

Chapter 6: Interrupting patriarchy to transform women's caring

INTRODUCTION

If feminist pedagogy offers a way of challenging structures of knowledge and power that exclude and marginalise women, and of caring for and empowering women as agents, then my next task is to look more closely at its application within theological education and specifically in the training of women for ministry.

In this chapter I have chosen to examine the applications of a feminist pedagogy in two theological sites in a measure of detail, acknowledging that these are not the only locations in South Africa where a feminist curriculum and pedagogy are in operation. My choice of these two sites is influenced by some of their commonalities – both offer a Women's Studies course at the Diploma in Theology level, and both have ministerial formation as their primary objective. The *first* site is in the context of a residential theological college with a single denominational focus, the *second* in a 'virtual' classroom of an ecumenical distance education institution.

In analysing the contribution of these interventions I want to explore the continuities and discontinuities for women between a feminist classroom and the church as a site of formation and practice. In theorising the role of church as an educative community, I draw attention to its socialising or reproductive role in conserving the *status quo*. My aim here is to assess how women experience the church when they try to assert a different theological paradigm.

I discuss the notion of 'communities of practice' and present for investigation a case study of such a community – the Grail Christian Women's Movement - as a further site for the theological formation and ongoing support of women. From this case study, I aim to derive some general directions for ways that intentional communities like the Grail and the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians can be supportive of churchwomen to keep alive the critical dimension of their caring work and prevent it from being subsumed into a domesticated and unliberating agenda of the church.

Rather than trying to establish any one mode of formation as *the* mode for critical and transformative reflection and practice, this chapter tries to draw together the intersecting

and overlapping contributions that the academy and women's communities can make in sustaining women in the transformation of their ministry of care. Thus I speak about these interventions as 'interrupting patriarchy' to suggest the limited role for any one intervention in challenging a system that has had such a long history and such a pervasive impact as patriarchy has had. At the same time, an interruption is a discomfoting occurrence – it disturbs the complacency and challenges the *status quo* - both of which are necessary for the shifting of any paradigm.

6.1 FEMINIST THEOLOGY IN THE CLASSROOM

In this section I plan to describe the contribution of two theological colleges that offer a course in Women's Studies – one is part of the diploma programme offered at the College of the Transfiguration (COT), and the other part of the diploma offered by the Theological Education by Extension College (TEEC). It is not my intention to evaluate the overall theological programmes offered by these two institutions, nor the academic prowess of the students in the course, important as these might be. Instead it is to focus on the contribution of a course, which has a dedicated feminist theological focus, on the lives of women who take it. This is useful in relation to my broader aim of researching the role of women as carers in the church and the way their formation impacts on their ability to minister in a critical and caring way.

6.1.1 Background to the Women's Studies course

The Women's Studies course is one of the optional accredited courses in Practical Theology which forms part of the Joint Board Diploma in Theology.¹ It was first offered by COT in 1998, followed by TEEC in 2002. Subsequently a few other colleges have elected to offer it. The stated purpose of the Women's Studies course is: 'to provide an opportunity to engage with the basics of feminist thought and apply that thought to biblical hermeneutics and theological thinking; and understand the historical and contemporary place of women in the church.' By the end of the course it is intended that learners are able to:

¹ The Joint Board is due to be disbanded in December 2005.

- Appreciate the extent and effects of patriarchy
- Evaluate feminism as a critical and transformative tool
- Be able to apply a feminist hermeneutic to the reading of scripture
- Appreciate the contribution of feminist theology to the major Christian doctrines
- Assess the role of the church in the oppression of women
- Be able to suggest alternatives which are inclusive of and value women in church thought and praxis.

The course adopts a feminist curriculum in its focus on women's needs, questions and issues, and it challenges those who are engaged in ministry to evaluate their own experiences of patriarchy and the way it manifests itself in the church. The core content is listed as follows:

1. Patriarchy and the marginalisation of women

(Aim: to introduce students to the concepts of feminism and patriarchy and look at some of the theological responses)

- a) An introduction to feminism
- b) What is feminist theology?
- c) Feminist theologies - womanist, mujeristas, African, Asian etc
- d) Feminist anthropology.

2. The place of the Bible in the oppression of women and in their liberation

(Aim: to note the selective processes in writing, editing and commenting on the scriptures and to introduce a feminist hermeneutic)

- a) The Bible as patriarchal text - Terror and silence in scripture
 - Readings of Hebrew and New Testament scriptures which are oppressive of women, those which silence women
 - Paul and women.
- b) Feminist hermeneutics - Tribble, Schüssler Fiorenza etc.
- c) The Bible as liberatory text.

3. An introduction to feminist thought in some of the major doctrines of the church

(Aim: to introduce the main doctrines of the church through a feminist hermeneutic)

- a) God and Trinity
 - Language about God and feminist models
 - The body of God - ecological concerns.
- b) Pneumatology - femininity and the Holy Spirit.
- c) Christology.
 - Jesus and women
 - Jesus a male saviour
 - A Christology for African women.
- d) Mariology and virgin birth stories.

4. Women and church

(Aim: to consider the place of women in the church's history, look at some of the egalitarian movements, and consider to what extent the church is presently "friendly" towards women)

- a) The ministry of women in New Testament and early church times.
- b) The systemic persecution of women, looking especially at witchcraft.
- c) Current liturgical practices and some alternatives.
- d) The ordination of women.
- e) Schüssler Fiorenza's *ekklesia* of women.

It is important to note that the Women's Studies course is not the only space for a feminist critique of patriarchy within either COT or TEEC curricula, and there have been attempts by both colleges to 'engender the curriculum'. COT theology is taught from a liberationist perspective: 'Overall there is a commitment to keeping women's issues on the agenda - e.g. as a focus in Biblical studies classes, in Systematic theology, in Ethics and Pastoral studies'; also the language of the College liturgy is inclusive, and attention is given to situations of abuse or discrimination against women in general college life (see Trisk 2003:Questionnaire, and in discussion). At TEEC there has been a serious attempt to use inclusive language and include insights pertaining to feminist theology in new course material being written, particularly in Systematic Theology (see Chatfield 2002: Questionnaire). However, I will argue that the Women's Studies course offers a focused attempt at both presenting a feminist theological content as well as applying a methodology that is more consistent with the elements of feminist pedagogical practice outlined in chapter 5 (section 5.3.3).

6.1.2 College of Transfiguration (COT)

The College of Transfiguration (COT) in Grahamstown was founded in 1994 as the residential training college for the Church of the Province for Anglican seminarians in Southern Africa. It replaced the Anglican seminaries of St Bede's (Umtata) and St Paul's Grahamstown (on the present site). As a result of the decision taken by CPSA in 1992 to ordain women, COT is open to women and includes students from South Africa, Botswana, Swaziland, Lesotho, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, and one student from Sudan (at the time of the research). In 2004, there were 47 students of whom seven were women.²

² Information gathered in April 2004 when I visited the College.

Between 1998 and 2003 a total of 23 students had completed the Women's Studies course of whom nine were women and 14 men. COT is a residential college and there are formal contact sessions, as well as opportunities for evening and week-end work, meetings, worship times, retreat experiences and practical experiences in aspects of ministry. Regarding her *teaching methods*, Trisk refers to herself as a 'facilitator'.

'My preferred model is through seminars at which learners take turns in presenting their readings of particular articles, books, reflections etc.... The course is taught only through discussion / presentation and learners are encouraged to share their own experiences and listen to those of others in the class... Sometimes women need more encouragement to talk in class. However, once it is understood that women's experience is the primary category, this usually frees them up to talk more than in other classes. The men who take Women's Studies take it as an elective and are by and large already sympathetic to the outcomes of the course.'

6.1.3 Theological Education by Extension College (TEEC)

TEEC was started in South Africa in 1976 by a Dominican, Louis Peters as part of the worldwide movement of theological education by extension.³ Course development and distribution, college management and administration are based at the college headquarters in Johannesburg. The college is ecumenical, including students from more than 20 Christian denominations from different parts of southern Africa.⁴ The staff also represents different denominational and theological perspectives. In 2003 a total of 2603 students were enrolled at one of four levels – degree,⁵ diploma, certificate or award. A breakdown of gender statistics was not available.

³ Theological Education by Extension began in 1963 at the Evangelical Presbyterian Seminary of Guatemala, South America. Teachers at this seminary were struggling with the question of how a single seminary could prepare ministers for a diverse range of ministry needs. They embarked on an experimental programme based on the belief that the seminary would need to go to the student rather than the student coming to the seminary. This enabled the context of the student to be taken into consideration and used as a part of his/her training. (source <http://www.tee.co.za> downloaded 07.01.05)

⁴ In 2003 students from the following denominations were listed: AME Church, Anglican, Assemblies of God, Betheswa Church, Congregational, Dutch Reformed, Episcopal, Full Gospel Church, Lesotho Evangelical Church, Lutheran, Methodist, Moravian, Order of Ethiopia, Pentecostal, Presbyterian, Reformed, Roman Catholic, Salvation Army, United Reformed Church in SA, Volkerk van Afrika, Zion Church.

