Chapter 7: Empowering women for a ministry of critical care

I took the slow lane today ...
On my way to teach you theology.
What difference will that make
To how we care - you and me?
(Ryan 2002)

INTRODUCTION

During 2002 I was employed as a full-time lecturer in the theology department at the University of the Western Cape. Each day I traveled the N2 highway from Strand to Bellville, mostly in the slow lane as I enjoyed the scenery and the time to think and prepare for my day. In the slow lane, I also passed the sprawling shack settlements that line the N2 causing such embarrassment to those who would wish that Cape Town were simply a tourists’ paradise, of exquisite mountains and sea-scapes, of wine farms, pleasant guest houses and excellent, if overpriced, restaurants. It is not only the shacks that cloud the view, but the sight of humanity squatting alongside the road, using the verge between fence and highway as a public toilet; evidence of people who do not even have the private space of a toilet, let alone their own waterproof and secure home.

In that year I also became aware of the kinds of pressures and traumas that the students were confronting in their own lives. I began to document the different scenarios that students described, usually as reasons why they had not produced work on time, or up to standard:

- A student who handed in his assignment late because he had been highjacked at gunpoint in an underground parking in the centre of Cape Town
- A student who under-performed because he was still having nightmares after being attacked by a knife-wielding assailant in his bed
- Another who had to care for the family of a neighbour who’d had his throat slit
- A student whose night time job washing bodies in the hospital mortuary disturbed him so much that he could not sleep nor concentrate on his studies
- Students whose sisters / mothers / fathers / children have recently died – most of them casualties to AIDS
- Students struggling to pay fees and working in part-time jobs for R6 or R7 an hour in the local Checkers/Pick ‘n Pay supermarkets
- Part-time students who fall asleep in class because they are just so tired juggling work, study, church, and family demands
Married women students who’ve had to leave children in the care of others while trying to complete degrees which do not guarantee jobs in a province with over 40% unemployment

A student who felt so lonely and depressed that he could not face coming to class

Those with health problems and lack of funds to pay for medical help etc.

I do not believe that my office was any more remarkable than any of the other lecturers - their litany is probably very similar and a lot longer than mine. In addition, I discovered from discussions with the Gender Equity Unit and the Institute for Counselling, that there are many cases of sexual violence, rape and HIV and AIDS, as well as students who have to drop out because of financial problems.

These stories present a real challenge to those who teach theology. Our response cannot simply be expressions of personal kindness, but calls for a considered and programmatic response to be tabled at staff meetings and given the same attention as the rituals of passing and failing students, writing module descriptors, and participating in seminars on theological topics. These stories must also shape our curriculum and our teaching practice. Only then will theological education really be contextual and relevant to students’ lives, and, in the case of women, help them to shape a critical and conscious ethic of care that is liberatory for them and others.

Travelling in the slow lane has been for me a symbol in this research for a place of reflection: about women in their ministries, their/our context, and about my practice as a theological educator. If what I am about here is self-reflexive research, then the slow lane must have as its final destination something to offer those who work with women in theological education; and something to offer those who care in the context of poverty and human degradation symbolised by the absence of private toilets.

By drawing together in dialogue the elements of an ethic of care, feminist insights in theology and education, and the needs and insights of women who are in ministry or preparing for it, I hope to offer a fresh way of envisioning the training paradigm for women students. However, as I will conclude in this chapter, the success of any endeavour to develop a critical ethic of care among women in ministry will depend on

1 UWC statistics suggest that the student profile includes more women than men, and a number of women with children.

2 Interviews with the Acting Director UWC Counselling Service, 1 April 2003 and with the Director Gender Equity Unit, 8 April 2003.
educators’ commitment and ability to see beyond the conventional task of education in order to support women’s healing, as well as their sustained ministry beyond the confines of the theological classroom. And it asks of us educators whether we ourselves witness to a critical ethic of care within our academic practice and beyond, in the public spaces where church, women and society meet.

It is to the urgency of this responsibility that I wish to direct our attention as those committed to the theological education of women. But first let me recall some of the conclusions drawn at different points along this research journey.

7.1 WHAT THE RESEARCH HAS INDICATED

In chapter 1, I set out the purpose of this research, firstly to investigate whether it is possible to reinstate ‘caring’ as a transformative category for women in the church, capable of transcending the traditional roles and expectations that perpetuate the subjugation of women. And secondly, to establish the core principles of an appropriate training model in theological education that can help to promote a critical ethic of care among women in training for ministry. I also described my own motivation and declared my positionality as a white, middleclass, South African woman who is engaged in theological education.

In the same chapter I explained the theoretical framework and methodology underpinning this work and described the empirical research, some of the difficulties encountered, and some of its successes. These included practical and logistical difficulties of doing empirical research with a sample that was geographically quite widely spread, as well as problems associated with questionnaires that were not all returned. However, there were a number of successes, including the opportunity that was afforded the women from two colleges to meet with one another, and to reflect on their learning in some depth. It was important for them to discover that women from other church contexts experience many similar problems. Thus it created a sense of solidarity with other churchwomen.

