone to hold us accountable to that, else it doesn't happen.

And that person has almost got to be given permission to hold [us] accountable... you talk about some of the meetings where I was there and didn't raise the red flag, or wasn't able to, and it's almost that I wasn't given permission to, you know, that wasn't my *role* at the meeting, so it always has to be somebody's role and everyone needs to acknowledge that.

I think every group, whoever we are, whether we're in cell groups or in leadership, it can be a valuable thing to have, to just be held accountable to things which you feel are important, and to have someone from the outside to tell you, how it's been perceived. I think otherwise you can move ahead and not even know that you are doing damage.

## **5. THE WITHDRAWAL OF THE INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE**

### **5.1 We went back to the way things were**

I think that as the process has unfolded, I think I have had a sense of holding the process with a sense of hope sometimes, and sometimes with a sense of despair, depending on how our various meetings went. You know, when I watched how we got back into some of the old patterns of being where one person dominated, and space wasn't given for other people to participate equally, you know, I watched some people retreat more and more, and just be more and more silent.

I would leave meetings like that despairing, because I knew that we had found something that we could all do, and somewhere along the line it was slipping through our fingers, but it didn't seem as if there was an awareness of what was happening... Coming away from some of those times I would have a sense of despair at what I was watching, but didn't really know how to save it or retrieve it somehow... and then, I think towards the end, watched that 'business as usual' kind of come back into the flavour of the meetings and... it kind of left me with a choice and I thought, 'Well, okay, I have a number of choices here. The one can be just to accept that we've gone back to business as usual, to look at the kind of place that leaves me, which would be really needing to really push my way through in order to contribute in a way that people...in the way that I felt that I had been able to before or, um I could just really walk away from the process realising and just really accepting the fact that "business as usual" is really the way that this group seems to prefer to work', and that if that was the case then that might be easier to live with.

It just feels like we found so much together on that weekend, and it feels like I'm fighting against the way that... what I'm fighting for is to keep it and what I'm fighting against are the forces that try to.... the forces that say things like, 'only one person's idea counts', maybe, 'you need to be a man to have your voice heard', 'you need to be maybe one of the 'boys' or maybe, 'you need to be one of the more powerful characters in this group'. So it feels like I'm fighting against some of that and it's because I saw something quite wonderful happen when we were all given an opportunity to participate freely.

But with that has come an enormous sadness, you know, that an opportunity has been given but somehow it requires an ongoing fighting for, and I don't know if I am always in a position to do the fighting on my own. And it has left me wondering really where some of the people who have been part of the process, and who now appear to be silent, where they are with that, you know... is that okay with them, is that... disappointing for them... So I'm left with a lot of questions really.

Maybe fear [of women's participation] could be encouraging the [men] to keep the status quo; keep things as they've been. You know, 'We've been on this little diversion but now we've got things back and... we'll tolerate this for this much but then...' or, 'We'll appease the process, but we'll take our own back again'. Somehow control came in and said, 'Whoops, we're going to change, we've walked that walk now, journeyed that little journey, off to the real thing – the tasks'.

I think they [the men] are afraid of this: that openness and honesty will get us to a *totally* different place, which would require different things of them... and so, 'We can't let the women's voices become too prominent in case it becomes part of the norm of (being)', I don't know, maybe? I do have a sense that they're quite okay in the glass box... safe... and that our knocking is not something that [bothers them].

And yet at Skulking there was a sense of dissatisfaction at the way things were... I just remember hearing so many of the men saying that involvement is just an obligation, and that the passion is gone and, 'We just go because we feel we should', and those were the kinds of things we were hearing...and yet the other way was just too...

There came a point where there was impatience with the process... we had to *do* things, we had to be seen as ticking things off and then the process started getting smaller and smaller and the normal 'task' became bigger and bigger and then the value of what we had done disappeared, the togetherness, the women and the men.

It was kind of becoming very management-like, you know, doing things so that you could tick it off on a list as opposed to... maybe, building and growing things in a different way.

Ja, and the way that deacons' meeting happens, the guys need to obviously have some way that it works for them, but somehow when we're together as a team, as the girls as well... there needs to be a different set of values somehow that make sure that everybody is included, because it looks as if what works for a deacon's meeting doesn't actually work for us as a team, there needs to be two sets of values and, I don't know, it doesn't seem that the one set works for the other group.

The men acknowledged that we are worth it, but then they've moved back into position and we've moved back into position. They've moved forward again and we've moved backward again, without valuing each other, that's just what happened. I don't know why we let that happen... that's why it seems to me that it just doesn't matter enough...

'Cos we've done it like that for such a long time.

So, we are saying then that this is possible to happen within our group... but we don't allow it to happen... we're not allowing it... we don't allow ourselves to be heard... That's what we don't allow and the men aren't used to listening to us... It feels like, they're not... and then we just give up... we do...

It seems so buttoned up now. Like those six points are in place and it's buttoned up. And I don't know if there's space for me, I don't know. It's, like, been decided.

We get tired ... we did get tired... there was sense of uselessness and, 'Agh, let's just go back to what we know... the line of least resistance, it seems we took the line of least resistance... and gave up on ourselves... because of the discouragement.

Even we women were saying the same, 'It's easier to be going back to the old way'. The struggle is too hard, or it's what we know how to do, or let's just go with the old system.

I think for the guys it's been a new way of thinking... for, how many years? Forever... it's just been like it is and it's a whole new way of thinking for them, so unless they, consciously like... not draw it out of you but, constantly make you feel accepted, we won't. We will just

think, 'Oh well, they're the MD so, step back, we're the workers and that's just... but you know if your boss, every week, every day says, 'How are you? How are your family doing? How's your husband doing? How's things with your wife?', you will be more encouraged to say, 'Gee this guy...they really are interested in what I'm saying'. So maybe the first time you might say, 'No, they're all fine', and the next time you might say, 'My child has a broken leg', and so in that way we're now... We're not prepared to force our way in and they are so comfortable with us not forcing our way in that it doesn't open up... they need to rethink and we need to say, 'How can we be more... visible, active?'

## **5.2 How we are together versus what we have to do/achieve together**

I'm just wondering... you know part of my frustration has been... the whole thing of the 'how' and the 'what'. It seems so clear to me in the sense of how the 'how' [we are together] creates a context in which people connect, in which it was possible for people to participate and to share and to be safe and... that the 'how' is almost about being church together, you know, that it's how we are together that is the body of Christ rather than what we're doing and... maybe just the absolute importance of the 'how' is very clear to me.

And that's what we have lost sight of, and it has gone back to *what* we should be doing. 'Cause that's what we had at Skuling, the joy of just being together, how we were together; the freedom to relate, differ and just all that stuff, but when we got back here – and that is why I say we left Skuling behind – we got caught up with what we were doing, so the process was tolerated at Skuling, but not back in [our city]. Because in [our city] you should be 'doing' stuff and that's why we had to come up with our six themes to 'do', relationships and youth and so on.

We can't do it and we haven't got it right because I don't think we have understood the value of those principles... People sabotage them and they work outside of the framework of that without realising what damage they are doing... That's the 'business as usual' and I don't think people realise what damage is done to the whole group when those principles [business as usual] are adopted, as opposed to the ones that held together and gave us the safety, the being able to speak without being interrupted and so on.

I don't know if the [team] understands that... No... I don't think they understood that it was the focus on the 'how' that gave us the beauty of the Skuling weekend and that by not attending to it and attending to the 'what', that's the loss... Ja, the whole process got lost on the journey from Skuling back here.

And that is the gift that I think, we as women, give to a group. We are more focussed on the 'how'. Somehow there is more of a freedom [within women] to revel in the 'how' and to reflect on it... and enjoy it! Because we all enjoyed it – the men and the women enjoyed it. It wasn't just about the women there. Maybe we gave each other permission to be less than ... busy, but just to kind of enjoy listening to each other.