⁵ Unisa and the Theological Education by Extension College (TEEC) signed a cooperation agreement to offer the Unisa BTh programmes jointly. This meant that 50-60% of the programme consisted of Unisa BTh modules and 40-50% of TEEC courses. The agreement made it possible for someone who had already passed a number of TEEC courses to switch to the joint Unisa-TEEC programme, provided s/he had not completed more than half of the courses for the Joint Board Diploma at TEE College, and was in possession of a matriculation exemption certificate before commencement of studies towards the Joint

The aim of TEEC is to provide contextual theological education by extension (correspondence study supported by a tutorial structure and a network of Regional Centres). Thus students can continue in their employment as well as their service in the church while receiving their training. Course co-ordinators based at the college ensure the academic delivery and development of course material, while assignments are marked by a group of externally based markers who are paid a small fee. Students are expected to attend regular tutorials organised from 22 regional centres organised by regional co-ordinators. A library based at the Johannesburg college circulates books on request to students.

It [TEEC] offers a comprehensive training in Christian living, witness and services...Theological education by extension brings to the student in his (*sic*) residential forms of training. Self-instructional textbooks give immediate feedback, and local centers provide tuition and contact between students and tutors. In other words, the extension method is designed to enable the student to study in the context of his own environment and at the same time to enjoy advantages previously available only at residential places of learning (*TEEC Prospectus* 1976:5).

Like COT, TEEC is a member of the Joint Board and its diploma curriculum adheres to the learning outcomes and assessment criteria adopted by the Board. Between 2002-2003 a total of 37 students had completed the course – 10 men and 27 women. The course was developed as four workbooks containing theory, questions for reflection, and practical activities to be applied in the learner's family, work or church environments. A Reader comprising articles written by different scholars in this field accompanies the workbooks.

To overcome the limitations of the *distance education methodology* and the absence of a face-to-face relationship between teacher and learner, assignments in the workbooks were designed to support not only the theoretical knowledge of feminist theology, but to encourage personal reflection and creativity which could be

Board Diploma (source <http://www.tee.co.za>, downloaded 07.01.05). Due to changes in national educational accreditation, this agreement is no longer operational and TEEC now offers both 240 and 360 credit Diplomas in Theology at NQF levels 5 and 6 respectively.

communicated in some way to the marker.⁶ Care is taken by the marker to respond to both the cognitive and also the affective dimensions of all assignments. In addition, learners are encouraged to develop small action research projects with women within their local church communities, and to reflect on the outcomes with the marker. In order to try and create a virtual learning community, tutorial letters and telephone conversations are encouraged between the course coordinator and the students. Reverend Jill Chatfield says of her experience with the women in her TEEC tutorial group:

'My personal contact has been with a very limited number of those who enrol for this course. However, even within the first meeting, students were speaking about their own experiences of abuse. The course material and the assessment are designed to encourage women to address these issues' (Questionnaire, 2003).

Both colleges use a range of assessment strategies and external assessment is via the Joint Board common assignment.

6.1.4 Evaluating the course

In this section I want to use the criteria that I formulated at the end of chapter 5 to evaluate the extent to which the Women's Studies course succeeds as a critical feminist pedagogy among the women in the research. The criteria are:

- It contributes to women's insertion as subjects into theological knowledge;
- It supports women's growth, healing and confidence to speak about their knowledge;
- It helps women to analyse their oppression at a personal and structural level;
- It develops women's sense of moral responsibility and agency;
- It helps women feel connected to other women in the struggle.

Of the 19 women in the research, only one said that the Women's Studies course had not helped her and she only took it because it was compulsory (that year). She felt that the issue of women was sometimes pushed to the extreme, but acknowledged that she had acquired an awareness of women's rights. The remaining 18 women all expressed *varying degrees* of growth and enrichment as a result of the course. It is important to note that experiences of the course were not uniform across all the criteria but that some shifts were experienced by all, including the person cited above, who expressed a minimal level

⁶ Different creative work was encouraged: poetry, handicrafts, paintings and cards, prayers, songs and liturgies.

of gain. As this was not a quantitative study my evidence is drawn from the participants' comments and feedback in the questionnaires and in subsequent interviews.

6.1.4.1 Women are inserted as subjects of theological knowledge

In exploring ideas about God and women in an environment where some of the strictures of their 'received knowledge' had been lifted, some of the women were able to speak about different ways of being in relationship to God in which they were equally present.

'I felt enriched by the fact that God is my friend. It is important for me to recognize that male symbols of God oppress women and harm our planet. I learnt that using inclusive language when speaking of God increases my sense of self-worth and dignity as a human being and I need to bring it to the awareness of people I meet. God is both father and mother. I also experience new life in the Spirit.'

'Learning about Jesus as the liberator for women was so positive to me. It changed my life and made me to stand knowing that I am an equal to man.'

One woman described her sense of liberation when she was given the task of creating a liturgy (on giving birth), an activity which she had only experienced as being done by men:

'I really wanted to write a liturgy, but I was anxious, as I have never done so before – what if I was inadvertently heretical? I spent a lot of time thinking about what I wanted to say about birth, what it meant to me, how I experienced it, how it related to God, Jesus' life, and the love of God. I thought through the issues of gender neutrality in the service... I was nervous to do something this different, as our church can sometimes be a little conservative.'

Trisk has previously stated that the starting point for the Women's Studies course is women's experience (2003:Questionnaire). This opened up new areas for reflecting theologically that may not normally be seen to be part of a theological agenda. The women were asked to comment on what issues raised in the course they had found most helpful, and what issues they would have liked to have discussed. The following suggestions were made:

caring for children, economic issues and budgeting, loneliness and ways of supporting one another, depression, birthing, breastfeeding, premenstrual tension and menopause, losing interest in sex, divorce, problems of old age, disability, homosexuality, dealing with our differences – race, culture, religion, HIV and AIDS and how to care for orphans, skills for coping with patriarchy, hearing other women's stories, any form of abuse or injustice, prostitution, abortion, self protection.

These issues reflect their own needs but also the needs that they perceive of women around them. The women appreciated the opportunity to reflect on the real experiences of women in their theological studies and want to be able to do this even more. Many of them also commented on how much they enjoyed the different teaching methods and tasks they were required to do for the course, for example, interviewing a woman and writing her story, preparing and running workshops and seminars, researching topics using the media and information from different organisations, creative tasks like writing poetry, prayers, and sermons, and developing liturgies on women's issues.

6.1.4.2 Women's growth, healing and confidence to speak are supported

Most of the participants in the research commented extensively on how the course had given them new confidence and skills to speak out. Many experienced themselves as women in a liberating way. Others expressed how their relationship with God and with others had taken on new dimensions. Some examples from their responses illustrate this:

'[The course] has helped me to be far more comfortable in imaging God as mother. It has also helped to heal my image of God as having men as God's favourite creation.... The church is no longer a men's club. It is a place of healing for all... I have developed a deeper awareness of my relationship with God and other people, and increased love of myself.'

'[The course challenged me] to deal with my own oppression and to live the truth, and to take the opportunity when offered.'

'I feel more positive and good about myself as a woman, more gentle with myself and others, risking to love and be loved and cared for. [I have] a deeper awareness of how Jesus values women's dignity and self worth. [The course] challenged me to respect myself, respect others and take full responsibility for my life-decisions. Also to value other women's opinions as well as my own especially with regard to scripture and other related issues.'

'I felt that I am God's creation and can do whatever any person can do irrespective of sex. I was proud of myself being a woman... It has built up my confidence; no woman is weaker than man... I know that is not a mistake for me to be a woman.'

'I feel that I have grown emotionally, intellectually and especially spiritually. I have found myself intellectually challenged at times on topics I have not pondered before.'

'One can only minister from the place where you are as a person. I am growing on a personal level through the course – it is a healing process rather than an academic or cognitive process.'

Reflecting on the overall College environment at COT, and its support for women who may be struggling with specific problems, Trisk says:

'All students are given support... For example, students are given time and sometimes financial assistance, to travel to be with family members in need. All students are assisted in obtaining psychological and medical help. All students are given the necessary time off for dealing with depression, illness, childcare needs.'

6.1.4.3 Women are educated to analyse oppression at a personal and structural level

Both colleges share a similar view on the purpose of the course, viz. to help learners examine patriarchy in church and society:

'The course addresses the patriarchal nature of the church and society structures. It also deals with issues relating to different stages of being a woman, abuse, sexual violence and fears of being unsafe, caring within the context of HIV and Aids, and gendered poverty.' (Trisk, COT 2003: Questionnaire).

'We are trying to encourage women to read the Scriptures differently, to challenge the structures within society and the Church that are responsible for oppression, to build a different kind of relationship between men and women within their own particular contexts.' (Jill Chatfield, TEEC 2003: Questionnaire).