I tried to show how the methodology employed was an attempt to establish a conversation between the theory, the experiences of women caring in the church, and the practice of theological educators.
In chapter 2, I developed the theological ethical paradigm which framed this enquiry. Primarily, it presents itself as a discussion concerned about a moral vision, values and virtues, moral agency and the formation of women as moral subjects. Having established the broad parameters of theological ethics with reference to the work of a number of theorists who integrate notions of Christian vision and human agency (Birch & Rasmussen 1989, Kaufman 1993, Kammer 1998), I explored the interrelationship between an ‘ethic of being’ and ‘an ethic of doing’ and the role of the Christian community in its responsibility for moral formation. Bridging the gap between moral and spiritual formation (Kretzschmar 2004), helped to create the platform for a discussion of women’s theological formation in which these two strands - their own faith and spiritual development, and their development as moral persons, could be discussed. I concluded that only as critical moral agents could women develop their spirituality and fully care for themselves and others.

In this second chapter the terrain of feminist theology was sketched broadly, and some of the major debates to surface in subsequent chapters were highlighted. I examined the deconstructive task of feminist theology and its challenge to the mainstream theology and practices of the church which impact negatively on women’s self-understanding and behaviour. Using Wehr’s (1987) analysis of the manifestations of patriarchy as androcentricism, exclusion and sexism, I described some of the ways that women in the church experience patriarchy through the sexist language and treatment, exclusion from certain roles, and sometimes abusive or violent treatment.

In presenting an outline of the reconstructive task of feminist theology, I drew attention to its creative work in feminist hermeneutics, and revisioning symbols of God, doctrines of sin, creation, salvation and redemption, the body, and women as part of God’s good creation. I also discussed how other ways of understanding the purpose, mission and death of Jesus can offer new hope and life for women in oppressive situations.

I concluded that the formation of women as moral agents has to take into account the undermining forces of patriarchy in the church and seek new ways of affirming the Christian story for women.
In chapter 3, I discussed the notion of care/caring in relation to other Christian ethical values such as justice, compassion, mercy and love. I demonstrated that caring is a key dimension within Christian ministry and I explored it in relation to the notion of servant leadership. Here, I paused to examine the question of power and its potential for abuse, especially in relation to women within a patriarchal church.

Next I drew attention to the feminist discourse around ‘an ethic of care’, as Carol Gilligan first introduced it in her discussion of relationality and caring as another moral perspective alongside an ethic of justice. But, as I illustrated in my discussion on the subsequent debates, caring needs to be problematised and subjected to scrutiny before it can be adopted as a principle or a rule of life, especially for women. From a feminist perspective, the debate on caring is important for a number of reasons: it has helped to make public some of the hidden aspects of women’s lives - their pain, particularly the abuse and violence that takes place in the private space of the family; as well as highlighting the hidden work that women do, especially poor women. However, the debate has also exposed some of the harmful aspects of an uncritical ethic of care. For example, where it reinforces women’s subservience and passivity even in potentially violent situations; the way it feeds gendered stereotypes of women’s innate caring and nurturing natures; and how it masks the sometimes harmful and uncaring roles that some women play, particularly in relation to other women and to children.

I concluded that an undifferentiated approach to caring which sees all women’s caring as ‘good’ or ‘morally right’, and which does not examine the critical and creative possibilities, as well as the potential for harm, can serve to reinforce patriarchal expectations of women, is morally indefensible, and is not a liberating ethic for women in ministry.

I then drew together some of the strands of the chapter to construct an ‘identikit’ of a critical ethic of care which is based on the integration of love and justice in the biblical notion of compassion. I concluded that compassion draws the carer and the person who is cared for into a mutually enhancing relationship. It does not fall into the trap of a privatised or domesticated notion of caring, and it summons us all, regardless of gender, race, or class into a common project with God to bring healing and justice to the world. It challenges hierarchies and inequalities, and results in a critical appraisal of patriarchy and
power. It weeps with, and it analyses, thus it is both affective and analytical, and it operates in relation to the personal, interpersonal, institutional and the macro levels of society. It is this critical caring which can be a liberatory ethic for women in ministry. The task of theological education is to support women in developing the requisite skills appropriate to such an ethic. *This suggests a curriculum framework in which a critical ethic of care is a core construct.*

A critical ethic of care points to a number of challenges to women’s moral agency: *one*, to recognise and deal with their own internalisation of oppression and need for healing; *two*, to recognise, challenge, and oppose the manifestations of patriarchy and other forms of discrimination within the lives of women and in the life of the church; and *three*, to witness to ways of living and doing ministry that are not rooted in ‘the patriarchal will-to-power’\(^3\) but instead model different ways - of a household of freedom (Russell), friendship (Haney) and mutuality (Farley). This represents a pedagogical challenge to careful, vigorous and courageous analysis of the church’s power and the theologies that are taught which support the oppression of women in ministry. It is also a call to see the potential for subversion and resistance within the formal spaces of church structures and in society.

In *chapter 4*, I sketched several features of the current context in South Africa and drew specific attention to the extreme conditions of poverty, violence against women, and HIV and AIDS – a disturbing tapestry for understanding the challenges that face women in ministry. In introducing the subjects of my research, I wanted to emphasise that both because of, and despite these conditions and their own experiences of them, women continue to be called and committed to caring as a central feature of their ministry.