It seems to me as if there is some voice that is very loud in the minds of the more outspoken in the [team], which is saying, 'You are letting everybody down unless you deal with the "what"'. It seems as if that voice, whether it comes from the business environment, whether it comes from, 'That's the only way that I can be valued as a man is if I attend to the "what"'; it

seems as if that voice somehow pervades the being back in [our city] and the 'how' we are doing church, and that... every now and then you get a sense of urgency that comes through some of the [team] members' voices which says: 'Come! We need to *do* this'

'We need to do this otherwise we are failing', and I feel sad about that voice, and the fact that it's not reflected on and we don't allow one another to even recognise that it's there... I would love to come to the group and say, 'Where does this voice come from? Is it true? What does it say to you? What are we losing by listening to that voice? Is there another voice we could be listening to? If we allowed ourselves to listen to another voice what would be? Would it be the same one we listened to at Skuiling? And then what could it give us? And so if, in fact, we are in a better place if we turn a deaf ear to that voice, umm...what we get out of that, is that what we want?'

If we began to talk about, 'Okay, actually that *is* what we want. We don't like that other voice because it drives us into the ground. Okay, how could we agree to turn a deaf ear to that voice? How could we be as a group? How could I hold you accountable, hold the whole group accountable to turning a deaf ear to that voice?' But it's like even that strong voice doesn't give us the permission to question it.

What is the name of that voice? Power? Control? Ego?... To me it's about 'Being successful means you have to be productive which means you have to be able to come up with... stuff... a plan, so that you can tick it off'. That's what it's called for me. And if you don't play that game then you don't belong here... 'cause that's how we've always done it... that's what we know, that's how we know how to do this... that's how we work.

And that's why I think our voices as women are quiet, become quiet, because the flavour is something about that... and it *quietens* our voices, I suppose that's what you could say... it *quietens* our voices.

The doing stuff really holds the rest at bay...the richness. It just doesn't make space for the womens' voices... it crowds out the joy of being together, the joy of dreaming together, of relating and of... of being in a very rich way together. It crowds all of that out. There's no space for that, because, I mean, how can you tick that off on a list. You can't really. It's blimblingwell ongoing, it never ends and I think that's what the [men's] frustration with some of this process was – *when* can we tick this off?! How many *more* meetings do we have to come to before we...

And it doesn't have to stop, the process... And they want to stop it!

Meanwhile,... if we just move away from that and move away from the six points and maybe pick up something else, just... whatever... I think, for me, just picking up on relationships in this group. You know, what does it *do* to you if I am this, or if I am that...

You can talk until you are blue in the face, and preach and sing and all of that kind of thing, but if it's not true to the principles of, or the values which are ultimately God-values, you know, that each person is the same and each persons' voice has... equal value, it's actually pointless. That's why I said at the end of the last meeting, 'I am not interested in this process. I have lost interest unless we attend to the "how". We have got to look at the "how" of how we "be" together'... I guess it's just something that I'm passionate about.

I mean, imagine what a question like this at the end of a group meeting: 'So how have you experienced this meeting?' Imagine how that would change things.

### 5.3 Pretence: Appearing to be

We need to invite [the men] into our process, 'We would *love* to invite you into our process', you know, which might enable them to invite us better into their process. 'Cause they are not inviting us into their process; they're allowing us to sit here, or wherever, and we are... sitting here – *that's* where the pretend comes in! Then we *seem* as if we are part of the process, but guess what – we're actually not part of the process – that's very important for me.

It sounds legit, you know, we're all together, we're all together, but there's something about just pretend, and everybody believes it, somehow we all believe it... except [some] of us.

There is a sense that it is seen as being good and right and open, but when push comes to shove, it's not... It's pretend, it's really pretend and we're all feeding into that pretend – the men and the women.

[The men are] so used to pretending that they believe it, so even at Skuiling, there was something about it – they thought they were doing so good, but it was like a pretence and then they believed it...

We're actually not sharing and being partners, and if we're a microcosm... of the church, then they're actually not really sharing, and all that sort of thing. Certain voices [are] there, the loud voices, the influential voices... but in church there are people... [who are] not being heard, and so they give up, some of them, and some of them move away, physically or in their heads... Which is a sadness for everybody; the person moving away and the rest of us.

And there are some things that help that pretend: the rushing, the rushing the meetings to finish whatever we accomplish and... the achieving, the sense of point 1, point 2, point 3, point 4; that was achieved. The pretend and the appearing... there's an appearance of and a pretence, they're intertwined, absolutely intertwined... and if we got ourselves together as women maybe we would unravel some of that.

Nobody has actually asked the question, 'Ladies, how is this for you?' Nobody asks that question.

I would love the men to know what we have spoken about. I'd *love* to be that honest, 'Guys, this is what we've spoken about'. I would *love* that. I don't want to pretend about that.

## **6. WHAT WOMEN SAID ABOUT BEING WOMEN IN THIS CHURCH**

### **6.1 Women-focussed hopes expressed for the Skuliling retreat**

- There will be less of 'his' and 'hers'
- We will include the voice of women and invite the voice of children
- Wives will become a part of the team / become more visible and participate more in the church

### **6.2 Roles and expectations**

We all came away from [the weekend] with expectations, with hopes, anticipations and, um, ja, I'm very aware of how long has gone past since that weekend... [without anything having been done]

The leadership needs to be more representative of the entire church. Including the women set up certain expectations. I have expectations. We need to know: What is our role? What is our duty?

I know at Skuliling we spoke about the possibility of meeting and contributing to further decision-making... I wonder if that will also be something that is possible.

Well, I think that Kate and Sophia, as pastors' wives, need to be far more involved than you are, so that people know who you are and what you stand for and... there are some people that, I think, don't even realise that these two ladies are the pastors' wives... people need to see you and know who you are... and know, 'Gee, that's the pastor's wife. Now, I don't feel I can go to a man with my problem, but I can go to one of the pastor's wives', and you need to be... what's the word, in the picture...

I'll get you [Kate] a big badge... that you can wear on Sunday.

Ja, that says 'pastor's wife', for both of you.

I just don't know if what we are talking about is the pastor's wives being obvious... it needs to be all women.

Yes, but you're the leader ladies... aren't they... you are.

But then it feels like [dropping shoulders and arms as if under heavy weight] huhh, responsibility.

No, no it mustn't feel like, 'Oh gee, I've got to stand at the door every week' or... [laughter].

I think there's quite a big question mark, well for me, in terms of the leadership and the men's perspective of the women's roles in this church and... I know for me there's a big question mark in terms of where women stand in the church and what their role is, and should they be in leadership positions, and so on, but I would find it interesting to see what the view of men is, and where the boundaries are because... I don't think that anyone here has [the] intention [of starting a revolution] and it's not about [revolution]... it's not about women's lib... I'm not for women's lib. I think it can be very damaging, and I think that

having a proper understanding of where both men and women's roles fall in the church would enrich the church, and I think that if there was proper defining of those boundaries ... if those roles were well-defined, it would be easier to feel comfortable in them

I also think in terms of women in leadership positions, I think there's a question mark whether it's something that needs to be asserted or something that needs to be invited ...and if it's asserted then the assumption is that we [the women] need to be doing something, whereas, if it's invited then the assumption is that men should be doing something so, umm, ja it depends again where the responsibility lies....

### **6.3 Silencing of the women's voices**

I am aware that my voice just became more and more silent because I just didn't want to, I didn't have the 'want to'... and the other voices were so loud. I didn't have the want to, so I just stayed quiet. I had lots of thoughts, but I didn't want to put them into my mouth. It felt dangerous... and it made me as a person feel vulnerable. But... I was thinking, it wasn't just my voice that was silent. It was the voices of women, the women really became silent. I would like to hear from [the other women] what happened to them, in their silence, what happened, what made them silent?... Because we weren't silent at Skuling, every one of us. We all had wonderful voices, with *different* things to say. [softly] It was easy to speak. And I wondered, I wondered if we got together as women, and shared some of how we are feeling, ... if that would make a difference to the end result, and to where we are at, if it would have changed anything...if we would have fed into each other, encouraged each other to... to keep speaking and to feel free, but we didn't.