Many of the participants commented on how the course helped them to see patriarchy at work in their homes, the church and society. As described in chapter 4, a number of the participants had experienced physical and emotional abuse in their marriages or were working with women and children who had been abused. Others described being sidelined by male clergy in their churches. A number of the participants described the changes in themselves as they realized how they had absorbed and internalised their roles and the church's expectations of them (see chapter 4). Most of the women indicated that the course had made a difference to their theological insights about women.

Sixteen of the 19 participants agreed that the Christian religion oppressed women in some way (of the remaining three, two were adamant that it did not, and one was not sure). They cited a number of reasons for their answers including exclusive language, expectations that women should occupy submissive roles, negative attitudes towards women experienced in the church, and biblical interpretations and doctrines that were prejudiced against women:

'[The Christian religion oppresses women] when the church becomes patriarchal and teaches androcentric culture as the gospel and God's will.'

'When women are limited in the ways they can serve God because men are unable to accept the equality of the genders.'

'Certain parts of the bible have been taken by the church fathers and used to keep women oppressed. Jesus' words and actions have conveniently been ignored when it comes to women. In churches today, words are cheap. People talk about having been liberated and yet patriarchal language is still very prevalent. Our young people still believe that God is male and that's just the way it is.'

'This course has introduced me to a different interpretation of the bible. It opened my eyes to reading with perspective and to seeing how radical Jesus' attitude to women was. This has been very powerful and healing for me.'

'[The Christian religion oppresses women when it decides] when they are allowed to speak or not.'

'[The Christian religion oppresses women when it demands that women] 'Cover their heads particularly when she ought to stand before the congregation and preach.'

When asked to discuss the relationship between men and women, all agreed that men and women were equal. Several spoke about a complementary relationship between men and women suggesting that women and men both have gendered qualities that they bring to the ministry, where women's contribution was gentleness and care. I think this is problematic in the light of the way that the church assigns caring roles automatically to women, and that some women perceive this to be the way it has been ordained by God. One participant commented on women's greater strength in difficult situations:

'the women are the ones making ends meet while many men are unemployed.'

Another said that 'men are rough, cruel and mostly irresponsible'.

When asked to think about their ideas about the body and sexuality, they all agreed that a woman's body was good and that sexuality is a gift to be celebrated and enjoyed. A few of the women suggested that the soul was more important than the body and two women believed that a woman's body tempts men so it should be well covered. Most of the women support the view that God has ordained women as nurturers and carers. These tendencies to gender stereotyping point to further work that needs to be done with women to overcome their socialisation, and particularly how their compliance with gender stereotyping is open to exploitation by the church that prescribes caring work as women's work.

6.1.4.4 Women's sense of agency and responsibility is developed

Many of the participants expressed how they were challenged through the course to do something with their new insights, either to expose sexism in the church structures, to share their experiences with other women, or to get involved in broader social projects aimed at addressing the needs of women in society. Some of these projects have already been described in chapter 4. This is important as it suggests that the course was not limited to acquiring new knowledge and consciousness, but that women decided to act on this knowledge and assert their moral agency in their local situations.

'I know today that I have a stand in my family. I don't talk to my husband when he is drunk. I talk to him in the morning and show him the correct way of living that as a woman I also need love and care.'

'[During the course I felt] exhilaration, excitement – what more can I do, how much can I do, when and how soon?'

'I decided to be the best role model that I could possibly be especially in my role as Rector... It also helped me to reflect on what I have to offer the church as a woman.'

'Women's Studies helped me to give awareness to other women in the church who still think that their subordination to men is God given. Also to be aware of the social issues that are happening around them especially to be critical of what the media is displaying as right for women while using them for its marketing.'

'[The course has helped me to] challenge patriarchal oppression through church leaders which has resulted in victimization of women, including myself... I find myself being able to support my views by making references to what I have learnt biblically.'

'[The course] has affirmed in me that I have a right to enter the ministry which is mostly male dominated. It has given me the courage to be outspoken on women's issues.'

The work of Belenky *et al* (1986) discussed in chapter 5 has shown how the development of a woman's voice and agency is measured in some way by her ability to question and challenge the received knowledge and those who authorize it.

Whenever subordinate knowledge is claimed and voiced within the public domain, the hegemony of the mainstream knowledge is challenged, and public space is claimed for an additional voice (Brooks 2002:147).

Thus when women stand up to their drunken husbands, take on leadership roles, share their insights with other women, ask questions in committee meetings, and speak their voice in the public spaces of the church in their preaching and teaching, they are allowing the hidden transcript to be made public. These are acts of resistance and of moral agency.

6.1.4.5 Women feel connected to other women

As previously noted, participants enjoyed the creative tasks and the use of story as a way of learning about the realities of other women. This observation corroborates Hart's comment (2002:146) noted in chapter 5 (5.3.3) about the potential for stories to transform women 'from silence to language and action, and from isolation to connection'. For example:

'I was more able to work with other women in the community – more sure of my thinking – more sure that I would like to continue this study.'

Other participants commented on how the tasks drew them into a deeper understanding and empathy for other women as has already been discussed in chapter 4 (4.2.4.4).

In summarising these insights expressed by the women it is important to note that they generally have a positive view of the Women's Studies course. Its aims of exposing students to patriarchy in society and the church, and the contribution of feminism as a critique and transformative tool have largely been met. This suggests that the Women's Studies course in these two educational contexts has made a contribution in providing a space for engagement with the question of patriarchal power, as well as for affirming women's agency and supporting them to find new and liberating ways of serving God.

Duqué (2001:30) speaks about the educational institution as the 'illuminator of reality'. It seems that the Women's Studies course tried to do this - to illuminate the reality of the oppression of women by church and society, and what needs to happen to change this. Further, it created the space to hear women's theological voice which, as Duqué suggests, is not simply a matter of physical space in a school but 'it is a matter of subjective space, that is a pedagogic, semantic, and epistemological space' (:31).

But there are indications from the students that point to the need for further theological work, for example around issues of sexuality and embodiment, and dealing with some of the vestiges of dualistic thinking which have influenced theological anthropology, as discussed in chapter 5. There are elements of self-care that need to be enhanced. In addition, the women also indicated a number of difficulties mainly to do with their overall experiences of learning in the institution.

6.1.5 What gaps remain?

The women in the research highlighted areas of difficulty and contradictions relating to accessibility, support and sustainability, which I will now discuss.

6.1.5.1 The question of women's access to theological education

The criterion of access relates to broader institutional policies of the colleges and the supporting churches, as well as to questions of finance and family responsibilities. At COT, as previously noted, women in 2004 constituted less than 15% of the student body. As Trisk says (2003:Questionnaire), access to the College is dependent on bishops of dioceses who decide whether women will be sent away for their studies. However, the College is supportive of women students and provides family quarters, making it possible for married women, or single women with children to attend. However, this is contingent on the ability of the family to relocate and spouses to find work in the area.

Because TEEC offers its programme via distance education, many more women are able to access theological education. Most women in ministry are in families as well as working in their churches and communities. The residential option is attractive but is not accessible to most women, and in addition is a costly one. As we see from the COT enrolment mentioned in the beginning of the chapter (6.1.2), dioceses still opt to send men for residential training, highlighting the patriarchal attitudes that drive decisions about training women. Thus the TEEC model is a realistic and affordable option. It also keeps the women embedded within their own environments and so assignments can be applied in context, and opportunities for reflection on practice in their church communities is possible. However, as Khitome (2003:245) points out, although the distance model makes theological education accessible to rural people, the downside for women is that it adds a further burden to women's already burdened lives. This is an important consideration in the context of our discussion of women and self-care.

As I pointed out in chapter 5 (5.1.1.1) questions of access do not refer only to gaining entry into theological institutions, but they also include *support* for women in their academic studies once they are there. Learning is a social process – COT recognises this and creates opportunities for this to happen where ideas can be shared, challenged and integrated into practice within the framework of college life. It also creates a caring

and supportive environment within which this learning can take place. But, as Trisk suggests, women with families do not always find the College routine takes their family needs into account:

'.. the overall college programme is not "family friendly", e.g. chapel times are inconvenient.

TEEC learners are generally alone in their studies and some participants noted the difficulties they experienced with the extension model: lack of support from some tutors, tutors who are sometimes unsympathetic, no tutorial groups in some places, or tutorials that were not useful. For many, the limited time for reading / study while also caring for a family, working in ministry, and earning a living was a real problem. This participant raised the question of few supports for learners in rural areas:

'I would not mind a few more meeting the lecturer sessions. But I accept that staying in the Styx like we do, that's our lot.... I feel people in cities are hugely privileged because they can also meet in groups with other students and we don't have that... It's very isolated and honestly, there've been times when I've been so lonely... It's not a college situation. It's definitely correspondence. ...I think also to be able to meet like that (residentially), I think you grow spiritually so much than being isolated... I think in cities it works better because when I've spoken to people in the cities, they've had huge support there.'