Drawing on the empirical research specifically conducted for this thesis and other work in this field, I then looked at some of the manifestations of the contradictions in the structures and practices of the church and the academy. I illustrated how, despite their own need for caring, women are generally not cared for by the church. They are constituted as caregivers and seldom as the recipients of care themselves. Examples of women’s experiences of not being cared for include their marginalisation in the

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structures, being prevented from preaching and teaching, their co-option into the status quo, the church’s silence in the face of sexual abuse and violence against women, and the imposition of a discriminatory theology used to legitimate asymmetrical gender relations.

I drew attention to women’s consciousness of the way patriarchy is at work in the church, and I pointed to the contribution of women’s theological studies in either suppressing or raising their consciousness. I noted that while many women may experience the church as oppressive, they absorb these experiences and assert their agency in different ways. Some examples are when they challenge discrimination in the church, assert themselves with the hierarchy, and refuse to perform certain tasks that undermine them. I referred to Scott’s (1990) theory of the ‘hidden transcript’ as a way of understanding these different acts of resistance which may be hidden from the public gaze.

What the chapter indicated was that women analyse the problem differently: for some the central issue is equality and access to leadership roles in the church; for others it is about being allowed to nurture and care more effectively; and for a few it is a struggle for justice that challenges the constructs and control of theological knowledge. What became clear was that many churchwomen hold contradictory notions about themselves in relation to the patriarchal church and do not always recognise their own oppressive behaviour towards other women.

In this chapter I reiterated the point made in chapter 3, that an ethic of care is a primary aspect of a Christian theological paradigm. However, I concluded that a movement from women’s co-option into a patriarchal understanding of care, to a liberating model of care requires the correctives of justice and social analysis. These correctives will ensure that care is both compassionate and conscious and a liberating practice for women in general, and especially for women in ministry. Critical consciousness (Barr 1999) shapes the discourse through which women are able to understand and resist the oppressive conventions that are prescribed in their families and in the church. I concluded that the struggle for a transformative theological ethic of care for women in ministry must also be integrated into the struggle over the generation and transmission of theological knowledge.
In chapter 5, I argued for a critical feminist epistemology as foundational for liberatory educational programmes with women. Such an epistemology takes seriously the issue of power as it resides within frameworks of theology as an academic discipline, as well as in the institutional structures of the church and the relationships that constitute it. As the chapter has suggested, dominant knowledge practices disadvantage women in a number of ways and I proposed that revisioning theological education should scrutinise the conceptual assumptions which underpin the theological knowledge that is being reproduced and taught as ‘truth’ to women. This will impact on notions of God and ways of describing God in relationship to humankind and the universe. It calls for the scrutiny of scripture and doctrines that are oppressive of women, and for new ways of thinking about sin, grace, creation, salvation and caring in human relationships.

The chapter presented in some detail the framework ‘Women’s Ways of Knowing’ (Belenky et al 1988) as a useful schema for interpreting women’s ‘voices’ and how these different voices shape a particular relationship to knowledge, its authorisation, and to women’s agency. Although critics of this framework have warned against essentialising women’s knowledge and experiences in relation to differences in gender socialisation, I have suggested that it makes a useful contribution to the theological classroom as it affirms and validates women’s experiences and their knowledge, and encourages them to be active subjects in acquiring and producing this knowledge. It also has implications for understanding the themes of ‘voice’ and ‘moral agency’ as an integral feature of the theological formation of women for ministry.

The discussion on ‘voice’ led me to the role of the teacher/lecturer in the feminist classroom as one of care and support, to facilitate women ‘coming to speech’ as reflective and connected students. Teaching strategies that shift the traditional hierarchies of teaching and learning were suggested, including creating spaces for listening and mutual learning, using storytelling, art, drama, music and poetry as methods, encouraging the sharing of other forms of knowing to include emotions and the body, in addition to discursive forms.

Further, I argued that feminist theological pedagogies must support the development of women’s analytical skills in order to understand, challenge and transform the institutional structures of theological knowledge and power. This would help women
understand the way their identities have been constituted in the social and cultural practices of a patriarchal church, and how theological formation has been used to justify their subject positions. Also, as I had argued in chapter 4, practical ‘survival’ skills should be incorporated into the curriculum so that women may be better equipped for the exigencies of a caring ministry in their local contexts.

Drawing on the work of Horsman (2000) on the classroom as a healing space for women in the context of widespread violence, and Bourdieu’s (in Usher 1997) notion of habitus, the chapter pointed to the importance of creating welcoming and healing environments for women students. It was argued that if the habitus of the theological environment is predominantly shaped by men and male stories, histories and experiences, and in South Africa it has been traditionally white and male, then women’s knowledge, stories and experiences will not be seen to ‘fit’ so easily, and women will very likely feel uncomfortable and alienated when joining a theological institution.

The chapter also raised the particular difficulties of students in the distance education situation, and argued that additional support is needed from the administrative centre in helping to form viable local study groups, as well as greater contact with academic staff over the content and delivery of their courses.