[Perhaps] we would have been able to say, 'What did you feel when that happened and when that happened or was said, how was it for you?' But we didn't, and we didn't seem to need to. I think [some of us] might have touched base vaguely, but the other women, it's like the dutiful women came back... Something like the fight was too big, or the struggle was too hard.

There was something about Skuling that was very new, to me it was very new. It was a new way of relating to the big group, it was a new way of being women together, so I guess new things are sometimes fragile, they need a lot of support, they need nurture... and we *didn't* do that.

We had that one meeting with the women, and it felt like people were quite real and quite open at that meeting... At that meeting I think we were all aware that already there was a retreat of power... of voice; I would rather use the word 'voice'. There was a sense we were retreating. We didn't **want** to, we didn't want to, but we were, and we were giving the voice back to the men and only the men, and we just gave over. There was a sense that we just gave it away.

And yet, coming out of that meeting there was a sense of protest, because, remember, we prepared that statement which we never actually used, it kind of came out in different ways in that meeting with the men, but there was definitely a dissatisfaction with what was happening and not happening.

I think we still are dissatisfied but we just... we're just being quiet.

There just doesn't seem to be much space to be different from the status quo, the dominant voice, the dominant way of thinking and being and... in fact there's quite a pressure to agree with the dominant voice... let alone space given to an opposing voice or even inviting a different point of view.

What we as women have done, we have allowed majority to reign, majority and clout, loudness, clout, we've just allowed it to be, to reign... and also, I would like to add to that, *usual* ways of being, without questioning whether usual ways of being are actually good ways for everybody.

I just found in the meetings we had after the weekend that often, you would start to say something and somebody would say, 'Yes, but if you did so and so... and if we went so and so...', and then it's almost like [made a sucking in sound and motion, demonstrating withdrawal], 'Okay, I won't say anymore'. I just noticed that and I thought, 'Ooh, gosh'. Whereas at Skuiling... if you wanted to spend twenty minutes on what you wanted to say then that was fine and nobody else could interrupt. But I think it's that some personalities are a lot stronger than others, and they feel that maybe you're just wasting the time, or it's not that important.

I'll give an example. At [a recent leadership meeting] I asked for a couch for the counselling room... [I explained my reasons] and there was no understanding of that because no-one else has ever asked for a couch, and I thought, 'Oh my gosh, [slapped her wrist] the voice has to be quiet' because if there is a need for a couch, it seems to me there has to be lots of voices, but one lone voice can't ask for a couch... and I felt alone ... and I withdrew... and I won't ask for the couch again... why should I? Why should I? It's too hard.

I had a sense of giving up... because our voices got quieter and quieter and we became less and less, and we did sort of give up on the enthusiasm which we had created at Skuiling... not only us, which the big group had created at Skuiling. But it got less and less possible to pool resources... it became more and more possible once again to just have the loud, dominant voices heard

I think it's a real pity that the women's voices seemed to become smaller... I think that's really sad...

#### **6.4 Influence on women of 'Christian traditional ways of doing things'**

What I know about our church, for me, is that it's male-dominated, personality-dominated, loud voice dominated, and what I know about our church is that we women tend to accept that... sometimes grudgingly, and sometimes because it's what we do, the submitting female for ever, my mommy taught me to do that and ja, ja... and so if I go against that, there are huge ripples that happen, because I go against that and it's one voice... and it's hard, it's difficult for me, and I feel like the baddie and everyone else is the 'goodie'... Even though I see nods, I don't hear voices.

I think for me as a woman... in these kinds of meetings, because they are church meetings, I have to behave, and behave means that I don't shout at somebody, I don't be ugly to them

even if they have been ugly to me, or hurt me, um... that I try not to be conflictual or argumentative, that I need to... *especially* as a woman, I feel like I need to behave

I almost have a sense [that] there's these men with loud voices...or not so loud...but powerful influence, voices and influence. Okay, maybe men with power, with position, with authority that has been given to them by their position, and almost standing behind them, even bigger seems to be the 'bible' and 'Christian ways of doing things'.

*Traditional*, traditional ways of doing things... Christian traditional ways of doing things.

Ja, religious stuff, you know that kind of, almost seems to grow the men's power, or grow their position somehow...[long pause]. They depend on that... and we as women, allow it... it's quite hard to fight against that though.

[We] have said a number of times about how, in the end, [we] just give up because it's too hard, it takes too much energy, and I wonder if that's not just the men that [we're] up against. There [are]... ideas, that seem like mountains, that come stand behind the men. That's the picture that I have that [we're] up against the men and all these ideas about... I don't know what the ideas are but... maybe the traditional voices

Ja, it just feels like we found so much together on that weekend and it feels like... what I'm fighting for is to keep it, and what I'm fighting against are the forces that... say things like, 'Only one person's idea counts', maybe, 'You need to be a man to have your voice heard', 'You need to be maybe one of the 'boys', or, maybe, 'You need to be one of the more powerful characters in this group'. So it feels like I'm fighting against some of that, and it's because I saw something quite wonderful happen when we were all given an opportunity to participate freely.

[Traditional Christian ideas] also disable people from talking about why they have left or why they have (unplugged) because, okay, if those are kind of God's anointed people, who are in these traditional roles, you can't be honest about things which show them up in a bad light. You can't do that. So, I think it's actually a very scary place to be in, you know, it kind of puts you in a glass box but it sets you up for a life where you are not held accountable... for what you're doing.

I wonder if the men are aware that they have this traditional thing and... the bible or whatever it is that they are leaning on or being supported by. I wonder if they realise that that is how they are perceived by many people and if they did realise it, I wonder what kind of influence it would have on them.

## **6.5 What women want**

I don't know that we really need to be in leadership, we just want to be included in decisions...I don't need to be in leadership. I'm very happy with what I'm doing...But there may be other women who do want to be in leadership...mmm.

I would like to add value. My contribution should be valued.

## 6.6 Solidarity

[Meeting with the women allows me to feel] supported, it feels amazing, it feels like 'I've got the girls around me'

We're strong at the moment [laughter]

I really don't want to establish a 'them and us' thing [by meeting together only as women]... but it was just a sense of there being almost a fledgeling participation that I wanted to nurture a bit, and say, 'Hey, is this okay for you? Is it okay what's been happening? Is it not okay? What's your experience of it?'

I feel that if we go [to the men] together as women, we would... we would be able to have a combined voice, a support voice for each other, and it wouldn't matter if it came from you or from [another woman], we would all know that that's what we want to say, you know. But at the moment we don't know what each other wants to say and maybe I would want to say, 'Right now I think we as women should move away and just have little chat, so that we can find out where we are. You as guys can have a little chat and find out where you are, and then we can combine and pool again', and in that away time we would say to each other, 'Come on girls, we've got to get it going... we're losing... we're letting each other down' sort of thing. The men can decide and we can come back and say, 'This is what we've decided: You're not letting us talk again'... That might help me personally to have a stronger voice

I'm thinking that I wish we could do it again and say, 'Come on girls, lets get together, for our sakes, and give ourselves a voice within each other, in order to thicken our own voice and let's kind of covenant with each other [so] that at the meetings, the together meetings, we would allow ourselves to speak. Because it was so worthwhile speaking at Skuiling, what's become not worthwhile?'

How would you feel if the ladies got together just for a ladies discussion sometimes so that some of the ladies who feel that they cant talk in front of the men, but have got things they want to say, and don't get a chance to say them, do you think that would help draw us together more... 'cause if we're united then... it would be lot easier...if we knew what each other were thinking...

I know we're all different but if we kind of got together and said, 'You know, guys how are we going to handle this?'

It sounds good... I'd like to say yes. I'd hate to know how to introduce it: [Hands to mouth, 'hush-hush'] 'We are having a ladies gossip session' [laughter].