Jarvis (1997:115) reflects on distance education and the ethical issues that are associated with it in relation to the development of course material, as well as its delivery in the teacherless, virtual classroom. His view is that ethical responsibility requires a relationship between teacher and learner which is not possible within a distance education context. A course team/writer decides on the topics in the course and prepares materials that are then produced and marketed. Thus the course writer and others in the production chain are separated from the learners - the other - and have no direct responsibility for them because there is no relationship, although they will have a professional regard for the quality of what they write or print etc (116).⁷ Similarly, the course writer or a part-time tutor, as in the case of TEEC, may mark assignments and send out memos as a way of 'teaching' the course. But once again there may not be any relationship.

⁷ Bauman uses the term 'adiaphorization' to describe the process of stripping human relationships of their moral significance, which he suggests is an accomplishment of bureaucracy, aided and abetted by technology. In Jarvis, *Ethics and education for adults in the late modern society*. (Leicester: NIACE, 1997) p.116.

My experiences in several distance educational institutions as a student,⁸ course writer and a 'lecturer' suggest that this relationship can be bridged and the ethical responsibility of 'teacher' and learner reinstated, depending on the commitment of the lecturers and of the students. Contact via telephone, e-mail, personalised tutorial letters, as well as formative and extended responses to assignments can help in building this relationship. But this requires effort on both sides and the personal contact visits are essential, infrequent though they may be.

TEEC learners' comments about the institutional environment were limited to their experiences of efficient delivery of coursework and marked assignments, and adequate and helpful responses to queries, generally of an administrative nature. From their questionnaires, it is evident that very few students have any idea of how the college is run, its culture, or about the working relationships between staff, although some of the students in Johannesburg and the environs have had direct contact with staff during tutorials and visits to the library. One of the participants remarked that the College did not get to know its students:

'The College is not very involved in our lives at all. The 'student groups' never materialised. I am not sure if they ever get to know us as students at all. I just happen to have friends there, so they know me.'

Yet it is interesting to note that several participants commented on the efficiency of the administration with regard to delivery of course materials, posting of marks, and general help they received from the administrative staff when they requested it. Jarvis' point about the separation of teacher and learner in the distance education model is borne out, but it would seem that the learning relationship is mediated in other ways, in this case through the administration.

Kithome (2003:250-253) discusses the TEE model from the perspective of other African countries,⁹ and highlights two features that may have been lost in the South

⁸ In the 1980s I developed a number of courses for a distance learning Matric programme for the Sached Trust. I have been both a student and a staff member at TEE College where I was in charge of the Practical Theology Department and wrote and overwrote a number of courses. I have been a student at Unisa since 1996 and worked there for a short while on contract.

⁹ Kithome is writing about using the TEE methodology as an effective method for HIV and AIDS education in rural areas in Africa.

African development of TEE and which could still be useful. *Firstly*, the role of the small group facilitator who may be one of the students, and whose function is to ensure that the group meets regularly. TEE South Africa has developed a corps of theologically trained regional co-ordinators who convene tutorials and provide academic support, but has not placed emphasis on small group facilitators who could ensure smaller, local meetings on a more regular basis.¹⁰ *Secondly*, using a range of methods to enhance the print medium of the course material, Khitome suggests song and dance, games and role play, story telling, puppetry, and using traditional symbols and visual material. This presupposes that there are groups of learners, which may not always be the case for TEEC learners in South Africa. But certainly regular meetings of small groups, where possible, and an integration of popular learning methods could be useful in addressing some of the difficulties of second-language English speakers that I raised in chapter 5 (5.3.3).

6.1.5.2 Unhealed wounds, fears and loneliness

Once women have gained access, are their needs for healing really met within the context of their theological training? In the questionnaires and the interviews the women spoke of their own experiences of abuse as children, and others in their marriages. The high incidence of violence against women in our society also makes it highly probable that among women in training for ministry there will be women who need the classroom to serve as a 'healing space' as Horsman suggests (chapter 5, 5.4.2). Other needs for care were raised by the women: one described her struggle against cancer and another spoke about the stress she carried trying to earn a living in addition to her studies, ministry and family responsibilities. But a number of other needs for healing have also been highlighted by the women in this research which include: dealing with their own poor self image and lack of confidence; grappling with the way culture and traditions have shaped their identity and how this continues to be harmful to them; lacking the skills and confidence to challenge authorities and discriminatory practices in the church; and feeling lonely, tired and depressed as the burden of their work and their growing consciousness isolates them from fellow-clergy and parishioners.

¹⁰ These were the practices I observed during my period of employment and afterwards during my research.

COT provides opportunities for psychological counselling to those students who need it. However, while the TEEC Women's Studies course raises the importance of this healing, as an extension college it is not able to respond to this need. This may mean that many of TEEC's students have to find other spaces for this healing; for many this will be in their churches.

But, as we have seen, churches do not always provide this care. One participant spoke about the absence of community and her loneliness despite belonging to a vibrant parish. Another described the prevalence of racism in her church, referring to the isolation that some ordained women of colour experience within the church, where 'white women are seen as honorary men'.

6.1.5.3 Sustainability

The *question of sustainability* was also raised by students from both colleges. Many participants spoke about a lack of support for women once they graduated from college and entered the church. One COT woman says:

'I think for me I was very much aware that I was coming to a male dominated career. And I think ...the theological studies prepared, ...helped you enter into that career as a man. As a woman I think you have to find your own way. And also where do you get the support, how do you create that support for yourself as a woman when you are in a male dominated world?... How did other people do it; how did other feminists do it?'

She reflects further on the way ex-students are spread out, making it difficult for them to support one another, and also that women themselves do not support one another enough: 'that's where women fail each other'.

Other COT participants spoke about their struggle to sustain an alternative vision for their ministry once they left the supportive environment of the college, of the difficulties of engendering the liturgy and other aspects of ministry. This suggests that it is difficult to sustain a feminist critique and practice once women are placed in their churches that are either hostile, or at best neutral to women's issues, insights and leadership. These concerns were raised in chapter 4 (4.3).

TEEC students who are already operational in their churches spoke about being exposed to new and challenging insights in their studies but which they are generally unable to reflect on in their church community, and their difficulties with sustaining different views and practices within the church. Musimbi Kanyoro and others draw

attention to the situation that trained women theologians confront once they leave their colleges. Not only do they face the power and hierarchies within the church and the constraints against women entering a male-dominated institution, but also the conservative aspects of culture that make other women not allies to a transformative project but some of women ministers' harshest critics.¹¹

All these insights point me to an examination of the church as a site of formation and of practice for these and other women.

6.2 THE CHURCH AS A COMMUNITY OF FORMATION AND PRACTICE FOR WOMEN

While a few women, once they have completed their theological training, may take up positions in academia, chaplaincies or church administration, for the most part women will express their ministry of caring in their local churches. For critical and conscious women this may well represent a contradictory space for them and be extremely difficult. If I think of the women whom I described in chapter 4 (4.1) and extrapolate from what they have said, questions like these emerge:

- How can **A** and **M**, both serving in rural parishes where 'women pull hard under oppression', sustain their own belief that it can be different and also help other women understand how culture and traditions can also be part of their oppression?
- What support can **C** draw on to deal with those in her parish who trivialize her insights with their 'little-women mindset'?
- Does **D**, despite being retired and widowed, still feel connected to other women who are asking questions about women and their religion?
- How can **E** confront the sexism of her male colleagues at school and her parish priest?
- Is **F**'s exhaustion and burn-out an isolated experience? Who helps her to recover and prevent it from happening again?
- Will **G** be able to sustain her ministry in a remote village without navigating the system and the hierarchies of the church? What support structures can she draw on?

¹¹ See Musimbi Kanyoro, Engendered Communal Theology: African Women's Contribution to Theology in the 21st Century, in Njoroge & Dube *Talitha cum: Theologies of African Women*. (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2001) pp.158-180.

- How can **H**, and **J** and **K** overcome the resistance to their leadership in their parishes?
- Who will help **I** deal with the tension of responding to issues that affect women in her community, and her culture that demands obedience and respect for the man as the head of the household, as well as church hierarchies?
- Will **L** always be confident enough to challenge church council decisions that marginalise women?
- What does **N** do with her questions about women's exclusion from ordination in her church?
- Without support, how long can **O** and **S** continue to respond to all the demands on them for caring from their families, their parishes and their communities?
- How long can **P** survive in an environment that does not support her ministry and also resolve her questions about the feminine nature of God?
- Who will support **Q**'s healing from abuse?
- Will **R** move completely outside of the church in her search for acknowledgment of her skills and ministry?