In the chapter I also drew attention to the research findings that suggest that women resist the imposition of their ‘diminished’ identity in a number of ways. Examples of how women challenge, assert themselves, and speak up, point to them claiming voice and agency. When a number of the women describe their ‘call’ to minister and exercise it, despite opposition, this suggests that they seek validation for their work and their identity beyond the authoritative voice of the church.

In chapter 6, I analysed two examples of feminist pedagogy in theological education. Empirical evidence was drawn from a number of women who had completed a Women’s Studies course at the College of Transfiguration and the Theological Education by Extension College. Their detailed reflections suggest that through their exposure to a critical feminist pedagogy, many of the women have developed greater confidence in themselves, and become more aware of the negative impact of patriarchal oppression on their lives and on their spirituality. These women are confident in a God who loves and cares for them as women, and they understand the ethical call to compassionate service,
whilst recognising the importance of maintaining a balance between their own needs and those of others. Many of them have deepened their understanding of what it means to respond as moral agents within their local situations.

But what the research has also shown is the need to continue the 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 some women who, despite having completed the course, continue to hold negative associations about women’s bodies, and many of them believe that God has ordained women for caring and nurturing work.

Further, many of these women find it very difficult to apply and sustain feminist theological practices in their church-based ministry. In the chapter, I argued that the church constitutes a contradictory site for women, and the task of feminist theological educators is to anticipate this and prepare women for the loneliness and difficulty of sustaining a transformative practice once they leave their theological institutions. Feminist theology supports a model of ministry that constitutes women as agents of transformation and, as one of the women in the research has pointed out, they need to learn the skills and strategies for this work. This suggests that the curriculum of feminist theology needs to provide the scaffolding for women’s ministry that will be able to sustain the complex and often bitter struggles for transformation in local churches and institutions. Elements in this scaffolding would include: opportunities to participate in supportive networks of women attempting to apply a feminist theology in their local practice; ongoing conversations with other women on issues that include healing, self-care and analysis of their local contexts; and supporting one another in situations which feel overwhelming.

In an attempt to respond more concretely to the expressed need for ongoing support, I examined Lave and Wenger’s (1991) research into communities of practice. This was extended into a discussion of the Grail Christian Women’s Movement as an example of such a community of practice which supports the theological, spiritual and ethical formation of churchwomen 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 these kinds of communities as sites of ongoing formation and reflection on a
critical ethic of care, which could help to extend the cords of solidarity and support to many more women who are both new and active in ministry.

I then examined the notion of ‘peripatetic teachers’ or ‘organisers’ who would help to make the connections between women in the church, and the academy. Such organisers would link willing and supportive academics as resources to local communities, which in turn would help to ground academics in the concerns of women ministering in their local contexts. At the same time I stressed the role that the women themselves must play in creating such supports for themselves, or to link with existing communities.

I concluded that in addition to being theological, this work of changing the caring paradigm is political work and it is profoundly spiritual work as well. It is only when this work happens at both local and institutional levels that women’s work of critical caring in the church is likely to succeed.

7.2 Contributions of this research

The purpose of this thesis has been to explore the contribution of feminist pedagogy to the formation of Christian women ministers. I have argued that a critical ethic of care which incorporates compassion, justice and self-care is central to the liberating praxis of women in ministry. This has two important consequences: firstly, it has implications for the women and how they assert themselves as moral agents of critical caring in their ministry; and secondly, it has implications for theological education and how responsive it is to the challenges presented by such an ethic at the epistemological, the pedagogical and the practical levels. What remains for me to do is to indicate precisely how this research impacts on these two aspects.

7.2.1 Contribution to women as critical carers

In the thesis I have argued that caring, as understood traditionally in the church, very often oppresses or submerges women in exhausting pursuits of service to ‘the other’. This perspective is justified by a theology of ‘the servant leader’ which, when incorrectly interpreted and indiscriminately applied, can result in the further oppression of the one in need of care, or of the carer herself. Such an ethic can lead to greater injustice, less love,
and ultimately less care. Thus, an ethic of care is theologically untenable as it stands. However, I have argued that a transformed ethic of care, rooted in the biblical notion of compassion and which sees justice and care of self, the other, and of God in an integrated way, can be a liberatory ethic for women in ministry. But, as is discussed below, women have to reorientate their notions of what it means to care and their roles within it, and they have to assume moral agency in asserting this new model of caring for themselves and for men as well.

7.2.1.1 Appropriating a transformed ethic of care for ministry

In this research I have drawn attention to the important work of caring that women do when they counsel, heal, support, nurture, teach, pray, create liturgies, administer, organise, weep with those who mourn, and celebrate with others. Through this work, women have been called and are responsive to God’s purpose for redeeming and caring for the world.

But this thesis has also redefined an ethic of care for churchwomen. It has said that care, rooted in compassion, justice and self-care, empowers women to scrutinise these conventional ministerial tasks and to make decisions or take actions that are not necessarily what is normative. Thus, women also care when they seek justice by challenging the status quo understandings and practices of caring, when they resist patriarchy, and when they refuse to be made victims within relationships of domination. Caring is not abusive, violent or harmful to the other. Caring is not only about the domestic or the personal, nor is it about uncritically preserving and transmitting family, group and cultural traditions and practices. Critical caring extends to collective and structural responses where the different aspects of caring work (from policy making to implementation) challenge the contours of hierarchies, abuse, violence and discriminatory practices that operate in church and society, and which are based on gender, race, class and culture.