Maybe things that are important to us women, ...maybe we first need to say 'Listen guys [women], we need a [couch]. When we come to the meeting we are going to ask for our [couch], but we are all going to say, 'Yes we do need it', you are not going to stand alone.

Don't you think that if we are... wanting to be part of the leading of the church, we should be at [the men's] meeting... I don't wanna go there and listen to where they spent R20... I don't wanna do that...But when it comes to actually making decisions about who is going to run the alpha course, who is going to run the soup kitchen... we should be there. Because [the men] go and they say [this person] will do this, and [another person] will do that... and

they inform you, but you haven't been there [*said that women might be more in touch with who is passionate about what*]. But while they meet and do their planning and we meet and make our little voice and that, we've got a big gap in between here. I don't know, maybe I see it differently, but I don't see how we are united then. I don't see how, if we are doing our two separate little camps.

Would it be helpful to do the two separate little camps and then come together?

Yes, I'm sure it would be, ja...

If we have our meetings [we can put down our suggestions and give them to the deacons] because, lets face it, we're never going to go to the deacons' meetings [agreement] but at least if we can come up with suggestions that we've made: 'We've got together as ladies, we've discussed things that we feel need to be done'. We need to write it down and say, 'This is what we need'... and then they can at least read it and say, 'Oh well, okay'.

I really do know that some of the ways, traditional ways in which women met are not altogether satisfying for me...and I know, for some people, unless you are meeting together to actually work out a plan of what exactly needs to be done and how you are going to it, it seems a bit of a waste of time? But every now and then just to gather as women and to say, 'Where are we and how are we doing?' I think that would be very valuable... How are we experiencing our lives? How are we experiencing church?...[long pause]. Even just to pick up with some of the women on their dreams would be fascinating. 'How do you see your dream come about? Is it coming about or is it... has it died...I would love to do that.

For sometime I've really believed that it's the men who need to give us permission to speak, or kind of invite us to speak, but, you know, really, I kind of think that they are where they are at because of their own journeys and history and ideas and so on... but that really oughtn't to stop us doing what we need to be doing... and the time will come when, you know, we will find each other, but unless we begin to speak amongst ourselves... maybe that will make a way for us to connect at some stage.

When I think of the women I do know that many of us have incredibly valuable voices, they have valuable things to say, and valuable contributions to make and if anything I would see myself creating space where those contributions can be heard and um,...that's the only thing that draws me to any further meetings. At this stage I've lost a little bit of motivation to have any impact amongst the men, I just, I think, I think the Skuling process has given me ...an understanding of the value of womens' voices, I mean just *hearing* on the Skuling weekend and at some of the other meetings just *what it is* that women *say* and just to hear the beautiful words and the beautiful hearts behind the words, it's given me the opportunity to see something that I don't know if I realised fully beforehand. So, maybe it's just given me...ha, a want to be part of hearing, listening, being together in a way that I think women really can do really well, um, you know, agree on what terms and all those kind of thing and how often and for what purposes, um and to just let the process go from there. If there are things that we begin to feel need to be said, perhaps we could bring them to another meeting, or something like that... I just think that some kind of context where, where we discover and give space for each others' voices would be really valuable and, at this stage, in order to strengthen and nurture those voices, maybe the men needn't be part of it at this stage

Maybe my way of saying it would be to regather our forces... not for a fight but just for the sake of regathering because we aren't together; the *women* aren't together; we've forgotten that we can be, so all we need to do is regather.

Maybe it's not even necessary to catch people up with the process but to just create the context again in terms of the 'how', you know, in creating a safe place again for people to share, and the 'what' of what is shared and what comes out of it is almost not as important... For me it's almost as if there are a couple of things that we've learnt and picked up through this process, and if, instead of just kind of tagging along with the ground rules that have now kind of been adopted, what really stops us from, from... going back?... Picking up the 'how' and saying, 'Okay girls, what will happen when we create this how, when we create this context for ourselves?' We can choose what we want to talk about and where we want to go'.

And do we want to start off with saying, 'Well, where are we going as women? Do we want to go somewhere together? What is it like being together? Does it do anything for us?'... To me it's almost as if I want to leave the Skulking process. I want to leave that, but there are some things that I really believe in that I want to take with me, and I am kind of curious about who else wants to... go there. I have a suspicion that there'd be quite a few people who, in creating that context, would really enjoy it.

And then, we would have to encourage each other not to be fearsome, or fearful when we are together. So we need to know how we can encourage each other to do that because... we still are so fearful, and I think each one of us would be fearful of different things.

So, even getting to the point of creating a safe place, would be a lengthy, not a lengthy but... a process. There would need to be a lot of hard work done... commitment to each other... to create a context in which people can even begin to stand together.

Now I know why that story was so important for me. Ah!! [laughter] I **knew** it was very important for me. The silly story about the farmer and the carrots [laughs].

One of our church members, he's a vegetable farmer, so he's wanting to know, 'How can I plant better vegetables?' So he's going around to all the successful farmers in the area and he's asking them, 'How can I grow better vegetables?' So he discovered that there's this one farmer who spends nine months of the year preparing the soil. He plants *one* crop and he gets about 90 tons of carrots. There are other farmers in the area who put in three crops a year, and all together they only produce 75 tons of carrots. *It's about preparing the soil.* Preparing the soil is creating a safe place and sometimes, if peoples' voices are so... not heard, so silent, there needs to be an enormous amount of work that happens before you even get to a place where the voices feel like they have the space where they can be heard. Now I know why that story was so important.

I'm no longer fighting for this group. I'm fighting for... creating space or a context where women would be able to see themselves as valued, and that is done by creating a context where your voice is heard, you're not interrupted... and valuable... and it happens.

But it doesn't matter if what we say doesn't happen, that's not important. The point is that I've been able to say it. I like rain. You don't like rain. But it's just so nice to say, 'For me it's nice'. I don't want it to rain every day, that's not what I'm saying.

And it's not important that the men approve of it either, or... not... or that it's part of a programme, but it's that it happens.

And it's not important that everybody comes or even the Skuiling group comes. What is important is that there is a space for people who want to be there ... and maybe some of them would get so darn curious that they couldn't keep away.

## **6.7 What has kept the women apart?**

### **6.7.1 Not knowing what one another are thinking**

There was a sense for me that I didn't know... whether the other women wanted this. Sometimes I wondered whether this was just about my enjoyment of being able to participate, and whether this was something that other women felt comfortable with. I knew they were comfortable with it at Skuiling, I had a sense that they were.

I guess I took some of the responsibility for that and I thought well, is this something that I want to pursue and I wonder what effect it will have on the other women. You know, if it's just something that I'm pursuing, and I'm taking the other women along with me... am I taking them into a place that's going to be harmful and hurtful, and in that case I don't really want this to be harmful and hurtful. You know, I really want it to be what Skuiling was.

We just let it go... while you might say it matters to you and I might say it matters to me, even if it matters enough to this little group, it doesn't matter enough to *all* of us.

So some of that kind of stood against... my wanting to fight for it. You know, I just thought, 'What am I fighting for? Am I fighting just for me or... I wonder if these women really want me to fight for them too?' You know, I wondered if the fight was worth it, that's it. I know that it was a concern for me, but I didn't know whether all of the other women really wanted that. Cause we never shared how we were feeling. There was a sense of, 'Hmm, why is she not speaking?' And I come back to what I said that we did not share and the responsibility ...was with us as women. We didn't carry on the conversation with each other and the men seemed to have done that in the deacons' meeting, so their togetherness was thickening and strengthening, and ours was waning and getting very fragile and weak... Because they *did* speak about the Skuiling process at deacons meetings... They took what happened in our ongoing Skuiling meetings and they had their own ..

### **6.7.2 Fear**

Where would the harm have come from or where was the danger in this? Well, when you are in a context where your voice isn't valued and heard, it's a very devaluing process and I don't want... to be part of a process where people are devalued. I don't want to be part of that.