Daly (1994:128) has suggested that the institutional church is not the community for women, as it cannot function in a liberating way for them; it imposes its sexist ideology and restrictions on women and has created a 'caste' of women. While acknowledging this critique, I wish to consider the conditions which will make it possible for women to remain and function as critical and caring agents in their churches. Here I want to discuss the notion of 'communities of practice' (Lave 1988, Lave and Wenger 1991, Wenger 1998) and how such communities can provide spaces for women to develop strategies for sustaining their critical insights with others who share their concerns.¹²

6.2.1 Communities of practice

A *community of practice* is a community intentionally formed around a common focus, mainly around things that matter to people. As Wenger (1998:1) suggests:

Communities of practice are everywhere. We all belong to a number of them – at

¹² I am grateful to John Mc Cormick and Howard Summers for introducing me to the work of Lave and Wenger in *Christian Religious Education*, Book 1, chapter 4. (Johannesburg: TEEC, 2001).

work, at school, at home, in our hobbies. Some have a name. Some don't. We are core members of some and we belong to others more peripherally.

Communities of practice are informally bound together by what people do together. Within an educational institution a focus group, a small study group or a student movement may be such a community of practice. In the church context, religious orders of women which developed during the Middle Ages and subsequently could be considered as communities of practice where groups of women defined for themselves their particular responses to the social imperatives of the time in relation to their spirituality and understanding of God. A local church may be a community of practice, but so too could some of the smaller configurations in a church be considered as such, e.g. prayer cells, Bible study and faith sharing groups, as well as organisations within and across local church borders.

6.2.1.1 How learning happens

Lave and Wenger (1991:100ff) describe how learning happens in a community of practice through *legitimate peripheral participation*.¹³ A newcomer enters a community of practice and learns from the older members through participating in the work of that community. She thus becomes integrated into the community, sharing in the knowledge, activities and processes that are in circulation. Learning includes the cultural assumptions and values, rules, patterns, tools, practices etc.

“Legitimate peripheral participation” provides a way to speak about the relations between newcomers and old-timers, and about activities, identities, artifacts, and communities of knowledge and practice. It concerns the process by which newcomers become part of a community of practice. A person's intentions to learn are engaged and the meaning of learning is configured through the process of becoming a full participant in a socio-cultural practice. This social process includes, indeed it subsumes, the learning of knowledgeable skills (:29).

¹³ Lave and Wenger (1991) based their findings on studies of apprenticeship in five diverse groups – the Yucatec Mayan midwives in Mexico, Vai and Gola tailors in Liberia, work-learning settings of US navy quartermasters, among butchers in US supermarkets, and among ‘non-drinking alcoholics’ in Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). They examined learning in relation to changing identities, forms of recruitment, relationships between masters and apprentices, and the organisational activity with which members were involved (:63-87). Within the process of learning, Lave and Wenger suggest that particular methods are used in different communities of practice, for example, in the AA (Alcoholics Anonymous) personal stories are told in order to help drinkers see themselves within the stories of other alcoholics. Through telling their story and listening to others tell theirs, new members are able to recognise themselves (:81).

By participating in a community of practice, ‘newcomers’ are gradually transformed into ‘oldtimers’ who will initiate more newcomers into the practice. So rather than learning by replicating the performance of others or by acquiring knowledge transmitted in instruction, learning occurs through ‘centripetal participation in the learning curriculum’ of the community (:100).

Newcomers are legitimate participants no matter what their levels of experience are. They participate in the community as well as in the productive activity (:110) and are important for the community to reproduce itself. Old timers continue to learn by their continued participation in the community. They do not become leaders or managers by virtue of their knowledge or age but as a result of their experience, strengths and ongoing participation and growth.

When members participate in the life of a community of practice two things happen. *Firstly*, an identity is shaped as a member of the community.¹⁴ Learning involves deep changes on behalf of the learners even if there is no specific intentional instruction or a set curriculum to be learned. *Secondly*, the newcomer begins to gain the knowledge and acquire the skills necessary for them to become ‘master’ learners, the experts and specialists in the life of the community and thus to shape the community (:55).

The practice of the community creates the curriculum but it is not specified as a set of rules that have to be followed, and mastery or competence is judged according to engagement in practice (:93). In the apprenticeship model, Lave and Wenger speak about ‘a decentred view of the master-apprentice relation’ meaning that the focus is not on the master with all the knowledge who must transfer it to the apprentice, but mastery is in the organisation, of which the master is a part, and the community is the container or repository of the knowledge. This knowledge is not just a number of skills but is also a set of activities and relationships, in the community and in relation to other communities of practice (:98). Sometimes members make their own curriculum or bring new skills and understandings to the group that may be incorporated into the group’s practice.

¹⁴ Identity is understood as ‘the way a person understands and views himself (*sic*), and is viewed by others, a perception of self which is fairly constant’. Lave and Wenger, *Situated Learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) p.81.

Lave and Wenger (:115) acknowledge that relationships between newcomers and old timers are not always smooth. They refer to the term ‘continuity-displacement contradiction’ to describe different ways that oldtimers and newcomers conflict and generate competing viewpoints and how this can lead to power conflicts. But both need each other – the newcomer needs the oldtimers to learn from, oldtimers need the new generation of members to continue the community and do the work. Huzzard (2004:357) raises the issue of power relationships within communities of practice and suggests that they have the potential to become ‘communities of domination’, i.e. for power to be asymmetrically defined.

6.2.1.2 The church as an example of a community of practice

Lave and Wenger’s description of communities of practice can well be applied to the church. Newcomers are inducted into the community in different ways: as young babies through their parents, as young children or teenagers, or later as adults. This induction is usually ritualised in the ceremony of baptism and the person assumes the identity of a Christian, a disciple of Jesus.

The church as a community of practice has a reproductive function – it socialises its members in the theological knowledge, practices, habits and roles necessary for the church to reproduce itself in society. It also seeks to shape the character of the person in compliance with certain habits and virtues. In chapter 2 (2.1.3.1) I referred to Hauerwas’ focus on the role of the Christian community in fostering the moral person (in Richardson 1994:92). This happens through functions of worship, proclamation and reaching out, and training for discipleship and in communal virtues of courage, patience, hope, charity, non-violence, hospitality to the stranger (:96).

Most formal learning in the church takes place through the preaching and teaching offices of the minister and other church leaders whose role is to provide the ‘interpretive support necessary for making sense of its heritage’ (Lave and Wenger 1991:98). But much of the learning takes place through members’ participation in different church activities, e.g. in youth groups, prayer and bible study groups, choir, liturgical/worship events, social and pastoral activities, and other church groups or organisations.

Richardson (1994:97) has previously argued that the church is a contradictory environment and can be supportive of theological perspectives and practices that are distorted or support discrimination. And, as the research has indicated, the church is often not a comfortable place for conscious women. Tuckey (1997:159), in her discussion of the religious socialisation of children, argues that gender stereotypes and submissive roles for women are deeply embedded within attitudes and practices of the church. These attitudes are shaped at a young age through the formal processes of learning in the Sunday school material, the Bible stories and the Christian education programme of the church. However, a powerful form of socialisation also occurs informally through the tacit knowledge, activities and processes that are in circulation, viz 'the cultural assumptions and values, rules, patterns, tools, practices' (Lave and Wenger 1991:100ff). As Tuckey (1997:159) suggests:

...most socialisation is unconscious and comes through being part of the faith community. Children absorb what happens around them: the language used, the symbols, people's roles, the patterns and atmosphere of worship as well as the attitudes and values of the church community.

To change these perceptions of women, Tuckey (:162-167) proposes conscious interventions at the level of inclusive language in the liturgy, selecting biblical and educational materials with pictures and text that are gender sensitive, and which foreground women role models in the Scriptures.

As has been noted by the women in the research, those who enter or return to churches with new theological insights and a critique of the gender roles in the church find it very difficult to negotiate a space where such insights can be recognised and applied, as they appear for many in the church as totally new and threatening to the *status quo*. Gebara (2002: 69) reminds us that any change in a system requires more than new knowledge; it also requires the establishment of consensus:

Knowledge is certainly important in the process of transformation, but it is not enough to bring about actual change. To change the very conditions that produce relationships of domination, there must be a collective process of education. There must be agreement, a minimal consensus, a common analysis to intercept what has become habitual.

Women who come into their churches with new knowledge have yet to work for consensus amongst their co-clergy and the parishioners in order for this new knowledge and practice to become acceptable and ultimately normative. At the same time it is important to note that churches are not homogenous spaces, and that within a church community there will be different interest groups and power bases, some of which will be more receptive to change and ready to appropriate new ideas and practices. However, those women who wish to serve as change agents within their churches, will require a level of support that may well not be present in their primary community of practice. Thus I propose that a 'secondary' community of practice is essential for women to sustain their critical theological consciousness and practice. And women need to be proactive in forming such communities of support. They should identify other women in their locality who share their ideas and agree to meet on a regular basis.

In the next section I present another case study of the Grail as an example of a 'secondary' community of practice for women working in the church during the 1980s.

6.3 A WOMEN'S MOVEMENT AS A COMMUNITY OF TRANSFORMATIVE PRACTICE

Wenger (1998:3) draws attention to the possibility of communities of practice which may develop *within* or *across* larger organisations or structures and which can be agents of generating new knowledge and transformative practice in the organisation. These communities of practice are driven by what the members identify as important, i.e. there is an 'internal mandate' although, as Wenger (:2) suggests, outside constraints or directives may influence this understanding. 'In this sense, communities of practice are fundamentally self-organizing systems' that are open to newcomers who become an integral part of their functioning.