And women care when they look after themselves: when they seek healing, when they scrutinise their roles and responsibilities, when they make decisions whether or not to care, and how best to care in particular situations, and when they surround themselves
with supportive bases once they enter the difficult and often uncaring terrain of their churches.

7.2.1.2 Asserting moral agency

Women who have come to understand what it means to be ‘critical carers’ must assume agency and take the lead in developing and shaping it as a model of ministry in the church. In doing so they will give witness to the overwhelming cry of our context for healing, for care and for justice, and they will invite others to see these needs and to respond.

Caring is not only for women – the responsibility has to be shared by men as well. However, women’s experiences of caring strengthen their ability to take the lead and give direction to others with regard to caring. Women who have for so long been the carers and the nurturers are now called to show others how to care. But, in taking leadership, women must attempt to establish a different model of power that does not reproduce the old hierarchies, oppressive agendas and dependence on status and self-aggrandisement. Inspired by a model of power that is mutually empowering but also effective, women leaders can contribute to decisions, policies and programmes that are aimed at critical caring.

This leadership requires skills and the ability to analyse, strategise and act. It is political work that women need to learn to do. But it also requires humility and courage, and a strong and centered spirituality that can sustain the resistance and opposition that such a critical ethic is certain to attract.

Women become agents of shalom when they participate in the creation of ‘gendered truth’; when they are active in protest against gendered violence; and when they are agents in the healing of themselves and their communities (Van Schalkwyk 1999:15).4

I have argued that a transformed ethic of care is only possible if women assume their moral agency, by recognising and dealing with their own internalisation of stereotypes

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4 Van Schalkwyk (1999: 149-152) develops the theme of women as agents of shalomatic mission. *Shalom* is the Old Testament word to describe the goal of salvation. It includes ideas of peace, personal and collective well-being, and wholeness and prosperity; not simply achieved once and for all but to be worked out in actual situations (1999:21); that which is partly realized now, but to be fully realized in the final *eschaton* (:15).
and their socialised roles of caring and uncaring. The shaping of women’s moral agency depends on careful and critical processes of formation which help women to scrutinise the values and virtues they have been socialised to adopt, to analyse their attitudes and responses to situations for their potential to do harm to themselves or others, and to cultivate relationships that nourish and grow them as adult women. The discussion of such processes follows later.

7.2.1.3 Caring for the carer
The questions of self-care and sustaining critical insights once women leave the safe space of the feminist classroom or college have been discussed throughout this thesis. Women need to recognise their own woundedness as a result of abuse or violence, their lack of confidence and diminished sense of self-worth, and take responsibility for securing healing. They must also ensure that the decisions they make in response to others and their situations does not cloak their own needs for healing, nor become ultimately destructive of themselves and others. This may mean challenging prescribed ways of responding or, at times, even refusing to comply. It also means being creative and proactive in finding other ways to respond.

With regard to self-care once women leave their colleges, I have stressed the importance of linking with or forming communities of practice. In establishing supportive communities of shared practice we can draw on precedents in feminist theology in some models of women-church.5

Rosemary Radford Ruether (1985:62) refers to feminist base churches which are critical, cultural and celebrational communities that have some autonomy from the established institutions. This does not mean leaving the established church but finding ways to be authentic church with those who share our vision and struggles in order that we can be that church within the Church. Such women-church groups incorporate

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dimensions of sharing experiences, prayer, worship and creative rituals, study and analysis, and political action.\(^6\)

Rebecca Chopp (1995:46) discusses *ekklesia* as ‘places of grace’ where it is possible to envision the transformation of church from patriarchal and dehumanizing practices into a new nature and mission. She (58) discusses the way an *ekklesia* of grace creates spaces for denouncing sin and announcing grace; for lamentation of suffering where truth may be told and suffering can be wailed, and healing rituals be held;\(^7\) and as a space where systems of oppression can be critically analysed. This grace may be experienced as a personal transformation to live differently (61). Such an *ekklesia* of grace will provide women in ministry with the space they need to support their work of critical caring.

If women are to appropriate this critical ethic of care and see it as a foundational ethic on which to develop their ministry, then there are a number of implications for their theological training. I now propose ways in which the theological education of women needs to be reshaped if this ministerial agenda based on critical caring is to be sustained.

### 7.2.2 Contribution to theological education for critical caring

The formation of women for a transformed ethic of care has implications for their theological education at the level of the knowledge frameworks and epistemologies, methods of transmission and pedagogical practice, and the specific skills that women need in order to practice as critical carers in ministry.

In *chapter 1*, I stated that this research did not intend to map out a detailed curriculum, or revise the traditional subject areas of theological education (Systematic Theology, Theological Ethics, Old and New Testament Studies, Missiology, Practical Theology etc.) in line with a feminist or African women’s perspective. I believe this work

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\(^7\) See also Denise Ackermann, *Tamar’s Cry: Re-Reading an Ancient Text in the Midst of an HIV/AIDS Pandemic*, (Stellenbosch: EFSA, 2001).
is already being done. My starting point from the perspectives of both theological ethics and feminist theology has been to explore the notion of critical caring as the hermeneutical principle with which to understand women’s work in ministry, and to argue for the revisioning of theological education where this becomes the key principle.