I'm very fearful of the unknown, because... I anticipate a little bit, and I assume a little bit, and I think, well, this unknown for some people might be called, hmm, it might be called 'feminism', it might be called those kinds of things. And I know it's not about that necessarily for me, it's just about participating in a group and having my voice heard and feeling like I'm contributing. That's what it's about for me. But nobody's asked about what it's about for me, but I kind of have a sense that maybe the men are becoming a bit irritable, you know,

because, 'This thing needs to be held in check now, we can't let it go too loose and too free because then we don't know where we'll be. You know, we really might be in a church that has a woman minister and God forbid that' [laughs].

Really, in meetings I sit, and I have those thoughts that come into my mind, and I sense the agitation of the men and I'm thinking, 'That's what they are thinking; they're thinking that we want to take over, that's what they're thinking. That's why they want to control and make sure this process is managed, so that it doesn't get into the hands of women. And that kind of thing I have to even fight against in myself. Ja, it's just things that I interpret in body language and so on, but it might not be real, but because we don't talk about it and because it's unknown, the fear grows... and it keeps me back from speaking out... It keeps the power the way it is.

[*One woman had just referred to an incident where at the first women-only meeting, one of the men had popped his head in and said: 'Aha, I know you're plotting a revolution here. You've even got the doors locked'...* There's almost a sense that when women get together: 'What's going on here? What are they plotting? And it was said in a joking way, but it was kind of, 'What's this... women meeting together...to talk about *what!*'

And that kind of comment or insinuations that have a similar meaning, actually play over and over again in my head, so that even a meeting like this with a closed door I keep thinking, 'How does this feel? Does this feel like kind of a secret gathering? Stuff that's being plotted? How much of this do I need to explain? And why don't I feel okay about it?'

Precisely! Because we haven't conditioned ourselves to say, I'm really allowed to do this...I'm really allowed.

There's a perception that has a fear about it of what other people or the men are thinking and, for me, I don't know what they're thinking, but comments like you've just made, 'plotting a revolution', are ones that happen in my head, that I need to fight against, even though I know the men aren't necessarily saying it or thinking it, it's kind of something in my head that's keeping me from having the conversations... it's not the only reason, but it's there... and I don't know why.

I kind of get a fearfulness in me because I think that [there] is a pattern – I don't know if anyone would recognise it, but for me there is a pattern – that if something becomes *too* loud and *too* different and *too*... in our midst that one of the ways of... getting rid of it... handling it, you just shake it out, you push it out... and then everything will be back to normal again. And that, it kind of sits with me here [putting hand over stomach]. I need to... watch myself because if I get too loud or too different or whatever, maybe the same thing would happen to me. Yes I do, I fear that.

For me, there was a sense of um...when you are attached to someone?...Bonding.. I'm more bonded to my husband than to the women, it felt like... I don't know if the word is fear, that we should rather stick with the submissive thing, rather than the 'what we want' thing.

[The what we want thing is] too... risky? We had never risked this big. It was fine at Skuiling to risk, but now push is coming to shove, it feels like it's getting really risky now, so let's just be safe. Safer. So none of us did anything.

And that's what we don't do with each other, is risk... *That's* what we don't do, we *don't* risk... 'cos we're too scared. It's like the women have lost the courage to risk. Yes they have.

Maybe I just don't want to [expose] myself and maybe that's okay... in our church.

It's not okay for me, but it's wise... When I get a sense of a lone voice and I really know I'm not bad, I know where I'm coming from, I know my passion and my passion is because *we have something to say* as we have already said, we are worth it!

[Imagine the richness of being together if we could be together as] men and women... and say, you know what, we've just discussed this and this is what we'd like to throw into the melting pot for tonight... the fact that we as women seem to fear you... some of us, most of us? And how that falls on your ears... What do you think about it. Ha, we could have such an evening round this and... [other] taboos.

### **6.7.3 Differences between women**

I do think that within the women we are divided, and some of us are the 'doers' and the others of us are the thinkers and the feelers. So the 'doers' might tend to say, 'Yes, okay, let's put it up on the board and get it done', and others of are still thinking, 'I'm not finished thinking or feeling what I'm feeling, never mind expressing it', and then... sometimes when I do get the courage to express things, then it's not right... it's not right and it's not accepted or noticed or heard.

## **7. RELATIONSHIPS**

### **7.1 Relationship-focussed hopes for the Skuiling Retreat**

- ♦ That the love between us would be visible to the rest of the congregation
- ♦ [That] we will listen to one another

### **7.2 Relationship-focussed dreams at Skuiling**

I see two pictures. In the first there are people having a picnic. There are many different people; people of all ages, personalities and colours and they are relaxing, having fun, and enjoying one another's company. I hear laughter and see children running around. People are playing games, lying under the trees chatting. The people are transparent and real, they are not wearing masks. They are unified with a common goal and there is a sense of harmony.

In the second picture I see a group of many different people singing, worshipping together in unison. There is perfect harmony. It looks like a choir but they aren't performing for an audience, they are looking upward, to God, and are singing for God. They are each singing different notes of a common song, blending in perfect harmony. I see openness and transparency with each other and with God. The people are free, expressive and sincere.

I see lots of people together in a place – I don't think it is our church building. Some of the people I know and some I didn't know. The people are excited. There is a feeling of warmth

and such love. It is a safe place. I feel that I belong. Everyone is willing to do things. It is a lovely place.

My dream is one of togetherness – a coming together of all age groups within the church. From there all other things branch out. I put down loving, sharing, caring and helping but it also includes worship and so on. There is the opportunity to get to know all the people better.

In my dream, I see the church as a family home. It is a place of caring for each other, where people feel free and are accepted. It is a place of love. In this family, the younger members learn from the older family members. It is a place where we are able to bring friends home. There is a sense of togetherness.

### **7.3 Relationships in the wider church**

[Leadership needs to] set an example of vulnerability/risk/real sharing/truth.

*[In response to a strong emphasis on cell groups as the primary vehicle for developing 'significant relationships' in the church]:* There are many other small groups which exist, which are not cells. And I don't think that just because someone goes to a worship practice, and have some of those needs met [there] that you can exclude them, as not being in relationship. And is it not a broader thing even than groups? That when you come to church you are invited to get into relationship with people. It's about the people who welcome you at the door – they are thinking relationship, 'How can we build relationships with these people?' So, I think of some of the structures that are already in place, like signing the visitors book, having someone go and visit them, I think that is all about building relationship. I think it's much broader, so that anyone in the church that does anything is thinking, 'Relationship'... so that when you are pouring tea for somebody, you are thinking, 'Relationship'. Everybody is the 'vehicle' [for developing relationships within the church], if they know that building relationship in our church is important.

Trust is a word that keeps coming back to me, there was definitely the trust there [at Skuiling], and I think that also comes as you get to know people. I don't think that if we went to the church and said 'We had this fantastic weekend and this is a safe little spot and you can tell us whatever you like, no matter what's happened to you, no matter who's beat you up, it's fine, you just tell us here'. I would never open up, you can forget it! I just know I wouldn't. But if I would get to know you, and you would get to know me, and we [become] friends, and perhaps I phone you during the week if you're not at church... that's where I see the family thing coming in.

I guess what I'm wondering is, 'How does one facilitate better relationships?' It's difficult to have a team driving relationship development... relationship is almost something you can't do directly, you can only... create an environment in which relationships can grow.

I have a real resistance in me when we talk about relationships and *doing* this thing as a 'tack on' because we *are* all in relationship. How about just making, creating places where we can learn about how to make the existing relationships better, talking about, 'Well, what are relationships like on the leadership? Are they good? What's good about them? What are maybe some of the things that are hurtful to others?'

And the way that deacons' meeting happens, the guys need to obviously have some way that it works for them, but somehow when we're together as a team, as the girls as well... there needs to be a different set of values that make sure that everybody is included, because it looks as if what works for a deacons' meeting doesn't actually work for us as a team. There needs to be two sets of values... It doesn't seem that the one set works for the other group.