In many ways this particular women's movement – the Grail – can be seen as an example of a 'secondary' community of practice forged by women from different parishes and even denominations. Its aim is to generate new theological knowledge, shape alternative practices, and serve as a support for women's transformative work in their homes, parishes, and other structures in the church, community and larger society. Through this exploration I hope to derive some general directions for ways of supporting women in the church.

6.3.1 Background to the Grail¹⁵

The Grail is an international Christian women's movement consisting of about one thousand women from 24 countries. It was started in 1921 by a Dutch priest, Jacques van Ginneken, originally known as the Women of Nazareth. Van Ginneken believed that a new era was emerging for laywomen that was different from the life and commitment of religious sisters, and where women could make a contribution to the transformation of the world. By 1939 it had become a large movement of thousands of young women in Holland, England and Germany but was crushed by Hitler and forced to go underground. After World War II it started up again and spread to other continents. The movement has different kinds of members: the nucleus where members make a life commitment to living in celibacy and to be fully at the disposal of the movement, and married and single women.

The spirit of the Grail is infused by the legend of Parsifal in search of the Grail cup - a popular legend during the Middle Ages but one which describes the human search for the sacred, for peace and plenty and the transcendent in many cultures and mythologies. This particular version of the legend tells of a young knight who goes in search of the Grail, the cup that Jesus is supposed to have used at the Last Supper and which Joseph of Arimathea used to catch Jesus' blood as he hung on the cross. After the death of Joseph the cup was passed down in his family and every year the guardian of the cup held a great feast - for everyone it served as a symbol of peace, of generosity and affection. But one day the current guardian, the Fisher King, refused to help a beggar with food and after that, things went wrong - the crops failed and peace was lost - the country became a wasteland. The Fisher King lay on his bed in great pain and illness and there were no more feasts and the castle disappeared. Many knights set out in search of the castle of the Fisher King, but none were successful. Parsifal tried his luck as well and arrived at the castle, but his attention was diverted by the sight of a great procession, and he ignored the king and his suffering. And so he was led away from the castle and back into the world. But slowly he became aware of the suffering around him and grew in compassion, wisdom and humility. Finally he found his way back to the castle and to the

¹⁵ I have drawn information on the background to the Grail movement from Anne Hope (ed). *The Grail: Entering the 21st Century*. (New York: The International Grail Secretariat, 2001) pp.3-5.

dying king. This time he was able to respond to the king's needs and asked the crucial questions: What ails the king? What is the Grail? Whom does it serve?' This translates as – what is the cause of your suffering, and how can we respond to it with compassion? What are we meant to do?

It is this story that captures the purpose and commitment of the Grail movement as summarised in the core beliefs/principles:

- Recognition of the dignity and contributions of women and their leadership;
- The belief that work is love made visible and 'through good and generous work, Christians can share in the co-creation, renewal and transformation of society'¹⁶
- Recognition in the oneness of the human family where people from different cultures and religions share with each their insights of the nature of God (:83).

Hope (2001:10) sums up the mission of the Grail as being participant in the transformation of the world through care, which she describes as 'much more than a personal attitude of women in their relationships with others in the family, the neighbourhood and the workplace... it is an ethical choice, asking of both human beings and institutions a "paradigm shift", a disciplined search for deeper awareness, and a conversion of heart'. This is an important insight in the light of this research which seeks to support women through their theological formation, in finding spaces for the expression of their ethical call to care beyond the boundaries that are prescribed by society and by the church.

6.3.2 My experiences within the Grail (1981-1991)

I joined the Grail in South Africa¹⁷ in 1981 when I was living and teaching in Lesotho after meeting with a Grail member Cathy Bond Stewart who was working in a rural community in Kwa Zulu-Natal. Initially my contact was limited to attending a national meeting. However, when our family moved to Johannesburg I joined the local group and became an active participant – attending monthly meetings and working in some of the programmes of the group. There were about 20 women from different parts of Gauteng:

¹⁶ In Van Schalkwyk, *The story of Anne Hope: A White Woman's Contribution towards South African Liberation*, In Isabel Apawo Phiri *et al*, *Her-Stories: Hidden Histories of Women of Faith in Africa*. (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2002) p.83.

¹⁷ In South Africa there are three Grail locations – in Johannesburg, in the Western Cape and in KwaZulu - Natal.

some from Soweto, others from the surrounding suburbs and a core of about 6 'nucleus' members who lived at the Grail centre and were the older and more experienced members. The centre was the hub of business meetings, planning groups, liturgies and celebrations. It was also a meeting place for political discussions and a safe haven for comrades on the run from the security police during the repressive days of the State of Emergency. Often we provided shelter for young activists.

Most of the members were also actively engaged within their parishes, either in catechesis, prayer and bible study groups, working with women's organisations in the church, e.g. the Ama Ana and the Catholic Women's League, or involved in the structures of the church and parish renewal. Others became involved with skills and empowerment projects with unemployed women in local communities, with ecology projects and conscientization work.

I joined the work of two senior Grail members in projects – one a Skills Training project in Soweto which was a co-operative where women met daily to learn sewing and knitting skills. There I taught English and life skills and joined in other aspects of the work. The other project was the Women's Leadership Training project and my task was to work with a group of teenage girls from Soweto and write a manual that they and other groups could use in their meetings.

I was a keen member and quite happy to take on responsibility and leadership within the group - initially serving as chairperson of the local group, then as the formation co-ordinator, and also as the international representative for a period. It was through the Grail that events taking place in South Africa during the 1980s were filtered. I also became connected to the Justice and Peace movement in the church and wrote two manuals for them during this time.

I learnt a huge amount while I was there – but the learning was never formally devised within a curriculum or handbook. It was learnt 'on the job'. Through helping to plan events, I learnt a range of organisational skills – chairing meetings, writing reports and minutes, and planning agendas and other events. Through my involvement with the prayer and bible education group I discovered feminist theology, new ways of speaking about and relating to God, women in scripture and in history, and preparing women-

friendly liturgies, including house Eucharists where women delivered the homily, retreats were led by women, and *seder* meals celebrated women in the bible.

Meetings were a combination of business and analysis and input on politics, economics and theology – never delivered formally but using Freiran methods and group processes – codes, role-plays and local stories.¹⁸ History, politics, economics, the resistance movements, the environment, women and health issues were all an integral part of the discussions and programmes within which we were involved. Although there was no absence of theory, it was always integrated into a reflection-action process in which a commitment to justice and action in the world was fostered.

During two international events I was able to meet other Grail members from around the world and was privileged to meet members from those countries who gave first hand accounts of two world events - the collapse of the Berlin wall and the revolution in the Philippines. Other political events around the world, and in particular how women were involved or affected, formed a central focus of those international meetings, as well as times to celebrate the diversity of cultural and faith expressions. The international dimension of the Grail I believe is very important for breaking tendencies to insularity which might be a weakness in the community of practice model. Also the movement's connections and interactions with others individuals, groups and structures outside helped the balancing of inward and outwardly directed energies.

This description has deliberately been a thumbnail sketch of an extremely rich and formative period in my life which came to an end in 1991 when I decided to leave. After an intense period of involvement and activism, and of trying to balance the demands of family and remunerative work, I felt that I needed space and time to think about what I had been learning and to pursue further academic studies.

In analysing this case study of the Grail and how this movement demonstrates the characteristics of a community of practice, I wish to identify elements that may be of value to other women seeking ongoing support for their work in ministry.

¹⁸ The handbooks prepared by Grail members Anne Hope and Sally Timmel *Training for Transformation* were 'core textbooks'.

6.3.3 The Grail as a community of practice

The Grail can be said to function as a community of practice that gathered Christian women from their roles in other primary communities of practice. It was an intentional and ‘self-organising system’ that was open to newcomers who chose to identify with its aims and become part of its functioning. Newcomers to the movement learnt how to make ‘ethical choices’ within a community; they learnt that their faith and spirituality are linked to these choices; and that care is about self, the other and the earth.

The modes of formation were based on methodologies that encouraged women to speak with confidence and which helped women develop analytical skills and a responsiveness to the issues in the context. Participation in the movement gave members a space where their discontent in their local churches, and their separation from women from other races was bridged. It also provided opportunities for spiritual growth and for engagement in actions. In all this, the movement had ‘value for its members’ (Wenger 1998:3).

6.3.3.1 Recruitment

In the Grail new members sought the movement and were introduced to its vision and mission through contact with old members, hence my introduction via another member. Newcomers were initiated into the movement through being drawn into the activities of the movement at a local level. There was also a ‘Growing into the Grail’ process, which culminated in a commitment ceremony.