Subsequent chapters have highlighted some of the aspects in the curriculum that will have to be addressed. In chapter 2, it became evident that central moral categories like values, virtues, character and community need to be scrutinised through the lens of gender so that they are not uncritically transmitted and effectively perpetuate women’s compliance and submission. The formation of women as critical carers must be aimed at inculcating a sense of moral responsibility and agency, as well as spiritual maturity.

Chapter 3 raised questions about ministry and the way power operates within it, important discussions from which to launch a transformative model of ministry for women based on mutuality, choice, freedom, commitment and analysis. Chapter 4 highlighted the analytical and self-caring skills that women need to learn in order to maintain the balance of their own and others’ needs.

Chapter 5 drew attention to the contribution of feminist theology to developing new insights concerning notions of God and ways of describing God in relationship to humankind and the universe. It also highlighted the place of critical biblical hermeneutics and reframing of core church teachings. It raised the importance of creative and different teaching and learning methodologies that integrate the discursive, experiential, intuitive and emotional dimensions into learning.

In chapter 6, the focus went beyond questions of content and teaching, to the learning environment. It drew attention to the importance of healing and hospitality in the theological institution itself, as well as the need for ongoing support for women once they leave the institution.

In summary I contend that if critical caring is adopted as a key principle on which women’s theological education is to be based, then the following aspects must be considered: the programme and its content must be liberatory; methodologies must be creative, empowering and holistic; the institutional culture and the relationships within it

8 It is important to note that a theological curriculum which centres women is currently being produced by The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians and due to be published in 2006. It takes as its starting point women’s experiences of oppression and exploitation in the church and society.
must be healing and hospitable towards women; and women’s need for support beyond the institution must be met. If we respond to these different imperatives, only then can we, as theological educators, claim to have discharged our responsibilities towards our women students in a way that is consistent with a critical ethic of care.

7.2.2.1 Challenging traditional theological knowledge
If the theological knowledge that we teach continues to oppress or support the oppression of women, to make them feel guilty, unworthy, and dependent, then as educators we have the responsibility to examine this knowledge for its associations with patriarchal notions of God. If we care about the women we teach then we must ensure that what we teach is about a God who heals, affirms, liberates and enhances women’s self-understanding of being made in the image of this God. This extends to the notions about God and the language and symbols that are used. It requires that women are exposed to a critical feminist hermeneutic and includes revising our teachings on sin, grace and salvation, and of interpreting creation, incarnation and redemption in ways that are liberating and invite women’s full participation. Rebecca Chopp (1995:99) suggests that feminist Christianity represents a new type of Christianity and as such it implies new meanings for symbols and new ways for performing God’s ‘saving work’. 9

But knowledge about the complex processes at work in our world is also an important aspect of churchwomen’s formation. Skills in social analysis and practical caring skills and information are equally important if women are to be equipped to care. In addition, personal knowledge and self-awareness are central to women knowing their own needs and how best to respond to them. Finally, developing a strong spiritual centre and a sense of self and ‘voice’ and the ability to speak confidently are important aspects of the curriculum for women.

7.2.2.2 Exploring different and holistic methods of formation
The conventional theological classroom is usually the lecture room, often in raised formation where the gulf between teacher and student is suitably enhanced by a podium.

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These physical arrangements of the space symbolise the hierarchies between those who know, and those who need to know, and separations between people who are focused on acquiring knowledge in a competitive way. Smaller groups of students may be accommodated in a more intimate setting in a circular way in seminars. But despite the different physical arrangement, the methodologies which most commonly apply do not usually signify a circular or participatory methodology. Whilst I would argue that there is a place for lecturing as one modality in the teaching repertoire, I am convinced that it is not the most effective one, nor does it engender sufficient participation or shared learning to be consistent with a feminist classroom.

Discussions by Freire (1970), Barr (1999) Jarvis (1997) and others summarised in chapter 5 pointed to the relationship between teaching methodologies and processes of socialisation. It was argued that the aim of the feminist classroom is to develop women as critical thinkers rather than passive participants in the learning process. Also, because the exchange of knowledge is a mutual task of students and teacher, our aim in the feminist theological classroom is to develop women’s voice and ability to engage their own learning, listen to other voices that may come from different cultural/racial/class locations and hear the voices of theory and reflection in a reflexive way. This calls for creative methodologies, using poetry, art, music, storytelling, meditation and rituals, as well as seminar discussions, lectures, research projects and more conventional styles of learning. It also requires the openness on the part of educators to see our role as facilitative, as well as the courage to acknowledge our own positionalities in the process, and being open to learn from our students as well.

Women’s struggle with academic literacy needs to be addressed, particularly in our South African context (Kerfoot 2004). Bridging support needs to be provided and language policies revised so that learning and assessment can take place in different modes and also through languages other than English. This may present difficulties where numbers are great, but in smaller colleges or institutions, more flexible conditions can apply and should be exploited to the students’ advantage. Even within the framework of the outcomes based education curriculum, there is much greater scope for adjusting teaching and learning and assessment practices to develop students’ capabilities in more diverse ways.
With regard to distance education contexts, the research points to a need for greater support for students, and attention to the way local study groups actually function. Greater contact between academic staff and students, not just administrative personnel, seems to be called for in the case study.