Let's not do another whole thing on relationship. I mean we are all here in relationship, we have all been with each other numerous times and surely we can just kind of distil it into, 'Okay, so what about our relationships are good? What things can we build on?' Okay there may be an element of having a champion who now creates environments in which people can get closer and all that, but so much of this family that exists, that meets Sunday by Sunday by Sunday, are already doing things – they're already talking to each other, they are already ... I don't know quite how to explain this but... It seems crazy to create this whole kind of strategy of how we're going to do this better when it's already happening, and each of us has a sense of what here works for me and what doesn't. I know that, for me, that's where I'd love to start...

It seems to me almost that there's two dimensions to it... that there's the strategy side of it that's saying, 'We've got to create more relationships and get more people connected'... but I think what I'm hearing you saying... [is] that there are existing relationships, and you're talking about depth and quality of those relationships.

Can I just make a suggestion? In terms of the relationships, I think there is quite a difference between the 'how' of relationships and the 'what' of relationships. And I don't know if you might need two champions. The 'what' of relationships, you know, organising social functions and, keeping people meeting is a very different function to holding people accountable for *how* they are relating to people... So that's just my suggestion that they would like be two very different functions.

A lot of what come out of Skuling was how the body of the church who are not part of the leadership, are perceiving the leadership and are perceiving the church, and it's almost a voice from the marginalised in the church... and my suggestion, and you can shoot me down, is that perhaps a champion for [holding the leadership and wider church accountable to *how* we relate to one another], needs to be from a group of those who are not... Basically what I'm saying is maybe it needs to be a women... [It is] the group of women that are sometimes on the receiving end of not having a voice and not participating, and I think that somebody from that group would best be able to hold the church accountable to whether they are feeling heard and being given a voice. I think, the men might not see it.

There didn't seem to be a willingness to... start at home... [to] start with this [leadership] group and these relationships. It needed to be stuff that happened out there. Which really left me wondering about... the merits of it. You know, it's all very easy to... nominate somebody to do relationships out there, but... it's a very odd way of going about things really.

There was quite a strong reaction against the idea of focussing on relationships within the leadership group... 'No, it must be something that we do out there. We're not going to be part of it, they're going to do it'... There was something about, 'We are already in relationships, now we need to get other people in relationship'... and almost a, 'Don't ask us how our

relationships are, they're fine. Don't even question that, they're fine'...And again, the voices of the women were not heard. So the ladies didn't say whether it was fine or not.

## **8. COMMUNICATION**

### **8.1 Communication at Skuiling**

It was an opportunity to say what we felt... openly, even if we upset people, you know, and we didn't always upset people but we could have upset people... because we were asked to be truthful.

It was good that we [the women] could share openly, but it was also good to hear what other people were feeling, and how things were affecting them, and things that you perhaps didn't think about and thought, 'Wow, I never looked at it that way', and things came out that we can maybe now do something about, because we heard of different things that were maybe bothering people...

### **8.2 Communication with the church after Skuiling**

Can we take this through to a morning service and share what we have experienced?

You know when you come back from a camp, people can give testimonies and it doesn't mean anything to the people in the pews really. Maybe our feedback should have been in our cell groups, where it's a smaller group who know each other and have learnt to love each other and it would be more exciting perhaps to report back in that context

I know what camps can do and it sounds like really a special camp and just now I thought something special is really specially shared when you are feeling the joy in your heart and you want to express it and it's real when it's just come out of that experience so it's a pity that the camp didn't bubble over into the church after the camp.

At least [there should have been] a report back so that they could see that we were doing something, you know something was happening. It wasn't just that we went away for a jol.

A letter to the church may go some way to explaining or sharing.

### **8.3 Communication within the church generally**

Communication seems to be absolutely key to the way forward. The perception seems to be a shroud of secrecy or mystery around decision-making in the church. Is it possible in some way to demystify leadership and lower the barriers?

The silence is a problem. Perhaps we are expecting more from deacons' meetings than actually happens. But there has not been a sense of sharing. Perhaps the Church is also expecting sharing and openness. We are not a sharing Church.

It has been my experience that by not doing anything or saying anything we reinforce the old paradigm without realising it. Habits of old speak louder than words. Communication is essential to counter the voices that invite us to think and do in the old way.

What I am realising is that perceptions are more important than reality. If we [as wives of the deacons and pastors] have thought that the deacons are a closed circle, what have the others in the church felt? We must go the extra mile to say, 'What can we do to increase openness, inclusivity and transparency'.

### **8.3.1 Husbands to wives**

I think that [our husbands] think that they've told you because they've thought about it, but they really haven't told you...[A previous deacon's wife], if she found out anything was happening, she would phone me and she knew jolly well that the husbands wouldn't always tell you.

You see, they're thinking about it and they think they've told you, like this meeting on Saturday, (two days later) [my husband] was convinced he had told me, then afterwards he came to me and said, 'You know maybe I didn't tell you', and I said, 'No you didn't'.

### **8.3.2 Amongst the women**

I suddenly had a feeling while you were speaking.. I thought... we've actually separated ourselves to discuss... the men should be listening. The men should actually be hearing this...That's the problem. So how are they going to hear it? This is the next thing...How are they going to hear this?

## **8.4 Ideas for better communication**

So [the concept of communication] would really impact on the every group in church ... because [if a] cell group has somebody really ill, they need to take responsibility for communicating that to [the pastor]... So it's difficult to create or put a champion in there, where each of us maybe should be taking responsibility for communicating in our particular roles.

Words are 'amazing' and we can see how important it is to pay attention to them.

## **9. TAKING ACTION**

### **9.1 Feelings about the lack of follow up for six weeks after the Skuling Retreat**

I hadn't realised when we were on the weekend that... there were a number of action points, particularly around the whole issue of criticism, that were put down, but there was no, 'Well... this is the person who is going to do it and this is how the process is going to be taken forward', and I think that was because we were anticipating a follow-up meeting fairly soon when that kind of detail would be discussed... But that was something from the whole weekend – there weren't any specific names and dates and times and things set to anything, and I think that was [due to] the anticipation of a follow-up soon, and maybe that's also why things have fallen between the lines... the cracks, yes.

Isn't Saturday [the first leadership team meeting/workshop after the Skuling retreat] a day when we will now get down to brass tacks as it were and do some planning, things that we're

going to do... Isn't that the whole idea of Saturday? I mean the men also realise that nothing's happened, they're not sitting thinking that it's all hunky dory... They also know that since the weekend nothing has happened, really.

We did not know that this would be the first opportunity to get together. We take too long to do things. We procrastinate.

We need to have a group planning meeting because it's not practical for the women to go to the deacons' meeting, because deacons' meetings are too late already as they are, they're business meetings really so you can't go and plan [social functions] at a business meeting. There needs to be a separate meeting where the men and the ladies are together to plan things like that

I feel that we are too far in the dreams, we need to come back to practicalities.

## **9.2 After the first team meeting/workshop after the Skuliling retreat**

[I have] a sense that we are going in a positive direction and dealing with the real issues

I appreciate the fact that we are actually going to DO something now.

## **9.3 Concern with sense of rushing into action**

Before we can do planning, we need to know where we are going and why we are going there.

I feel that the whole way this process and the way forward is evaluated, is critical. If it is reduced to people keeping register and talking about numbers, it will destroy everything. Evaluation is critical.

I need to just say that for me the process has been rushed and has needed to fit into very do-able, tickable-off kind of compartments... I really don't buy into doing things just so you can tick them off, just so you can say okay, we've done that process and now we can do another thing. You either want to do it or you don't, really.

## **10. CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY**

The one thing that really lives with me... what keeps coming back to me about the [Skuliling Retreat] is... very much a sense of... God being present in a way that surprised me and I was deeply grateful for.