Wenger suggests that there is a life cycle to a community of practice (see table below), which is determined by the value that its members find in continuing to belong to it. The *Active stage* reflects the period of peak engagement with the community of practice. This is helpful in seeing that membership of a community of practice does not necessarily extend into perpetuity for each member; there may be a time when some members do not need it any longer and they move on. In the Grail, the core of members – the nucleus – remained mostly constant, but there was also movement outward of other members, including myself, who found themselves moving in other directions not necessarily satisfied by the movement. However the experience remains ‘memorable’ and its learnings frequently referred to by those who move on.

Table 5: Life cycle of a community of practice

STAGES OF DEVELOPMENT				
		Active Members engage in developing a practice	Dispersed Members no longer engage very intensely, but the community is still alive as a force and a centre of knowledge	Memorable The community is no longer central, but people still remember it as a significant part of their identities
Potential People face similar situations without the benefit of shared practice	Coalescing Members come together and recognize their potential			
TYPICAL ACTIVITIES				
Finding each other, discovering commonalities	Exploring connectedness, defining joint enterprise, negotiating community	Engaging in joint activities, creating artifacts, adapting to changing circumstances, renewing interest, commitment, and relationships	Staying in touch, communicating, holding reunions, calling for advice	Telling stories, preserving artifacts, collecting memorabilia

6.3.3.2 Identity formation

In the Grail there was a strong commitment to supporting the growth of the person to become ‘fully whom God intends one to be’. Thus the particular talents, gifts and interests of each person were welcomed and fostered. There was also a certain ‘Grail’ identity which newcomers were tacitly expected to adopt and which expressed itself in lifestyle options of simplicity and anti-consumerism; inclusiveness and non racialism towards others; an appreciation of that which is authentic and aesthetic; the value of the group as a place of support, challenge and nurture; the importance of personal development, prayer and interiority; and a commitment to service of others.

6.3.3.3 Relationship between newcomers and old members

In the Grail newcomers were welcomed into the group and efforts made to integrate the newcomer into the life and work. Learning happened through participation (meetings, projects, liturgies, and other events). Old members saw their roles as mentors of newcomers and gave generously of their time and expertise in sharing skills. At the same time the contribution of the newcomer was encouraged and new insights and suggestions given space. New members were encouraged to get involved in projects and take on responsibilities. The oldtimers served as role models for the newcomers.

6.3.3.4 Transmission of knowledge

The knowledge transmitted was holistic and incorporated personal growth programmes, e.g. Myers-Brigg, Enneagram;¹⁹ opportunities for developing one's spirituality and exploring some of the debates in feminist theology. There were workshops on church liturgy and frequent discussions on ways to engage creatively in parish structures. Topics relating to developments in the political and economic arena of South Africa during the 1980s were often organised. Other concerns that were debated were issues of care for the environment and peace education. Although there was no documented curriculum, nor accreditation procedure, the knowledge was embedded within the overall mission and work of the movement and applied to practice within the action-reflection model: in the 'set of relations among persons, activity and the world over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice' (Lave and Wenger 1991:98).

6.3.3.5 Productive activity, support and relationship to the broader church

The productive work of the Grail in the community, in making an impact on the church and the broader society, continued through the oldtimers, who at the same time drew on

¹⁹ The *Myers-Brigg Personality Indicator* is based on the model of personality developed by Jung and later Isabel Briggs-Myers. It examines a person's preferences in relation to four questions, each signified by a letter, where the four letters constitute a type. The questions are: where the person's energy is directed (I/E); how the person prefers to process information (S/N); how decisions are made (T/F); and how the person prefers to organise his/her life (J/P) www.teamtechnology.co.uk.

The Enneagram is an ancient spiritual tool said to have been used by the desert fathers and mothers, and possibly derived from Sufi wisdom. It attempts to map a person's inner world by examining motivations and compulsions. Its fundamental premise is that each person has one dominant, but not exclusive energy, that motivates everything we do. A nine-point system is used where each point represents a particular orientation or drive www.enneagramcentral.com.

the fresh energy of newcomers in initiating new projects. There was always an ‘oldtimer’ or a committee of ‘newcomers’ and ‘oldtimers’ available to provide help or support with projects, and strict accountability at local and annual meetings was expected.

Wenger (:4) suggests that communities of practice relate to the whole structure or organisation in a number of different ways:

- unrecognised by the rest of the organisation;
- informally known by some;
- legitimised or officially sanctioned;
- seen as strategic to the organisation;
- capable of playing a transformative role in the organisation.

In the case of the Grail its relationship through its members to parishes and the larger organisation of the church was varied. Where members served on official structures in the Southern African Catholic Bishops’ Conference, on diocesan structures, within Catholic women’s organisations and in parishes, their relationship could be said to be ‘legitimized or officially sanctioned’ and in some cases played ‘transformative roles’ in the work for justice and for women in the church. In other cases Grail members would initiate programmes among women in the parish without necessarily acquiring permission from the clergy. In these cases, they could be considered to be ‘informally known by some’ but were mostly ‘unrecognised’ and sometimes when discovered, were actively discouraged. During my time with the Grail, I do not believe it ever achieved mainstream legitimacy but I have no doubt its impact through its members meant that it did play a ‘transformative role in the organisation’.

Wenger (:5) proposes that there is a core and a boundary within a community of practice – the core is where it develops its knowledge, and the boundary is where it shares this knowledge across other communities of practice in the organisation. This is important as it points towards maintaining a balance between the internal interests of maintaining and reproducing the community of practice, and ensuring that members feel a sense of ‘being at home’. At the same time, the aim of the community to impact externally on the organisation - in this case the church - has to be kept in focus. Thus it is important that such a ‘secondary’ community of practice does not lose sight of its role to support women to disseminate their new knowledge, and work to transform the broader

structure of the church. Thus women who may join a 'secondary' community of practice need to keep in mind this broader objective.

Wenger (:4) defines the ways that communities of practice can mediate new knowledge in an organisation or other communities of practice:

- by exchanging and interpreting information that is relevant to the community, in a way that is accessible to it;
- by retaining knowledge in living ways (not in data bases) and thus being able to transfer this knowledge to newcomers;
- by keeping up with new knowledge and helping to share this in the organisation;
- by providing an identity for those who share the particular concern.

In many ways the Grail women's movement meets the criteria discussed earlier for a feminist pedagogical practice, viz: support for women wanting to access theological education; opportunities for healing and nurture; engagement with critical perspectives of feminist theology; methods of learning that are empowering and relational, and opportunities for making connections with other women. But it also provided an important base from which some of the difficulties of working as change agents in the church could be explored.

One of the potential dangers that I can see in any community of practice is that the internal demands to maintain it, and its own need to reproduce itself may interfere with its primary objectives. Then instead of being a support for transformative work, it subsumes women's energies at the expense of the former. The Grail managed this tension to some degree through its layered membership, where the nucleus held the centre and ensured its continuity.

The Grail is one example of a community of practice but there are other movements and communities of practice that may well fulfill women's need for support outside of their local church. Another example is the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, which has at its heart the vision of transforming the church, society and culture and impacting on the theological education of women.

6.3.4 The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians²⁰

The Circle for Concerned African Women Theologians was inaugurated in 1989. It was founded by Mercy Oduyoye, a Ghanaian woman, in order to help African women express their theological voice through writing and publications. Oduyoye was very concerned that women's voices were almost entirely absent within African theologies. The criterion for membership of the Circle is a commitment to doing theology with others and researching, writing and publishing on issues affecting African women and women of African descent. It draws its membership from women of diverse backgrounds, nationalities, cultures and religions rooted in African Indigenous Religions, Christianity, Islam and Judaism. In South Africa the Circle is active in three locations – KwaZulu-Natal, Cape Town and Pretoria.

One of its projects underway is the establishment of the Talitha Qumi Centre in Ghana which is to house the Institute of African Women in Religion and Culture. Here seminars and outreach programmes will be facilitated dealing with issues of mission, humanization and development.

Other publishing projects include 'The Engendering Theological Curriculum' handbook which is currently being tested in a few theological institutions before being published in the form of a handbook. A range of books, articles in journals and papers have also been published over the past 15 years focusing on issues of violence, sexuality, women and African culture, and HIV and AIDS. The Circle publishes a newsletter twice a year in Portuguese, English and French. There is also a Circle website

Publishing is a requirement for membership in the Circle, and it has become necessary to promote the theological education of African women, as well as academic writing skills.

In summing up this section I would like to return to the concern which has been running through this chapter which is about *sustaining* the self-caring and critical consciousness of women once they leave their formal theological programmes. It is unrealistic to expect theological educators in institutions to take on the whole task of ongoing support for

²⁰ Information obtained from The Circle of Concerned African Woman Theologians Newsletter: November 2004 November www.thecirclecawt.org/newsletter (11/09/05).

women once they leave. But there is a responsibility to prepare women for this need, by raising the possibilities of 'secondary' communities of practice which will support them in their work in the primary community of practice – the church.