7.2.2.3 Providing opportunities for healing

I have established in this research that education is about far more than just growing the mind. Our students are more than minds; they are also hurting hearts and broken bodies. As Oduyoye and Ackermann have said previously:

...women do theologies with their bodies: fetching water over long distances, chopping wood for fire to prepare food for the families, working in the fields – and in the homes of the middle class and upper class (Oduyoye 2004:19).10

The HIV virus enters, lurks, then makes forays into the immune system until it ultimately it destroys the body. This pandemic is all about bodies - especially about female bodies (Ackermann 2001:20).11

Those involved in the theological education of women must envision education as connected and holistic. As academics we need to analyse the way that violence and trauma impact on students’ ability to learn, and demand the freedom to shape curricula that are more responsive to their needs. This may require that we ourselves acquire other skills to enhance our ability to provide education for healing. It also demands of us greater attention to seeing connections between the real life concerns of our students and the theology that we teach. As I argued in chapter 5, the classroom has also to become a place of healing (Horsman 2000:74ff):

Experiences of trauma as a result of violence cannot be individualized or pathologised where women (or men) have to go away and heal – this violence is endemic and part of a sick society; there is no place to heal – the classroom has to be a healing place.

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I contend that our theological project needs to extend into the work of healing and making whole our society if it is to make any claims, like Irenaeas did of old, that ‘the glory of God is the person fully alive’.

7.2.2.4 Creating spaces where women feel at home

Although women are increasingly being included as students and teachers within theological institutions, it is often in an assimilationist way, i.e. where they are incorporated into the male dominated environment, with little or no adaptations to the curriculum and the institutional environment.12 ‘Christian theology… confronts women with problems which cannot be resolved simply by changing who does the theological reflection’ (Maxey 1972). We are reminded of the limited effects women’s inclusion into the ordained ministry has had on the mainline churches. As Rakoczy (2004:236) explains:

The ordination of women in many churches has not ended patriarchy and androcentricism. Often women are given small remote congregations to lead. Some local communities will not consider calling a woman to be their minister. The inclusion of women in the ordained ministry has not, of itself, transformed the church and often women are regarded as “second-class” clergy. At times women who are ordained fit the kyriarchal mould of power; this does not advance the transformation of the church into a “discipleship of equals”.

Or, as Oduyoye amusingly suggests: ‘Adding women and stir’ to the priesthood does not guarantee a transformed church (in Rakoczy :237). The point that both Rakoczy and Oduyoye make is that simply by incorporating women into the system does not change the fundamental issue of power that originally excluded them. In incorporating women into theological training institutions without making significant changes to curriculum, pedagogy and culture, we will simply be reinforcing a system of codes and

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13 Kyriarchal is a term introduced into feminist theological discourse by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and refers to domination over by the lord or master (Greek kyrion = lord/master and archein = a socio-political system of domination in which elite educated propertyt men hold power over women and other men. Fiorenza in Susan Rakoczy, IHM In Her Name: Women Doing Theology, (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2004) p.11.
signs which have been developed and transmitted by men, without engaging with how power expresses itself both in the structures and in the theological content that is purveyed. Simply incorporating women into leadership positions within the institution is also not the solution for, as Parsons (2002a:124) warns, women are just as capable of ‘the will to power’ which must be resisted if we wish to develop a more relational theological paradigm for training and for ministry.

The research points to the ethical responsibilities of theological educational institutions to examine their policies, structures and modes of operation which may be discriminatory or unsupportive of women. It has drawn attention to the need for institutions to evaluate their culture and the values that underpin decisions that are made that reflect this culture. Does the institutional culture privilege one racial group or gender over another? Is there a gender skewing in the personnel? How hospitable is the institution to women, and to women with children? If women with children are to be included in the residential college setting, then consideration of needs of parents and children in timetables and programme needs to be given. In distance education, the multiple demands facing part-time students including their families, their work, and their church commitments must be taken into account.

To make women’s inclusion intentional is to include their lives, their experiences and their reflection. Theological education must confront specific issues of injustice that women experience through a critical lens that helps to make explicit the gendered nature of these experiences, analyses the power relations that are in operation, and proposes solutions that will empower women.

7.2.2.5 Meeting women’s needs for continuous theological formation and support

In this research I have also argued that our ethical responsibility should extend beyond the confines of the institution and academic programme to a concern for the support of our women students after completing their studies. I have emphasised that women will need to be proactive in establishing their own critical communities of practice in their local areas. But these could be served by, and linked to, the knowledge workers in the academy. There needs to be greater interchange between the knowledge produced by academics and the grounded knowledge that women in ministry bring through their
embeddedness in the realities of other women’s lives. For this to happen, I have argued for a networking role for some academics or teachers whose responsibility it is to connect these two sites of practice – the academy and the women in their local churches. Different possibilities include: the Grail, The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, and women in ministry groups in individual churches and across denominations.