I take with me an excitement about the possibility that this process will be taken further. I have been encouraged and inspired and deeply touched by God's willingness, eagerness to meet with us, when we open ourselves to God.

What happened within the group at Skuliling is like 'the candle of God' which has 'come into our midst'. We have all caught the light and there is a new enthusiasm and excitement. It is important that we pass it on and keep fanning it into flame for one another, encouraging one another, rekindling the fire. We all need to 'tend the flame' and not let it go out.

It's exciting for me that there isn't one thing that you can put your finger on and say 'This is what's done it'. There's just an atmosphere of openness and expectancy. You're not saying 'Okay this is what did it, we must do more of this'. It's not a programme...It's an unfolding...It's about God

*[At the second leadership team meeting/workshop (April 2004), Kim opened the meeting with a time of reflection on the following passage from Henri Nouwen's 'Bread for the Journey']:*

### **Fruits that grow in vulnerability**

There is a great difference between successfulness and fruitfulness. Success comes from strength, control and respectability. A successful person has the energy to create something, to keep control over its development, and to make it available in large quantities. Success brings many rewards and often fame. Fruits, however, come from weakness and vulnerability. And fruits are unique. A child is the fruit conceived in vulnerability, community is the fruit born through shared brokenness, and intimacy is the fruit that grows through touching each other's wounds. Let's remind one another that what brings true joy is not successfulness but fruitfulness.

*These were the women's responses to the reflection:*

I just had a sense of the enormously powerful model of Christ's vulnerability. My joy comes from his vulnerability.

I saw a seesaw with success and fruitfulness on opposite sides of the seesaw. I was struck by the wonderful words in the passage and I wondered what success and fruitfulness look like.

If we are going to be fruitful we need to be vulnerable before God.

When people are successful they often feel that they don't need God.

When we are not so sure of ourselves then God can use us. In the end, if we rely on God, we will be more successful – not because of ourselves but because of God.

The passage has left me with two clear pictures in my head. Success is like a multistoried building. The most important and most powerful people occupy the top floor suite. There are increasing levels of comfort as you move up through the building. Success dishes out its rewards to the most important people. The least important are afforded the least comfort.

The other picture is of fruitfulness as an orchard, where even the destitute, even the beggars are welcome and may taste of the fruit and take it home.

*One of the women described her experience within the church of an 'enormous pressure, almost a motto, to always put your best side forward'. She spoke of the fact that we all have two sides: our best side and our wounded, broken side and drew our attention back to the Henri Nouwen's suggestion that intimacy happens when we touch one another's wounds. She wondered how our emphasis on putting your best side forward at church is perceived by people coming to the church who may be broken or 'damaged' and whether it serves to marginalize rather than welcoming them. She would like to see us creating an environment that will offer a welcome to wounded and damaged people. She suggested that as we*

*acknowledge and welcome the brokenness in our own lives we might be more able to welcome and include others who are broken.*

Success seems to have an individual face while fruitfulness feels more like a gathering.

We need to be sure that we don't water down the dreams that come out of the process so much that they remain 'superficial' and 'manmade' and don't reflect what is really on God's heart. The process must be God-focused.

I did not take it lightly when I said that we were inviting God to speak into people and through people in the dreaming. I believed wholeheartedly that that was what would happen, and I believe that has happened and that the Holy Spirit has breathed the dreams. What about God being Author and Perfecter? God authored the dreams and will perfect the dreams; will bring them to be and if we could just see God in the process, see God's hand without this need to control it and pin it down and measure it, evaluate it. Why would God participate in the process of dreaming by speaking through people only to abandon the church now and leave the implementation up to [the male leaders]? Where's the place for celebration? Where's the place for gratitude? To say, 'Hey God, YES! Look at what You've been doing! We get it! We get it!'

## **11. POSTSCRIPT**

### **11.1 18 months later: The effect of the Skuiling Process on the women**

I'm still wondering if we have changed... and I think my answer is: those of us who were there, have changed. We might not be united because we don't tell each other, but there is a different attitude amongst those of us who were there, but it hasn't moved out into the church, has it?

I don't think it's *really* moved out into the church... maybe to a few people that have sort of been interested and asked questions and got involved but not generally.

Maybe it's an awareness again... maybe if you're not aware of it, it doesn't bother you, whereas, when we went to Skuiling, we became aware. We allowed ourselves to express what we were aware of, what we know of our church.

I think that we have walked a mile. Because before we went to Skuiling we never would have thought about suggesting anything to the deacons' meeting because that was just... whereas now we are thinking, 'Perhaps we can contribute'.

I feel that it was a very positive weekend and I think that a lot came out... I would like to see more come out of it all... I think that there are greater fruits that what we are seeing now. It looks like the women have been subdued, but I think that ultimately, having felt that what you had to say did have value, has to be a confidence boost and, ja I hope it is motivating...

### **11.2 How the women felt about the Book of Women's Wisdom**

*What was it about not having names in that stood out for you?*

It made the voice united... it didn't matter who said what, we sort of wove in and out, our voices were united.

Something great and deep was achieved through your choice to offer all our words back to us at one go, in a context where there was no interruption, they could just be heard.

*What effect does a unity of voice have on you?*

Support... it was as if, because women were speaking there was support for each other...

This document is almost the easiest or safest way to have our voices heard.

I found it quite interesting having a look at what was said in terms of themes. I think we say some very strong things about some things, about... we have a lot to say about relationships, for example. And I think a lot of them are really profound things, that I recognise as being different in some cases to what actually happens and there are things that are being said here that I'm thinking, 'What a *good* idea, why don't we do this?' [laughter]. I mean, on that one page there about the suggestions of having two champions; the 'what' of 'relationships' and then the 'how', you know, holding people accountable for the relationships they already have and just being honest about, 'What about our relationships is actually hurtful and not helpful'... I would imagine that that kind of thing would be really helpful...

[Our words] seem too valuable just to leave, I think that as a group we'd be the poorer for it, if we did.

I'm quite overwhelmed by how much the women had to say.

*Is there anyone who feels uncomfortable with it being a united voice, when there were different voices and different opinions?*

There's something about having moved on... because we have and moved away... and I'm wondering if we've changed, and even if we haven't changed... do we want to deny this... or add to it?

You know, what these documents do for me is, they make me realise two things. Where we've been; so it gives a sense of having been in a place and moved on and it also makes me aware... of what you [Kim] say is wisdom... and it really is, it *really* is... So, I don't think I'd like to throw this away. I'd rather like to keep them, and when I'm confronted with some of those ideas that come my way every now and then, that what I say doesn't matter, it's not being heard, it reminds me that I have something to say, and at one point in time I did say it, um... [long pause] And that kind of makes me wonder, you know, if we were to grow a group somehow, you know, if the five of us can come up with stuff like this, what would ten people or twenty people come up with?... And what measure of wholeness is out there to be taken hold of?

I have an amazing sense that this [document] is not the end of the road. I would like the men to see it and to almost be given an opportunity to re-listen... or to listen for the first time.

Reading through the documents left me with a picture: A dam bursting its banks and spilling out over a flood plain, nourishing the plant life below. It's as though all the words we've

spoken over the months of the Skuiling process, have trickled into a dam, collecting until our meeting where the dam burst – spilling out words as stories over us as we sat listening.

I know that water brings life and influences growth, and I wonder at the influence this spilling out of our stories will have on us, on our sense of contribution, value, participation. The impact of this meeting on me has been one of the most significant of the entire process. Our words, having sometimes struggled to be heard now spill out gushing and strong, to feed and nourish those who will listen to them.

This allowed me to let go again of my own agenda or expectations. A bursting dam is uncontrollable and the effects that the water will have are uncontrollable, but there is a sense of the inevitability of growth when the ground is watered. Growth is not something that we have control over, the seasons do, rain does, now I have to let go and trust that growth will happen.