Both the Grail and the Circle extend support to women beyond the theological institution. They both serve as points of convergence for women from the academy, the church and others who share in the common vision of the transformation of the church and society for women. But both are confined to a few locations which means that women who live elsewhere cannot easily connect or access their resources. (It should be remembered that the Circle issues a biannual newsletter, plus a number of other publications.) As publishing is a requirement for membership in the Circle, this may exclude those women who either do not have the skills or the time to do this kind of academic work, in addition to their caring work.

If membership of these two movements (the Grail and the Circle) is not possible, I propose that women in the church need to develop their own local communities of practice, so that they can derive the necessary support from one another to sustain their critical and caring work. Such local communities could be connected to supportive teachers and researchers in the academy, in order to derive the benefit of their ongoing research and scholarship. Academics could be drawn in to give seminars, run workshops and give keynote addresses at regional meetings and conferences. The women in turn would help to ground those in the academy in the questions and challenges facing those 'on the ground'. This partnership could thus provide mutual benefit to both.

Creating this convergence between these two sites of practice will not happen automatically and I suggest that there is place for catalysts in helping to make these connections.

6.4 MAKING CONNECTIONS - THE ACADEMY AND WOMEN IN LOCAL CHURCHES

Rather than trying to establish any one site of formation as *the* site for critical and transformative reflection and practice, this section affirms the intersecting and overlapping contributions that the academy, Christian women's movements like the Grail and the Circle, and churchwomen's communities of practice can make in sustaining

women in the transformation of their ministry of care. But, as Myers (2001:50) has suggested:

The worlds of the seminary, the sanctuary and the streets generally spin in very different orbits, with little engaged conversation between them, much less mutual accountability.

Myers argues for greater engagement and accountability between those in the academy, those who are activists,²¹ and those who are in the churches. In the North American context he suggests theological and biblical scholars tend to ignore the demands of practice, and do not always interpret their work to lay Christians. On the other hand, Christian activists often neglect critical theological and political reflection, and ‘people in the pews’ and their leaders often ignore the insights of academics and the challenge of activists. In order to bridge these gulfs, Myers urges a reintegration of the competencies of these three ‘alienated worlds of Christian witness’ (:50).

He proposes an alternative popular model for theological education which will make theological education more accessible in the North American context. As Kithome (see section 6.1.5.1 above) and others have said, theological education is inaccessible to most, especially the poor and vulnerable. And it fails to address the whole range of additional practical skills needed for contemporary ministry including community organising, social analysis, communication skills and nonprofit administration.

The model Myers (:51-52) proposes, which I think bears scrutiny, is really a form of ‘floating alternative seminary’ where the ‘teacher’ travels to the learners. The learning events are workshops, seminars, conferences and retreats which integrate bible study, worship, analysis and practice. Through these interactions, networks and relationships across diversity and denominational boundaries can be extended ‘to build capacity for the movement’. Myers refers to this work as evangelical and pastoral; and it is about caring for one another. He describes the role of this peripatetic ‘teacher’ in four ways:

1. to reflect back to the movement what we are hearing and seeing, helping assess who and where we are in the historical moment;
2. to help interpret current events, trends and signs of hope;
3. to translate some of the crucial concepts and fresh perspectives being generated in different academic disciplines into a more accessible form; and

²¹ Where Myers refers to ‘activist’ I refer to those who are members of social movements, including the Grail.

4. to help forge a creative theological synthesis that weaves together political, socioeconomic, biblical and experiential perspectives (:52).

It is interesting that Myers' 'organising' model is not too different from how Mark describes the spreading of the gospel in the very early days of the church:

On one of his teaching journeys round the villages, he summoned the Twelve and sent them out in pairs on a mission (Mark 6:7).

I believe that this 'peripatetic'²² style of disseminating the good news and building the network of Christians has something useful to contribute to our mission of building a movement of women committed to, and actively working towards a theological vision that fully includes all women. There is a role for small teams of academics and teachers to extend the scope of the movement to women who are ministering in their churches. In our context such teams would need to be drawn from the pool of academics and teachers who are committed to the vision of supporting the work of women in their local environments. Some academics are already doing this work in their own denominations, but I suggest that their resources could be more widely spread to interdenominational forums.

Through informal meetings, seminars and workshops, the scholarship and insights generated in the academic institutions can be shared with women in their local areas. These activities will also help to link women, who may otherwise be isolated, to a broader community of reflection. By reflecting theologically on local needs and actions, women can be helped to see their work within the perspective of a broader struggle. These gatherings could also help in the formation of supportive communities of practice and networks where they are needed.

CONCLUSION

In chapter 3 (3.2), I raised the problems associated with an uncritical ethic of care which manifests itself in lack of self-care, an over-assumption of responsibility for others, and a

²² 'Peripatetic' is the term that I am using to interpret Myers' idea of the theologian as an 'organizer'. It refers to Aristotle's custom of walking while teaching. It is associated with missionary religious orders e.g. the Dominicans and Franciscans, and later evangelists. It also refers to the role of the 'barefoot doctor' in developing countries.

narrow view of caring that does not take into account the impact of power relations on social structures and institutions. All these aspects were exemplified by the churchwomen in this research. A number of the participants described how the Women's Studies course helped them to realize how they had internalised their roles and the church's expectations. They were also aware of how their churches oppressed women: using exclusive language, imposing submissive roles on women, perpetuating negative attitudes, and interpreting the bible and doctrines in ways that prejudice women.

What I hope this chapter has highlighted is that the Women's Studies course has made a difference to the lives of most women in this research. Through their exposure to a critical feminist pedagogy many have developed confidence, have seen the negative impact of patriarchy on their lives and spirituality, have been exposed to alternative theological insights, and have grown more confident in a God who loves and cares for them as women. Many have deepened their understanding of what it means to respond as moral agents within their local situations. Their acts of resistance and moral agency include standing up to their drunken husbands, assuming leadership roles, sharing their insights with other women, asking challenging questions in committee meetings, and speaking their voice in the public spaces of the church in their preaching and teaching.

But the research also points to the need for further theological work, for example around issues of sexuality and embodiment, and dealing with the vestiges of dualistic thinking which have influenced theological anthropology. There are still women who have negative views about their bodies, and many women believe that God ordained women to be carers and nurturers. There are also signs that women do not always care for themselves. In addition to these theological concerns, the women also indicated a number of difficulties mainly to do with their overall experiences of learning in the institution.

Many of these women find it very difficult to sustain these learnings in the environment of the church. I have argued that the church constitutes a contradictory site for women – it is the site where they perform their ministry of care, but it is not always caring of them. As a result, conscious women often feel lonely and isolated in their local situation. The task of theological educators is to anticipate this and prepare the women for this loneliness and the difficulty of sustaining a transformative agenda in their local sites of practice. Women in ministry are required to be change agents in their churches

and, as one of the women in the research has pointed out, they need to learn the skills and strategies for this work. And they also need to take responsibility for garnering the support they will need once they are in the field.

The Women's Studies course as it is currently offered is open to men as well, but it is clearly positioned within women's experiences and reflections. My question is whether the course should only be for women, with a comparable Men's Studies course where men can be supported in scrutinising, challenging and renegotiating their male gender identities in the church. The research indicates that while the catalyst for women's transformation is claiming their voice, the catalyst for many men is the discovery of their feelings (Hart in Hayes 2002:144). I suggest that within the ministerial formation programmes there needs to be at least some separate spaces for women and men to do their own healing and recovery work in addressing their different agendas.

Drawing on the research of Lave and Wenger (1991), I examined the notion of communities of practice as sites of formation. I extended the discussion to a case study of the Grail Christian Women's Movement to illustrate such a community of practice which supports the theological, spiritual and ethical formation of women in a critical way. I also referenced the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians as another such community. I pointed to the need to proliferate such communities and thus extend the boundaries of a Christian women's movement to many more women who may seek it. I have stressed that the women themselves should be proactive in securing this support, and to find ways to link up with willing and supportive academics and teachers who could help to resource them.

In trying to find a way forward I examined the notion of 'peripatetic teachers' or 'organizers' who would help to establish networks and ongoing opportunities for women to come together and reflect critically, and support one another in their local areas. I concluded that only this kind of intervention that is ongoing and accessible will make it possible for women to remain as effective change agents within their churches, and help them balance their own needs for self care.

Bourdieu (1990:118) speaks about the work of group-making as political work, and that it is more likely to be successful if there is a degree of theoretical convergence and when it is grounded in reality. This research has indicated that there is a substantial

degree of theoretical convergence among feminist theologians, and that the work is well grounded in the reality of women's lives. I submit that this work of changing the theological and ethical paradigm to one that is *just* and *caring*, and provides 'a home' for women, is political work; it is ethical work, it is caring work and it is profoundly spiritual work as well. The task of those engaged in the formation of these women as effective and courageous moral agents is also work of *justice* and of *care*. Finally, I believe it is only when this work by both the women and the educators happens at both local and global levels that women's transformative work in the church is likely to succeed.