### 7.3 I HAVE A DREAM...

I have this dream of establishing a theological community for the ongoing support and formation of women. It is fuelled by a deep concern for the paucity of critical theological formation for Catholic laywomen in this country. And although I have at heart a desire for an ecumenical experience, as my own formation has been so richly nourished by such reflection, the appalling neglect that I see in my own church suggests that my starting point is ‘at home’.

My focus is on laywomen because religious sisters have the opportunity to create reflective spaces within their communities, and many of them have benefited from considerable theological formation.

I would like to begin the process at a round table, where the table represents both the symbolic meeting place for mutual nourishment and support, and its symmetry points to the kind of power relations that I wish to underpin a venture of this kind.

I have in mind a less formal, or fixed programme as is offered in existing institutions, because mostly the women I know who are doing all the caring work, could not easily extricate themselves from their responsibilities for any length of time. Instead, there is the possibility of short, residential programmes which allow time for women to rest and recreate, experience living in a supportive community, and participate in discussions and reflections that start from the questions and struggles that they bring, and draw in theological reflection and opportunities for rituals and celebrations.

This is a modest model but in its simplicity may well be possible to replicate. The women are there, the theological reflection is abundant – it needs the round table for them to meet.
7.4 **BEYOND DREAMING**

I am aware that this thesis has focused on theological education within the institutional framework, while my dreaming has run ahead of me and assumes an existence outside of the academy or institution. This has been intentional - there are others who are working at the level of rearticulating the curriculum, and hopefully this thesis adds something to their work. But I do not see enough happening at the level of ongoing support for those who have completed their foundational training and who are digging away at the hard and often uncompromising coalface of their local ministry.

Be that as it may, there is a need to take some of the questions raised by this research further. Questions about how the curriculum framework should be further elaborated in the discipline of theology when a critical ethic of care is appropriated as the hermeneutical principle; what are the practical and financial implications of revisioning the teaching and learning strategies to accommodate a transformed model of ministry; the implications of transforming an institutional culture in which a traditional ethic of care prevails; and the challenges of action research to support processes of transformation both in the theological institution and in the practice of women’s ministry. Do we have a large enough pool of educators committed to the vision and skilled enough to implement it?

There is much more work to be done and many more creative contributions needed before I will feel satisfied that our role as critical and caring academics and teachers have discharged our responsibilities. But, I do believe in the little steps, and this thesis is one little step.
Conclusion

My intention throughout this research has been to see whether there is a way between the overwhelming need for care within our context while at the same time ensuring that women’s needs for liberation are not sacrificed and justice is done for all – carer and the ones who are cared for. I do believe this is possible when we are able to see care in the context of relationship with ourselves, our immediate friends and family, our broader social context, our world and our God.

Trisk (2002:62) discusses Levinas’ view of the other as ‘the one who summons us to responsibility, to ethical response’. The other is not an object to be known, but that which will ‘constitute me as an ethical being’. This requires that I am in relation to the other, and I become ethical through the other. But, as I have indicated in chapter 2, this is predicated on a belief in the relationality of God, of a God who cares for us and for our world. So we are constituted as carers in our relationship to God and to others. The incarnation of God through Jesus is a sign of God’s relationality to us and our world: ‘God loved the world so much that that he [sic] gave his only Son, that everyone who has faith in him may not die but have eternal life. It was not to judge the world that God sent his Son into the world, but that through him the world might be saved’ (John 3:16-17). This relational vision challenges every form of hierarchy.

An ethic that situates the self, the other, God, and our world in this interdependent relationship calls forth agency and subjectivity. It calls forth caring and concern and doing justice on behalf of other. It extends beyond the individualism of personal ethics to an ethic of solidarity with the other in community and with the whole of creation. It calls forth critical analysis and wisdom, strength of will and clarity of purpose, as well as gentleness and mercy. Above all it calls for ‘existential courage’ in the face of extreme conditions endangering the lives of others and of our world.

The ethic emerging in the struggle has as its main theme not prudence but existential courage. This is the courage to risk economic and social security for the sake of liberation. It means not only risking the loss of jobs, friends, and social approval, but also facing the nameless anxieties encountered in new and unchartered territory (Gebara 2002:124).

It is to this work that women are being called in their ministry, and which we as theological educators of women are called to support. And we can do this, empowered by
a deep sense of the Spirit at work in us as we are sent forth. As Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza captures so expressively:

A feminist Christian spirituality therefore calls us to gather together the ekklēsia of women who in the angry power of the Spirit are sent forth to feed, heal, and liberate their people who are women. It unmask{s} and sets us free from the structural sins and alienation of sexism, racism and exploitation, and propels us to become children and spokeswomen of God. It sets us free from the idolatrous worship of maleness and articulates the Divine Image in female human existence and language. It sets us free from the internalised demands of altruism and self-sacrifice, from the mindset that is concerned with the welfare and work of men first to the detriment of our own and other women’s welfare and calling (1993:199).

And after we have done our work we will in hope and confidence be able to say:

For thus said the Lord God,

The Holy One of Israel:

By waiting and by calm you shall be saved,

In quiet and in trust your strength lies (Isaiah 30:15).