### **11.3 Gathering the threads: A vision of a whole community**

I keep coming back to this word ‘gift’. Sometimes you carefully select a gift for somebody and give it to them, and you’re almost shocked by the lack of appreciation of it, and sometimes I wonder about... our participation with them as a group... if we don’t sense how good that actually was more than they do, but not only for us, but for the whole group. And so it’s almost as if we have a responsibility somehow to say, ‘This might be odd, or uncomfortable or whatever, but there’s a sense in which for some parts of the year or whatever, almost we need to be together because we give each other something that is richer than what either group can contribute [alone]’.

I think just reading this [The Book of Women’s Wisdom] and remembering the sheer delight at listening to the contribution that the girls made at the Skuiling weekend, makes me realise that this community is the poorer if the women’s voices aren’t heard... we really are the poorer. I think that women bring to any conversation, things that... are so valuable to a community... there’s just ways that we see things and therefore can contribute and it helps to form a wholeness in conversations and in the way things are done... and I don’t think I was aware of that as what I was *after* the Skuiling weekend, and in just some of the things that have come up... I mean, think church could work in the old way, in a manner of speaking, but I don’t know... I really believe that [wome n] bring something into the dynamic.

I know that if I’m not with my family for a day or two, there are things that they miss. It’s not just the food... it’s... what is me that is feminine that they miss out on, and because of me being woman and my particular personality, there are things that aren’t there. It’s about smoothing the waters, it’s about glueing, you know, a [family] together that might be pulled apart. So if that is true of me in my family, how much more is it not true of us as a group [of women], who have... God’s wonderful feminine side, to contribute into this place.

I’m kind of asking, if I’ve seen this kind of thing happen at Skuiling, what then is this church community missing by us not contributing? It’s not that I want to be at leadership meetings and have all the decisions and stuff go my way... It’s not that at all. I have a question about, what is being lost by us not making a contribution and participating... and I don’t know who

can tell us that... You know maybe there's a newcomer who is really hurting and if there's not the space for just a feminine welcome at the door, then there's just something missing... I don't know what you think of that, but maybe I'm different in thinking that women make more of a difference than what they do... but, I don't know, I really have a yearning for a wholeness and I think wholeness is God's design for us as people and as community. You know that all of us, women and men and children kind of pull together in all of who we are.

I know that, in my family, if my two boys weren't around I'd be so sour and serious. They're the ones that bring the fun out and the childlikeness out of me... All of us when we begin to work in a dynamic interrelatedness together, we draw things out of each other... and there's a softness and a... gentleness and a... nurturing when women... thrive and participate in something... and I long for that. I'm not saying it's not happening, but I just feel that there could be more of that kind of thing.

Remember, it [the Skuiling Retreat] was a together 'capture'... It wasn't just about the women. The freedom came from the women... was within the women, but it was a together capture. It wasn't a women thing. It wasn't only about the women, it was [the men] as well.

I really like what [one of the women] said, because I think that that's a very good picture: women adding wholeness to a church. Without them it's just a half, umm, I think that, ja, it's a good picture.

I really identified with that comment that was made a little while earlier, and it was beautiful, that before Skuiling we didn't realise we had anything to offer and Skuiling showed that we actually do have something to offer, but now we've kind of forgotten about it. I think it's just raised within me an awareness that... [the men's] picture is not the whole picture and our contribution is valuable in whatever form; that somehow what we bring into a group, could have an enormous influence on how people experience church... I think that's just a realisation that has just been reawakened for me, that...is making me think about whether I want to just let it go... I'm not sure where I would go with it.

### APPENDIX 3: LETTER SENT TO THE TEAM

Dear ...

Thank you for welcoming me at your meeting last Wednesday night. Since then I have listened to the recording of the meeting again and transcribed most of the discussion. I am attaching the transcript and I'd encourage you to read through it. I have also spent many hours reflecting on the meeting, which left me wondering about many things and I'd like to offer my questions to you for reflection.

Did you enjoy the meeting? What were your feelings and thoughts as you went home on Wednesday night?

I was surprised to see that there were only three women present. Am I correct that there are nine women on the leadership team?

What do you think were the reasons that they did not attend?

What valuable contributions were lost with them not being there?

If you had been a witness to the meeting, how would you describe your ways of relating and being together?

How would you describe what happened during the meeting with regard to:

- building relationships
- respect for one another
- hearing one another
- welcoming and honouring peoples' contributions?

I'd be interested to know whether this meeting was unusual in the way that people related to one another or if this is the usual pattern. If it is the usual pattern, can I ask:

- Are your ways of working and being together ones that you prefer; are they helpful, life-giving energising? If not, is there another way?
- What effect do you think these ways of working together might have on what you are trying to achieve?

I wondered what impact it might have on the church if the leadership adopted a policy of transforming relationships within the leadership group as their first priority.

And if you did adopt such a policy, what would it take to create the kinds of conditions in which the building and nurturing of relationships becomes a priority?

What would give everyone a sense of welcome and belonging in the leadership group?

What could you do to ensure that everyone feels it is safe to participate?

How could you ensure that every person's contribution is heard and valued?

What would encourage each person to take responsibility for making respect and care a priority at all meetings?

How could you hold one another accountable to such a policy?

I also wondered where the sense of urgency came from: the urgency to develop an action plan and get on with the 'real thing'?

What effect does urgency have on you as a leadership team as you plan together? Is urgency helpful or does it work against you?

What effect do you think urgency has on the church community?

If the core issues that your church community have identified as being crucial to their vision for the church (*Relationships, Teen/children and intergenerational ministry; Community ministry, Communication, Worship and a new working of the Holy Spirit*) could have a conversation with urgency, what might they say?

I also wondered what the 'real thing' is?

What will it look like and be like?

How will it be different from what is happening now?

What do you hope that an action plan will achieve?

Who will benefit from there being an action plan in place?

What was the value of the Skuiling process?

What effect has it had on your church community?

In what ways has the Skuiling process been different to the programmes that you have implemented before?

Is there anything that you would like to take with you from the Skuiling process as you look towards the way forward?

And lastly, I wondered what effect it might have on you as leadership and on the church community if you took time to celebrate the process that you have embarked on and any progress that you feel may already have been made towards your dreams and visions? What difference might it make to how you see the way forward if, for a moment, you could just enjoy, celebrate and give thanks for the way you have come and the place you are in right now?

I would really like to hear your reflections and responses to these questions. Would it be possible to meet to talk about this?

Yours faithfully

Kim

## APPENDIX 4: REFLECTION DOCUMENT ON 'HOW' AND 'WHAT'

It seems to me that there are two things coming out of the Skuiling dreams. One is WHAT: What do people see happening that may not be happening now, or may just be beginning to happen? There are many specific dreams about what the church can be organising and doing. These have been summarised under the six headings. But, as I read through the points under the headings, there are two kinds of dreams. Some tell about WHAT people see happening in the church. But many speak of HOW they would like the church to operate/be, no matter WHAT the church is doing.

That left me wondering what the relationship is between HOW and WHAT. As I looked back on the Skuiling process, it seemed to me that we came with a HOW, a process, not knowing at all what the outcome would be. We structured the HOW of the Skuiling process to invite participation, give people a safe space in which to share, respect each person's contribution, and to entrust the dreaming process to the participants: we told people that God would dream through *them*, God would use *them*. And it seems to me that the HOW facilitated the WHAT. You have told me how much has been happening in the Church recently, relationships improving, people being more real and vulnerable, people more enthusiastic to participate.

- Is there anything about the HOW of the Skuiling process that has supported this, made it possible?
- What might the effect be on the church if we now lay aside the HOW to focus on the WHAT?
- What effect might it have if we hold onto the HOW and allow it to inform our plans and strategies?
- What are the key features of the Skuiling process that people would like to become an ongoing characteristic of HOW we do church here?
- What would this church choose as its foundation: HOW we be church together or WHAT we do together as a church?

## **APPENDIX 5**

### **SUMMARY FIGURE: MY DISCURSIVE POSITIONING**

